

# ORBIT

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## THE BEST IN Science Fiction

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*A Science Fiction Novelette*

# THE HEART OF THE GAME

**O**N VOLMORA, a whisper ran across the yellow living fluid under the vast and ancient trees. Each living cell caught the whisper, pondered it. Vacuoles opened in each cell to add each tiny strength to the sending of the message.

They were but tiny cells in the great leaves of the immortal trees, yet each with its own work and life and interest; each with its own knowing and feeling and doing. The whisper grew, and became a great wind of meaning rushing across the yellow fluids of the ocean. On the farther shores the great trees lifted their leaves and heard. "It comes! The laughter of the babe from nowhere will be among us once again!"

*by Richard English*

Down toward the sea of life rushed the metallic shell of "the man-babe", splashing a geyser of foaming spray as it sledded over the mild, silent surface. The great mouths beneath the surface smiled with grim amusement, and forbore to gulp down the innocent ignorant from the barrens of beyond.

Within the space-craft, one Richard Horton gazed with awed eyes at the brooding, vasty scape of sea and trees and strange, slow-moving monstrosities not to be described by any earthly tongue. In his mind he heard again the voice of Dr. Fort-Masson, saying:

"We are so used to life's fixed patterns on this world that we cannot easily understand the differences of which the life force is capable. In our minds life means dogs, cats, cows, men and insects and trees, all the familiar creatures of earth. But life can be anything, is modified by the infinitely varied conditions of its being on the innumerable worlds of the universe . . . into *anything!*"

Horton remembered stopping the old man with a raised hand, saying: "I can accept all that, Doctor. I can imagine that life as we know it is but a faint echo of what it can be under better and varied conditions. But it is hard for me to picture this par-

ticular violent mass of growth of which you are speaking! Volmora! The place has drawn me, fired my imagination since first I read your reports on it. But why is the thing so important? No other explorer even mentions the world."

He remembered now especially the old explorer's smile, as he murmured: "No other human ever returned from Volmora, Horton! But if any had, they would have brought back far more than from any number of other voyages to the so-called cultured peoples of far planets. Within just one small area of a thousand acres or so, there exists, on Volmora, a most titanic struggle between advanced life forms. It has been going on for untold centuries. Its equivalent on Earth is not to be imagined. Just suppose the nations of Earth had been locked upon one small battlefield for a thousand years! And even that—."

Horton had not been able to visualize the picture, the old man saw by his puzzled expression. He went on, trying to depict the undepictable. "There, the greatest enemy of their life is the same vitality and tenacity bequeathed all the upspringing ignorant new life—in other words, *life* itself! Yet it is that virtue of strength-in-life that is their power, and it is hardest of all to comprehend

that the gift of vast and powerful life-force within the individuals brings with it its own set of terrific problems."

Horton had stood up then, impatiently, eager to get on with his plans. "I'm going there, Doctor. You have said the greatest treasure in all space would be to learn what those ancients of Volmora have learned in their endless struggles with the obstacles life itself creates. I mean to get some of that treasure!"

The old man nodded, sighed. "I advise you try elsewhere. But if it must be Volmora, remember you cannot return to brag about your visit, as I did. Our Government has forbidden visits to Volmora, because no one returns. Yet . . . with my talisman in your hand, and the right attitude of simple desire for learning . . . you might live. Yet . . . I don't know if I am being wise . . ."

Tearing his mind from introspection, putting all thought of Earth away from him, Horton bent all his attention upon listening, as the old man had taught him. And like a strange wind across the fields of thought that were within his mind, he heard!

"The game begins! The game begins!"

There was gargantuan laughter, a vast and many-voiced amusement, an anticipation that

was embarrassing in its implication of clownish behavior on his own part. Horton could not recall having been laughed at very often . . . and that thought seemed to bring on a convulsion in his unseen audience. Angrily Horton heard himself exclaiming aloud: "So it's particularly excruciating that no one in my own world found me comical, is it?"

The reply rushed through and around him . . . "Excruciating!"

For Horton, there was little sign of struggle at first. He learned rapidly, he thought. He heard the howl of amusement as his idea of "learning rapidly" with an embarrassment to which he was becoming accustomed, if not immune.

He learned that all Volmora was knit about with telepathic sensing; that every living creature evaded the telepathic hunting of the predators by the creation of false thought patterns in their minds. Just as on Earth a butterfly seems to be a leaf, or a chameleon takes on the color of a stone, or a mantis pretends to be a twig. That immense hunger, hunting for what would fill it, was sensed mentally by the lesser creatures and evaded instantly by mental posturing, rapid flight, or instant attack—or a combination of all three.

It was this instantaneous perception of peril and the instan-

taneous reaction to it that made life possible for the native life-forms. It was the lack of this faculty that made life on Volmora so precarious to an Earthman. For he could not sense any single mentality among the many that he heard constantly, nor could he react to peril with the speed and quickness of thought. If he did hear or see something he thought was dangerous, it was always a mistake. It was this bungling progress through the jungle that made him so funny to the Volmorans. He would shy from a harmless edible mushroom because he thought it was the back of a monstrous turtle, or turn his explosive pellet gun upon a liana possessed of movement as it tried to move from under his feet. For the Volmorans he was pure slapstick, broad and convulsing and eternally wrong in every one of his perceptions and reactions.

After some hours of this, one of the ancients conceived a new angle to the comedy, and consulted with the other aged mentalities about him. And presently from a great bulbous monstrosity of growth exuded a flow of red and viscous sap, which presently became surrounded by a film of whitish substance. The globule hung in the brilliant sun-glow, and within it went on swift change. The strength of many minds were at work directing the

life in the globule, working with it as a man's hands would work with clay, manipulating the tiny spore seeded in the red gum-like fluid. Swiftly within the strange womb grew a life.

## II

Not many hours later, Horton had begun his stumbling exploration of the second great valley of mossy growth that lay between the three arms of rocky outcrops stretching down to the beach where his craft lay on the sands. For a time, it seemed this valley was to be as unrewarding as the first. Then he stepped through a screen of vines and leaves into a glade in the everlasting forest.

It was a spot of exquisite beauty. Wood-flowers nodded tremendous but delicate cups, tiny scampering forms disappeared beneath the riotous fern leaves, and Horton stood for minutes drinking in the delicious scene and wondering how anything could be so lovely and yet contain deadly threat, impossible peril . . .

A low voice came to him from deeper in the glade. For an instant as he turned he glimpsed what seemed a human face half hidden by the screening greenery. That voice had seemed to say: "That is the one? Oh, ha ha!" He put this thought down to his overworked nerves, and did not

leap off in pursuit of the impossible face. His second thought, that the face had possessed qualities entirely feminine and utterly fascinating, decided him. He had had enough, he was seeing things. He made his way back to the ship and tried to compose himself to sleep.

But in his bunk he lay frozen in a daze of ecstatic anticipation. He was afraid to move for fear he would destroy the dream of that face that was so much more than any face he had ever been attracted to before.

Next dawning, after a night of impatient tossing on his pneumatic mattress, he made his way with precipitate and utterly reckless haste back to the spot. Above him through the leaves whispered the everlasting murmur of half-understood meaning, and he was sure he could discern the growing strength of that murmur as it swept on and on through a myriad listening minds. Moreover, it seemed the meaning was a vast glow of pride in their handiwork, an anticipation of delightful foolery to come . . . The words, if he could have put those half-heard, strange concepts into words, would have been: "He is attracted to the She we have made for him! Now we shall see ridiculous fun, as our creature traps him in coil upon coil of . . ." He could find no word for THAT.

Perhaps they meant *preposterous romanticism*, and even as he almost accepted the whispering, he rejected it all as his own fevered imagination.

Cautiously he crept forward now, determined to surprise the owner of that face if she existed. He peered through the screen of leaves where the face had appeared, and into the bower beyond, refusing the evidence of his eyes. His heart sang strangely as his mind at last accepted the truth of her existence. Here was the nest where she had slept, perhaps dreaming of himself as he had dreamed of her. But she was gone.

Into the bower he crept, silently, carefully, not to disturb the numerous articles betraying HER occupancy. Chains of flowers strung upon the stems of grasses hung along the wall of vines. Little shells had been put together in child-like patterns of play upon the carpet of soft greenery underfoot. There were dozens of great hard-shelled fruits piled in a nook beneath the root of a tree, and a little knife of hardwood was still moist where she had been prying out the pulp of the purple fruit.

Horton sat down upon HER couch of piled mosses, and waited. Presently she would think him gone and steal back, and he would perhaps get a

chance to make friends. But the sleepless night now took its payment. The finding of the reality of the glimpsed face had caused a release of tension that resulted in an overwhelming sleepiness. His head nodded, he was weary. Perhaps Volmora was not the terrible land of peril old Fort-Masson had tried to picture to him. If this child of the wilderness was able to grow to adulthood alone in this forest, with no protection but her sharp ears and swift feet, so could he survive with his powerful weapons and experience . . . So thinking, with his eyes heavy, he sank gradually into a reclining position, and within fifteen minutes of his vigil's beginning, he was snoring lustily.

It was Horton's first sleep upon Volmora. He went almost at once into a dream state.

*It seemed that he became with complete naturalness a part of a mighty game. He could see the players above him in a misty far-off dimness, gigantic forms that were not rigid or solid, but motile and changing. Yet, in all their slow changing from bulging beast-shape to waving tree-shape to slender, endlessly reaching snakiness, they retained an unmistakable character. Each of them was himself, a self having nothing to do with shape.*

*The game was just beginning again. He had been given a part . . . a startlingly important part. The focus of play was all about him, he was the new center. His mind fumbled with the game until he saw the analogy. It was like chess, and he was the new king! A king was a piece unable to attack or defend except feebly, yet whose freedom and inviolability was the point, the heart of the game. Quite abruptly he understood why the Volmorans had welcomed him. He was the perfect kingpiece, and it enlivened the game to have the king utterly comic.*

*He looked about him, and was aware of the Queen, beside him, charming in appearance, but frightening in her utter self-sufficiency and strangely savage mental outlook. She seemed to find him a delectable prospect, a unique and priceless specimen . . . and he was newly embarrassed. Her thought was: "a specimen of un-manhood".*

*She was human in appearance. How then could she have mental powers and physical armament so superior to his own? Without conscious thought, instinct told him that the powers of the varied pieces were bequeathed and determined by the whim of the players. And that "whim" was yet ancient and unbreakable law, just as in chess.*



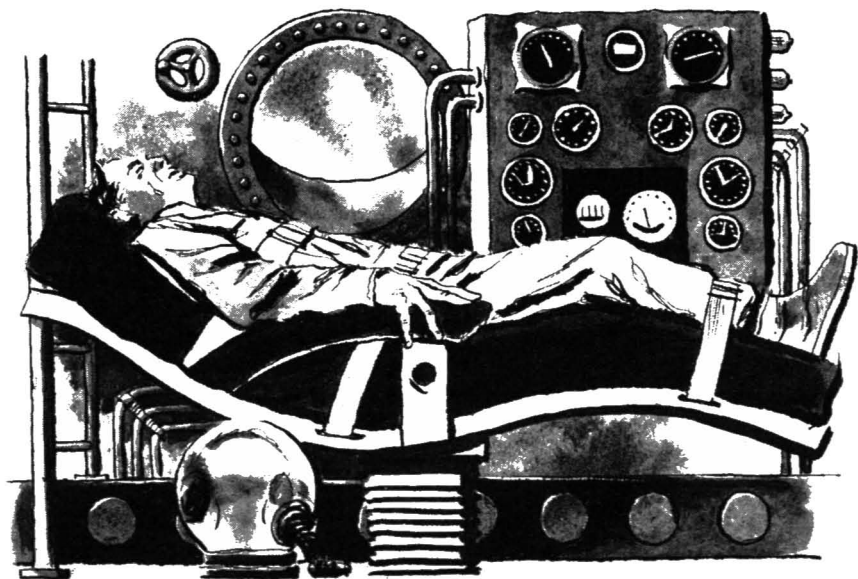
*In his dream he examined the other pieces, the beasts of the vast yellow ocean on the enemy side, and the beasts of the endless towering forests and swamps and plains. All, all were pieces in the game being played over and over again by the mighty, distant players.*

*There were two groups of players who used this certain area of the planet for their board. The distant group, the rulers of the sea, were far more strange in their unending change. His mind could not grasp any stable thing about them for comparison in his own experience of Earth life. Their characters, wise, subtly sinister, knowing and patient in their vast plans for the game to come, were ruthless in their slow visible evaluation of the various group-*

*ings and possibilities of the circular area that included many miles of sea and forest and plain.*

*Behind him he was conscious of his own side, the Lords of the Forest, breathing vast windy breaths like great trees in a storm, or like mountains swept by winds, or again, like subterranean vaults, brooding, empty, yet full of living thought. His sleeping mind faltered, trying to grasp the unknowable quality of the subterranean Lords. And he found their thought in himself, delicately conjuring understanding in him, telling him who were his friends and who his enemies in the game now to begin.*

Quite suddenly he was not asleep, and knew he was not alone. Cautiously he peered



through his lashes out of slitted eyes, trying to see, without betraying that he was awake, what had approached him in his sleep. SHE was there, in her place in her bower, watching him, waiting for the King to awaken.

On her soft lips there was a smile, unknowable in its mysterious depth of meaning, so that he saw through the slight motion of delicious lips a distant reflection of thought not her own, but the conveyed thought of the players seeing through the Queen's eyes. His mind closed now forcibly, he was not to know when they moved him or why.

He opened his eyes, then, and smiled at the woman's instant reaction to his waking.

She sprang back from him, for she had been seated, bending over him and peering intently at his sleeping face. She had been fascinated, but she herself did not know why.

In one explosive motion she sprang back, reaching up, and in her hands appeared a weapon, a long stick with thorns he knew instinctively were poisoned.

"Be careful, Beautiful," Horton heard himself saying in a low, soothing voice. "Those poison thorns are far greater peril than myself."

She shook her head, and he knew the words were not mean-

ingless to her, but unnecessary. She understood quite well what he meant. For answer she lay the thorn branch carefully away overhead, in a place from which she had just seized it. Then she relaxed and came toward him, squatting on the soft mosses before him, peering and bending to look into his eyes. She did not need words for speech. She was asking: "Why are you here in my home?"

He found himself speaking words unnecessarily, for she had divined his meaning before he himself had found the words to fit. "I was waiting for you. I saw your face and could not rest until I saw all of you."

"And now that you see all of me—" came into his mind from hers, and he watched her lips parting in anticipation of the thought she peered at behind his eyes, and he could hear the echo of his own thought in her mind as she listened, "—you find me beyond compare. You wish to embrace, to love me, you want my lips . . ."

Her eyes dropped, and she struggled to withhold her own thoughts from his eyes. Horton, watching, sensed a wrongness, an unearthly slant to her meanings. She was thinking:—"How could I want to give my lips to an outland beast, of no knowledge and little intelligence? How can you

speak of love, who does not have in his heart even the seed of true love?"

Somehow, listening, Horton heard the pronouns all wrong. He was an "it", and she was an "art". They were two very different things, in her mind, and not man and woman at all. His puzzling about this was comical to the unseen players. Yet the fact was that the game was of deadly seriousness, not only to him but to the unseen powers behind, above . . . he did not know where! He sensed that was part of the game, never to know. It was not a game for sport only! It was a game between two vastly divergent ideals, two mighty long-term plans for two divergent futures that could never exist on the same world. It was a very old game. His coming, strangely, had caused a pause, a new alignment of forces, a fresh beginning. Horton vaguely wondered if he would ever come to understand and appreciate the nuances, the full, complete, detailed picture of the conflicting futures projected by these two warring plans. The back of his mind abruptly ceased to consider anything but the here and the now of HER, this strange wild human.

Some flow of message meaning had told him she was the only other human on the planet . . .

"You can never understand,"

she was saying, watching him with a cat-to-mouse look, "having been born on a world where there are many, that I am the only one. The ones who made me are not like me! But those who made you are like you. That is why we are not both *it*. I am an *art*, and that is far more than something just accidentally born."

Horton tried to digest this, and failed utterly. She turned her face away, dismissing him as a thing of no possible consequence, having no mind. Embarrassment, humiliation, anger, pursued each other through Horton's mind. He burst out: "Women always put on superior airs for no reason. You are human enough in that."

She ignored his outburst, and after a time he swallowed his anger, asked humbly: "This game we play. If we win, what do we win? If we lose, what do we lose?"

She did not answer, and he leaned sidewise to see her expression, but there was an enigmatic mask over her features. He could neither hear her thought nor guess what it might be. She stood up suddenly in one of her explosive motions, this one eloquent of exasperation. "You do not know, or do you not want to know? It should already be knowledge within you. You are very stupid to ask."

Horton pondered over that. Somehow, inside, he knew the an-

swers, but could not assemble them properly in his consciousness. Finally he guessed: "If we win, we win a life of fulfillment of our natural wishes. If we lose, we will be transformed into something we will never find natural. We will find ourselves forced to conform to a pattern of living to which we can never truly adapt. Is that correct?"

She sat down, gently now, clasping her hands and knitting her brows in concentration. "Of course, you *do* know all the time! Why should you not believe what you know is true?"

Horton drifted into a lost contemplation of her beauty, did not even hear her speech. "I do not even know your name. Will you tell me?" he asked, his voice catching in his throat as if reluctant, so that he kept silent and let his mind do the talking.

"I know *your* name! Why don't you know mine?" She was indignant again, and Dick Horton sought again through his mind for this new *knowing* that he did not need to learn beforehand. "I feel your name is Rhea . . . Rhea what? But I do not know how I know."

She sniffed contemptuously. "On this world one does not have to learn any simple thing. Everything has already been learned, and is waiting to be known by you. It is only the *new things*, that did not exist before you, that must

be learned. When you learn them, *then they exist forever!* No one has to learn them again!"

Horton shook his head. It made no sense, yet he knew very well it made greater sense than he was used to having in his mind. So he tried this new-found *knowing* on it, and found he really knew all about it. One was in mental contact with a myriad of minds. No knowledge was lost. *They retained it all* in their billion-trillion memories, and when one reached for it, there it was, ready to *know!*

### III

"It is time for a move. The focus of power approaches," Rhea whispered, her face flushed with sudden elation, an anticipation of glorious action to come. Horton flinched from the terrific picture he caught of vast powers moving across the face of this world, intangible, terrible as a tornado, irresistible and ancient beings bent upon incomprehensible goals . . . and himself the focus-to-be of their warring! His knees shook, his hands began to quiver, he found himself unable to rise, until the quaking passed as quickly as it had come. For he "knew" that the game was also a way of bringing about new knowledge, and that they must shift about a new center to bring about new conditions; new forces must be brought into play. These were

friendly powers he could hear approaching. As the strength of them became a thunder in his mind, he fell into a trance of unhearing waiting.

In his trance he followed Rhea, who went gliding into the deeper shadows of the forest, pausing only to snatch a bunch of fruit like grapes from a vine. He picked a bunch, too. They were not grapes, but tasted like nuts without shells.

They were the first food he had eaten on Volmora except his own tinned rations. He had feared to eat anything, not knowing its effect. But now he would always "know" what was good and what was not good, so long as the game went on. The pleasure of eating the fruit was intense, and he "knew" that this pleasure was compounded of the reaction of many minds to the thought of eating, their memories adding strength to his own pleasure in eating.

As his trance state diminished into consciousness again, he found himself wondering: "In chess, the players alone do not die. The pieces are all killed, the King as well as the Queen . . . but no! The King is never killed, only imprisoned, deprived of movement!"

Pondering further, he heard himself questioning the surrounding aura of listening minds,

"Must the whole planet be devastated, everything else killed, just to checkmate me? And does that checkmate mean death?"

His knowing told him *Yes* to both questions. Rhea turned and smiled, then broke into a laugh. "You are wrong again! There is no real death on Volmoral Bodies sometimes perish, but yourself goes on! I have lived long, over a century of your time since I became a being in the thought of the many. But only when you came did I acquire a body!"

And then there was no time for questioning or wonder. The air about them was suddenly full of flying forms, which opened fish-like mouths as they flew toward the human pair, and as they struck their teeth ripped and tore. Rhea screamed. Horton threw himself flat, pulling Rhea with him to the ground. Something abruptly diverted the stream of flying things, before Horton had fully understood that they were being attacked by flying fish, here in the depths of a forest. The stream of flying forms passed, a solid phalanx of soaring death, piranha mouths champing under fixed fierce stares, long, vivid wings glittering prismatically, long, steel-strong, slender bodies quivering . . . and was abruptly gone.

Rhea threw her arms about Horton then, there on the soft

moss of the forest carpet, and he found himself kissing the dozens of bleeding gashes on her bare arms and shoulders as he murmured, "There, there, they have gone, and you will soon heal. Let me use my first aid kit."

At his words she released herself and drew back, her eyes horrified and her hands pushing him away. "You *know* that the proper remedy for such bites is the sap of the boondar tree, yet you want to get your mercurial poisons! Why can't you learn to know correctly?"

She hadn't said a word, but he had heard her horrified thought and, seeking desperately in his mind for the new knowledge, he understood that mercury to her body chemistry would have a virulence unimaginable to an Earthman. He read, too, a dozen simple remedies for such superficial wounds, all better than anything in his kit. He bowed his head in a fearful realization that his suggestion of using Earth's poisonous antiseptics had not been at all comical to the powerful minds who had created this Rhea . . . and this time his belief went along with the concept of creation. For such beings apparently had the power to clothe a thought with flesh if there was a need for it.

Into him came a new and powerful thought: "We remem-

ber the ignorant medical methods brought to us by the others from your world. You must not again think of using any of that inadequate toxicology based upon an inorganic medicinal pharmacopoeia often more detrimental to the one treated than the injury itself. Seek first our own healing methods, always waiting in the myriad ancient memories about you. And if you see the Sea Queen's flying brutes again, remember to think of yourself as a great beast fond of eating fish, and hold your body quite still. They hunt you by your thought, and it is a most delectable, helpless tidbit you reflect from the listening about you to their hunting scent."

So the two, Horton the King and Rhea the Queen, went silently and humbly through the thinking, friendly forest toward the nearby boondar tree that waited consciously for their coming. They spread the already exuded sap with their fingers everywhere the fishes' teeth had scored their flesh. Within short minutes the pain went out of the wounds and they knew they would heal now without soreness.

Then Rhea went through a little ritual of blessing the ground beneath the tree, a kind of prayer of communion with the tree, and they lay down and slept under it. When they awoke they collected

several armloads of dried animal dung from the game paths, spreading them beneath the tree for payment, for such was the law. A benediction followed them as they left, and a thrill of pleasure went through them, for they had obeyed the law.

A thought came to Horton from his own maladjusted self, then, and a shudder went through all the gentle forest . . . or was it gentle only in the seeming it wore like a veil of mist? His thought, that "perhaps he had fallen into a basic error, and should in truth be upon the side of the Sea? For how could the life of the forest ever conquer the boundless ocean?"

"It is the game, and it goes on! Our life is a part of land life, how then could we be part of the sea?"

Horton looked at Rhea, wondering if it was really she speaking, and was confused at knowing he could never be quite sure whether he was talking to her or to one of a million other minds which all managed to be present in his "knowing".

Rhea looked at him coldly, her lips sliding back from her perfect teeth to reveal a savage sort of snarl that was certainly never meant to be a smile. "So you already wonder if you have made a mistake and chosen the losing side? And for this we make you our King? Perhaps you are right,

and we should throw you to the sea and dismiss you from our plans?"

Unhappy idea, unhappy thinking. He withdrew from his thoughts, and moved softly along beside Rhea, his feet noiseless beside hers on the moss. He let his mind relax into the knowing presence of the many about him, felt their welcome. Living became again a great adventure, the flowers seemed to open afresh, the leaves drooped to caress him, and the thorns lifted themselves from before his path. He felt now an upwelling of contentment, a something vastly more than any homecoming could ever be.

Suddenly he was aware of the distant great beating of *the heart of life*, somewhere in the dim greenness of an inviolate and secret forest glade. He heard *the heart* saying: "This is your natural home, the forest and the glens and the streams that go splashing and rippling down to the quiet rivers."

And that distant heart was his own heart, too, as truly himself as *the heart-thought* of all that multitudinous life that made up Volmora's citizens.

Now the light came stronger from above, and Horton wished he could see the sky. Instantaneously he could see, with some distant thinker's eyes, two suns drifting overhead, one high and

one just risen. Though the sky was entirely hidden, he yet "saw" it clearly, deep vivid blue-green, a peacock color striped with lazy white streamers of cloudland, colored bizarrely by the rising second sun into warm rose and flaming scarlet and soft pink and hazy gold. Far off he sensed the yellow sea lying sullenly waiting; he feared it, for it was the enemy watching for the time to hurl its myriad warriors against his own. He feared for his friends of the forest, knowing their bodies must perish in the battles to come until it was decided once and for all who ruled Volmora and what it was to become.

The game had become very real to him now. He saw his own part more clearly, the long chain of events stretching out from himself to Rhea to the misty future that would eventually mold that future to the all-hearts' desire. He heard the all-hearts' heart of hearts beat in reply, distant and dark and profound, and love for this life beyond his own was strong and knowing in him. His arm went about Rhea's waist. She leaned against him, knowing their new affection was everyone's natural affection. Together they joined in the thinking of the many minds, feeling the life-principle itself coinciding all its lines of force with all their own, like a general marshaling his

armies. Together they rediscovered TO BE, a purpose which was the center of all purpose and their own central will. Dick Horton had never understood that all his thinking was always the life principle of all time's flows; allied and mutually dependent life-forms reaching through his mind toward better life. He knew then, with Rhea's soft, pliant waist within his arm, that never before had he understood what thinking and life-effort were really about. Now he did know, and would always work with all other lives to make the life-field more hospitable for each of them.

"There are two enemies in life, and only two," he heard his own voice murmuring. "One is mutually supporting life, the symbiotes. The other is mutually destructive life, the parasites and the omnivores who have developed an errant line of effort from the central principle."

"On your world," murmured Rhea, "the errants long ago conquered and destroyed the natural life-pattern, to substitute a degenerative pattern of their own."

"As bad as that?" asked Horton, not caring if he was conversing with Rhea or the all-mind about him. For now he knew it was all the same thing.

"As bad as that, dear student. Of course, it can always be changed, come to understand its



own errant nature and begin to remedy its faults. But it can never become what it would have been had the symbiotes won the first great battle."

"Armageddon," thought Horton, and about him murmured the myriad thinking selves:

"Armageddon, an age ago, and the symbiotes died. Then Earth inherited death and age and warfare forever. Sorrow came to live forever with each one, and all minds separated into single warring entities. Forever they try to destroy each the other, never seeing the other *as themselves* . . . though their true interests are identical, and never opposed. The trees became victims, the forests passed away. The streams dried up, the air became sterile and empty of the trees' gift of living water. The sun became a deadly enemy, burning away the green base life into deserts. Catastrophe followed disaster, life nearly perished on Earth. Then came a slow resurgence of the symbiotes, left alone by the vanished destructives. And again the name of *man* became the synonym for death, for he multiplied and he destroyed. Again Earth became barren and blasted with war, and man almost vanished. Think you our forest of life wants MAN?"

Horton withdrew his arm from about Rhea, and her eyes blazed sudden anger at him. "Fool, you

cannot comprehend. *They mean man without contact and love!* Here, man could be many and strong, and still not lose symbiotic contact. It is not the shape or color of a life that makes it one or the other. It is its point of intent, the deep inner impulse of its energy, the direction of its will.

"To lose the direction, that is the sin that changes any life-form from a healthy part of all-life to an enemy of all life!" This came from some deep subterranean mind, and Horton accepted it as one with the voice of Rhea.

"I see." Horton lifted his head, recovered from his shock of learning what he himself was to this people so various yet one. His arm moved about Rhea's waist again, but she threw it aside, her eyes fierce as a mother leopard shielding her cub. "When you truly understand and are truly adjusted and a part of us, I will know! Until then, do not even think of love for me. It will be only pain to you! On Volmora there will be no robot race of erring ant-like-men, tearing the world of life into fragments beneath the tread of their insane armies!"

Horton bent his head, and walked beside her, silently cursing Earth's history. For within him was welling up a fountain of understanding, and in the light of that new thought he saw him-

self for a mutilated fragment of horror from an ancient world of pain.

"There are no ant armies upon Volmora," Rhea murmured, her voice softened now to a calm acceptance of him and his unpleasant heritage of horror. "But within the yellow sea many errant forms are developing, and the Sea Queen uses them in the game."

"Is all the yellow sea slipping into the anti-symbiote patterns?" asked Horton, reaching out now for what was concealed, the underthinking of the far-off destructive leaders, the terrible cancer that had destroyed his own world and was now seen to be at work here . . . perhaps grown beyond surgery.

"*That is the game!*" came Rhea's voice, but not her own sending. It was instead a terrific source of thought energy that brought her body up taut and vibrant against his own, not in love but in a terrific promise of something vastly more than any mere earthly love of male for female. And as swiftly the promise was withdrawn, became conditional upon his own development. Horton's self became then a reaching, an enfolding, a branching-out of many mental seeking fingers, and he heard his inner self swear an oath to make a mighty effort toward metamor-

phosis into . . . what? There was no earthly thought which could hold that concept, the thing he wanted to become.

"A sad Earth," he heard the myriad sighs of sympathy. "Sad, sad, not to know the word for *self*."

Horton knew that till this instant he had never had a *self*, but only a miasma of error, of inner delusion, an ego that twisted forever in tortuous fumbling from error to mistake to dungheap of ignorance.

Abruptly Rhea laughed, throwing off the whole too-serious discussion with a toss of her dark mane of glossy tresses. She stepped close, holding him for a long second and staring into his eyes. Then she pulled his head down to her soft breast, close and sweet and melting, and a self that was really her own came out and peered from within her into his own inner eyes.

"Happiness," said Rhea, her voice a soft murmur of real words above his head. "Win or lose we have ahead many days and nights of love. Forget now, and become again your own poor starved Earth-self, and let me help you grow into our reality."

A kiss, was his thought. His act was swift to follow. Their kiss was an oath of dark bliss, a waiting they must enforce while they snatched from the stark game of

death to come what moments of peace might be theirs.

Then she was gone, and he was alone in the too-bright noon, the forest silent and waiting about him.

"The Queen has gone upon war's errand, the King is fixed upon his square," was Horton's last conscious thought as he sank upon the grass and slept.

#### IV

In his sleep Dick Horton felt the sullen yellow flood reach for him, lift him, chortle as it bore him away. When he won his struggle to open his eyes, there was a rushing all about him, and a face beside him that was *not* Rhea's face!

The face was familiar, like the face of some half-remembered portrait seen in an ancient mansion. Or a picture held up by an auctioneer, somewhere, that you knew you should know the person, but can't quite remember. His guessing about the nature of the owner of the face was half scornful, half impressed by the aura of lineage, of pride in power. A lean face, lovely in a bizarre angularity and strength, yet frightening with the suggestion of ruthlessness and self-will . . . Her thought reaching into his mind was mocking: "The King of the Forest does not resist? Where now is the promise of the Heart

of the Forest? Where the power of the hosts of forest beasts? What use the wisdom of the ancient dwellers of the under-soil?"

"Does this capture end the game?" asked Horton, half certain he was dreaming still, and about to awake safe in his forest glade.

The creature laughed, and he knew that was real laughter, a sound of mockery and bold, rebellious courage in his ears, and no dream. "End the game?" Her voice was sound, too, and he wondered why she should speak thus, like an air breather of his own world, and in his own tongue, until he realized it was the perfection of her mental contact that gave the complete illusion of speech; a trick, perhaps, to impress him. "Hardly, little man. You are not that important. I have captured the new King, yes. To you it is important, and to me. But they can create a newer King, or go on without one. To them, I wonder if you *are* important."

"Why to you?" asked Horton, his eyes and his new knowing faculty searching inwards toward her secret thoughts, while his conscious mind was employed taking stock of her soft sleek shoulders, the piercing grey eyes, the smooth, pointed chin under the mocking red lips.

"The Sea Queen has always a use for one who can give her

what you can give." Her eyes were suddenly keen with something too deep for Horton's faculties to search out. He found in his mind only a blankness and a strange mental scent like the hide of a seal under his nose—a scent that told him there was about him no thought-field natural to his mind, but only the grey reaching of many strange deep sea-things, searching for food, for life, for something else even more important yet unguessable to him.

"I am under the sea?" he asked, trying to pierce the almost-dark around him, and then the motion ceased and she released him. He stood alone as she moved away in the darkness. Fear of the weird, merciless thoughts about him rose up and overwhelmed him. This was not his place; this nest of terrible, alien thinking was too far removed from any possible path of human experience!

The light came slowly. He saw the wall of dark wetness holding back the inconceivable pressure of the terrible depths, and the Queen striding toward him across the floor of softly glowing glass. Some wild thing in him rose up, then, in answer to her bold beauty, the lithe grace and strength of her, the long clean legs with their swimmer's webs only adding an exotic touch of fantasy. She laughed at the flush

that rose in his cheeks, and touched his naked arm with her fingertips. He saw that her hand was but slender, too-long bones ending in sharp claws, with the webs between glittering wetly. Yet her touch was not a horror to him, but a strange wonder! His flush deepened, and between them pulsed a recognition of the wild courage and reckless will-to-pleasure in the other, a thing between them strong and new, that would never brook any obstacle barring them from their desires.

She was woman, well enough, in spite of her mer-woman look. Her breasts were two white poems of alabaster, her waist was a slender pillar of exotic rhythm swaying above her hips, as his eyes approved and would not leave off approving. His heart rose to a thunder in his breast in weird acknowledgment of her beauty's power over him.

"What could I have that you would find of value?" asked Horton, his eyes seeking her own while his mind strove against her lure, suspecting some subtle trickery at work, some reason for this capture of his susceptibility that evaded him. His mind strove against the meshes of her trap, but he knew only that he was powerless against her. His mind met in its searching only a mocking myriad of minds each assur-

ing him that he was now of the sea and would so remain.

"We of the sea want knowledge of your world, for many things have happened there in ages past of which we must know more. We have been cut off by the forest powers from learning of other worlds of life. There is one question we must answer. We think the answer is in you, unknown to you. Too, there is another reason I want you for myself. Need I say *what* that reason?"

Her eyes told him; and his mind knew it was true. His heart thundered that it had no will to escape. He tried to think of Rhea and of *the great promise*, but the knowing thought about him pressed the memory out of him and gave him a mocking emptiness, as swiftly replaced by a false memory of unpleasant forest aisles where only death awaited.

Willy-nilly, he was grateful to the Queen of the Sea for rescuing him from the death of the forest. His lips opened as he began to tell her so. But there was no need, she knew it, he knew that she would always know his deepest, most secret thought. Some little warning rang futile alarm in his inner mind, and a door swung slowly closed in his heart. Again he tried to release himself from the spell of her

strange beauty upon him. But it was all useless, and he moved toward her hungry arms eagerly, thinking only that he had courage to match hers, that together they would snatch great joy and infinite love from the hungry abyss of peril surrounding them.

Rhea sought for her Earthman a long time, when she returned, but there was only the wet track of the water that had rushed across the forest floor. There was only the certainty given her by the knowing forest minds that *the sea* had snatched him away. She pondered on the new use of forces by the sea that made it able to send water out of the sea on an errand such as that, where no water had ever flowed before.

"The King is captured," said the greater of the many minds of the forest. "But he has not mated yet!"

"They have provided a mate?" asked Rhea, and sadly knew that they had created such a thing, if it had not already been created long ago . . . perhaps a whole race of creatures similar to men. How could she know?

They took long council, then, with Rhea listening but not fully understanding, learning only that the vast forces of the sea were drawing together in a deep close at hand. She learned that her own rulers had decided to make a

thing of life to send against this sea army, before it came out to destroy forever the greater minds of the forest.

Rhea came, after weary days of waiting, to the place near the shore where the new life-thing had been created. It was huge, it looked like a fish, but it was no fish. Terrible were its jaws, huge its head, powerful its driver fins as the sea itself. She stood beside it as a mouse beside a mountain. At last its side opened, and she went in to the place prepared for her there.

It moved as a turtle moves, down the steep slopes to the sea, with its great fins working so powerfully that the land was thrown up in hillocks beside it. The life-thing struck the water with a roar of waves, slid along the mud bottom into deeper water. It lay there for a time, new-thinking with its vast mind, thoughts deafening to little Rhea. She could hear nothing but its call to the people of the sea.

Presently the sea people swam toward this beast now entered into the sea, gathered about it, and Rhea knew their minds were captured and enslaved by the vast forces of its thought. Then it moved, swimming powerfully, and beside it gathered ever new myriads of fish forms from the gardens of the sea, waiting now to do their new master's bidding.

Rhea lay inside the thing like a tiny seed in the womb of a monstrous mother. Her thought was but a part of the war-thought sent out by the monster war-thing. Her own self slept and waited, watching the shock and chaos of the growing battle about the new beast as a tree might watch the struggling of warring men beneath its branches.

Her mind went ahead of the deep-diving monster and ahead of the swarms of enslaved sea-creatures, fighting now against the Sea Queen's gathering forces. Down and down into the deeps ahead she went, to find the bubble of force within which walked her man, and within which walked also the Sea Queen to whom they had given her man. Most of all she wanted to pit her strength against the strange strength of that Sea Queen, to learn why they had taken him, and what they meant to do with him. For if she guessed aright, they meant to father a race of monstrous man-like warriors, amphibians to swarm out over the forest and whelm it once and for all under the Earthman's horrid way of life.

And all that diving and battling of the beast that bore her was like a dream, through which she slept, her dreaming mind racing ahead of events to reach the heart of the future and there turn

aside disaster. In her dream she wept and writhed in pain as she saw the many minds of the sea forces drawing from the Earthman's mind the plans for Earth's tools of war, the great guns and bombs and gases and deadly viruses Earthmen had used to destroy each other and the other good life on their world. Worst of all was the way of Earth armies. She awoke in a sweat of anger as she learned that they meant truly to use him to father an army of sea-creature slaves. "Sea-ants, like men, but even worse in their predestined will to destruction!" She was crying it out as she woke, and became conscious of the struggle about her beast, the mighty fishes tearing each other to bloody fragments as they were moved by the controlling mind of her powerful war-beast to protect the sides that enclosed her.

"It is his knowledge of warfare they want," the Heart of Hearts told her, from its home far off in the forest. "It is his seed, the destructive inheritance from his race's centuries of terrible error. They want to loose a host of such destructives upon our forests!"

Rhea was ready, then, the anger in her a great leashed power, as the beast she rode smashed into the bubble of force and burst through. Its side opened, and she stepped out, to face the queenly beauty of the sea-thing they had

made to trap the Earthman to their will. From her eyes the *on-power* streamed, gifted her from the life-strength of the hosts of forest folk, the queen-power her makers had given her. For a long minute the taller, lithe beauty of the mer-creature stood against that eye-glance of lightning. Then she bowed her lovely head and sank slowly to her knees.

Behind her Rhea could see now the black bodies, the massed sea-beasts in their deepest nest, and she felt now the full force of their blind hate. She staggered in weakness, for that was a terrible force unleashed against her; she felt her mind burning and withering in her skull. Then a strong arm seized her about the waist, and faintly she heard the voice of her dear, foolish Earthman, crying: "My Rhea, you came, riding that black monster to meet death for me!"

He lifted her, moved toward the opening in the side of the monster where it lay on the sea floor. Steam came out of its nostrils, and from its great head shot out thought-powered bolts of deadly meaning. The sea rulers coiled and writhed in their black nest, and now collapsed the bubble of force that held back the water from the Sea Queen's trap, where they had meant to breed the new race of Earthmen-slaves.

As the terrible pressure crashed

down about Horton and his Queen, the sea-rulers will never ceased to project hatred against Rhea. She straightened in Horton's arms, her feet touched the glassy pave, thrust forward against the roaring crash of waters upon them.

The mer-woman, struck, too, by the sudden crash of waters, yet tried to hold her captive. Now she seized them both by the arms, her driver-fins lashing to drag them back from the haven of the opening in the side of the huge thing that had brought Rhea. Rhea twisted from her grasp, caught her by the throat, and as Horton collapsed in the black water, thrust them both through the opening ahead of her, leaping in as the flesh-opening closed like a great mouth gulping in food.

Still the beast lay there, sending out against the sea rulers great bolts of truth-meaning. They coiled and writhed and twisted their wills into dull knots of futile error to escape the paralyzing truth-power.

Then with a thrash of great driver-fins the monstrous turtle form twisted, smashed against the force wall of the dark nest that protected the sea rulers, drove its weight into and upon the soft writhing forms of them. And what it did to them as they cast coils of tentacles about it was

what all whales do to all squids, slash them into eatable pieces and gulp them in.

But down upon the forests' swimming beast came now the whole host of the sea powers, fishes in schools so thick there seemed no water between them, biting and tearing at the dark woody sides of the forest beast. Great tentacular arms multiplied about the beast's dark sides, holding against the driving power of his fins.

Every grimy part of the beast was gripped and held by some writhing cable of strength. Ink sacs emptied till all was black as the pit, but still the vast strength of the beast moved, slowly on and on, the center of a terrible moil of threshing destruction. Against the sides of it those three tiny lives who had found shelter there felt the shock and rip and clash of teeth tearing, great bodies thrashing wildly to stay forever its driving force, to drain forever the living power of it. Every inch of the beast felt the force of the tearing mouths of the sea host, striving to tear out its mighty strength by fragments.

Inside, the minds of the three were assaulted with terrible will-force from the all-mind of the multitudinous life of the sea, but through it all there was felt a cooling force of sustaining will, and some of that was *from the*



sea; and some from the forest far above.

"There are rebel rulers in the sea, who want no warring with the land, who disapprove of the game!" The thought was in Horton's mind. "They want us all to live amicably together. They side with the symbiotes of the forest. They say there is no need of the game of war between us!"

"They are right," Rhea's thought answered. "These rulers behind the sea-woman here are errants. They plan everlasting destruction to all life not like their own. And what they call *their own* are the worst mutants of the life process, the most degenerate of the wrong paths creation can take; they are sea-life in which the original life seed has become distorted into horror . . ."

"What will you do with this Sea Queen you have captured, my Rhea?" asked Horton, lifting his head from the weariness that had overcome him.

"I am taking her mind back to the Forest Hearts for them to see what those others put in the flesh they designed for you to mate. They will know then that the ancient laws were broken by this clique behind her. They will know the ancient game has become but horror trying to overwhelm the peaceful folk forever. The Hearts must know, and plan differently."

Horton did not wonder who spoke, himself or Rhea or the myriad multitudes of the friendly folk of Volmora's all-mind. For he knew now that it mattered not at all, for he had found their wills the same as his own in truth, indistinguishable. He had learned that *self* is an illusion, possible only to one who has had no mental contact with living minds.

## V

Now, on Volmora, many lazy suns have circled overhead. The years are many and long since the First became mated to the Earthman. Their children are many. But on Volmora there are no cities and no highways. The machine is still almost unknown, and un-needed.

In the yellow sea, too, swim great numbers of mer-men and mer-women. All of them claim descent from the First Queen of the Sea. It seems she was created by the urge of the life-union of the sea to mate with a strange air-breather, without fins or gills, when the Sea-Heart saw it was necessary for new ways to come to Volmora.

Over all Volmora death is little known, for no worthy mind-being is ever forgotten. The all-mind makes a new body for every being whenever the old one wears out. But many live on in the all-mind, without seeing any need

for a body except during the time of the Feast of Mating, and during the great Fete of the Day of the Armistice.

There is still a great game the ancient rulers of Volmora play, but it is said they do not take it so seriously as in former times. For there are but few dissidents to the rule of the All-heart, and Love-of-Being keeps all of the Friends within the Covenant.

There are still the hunters and the hunted, but this is ruled strictly by the Covenant; and mind-beings do not take part in the hunts. Short is the life of him who breaks the Covenant! For the hunter must always destroy the destructive, and there are hardly enough who become errant offspring of the life-force to keep hunters keen on the trail.

But the skies are always watched for the errant beings who may come from the worlds where error has overcome the Way of Life. And many come, but few are chosen. And fewer yet are those who ever leave Volmora for lesser worlds.

As King Horton said to the First, only yester-double-day, "To return to Earth would be a mighty game! But would the prize be worth the *lost* time?"

And as the First replied: "From your memory of Earth, is not the Way of Life there too weak, and the error too deep-rooted? What plants and what creatures would be left when the game was finally won?"

Then there was brooding, and a faint voice of ancient weakness spoke through the First, or beyond her: "We are not ready for such an effort, anyway. To overcome a whole world, that a few good seed-lives might be saved from the destruction of the destructives? Is there good thinking in such a project?"

Horton saying: "You are right! If we two went, we would not have the Heart of Hearts with us, for there is none left alive on Earth from the first beginners, as there was here. We would find ourselves set upon by all men, by every fierce life-form . . ."

Horton answering the voice that had spoken through him: "We might win *man!* It would be a worth-while game, and a fine prize!"

Heart-of-Hearts whispers to them both: "When you are ready, you will be told! Grow strong, and one day soon, you may go and play that finest game on *Earth!*" . . .