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NOVELET

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The Heirs

by Irving
Cox, Jr.

Once this world had been
humanity's home, but
now it was known as the
Planet of Horror.

STILL UNMEASURED miles short of its destination, the ship lurched from the time drive into objective space. Lieutenant Cannon felt the customary wrench of mild nausea—and a cold shock of fear. Something had gone wrong; it nearly always did in these one-man, commercial carriers.

The Lieutenant grabbed for the control panel, to cut off the power, but he was too late; an explosion rocked the floor of the cabin and sent Cannon reeling against the metal wall. A moment later, he was floating awkwardly in midair as the gyros cut out. The automatic safety mechanism threw the cabin free from the exploding power pile.

Cannon caught the back of the pilot's chair and swung his hand toward the controls. The motion was too abrupt. It sent him spinning toward the view-screen; by twisting his body

Thirty years ago, science fiction authors were more or less sold on a standard portrayal of far-future man: a wizened creature with a big head, non-sexual, his limbs atrophied to the point where he could barely get around under his own power. In recent decades, a variety of portraits have been drawn, and here Mr. Cox presents a picture which is no less plausible, but is certainly more interesting than the big-heads of bygone days.

grotesquely, he was able to avoid smashing the glass. Very gradually, then, he eased himself into the chair, buckling the landing strap across his hips to hold his body in place. Deep in his mind, he was cursing the military service; it was their fault that the commercial ships were slapped together from left-overs and discards. Cannon had spent most of his twenty-four years cursing the generals and their eternal wars —cursing them silently, in the secret places of his soul.

IN THEORY, Cannon had two alternative means of escape. He could radio the base for help, and wait for a pick-up cruiser. Or he could use the short-lived power of emergency rockets to land the escape cabin on any planetary body that he was able to reach. But he was too far from the galactic base to hope for his beam to be picked up; and he had perhaps one chance in a thousand that his ship had emerged into objective space anywhere close to a habitable solar system.

Reluctantly, Cannon snapped down the lever that activated the viewscreen. Green-tinted static waves swam across the glass briefly, slowly resolving into a star-patterned sky. The radiant

sphere of a planet hung in the upper quadrant of the field. With soaring hope, Cannon tabbed the calculator for directional data. When he read the tape, he knew that he had played into phenomenal luck. The explosion of his ship had flung him on a course that would coincide with the orbit of that planet. He had ample power in the emergency rockets to make a landing.

He would have to land in less than an hour. He ran a hasty spectrographic analysis; the planet had an oxygen atmosphere. Then he checked the viewscreen again—and he seemed to recognize the astronomical pattern of the neighboring sky. His ship had lurched from the time-drive almost at its point of destination.

Cannon clenched his fists against his lips. "Oh, Lord, not that!" he whispered aloud. He had wanted to see it, yes—but from the safety of space. He had not intended to land in that seething swamp!

He was close enough to the planet to see the gapping scars torn in the surface, the sprawling deserts of red dust. With shaking fingers he rolled the chart film through the projector until the image coincided with the pattern on the viewscreen. Beyond any doubt

this was the solar system where man had originated; the scarred globe dominating his screen was Earth itself.

The horror world.

Air caught at the falling escape cabin. The Lieutenant felt the abrupt tug of gravity as the triangular glider wings shot out. He hesitated before he fired the rockets. It might be wiser to crash—to die at once, without facing the horror. In the military academy he had been taught to accept suicide as a normal device for solving problems; the suicide squads were often the only means the military had of penetrating an enemy raid-dome. Yet, at twenty-four, a man does not readily resort to suicide, except under the hypnotic impetus of organized patriotism. Cannon glared at the horror world mirrored on his viewscreen. He was determined to live; he was determined to survive, despite the horror.

Furiously he jammed his thumb on the firing stud, but his hesitation had been a split-second too long. The escape cabin soared toward Earth too close for an initial approach. There was not enough fuel in the emergency rockets to pull the cabin into an alternate course.

During the last two minutes

of flight, as the cabin fled screaming less than half a mile above the ground, Lieutenant Cannon saw the checkeredboard pattern of the horror world swing in a stately panorama across the viewscreen. Sprawling jungle forests and mountain ranges sculpted by rain and wind; a long, straight stretch of broken paving that might once have been a highway; geometric patterns of crumbled granite which suggested the locations of ruined cities.

THE ESCAPE cabin came to a wrenching stop in an open field. Cannon was flung by force of momentum into the control panel. He felt it shatter beneath him. Bruised and cut, he pulled himself to his feet and, in dismay, surveyed the wreckage in the cabin. Not one of his machines had survived the landing, and he had no replacement parts aboard.

Cannon pried open the cabin door and stood looking out at the yellow grass carpeting the landing field. He was waiting—waiting for the horror to rise up around him. What form would it take? He did not know. No man knew—except that monstrosity and degradation were scientifically inevitable.

He heard no sound—only

the gentle whisper of the wind over the yellow grass. Surely they (whatever they were) had noticed his landing; surely they had seen his flight through the tranquil air. Why hadn't they come to investigate?

Every galactic scientist said that even the soil on the horror world would still be radioactive. Cannon went back into the cabin for his portable counter, but he found that it, too, had been smashed in the landing. Again he hesitated at the open door. Without the counter, how would he know where he might go safely?

Perhaps the field itself—his muscles tensed with a quiver of fear. For a moment, the nodding, yellow grass seemed to be a desert of red dust. A trick of the sunlight, of course; of the horror that trailed ghost whisks across his mind. With an effort of will he pushed the fear out of his mind. He had to leave the cabin; he had no other alternative.

HE THRUST a blaster and a recharge cartridge into his belt clip and leaped through the cabin door. The ground felt soft and moist beneath his feet. The air was sweet with the fragrance of growing things. The strange

contrast disturbed him. This was Earth—the horror world—but it seemed an idyll, the dream of peace that every man treasured deep in his soul.

With a feeling of confidence, Cannon strode toward the trees that bordered the field. He was a tall, well-built man—a typical physical product of the military training schools. Although he was on leave, he wore his fleet uniform: black, tight-fitting tunic and trousers, laced with the mesh of the automatic heating grid and pressure stabilizer; black, plastic boots; and a broad, metallic belt crusted with the clips that normally held the paraphernalia of his profession. His face, surmounted by a closely cropped mat of blond hair, had a settled, arrogant expression—product of his military training.

The trees beyond the field sheltered a cool, forest glade where the sunlight filtered through lacework leaves and danced jewel colors on the surface of a swift-moving stream. Again the idyll! In the towered, cluttered, galactic cities Lieutenant Cannon had seen a thousand times the tri-D pictures of a similar glade, sometimes the only ornament on the bare walls of

the tiny dwelling units. A visible symbol of every man's dream—but here a reality of the horror world.

The Lieutenant came to a place where the stream widened to form a pool. He heard the sound of splashing and the muted note of a woman's voice. She was singing softly to herself, a haunting minor-keyed melody.

CAUTIOUSLY, with his blaster in his hand, Cannon pushed aside the brush until he had a clear and unobstructed view of the pool. The woman had just pulled herself from the water. She sat on a low, flat rock, spotlighted in a shaft of sunlight. The water clung in a thousand tiny pearls to her naked shoulders. She moved languidly, luxuriating in the warm sun, the most sensuously beautiful woman Cannon had ever seen.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Why don't you come down here and sit in the sun?"

"You—you're speaking galactic!" he gasped.

"We had the language first," she answered.

Somehow this was all wrong—absurd. Cannon felt a vague fear, but that seemed foolish, too. "I'm a stranger on your world," he told her. "I just landed in—"

"Yes, we saw your ship," she replied matter-of-factly, as if a landing on the horror world were an everyday occurrence.

"You saw it?" Cannon repeated. "And no one came out to—to—" His voice trailed off; he wasn't altogether sure what he had expected the earth people to do.

"The elder sent me to meet you; I thought it would be more pleasant if we first saw each other here in the glade."

SHE MOTIONED again for him to join her, and he moved slowly toward the rock. Her nudity embarrassed him; no galactic woman would have been so crude. But he reminded himself that the earth had become a primitive world; he couldn't expect this brown-skinned girl to understand the standards of a sophisticated society. The miracle was her altogether human appearance—on this world. Scientifically he knew that was impossible; nothing remotely human could have survived. Yet here she was, breathtakingly lovely and as human as man's lushest dream.

She pulled him down on the rock beside her. "My name is Marian."

"I'm Lieutenant Cannon—Milt Cannon of Astoria.

That's another planet, Marian, many billions of miles away. Of course you wouldn't—"

"Astoria? Isn't that one of our most highly developed colonies. Near the heart of the galaxy."

Again her answer seemed absurd; how could anyone on this neglected horror know anything of man's galactic culture? Cautiously he tried to ask her for an explanation. She threw back her head and laughed—musical laughter that sent hot waves of desire flaming in his veins.

"All the worlds of man are our offspring," she reminded him. "Your civilization began here on Earth, centuries ago. We're naturally interested in your progress; we like to keep in touch."

"But how, Marian? Earth sends no ambassadors to the civilized planets."

"We have visitors now and then—people who stray back to Earth, the way you did, Lieutenant Cannon."

VISITORS, yes: archeologists and physical scientists, he thought. He had read their books. The last expedition had returned only a year ago. Unanimously the scientists reported the horror: deserts of red dust and nightmare monsters crawling among the misshapen trees. Why had

they lied? Or had they never found the quiet glade or the tranquil fields?

"You said the elder sent you to meet me," he reminded her. "By that do you mean your father? The leader of your—He paused, unsure of his choice of words. "The leader of your tribe?"

"The elder is just—an elder. We have many, wise in the things of the mind. We always seek their advice. And your word 'tribe,' Lieutenant—I don't think you quite understand. All men are one tribe; all men are brothers."

He stood up, putting his blaster back into his belt clip. The conversation seemed nebulous, words vague with invisible shadows. He wanted to come to grips with something real. He asked, "Am I to meet the others, Marian? The elder, perhaps?"

"In time, Lieutenant Connon."

"Is your villages close by?"

"Just beyond the old city." She arose and drew a thin veil around her shoulders. "I hoped we might talk a little longer, but since you're so very impatient—" She sighed and there seemed to be a note of sorrow in her voice.

She led him across the bathing pool on the causeway of small stones. They ascended the mossy bank and emerged

from the trees on a broad, artfully landscaped highway. Perhaps half a mile away Cannon saw the arching levels of a city rising above the rolling, green meadows. The sun was beginning to set and the flaming gold of the sky was reflected from the countless city windows.

A FAIRY city it was, fragile with the stuff of dreams: the kind of city the people of the galaxy dreamed of building one day, when the wars were finished and they could escape the confinement of the thick, metal raid-domes. The earth duplicated in intimate detail the hope and the vision of Cannon's own mind.

"Why did you come here, Lieutenant?" Marian asked as they walked toward the city.

"I was curious; I had a month's leave from the fleet, and I wanted to see Earth."

"We decided you weren't a scientific expedition when we first saw your ship. They always come in large cruisers—scores of men at one time."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't intend to land, but my power pile blew and I had no alternative."

"You were going to sit out there in space and just look at us?"

"I had a viewscreen with

good magnification." Sheepishly he added, "I was afraid to come any closer. Marian, the scientists have lied. They must have been subsidized by the military; that might explain it. No one in the galaxy knows the truth about Earth."

"The truth, Lieutenant?" She laughed gently. "In the best of us, truth is relative to our point of view—to the overall configuration of what we believe. That's one of the failings that makes us human beings."

"In small things, maybe; but this, Marian, is a deliberate conspiracy." So it seemed to Cannon: a gigantic conspiracy against all mankind—to keep the galaxy in ignorance, enslaved by war. On Earth, was peace, but they called it horror, for that suited the purposes of the war-makers. If men knew that perfection such as this could actually exist, they would become impatient with the restraint and the regimentation of war; they would throw off the yoke of the raid-domes and begin building a similar perfection for themselves.

"We say that Earth is a horror world," he told her, in shame.

"And do you find it so Lieutenant?"

"**W**E BELIEVE that only because the inhabited

worlds are so far away, and so few of us ever have the chance to come back to the earth. Most people feel a sort of guilt, too: the horror was our fault. We tried to move as far away from it as we could, to forget it by ignoring it."

She repeated her question. "Are we a horror, Lieutenant? Look around you; tell me what you see."

"In school we're taught that the earth was involved in the First Galactic War—just after men began making the early galactic colonies. Our present weapons, in a primitive form, were used in that war, and Earth was burned with radioactive beams. Not enough to destroy all living matter—as our guns do now—but enough to cause a riot of uncontrollable mutations in plants and animals—and in human beings. There were new horrors created with every passing generation, and no one could prevent it. We had done that—or so were told—to our mother world. So we ran away, to the farthest part of the galaxy, and built new colonies and made new wars. Now, when we burn a world, we do it cleanly and completely; nothing outside the raid-domes survives."

"So what you did here," she said, "gives you a reason to

call your weapons humane."

"That's it, of course. That's why the militarists have persuaded the scientists to lie."

"Perhaps that is a logical explanation that you can believe, Lieutenant Cannon. For you it will become a truth."

HER ANSWER troubled him; it seemed to have a significance he couldn't grasp. But he had no time, then, to consider it more carefully, for they had entered the city. He had expected to see the streets thronged with people, throbbing with the churning wheels of heavy traffic. But the city was silent and empty.

"We no longer live in our cities," Marian explained. "We found more freedom outside. But we keep the cities in repair—national monuments, you might call them or living museums of the past. I wanted you to see the city first, Lieutenant, so you wouldn't form wrong impressions about us."

Cannon marveled at the wide streets, the plate glass store fronts, the spacious interiors: a city naked beneath the open sky, and unafraid. Nothing in the galaxy was like this, for the impenetrable metal of the raid-domes blotted out the sun and restricted the city buildings to jam-packed rabbit warrens hunched over

tunnel roads. Until it was dark Cannon walked in the deserted earth city, reveling in the crisp, geometric beauty of unconfined space. This, too, like the glade, was a part of man's dream: the world he would make when the wars were finally done.

"And your people have given all this up?" he said to Marian unbelievingly.

"We've outgrown it."

"But what could possibly be better or finer—"

"The city is the final product of a material culture. For all its conveniences, it can clutter a human life with a great many tensions and burdens. A simplicity in things gives freedom to the mind, and that's the only freedom that has real value. On the earth, Lieutenant, we've progressed to the next evolutionary stage of man. One day you colonists will find a way to take that same step forward for yourselves."

MARIAN turned toward him and took his hand in hers; her voice pulsed with a deep intensity, a desperate urgency. "Remember one thing, Lieutenant Cannon, whatever else you may think of us, whatever else you may see on the earth: it is the mind that makes men brothers, nothing else. Nothing else! And what

we have made here—this universe of the mind—belongs to you, too. To every man, Lieutenant, if he can awaken the mental potential he already possesses."

At dusk they left the city on a broad, cement road. They walked a short distance toward a dense stand of trees. Among the trees Cannon found her village. Village? The connotation of that term made it inapplicable, but he knew no other word to describe the endless scores of small, plain cottages scattered through the forest.

It was dark by that time and Cannon actually saw very little of the place where Marian lived. No curious crowds gathered around him. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of someone in the shadows, but that was all. He saw no cluster of buildings which might represent a center of government. When he asked Marian about it, she laughed.

"Government is vitally necessary in a material culture," she conceded, "but scarcely in ours. The mind creates its own discipline and its own standards."

"But how do you handle the essential services of government—communication, medical welfare, education?"

"The direct meeting of minds simplifies a great deal."

HER REPLY was a subtle shock to him. Again he felt a numbing sense of vague fear. "You mean telepathy?"

"In a sense, but it is both more than that and less. Our mind-meeting is a permissive thing. We cannot force a way into a part of the mind that is closed to us; if we choose, we can wall ourselves off entirely from outside contacts. But the mind-meeting gives us a community democracy more perfect than anything we've ever had, because it isn't first filtered through the treacherous symbology of words."

"And you've been using this sort of communication with me?"

"Of course not, Lieutenant. It might have frightened you."

She seemed to answer too quickly, too readily. If she were a telepath, how would he know if she had used the technique or not? And it seemed clear that she had. What, otherwise, accounted for the fact that she seemed to speak galactic as if she had grown up on a civilized world? Worse still, the mind-meeting implied mind reading as well. She said it was possible to close off a part of the mind, but Cannon certainly didn't know how that was done. He knew why he felt afraid, then: he was helpless in her hands.

Could she also shape his thinking to suit herself?

AT AN INTERSECTION of paths an old man met them. He was tall and ramrod-straight; the sharply chiseled angles of his face gave him a marked resemblance to the commander of the military academy on Astoria—the only militarist Cannon had ever respected. Instead of the fleet uniform, the old man was wearing a loose, toga-like garment that left half his chest exposed. Except for the difference in costume, he might have been the commander's twin.

"This is our elder," Marian said. "His name is Paul."

"We are pleased to welcome you to Earth, Lieutenant. Our guest cottage is ready."

Cannon followed Marian and the elder to a tiny, one-room dwelling hidden among the trees. The ceiling radiated a warm glow of light and fire blazed on the hearth. The cabin was furnished in maple, worked in traditional patterns, centuries old. Cannon had seen tri-D's of the same style in his school textbooks, but never the reality, not even in the museums of the galaxy. He had always yearned to live with the old things, but under the raid-domes of the galactic cities that was out of

the question. The craftsmanship of wood was too time-consuming for a civilization that devoted its energies and its resources to war. In the small, functional dwelling units of the Astorian cities, the furniture was always identical—simple, plain designs which could be stamped from plastic by the power machines.

CANNON dropped into a chair, running his fingers lovingly over the richly grained wood of the arm. "Did you give this sort of welcome," he asked, "to all the scientists who came to visit the earth?"

"We would have, if we could," Paul replied.

"They refused?"

The elder turned toward Marian. "My dear, see if the food is ready. The Lieutenant is hungry, I'm sure."

"Why are you giving me so much attention?" Cannon demanded.

"Your situation is different. The archeologists had their ships; they could always reject us and go back to their own worlds. Your ship crashed, Lieutenant. You cannot escape. It is our duty, then, to teach you our—our form of communication: you can think of it in those terms."

From a wall cabinet Marian brought a tray of food. Where it had been prepared, Cannon

had no idea, but on the tray he saw every item of food that was his own special preference. Marian had done a superb job, he thought, of picking his brain clean and passing the information on to the others. Their telepathy, their peaceful universe of the mind, made the earth natives his superiors; apparently they weren't aware of that. They were making every effort to be friendly, to curry favor. Why? Were they afraid of him?

Then he saw on the tray a sizzling smani steak, simmering in graddan sauce. The rarest delicacy on Astoria, and only available in half a dozen cities close to the mountains. No man had yet found a way to preserve the smani for export. They couldn't be serving that steak here on earth; it was a physical impossibility.

For a split-second a new thought—terrible with shattering implications—began to form in Cannon's mind. But it was gone before he could focus upon it clearly, washed away by a wave of embarrassed confusion. For he looked again at the tray and what had appeared to be a smani steak was actually a food he had never seen before. A native product of the earth, obviously, although its resemblance to the smani had been remarkable.

AFTER THE Lieutenant had eaten, Marian and the elder left him alone in the cottage. "We will be close by, if you want anything during the night," Paul promised. "I am most anxious for you to have a good rest, Lieutenant. Your education in our techniques must begin immediately in the morning."

"Marian told me the mind-meeting is a higher level of human evolution. How can you expect to teach me—"

"We must," Marian said fervently. "There is no other way, Lieutenant, for you to live among us."

"We are entirely certain," Paul added, "that our methods are not beyond the ability of any human mind. It is simply a new approach to the use of the mind, and the mind, Lieutenant, makes men brothers. Nothing else! You must believe that. You must never doubt it, whatever happens." The elder spoke with the same desperate intensity Marian had used earlier when she said the same thing. Why did they hammer so much at that obvious fact?

As soon as Marian and Paul were gone, Lieutenant Cannon felt a tremendous weariness—unaccountably, because he had done nothing to tire himself, and not quite four hours before he had emerged from the

physical suspension of the time drive. The suspension was like a long and dreamless sleep; it always left a man alert, energetic, eager for physical action. There was no reason that he should feel exhausted, yet Cannon could not hold his eyes open.

HEEING THE EXTINGUISHED ceiling light and slid beneath the soft, down quilt on the bed. Languishing in the half-world between sleep and wakefulness, he thought with pleasure of the quiet beauty of the earth. The galaxy called it a horror world, this reality of man's dream: the forest glade, the fairy city gleaming in the golden sun, the straight ribbon of landscaped highway...

The highway! A shock rocked Cannon's mind. From the air he had seen the roads and the city sites; and they had been ruins. He knew that was significant, but he couldn't understand why, for his brain was too drugged with the desire for sleep.

For a long time he struggled to pull himself awake. Very slowly he drove back the fatigue. He had no idea how much time passed. Hours, certainly; perhaps half the night.

After a time he was able to sit up on the edge of the bed. His head swam with a nausea of mild pain. It occurred to

him that if he climbed to the top of one of the skyscrapers in the deserted city he would be able to see a vast area of the surrounding countryside. If there were ruins nearby, he could identify them. It would have been wiser, perhaps, to wait until daylight, but if he did Marian and Paul would not let him go. He knew that. For some reason of their own, they hoped to conceal the truth from him.

He slipped out of the cottage. A faint, gray light washed the eastern sky. It was nearly dawn; that surprised him. He must have slept the night through—or at least fought that long against the mind-weight of fatigue. As his brain began to function more normally, he realized that the desire for sleep had been induced—perhaps by a drug in his food, perhaps by some form of hypnotic suggestion.

Hypnotism? Why not? If the natives of the earth used telepathy, the lesser skills of the mind would be no problem to them. But it was a chilling idea, to consider what a telepath might be able to do with hypnotism.

WHEN CANNON reached the highway, he heard footsteps in the forest behind him. He began to run toward the city, silhouetted against

the morning sky. Clearly he heard Marian's voice, and he knew she was speaking directly into his mind, "Come back, Lieutenant. For your own sake—"

By ignoring her he found that he could cut off her voice; so that was how a mind walled out a telepathic intrusion. It was good to know. Cannon began to run faster. He was on the outskirts of the city. He saw the long vistas of broad streets and sparkling glass.

Then Marian spoke again, "Yes, Lieutenant, it was hypnotism. For your protection. Believe that, please. We only want to help, because you've no way to escape. We can't maintain it now that you know—not without your co-operation." Her words were colored with a sense of frantic appeal. "Come back, Lieutenant; let us do this our way. Don't try to prove what you think you saw yesterday."

"What I think I saw?" he repeated aloud, grimly. "I know it, Marian. I know absolutely—"

And suddenly his voice was choked in a paralysis of terror. Hypnotism and mind-meeting: with that technique Marian could have made him accept anything as objective reality. The dream itself—the glade, the open-faced city, the cottage with its beautifully crafted fur-

nishings, even the smani steak—all that she had reconstructed from the fragile hopes and desires of his own mind.

THEN HE understood. And before his eyes the fairy city dissolved into ruins. The dream became the reality of the horror world, the savage chaos that was Earth.

"We never tried it this way, Lieutenant," she whispered. "There were always too many men in the scientific expeditions for us to create a consistent illusion that would be acceptably real to them all. You're the first isolated individual we've ever reached. The others have seen only the horror, and nothing else that we have tried to say has meant anything to them after that. For a few hours, Lieutenant, you have seen us differently. You must believe, now, what we told you: it is the mind that makes the brotherhood of man, nothing else."

In terror he flung her gentle voice from his mind. He turned away from the gutted city and began to run across the scarred, red earth. Where? Why? He had no idea. Dust clouds choked his lungs and blinded him. The trailing, purple foliage of things that had once been trees lashed at his face. He flung his arms across his

eyes, yet still he saw the horror.

And he could not escape. He was confined to this hell for life. He screamed defiant terror at the swirling dust, and his reason began to crumble.

A THICKET fifty feet high loomed ahead of him. A remote ancestor of the plant might once have been a rose, but the blooms on this monstrosity were black and three feet in diameter. Cannon used his blaster to try to cut a path through the bush, but even before the knife fire died away the surviving branches swung together and choked the path.

Cannon heard steps behind him. That would be Marian. He swung toward her, still holding the blaster in his hand. At that moment the first light of the rising sun touched the earth. Cannon saw her clearly—the thing that had touched him and fed him yesterday. He tried to pull the trigger, but his muscles were paralyzed with horror.

For one minute more his sanity survived. He heard Marian's voice, gentle and compassionate, "Appearances are nothing, Lieutenant. Only the mind makes a man. We have evolved new techniques, true—but we know you can learn them and speak for us to the

scientists when they come again to the earth. We want the galaxy to lift itself up to equality with us, Lieutenant; otherwise in the course of history it is inevitable that we must become your heirs. You are our children—our colonies; we want to save you if we can."

A tenuous thread of reason

whispered that she was right. But madness screamed a psalm of terror. The heirs of man—these things! This nightmare was hell, and as long as he lived he was condemned to it.

As long as he lived. There was a release, then; there was an escape. Cannon jerked up the blaster and jammed the muzzle between his teeth.