

**SUPER  
SCIENCE  
STORIES**  
25¢  
*THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION*

VOL. 5

JULY, 1949

No. 3

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Illustrations by Bok, Finlay, Kramer, Lawrence, Leydenfrost and Paul  
Cover by Lawrence

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Super Science Stories is published bi-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc. at 353 Third Street, Niagara Falls, New York. All correspondence relating to this magazine should be addressed to 353 Third Street, Niagara Falls, N.Y., or to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N.Y. Application for entry as second-class matter is pending. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright, 1949, by Fictioneers, Inc. under the International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Annual subscription \$1.50. When submitting manuscripts enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. Publishers will exercise care in the handling of uncollected manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. July, 1949, Volume 5, No. 3. Printed in Canada.

# THE HUNTED

**T**HE LESSER gravity of Earth gave the two creatures a free bounding stride as they walked down the slope toward the pens. The myriad facets of their eyes caught the morning sun with the iridescent gleam of oil on water. As was the rule when inspecting the penned creatures, they both carried the tiny silver tubes which, when properly aimed, blocked all neural impulses except those necessary to sustain life.

To the two of them, the penned creatures were a source of excitement.

Thome, the elder of the two, said in his piping voice, "A new lot came through yesterday. I want to get your opinion."

They stopped and looked through the electrified wire. Riss, the younger, made a high thin sound of satisfaction. "Excellent! They are in fine shape. Look at that one."

They both looked with proprietary pride at a young naked man who stood and stared sullenly at them. He was well over six feet tall, heavily muscled. his tan skin marked with the white scar



By **JOHN D.  
MacDONALD**

**They are the best and most dangerous game in the solar system—better than the Venusian fire lizards or the awesome winged snakes of Callisto — these strange, vicious beasts called “Men”!**

tissue of many wounds. His blue eyes seemed to flare with the instinct to kill as he looked at the two outside the fence.

“It seems odd,” said Thome, “that the first of us to come here found these creatures repulsive. I have become quite fond of them.”

“In a way,” Riss said, “it is sad.” He turned and pointed to the shattered skyline of Chicago. “They were far enough advanced to have built their crude cities, even to release a fractional part of the power of the atom. Who can tell what their destiny might have been?”

Thome giggled. “You are too imaginative. They are too wild to have continued to live with the atomic power in their grasp. We saved them from themselves.”

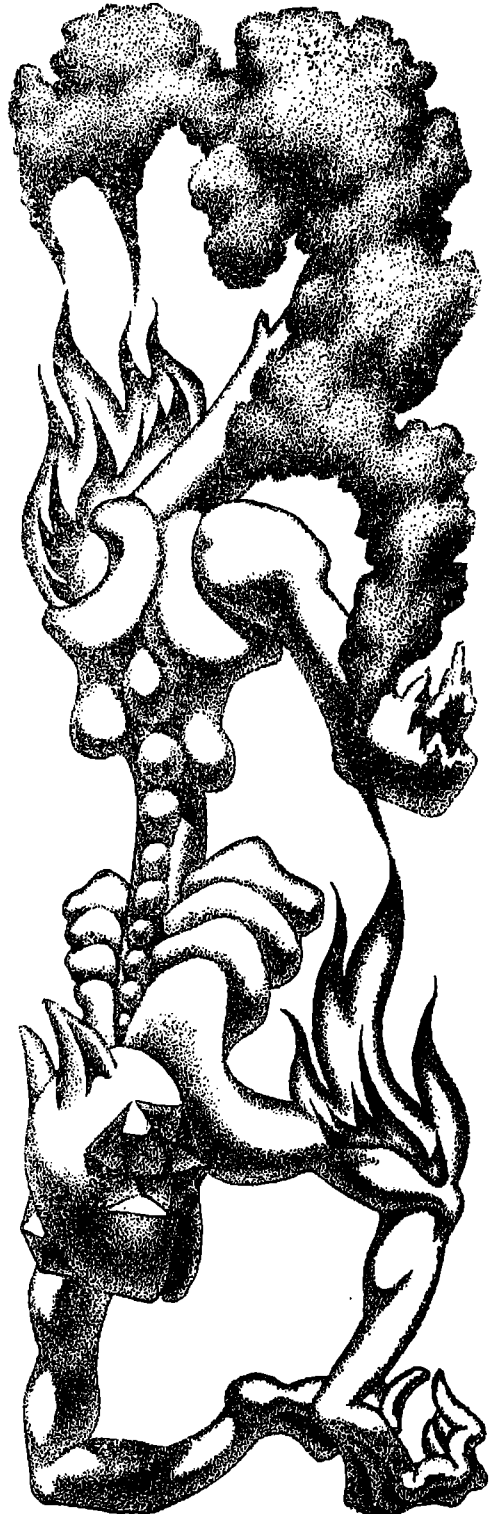
Riss shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. And then again, in the last eighty years of breeding, while we strove for ferocity and cunning, we may have bred out of the race some leavening factor which would have enabled them to overcome their innate murderous instincts.”

“This group will make good sport,” Thome said proudly.

“What is planned?”

“Tomorrow I am expecting a rather

**A shattered figure spun over and over toward the pavement.**



large party. We will release twenty of these creatures in the ruined city. All will contribute and a prize will be given to him who brings the most of them down."

Riss frowned. "They are dangerous in the city. It is better to hunt them on the plain."

Thome giggled again. "All the better. The sport lasts longer. Would you like to inspect that one?"

Riss nodded. Thome adjusted the switch on the small silver tube. As he aimed it, there were hoarse cries of fear from the pen. But the young blond man only crouched and drew his lips back from strong white teeth. Thome carefully sprayed the group with the silver tube and they froze in position. One, caught off balance, fell heavily.

After throwing the switch, Thome opened the gate and the two of them went into the pen. The blond young man was frozen in his half-crouched position. They walked around him while Riss prodded his muscles, inspected the white teeth.

"A fine specimen," he said at last. "Will he be used for breeding?"

"If he is not too seriously injured in the hunt."

**P**ETER could not move his eyes. Many times this undignified thing had happened to him and each time it made him furious. The two dead-white beings with the silver tubes walked back out and slammed the gate. He could see their movement from the corner of his eye.

The silver tube was pointed again and the power that had kept him immobile was suddenly released. He looked at them, made a low growling sound in his throat and turned away. His hands itched with the desire to get hold of them, to tear their pale flesh, sink his teeth in their tiny throats,

smash in the huge many-faceted eyes.

Vaguely he wondered why they had looked so carefully at him. This was a new pen. In the beginning, the first thing he remembered was the pen of the children. That was when he learned about the fence. Only once had he been thrown back stunned, after touching it. Yet he had seen others in the children's pen touch the wire many times.

In the end of the runway was the feeding trough. It was wise to run quickly at feeding time, to push the others away, to snarl and bite and strike out. If you missed too many feeding times, you became weak and then never again would you be able to feed. The others would push you away and then you would lie down on the dirt and breathe no more.

In the pen of the children he was the strongest. All bowed to his fist and his sharp teeth. He remembered the time they had moved him from the pen of the children to the pen of the young men. He had not wanted to leave the pen of the children. A week before, he would have been glad to leave, glad of the change. But he had begun to have an odd feeling when he looked at the girl-child they called Mary. He did not want to leave when they moved him.

The pen of the young men had been vast. There was not so much fighting there, because of the work. The work was strange. Great stones had to be carried back and forth without reason. And then, of course, there was the running.

He did not know how long he had been in the pen of the young men. It was like the children's pen in that there was a place for sleeping, with a roof, and the feeding trough. And the wire.

Then he had been moved. One sun

ago he and many from the pen of the young men had been moved to this much smaller pen. It was far too small. He felt cramped, stifled.

As the two walked away from the wire, back up the slope toward the white sphere in which they lived, Peter turned back toward the sleeping place. The others laughed at him because he had been prodded and inspected.

"Oh-eh, they will kill you and eat you, Peter," one of them said.

The others laughed deeply in their throats.

Peter pretended not to notice. He walked slowly by the group. Then, bunching the muscles of his huge legs, he threw himself at them, striking them at ankle height with his hurtling body. He was the first to scramble to his feet. He did not use the blows that kill; just punishing blows. His square fists smacked against flesh. One of them leaped onto his back and with a quick twist he threw the man against the wire. There was a puff, the smell of singed flesh. They crept away from Peter and laughed no more.

He inflated his big chest and thumped it twice with a heavy fist, making a hollow booming that resounded through the pen. At the sound, an older man swaggered out of the sleeping place. He was more scarred than was Peter. Peter had given the challenge.

Stiff-legged they walked around each other, making small sounds in their throats. Once the challenge has been made, the fight must be to the death. Peter saw that this was an old one, a clever one.

The clever one's body was nearly covered with tightly curled reddish-brown hair. His face was scarred so that one side of his mouth was always drawn up away from the yellow teeth in a snarl.

The old one feinted, thrust at Peter's eyes with long nails. Peter slid away from the stab, clamped his fingers on the other's wrist and spun. The old one cleverly threw himself in the right direction so that his arm did not snap. In doing so, he brought his shoulder close to Peter's mouth. Peter's teeth met in the meat of his shoulder, and then with a wrench of mighty neck muscles, he tore a long strip of flesh loose. The old one bawled, leaped away, blood staining his arm, dripping from his fingertips.

The others in the pen, some thirty of them, stood in a loose circle and watched without expression, without sound.

Once more they circled each other. This time the old one was more cautious. He knew his muscles were stronger, but that he was not so quick.

Peter dodged suddenly to one side, and then threw himself straight at the old one, knee plunging up toward the groin. The old one turned, caught the thrust on the hip bone, and his arms locked around Peter's torso. The old one made a small purring sound of approval. Slowly his arms began to tighten. Peter took a deep breath. The old one had his face tight against Peter's chest so that Peter could not get at his eyes. Peter grasped the hair of the old one's head with both hands, pulled the old one's head back. Then, letting go with his right hand, he quickly brought it around so that his forearm was across the mouth of the old one. Peter felt the stinging pain as teeth met in his arm.

His leverage was good, but the old one was stubborn. Sweat poured from both of them. Suddenly there was a dim crack, as of a dry twig in the forest. The old one slumped to the ground, his head at an odd angle. Peter kicked him full in the face with the

hard ball of his foot, then turned and once more issued the challenge. There were no takers. He walked into the sleeping place, stretched out on the straw and began to lick the wound in his arm. It was in a difficult place, but he knew that if he did not lick it, it would not heal properly.

Somehow he felt no urge to join the others. They had gathered the sticks and built the fire. He could hear them quarreling mildly over the more succulent portions of the body of the old one. Though they had just been fed, they would eat the old one, because there was no other way to gain the strength that the old one had possessed.

After a time Peter slept, his big chest rising and falling very slowly, his dreams filled with memories of battle.

The next day, just as the sun had risen, a large number of the masters with the little silver tubes came to the wire. One of their floating platforms was brought close. The little tubes were aimed and Peter felt the sudden stillness that could not be broken.

With their lifting sticks, they picked him up, floated him through the door set into the wire and dropped him heavily onto the floating platform. Though he tried with all his strength, he could not break the invisible bonds of the silver tubes.

Others were dropped near him. He felt the thuds of their bodies. Many thuds. One man landed across Peter's legs.

The gate closed and then the floating platform went off at great speed. He knew they were high in the air and it made him dizzy.

His stomach felt the sudden drop, the slowing, and once again the platform hung still in the air. They were all taken with lifting sticks and dropped onto rough broken pavement.

He heard the voice of one of those weak, soft men who served the masters. The hated voice of one of those who filled the feeding troughs and cleaned the pens.

"You are in the city. You are free. You cannot leave the city, because on one side is vast water and on the edges of the city are the areas of pain. But the city is large. There are many places to hide. The masters will come to hunt you down and kill you. If you can, you are permitted to kill first. There will be no punishment.

"In an hour the masters will come. Many of them. They will leave the city at dusk. They will return at dawn. If any of you last for three days without being found and killed, you will then be recaptured and sent to the pens where there are women."

The voice stopped. The pressure was suddenly released. Peter jumped to his feet, saw the floating platform soaring above the shattered roofs. He looked about, his head thrown back, sniffing the air.

So the masters were coming to kill! Good! They would come to be killed, also. He, Peter, would see to that. At last a chance to tear their pale flesh! In the full pride of his strength, he beat his chest once more.

It did not occur to him, nor to any of the others, to band together in defence or offense. Set down with a common nucleus, they drifted off in all directions, wary and alert.

It was the first time Peter had seen a city. He did not like it. Great mouldering walls, and streets blocked with rubble. Pavement heaved and torn. One had to step carefully, because of the shattered glass.

He walked aimlessly at first, then suddenly remembered that the masters would begin the hunt in one hour. He did not know what an hour was, but he

had the idea that it was a very short time. There were many hours in one sun.

A dark entrance looked like a place in which to hide. The doorway was almost blocked with rubble. He squeezed through, waited until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. A sagging stairway led up. He went up it rapidly, touching his knuckles to the stairs, his nose alert to the scents around him.

At the top of the stairs it was light. There was no roof on the building. It was not a good building in which to fight. He left it in disgust, but as he went down the stairs he wrenched free a stout club. It felt good in his hand. The firewood was always too small to use as a club. This was a fine, a wonderful club. He swung it, listened to the whistle it made. Ah, this club would smash the brains of the masters, the white, weak ones with the insect eyes.

The third entrance he tried was good. It was a very big place. His bare feet padded on some smooth cold stone on the floor. To his left were several cages made of metal. He stuck the club into an open place in the metal and twisted. The metal was weak. It broke under the strain.

The cage was dark inside. He looked up and saw that it went up a great distance and that long metal ropes, two of them, went up into the blackness. He wanted to climb the metal ropes to find a secret place high above him. Yet he could not climb and carry the club at the same time. It took a long time of thinking. Then he found a bit of rotted rope, tied it crudely where it seemed weakest, then tied one end to the club. He looped the other end around his waist and tied it.

He leaped up into the darkness, his powerful hands closing on the metal

rope. Hand over hand, he went up into the darkness. The rope was sticky. His biceps began to crack and tingle with the strain. He locked his legs around the rope and rested for a time. Once he looked down and clung more tightly to the metal rope.

The second time he stopped to rest, he did not dare look down. He clung to the rope and shut his eyes. At last he came to the end. The metal ropes, both of them, went around wheels. There was a faint light. Above him was flat metal. His muscles ached with strain. He inched up further, clung with his legs and his right hand, and got the club with his left. He jabbed it up against the metal. There was a hollow sound, but it seemed solid. He waited for a moment, wondering what to do.

Then he saw a metal bar across the wall five feet away. Above the bar was a narrow space. He could squeeze through up there.

WITH sudden resolve, he grasped one of the wheels and swung across, reaching out his left hand, then hung, panting, to the metal bar. Slowly he worked his way up until he could stand on the metal bar. The narrow place touched his chest and his back. Above him was light. Finding small handholds, he worked his way up for a distance of about ten feet. Then the narrow space opened out and he found he could stand on a flat surface. As nearly as he could make out, the thing on which he stood was fastened to the metal ropes and fitted inside the shaft up which he had climbed. He wondered if it was used in the old world to carry people up and down the shaft.

Eight feet from the top of the box was an opening in the side of the shaft. He jumped, caught the edge with his

fingers and pulled himself up, rolled out onto a stone floor like the one so far below.

There were many doors opening onto the long hall. They sagged on their hinges as though they had been driven open by a blast. He looked in the first one. In great wonder he looked at the gray fragile bones of a man who sat, in death, behind a large box. There were tiny shards of glass on the floor. The floor was covered with a soft, rotted fabric.

In one corner was a smaller box and on top of it was a strange machine. Smaller bones were on the floor near the machine. Smaller bones and whisps of long pale hair. He could smell ancient death. His skin prickled.

The machine was rusted. It had a black roll across the top of it, and in the roll was a fragment of scorched paper. With a blow of his club he drove the machine off the smaller box. It fell in a reddish cloud of dust and rust.

Suddenly he remembered the danger. It would be wise to find out if there were another way to get to this place. He ran down the corridor, looking in each room, trying to find some place that led down. In most of the rooms there were machines and bones and the smell of dust.

At last he found a place where stairs led down. It made him angry. He growled low in his throat. The masters could come up this way.

If it was not blocked.

He went down many lengths of the stairs, going ever lower, and then he rounded a corner, fought for balance, his mind sick with fear. Below him was emptiness for fifty feet, and below that, the building started again. It was as though huge jaws had taken a bite out of the side of the building.

Returning, he went back up the

stairs. He went back beyond the floor where he had climbed out of the shaft. The stairs ended. Above him was wood. He pushed against it and it opened with a creak of rusty hinges. He was out in the air. He was on a flat place bigger than the pen. It was surrounded with a low stone wall. He went to the wall, looked cautiously over. The street was a dizzy distance away.

Even as he looked he saw one of the floating platforms far below, cruising down the street. He growled deep in his throat. Two of the masters were on the front edge of the floating platform. His keen eyes saw that they did not hold the silver tubes. Instead, they held the thick, stubby, black rods with the glowing coil above the barrel.

Peter knew those rods. He had seen one used, on a man who had been blinded in one of the fights in the pen.

The master had pointed it. There had been a thick noise, like a husky cough, and the blinded man's head had disappeared, blood spouting from the neck stump.

They were looking for Peter to kill him with those black rods. He snarled. Then his eyes widened in quick interest.

As the floating platform speeded up, he saw a naked man leap from behind a pile of rubble, hurl a stone at the two masters. Without seeing where his stone landed, the man turned and ran.

Peter smiled in satisfaction as one of the masters toppled from the platform. The other one aimed the rod. The running man threw up his arms, stumbled and rolled in the cluttered street, was still, his blood bright and red in the sunshine. The platform settled to the pavement. The master who had killed the man hurried back to his companion. He leaned over him.

Suddenly Peter realized that they were almost below him. He looked



around for something to drop on them. Then he saw that the railing was made of large stones that had been fitted together. The substance which had fastened them together was crumbled.

He put his hands on the edge of it, braced his feet and pulled. The muscles stood out on his arms and shoulders. He pulled until the world went red in front of him, and slowly the stone came free, dropped onto the roof.

He looked over the edge. They were still down there. But they were some distance from the wall of the building. The stone would have to be hurled away from the building.

The sharp edges cut into his thighs, tore the flesh as he picked it up. By great effort he got it above his head, both palms flat against it. His legs shook.

He moved to the edge. They were still there, but the one who had been hit by the stone was sitting up. There was little time left. He moved a foot to the left, then took two quick steps, pushing the big stone as far out from the side of the building as he could. For a moment he thought he was

going to follow it over, but he caught the edge with his hand.

Fascinated, he watched the huge stone dwindle, turning over slowly.

He thought it had gone beyond them, then suddenly they were blotted out. The white stone leaped into a hundred shattered pieces. After he had seen the pieces fly, he heard the crash.

Where the stone had hit there were clots of white pulp against the gray pavement, and a thin, watery substance.

The floating platform rested there, waiting for the ones who would not return. On the forward edge of it was one of the black rods.

Slowly the idea came to him that soon another one of the masters would come. The master would see the bodies, see the fractured stone.

Then he would look up, see the roof, come up after him on one of the platforms. That was a way of getting to the top of the building that he had not considered.

Thus his building was not good. Not a safe place.

But if a man could have one of those platforms . . .

**H**E RAN down the flights of stairs to the corridor, jumped down to the top of the box, squeezed down between the box and the wall, swung across to the cable and slid down. The heat of the friction seared his hands. At last he thumped against the floor, climbed out through the broken grille and went to the street door. Flies buzzed over the body of the man who had been shot down as he had tried to run. The black rod had bitten a head-sized hole through his torso.

All sense alert, Peter stood inside the doorway. There was no sound, no scent of the masters. He ran to the floating platform. He did not even look toward the white pulp of the two masters he had slain.

At first he made a motion to push the fearful black rod off onto the street. Then curiosity got the better of him. He picked it up, sighted it the way the master had done, and touched the button set into the side of the barrel. The body of the man up the street jumped and slid several feet further away.

He tried to remember how he had seen them work the platforms, and felt angry with himself because he had not watched more closely. The platform was of a silvery metal, and was as wide as he was tall, and twice as long. It was as thick as his thigh. Two tiny levers, made for the masters' childlike hands, protruded through two slots near the front of it.

He grasped one lever and pulled it back. The ascent was so rapid that it forced him down against the platform. By the time he overcame his shock and surprise, and got the lever pushed forward again, he was higher than the roof he had been on. Much higher.

In fear he pushed the lever too far forward. The drop was sickening. He

brought it back to the halfway mark and the platform hung motionless in the air, moving slightly toward the building because that was the direction of the wind.

The slot for the other lever was bigger. He found that the second lever would move in any direction. More cautious than he had been with the first lever, he moved it to the left and the platform moved slowly away from the side of the building. He pulled the first lever back slightly, waited until he was above the roof, and then pushed the second lever to the right. The platform floated over the roof. He pushed the first lever slowly forward until the platform settled onto the roof with an awkward jar.

He made a warm sound of pleasure, scratched his chest and looked at the platform with pride of possession.

It was then that he heard the distant cough. A section of the stone railing flew off, and the rock dust bit into his face, stinging him so that tears came to his eyes.

With one motion, he snatched the black rod, whirled and dropped flat behind the railing. He scrambled far to one side on his belly, and then took a quick look. A second platform was coming up toward the roof on a long slant. One of the masters held a black rod. The second was guiding the platform.

He saw that they were going to pass right above him, and he felt fear. He brought the rod up to aiming position. Then he jumped to his feet, his finger tight on the button, aiming full at the two figures.

Near his feet a hole suddenly appeared in the roof.

A shattered figure spun over and over, down toward the pavement. A second, suddenly headless, hunched

over the control switches. The platform continued to angle up. It passed so close to him that he involuntarily ducked. Then it continued on at the same angle, constantly rising as it passed over toward the vast stretch of blue water.

With three bodies in the street, this would not be a good building. And sooner or later, one of the masters would fly over and see the silver gleam of the platform.

If only the platform could be hidden. If there were a hole to put it in and cover it over. He stared stupidly down at it. It was so large! Gradually he became conscious of the weight of the black rod in his hand.

There was a hole in the roof near his feet. He looked down the hole into a large corridor. Shaking with sudden excitement, he put the end of the rod close to the roof and touched the button. It cut through the roof. He moved it in a large rectangle, remembering at the last moment that he should be standing outside the rectangle. It sagged and, as he cut the last portion, fell through. There was a crash and a cloud of white plaster rose up. He hurried to the platform, and, with growing skill at the simple controls, moved it a foot off the roof, directly over the hole, and then pushed the first lever forward. It sank through the hole. He stopped it before it touched the floor, then eased it forward. There was a wall in the way. With the rod, he blasted a hole in the wall and edged through. He thought it might be necessary to leave quickly, and he mentally reviewed the lever motions that would be necessary.

**W**EARY with the hunt, Thome returned to find Riss standing near the depleted pen. The last rays of the sun touched the

shattered towers of ancient Chicago.

Riss looked up. "I told you it would be dangerous," he said mildly.

Thome sagged to the ground. He shrugged. "They wished to have sport. Dangerous sport. I told them that the creatures were crafty and dangerous. But they were jaded and wished the excitement and the killing. They received it. And five of them were killed! I was nearly killed by one who attacked with a club in a narrow place we thought empty."

Riss gasped. "Five! I thought it was but two!"

"We found three more bodies. Of the twenty that were released, fourteen have been killed. There are only six live creatures left in the city."

Riss looked relieved. "Then tomorrow there will be little danger."

Thome plucked at the grass with his thin white fingers. "Little danger? One of them, we do not know which one, has captured a platform and a thrust gun. The hunted becomes the hunter."

"Then that ends the hunt," Riss said firmly. "They will bring over one of the ships and char the city, surely."

Thome shook his head. "No, Riss. They intend to stick to their bargain. After all, the creature will be clumsy with the platform and the thrust gun."

Riss asked quietly, "Will you join the hunt tomorrow?"

"Would you?" Thome asked.

**T**HERE was a sagged place in the roof that held water. Before dawn Peter found it and drank thirstily. Thus, at dawn he saw the two platforms floating over the city.

He slipped down into the building and watched from the darkness. They seemed to be searching: two of them. The odds were against him, in spite of his new and satisfying weapons. He

guessed that they would now hunt in groups of two or more.

He faded out of sight. After a long search of the rooms he at last found a place where there was the smell of dried food. There were many round metal containers. Some of them had rusted, and the food had run out and dried on the shelves. He took two without holes, found a sharp piece of metal and punctured them. The taste was strange, but good.

It was while he was eating that the building began to quiver. He dropped the metal containers, ran to the roof. When he was certain that nothing hovered over him, he ran to the wall, looked cautiously over.

Two platforms hovered above the street. The masters, four of them, were aiming the black rods at the base of the building.

Even as he watched, the building jolted and sagged. There was an ominous sound of tearing metal, of the crunching of stone and plaster. He realized what they were doing. The building would fall. He would be crushed. He ran down to the platform, threw himself face down on it, the black rod under his chest, and slowly brought the platform up so that it was flush with the hole he had made in the roof.

The sweat of fear was on his body. If he caused the platform to fly up into sight, they would come after him. If he waited, he would be killed.

Slowly and majestically, the building began to move toward the street, tilting toward the smaller buildings on the opposite side.

He pushed the second lever to the left, moved with the building for a few seconds, then hung motionless while it fell away from him. The two other platforms shot up and he got a glimpse of them just before a vast cloud of dust

rose up and he was deafened by the grinding, prolonged crash of the building.

The dust choked him. He pulled the first lever as far back as it would go for the maximum upward speed and wedged the second lever as far ahead as it would go. The wind tore at his face as he angled up out of the dust, rising at tremendous speed.

As he came out into the clear air, he had a chance for a quick shot at one of the other platforms. He saw the faceted eyes turn toward him, and then a gouge flew out of the rim of the other platform which held the control levers.

It seemed to hang in the air for a moment, and then went down like a falling leaf, spinning over and over. He looked behind him, saw the second platform match course with him. But it was far behind. In the remote distance, he saw two more leap up out of the city and turn toward him.

A great and intense pain suddenly knotted every muscle. He groaned and screamed and thudded his head against the cool metal in an ecstasy of pain. Then it was gone, and the city was behind him.

The pain had left him weak. He dimly realized that he had shot through it at such a great speed that it had not caused him to faint. Usually the pain did that. The masters were able to make the areas of pain wherever they pleased. Once he had escaped with two others from the pen of the children. From above they had been enclosed in a ring of pain. It was more certain than the wire. No man could crawl through it without fainting, remaining helpless until picked up. The pain had no effect on the masters.

As he slowly recovered his strength, he grew conscious of great cold. The earth was far below. Frost was beginning to appear on the silver sur-

face of the platform. He pushed the first lever slightly forward, without decreasing the speed. The platform behind him remained at the same distance.

Suddenly he wanted to be back in the pen, back among those who fought with fist and teeth and nails. He wanted the security of the pen. He wanted to weep with loneliness and with fear of the death which was coming so inexorably behind him. The masters could not be beaten. One must not escape from the masters. That was the Law.

He looked back. The distance between the two platforms was too great for the use of the black rod. Anger was black within him. He growled softly.

He shifted his position, stretched out on his belly. Then he held tightly to one of the small hand rails, brought the black rod up and aimed it at the following platform. Glancing over his shoulder, he hooked a cautious toe over the forward speed lever, suddenly yanked it back to full reverse.

The strain nearly tore his arm out.

The platform loomed up with startling suddenness. Finger on the button, he held the rod aimed at the two of them, saw them driven back off the platform in a spray of the clear watery liquid that had stained the street of the city.

Their empty platform shot by him on one side so close that he could have touched it. He scrambled quickly to the front of his own platform, grasped the leading edge and once more switched to full speed ahead.

The other two platforms were much closer. Almost as close as the first one had been. He did not dare try the trick again. They had seen it, certainly. They would be waiting.

Far ahead rode the empty platform that had passed him. Without the burden of passengers, it quickly increased the distance.

The sun was high when he approached the fringes of a huge forest. He glanced back. The pursuers held their position. He looked ahead. They would never find him in the immensity of that forest; yet they might mark the spot where he landed, and blast the

earth with some weapon other than the black rod.

He lowered the platform slowly with-out diminishing speed until he was but a few feet from the tops of the highest trees.

It was worth a chance. They were far behind him, so far behind that they were two white dots on a metal sheet half the size of his little finger nail.

He made his decision. Bracing himself as before, he threw the lever into reverse, and, as the platform came momentarily to a dead stop, he pushed the lever forward again, yanking the altitude lever back.

He let the platform speed out from under him. He had hoped to drop into the trees. Instead, he landed in a small clearing, landed with a force that drove the wind from him, dropped him into sudden darkness . . .

“S O THEY were all killed?” Riss asked.

“Nineteen of them were. The twentieth, the one you saw the day before yesterday, fled on a platform. He dropped off over the northern forest. An hour later his platform ran out of fuel and it was only then that the stupid ones who followed him found the platform empty and discovered that he had fallen. They could not find the place of course, but it is obvious that he died.”

“He was more intelligent than the others,” Thome said.

“A good beast to hunt, my friend. A dangerous beast. The best kind. Better than the fire lizards of Venus or the winged snakes of Callisto. This beast called man is the best of all.”

“When is the next hunt?”

“We’re expecting a shipment next week. But for the next hunt, there will be special, complicated controls on the platforms and thrust guns, so

that the creatures cannot capture them and use them.”

“Splendid idea,” Riss said. He looked down toward the pen where the creatures were fighting to get at the food trough.

**I**T WAS night when Peter awakened. His head throbbed. Something bit into his side and he found that it was the useless fragments of the black rod, broken by his fall.

His sensitive nose savored the light breeze that blew along the forest floor. He broke the rope that still held the club to his waist. He got to his knees and listened. Something rustled in the leaves. He crouched, sprang, and killed it with the first blow of the club. It was a small animal.

By the pale light of dawn he saw that it was a beast with a hide covered with long stiff thorns. Its belly was soft. He tore it open with a sharp stick, ate the raw meat. It would have been better cooked, but there was no way to make fire.

An hour later he found a cold brook, drank deeply and bathed his bruises. He was stiff from the fall.

It was good to be free, to walk where he pleased. The free air had a good smell. The forest floor was pleasantly springy under his feet.

He walked aimlessly under the huge trees, and it was as though deep instincts were reawakened, as though all his senses had become sharper.

Even so, he did not know that they had surrounded him until he heard the hoarse shout that was a signal.

It happened in the middle of a clearing. He paused, saw the men step out from behind the clumps of brush. He turned, found them on all sides.

They were powerful men with wary eyes, tangled beards. They wore the skins of animals, belted around them

with leather thongs. He was oddly conscious for the first time in his life of his absolute nakedness.

There was no escape. They carried clubs, even as he, but to the ends of their clubs were lashed sharpened stones.

One of them, not as powerful as the others, and unarmed, stepped toward him. Peter lifted the club in a threatening gesture.

"Who are you?" the stranger asked.

"I am Peter."

"I am Saul. Where do you come from?"

"I was in the pens. The masters put me in the ruined city so they could find me and kill me. I killed them instead. I took their platform and their gun and I came to this place."

Saul looked at him with contempt. "You wear no skins and you are dirty. You come from the pens. That is plain."

Peter threw aside his club and growled low in his throat. "You lead these men? I can kill you."

"It is like that in the pens, but not here, my friend. He who leads here is the one best able to lead, not the one with the sharpest teeth. Should you strike me, these others would kill you quickly."

Peter looked sullenly around at the waiting men. He saw, on their faces, not the blood lust of those who watched the fights in the pens, but rather a sort of contempt, and amusement. It made him ashamed.

"Did you escape?" Peter asked the one who called himself Saul.

"My father escaped. I was born here in the forest. This place is called Nicolet. All of us were born here, except that one over there. He escaped five years ago."

"What do you do here?" Peter asked him.

The man called Saul looked proud. "We live in huts in the forest. We trap game, plant crops and increase in numbers. We are free and strong. We no longer call those beings our masters. We are our own masters." He looked around. The other men rumbled agreement.

"What will you do to me?" Peter asked.

"If we do not want you with us, we will kill you. If you want to come with us, you must remember that we do not fight among each other. We work, all of us. It is hard, but it is good. We will find you skins to wear. Among the daughters you will find a wife. Then all will help to build your hut. You will obey our laws and vote in the council of the adults as does every one of us."

AS THE first touch of night began to shade the forest, the hunting party topped the crest and went eagerly down the slope to the village. Peter was with them, clothed in fresh skins.

Hidden among the trees, the lights of the cooking fires twinkled. He heard the glad welcoming cries of the women, the soft sounds of the voices of the children.

He stood alone for a moment, and there was an odd stinging in his eyes and it seemed to him that he surely had been in this place before, heard these same warm sounds.

He started violently as Saul touched his arm.

"Come, Peter," he said. "They are eager to see you. Already the men have told about you. Tonight you will share my food and drink and sleep in my hut."

Peter followed him slowly down into the glow of the firelight.