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Volume 1, No. 4

EVERY STORY ORIGINAL:

LAST NIGHT OF SUMMER

by Alfred Coppel 8

BEAST IN THE HOUSE

by Michael Shaara 17

DANGER PAST

by James E. Gunn 27

ME FEEL GOOD

by Max Dancey 36

NO MORE THE STARS

by Irving E. Cox, Jr. 39

THE THINKER AND THE THOUGHT

by August Derleth 56

THE IMAGE OF THE GODS

by Alan E. Nourse 66

ADJUSTMENT TEAM

by Philip K. Dick 81

INTRUDER ON THE RIM

by Milton Lesser 101

SCIENCE NOTES

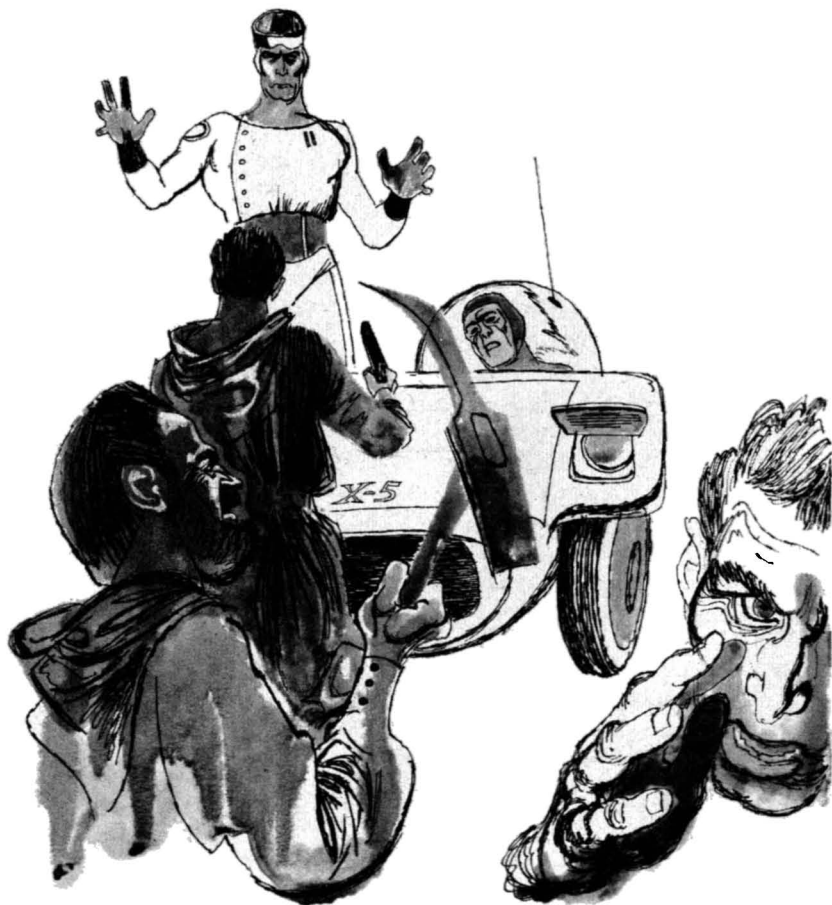
6

A STERLING PUBLICATION

THE IMAGE of the

WHEN THE SHOWDOWN CAME, A BRAVE BAND

OF REBELS FOUND THEY HAD SOME FRIENDS.



GODS

by Alan E. Nourse

IT WAS nearly winter when the ship arrived. Pete Farnam never knew whether the timing had been figured out that way in advance or not. Also, he never knew whether or not there was any connection between the ship's arrival that year and the fact that the colony had been predicting its first real bumper crop. After it was all over, Pete and Mario and Tegan and all the rest hashed it out six ways from Sunday. And none of them knew, for sure, what had happened back on Earth, or when it had actually happened. They just had too little information to go on. All Pete Farnam really knew, that day, was that this was the wrong year for an Earth ship to land on Baron IV.

Pete was in the field when the ship landed. As usual, his sprayer had gotten clogged—tarring should have been started earlier, before the weather got so cold that the stuff clung to the nozzle and hardened be-

fore it got settled into the dusty soil. The summer had been the colony's finest in the fourteen years he'd been there—a warm, still summer with plenty of rain to keep the dirt down and let the *taaro* root in deep, and grow up tall and gray against the purple sky.

But now the *taaro* was in, packed and compressed and crated, ready for shipping, and the heavy black clouds were moving nervously across the sky, going faster with every passing day. Two days before, Pete had asked Marigny to see about firing up the little furnaces the Dusties had built for them to help fight the winter. All that remained to be done for the year was tarring the fields, and then buckling down beneath the wind shields before the first storm struck.

Pete was working hard to get the nozzle of the sprayer cleaned out when Mario's jeep came roaring down the rutted road from the village in a cloud of dust. In the back

seat a couple of Dusties were bouncing up and down like happy five-year-olds. Pete was twisting a jammed valve with his heavy, powerful hands when the brakes squealed.

Mario's voice bellowed at him from the road. "Pete! The ship's in! Better get hopping!"

Pete gave him a wave and started to close up the sprayer. One of the Dusties tumbled out of the jeep and scampered across the field to give him a hand. Although it was an inexperienced hand, the Dusties were so proud of the little they were able to learn about mechanized farming that nobody had the heart to chase them away. Pete watched the fuzzy brown creature get his paws good and stuck up with tar before he had to be pulled loose and sent back to the jeep with a whack on the backside. Pete finished the job himself; then he grabbed his coat from the edge of the field and pulled himself into the front seat of the jeep.

Mario spun the little car around and started back into his own dust cloud. His dark face was dirty and his beard was getting long for the winter, but now there were lines of worry around the young colonist's eyes. "I don't like it, Pete. The ship isn't due this year—"

"What time did it land?"

"About twenty minutes ago. Won't be cool for a while yet."

Pete laughed. "Old Schooner is just getting thirsty for a taste of that Scotch I save for him," he said.

"Maybe he'll have some cut plug for us. Maybe even cigars, who knows?"

"Maybe," said Mario without conviction.

Pete looked at him and shrugged. "We should yell if they're early. Maybe they've found a new way to keep our dirt from walking off on us this winter." He stared at the fields, at the heavy windbreaks that had been stretched across in long, jagged curves in the hope of outwitting the vicious winds that howled across the land during the long winter. Pete picked bits of tar from his beard and wiped the dirt from his forehead with the back of his hand. "This tarring is mean," he said wearily. "Glad to take a break." He started picking cakes of the black stuff from his fingers.

"Maybe Cap Schooner will know something about the rumors we've been hearing," Mario said suddenly.

Pete looked at him sharply. "About Earth?"

Mario nodded. "Schooner's a pretty good guy, I guess. I guess he'd tell us, wouldn't he, Pete? If anything was wrong on Earth?"

Pete nodded and snapped his fingers. One of the Dusties hopped over into his lap and began gawking happily at the long fields as the jeep jogged along. Pete stroked the creature's soft brown fur with his horny fingers. "Maybe someday these fellas will show us where they go for the winter," he said. "They must have it down to a science."

Somehow the idea was funny and both men roared. If the Dusties had anything down to a science, nobody had discovered what, so far. Mario grinned and tweaked the creature's tail. "They sure do beat the winter, though," he said.

"So do we. Only we have to do it the human way. These boys grew up in the climate." Pete lapsed into silence as the village came into view below them. The ship had landed quite a way out. It rested on its skids on the long shallow groove the colonists had bulldozed for it years before, the first year they had come down to Baron IV.

Slowly Pete turned Mario's words over in his mind, allowing himself to worry a little. There had been rumors of trouble back on Earth—rumors he had taken care to soft-pedal, as Mayor of the colony. But there were things that were strange: like the old newspapers and magazines that had been brought in by the lad from Baron II, and the rare radio message that would be relayed so far out they could get it. Perhaps there was ground for unease.

But Captain Schooner and Pete had seen eye to eye for a long time, and he'd always welcomed the Captain's visits, however short, and whatever year they came. True, they were few and far between. The colony was small; it didn't require but one supply ship in three or four years. And at that the *taaro* crates from Baron IV wouldn't half fill up

the ship. There were other colonies far closer to home that sent back more *taaro* in one year than Baron IV could grow in ten.

But when Captain Schooner got his ship down there was fresh food from Earth, meat from the frozen lockers and maybe even tobacco and a little candy and salt. And always, for Pete, there was a long evening of Scotch and palaver with the Captain about things back home and things on Baron IV.

Pete smiled to himself as he thought of it: things back home. It seemed so incredibly remote to him, now. He could remember Earth, of course—the green fields and the blue sky that he had missed so much in his early days at the colony. But thoughts of Earth were far off now. Baron IV was home to him, and he knew he would never leave it. He had too many hopes invested here, too many years of heartache and desperate hard work, too much deep satisfaction in having cut a niche of humanity out of a dusty, hostile world, to ever think much about Earth any more.

Mario stopped in front of the offices, and one of the Dusties hopped out ahead of Pete. The Dustie ran across the rough gravel to the door, pulling tar off his fingers just as he had seen Pete do. Pete followed and then stopped before the door, a frown creasing his weatherbeaten face. There should have been a babble of voices inside and Captain

Schooner's loud laugh roaring above the excitement. But Pete could hear nothing.

A chill of uneasiness ran through him. He pushed open the door and walked inside. A dozen of his friends looked around at him silently, then nodded and mumbled, and looked away from the man sitting in the chair. Pete glanced around the room and his eyes met the Captain's, and Pete knew something was very wrong.

It wasn't Captain Schooner. It was a man he'd never seen before.

The Dustie ran across the room in front of Pete and hopped up on the desk as though he owned it, throwing his hands on his hips and staring at the Captain curiously.

Pete took off his cap and parka and dropped them on a chair. "Well," he said. "This is a surprise. We weren't expecting a ship so soon."

The man at the desk inclined his head stiffly and glanced down at the paper he held in his hand. "You're Peter Farnam, I suppose? Mayor of this colony?"

Pete nodded slowly. "And you?"

"Varga," the Captain said shortly. "Earth Security and Supply." He turned his eyes toward the small, frail-looking man sitting beside him in civilian clothes. "This is Rupert Nathan, of the Colonial Representative Service. You'll be seeing a great deal of him." He held out a small wallet of papers. "Our credentials,

Farnam. Examine them carefully, please."

Pete glanced around the room. John Tegan and Hank Marigny were there, their faces uneasy. Mary Turner was watching the proceedings with her sharp little eyes, missing nothing. Mel Dorfman stood like a rock, his heavy face curiously expressionless as he watched the visitors. Pete reached out for the papers, flipped through them, and handed them back with a long look at Captain Varga.

He was younger than Captain Schooner had been—far younger. He had sandy hair, clipped short and graying about the temples, and his pale eyes looked up at Pete from a soft baby face. His face was clean shaved, and his whole person seemed immaculate as he leaned back calmly in the chair. His civilian companion, however, had uneasiness written in every line of his pink face. His hands fluttered nervously, and his eyes avoided Pete's.

Pete stared at the men, and his hand went up toward his tangled beard. Self-consciously he stopped in time and reached into his blouse for a cigarette. Beards had their uses in a climate like Baron IV had. His would be good and thick by the time winter struck. But these clean-shaven puppies had never spent a winter on Baron IV.

"The papers say you're our official supply ship," he said to the Captain. "We're surprised to see you, but an

Earth ship is always good news." He clucked at the Dustie, who was about to go after one of the shiny buttons on the Captain's blouse, and the Dustie hopped over and settled on Pete's knee. "We've been used to seeing Captain Schooner."

The Captain and Nathan exchanged glances. "Captain Schooner has retired from Security Service," the Captain said shortly. "You won't be seeing him again. However, we have a cargo for your colony, Farnam, and I think you'll like it. You may send these people over to the ship to start unloading now, if you wish—" His eyes swept the circle of windburned faces—"while Nathan and I discuss certain matters with you here."

Nobody moved for a moment. Then Pete nodded to Mario. "Take the folks out to unload, Jack. We'll see you back here in an hour or so."

Mario's eyes shot to the Captain, and back to Pete. "Are you sure—"

"Go ahead, Jack. Mel, Hank, go along and lend a hand." Pete turned back to Captain Varga. "Suppose we go inside to more comfortable quarters," he said. "We're always glad to have word from Earth."

"I'm sure," said Captain Varga in an acid voice. He stood up sharply. "Come along, Nathan."

They passed through a dark, smelly corridor into Pete's living room. For a colony house, it wasn't bad: good plastic chairs, a hand-made rug on the floor, even one of

Mary Turner's paintings on the wall, and several of the weird, stylized carvings the Dusties had done for Pete. But the place smelled of tar and sweat, and Captain Varga's nose wrinkled in distaste. Nathan drew out a large silk handkerchief and wiped his pink hands, touching his nose daintily.

The Dustie hopped into the room ahead of them and settled into the biggest, most comfortable chair. Pete snapped his fingers sharply. The brown creature jumped down again like a naughty child chastised and settled back on Pete's knee.

The Captain glanced at the chair distastefully and sat down in another. "Do you actually let those horrid creatures have the run of your house?" he snapped.

"Why not?" Pete said. "We have the run of their planet. They're quite harmless, really. And quite clean."

The Captain sniffed. "Nasty things. Might find a use for the furs, though. They look quite soft."

"I'm afraid we don't kill Dusties," said Pete coolly. "They're friendly and they're not unintelligent." He looked at the Captain and Nathan, and decided not to break out the Scotch. "Now what's the trouble?"

"The only trouble will be the trouble you make," said the Captain. "You have your year's *tadpo* ready for shipping?"

"Of course."

The Captain took out a small pencil on a chain and began to twirl it.

"How much is there, specifically?"

"Twenty thousand, Earth weight."

"Tons?"

Pete shook his head. "Hundred weight."

The Captain raised his eyebrows. "I see. And there are—" he consulted the papers in his hand— "roughly two hundred and twenty people in the colony, is that right?"

"That's right."

"Seventy-four men, eighty-one women, and fifty-nine children, to be exact?"

"I'd have to look it up. Margaret Singman had twins the other night—"

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped the Captain. "On a planet of the size of Baron IV, with seventy-four men, you should be yielding a dozen times the *taaro* weight you stated. We'll consider that your quota for a starter, at least. You have ample seed, according to my records. I should think, with the proper equipment—"

"Now wait a minute," Pete said softly. "We're fighting a climate here, Captain. You should know that. We have only a two-planting season, and the 'proper equipment,' as you call it, doesn't operate too well out here. It has a way of clogging up with dust in the summer, and rusting out in the winter."

"Really," said Captain Varga. "As I was saying, with the proper equipment, you could cultivate a great deal more land than you seem to be using. This would give you the necessary

heavier yield. Wouldn't you say so, Nathan?"

The little nervous man nodded. "Certainly, Captain. With the proper organization of labor."

"I wouldn't write it down anywhere," Pete said angrily. "You won't get that kind of yield from this planet. The ground won't give it, and the *mén* won't grow it."

The Captain gave him a long look. "Really," he said. "I think you're wrong. I think the men will grow it."

Pete stood up slowly. "What are you trying to say? This garbage about quotas and organization of labor—"

"You didn't read our credentials as we instructed you, Farnam. Mr. Nathan is the official Governor of the colony on Baron IV, as of now. You'll find him most cooperative, I'm sure, but he's answerable directly to me in all matters. My job is administration of the entire Baron system. Clear enough?"

Pete's eyes were dark. "I think you'd better draw me a picture," he said tightly. "A very clear picture."

"Very well. Baron IV is not paying for its upkeep. *Taaro*, after all, is not the most necessary of crops in the universe. It has value, but not very much value, all things considered. If the production of *taaro* here is not increased sharply, it may be necessary to close down the colony altogether."

"You're a liar," said Pete shortly. "The Colonization Board makes no

production demands on the colonies. Nor does it farm out systems for personal exploitation."

The Captain smiled. "The Colonization Board, as you call it, has undergone a slight reorganization."

"*Reorganization!* It's a top-level Board in the Earth Government! Nothing could reorganize it but a wholesale—" He broke off, his jaw sagging as the implication sank in.

"You're rather out on a limb, you see," said the Captain coolly. "Poor communications and all that. But the Earth Government has undergone a slight reorganization, also."

The Dustie knew that something had happened.

Pete didn't know how he knew. The Dusties couldn't talk—couldn't make *any* noise, as far as Pete knew. But they always seemed to know when something unusual was happening. It was wrong, really, to consider them unintelligent animals. There are other sorts of intelligence than human, and other sorts of communication, and other sorts of culture. The Baron IV colonists had never understood the source of the queer perception that the Dusties seemed to possess, any more than they knew how many Dusties there were, or what they ate, or where on the planet they lived. All they knew was that when they had landed on Baron IV, the Dusties had been there.

At first the creatures had been

very timid. For weeks the men and women, busy with their building, had paid little attention to the skittering brown forms that crept down from the rocky hills to watch them with big, curious eyes. They were about half the size of men, and strangely humanoid in appearance, not in the sense that a monkey is humanoid—for they did not resemble monkeys—but in some way the colonists could not quite pin down. It was the way they walked around on their long, fragile hind legs; the way they stroked their pointed chins as they sat and watched and listened with their ears lifted alertly, watching with soft gray eyes; the way they handled objects with their little four-fingered hands.

They were so remarkably human-like in their elfin way that the colonists couldn't help but be drawn to the creatures. That whole first summer, when they were building the village and the landing groove for the ships, the Dusties were among them, trying pathetically to help, so eager for friendship that even occasional rebuffs failed to drive them away. They *liked* the colony: they seemed, somehow, to savor the atmosphere, moving about like solemn, fuzzy overseers as the work progressed through the summer.

Pete Farnam thought that they had even tried to warn the people about the winter. But the colonists couldn't understand, of course. Not until later. The Dusties became a

standing joke and were tolerated with considerable amusement—until the winter struck.

It had come with almost unbelievable ferocity. The houses had not been completed when the first hurricanes came, and the inadequate structures were torn apart like tooth-picks. The winds came: vicious winds full of dust and sleet, wild erratic twisting gales that ripped the village to shreds, tearing off the topsoil that had been broken and fertilized—a merciless, never-ending wind that tore and screamed the planet's protest. It drove the sand and dirt and ice into the heart of the generators, and the heating units corroded and jammed and went dead. The jeeps and tractors and bulldozers were scored and rusted. The people began dying by the dozens as they huddled down in the pitiful little holes they had dug to try to keep the wind away.

Few of them were still conscious when the Dusties had come, silently in the blizzard, eyes closed tight against the blast, to drag the people up into the hills, into caves and hollows that still showed the fresh marks of carving tools. They had brought food—from where, nobody knew, for the colony's food had been destroyed by the first blast of the hurricane—but whatever it was had kept the colonists alive. And somehow, they had survived the winter which seemed never to end. There were frozen legs and ruined eyes;

there was pneumonia so swift and virulent that even the antibiotics they managed to salvage could not stop it; there was near-starvation. But they were kept alive until the winds began to die, and then they walked out of their holes in the ground to see the ruins of their first village.

The Dusties were not considered funny from that winter on. What had motivated them, no one knew, but the colony owed them their lives. The Dusties tried to help the people rebuild. They showed how to build windshields that would keep houses intact and anchored to the ground when the winds came again; they built little furnaces out of dirt and rock which defied the wind and gave great heat; they showed the colonists a dozen things which they needed to know for life on the little planet. And the colonists in turn tried to teach the Dusties something about Earth, and how the colonists had lived, and why they had come.

But there was a perceptible barrier that could not be crossed. The Dusties learned simple things, but slowly and imperfectly. They seemed content to take on their mock overseer's role, moving in and about the village, approving or disapproving, but always trying to help. Some became personal pets, though 'pet' was the wrong word, because the relationship was more of a strange personal friendship, limited by utter lack of communication. And the col-

onists made sure that the Dusties were granted the respect due them as rightful masters of Baron IV. And somehow the Dusties even perceived this attitude and were so grateful for the acceptance and friendship that there seemed nothing they wouldn't do for the colonists.

There had been many discussions about the Dusties. "You'd think they'd resent our moving in on them," Jack Mario had said one day. "After all, we are usurpers. And they treat us like kings. Have you noticed the way they mimic us? I saw one chewing tobacco the other day. He hated the stuff, but he chewed away, and spat like a trooper—"

One of the Dusties had been sitting on Pete's knee when Captain Varga had been talking, and he had known that something terrible was wrong. Now he sat on the desk in the office, moving uneasily back and forth as Pete looked up at Mario's dark face, and then across at John Tegan and Mel Dorfman. John's face was dark with anger, and he ran his fingers through the heavy gray beard that fell down to his chest. Mel sat stunned, shaking his head helplessly.

Mario was unable to restrain himself. His face was bitter as he stomped across the room, then returned to shake his fist under Pete's nose. "But did you see him?" he choked. "Governor of the colony! What does he know about growing

sauro in this kind of soil? Did you see those hands? Soft, sticky, pink! How could a man with hands like that govern a colony?"

Pete looked over at John Tegan. "Well, John?"

The big man looked up, his eyes hollow under craggy brows. "It's below the belt, Pete. If the government's been overthrown, then the Captain is right. It leaves us out on a limb."

Pete shook his head. "I can't give him an answer," he said. "The answer has got to come from the colony. All I can do is speak for the colony."

Tegan stared at the floor. "We're an Earth colony," he said softly. "I know that. I was born in New York. I lived there for many years. But it isn't home. This is." He looked at Pete. "I built it. You built it. All of us built, even when things were getting stormy back home. Maybe that's why we came—maybe somehow we saw the handwriting on the wall."

"But when did it happen?" Mel burst out suddenly. "How could anything so big happen so fast?"

"Speed was the secret," Pete said gloomily. "It was quick, it was well organized—and the government was unstable. We're just caught in the edge of it. Pity the ones living there, now. But the new government views the colonies as areas of exploitation instead of development."

"Well, they can't do it," Mario

cried. "This is my land, my home. Nobody can tell me what to grow in my fields—"

Pete looked up at him. "Sit down, Mario. You're making me tired."

"But can you sit and take it?"

Pete's fist slammed down on the desk. "Well, what do you want me to do?" he roared. "The law of the land is sitting out there in that ship. Tomorrow morning he'll come back here to the village to install his pink-faced friend as Governor. There are guns and soldiers on that ship to back him up. What can I do about it? What can anybody do?"

"I wonder," said John Tegan, slowly.

"You name it and I'm with you."

John looked up at Mario. "What were you thinking of, Jack?"

"I don't like the new law," Mario snarled. "I say fight it."

"How?"

Jack Mario looked around the room eagerly. "There are only a dozen men on that ship," he said softly. "We've got seventy-four. When Varga comes back to the village tomorrow, we tell him to take his friend back to the ship and shove off. We give him five minutes to get turned around. If he doesn't, we start shooting."

"Just one little thing," said Pete quietly. "What about the supplies? What if you fought them off and won—what about the food, the clothing, the replacement parts for the machines?"

"We don't need machinery to farm this land," said Mario eagerly. "There's food here, food we can live on. The Dusties showed us that that first winter. And we can farm the land for our own use and let the machinery rust. There's nothing they can bring us from Earth that we can't do without."

"We couldn't get away with it!" Mel Dorfman sat forward, searching Mario's face. "You're saying cut ourselves off from Earth completely. They'd never let us. They'd send ships to bomb us out—"

"We could hide! We could build up after they had finished—"

Pete Farnam shook his head. "They'd never leave us alone, Jack. Didn't you see that Captain? That kind of mind can't stand opposition. We'd just be a thorn in their side. They don't want any free colonies."

"Well, let's give them one." Mario sat down tiredly, snapping his fingers at the Dustie. "Furs!" he snarled. He looked up, his dark eyes burning. "It's no good, Pete. We can't let them get away with it. Produce for them, try to raise the yield for them, all right. But not a Governor. If they insist, we can throw them out and make them stay out."

"I don't think so. The soldiers on that ship can butcher us. They'd wipe us out."

John Tegan sat up and looked Pete Farnam right in the eye. "In that case, I think it might be better if they did," he said.

Pete stared at him for a moment and slowly stood up. "All right," he said. "Call a general colony meeting. We'll see what the women think. Then we'll make our plans."

The ship's jeep screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust, and Captain Varga peered through the windshield. Then he stood up, staring at the three men blocking the road at the edge of the village. The little pink-faced man at his side turned white when he saw the faces of the men, and his fingers began to tremble. Each of the men had a gun.

"You'd better clear the road," the Captain snapped. "We're driving through."

Nathan's face turned viciously to Varga. "I told you," he snarled. "Too big for their boots. Go on. Go on through."

The Captain laughed and gunned the motor. He started straight for the men blocking the road. Then Jack Mario shot a hole in his front tire. The jeep lurched to a stop. Captain Varga stood up and glared at the men. "Farnam, step out here," he said.

"You heard us," Pete said, without moving. "Crops, yes. We'll try to increase our yield. An Overseer, no. Leave him here and we'll kill him."

"Once more," said the Captain, "clear the way. This man is your new Governor. He will be regarded as the official agent of the Earth Government until the final production

capacity of this colony is determined. Now clear out."

The men didn't move. Without another word, the Captain threw the jeep into reverse, jerked back into a curve, and started the jeep, flat tire and all, back toward the ship in a billow of dust.

Abruptly the village exploded into activity. Four men took up places behind the row of windbreaks beyond the first row of cabins. Pete turned and ran back into the village. He found John Tegan commandeering a squad of ten dirty-faced men. "Are the women and children all out?" he shouted.

"All taken care of." Tegan spat tobacco juice and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Where's Mel?"

"Left flank. He'll try to move in behind them. Gonna be tough, Pete—they've got good weapons."

"What about the boys last night?"

John was checking the bolt on his ancient rifle. "Hank and Ringo? Just got back an hour ago. If Varga wants to get his surface planes into action, he's going to have to dismantle them and rebuild them outside. The boys jammed the launching ports up slick as a whistle, and no mistakes." He spat again. "Don't worry, Pete. This is going to be a ground fight."

"Okay." Pete held out his hand to the old man. "This may be it. And if we turn them back, there's bound to be more later."

"There's a lot of planet to hide on," said Tegan. "They may come back, but then after a while they'll go again."

Pete nodded. "I just hope we'll still be here when they do—"

They waited. It seemed like hours. Pete moved from post to post among the men—heavy-faced men, men he had known all his life, it seemed. They waited with whatever weapons they had available: pistols, home-made revolvers, ortho-guns, an occasional rifle, even knives and clubs. Pete's heart sank. They were bitter men, but they were a mob; they had no organization, no training for fighting. They would be facing a dozen of Security's best-disciplined shock-troops, armed with the latest weapons from Earth's electronics laboratories. The colonists didn't stand a chance.

Pete got his rifle and made his way up the rise of ground overlooking the right flank of the village. Squinting, he could spot a cloud of dust rising up near the glistening ship, moving toward the village. And then, for the first time, he realized that he hadn't seen the Dusties all day.

It puzzled him. They had been in the village in abundance an hour before dawn, while the plans were being laid out. He glanced around, hoping to see one of the fuzzy brown forms at his elbow, but he saw nothing. And then, as he blinked at the

cloud of dust coming across the valley, he thought he saw the ground moving.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes. With a gasp he dragged out his binoculars and peered down at the valley floor. There were dozens of them, thousands, a hundred thousand, their brown bodies moving slowly out from the hills surrounding the village, converging into a broad, liquid column between the village and the ship. Even as he watched, the column grew thicker, like a heavy blanket being drawn across the road, a multitude of Dusties lining up.

Pete's hair prickled on the back of his neck. He knew so little about the creatures, so very little. As he watched the brown carpet rolling out, he tried to think. Could there be a weapon in their hands? Could they somehow have perceived the evil that came from the ship, somehow sensed the desperation in the men's voices as they had laid their plans? Pete stared, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. They were there in the road, thousands upon thousands of them, standing there.

Three columns of dust were coming from the road now. Through the glasses Pete could see the jeeps. They were filled with men in gleaming gray uniforms; crash helmets were tight about their heads and blasters glistened in the pale light. They moved in deadly convoy along the rutted road, coming closer and closer

to the line of the motionless Dusties.

The Dusties just stood still. They didn't move. They didn't shift or turn. They just waited.

The Captain's car was first in line. He pulled up before the line with a screech of brakes and stared at the sea of creatures before him. "Get out of there!" he shouted.

The Dusties didn't move.

The Captain turned to his men. "Fire into them," he snapped. "Clear a path."

There was a blaze of fire, and half a dozen Dusties slid to the ground, convulsing. Pete felt a chill pass through him as he stared in disbelief. The Dusties had a weapon, they must have a weapon, he kept telling himself—something he had never dreamed of.

And then the guns came up again, and another volley echoed across the valley, and a few more Dusties fell to the ground. And still the creatures held their ground.

With a curse the Captain sat down in the seat, gunned the motor and started forward. The jeep struck the fallen bodies, rolled over them, and plunged straight into the thick of the creatures—and still they didn't move. The car slowed, striking half a dozen, and stopped, mired down. The other cars picked up momentum and plunged into the brown river of creatures, and slogged down, and ground to a stop.

The Captain started roaring at his men. "Slice them down," he

screamed. The blasters started roaring into the faces of the Dusties, and they began falling. The jeeps moved a few feet, but still more of the creatures filled up the breach . . .

Pete heard a cry below him and saw Jack Mario standing in the road. Mario's gun was on the ground and his hands were out in front of him as he stared in horror as the Dusties kept moving into the fire.

"Do you see what they're doing!" he screamed. "They'll slaughter them, they'll slaughter every one—" And then he was running down the road, shouting at them to stop, and so was Pete, and Tegan, and the rest of the men—

Something hit Pete in the shoulder as he ran; he screamed out and fell into the dusty road. A group of Dusties closed around him, lifting him up bodily, starting back through the village with him. He tried to struggle, but vaguely he saw the other men being carried back, also, while the river of creatures still surrounded the jeeps. Frantically, the Dusties half carried, half dragged him, their legs twisting as they ran. They went through the village, and up the hills behind, up a long ravine. They set Pete on his feet then and supported him, and then he came willingly. He didn't know what they were doing. But he knew they were trying to save him, and he followed.

They reached a cave—a cave Pete knew for certain had not been here when he had led exploring parties

through these hills years before. It was a huge opening, and already a dozen of the men were there, waiting, eyes wide with horror at what they had witnessed down in the valley. And more men were stumbling up the rocky incline, tugged by the fuzzy brown creatures with their wide frantic eyes and their eager fingers. They walked into the cave and found steps moving down into the side of rock, deep into the dark coolness of the earth. Down and down they went, until they suddenly found themselves in a mammoth room. And then Pete stopped and stared at the men who were already there.

Jack Mario sat on the floor, his face in his hands. He was sobbing. Tegan was sitting, too, his face stony, as if he had never seen Pete before. Dorfman was trembling like a leaf. Pete stared about him through the dim light, and then followed Tegan's finger down to the end of the room.

He couldn't see it clearly, at first. There was a dais there, with four steps leading up to the round platform at the top. A light burned on top of the dais, and behind the light, rising high into the gloom, stood a statue.

It was a beautifully carved thing, hewn from the heavy granite that made up the core of this planet. The designing was intricate, the lines carefully turned and polished. At first Pete thought it was a statue of a Dustie, but then he moved forward and squinted at it in the dim

light. And then, in the space of a second, he knew why the Dusties had done this incredible thing.

The statue was weirdly beautiful, in a curious art form such as Pete had never seen. It was the work of a master sculptor. It was a figure, standing with five-fingered hands on hips, head raised high. It was not a portrait, but an image seen through other eyes than human. It stood high in the room with the light burning reverently at its feet.

It was the statue of a man.

They heard the bombs much later. The granite roof and floor trembled, and the men and women stared at each other, helpless and sick as they huddled in that great hall. But soon the bombs stopped, and after a while, the colonists stumbled out of that grotto into the dimming light again. The ship was gone.

It would be back. It might come back to search; it might send men to go through the rubble of the village they had just ruined, or they might wait, and bomb out the new village when it rose once more. But the village would rise again and again, if necessary. And any time the hunters came back, they would find no one. Some day, they would give up. And some day, finally, Pete knew that the colonists would find a life. It would be a hard fight, but he knew one thing, and that one thing was strange and wonderful:

No matter what they had to do, the Dusties would help them. * * *