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THE LION AND THE LAMB by Fritz Leiber

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THE LION AND THE LAMB

BY FRITZ LEIBER

A culture is essentially the expression of an agreed-on pattern of thoughts, a pattern intended to solve the problems of living. But most problems have more than one approach to adequate solution . . .

Illustrated by Miller

The SS *Mole* FTL—Faster Than Light—ploughed through the Coal-sack. The jungle of the midship sunroom was in darkness. It was “night” for the plants that renewed the *Mole’s* oxygen. The banks of artificial sunlight that kept them alive on the interstellar voyage were switched off.

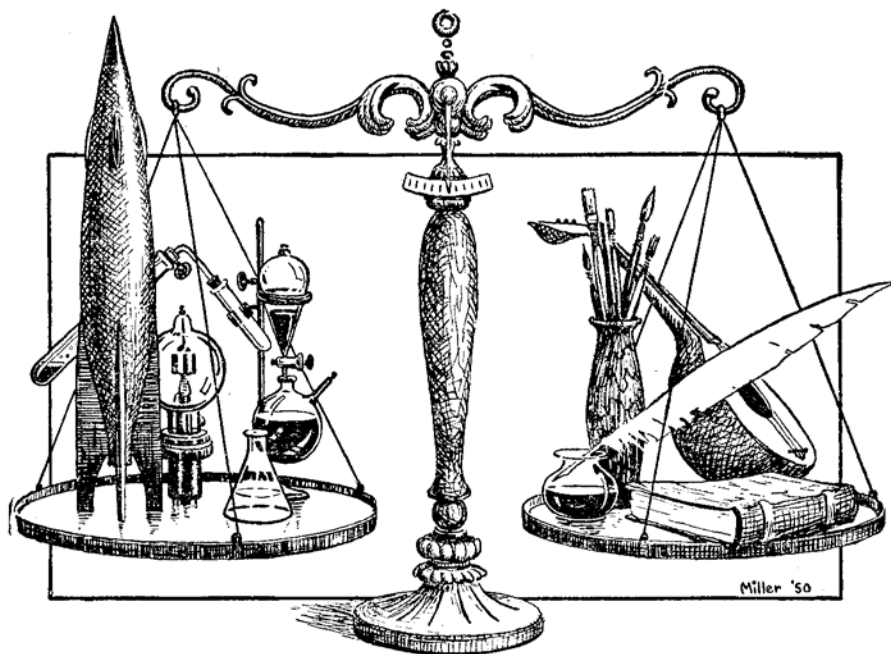
A faint glow from the dark nebular dust outside told of an approaching sun and barely outlined the lattice of narrow beams reinforcing the transparent circular wall.

Also from the dust, or through the dust, there beat another influence, intangible to the instruments of physical science—an unceasing pulse of menace.

Karl Friedrich, the *Mole’s* anthropologist and second mate, floating in the steamy darkness of the sunroom,

felt it—and was half inclined to trust his feelings. He had seen too many strange things on too many strange planets to wholly disbelieve in the supernatural, though the men who stayed close to the spaceships were apt to shrug at him. As for the home-loving citizens of the Confederacy’s civilized planets, packed on neat little spheres with their machines and offices and amusement places—and a bright little sun within nodding distance—they wouldn’t have understood what Karl was thinking about. And he wouldn’t have told them.

Gregg Dunstan, however, floating beside Karl, was no stay-at-home, and he was young enough at least to have a strong taste for the romantic. (In fact, his favorite complaint was, “I know why they talk about Mother



Earth. It's because space is so exclusively male—darn it!")

"Rather odd," Karl mused, "this endless trouble the Confederacy has with its dissident colonists and run-aways. A bit like the business of getting the lion to lie down with the lamb. Or perhaps I should say the lambs with the lion."

"The Confederacy's an old March Lion," the secretary and junior astrogator answered with a chuckle. "Roaring up and down the Galaxy for its lost children, to give them a spanking."

"Or silently stalking them," Karl added, "as we are."

"Right!" The word popped loudly out of Gregg's mouth. "Inciden-

tally, what's your guess?"

Karl knew that Gregg was thinking about the scene that had just taken place in the astrogation room: the dozen pairs of eyes fixed on Master Fulson's swollen fingers as they laboriously broke open the sealed orders and placed them in the reading machine. Nevertheless he asked, "My guess about what?"

"I mean, do you think it's just these runaways that the Confederacy is afraid of?"

"Can't tell," Karl shrugged, wanting the other's impressions.

"But look at the facts," Gregg pressed. "What were these run-aways? Just another bunch of dissident colonists who commandeered

an STL spaceship and dove into the Coalsack, maybe to elude pursuit, maybe because the old tub got out of control. Remember, there was hardly a technician and not a single real physical scientist among them. Just a bunch of artists, actors, psychologists, analysts . . . oh yes, and a few anthropologists."

Karl accepted the dig. "Sure, we're practically scum, our field's so far removed from the holy atom. Seems to me, though, there were some white-collars among them, too."

Gregg chuckled. "Seriously, old man, what threat could there be to the Confederacy in such a gang? I can understand the Confederacy being curious about them, now that it's gathering up loose ends a couple of centuries later. Nice to know if they found a livable planet and what sort of culture they've got and whether we can set up a research outpost there. Sure, that's understandable. But then—where's the danger?"

Karl Friedrich shrugged again. The glow barely silhouetted his slant-foreheaded profile. "Perhaps it's as you say, just a routine investigation."

"But why the business of sealed orders? Why all the hint-everything, tell-nothing warnings and cautions in those orders? Besides"—Gregg's voice grew diffident—"you feel it, don't you?"

Both the floating men, fingers loosely hooked to handholds on the windowframes, looked out at the

black dust through which the *Mole* was burrowing.

"Yes," Karl said simply, "I do."

Gregg nodded soberly and then added without any obvious continuity—except that he was Gregg Dunstan—"Gosh, I wish there were women in space."

There was a silky rustling behind them. A figure drifted up one of the radial pathways between the ferny banks. By indefinable impressions—for all men's senses grow abnormally subtle on an interstellar voyage—Karl and Gregg recognized the *Mole's* doctor and senior biologist, Juan Galvez.

For a few moments the three men floated without speaking. There was a quality about them that would have seemed strange and even uncomfortable to an Earthman of the Twentieth or Twenty-first Century. It was the shared knowledge and experience of men who have lived in the Galaxy rather than on Earth, who have pictured their personal universe in terms of suns and planets rather than states and cities, who have known no tempo of life except the old FTL grind, who have conceived of mankind's destiny as a scramble across black space for new planets—and who now showed in their deadened eyes and taut cheeks—deadened and taut to a man of the Twentieth Century, that is, or even the Twenty-first—the indelible mark of the machine.

"How's the master?" Gregg asked Galvez finally.

"I believe I've pulled him through this attack," the Spaniard from Arcturus Quattuor replied, drifting closer. "But, as to the real nature of Fulsom's illness, I'm only groping. One thing I'm sure, the edema is no ordinary absence-of-gravity congestion. As for the heart condition, I'd swear it was psychosomatic, despite its increasing seriousness, except that I can discover no possible emotional cause—and I've checked through the tapes of his psychoanalysis."

He paused, looking out through the lattice. "But then," he went on bitterly, "who can tell what unwholesome radiations and nuclei reside in this contaminated vacuum we're penetrating? Frankly, gentlemen, I do not like this stuff." He jerked his lean chin at the dust. "Just think, we're a light-week into it! I feel I'm suffocating."

Karl Friedrich smiled wryly. "I don't know, Juan," he said lightly, "but somehow I'm almost glad not to see stars. They always make you think of planets and of people straining to keep up the old FTL grind. I'm rather grateful for the dust and the dark."

Galvez grunted tolerantly, as if willing to allow any man his space-madness, and remarked, "Well, I've never been in anything but clean space myself, and I hate these lousy ashes. You could crack up on a planet before you saw it."

"It would be bound to show up on the scopes," Gregg reminded him.

"And we've been STL for a long time."

"I suppose so," the doctor agreed moodily, "but what about the *Grimoire*?"

"The *Grimoire*?" Gregg sounded puzzled.

"Didn't you catch that in the orders? It's the name the runaways gave their ship when they commandeered it. An old Earth word, meaning a grammar—of black magic."

For a moment the three men were silent, conscious of dust and darkness—and a faint ominous pulsing that beat like tiny black waves against the shores of their minds.

"Well, what about the *Grimoire*?" Gregg asked with a touch of beligerence. "Even if she were drifting around in space, an unmanned hulk, she'd show up on the scopes, too."

"Ah!" the Arcturan Spaniard said quickly, "but suppose she'd been space-wrecked; broken open, say, by a big meteorite. Do you recall the cargo the *Grimoire* was carrying when she was commandeered?"

"Radioactive war dusts," Karl answered. "Enough to kill a couple of planets."

"Exactly!" the doctor seemed dourly elated. "Well, imagine the *Grimoire* cracked open. The dust would spread—pressure of light and all that—through *this* dust. Suppose the *Mole*, following an extrapolation of the *Grimoire's* known course, is heading into a patch of stuff like that?"

"It would show up on the Geigers," Gregg assured him.

"Even if it had spread out into a great pocket and the *Mole* heading into it?"

"Even if!" Gregg said sharply. "Besides, the stuff would long ago have lost its potency. In the silo aboard the *Grimoire* it would be kept up to full strength by breeder action. But once adrift in space . . . war dusts have a devilish short half-life, you know."

"All right, all right," the doctor allowed. "Just the same I've got a feeling."

"We all have," Karl Friedrich told him quietly. "And perhaps you've got hold of Gregg's idea."

"What's that?" Gregg asked.

"What you were getting at when we were first talking about the run-aways. The idea that it isn't the run-aways so much that the Confederacy's afraid of, as something entirely different, something working through them. Hence the secrecy, urgency, warnings, and what not. Something big, hostile—and alien to mankind."

At that moment Karl became aware of an increase in the ground-tone of pulsing menace, and he became conscious of a faint yet portentous buzzing, like that of a giant insect dozing, and of an increase of darkness and of a faint dry odor, as if dust had invaded the moist sun-room.

From his companions' indrawn breaths, he knew they were sensing something, too.

Then it seemed to Karl that the invading dust—or something—took

the shape of a preternaturally tall, hooded and cloaked human—or non-human—figure drawn back in the vegetation. And from the vague head of that figure there seemed to peer two pale eyes like tiny twin moons lost in intergalactic space. And then the buzzing seemed to shape itself into barely audible English words.

"Go back, *Mole*. Turn your tunnel and go back."

He felt Galvez's hand clamp his arm. "What is it?"

Before Karl could reply a bell shrilled through the sunroom. A trap in the ceiling opened, spilling light through the green tangle of leaves and vines, and a man dove toward them, caught a handhold in the vegetation and came to rest facing them.

"Stations!" the newcomer cried. "Takimori has picked up a planet on the next sun. Earth-size or a little bigger, about Mars-distance. Looks like this is *it*. Hey! What happened to you?"

As the newcomer asked that abrupt question, it seemed to Karl that the dust-figure, banished by the light, half reshaped itself in the shadows. And he seemed to hear the buzzing voice repeat, fainter still: "Turn your tunnel, *Mole*."

He intently watched the newcomer's puzzled face. After a moment Tauno Sweyn turned his big, strong-jawed Viking's visage toward the shadows. And as if that visage had too much of the strong spirit of science and clear-headed honesty about it, the seeming figure

grew faint and vanished, and the seeming voice trailed off to silence.

"*Whew!*" Gregg blew his breath out. "Oh, my space nerves!"

Karl said quietly, "We saw a ghost, Mr. Sweyn."

Galvez managed a sickly chuckle, beginning with the word ghost. "That is, we seem to have experienced a collective hallucination."

The first mate and physicist of the *Mole* looked round at them soberly. "It's not space nerves," he said, "because I saw it and heard it, too." He paused, and it seemed that the strong spirit in him swelled a little, making his Viking's visage a very incarnation of man's hard-headed, adventurous quest across the Galaxy. When he spoke again, it was with great conviction. "It's something that hates man and his methods utterly. It's something that never works our way, or with our tools. It's *anti-science*."

Three human-days — somewhat longer than Earth-days—later, Gregg Dunstan was again at the windows of the sunroom, but the scene was very different. To begin with, Gregg was standing on the floor and the *Mole* seemed suddenly crowded, its three dimensions of movement cut to two. A gravity slightly greater than Earth's tugged at his flesh and blood—elastic stockings guarded the veins of his legs. Above him, the leaves and vines sagged downward.

Outside was wonder. The dimly-revealed landscape began about fifty meters below, where the stern of the

Mole based itself. First, an area blackened and bared by the *Mole's* landing jets. Then a band of trees and undergrowth flattened radially away from the *Mole* by the same blasts. Beyond that, shadowy jungle leading off into rolling hills, with here and there the glitter of flowing water.

But it was overhead and the real wonder existed. A sky that, although now reddening a little to the dawn, still showed the lacework of ten thousand meteor trails—an ever-changing diamond web.

"Beautiful," Gregg said softly. "Beautiful—as a woman."

Meteorologist Rykov nodded in appreciation beside him. "Should have known," he said, "that any planet with atmosphere in a dust cloud would have brilliant meteoric displays. Though this is beyond imagining. Lucky they're all uniformly tiny and burn out, or meteorite insurance would come high on this planet. But say, Greggie, beauty and astronomy aside, have you any new ideas on whether *that* is animal, mineral, or vegetable?"

By *that* Rykov referred to the one item that still remained from the scene three days earlier—the pulse of menace. Only now, as the flip-pant reference indicated, it had moderated. The intangible surge of horror had become an audible beat that reverberated faintly through the windows of the sunroom, a ridiculously banal sound that should only be heard in an antique adventure play about Earth's ancient Africa, a

ludicrous "BOOM, boom, boom, boom, BOOM, boom, boom, boom."

"What is it?" Rykov pressed. "I've heard Aludran drum-forests make such a racket."

"Lord knows," Gregg replied, and then his shrug turned into a lazy stretch. "But have I got planet-fever! What I'd give to go out there right now! Do you suppose there'll be any women?"

Galvez said, massaging his puffy eyelids as he came around the shrubbery, "Nevertheless, thanks to that individual—namely, Juan Galvez of that miserably provincial planet Arcturus Quattuor—you may get out of the *Mole* before noon."

"Don't we have to wait for your microbe samples to grow, so that you can give them the once-over, especially since this planet may harbor mutations of Earth microbes?"

Galvez yawned. "No need to grow cultures this trip. We have the new machine that lines up all the microbes in a sample, gives each one the spectroscopic once-over for antipathy to human protoplasm, and sorts out the suspects for individual examination. So far it's been through a hundred million or so viruses and bacteria, and I haven't seen anything that wasn't old news to me. I just told the master we were safe. Tests on radiation and atmosphere gave us an O.K. long ago, as you know, so now it's just up to Fulsom when we step out."

"How is he, by the way?" Gregg asked.

Galvez shook his head slowly, but

said nothing. The three men turned to the windows and watched the dawn come. It was far redder than an Earth dawn, more like the opening of a great furnace door. Against the glow, the hills defined themselves, strangely filmy fronds grew sharper in outline, then began to show touches of dusky green, created an impression of riot and luxury. And through all these changes there continued the mysterious but ludicrous, "BOOM, boom, boom, boom."

Suddenly Gregg electrified the others with a "Look!"

At first Rykov and Galvez could make out only the brownish glimmer of the spear points, the lighter and larger blurs below. Then they, too, began to see what Gregg was seeing.

Perhaps there were other faces peering out of the forest—they couldn't be sure. But it was undeniable that a few yards inside the clearing, a semicircle of tall, lean men stood in the flattened vegetation. They were naked except for short skirts. Each carried a spear. They seemed to be wearing hats—no, Gregg decided, headdresses of fantastic plumes. They looked strong and lithe, but uneasy.

In their midst squatted a man similarly clad except that he wore no headdress. White-haired and bearded, his gaze, like those of his escort, was fixed on the *Mole*.

He was beating a large tom-tom.

"Do you get it, fellows, do you get it?" Gregg demanded, pounding Ry-

kov's shoulder. Very likely they both did, but the young secretarial officer gave them no time to say so.

"It's the runaways! They've reverted to savagery! Being just a bunch of artists, with artists' weakness for the primitive, they speeded up the process. In a couple of generations they became prancing savages. They've come to welcome us as sky gods. No, change that—from their looks and that drumbeat I'd say they think we're bad medicine."

"Right on all counts, especially the last." The comment came from above. Karl Friedrich, knee and elbow linked around a handrail, was sliding down toward them. It was startlingly flamboyant behavior for the anthropologist.

"What do you want to know?" he announced triumphantly as he dropped beside them. "While you've been admiring meteor trails, I've had a bunch of robot television rockets scouting the neighboring villages. I've hovered over their market places. I've eavesdropped on their priests. I've watched them eat. I've peeked in their bedroom windows. I've investigated their old folks' lodges and their young folks' fraternity and sorority houses. I've even learned their language."

"In five hours?"

"Oh, it's English, of course, though of a pretty flossy sort." Karl smiled at them gayly, then got down to business. "Here's a sketch of their culture. Thatched hut stage. Matri-lineal inheritance, I think. Loose tribal structure, anarchic like some

of Earth's American Indians, with the old folk commanding respect only because of actual wisdom and skill in witchcraft. Strong emphasis on gift-giving and feasts, ceremonial dancing and athletic feats, poetry and legendry. Seem to put a very high value on beauty—physical beauty, beauty of thought, beauty in human relationships."

"Beautiful women?"

Karl grinned at Gregg, then went on, "But the most significant thing about their culture is that it's anti-mechanical. Not just unmechanical, but anti-mechanical. Absolutely no evidence of the wheel. No systematic use of the lever, as in throwing sticks, say. No bows, or twirl sticks for fire-making. No smelting of metals. Their weapons are cold-worked copper. Apparently there are pure deposits of the stuff.

"Got some direct evidence of their bias against machines. Heard part of a legend—mother telling it to a child who wouldn't sleep—in which someone got punished for trying to make a water-screw or something like that."

"Anti-mechanical," Galvez repeated thoughtfully. "Remember the expression Sweyn used? Anti-science." He caught Gregg's eye and for a moment the two men looked at each other, representatives of the FTL world of the machine come to a very different sort of place. Then their gazes stole toward the vegetation drooping above them, reddishly highlighted by the sunrise glow, but still showing great aisles of shadow.

Karl's voice called them back from their memories.

"I've saved the most interesting bit for last. In a sunken valley only twenty kilometers from the nearest village, I found a taboo area. A circle of second-growth vegetation, with some suggestive signs—including some big NO's—hacked in the surface of trees around the edge. What do you think was at the very center of that circle?"

Faintly through the windows came the vibrant, *BOOM, boom, boom, boom.*

Then Karl Friedrich told them. "The *Grimoire*."

The bell shrilled. The four men at the window straightened. Through the sunroom Master Fulsom's voice sounded—a tired voice, with faint gasps between the phrases.

"Landing party please assemble at the lower port to disembark. Mr. Friedrich will lead."

"The idiot!" Karl said, looking back over his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Gregg asked quickly. They had advanced a third of the way across the singed clearing. The savages had as yet shown no reaction, either hostile or friendly, except that the old man had stopped thumping his tom-tom and all of them were intently watching the approach of the *Mole's* landing party.

"I told Sweyn that machines of any sort were absolutely *out* in contacting these people, and look what the fool's doing!" Karl replied.

Gregg glanced back. One of the

Mole's copters had been wheeled out onto the upper landing stage. He could make out Sweyn's great figure, and another's.

"The master's up there, too," Gregg started to tell Karl, but then he saw that the anthropologist had his whisper-mike to his lips.

"I've talked to him," Karl told Gregg a few moments later, not looking around, keeping his eyes on the primitives. "He says Sweyn wanted the copter ready in case we were attacked. I told him to make no move in any case."

They went on, with Galvez and Rykov a few steps behind them. They were hardly a dozen yards from the edge of the clearing, but still none of the plumed men moved or changed their watchful expressions. Nor did their white-bearded leader. Despite his air of authority, he looked physically feeble—and his ribs fluted the skin below the mat of graying hair on his chest. The younger men were notable for their fine features and balanced muscular development.

Karl Friedrich's gaze wandered to the vegetation beyond them, then swung round to where a tongue of giant undergrowth stretched out into the clearing as far as the *Mole's* landing party had advanced. He looked up at one of the trees. It was covered with great tawny green and brownish leaves, like those of Earth's magnolias, but larger and semi-transparent, and splashed with violet blossoms.

As he drank in its beauty, a clus-



ter of leaves and petals softly detached itself and sailed down toward him. For an instant he watched it curiously. Then he threw himself down on the charred weeds, just as something with the form of a huge flying squirrel but a fanged feline face swooped inches above him. There was a skid and clatter of claws and he was coming up snatching at his blaster.

It is doubtful if he would have been quick enough, but fortunately there was no need. By the time the violet-splotted beast was under the sights of his blaster, it was pinned to the ground by a spear. Beast and spear were quivering.

He felt rather dazed, as if he had been suddenly transported to a dream world—of FTL human reflexes. He heard Rykov snort, evidently to Galvez, "And you said this planet was biologically safe!" He looked at the plumed men. One of them now stood a few yards ahead of the group. He no longer carried a spear. His eyes met Karl's. Both men smiled. Then the rose-plumed, purple-skirted savage took a step forward and held out his right hand in a gesture that was warm and masculine enough for all it had the grace of a ballet dancer's. Karl started toward him, holding out his own.

There was a whirring overhead and the upper half of the magnolia-like tree flashed into flame. Karl saw the smile on the savage's face turn to a look of pure horror. Then everything was walloping confusion,

as more branches flared, as the savages fled, two of them hurling on the old man between them, and as the copter from the *Mole* buzzed down to a landing.

When Karl spoke, his voice was quite under control. He addressed himself to Master Fulsom, who was lying back in one of the seats of the copter, breathing heavily, his puffed face troubled.

"Sir, I must strongly protest this intervention. What happened was the best thing we could have wished for. There is no surer way to gain the friendship of simple people than to let them do you a real service. As an anthropologist and sapientologist dealing with savage races and species, I've even manufactured such situations. This one was Galaxy-given! But now we have been set back to the beginning—and much farther."

Mate Sweyn, standing beyond the copter, his heat gun at the ready, his eyes searching the smoking jungle, spoke without looking around. "You were obviously in danger, Mr. Friedrich."

"Danger?" Karl queried sharply. "One simple carnivore? A few simple savages?"

"Simple savages? Come, Mr. Friedrich." Sweyn's voice was tolerant. "You heard the sealed orders. You know what, ultimately, we must be on guard against." His voice grew almost genial. "And if they are simple savages, we can't risk lives like yours to placate them. There isn't an expendable man on the *Mole*,

and we *are* in the heart of a dark nebula."

Karl addressed himself again to Fulsom. "I gave you full information, sir, about the extreme anti-mechanical bias of these people. We can't hope to establish friendly relations unless we minimize in every way our dependence on machinery. Such as copters and heat guns."

Sweyn's voice was like a dreamer's. It was addressed to no one in particular, but it rang with a bitter wisdom that brought uneasiness to the hearers. "Now it begins—the temptations of anti-science."

Karl set his jaw and, disregarding the interruption, continued to speak to Fulsom. "Sir, you gave me command of this landing party. If you do not choose to revoke that command, my next order will be that it proceed with me, on foot, into the jungle."

"And into the hands of the alien," Sweyn finished for him, still restlessly eying the charred foliage.

"Please, Mr. Sweyn." Master Fulsom's voice was low but it carried authority. "I gave you no order to launch the copter. I would have stopped you except"—his swollen visage twisted in a grimace that was more than half pain—"I'm not very quick today. Mr. Friedrich, you are still under orders to establish friendly contact with the natives. Continue in your command, taking such measures as you see fit." He slumped back in the copter seat, gasping.

Sweyn spoke. "In that case I would like to join Mr. Friedrich's party."

"You may do so if you wish," Fulsom whispered, "but Mr. Friedrich commands."

Sweyn nodded. Cradling his heat gun under his right arm, he said, "Anthropologist Friedrich, consider me under your orders."

Smoky red sunlight filtered down hotly through leaves which were transparent at the topmost levels, but became opaque near the sandy ground. The trees' slender multiple trunks, arching downward like the legs of an army of giant harvestmen, were specked with barnacle-like entities which snapped at tiny octopoid creatures which spun swiftly by them on outstretched tentacle tips, riding the slender trunks like monocyclists ride tight wires. There were many other insect-size creatures, some of them aerial. Now and then one variety would come lazily twirling down on living helicopter vanes. Others would squirm to the topmost branches. There, under the bright blue-green sky which nevertheless flashed with an occasional meteor trail, they would inflate opalescent bladders and then come jetting down in seemingly erratic sweeps, like toy balloons deflating, to land with unexpected accuracy on the leaves or branches harboring their prey.

These jet-propelled bugs were the only ones which much annoyed the party from the *Mole* making its way along the trail below. At frequent intervals they would land with disconcerting *plops* on transparent cov-

erals, perhaps mistaking them for some favored flower or shrub, since on this planet many blooms and plants, and even animals, seemed to be transparently packaged by nature. The creatures seemed harmless however. After clinging for a few seconds, they would drop off and squirm away.

Karl Friedrich and his party moved along cautiously, scanning the gaps in the looping tree stems and the branches above as well. Yet when the thing happened, they were taken completely by surprise.

It was like a theatrical illusion. One moment the trail ahead was bare, as they entered a slightly darker area where the leaves were more opaque, though riddled with tiny holes.

The next moment they faced, across a red-specked bower, the white-bearded man, fierce-eyed and cadaverous, flanked by the menacing brownish spearpoints of warriors half-concealed.

Karl and the others stopped dead. At close range, the bare-chested savages seemed, if anything, more magnificent physical specimens—and their leader more eerily impressive.

He suddenly raised his hands to either side in a proud gesture and brought them down slowly. The spearpoints followed them. Then he spoke.

"Oh Men of the Magic Tower, served by demons inhabiting dead matter, what is it that you seek?"

His English was reasonably clear, though some of the pronunciations

were strange. It had the lilt of poetry. He might have been some ancient Druid bard who had sought to purify his spirit with starvation—except that closer examination showed that his thinness was unhealthy and his skin-color not altogether wholesome. His eyes were dark-circled and the bones above the sunken cheeks seemed about to break through the hectic flesh.

Yet there was power, grandeur, too, in the way he held himself. Even when, at the end of his short speech, he broke into a fit of coughing, he did not lose dignity. Controlling the spasm quickly, he made a rapid gesture.

Instantly two young women came out of the jungle behind him. They were every whit as perfect specimens as the spearmen, only showing a daintier grace in their movements. Instead of plumes, their hair was dressed in elaborate, gleaming puffs reminiscent of the Twentieth Century. Otherwise they were garbed precisely as the warriors.

All of Karl Friedrich's party observed them with some interest, but Gregg Dunstan was by all odds the most impressed.

One girl carried a stool covered with some dark green fur, the other a small semitransparent gourd and napkin. With a "By your leave" glance at the men of the *Mole*, the old man seated himself. The second girl wiped his lips with the napkin, then offered him the gourd. He grimaced humorously, as if to show that this was medicine and not some

refreshing drink. Then he sipped briefly. The girl wiped his lips and dropped back.

The old man spoke again. "Men of the Silver Tower built in a single night out of thunder and flames, why have you entered our woodlands? Why do you desecrate their sanctity with things of demon-possessed dead matter?"

In the silence one of the jetting bugs plopped loudly against Karl Friedrich's coverall. Disregarding it, he took a step forward and bowed. "Wise and venerable one," he proclaimed, "we come from a far land, seeking only your friendship and to trade such objects and ideas as may seem wholesome to us both. It is true that we are served by demons animating dead matter, but we will not permit them to invade your woodlands. They are utterly obedient to our wills."

"Are they?" the old man demanded sharply. "The giant demon whirlbug came against us and spat flame at our forest." The warriors behind him nodded vehemently.

"That was a misfortune due to our lack of knowledge of your country and customs," Karl replied. "It will not occur again. Our own chief is sick, so that he cannot walk, yet he wished very much to visit you when you appeared at the edge of the clearing around our . . . magic tower. The whirling silver demon was only a servant-thing to bear him effortlessly through the air. Yet I, knowing a little of your customs, warned

him that he must not approach you with it. And while he watched, hating the sickness that holds him helpless, we others walked out to bid you welcome."

"We made no warlike move," the old man reminded him. "I beat the drum, but only to protect us against the demons we knew might lurk in your magic tower."

"It is true," Karl agreed. "But when the violet-spotted beast sprang at us, our chief thought was that our lives were in danger. He did not realize that, because of the great skill and swiftness of your spearmen, our lives were perfectly safe. So he bid the whirling silver demon bring him swiftly down to us, but only because he is a good chief and ever thoughtful for the lives of his men."

The old man looked at him skeptically. "But it was *after* the leopard-bat was dead under our spears that the demon came whirling down. Also"—he looked at Sweyn cradling his heat gun—"I thought it was *he* who was the demon's real rider—and he, too, who bade the demon send evil heat against our treetops, so that the leaves blackened and the b'loon-blooms frizzled and popped like bladder-bugs in a campfire."

Sweyn kept a poker face. Karl cut in quickly, "He only feared that there might be more leopard-bats hiding there. As I first told you, it was an unfortunate mistake. Henceforth we will keep our demons penned in our tower and will not permit them to hurt you."

"They have already," the old man

replied shortly. "Stand forward, Shurand."

One of the warriors glided forward. His left arm, raised for all to see, was swollen and crossed by an ugly dark streak bordered by angry red flesh. His comrades shot hostile looks at the man of the *Mole*.

"Shurand watched from the trees when the heat-tongue licked out from the whirling demon," the old man explained. "Were it not that he is above all others swift in the branches, he would have paid with his life."

"We are sorry for it," Karl assured him, bowing his head. Then he shot a quick glance behind him at Galvez, got an answering nod, and continued, "To show our good will toward you, may we heal his wound?"

"We have our own medicaments and do not hanker after demon cures," the old man replied and waved the warrior back again, then motioned the girl to give him the gourd again. She complied prettily. She was a redhead and it was on her, rather than on the equally handsome brunette beside her, that Gregg was concentrating his attention.

As the old man handed the gourd back to her, there was a whiffle of leaves, and something like a transparent, spike-tipped basketball with several eyes—or pale purple dots—shot out of the jungle and darted in erratic rushes toward the old man. Sweyn swiveled round his heat gun, but as he leveled it, the old man's

gaze flared at him, and he froze woodenly.

The animated basketball stopped by the old man's ankles and he leaned over and patted it, still glaring at Sweyn. It was shrunk compared to its first appearance and it had a skinny body of a sort inside its transparent balloon, which pulsed rhythmically as it reinflated. The old man's pats made a faint drumroll on it.

Karl turned toward Sweyn. The first mate was still frozen in his position. His face was flushed.

The old man spoke. "It is often difficult to tell whether something is a pet or a danger. Among strangers, it is well to wait." He looked at Sweyn, then looked away from him and the latter unfroze.

There was an uncomfortable pause which Karl broke by saying, "I am sure, old man, that there is wisdom in all that you say. But we, on our part, are not devoid of sense, good manners and honor. I give you my solemn promise that so long as we are in your land"—here he shot a quick, tight-jawed look at Sweyn—"we will keep all our demons penned up in the magic tower."

"But you are not your chief," the old man reminded him. "Would your chief give that promise?"

"I speak for him, with his full authority."

"I grant you speak with sincerity, still you are not your chief. Moreover, is it in your power, or your chief's power, to keep such a prom-

ise? You say you can control your demons, but can you? In our experience, the demons inhabiting dead matter corrupt men." Here he shifted his gaze to Sweyn. "The men become the demons' slaves, seeking only to establish the tyranny of the demons throughout the length of the world, until all true life is dead and dead matter reigns in a realm devoid of beauty and wonder.

"For, oh man in the b'loon-bloom suit, long ages past we lived in such another magic tower, slaves of demons and corrupted by all manner of evils. But we escaped and swore an oath for all times that we would have no more to do with the demons inhabiting dead matter, nor ever again avail ourselves of their tainted power, nor ever again set foot in the old tower. And we have kept that oath. Living in our woodlands, we have striven constantly to avoid the calling up of even the feeblest and most harmless-seeming of the demons inhabiting dead matter—since it is in the nature of man to be tempted to summon or create such things. Instead, we have sought to cultivate simpler powers."

He did not specify what those powers were. Nevertheless, there was no denying that at that moment, despite his frailty and appearance of ill-health—he was panting a little after so many words—he looked a man of might. Perhaps it was that there seemed to be a harmony between him and his warriors—yes, and the whole jungle around them and the creatures inhabiting it.

Karl Friedrich nodded. "I respect your wishes and your ways. But as to your suspicions of us, I can only repeat that you have my promise. Something stronger than that I cannot give."

The old man looked at him. "I like you," he answered simply, "and you make fair speech. Yet you are not your chief, and through your demons one of us has suffered hurt. Moreover, I do not like the spirit I sense in some of you. And I am alarmed by the swift growth of your tower—it is as if our old tower had spawned. And I am disturbed at the small weapons you carry at your sides and he"—looking at Sweyn—"in his arm. They may merely be clubs—and they may not. When my b'loon cat came, *he* did not handle his as if it were a club. The demons inhabiting dead matter assume many forms. Nevertheless—" And signing for silence, he bowed his head in thought.

At that moment Gregg at last caught the eyes of the redhead. He risked a smile, faint but very admiring. She hesitated, then gave him back the smile, which on her lips was quick and silky, and turned innocently away. Gregg rocked back on his heels, dazed by his success.

The old man looked up. He spoke briskly. "I must learn more of you. I must speak with your chief. Therefore I, Firānthoth, invite you to a banquet at our village tomorrow sunset. You will be treated as honored guests. You have told me that your chief is ill and cannot walk and so

we will provide conveyance for him. No, we cannot yield our privilege to dispense hospitality in our own woodlands. Meanwhile, I enjoin you to return to your magic tower and to remain there, or in the open space around it. On our part"—here he rose to his feet—"I, Firamthoth, declare that same space taboo to all our people. You are granted safe-conduct to our village tomorrow sunset, and safe-conduct back again, whatever the issue of our speaking together."

He laid his hand on his heart. Those behind him imitated his gesture.

"This we swear."

At last the vast silver spindle of the *Mole* showed up through the filmy treetops, a heartening sight to Karl Friedrich's party.

"Say, it does look like a tower!" Gregg observed. "Quite a lot easier to imagine it being built by genie than coming down from the skies hind-end-foremost with a flaming tail."

Karl nodded. "For a while old Firamthoth really had us in fairyland. Spaceships were towers and helicopters, chimeras. One must admit that the anti-machine obsession of these people showed up at every point. Don't you think so, Mr. Sweyn?" he continued, addressing himself to the mate. "By the way, Mr. Sweyn," he added, "I'm grateful to you for your quick thinking in not shooting the old guy's pet—that is, if it was your quick-thinking?"

He paused and when Sweyn didn't reply, he went on, "And in any case I'm grateful to you and for your co-operation and protection."

Sweyn, stepping into the clearing, nodded briefly. "Mr. Friedrich," he said, "I quite realize my protection was inadequate. It's quite true, as you surmise, that it wasn't my quick thinking, or any anthropological consideration for the feelings of savages, that saved the old guy's pet. Some force outside the sort of science we know, stopped my finger." He paused. "I've formed my opinion of these folk, Mr. Friedrich," he said quietly. "They're no savages. They don't use reality as we do. Or rather, something uses them . . . you see, I've kept the Confederacy's orders in my memory. It's all right. There are ways in which matter can oppose mind on its own level." And he strode on.

Karl frowned, shrugged, and fell back beside Galvez, who remarked quietly, "That little display of primitive hypnotic power back there rather bothered our Mr. Sweyn."

Karl shrugged and remarked, "Firamthoth was certainly an impressive old duffer."

"But a very sick one," Galvez interposed.

Karl looked at him questioningly.

"Oh yes," the doctor confirmed. "Miliary tuberculosis without a doubt. Whatever his 'medicaments' are, they don't seem equal to that. He'll be dead inside a month."

Karl frowned. "I hope we can per-

suade him to let you work on him. I suppose—”

“Oh sure, I can cure him easily enough—if he'll let me. I only wish—” Galvez didn't finish, but Karl knew he had been going to say, “I only wish I could cure *our* chief as easily as that.”

“By the way,” Karl asked softly, “just how badly off is Fulson? Sweyn's a crackerjack physicist and darn good first mate out in space, but this thing here is awfully ticklish to deal with.”

Galvez shrugged. “Fulson's not good,” he said somberly. “Now that we're in gravity, I'm surer than ever that Fulson's edema is no ordinary space-congestion. Though, of course, those space ailments linger. But I really think it's an emotional cause—except I can't touch it.” He looked at Karl and shrugged. “I'm really out of my depth, I'm afraid. Sweyn may be captain of the *Mole* tomorrow—or a year from now Fulson may still be master.”

Karl nodded and they set out after the others across the seared clearing.

“Well, at all events I hope old Firamthoth relents and lets you have a go at him,” Karl remarked in a louder voice. “I've developed an affection for the old duffer. It really got me when he put his hand to his heart.”

Carlo Baldini, the *Mole's* cook and junior biologist, liked children. Moreover, he knew children. So, although he had heard the whole story

of the landing party and of the taboo put on the area around the *Mole*, he was not in the least surprised when, next morning at sunrise, he glanced out of the galley and saw a half dozen sun-tanned, naked little urchins standing in a row ten yards from the *Mole* and gazing up at it solemnly.

It was an hour to breakfast. Carlo thought for a moment, then smiled happily. A couple of minutes later he stepped out on the lower landing stage, looked up casually at the dimming meteor trails, then slid to the ground. In his left hand he carried a large magnesium case. A slim hose snaked down after him.

Once on the ground he opened the case and busied himself with its contents. He paid no attention to the children. He knew without looking up that they had started to run away as soon as he had stepped onto the landing stage. He also knew that they would shortly be edging back. When he finally did glance up they were once more standing in a row, hardly ten feet from him.

He took from the case a Cenaurian *inkra* fruit, succulent, and light as a litchi nut from China on old Earth. He squeezed it, sniffed it appreciatively, then tossed it up in the air.

It didn't come down. The blast from the air hose in Carlo's left hand kept it hobbling a couple of feet above his head.

The children watched intently. Carlo thought, *Good old Bernoulli's Theorem, always good for a couple of tricks.*



Manipulating the air hose expertly, he made the *inkra* travel slowly through the air and land at the feet of one of the children—a handsome little tike a bit larger than the others.

Carlo motioned him to pick it up and eat it. The child looked at it, but did not stoop. Instead he looked at Carlo in a curiously wise way, tapped his small chest, and introduced himself. "Me . . . Mi-ki."

Carlo followed suit. "Me . . . Carlo." Then his hand dipped into the case and came up with a ball of steel wool. He tossed it to Miki, shook his finger when the latter

started to put it to his lips.

Miki examined the ball carefully, pulled at it. The other children crowded around curiously. Carlo held out his hand, palm upward. Miki looked at him questioningly, glanced down at the ball. Carlo nodded and wagged his outstretched hand. Miki came a couple of steps toward him, then tossed back the ball.

Carlo caught it in his left hand. His right now held an implement looking like a spray gun. He tossed

the ball into the air, pointed the gun at it. Apparently nothing came from the nozzle, but with a blinding white flash and a perceptible puff of heat, the steel wool vanished.

Carlo studied the solemn, but appreciative looks on the faces of the children. Now that just goes to show, he thought, if those were adults, they'd doubtless have beat it, scared to death. But children will accept anything. No matter what adults have been trying to make them afraid of—machines, ghosts, the supernatural—children live in a world of wonder where the impossible is happening all the time. Karl Friedrich's a good man, but if I were an anthropologist, I'd work through the children every time.

Miki was looking at him intently. It occurred to Carlo that with his dark skin, large eyes, and solemn imperturbable manner Miki would have made a good Hindu prince. He dipped again into the case.

This time he came up with a large glass mug. Into it he put, successively, two large irregular white globs, thick rich brown fluid, and a thinner white fluid. He held it up before the children. The layers of ice cream, chocolate syrup and milk stood out distinctly. Holding the mug by the handle, he directed the gun at it. The stuff inside began to churn violently, assumed a uniformly light color and frothed to the top.

Ultrasonic waves were really quite versatile things, Carlo thought.

Mix a soda as easy as ignite steel wool.

He handed the soda to Miki, who observed it gravely, sniffed it. Then Miki held it out to the others for a similar inspection.

Carlo made drinking-motions with his hand and nodded and smiled encouragingly.

Miki nodded. He did not, however, taste the soda. Instead he looked at Carlo quietly.

Suddenly Carlo felt a bit queer. This Miki was certainly an odd child! But then all children were a little odd—weren't they? He knew children—surely he did.

Still holding the soda, Miki pointed at Carlo, then at himself, then held up a finger for attention. His eyes held Carlo's. They were rather large strange eyes, Carlo realized uncomfortably. And there was something strange about Miki's graveness, not the graveness of a child imitating the gravity of an adult, but just Miki being himself.

Miki lowered his finger. Before he realized it, Carlo was looking at the object at which it was pointing.

The *inkra*!

A clod of dirt under the *inkra* must have crumbled at just that moment for it rolled a little. Carlo was annoyed at the way he jumped.

But the *inkra* kept on rolling. Toward Carlo.

Suddenly it leaped into the air and darted toward his hand.

As if it were the head of a poisonous snake, Carlo jerked away.

He heard it strike a fin of the *Mole* behind him.

What he would have done at the moment if he had been left to his own devices, Carlo could never afterwards be sure—for Miki's finger was pointing again, and Carlo's gaze had to follow it.

Carlo felt a perceptible puff of cold. Then, on the ground, at his feet, he saw an intact ball of steel wool.

But Miki was pointing again.

At the soda.

It began to churn.

When Miki handed it gravely to Carlo, the layers of ice cream, chocolate, and milk stood out distinctly. Carlo could even see tiny crystals where the scoop had jagged the frozen cream.

At that moment, those tiny crystals seemed to Carlo Baldini the most impossible and therefore horrible thing in the universe. He made a gulping sound, turned around, fought his way through air, grabbed the ladder of the landing stage and collapsed against it.

A few moments later he felt strong enough to start climbing. When he had his hand on the port, he screwed up his courage to look back.

The children were gone. Everything else was just as he had last seen it. Including the soda, which was sitting on the ground beside his case.

Even at this distance he could see the separate white, brown and white layers.

Karl Friedrich, waking early, though not quite as early as Baldini, and hurrying down to examine some of the less pressing robot-televisings he'd left over from yesterday, was startled to hear Gregg Dunstan's voice coming out of the suit locker beside the landing port.

"These are spacesuits. You wouldn't ever need one."

Karl stopped, silent in his regulation slippers of Fomalhautian spongoid.

"And this rack here is blasters, in case the natives are unfriendly. But it's my wonderful luck that they are not."

Karl wrinkled his forehead.

"And this is me, just a very ordinary Joe from Giansar Duo, but terribly grateful for a bit of heaven."

Karl opened the door of the suit locker. Gregg and the red-headed girl, who yesterday had managed the gourd for old Firamthoth, swung apart.

"Mr. Dunstan," Karl said sharply.

"Yes, sir," Gregg replied smartly.

Somewhat at a loss, Karl turned to the girl. "Young lady—" he began.

"My name is Gey," the red-haired girl interposed helpfully.

"I believe you are breaking a taboo," Karl finished severely.

Gey shrugged, a shade scornfully. "Taboos are for men," she said.

Karl turned back to Gregg. "How did you bring her aboard, Mr. Dunstan?" he inquired.

"He didn't," Gey interposed again.

"I came." Karl looked back at her. "Oh yes, I just stood outside. I knew he'd be watching."

"Weren't you afraid of the demons?" Karl asked, a little acidly.

Once more Gey shrugged. "Demons are for men, too. I knew that as soon as he saw me he'd let me in."

"Very well," Karl said. "And now he'll let you out. Mr. Dunstan, open the landing port."

"Men worship demons and taboos," Gey remarked sulkily. At the foot of the ladder, she looked up at Karl enigmatically. "I've a sister called Fey," she informed him. Then she scampered off toward the jungle.

Karl turned to Gregg. "Mr. Dunstan," he said severely, "you've been told, but you seem to have forgotten, that friendly—and I mean by that honor-bright—relations with the natives are essential to the success of any expedition of this sort. If there's one thing that primitive peoples are touchy about, it's the honor of their women. Your actions might have had—and still may have—serious consequences. However, since it was chiefly on this girl's initiative that all this occurred, I'm willing to forget the matter. Provided you give me your word you won't attempt to communicate with this girl Gey, and that under no circumstances you'll let her into the *Mole*."

"I give you my word, sir," Gregg snapped, red-faced.

"Very well, Mr. Dunstan," Karl snapped back. Then he relaxed.

"And let me assure you, Gregg, I'm sorry I woke up so early."

Mate Tauno Sweyn didn't wake at all, because he hadn't been asleep. He looked down at the tiny black box on his laboratory table, and at the other objects he'd been fabricating, and smiled with cool and impersonal satisfaction. Then he put away his tools and wiped his hand across his big forehead and went to the wall and switched on the window and looked out at the jungle, its glassy upper fronds swaying in the red sunlight, its lower reaches lost in darkness.

"There they are," he grunted softly, "the powers Fulsom and Friedrich think might be friendly. Might! As if there were any power in the universe friendly to man. Old Darwin knew. As if mind weren't always tearing at matter, seeking to destroy it. Old Freud knew. And as for the minds of beings other than man—" Sweyn laughed bleakly and glanced back at the table. "But we're not altogether without resources, whatever romance-baited traps we fall into."

A dust-dimmed sunset sent its bloody rays across the silvery metal of the *Mole's* landing stage. Mate Sweyn, bleak as a Norse God on the eve of Ragnarok, looked at Master James Fulsom resting on the arms of Karl Friedrich and Gregg Dunstan.

"Sir," he said, I'll speak as frankly as I always do. It's the most

dangerous folly for you to go to this so-called banquet and put yourself into the hands of these primitives. Mr. Baldini's experience—to say nothing of the things we saw on the *Mole* before we landed—is more than sufficient evidence that these folk are concealing powers of which we, with all the might of our physical science, may well stand in dread. Powers which, I firmly believe, constitute an immediate menace to the Confederacy. These are no simple savages, sir."

Master Fulsom, slumping puffy-faced, hardly looked up. "You exaggerate, Mr. Sweyn," he said.

Sweyn did not change expression. "I believe in electrons and atoms," he said. "They're the cosmos I know. Anything that's outside that cosmos is against me—and against the Confederacy. Sir, we've had evidence—from Baldini and others—that there's a power here that's other than atoms and electrons. We've had evidence that there's a power here that's anti-human—that's anti-science."

"Please, Mr. Sweyn," Fulsom said with difficulty. "The evidence . . . isn't all in."

"Nevertheless," Sweyn continued coolly, "my advice to you is: Destroy this planet and all on it, for the sake of mankind and the Confederacy."

Fulsom looked up at his mate from under swollen lids. "That's too much, Mr. Sweyn," he whispered. There was a pause. Then Fulsom turned to the man on his right.

"Mr. Friedrich," he said, "are we all here?"

"All except Mr. Aakimori and Mr. Rykov," Karl told him.

"Send someone back into the *Mole* to hurry them up."

Sweyn coughed. "That would be futile," he said. Mr. Takimori and Mr. Rykov are not aboard the *Mole*."

As Fulsom turned toward him, Gregg announced, "Say, there are our hosts." And he pointed toward the edge of the clearing, where a file of feather-bright primitives was emerging from the jungle, first spearmen, next four bearing a roofed litter.

"Yes, Mr. Sweyn?" Fulsom asked.

"This afternoon," Sweyn said slowly, "you were incapacitated, sir. In a coma, to be precise. Assuming command, I sent Mr. Takimori and Mr. Rykov to a certain place, in order to secure our safety. They are there now."

"And that place is, Mr. Sweyn?"

"Aboard the *Grimoire*."

Karl Friedrich looked at him. "You've broken the truce I agreed to."

Sweyn smiled. "I do not think so, Mr. Friedrich," he said. "We agreed to stick to our territory. The *Grimoire* is a thing of space, and a ship of the Confederacy—hence our territory."

"They're here," Gregg called from the edge of the landing stage. "The litter's empty. I think it's intended as your conveyance, Mr. Fulsom."

Karl spoke to Fulsom rapidly. "I'm not sure any longer it's advis-

able for you to go, sir. Our hosts may well have learned of Mr. Sweyn's seizure of the *Grimoire*—and misinterpreted it."

Fulsom lifted the eyelid on Karl's side. "We will keep our agreement with them, Mr. Friedrich," he said. And he lurched toward the ladder. Karl and Gregg handed him down. The others clambered after. Mate Sweyn stayed until the end, then shrugged, touched the blaster at his belt, and followed.

"It is a peaceful and beautiful picture, don't you agree, oh Man of the Silver Tower?"

"Peaceful and pretty as a Schlieren snapshot of an explosion front!"

Karl Friedrich nodded pleasantly at Firamthoth's comment, guiltily ignored Sweyn's harsh whisper. As if he did not have enough to worry about, what with Gregg and the girls, and Fulsom, and the *Grimoire* business, now Sweyn, out of all expectation, had picked this wildly inopportune time to lose his grip and get drunk.

He tried to keep his mind cool and ready for crisis. Old Firamthoth was right—it was an idyllic scene. The men of the *Mole*, together with some of their hosts, were seated along the outer side of a crescent-shaped table now heaped with a last course of exotic fruits and nuts in pouched and bearded shells, and set with fabulously shaped wineglasses of dark wood and transparent shell and horn. Before the feasters, along the inner side of the crescent, fires in shielded braziers cast a pulsing

light on the cleared space for dancing and athletic display. Beyond that space, another row of fires gleamed. All around—beyond the fires and behind and to either side of the banquet table—loomed the steep-roofed, fantastically thatched huts of the village, their kingposts and eaves showing a bold yet intricate carving reminiscent of Earth's Maoris. Beyond that rose the translucent, frondy horizon of the black jungle. While overhead stretched the diamond-veined magnificence of the meteor-fretted sky.

Firamthoth, a cloak of green and golden plumes dropping from his shoulders, sat midway along the table. Karl, at Firamthoth's left, glanced beyond him at the half-roofed litter in which Master Fulsom still rested. Firamthoth caught the look and his bony fingers lightly touched the back of Karl's hand.

"Do not worry," he said softly, yet with conviction. "Your chief is safe." His smile did not eradicate his cheek's skull-like hollows, black in the fire-shadows. He coughed gently.

Karl nodded obediently, wishing he were as satisfied of that—he knew Galvez wasn't. As soon as they had arrived at the village Firamthoth had insisted on giving Fulsom over to the ministrations of a gleaming-eyed woman as old as sin and as skinny as asceticism. Galvez had objected and tried to confer with Fulsom, but the master weakened and somewhat delirious from the journey through the jungle, had peevishly refused to talk. The *Mole's* doctor

had retired with tight-lipped dignity to his place down the table. The old witch was still sitting beside the litter, Karl noted. She seemed to be holding hands with Fulsom, and talking to him softly. He couldn't see Fulsom, though—the thatched half-roof of the litter hid him.

A hiccupy grunt at his left elbow recalled Karl's attention. Sweyn had emptied his drinking shell—a ridgy and spiraled one crusted with gold filagree—and was holding it out to one of the serving boys to be refilled. The fact that Sweyn, alone of all the men of the *Mole*, still wore a space cap, only made his crudity more annoying. Karl thought of remonstrating with him, but a glance at the belligerent tilt of the Viking's jaw told him that would only make matters worse. Groaning inwardly, he tried to concentrate on the dancers.

That wasn't difficult at all. The whirling girls, their fiery opalescent skirts standing out around them, seemed one moment like woodland sprites, the next like giant flowers in a whirlwind—their shirts the petals, their slim bodies the pink stamens—the next simply beautiful women waist-deep in flame. Their swimmingly rhythmic movements lured the mind down dreamy paths of reverie and desire. He noticed that Gey was among them. But what struck Karl Friedrich most forcibly was the sureness and ease of their movements, quite matching their physical perfection and as incredible as the physical feats of the male

leapers and sword dancers who had preceded them. Karl tried to tell himself it **was** just the "South Seas" atmosphere—so weird in the Coal-sack—and the willingness to overlook imperfections of an imagination fretted as much as Gregg's by the deariness and celibacy of deep space. But in his heart he knew that just wasn't so. There really was some secret of perfection here that all the rest of the Galaxy, with its taut and bustling spaceports, its planets crowded with people struggling to keep up the pace set by machines—the old FTL grind!—had lost—or never possessed.

The dance ended in a dying flutter of skirts and a clash of cymbals. At the end of the crescent table to Karl's left—beyond Sweyn, Galvez, Andrews, and Ubii—Gregg and Carlo Baldini stood up and loudly clapped their approval. The girls ran to them and stood clustered around that end of the table, laughing and panting, sipping from the wine horns eagerly offered them and only half-avoiding the hugs and kisses that seemed to be Gregg's and Carlo's notion of really proper applause.

And *that* wouldn't do, Karl told himself. He might have to watch Sweyn get drunk without lifting a finger and listen to some witch drone the Old Man to death, but he could not let those two get out of hand. He knew that though barbaric hospitality may seem utterly free and unbounded, it generally has some pretty sharp—even knife-edged and

knife-enforced—limits. He stood up, slipping a bit in an oddly muddy patch of ground between his chair and Sweyn's, caught himself, and started to move off behind Sweyn's chair—when once again he felt Firamthoth's bony and preternaturally nerveless hand on his.

"Sit down," the old savage told him, gently but with an authority Karl could not bring himself to challenge. "Now we look at smoke pictures."

Young men were heaping something on the fires beyond the dancing space. They ceased to flame and began to pour out thick plumes which swiftly joined to form a wall shutting out the huts beyond. On that upward-flowing gray waterfall the nearer braziers cast a flickering light.

Firamthoth rose slowly—all his movements had been slow and careful tonight, more so even than in the clearing—and addressed the men of the *Mole*, who were all—save Fulsom—sitting to his left.

"We will now show you smoke pictures. They are one of our simple pleasures—maybe too simple for you forceful men who wield great flames and build gigantic towers overnight and dare to dwell with demons. Yet perhaps you will humor us by watching them, and even find some mild delight therein. Silanti will make the smoke pictures for you."

And he gestured toward a slim, feathered-caped, indolent-faced man—youthful-seeming though with grizzled hair—who had moved into the

dancing space. Karl studied his huge, misty silhouette on the smoke curtain, watched it grow bat-winged as Silanti lifted his arm in greeting, and decided that such "smoke pictures" would be rather childish entertainment indeed—when Silanti stepped inside the row of braziers. He stood before Firamthoth's place, looking along the crescent at the crew of the *Mole*. Silanti's eyes, Karl decided, were the laziest and gentlest he'd ever seen.

"Our smoke pictures are simple things, indeed," Silanti said in a voice matching his eyes, "yet they are not always easy to see. It is a more fragile pleasure than dancing—watch it delicately. Lean back. Sip your wine or suck gently at the fruits, softly crushing their tender juice-sacks between palate and tongue. And watch the smoke."

Karl obeyed some of these directions, including the last. He wondered whether other shadow dancers would appear, perhaps behind the smoke, or if the smoke itself would change color from the materials heaped on it. But his mind wandered and he found himself thinking of Alpha Centauri Duo, the planet of his birth. He felt suddenly very lonely, depressingly conscious of the terrible distances of the Galaxy, and a spasm of homesickness went through him.

He was recalled from his reverie when his drinking cup, which he had barely sipped after the first refill, slid away toward the left. He turned and saw that Sweyn was gripping it

tight as a child grips a stolen toy, and scowling belligerently at the smoke. Then, seeming to sense Karl's interest, Sweyn scowled at him instead and slapped the blaster at his hip. Karl Friedrich shrugged and once more tried to see the "pictures." But that was a tedious business and again his mind wandered, this time to thoughts of the planet Rigel Tres. He imagined himself coming in on a copter through the heady, high-argon air that made all voices strangely deep past the green volcanic peaks of the Dead Jet Mountains, toward the metropolis of New Orion, its roofs smoky white under the bright, pale sun.

Then Karl Friedrich came to with a shiver hovering over the length of his spine. It had occurred to him that he had never been to Rigel Tres. He'd read about the place, of course, and seen films, but how could that tell him exactly how its high-argon air would hit his lungs, and the exact shade of New Orion's roofs, seen not through a camera's eye but through a Rigelian helmet's dark plastic? He shot a quick glance at Silanti. As if by prearrangement, the latter was looking at him. He fancied that the slim, grizzled man's lips were curled in a ghostly, playful smile. He looked quickly down the table to see if his crewmates had felt anything strange—and found a new worry.

Carlo had settled down again and was sipping wine and talking quietly, though with expansive grins and

grimaces, to three of the dancing girls. Probably telling them outrageous lies about himself.

But Gregg and Gey weren't to be seen.

This time Firamthoth stopped Karl before he could rise from his seat. The old chief's voice was almost stern.

"Watch the smoke pictures."

Karl obeyed, though with an inward reluctance—there was something a little frightening now about that gray, wavery blanket—and gradually his worries about Gregg and the girl were lost in a more spectral apprehension.

Once more his thoughts were shooting off to places light-decades distant, only now those thoughts—far sharper than his ordinary run of mental images—seemed more and more to project themselves on the smoke; and more and more they were scenes that he was doubtful if he had ever witnessed even on film. Jungles lit by triple moons. Space-ship bridges bright with the mixed, particolored daylight of double suns of different hue. Pluto's cold waste aglitter under star-small Sol. Whirling stampede of the wheel-beasts across the colorless steppes of Lyra Quinque, Kangaroo-hop of the coleopteroids out of their way, and the neat tire-tracks behind the wheel-beasts. A ceaselessly writhing forest where plants crept frightenedly past sessile, tentacled animals. Nameless white mountains.

Finally these fleeting images gave way to a more lasting vision. It



seemed to Karl that the smoke curtain—or the mental image projected on it—grew blacker than any ordinary night, blacker than blindness. Gradually he made out a few tiny white clouds, faint as swarms of phosphor-flies in a Douian marsh, and realized that he was envisioning a place set in double-deep space between the galaxies.

For a while that was all there was to the "picture," except that he noted that the galaxies lay in a single band, as if he were viewing them from the bottom of a deep canyon—and with better than human vision. Then, with a vision that was more than vision, a kind of direct perception, he began to make out creatures hanging along the walls of the chasm—great spidery things covered with a thick black fur out of which stalked organs occasionally pushed

for quick furtive glimpsings, or other sensings. And watching them, Karl became aware of a hunger and a desire that were nauseating in their cruelty and yet possessed a spidery fascination.

"Stop! Stop now!"

It was Firamthoth who cried out, shattering the hideous hallucination, so that Karl again saw only smoke. He quickly looked toward his left. With the exception of Sweyn, who was slumped over so that his chin almost touched the table and whose eyes still squinted stupidly at the smoke, the crewmen were all glancing at each other, pale and shaken.

Firamthoth turned away angrily from a humbly-bowing Silanti. "I ask your pardon," he said to the men of the *Mole* in a voice that suddenly grew uneven and gasping, though without losing dignity.

"Sometimes we make bad pictures. That is"—he shot a fierce glance at Silanti—"sometimes the stupid and foolhardy among us make bad pictures. To cure this unpleasantness, I myself will show you happy pictures. The oldest wine will be poured for you—and you shall see. Fetch b'loon tree wine, boys!"

Karl was no longer listening to him. Sweyn had gripped Karl's elbow and, lips close to Karl's ear, was whispering in a strangely cold, very sober voice—except that Karl had heard very drunken men use just such tones—"Now do you see? There's your final proof that these folk are either allies or dupes of some completely hostile extragalactic power that knows how to use thought as we use quantum mechanics. Wait a little longer and we'll be their dupes, too. Before the whole galaxy is infected—and with the *Mole* that could happen in weeks—we must exterminate all life on this planet. Right now. It can be done. It must be done. Once and for all, are you with me?"

Karl shivered, but before he could formulate a reply, old Firamthoth's voice cut through his muddled thoughts—not loudly, yet raspingly, like a saw-edged knife.

"I sense evil here! Merciless evil against us all, waiting for opportunity to strike. Men of the Silver Tower, until this evil is discovered, you are our prisoners!"

All faces turned toward him. The crewmen were strange and pale in the smoke-reflected brazier-light.

And shaken. All but Sweyn. He stood up tall and steady as a docked spaceship and faced Firamthoth, as if about to make some iron-firm rebuttal. Karl felt a thrill of pride at the mate's act.

But then the first mate wavered. His head rocked and his eyes began to roll in their sockets, and he squinted fantastically, as if that would stop them.

"You're drunk!" Karl heard himself saying in a burst of irrepressible disgust.

Sweyn nodded—or at least his chin slumped against his chest—and he pitched down asprawl over his chair.

Old Firamthoth's nostrils flared contemptuously. "Take him to the first guest house. There let him have his booze-sleep."

Four young men came behind the chairs.

"Wait," Karl said, "you may not do this," but even as he spoke, he felt Firamthoth's fiery gaze upon him, and his strength seemed turned to smoke.

The young men filed on impassively. Karl could not tear his own gaze away from Firamthoth, but he put out his arm to bar their way—and found he could not lift his hand above his elbow.

"Our prisoners," Firamthoth repeated to him with a meaningful glare. Karl felt his knees growing weak. He heard Galvez call from behind him, "I must attend to our mate medically. And I must see our captain." Firamthoth's gaze knifed past Karl and he said hissing, "You

will see no one. Nor stir from your place," and there was no more from Galvez. Then Carlo cried out something, but his voice was suddenly choked off, and Karl could hear the dancing girls laugh cruelly. Karl's knees buckled and he slumped down in Sweyn's chair.

As soon as that happened he found himself able to control his movements, though only in a feeble way, as if he were coming out of a fever. He turned with difficulty and watched Sweyn carried into a dark hut nearby. A few moments later the four young men filed out again. The hangings of the doorway fell to behind them.

"Listen to his mind, Tongew," Firamthoth called. "Make sure he sleeps on."

One of the young men dropped behind. He did not re-enter the hut, but squatted in front of the door, dreamy-eyed.

Firamthoth moved down the table, beyond Fulsom's litter, to confer with the men there. Karl became aware of a faint melodious voice sleepily droning, and saw that the old witch was still "ministering" to Fulsom. He had the impression she had not once looked up during the excitement.

The smoke curtain thinned, died. The fires across the dancing space flamed up, though not as brightly as at first. Karl was conscious of many primitive, impassive faces peering from the shadows. He looked around at his comrades and felt no great urge to communicate with them—

and doubtful of his ability to do so if he tried. Whatever hypnotic power Firamthoth had subjected all of them to, seemed to be devilishly slow in wearing off. Karl's limbs were almost powerless and it was hard for him to move his thoughts. He was aware of little things, like the muddiness under his chair. With difficulty he recalled the shadow pictures, retching a little at the last one, and tried to reason through the logic of the mate's response to them. The witch droned on. Time crept along.

Finally Firamthoth came back. The old chief seemed to have grown very weak—there was a man steadying him at either side and he moved as if conscious of an inward fragility—yet strangely enough his presence seemed to have a tonic effect. Karl could feel his own muscles grow stronger, his head clearer, and sensed that his comrades were undergoing a similar reaction.

Firamthoth sat down facing them in front of the table on a chair fetched for him. He smiled at them, wearily, but no longer grimly.

"Well, gentlemen," he said quietly, "we can take off our foolish masks now. The play is over. We need no longer refer to spaceships as silver towers. And instead of demons inhabiting dead matter, we can say—machines."

His face grew a little stern and somber at the last word. "For be sure of one thing—it was not altogether a play. Our lives are much as you have seen them. And we hate

machines. Our taboo against them is our life's core."

He coned their faces, then slowly shook his head. "You are not exactly like what I expected men from outside to be. For although we glimpse much of the outside, understanding and feeling is another matter. You are more complex and your minds are torn in many directions, but chiefly between the demands of the machines and of the rest of life—as were the minds of our own foreparents.

"Centuries ago our foreparents realized that man was moving too swiftly. His inventions were driving him on a frantic quest across the Galaxy. There was no time for his feelings and desires and understandings to catch up with the machines he had created. For inventions and power and knowledge increased at a geometrical ratio, and later even at a third and fourth power ratio. But there is no geometrical ratio of increase for the spirit—except for the spiritless brains of electricity and metal. More and more often, when the spirit made its demands, the answer was given, 'We have no time'—what you now call the old FTL grind. Individual men tried to slow their private worlds and give the spirit breathing-space by self-discipline or by drugs and drink, but with little success." He nodded toward Sweyn's hut. "Joy shrank. Wonder died. Spirit stopped growing.

"Our foreparents were men and women still interested in things of

the spirit. Though by then such an interest had become a painful thing. They realized that if even a little spirit were to be saved for growth, they must retire from mankind. Half measures were no good. They must forswear the machine forever and instill into their children a rigid destestation of it, else the glitter of the machine and the easy marvels it brought would some day surely draw them back.

"Ancient peoples on old Earth had tried the same experiment of retiring into the world of the spirit. But they had tried it too early. They had been ignorant, riddled by superstitious delusions. Our foreparents knew more. Men had begun to study the true workings of the spirit; they had explored the fringes of the unconscious realms and learned somewhat of how mind speaks with mind, of how mind-pictures are made to seem real, the art of seeing with the inward eye and listening with the third ear—though such studies had more and more difficulty in competing with the demands of the machine.

"To accomplish their purpose, our foreparents made one last use of a machine. They stole the spaceship *Logic*, renaming it the *Grimoire*. Knowing the Confederacy would track them to any planet in clean space, they took the risk of plunging into the Coalsack. And there they finally found a planet suitable for easy life. Landing the *Grimoire*, they placed it and all their other machines under an eternal

taboo, and walked into the jungle."

Although Karl Friedrich hung on Firamthoth's words, he was aware of a returning uneasiness. He looked toward Fulson's litter, where the witch droned on, and toward Sweyn's dark hut where the "listener" still crouched. Gregg was nowhere to be seen. And for some reason the muddy patch under his chair fretted Karl's mind.

"For the first years our foreparents fared poorly," the old hypnotist continued, "but gradually they built the sort of life they desired. They could not make it a life wholly of the spirit, for swords and spears and even the human body are machines, though the evil in them is small and they do little to pervert the mind.

"Slowly there grew a land of jungle villages in which life moved at a pleasant tempo, with due regard for beauty. The young learned the skills of play and the dance, of the hunt and love, of poetry and song, and were widely instructed in history and the arts. In short, the young were simple—though occasionally there would come one of precocious ability in the skills of the mind. Reaching maturity the young would choose whether to continue chiefly with such occupations, becoming leaders and students of men, or to become doctors of the body—mind that is the whole man, or to pursue those mental studies in which we have gained some skill."

Again he looked quizzically at his hearers. "And then you came, as I

suppose we should have known men from the outside finally would. We sensed your coming with our minds and tried to drive you back with phantoms, and when you still came, we pretended to be simple savages of no account, hoping you would take back such report of us to the Confederacy. But in the end our deceptions failed."

Karl's uneasiness had increased. On an impulse he dropped his hand until it touched the mud under his chair, then lifted it up.

It was his sense of smell that informed him. The mud was not earth and water, but earth and the tangy wine they'd been drinking. The deduction was obvious. Sweyn must have been dumping his drinks there.

Yet how could Sweyn have feigned drunkenness if it were true that these folk could listen to minds? Firamthoth's voice interrupted Karl's thoughts.

"So now what am I to do, Machine Men?" The old chief's skull-like face was grave, though with a ghostly humor playing about the lips. "I sense that some of you are almost friendly toward us, that you even have some admiration of our ideals. Yet I also know that there is fear in your minds, and that at least one of you hates us— or the things we stand for, or he thinks we stand for—so much that he would not scruple to destroy this planet and every life upon it. I cannot be sure which one of you, or whether more than one of you, holds that

hate in his mind, or might hold it at some time. I will not conceal from you that our mind reading is no simple matter, and all thought-skills are uncertain. We sometimes do marvels with the mind, bridging galactic gulfs in an instant. But sometimes it fails utterly, or reports falsely.

"So, I say, what am I to do? Free you—and with you the one who would destroy us all? Let you return to the Confederacy to report, or be persuaded to report, that we constitute a danger? Hold you, and have the fleets of the Confederacy come to seek you out? It is a tangled problem."

Karl cleared his throat. Only after he had started to speak did he realize the risk he was taking. "There is the fear among us," he began, "that you may be the allies or unconscious tools of alien, human-hating creatures more skilled in thought than you yourselves. Remember the bad picture Silanti showed us?"

Firamthoth frowned. "It was a bad picture," he agreed, "and I cannot deny that there may be danger there. The universe holds many horrors. Yet consider this: Who first planted the fear of us in the Confederacy's mind? Why were you sent against us as if against a powerful enemy? Too, would not a people lacking the higher thought-skills such as the Confederacy, be more in danger from thought-powerful aliens than a people with some thought-skills? Your fear cuts two ways."

Karl's answer was forestalled by the drumming of feet on hard-packed earth. He saw two figures racing toward them through the shadows. For a moment his heart grew sick as he thought that the girl was running away from Gregg. Then he realized that she had only outsped him a little. They arrived at the table almost in a dead heat.

"Giant silver whirlbug!" Gey cried excitedly. "Demon thing. Up from the jungle."

"Copter!" Gregg panted in amplification. "Don't know who."

Firamthoth looked at Karl Friedrich. "Someone has broken the truce," he said.

"Tell your story more clearly," Karl snapped at Gregg, taking command.

Gregg ran his hand through his rumpled hair. "Well, we'd wandered out in the jungle a ways."

"How far?" Karl asked coldly.

"About a mile," Gey answered, giving him a smile.

Karl continued to look at Gregg. He felt a bit like knocking him down. "Yes?"

"Well," Gregg continued, "as we were talking there, we heard a noise and looked up over our shoulders, and we made out one of the *Mole's* copters rising from the jungle and slanting off—fast."

"Toward the *Mole*?"

"Opposite direction, I judged."

Gey put her hand approvingly on Gregg's arm. "It is exactly as he says," she affirmed. Gregg broke into a fatuous smile.

Firamthoth turned to Karl. "Who of you—?" he began, but at that moment everyone looked toward the end of the table. Carlo had called out excitedly and darted back into the shadows between the huts. Before there was time to do anything, he was coming back with someone small cradled in his arms.

"There, you'll be all right, Miki," he murmured as the others crowded near. Then he looked up. "Thought I heard him whimpering back there, and sure enough he was, trying to crawl to us. Look at the crack he got. But it's all right, Miki."

There was a lump as big as an egg on the child's temple. He had been sick. "What happened, Miki?" Firamthoth asked. "Your thoughts swim."

The child swallowed. "Behind the huts," he said in a faint voice. "I saw the big drunken man crawling away. He saw me, too, and knocked me to sleep."

Karl's eyes turned toward the guest hut almost as quickly as Firamthoth's and he was behind the old chief as the latter strode through the hangings, while the listener blinked at them in surprise.

The hut was empty. A ragged hole gaped in the back wall. The single couch was bare, except for a tiny black box lying at the head. Karl picked it up and followed Firamthoth back out.

"What sort of guard are you, Tongew?" Firamthoth was berating the listener. "Your prisoner

was gone almost before you squatted!"

"But I tell you," Tongew objected, "I heard his thoughts all the time, and they were sleep-thoughts." Then a look of fear came into his eyes. "I still hear them." He looked at Karl. "Closer than ever."

Karl looked down at the black box in his hand. "I know," he said in a strange voice, feeling as if he were speaking under compulsion. "Sweyn must have made an electronic device to broadcast the normal rhythm of the human brain. First, when he pretended to be drunk, he adjusted it to broadcast the rhythms of sleep. When he escaped, he merely left it behind him."

"A machine!" Firamthoth shrank away as if a poisonous snake had suddenly reared up beside him. "Cast it in the fire," he ordered Karl. He sounded shaken, almost confused. "And you, Tongew!—to mistake a machine's mind for a man's!"

Karl stared at the black box. He made no move.

There was an excited flurry of voices. Those at the table were pointing at the sky above the jungle. There, very low on the horizon, barely visible through the transparent treetops, a new and reddish meteor was rising in the heavens. It moved more slowly than the other paler ones. But even as they watched, it began to gather speed.

"I know," Karl said again in the same voice. "It's Sweyn. He'd hidden one of the *Mole's* copters near

here. But it's not the *Mole* he's taking up. It's the *Grimoire*." He looked at Firamthoth, who stood very still. "Because the *Grimoire* is loaded with war dust."

Almost, it seemed to him as he thought that thought, the whole black jungle cringed.

"It will hardly be a matter of seconds," he added quietly. "Have you colonies on the other side of the planet, Firamthoth? Even that won't save you."

"Silanti!" Firamthoth's voice was suddenly fast as a young man's. "Send thought pictures against it. Bad pictures!" Then Karl felt the old chief's fingers close like talons on his arms and heard him plead, "Think of Sweyn! Think me to his mind. I cannot reach it alone. I do not know it well enough. Think of where he is. Think me there."

In the darkness of the hut's doorway, with Firamthoth's gaze pressing into him and the red meteor rising faster and faster above the treetops, Karl made his decision, trying not to value himself, trying not to be deluded by a liking for a strangely beautiful yet tiny and aberrant culture, trying to think of the Confederacy, and trying to weigh Sweyn's fears fairly, for the big and honest fears he knew them to be.

As soon as, in a matter of instants, his decision had been made, he felt a great wind come out of Firamthoth's eyes and lift him like a feather and blow him up, up, up.

There was a moment of utter blackness.

Then, without transition, he was sitting, foam-cushioned, on the bridge of a spaceship. And Rykov was sitting in the pilot's seat to his right, eyes fixed on the three-dimensional radar-map set like an open box above his lap. And beyond Rykov, sallow-faced Takamori was sitting in the astrogator's place. And his own strangely large hands were poised above the war-panel, above the tiny, neat controls of the guns and the torpedoes, and dusts—but mostly the dusts, for that was the *Grimoire's* kind of warship. In front and above the three of them, through the invisible dome, the sky was veined with rivulets of white fire, and he was conscious of a rasping grief at his heart, an ache that time would never heal for comrades who must die at his hand. But he was also conscious of a fear and a responsibility greater than grief.

"Straighten her out, Petya," he said to Rykov. "We want to be sure of getting the village at the first sweep. Then we'll take a wider orbit for the rest of the job."

Rykov didn't turn his head, but even as he obeyed the order, he said, "It has to be done?"

"Has to," Karl answered.

Then Takimori spoke in his swift, robot-stenographer voice. "And you are certain that Fulsom, Friedrich and the rest—?"

"Are safe in the *Mole*," Karl finished, knowing that he had to lie. "They'll wait until we're well started on the first sweep. Then they'll blast

out a quarter sun-distance and wait for us."

Suddenly, outside the dome and perhaps a mile ahead, something appeared—a dragon-jawed monster whose teeth jettied flame and whose many-branching tentacles caressed the dome's plastic. Karl glanced at Rykov and Takimori. Either they were too intent on the map, or else they could not see the gigantic apparition. He disregarded it. Then, leaning a little to the right, he watched the tiny cigar of the *Grimoire* move above the crystal-clear map of the jungle. "In orbit," Rykov murmured. Karl Friedrich's fingers moved toward the dust buttons.

Only they didn't reach them.

Something—something that was not a part of himself—was stopping him.

He shoved, as if against a wall.

His fingers stayed an inch or two from the dust buttons.

He realized that Rykov and Takimori were watching him.

He thought of black spidery beings in a canyon on an intergalactic planet, and almost went mad with fear that wasn't for himself.

He felt his breath coming in gasps, the sweat dribbling down his forehead with the effort he was making.

He still couldn't touch the buttons.

He began to flounder about wildly, like a trapped animal.

Then suddenly he stopped and looked sideways to his right. Rykov and Takimori were still watching



him. In their eyes he read a growing—a full-grown—conviction.

"Watch him," he heard Takimori whisper. "I'll take her down."

Rykov nodded. His hand snatched out and flicked off the panel-master in front of Karl. Rykov's eyes were cold and suspicious.

"To think—" said Rykov, and then apparently decided to leave it at that.

And Karl sat thinking of black monsters gripping his wrists from a hundred parsecs away, and tried still to plot how to break that grip.

But just then something happened to Karl's mind.

The bottom dropped out of it.

He still sat on the *Grimoire's* bridge, yet at the same time he was dropping down, down into a pit blacker and more velvet-furred and more horrible than any monster, so horrible that the speed with which he snatched the hand-blaster from the holster at his belt seemed slower than a crucifixion.

"Stop him!" he heard Takimori's cry, swifter even than Rykov's lightning movement toward him.

His rising elbow beat Rykov's lightning movement, sending Rykov sprawling half out of his seat against Takimori.

In that tiny time, the horror of the black velvet-furred pit grew immeasurably greater.

It wasn't at Rykov's brain that Karl sent the blast. Or at Takimori's.

Karl realized that he was standing in front of the guest hut, between

Firamthoth and the still-bewildered listener, and that he was holding his empty hand to his temple, and that with the forefinger of that hand he was repeatedly pulling a trigger that wasn't there.

Low on the horizon, a red and fitful meteor was sinking.

Then he remembered everything that he had felt on the *Grimoire*. His flesh grew weak. A kinder blackness closed in, caressed his mind, soothed it without quite bringing unconsciousness.

When it receded, Tongew was supporting him toward the banquet table. The red meteor was no longer in the sky, though a low red glow in its direction showed where landing blasts were mushrooming up. The primitive faces at the crescent table looked steady and serene, as if already sure in their knowledge of danger averted. Something of their spirit seemed to have leaked over into the faces of the men of the *Mole*, although the latter still were strained and shaken.

Walking at Karl's side, with dignity but a terrible care, went Firamthoth.

"Your mind found his," Firamthoth was saying, "and for those moments you were Sweyn. That blazed the trail for my mind and I was able to find you both."

Karl wet his lips. "What did you do to Sweyn," he asked, "so that he killed himself?"

Firamthoth's voice was very soft. "I was sorry to do it, and sorry that you should have to experience it.

But I was uncertain of my ability to keep his mind under control. He was a brave and clever man, though wrong in his opinions, and too great a danger to our planet to let live." Firamthoth paused, and when he spoke again his voice was curiously gentle and impersonal. "I merely showed him a part of his own mind of which he was unaware—what you call the unconscious—and the horror of that region was so great that Sweyn had no choice but to blot it out. If he could have endured that horror he could have lived, but even an adept in such things finds knowledge of his whole mind rather hard to bear."

There was a stir at the banquet table. Faces were turned away from Firamthoth and Karl Friedrich, and way made for a newcomer—a man even the men of the *Mole* found hard to recognize, because his eyes were so clear and his complexion so fresh. Nor was there a trace of puffiness about Master James Fulsom as he walked unaided and with firm step to rejoin his men—though there was a wonder in the clear eyes. The old witch stayed by the litter smiling cryptically.

Old Firamthoth looked at Fulsom. Again his voice was strangely distant and tender, as he said, "He, too, has seen a part of his mind which he had forgotten. The beauty-crushing tensions of the Galaxy that swims in clean space had become too much for him. The old FTL grind had begun to kill his body. But Selya opened his consciousness a little and showed

him that hope and wonder and romance and all his youthful dreams, were still there."

There was an exclamation of amazement. Heads turned toward Galvez. The lean features of the *Mole's* doctor were illumined with wonder. "It is what they would have called a miracle in the old days. It is something that neither I nor any other doctor under the Confederacy could do." He suddenly turned toward Firamthoth and his voice rang unrehearsed warmth.

"Sir," he said, "you've cured our chief with your greater knowledge of things of the mind and heart. Now turn about, and let us show our gratitude. I know the fever that's killing you, and it isn't from the mind, but simply from the attack of tiny, material creatures with which I know how to deal."

Old Firamthoth let himself down into a chair, with the weariness and collapse-held-barely-in-check of one who has taken his last walk in the world, almost as if the chair were his coffin. He looked at Galvez for a space and smiled gently, finally shook his head. "No," he said in a voice that was low, but that no one needed to strain to hear. "I thank you for the offer, and more for the spirit that prompts it. I know you could cure me, but your cure would take machines and the products of machines, and there I will make no compromise."

His voice grew lower yet and his gaze still more distant. "When one of our young men is to become an

adept in things of the spirit, he must go out alone into the dark jungle—the jungle darkness of his own mind—and abide there undaunted for three days. So now I must go into a greater darkness from which there is no return. It will not be long before I make that journey. In the past few hours and minutes, I have spent the strength that would have let me cling to life for many weeks.”

His expression darkened. “Perhaps I, too, must take that journey because I sent Sweyn on his.” He looked around fiercely. “He was a *good* man, better than most of you and many of us. Perhaps we were both too strong and sure to be permitted to exist.”

His lips crinkled faintly. “I would very much like to live. I would like to see the issues of this meeting—for be sure there will be many—and give my small aid as guide. I would like to see whether the mechanical lion can lie down with the mystic lamb. But other minds must attend to that. I have made my choice.”

The sky was so clean and bright a blue that the meteor trails barely showed. A clean wind dipped from the jungle’s bending glass-fronds and swept across the clearing around the *Mole*. And a sun that seemed hardly dimmed at all by the dust, beat brightly down. On the ground by the landing stage stood the crew of the *Mole*, and over against them stood a somewhat larger group of village folk. The former were in

dress uniforms, every last magnetic zipper burnished and trim as if for an admiral’s inspection. The latter were as ceremoniously and neatly dressed, all in black—coarse-woven black textiles, sable furs, and ebony bracelets and beads, and their head-dresses were black plumes bowing to the wind.

Old Firamthoth was not among them, any more than Tauno Sweyn was among the men of the *Mole*.

Captain James Fulsom finished the formal part of his speech of leave-taking and, as the tension relaxed, said in more conversational tones to Silanti, now spokesman for the villagers, “And so we return, taking a message of your friendship and harmlessness to the Confederacy.”

Silanti smiled. “We are grateful to you for that, yet I still have wonderings. You believe in us, but will the Confederacy see things in the same light?”

“We’ll make ’em,” Fulsom assured him gruffly.

Silanti nodded. “But as Firamthoth pointed out, there may be others behind the Confederacy—subtle, thought-powerful aliens—nagging the Confederacy into an interest in us and a hatred. Always remember that.”

“You can count on us,” Fulsom told him. “Incidentally, are you still set on not having any of your people come back with us? They might be a great help, you know, in persuading the Confederacy. And I think”—his eyes went to Gey and

Gregg, talking together earnestly, and to Carlo surrounded by half a dozen children—"that there are a few of them who would be only too happy to come, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"You speak the sheerest truth," Silanti agreed amiably. "Yet it may not be. We offer the Confederacy our warmest friendship, yet our taboos still stand. If we are to mingle with you, if we are to visit you, it must be at our own time and in our own way, not by your machines."

"Well, if that's the way you feel," said Fulsom.

Karl Friedrich broke in. "I've been thinking a lot about this," he said. "Isn't there some compromise possible? I don't think the machine is bad in itself. The only bad thing about machines is the regimentation and too-fast pace it's made possible. No more can mind be bad, except when it begins to spider-spin self-deceiving delusion and superstitions. Isn't there a way in which the best of the machine can be mated with the best of the mind?"

"There may be," Silanti said gravely. "Firamthoth spoke of the mechanical lion lying down with the mystic lamb. But that is in the future. We must first know each other better."

Karl nodded. Fulsom said, "Well, I guess that's that."

"Always remember," said Silanti, "that we are on your side. We will

keep watch for you on those possible enemies against which your subtlest machines provide you with no defense—always remembering that even those enemies may become friends, that there are no ultimate barriers to love and the spirit."

Karl, remembering a vision of black, spidery monsters chasm-crouched in the intergalactic dark, felt a bit doubtful.

There was a general stir of movement. Gey threw her arms around Gregg and their lips met in a long kiss. Takimori commented to Galvez, only one tenth joking, "Ain't love wonderful?"

It had been the bearest murmur, but Gey, stepping back from Gregg, smiled at Takimori and said, "Yes, isn't it?"

Carlo hoisted Miki in his arms. Miki did not smile, but said, "When you come back, I will teach you the trick of making time turn around and an ice cream soda become ice cream and milk and syrup again."

Carlo grimaced comically. "I'm not sure I'd like to know, Miki," he said. "But if you want me to, I'll try."

Silanti smiled at Fulsom and Karl Friedrich. He said, "Our thoughts go with you."

Then the villagers walked back toward the jungle and the other men climbed into the *Mole* and the landing stage was drawn in and the port closed behind them.

THE END