

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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# THE UNTOUCHABLE ADOLESCENTS

by ELLIS HART

*illustrated by* KELLY FREAS

The aliens wouldn't accept help, though their world was about to explode. They were adolescents. Adolescence is the time when you aren't smart enough to ask for help...

**T**HE planet Diamore, hung round and gaudy in the view-plates. As colorfully unchanging as it had been every day for the two weeks since the *Wallower* had plopped out of inerspace near it.

Captain Luther Shreve started violently as the whine of the Stress-Potential banks died away. They had been a constant noisemaker during the past two weeks; their continual dull rhythm had come to seem companionable. Now the keening discordanancy was

ended, and he knew they had finished estimating the planet in the plates.

He sat very still, staring at the energy dials building their reserves back up. The banks had used much extra power.

He sat very still, waiting for them to bring him the plates. He didn't want to see them. He was a full Captain in the Merchant Arm of the Commercial Navy, and he found the tough outer shell of himself that had formed during thirty years in that service suddenly



disintegrating. He was afraid of what those plates would say.

The tube glowed behind him and Teller—slightly overweight, slightly florid, slightly balding and a brilliant Psych Officer—stepped off the plate, into the control room.

Teller slumped onto the copilot's couch, extended the sheaf of plate readings. Luther Shreve tipped his cap back on his head with a practiced thumb and shuffled the plates in silence.

From time to time his pink tongue washed across his lips. Finally he sighed and rubbed weary fingers across the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes and slowly sank back against the cushions.

With eyes still closed, he voiced the final possibility. "Any room for error?"

He had tried to keep the tenseness from his voice, but it somehow doubled in the faintly resonating confines of the control room.

Teller shook his head. "They tell me no, Luther. I ran the plates up for them, mainly because they were all afraid to be here when you saw the sad

news. You terrorize those poor bankroom boys, Luther."

Teller looked across, saw the odd set to Shreve's face, and realized his jibes were annoying the other. He swung his short legs over the side of the couch with a thump, clasped his hands in his lap as though about to recite.

"They have somewhere less than five months. Then the Big Push comes. The eruptions will wipe out nine-tenths of the centers of community."

He leaned across and pulled one sheet from the stack Shreve held. "Here is the position map." He indicated with quick, short jabs of his finger where the first earthquakes would hit, and followed blue lines to their terminuses.

He extended his hands, palms upward, in a movement of futility and sadness.

Shreve sat forward, sharply. He swept the cap from his head with one hand, ran the other through stringy, brown hair. He pursed his lips, muttered, "We've got to do something! It's more than just business potential ruined. There are people down there, Karl!

Millions of them. We can't let them die!"

"True," Teller stated simply, looking at his clasped hands. "But," he added, "what about the itinerary? They'll scream bloody blazes back there if you break schedule."

He cocked a thumb toward the rear of the ship—toward Earth.

"Karl, I've been pushing one of these cans for MerchArm over thirty years. I'll be thirty-one in August. I've never broken a schedule in my life—but this is...this is something more important than bills of lading and sales curves!" His face had tightened, the character lines about his mouth standing forth.

"We've got to save them, Karl. We've got to help those people down there!"

Teller exhaled heavily. "All right, Luther. It's your choice. But you'd better produce something from those natives down there, or MerchArm might get unpleasant."

Shreve nodded, his face sagged into weariness momentarily. Then he straightened and depressed the public-address stud on the couch arm.

His orders were brief and direct.

An hour later, ship-time, the great Wallower fired away with directional rockets, and began to fall toward the multi-colored sphere of Diamore.

**H**IGH jungle surrounded the ship. Deep-red stringers of climbing vine meshed with the purple and green and blue of exotic tree-forms. From the edge of the dead path the Wallower had burned in settling, the patchwork melange of colored growth reared and spread.

The analyzers were just completing their spore-counts when the Diamoraii burst from the jungle, thundered onto the charred ground of the clearing.

They rode tall on the backs of their mounts, whooping and wailing in a minor key. The outside receivers, which had been left on in various parts of the *Wallower*, rattled tinnily at the noise. Men clasped hands to their ears and hurried to depress studs to shut out the din. Shreve and Teller whirled from their calculations

and stared fascinated at the sight in the plates.

The Diamoraii's huge, loping animals closely resembled Terrestrial giraffes. The beasts were pitch-black and ran with a gait beautifully adapted to the jungle. They came on with a liquid, side-stepping motion. They neatly leaped the twisted tree-trunks, swayed out of the path to avoid a cluster of high-pile blossoms, and trampled to a stop fifty yards in front of the *Wallower*.

"Stations!" Shreve yelled into the p-a mike. He turned back to the view-plate, staring at the black beasts.

There were twelve of them, each with a depression in its back in which a Diamorai sat, clutching the flanks of the thin, black animal with his knees. Twists of pliant material looped through the beast's noses served both as bridle and reins.

The twelve Diamoraii leaped agilely from their mount's backs, began looking at each other with indecision. They milled about the stomping animals for a minute, then each went to a bulky pouch slung across his beast's back. depres-

sion. They fumbled in the pouches.

Shreve turned the plates up to higher magnification, whistling through his teeth. "Wheew! What magnificent creatures! Did you see the way they ran that jungle like broken-field quarterbacks?"

From beside him the agreeing mutter of the pudgy psych officer blended with the busy clicking of the analyzers, totaling their counts.

"Those look to be the people we have to contact, Karl," Shreve added, motioning toward the Diamoraii who were dragging objects from their pouches.

"A young people," Teller mused, his face flushed. "A young and a virile people. Shouldn't have any trouble getting through to them." He turned a plate knob to sharper register.

The Diamoraii had advanced on the ship. They were almost humanoid. Tall—almost six and a half feet each with very long legs and boney, knobbed knees. Their legs seemed to represent almost half their bodies. Wide-shouldered, V-shaped chests; obviously large-

lunged. Otherwise, despite the wide-spaced, large-irised eyes, they were almost humanoid.

As Shreve and Teller watched, they each donned a hideous devil-mask.

“UGH!” Shreve blurted, his face drawing up into a picture of agony. “What ghastly greeting cards *those* are! If that’s a sample of their demonology, I’d hate to see them exorcising one of the poor devils: probably frighten the thing to life!”

Teller was leaning closer to the screen, his small eyes watching the twelve with undisguised fascination. He was talking more to himself than his superior. “Must be religious symbols of some sort. Must have put on their Prayer-day best just to come see us.”

Shreve looked at Teller sharply. “You don’t suppose they think we’re gods or something?”

Shaking his head in annoyance, Teller replied, “No, no, certainly not. You can tell they don’t! They haven’t prostrated themselves or offered up sacrifices or such, as the typical superstitious aborigine would.

No, I’m quite certain they don’t deify us. Probably just insuring that evil spirits don’t try to interfere with their mission—whatever that might be. But,” he added, “it doesn’t appear to be dangerous, whatever it is.”

The twelve were now capering and turning handsprings directly under the plate’s hull-pickups. Shaking their masks into the cameras. They seemed unaware that anyone might be watching.

“Ritual,” murmured Teller.

As though his identification of it had tired them of their actions, they sat—almost as one. Cross-legged, arms akimbo, expressions stolidly hidden by the grotesque shapes of their devil-masks, they waited. Again, almost to the second, they removed their hands from their hips and folded them across their massive chests.

Shreve looked at the tight semi-circle of aliens, then at Teller. He licked his lips anxiously. It was apparent he was happier, now that he had landed and felt he could help the Diamoraii.

“Well, what should we do, Karl? This is more in your

line. Should we go out and talk to them, or bring them inside? Do you think they're aware of the coming eruptions?" The questions had come out on top of one another, with an almost childlike anxiety.

It was odd to hear such a tone from the otherwise stolid Shreve. Teller looked up in surprise. He smiled slowly.

The psych officer flipped his plate off, turned, crossing his arms as the aliens had done, and sat on the dead console.

"I don't think they know what's happening down there, Luther. At least," he amended, "they didn't appear to be preparing for evacuation in the threatened areas when we went over them. So I rather suspect they're waiting for us to come out and chat." He shrugged his shoulders, staring at Shreve. "And that, my Captain, is it."

Shreve looked back at the aliens in his plate. He nodded his head with determination, and his face lit up with purpose. Teller had seen the look once or twice before—never on routine commercial ventures, however. He had labeled it missionary zeal.

The Diamoraii were still sitting in cross-legged squats, their knees up about their mask's pointed ears and horned temples.

"Well, then I suppose we'd better go out and chat. The sooner we set up the Stress Rectifiers, the better." He got up, stepped toward the shaft.

"Oh," he said, stopping and turning back to the psych officer, "I'd like you to come out with me, Karl. No orders, you understand, but I'd appreciate it."

The short psychologist looked at him for a moment, nodded his head in acceptance. Shreve stepped into the shaft and sank down through the floor as the tube glowed. Teller looked at the empty shaft for a moment. As the platform slipped back into place he flipped Shreve's plate off.

Stepping onto the platform he threw a glance over his shoulder at the now-grey plate.

"You're a very young race," he whispered, disappearing through the floor.

**T**HEY dropped the few inches to the ground,



bouncing a bit more than they'd allowed for, in the lessened gravity of Diamore. All around them the screams of the jungle meshed into one primal roar.

Shreve ran his tongue around the inside of his cheek. The medic had flatly refused to allow their exit, unless they submitted to the six shots he felt were minimum safety precaution.

With the feel of the electro-syringe still in his cheeks, Shreve stepped away from the monstrous plug-port, raising his arms in friendship. Behind him, Teller did the same.

They moved slowly toward the Diamoraii. The twelve sat immobile, yet seeming to be looking from each other to the Earthmen, and back, in sharp, jerking motions. It was all illusion, but disquieting.

As they stepped toward the aliens, Shreve felt the nerves in his teeth begin to twitch. He had been about to say something soothing in English, but the words never came out.

*Who are you?*

The question appeared in his head full-blown, inquisitive, without sense of direction or

distance. He knew immediately from where it had come, of course, yet he could not quite believe it. Shreve stopped dead, the pain in his jaws mounting. He glanced quickly at Teller.

The shorter man was clutching his jaws with both hands, biting his lower lip and rocking back and forth, eyes half-closed.

"Karl," Shreve's tongue stumbled over the words in his pain, "they're—migod, Karl—they're *telepathic!*"

They stood rooted in their tracks, staring at the twelve impassive aliens in their grotesque masks.

Teller stared in open fascination, still clutching his head. "The first," he murmured in awe. "The very first! They always said someday we'd meet them, and now, by God, we have!" His voice died off to a whisper and he stared unblinking at the dark-skinned Diamoraii.

The words appeared in their minds once more—this time more firm, tinged with impatience:

*Who are you?*

Shreve seemed unable to respond. He had thought them ig-

norant savages, on the verge of disaster, who would be jubilant at the offer of aid. Instead, he was faced with making contact; contact with the first mind-reading race Humanity had met racing through the stars. His throat tightened up, he could not speak.

**F**INALLY, he took a step forward, extended his hands in peace to the aliens. "Friends. We've come to help you. Friends."

He was certain they couldn't understand the spoken words. Whether or not they could decipher the thoughts—that was something else. Later, the Earthmen could bring out the communicators if the need arose. But for now, he wanted only the soothing good will in his voice to win them.

If they knew the Earthmen were protected by stat-fields, and that a dozen gun-blisters were trained on them, they gave no indication.

*We don't want your help.*

There was a tone of anger, a driving odor of fear, in the feel of the thoughts. The Earthmen felt their teeth jump as the thoughts materialized. Shreve

realized suddenly that the toothaches must be a by-product of the psi power.

Shreve turned to Teller. The psych officer was staring back at him, his eyes wide, his hands still clutching his jaw. They both recognized something they had missed when the telepathy first became known to them.

It was not an entering of the mind; they could not reach into the deepest recesses of the Diamorai's minds and get whole pictures. It was like a mental radio transmission.

They could send and receive, with inflection and depth, but they had to do it in darkness.

Teller said nothing, but he stepped closer to the aliens. Shreve could tell he was thinking at them, but *what* he was thinking was impossible to guess. If the aliens understood, they gave no indication. The transmission did not work between the Earthmen, obviously.

When Teller had fallen back, Shreve asked, "What did you say?"

"I told them we were here because volcanic eruptions were going to rip up their planet within five months. I told them

the quakes and volcanos would kill off ninety-five percent of their people. I told them we could help them to—”

The aliens rose slowly, and one stepped forward. He looked down at the two Earthmen.

*Hear this you are not the first strangers to come here once before strange men came to us from the sky they called themselves the Kyben and they told us they wanted to trade but they did not trade they ate away our land and burned our jungle and took our women and killed our young warriors.*

It came as a blast of pure thought. All at once, as though spurted out whole from the mind. The inflection was there—the meaning—the depth of bitterness. Shreve felt his mouth dry out at the calibre of agony in the thoughts.

Teller shrugged his shoulders as though he wanted no more part in the matter, and retreated a few steps, massaging his throbbing jaws.

The alien stream ceased, and the Diamorai drew back. He seemed to rise up on his toes, as though he wanted to strike the Earthman, but was restraining himself through the movement.

SHREVE felt a desperation mounting in him. He *had* to save these people, *had* to make them realize their danger. “But you can read our minds—you can *see* we’re telling the truth!” he argued. He found his stomach muscles had tightened, hands had clenched.

The alien thought reverberated in his head: *What makes you think you cannot lie with telepathy?*

Then the thoughts flowed again. This time cold, dispassionate, merely information.

*We have been as you think burned once and we do not wish to be burned again we cannot say whether or not these things you warn us of really exist but we will take our own destinies in our hands and treat them if they come we have seen no such indications of eruptions and we do not believe you.*

The thoughts ceased. Then one word alone: *Go.*

Shreve cursed the limitations of the psi faculty. Of what use was a mind-reading ability if it merely told you what another person thought—not whether it was true or not?

He stepped toward them again. He looked up at the fear-

some masks and felt the sinking of his stomach. He realized they were a young and headstrong people, Teller had made that clear to him. Their arrogance was the false front of a people frightened by the unknown. But were they so young that they could not realize when they needed help?

"Look," he found himself speaking, "you don't seem to understand." The aliens moved back as Shreve approached. They didn't seem to want him near them. "Your planet is a young one. There are internal stresses that are going to rip open your continents. We can set up machines that will redirect these eruptions—into the ocean, back in the jungle where it's uninhabited—so your people won't die. We—"

*Did you see the blood pits near the Great Ocean?*

Shreve caught the thought, and knew there was more to it than the Diamorai had thought at first. The thought was laden with blast-furnace hatred and a deadly bitterness.

He remembered the planet-circling landing the *Wallower* had made. He remembered the single body of water, the Great

Ocean, stretching yellow and rippling across a third of Diamore. The picture completed itself in his mind and he saw the monstrous gouges ripped into the land, near the shore of that ocean. Pits of fused, crimson soil; bare, gaping wounds, nothing but emptiness and dead plants surrounding them for miles.

*Those are the ones, the thought came. Those were the cities of Golamoor, Nokrosch and Huyt on the shores of the Great Ocean we resisted the Kyben when they wanted to drill out our ceremonial grounds for their soils they said were radioactive we would not let them drill and they sent down death to our cities.*

Tinged with such emotion, the words were so boldly put, their meaning was all too clear. These people would never reverse their decision. They hated all outsiders. Shreve wondered whether they could be blamed.

"But you need our help! You've got to believe me! You can read my thoughts—can't you see I'm telling the truth!"

*We could read the Kyben thoughts, too.*

Silence in their minds for an instant, then:

*Have you seen the blood pits?*

**L**UTHER Shreve felt as though he were being dragged down into a whirlpool. He didn't know why it was suddenly so important to him that he help the Diamorai. There was certainly no sense of brotherhood with the aliens. But he knew, on a level that defied all doubt, that he must save these people, or never feel at peace with himself again.

Behind him, Shreve heard Teller snort in disgust. The psych officer took two quick steps forward, jerked his head toward the massive bulk of the *Wallower*. "Children! That's all they are. They think those masks protect them from evil, they think their blind arrogance will protect them if trouble comes! They think they know better than us! They don't know when they need help. Come on, Luther, leave them if that's what they want!" He turned to go, his face flushed in anger.

Shreve looked back at the

aliens. He searched the blank and grotesque masks for some evidence of willingness to reason. There was none. Shreve gritted his teeth in frustration; he *wanted* to help, he *wanted* to save them—but they wouldn't *let* themselves accept his help. The aliens didn't *want* to be saved. They stood there, tall, impassive, the thought radiating unendingly:

*Go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go.*

Luther Shreve stepped toward them, anger boiling hot in his brain. "All right, damn you! If you're too stupid, or too swollen up with your own importance to realize you need help, we'll help you despite yourselves!"

*Why do you think the Kyben left Diamore?*

Shreve's words stopped before they could be spoken. His fury checked itself. He hadn't considered that. Why *had* another race, one that could decimate a planet as the blood pits indicated they could, leave when they seemed to be on the verge of getting what they wanted?

*We are not defenseless we*

*can stop you we will hurt you go.*

Teller's sharp laugh interrupted before Shreve could get an answer out. "Fools! Pompous adolescents! What makes you think your primitive warriors with their bogey masks can harm us? Look!" He stepped toward the alien. The Diamorai backed up. Teller stepped quickly, coming into sharp contact with the alien's body. The Diamorai leaped back, the short hairs on his body standing straight out. He thought something at his brothers. It was incomprehensible to the Earthmen.

"That's a stat-field. And there are a dozen guns pointed at you from the ship. We'll set up the machines and save you whether you like it or not." He turned away with a low chuckle, adding ruefully, "Though why you want to bother with such a bunch of arrogant children is beyond me, Luther." He walked toward the ship.

Casting nervous glances at one another, the aliens leaped to the backs of their mounts, reined in and turned to leave. Shreve stood and watched them

as they loped to the jungle's edge.

The ebony giraffe-things drew up short, and the leader's reared up as the alien turned to stare at Shreve.

*Go or we will hurt you.*

In an instant they were gone, melting into the colored riot of the jungle, the beasts hoofs beating ever more faintly as they moved away.

Shreve turned back to the ship. He should have felt no temperature changes within his stat-field, yet somehow he had grown chilled in a few seconds.

NIGHT had descended quickly, dropping like a sea of ink over Diamore. The robomechs had set out the floodlamps, almost to the edges of the jungle, and the *Wallower* was bathed in white light, sharply outlining her plate construction, and the clean transparency of the conning bubbles.

Paul Jukovsky, Roboexec, jg, stood behind his control console in the construction bubble, watching the thirty ton robomech carrying its burden. The sixteen-wheeled robomech rolled off the extended cargo hatch ramp, sinking just a bit

into the springy ground of Diamore. Jukovsky grinned at his foresight in spreading a primary hardener over the surface before the big boys went to work.

He two-fingered a cigarette out of his lapel pocket, stifling a belch. "Damn that cookie," he muttered. "If he doesn't stop putting cayenne in the salad..." He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, lipping it irritably for a second. He withdrew it, spitting out a loose bit of tobacco. Satisfied, he inserted it again, began to scratch it alight with his fingertip.

He moved a calibrated knob on the board three clicks. The lumbering monster outside revolved its head, the huge drilling plate it carried on its flattened and magnetized top moving also. "Like an old woman carrying a water urn on her head," he chuckled, puffing the cigarette.

The robomech neared phosphorescent markings laid out on the ground, where the fibreglass base plate should be planted. Stress Rectifiers would be magnoclamped to the base plate, then would begin their search-position-drilling.

He moved to press the release button that would cause the robomech to set its burden down lightly.

Paul Jukovsky's teeth suddenly began to ache with terrible intensity. He clutched at his face wildly, burning the palm of his hand on the cigarette.

A strangled sob began to form, ended in a gurgling half-scream. His eyes rolled upwards and a trickle of blood emerged from the corner of his mouth.

Stone-dead he fell across the control console, depressing all studs.

The thirty ton robomech whirled twice and burst toward the edge of the jungle. It struck the boles of three huge intertwined trees with a resounding clang; the base plate bounced from its head and crashed, shattering, onto a projecting rock spear. The robot struggled for a moment more, driving into the jungle, knocking trees from its path in blind fury.

The smell of cordite soaked through the clearing, and a wisp of smoke issued from the service box. An instant later its chambers fused their baffles and the robomech exploded

with a terrifying burst of heat, impossible light, and the scream of ripping metal.

**"H**IS brains were fused," Teller said.

The psych officer looked Shreve directly in the eyes, trying to find meaning in the captain's closed expression. Teller's face was unnaturally white, his usually drooping lips thinned to a black line. "The autopsymen were shaking like loose bolts when they reported to me, Luther. They swore they'd never seen anything like it before. It was as if someone had taken that boy's brains in his red-hot hands and molded them like clay."

Shreve's jaw muscles worked in a strange rhythm. His voice was cold and determined. "We are going to get those Rectifiers set up. Better stay in your cabin, Karl; I've got to put men on it."

When Teller had left, the odd stare he had cast still haunting Shreve, the captain sank onto his couch. He pressed the p-a stud and crisped his orders, naming men and leaving no room for argument.

He felt the tremors through the soles of his boots as the men began unchocking their mechs. His balled fist found its way into his mouth.

He was not aware his hand was bleeding till several minutes after the teeth had pierced the skin.

After the sixth death—all of them with their brain-pans charred and their grey matter stuck together—Shreve broke down.

He threw a blanker over the shaft and sat there swearing. His body shook and heaved as he mumbled into his hands. In one stride he was off the couch and had smashed his fist full into the reflecting metal of the console face. It left a shallow dent, and he didn't seem to notice the angry inflammation of his knuckles. Teller stood across the room, keeping very still, shaking his head slowly, and thinking soft sounds.

After a while Shreve stopped, and collapsed onto the couch, his face red and swollen. "Sorry, Karl," he said.

"Why don't you try crying, it's easier on the metabolism," he suggested.

Shreve gave a bitter laugh,



thin and short. "Last time I cried I was eating cream cheese and jelly sandwiches and didn't know where little babies come from." Teller didn't smile. He knew Shreve was covering up. He had never seen the man break as he had today, and he knew the knowledge should go no further.

"But why? *Why?*" Shreve pounded his fist into the yielding couch. "We came to help them, why won't they let us?"

"Luther, Luther," Teller soothed him, sitting down beside him on the couch, "don't you see? They're adolescents. They don't know when to call for help. They've been hurt, and with the single-minded purpose of the immature they're bound not to let it happen again. You can't blame yourself for what's happened.

"You had no way of knowing about this power of theirs. Why don't we leave right now. If we lay on all power we can make the schedule still pretty close."

Shreve stood up, flicked on the view-plates. He stared into them a moment, seeing nothing but tangled jungle. He drew up a bit, laid his hands flat on the

console. "I've got to talk to them once more. To beg them again."

**WE** warned you came the cold, hard tones. *The group-mind is infinitely stronger than our individual power now that you have seen our strength will you go?*

"I've come to beg you once more," Shreve pleaded, looking up at the masked Diamoraii, astride their mounts. He had made certain all outside pickup mikes were off. "We only want to help you. Won't you let us re-direct the coming eruptions.

Please!" Shreve had plumbed the depths of his mind in an attempt to find reasons for sacrificing such efforts to save the Diamoraii. The only reasons he had found he had not been able to translate—yet there was a sense of identification with the long-legged and stubborn aliens. *He wanted to save them!*

"Can't you read my thoughts?" he said, projecting truth, projecting honesty and sincerity. "Can't you see I want to help you, help your people?"

They did not even bother answering. He knew their acquaintance with the truth that men of other worlds had offered. To be defeated because those who need your help had been spoiled by another race!

The bitterness, the hatred, the distrust, washed over him, as the Diamorai leaned across his beast's neck, thought one snarled word: *Go*.

Shreve felt the futility of everything he had done, suddenly caving in on him. He looked up into the blank stares of the masked aliens, said slowly, "We will hang above your atmosphere till you call us."

He walked back to the *Wallower*. The huge plug-port closed behind him. The aliens sat astride their beasts, staring at the ship.

Their minor-key whoops of victory rang and bounced in the jungle's treetops as they swung their mounts roughly, dug boney knees into their sides, and careened into the multi-colored vastness.

The Diamorai had won again!

**T**HE *Wallower* spun slowly in space, the eternal dust

of the universe lapping at her ports. Below her, enveloped by clouds of steam, the planet Diamore blasted and erupted and screamed and belched and tore itself apart.

Luther Shreve sat before the control console, staring with almost hypnotized attention at the view-plates. He watched the world die.

His face was hard and unyielding. He had refused entrance even to Teller, barring everyone from the control room.

At every eruption, with each fissure that opened wide enough to be seen from that fantastic height, he felt a strange sinking in his heart. His throat was dry, and there was an odd pressure behind his eyes.

He watched silently, every once in a while letting the thought *They didn't know when to ask for help* filter through his mind.

**T**HE Group of Deciders huddled in the blasted Council Hall. The floor—what was left of the inlaid tiles—shivered and heaved. Beyond the twisted lattices of the win-

dows they could hear the mighty rending of the planet as it opened and swallowed all that stood.

Within an hour of the first eruptions, so quickly and with such fury that there had been no time for preparation, almost three-fifths of their race had been decimated.

The cities Kes and Uykva-bask and Laylor had gone under with roaring flames and the scraping of stone against flesh. The Great Ocean had exploded with a red-hot bubbling and roared onto the land, washing everything before it. The lava flows raced Eastward to the Ceremonial Grounds and Westward to the Hunting Preserve. Everywhere the ground opened without warning or reason, and life sank beneath the earth.

*Wrong, the Group of Deciders admitted in their last refuge. We were wrong we have been foolish we have rejected our only salvation we must prepare the group-mind send our plea for aid into space speak to the outsiders ask them to help us.*

They thought their instructions away from themselves, to their kin across Diamore's

blasted face. *Prepare! Join! Speak to the outsiders!*

And when they had gathered together every last Diamorai, with more dying as they joined the chain, with the feel of agony radiating through the group-mind, the message weakly rose. Tentatively it probed at the inner surface of Diamore's atmosphere.

The power was, perhaps, insufficient to reach the spaceship. Three-fifths of the Diamoraii were lost to the group-mind.

The group-mind struggled, frantically beaming, in hopelessness trying to get through to the Earthmen who rode above them.

The men who rode above them—waiting for a signal from the Diamoraii.

SHREVE turned away from the plates, flicking them off. "I can't stand it, Karl! How senseless! Because one race dealt them unfairly, they closed their eyes to help from anyone else."

Teller crossed his legs as he sat on the couch. He did not appear to be disturbed by the sight from below.

"Luther, you can't go on destroying yourself. You did everything you could. You were as resourceful as any man could have been.

"Now you'd better get back to the schedule. We're over four and a half months due at our next landfall." He saw his words were having no effect. "Look, Luther, I've been in this business almost as long as you. I've seen this time and again. When you come up against an adolescent race, that doesn't know when it's got something too big to handle, there's nothing you can do but back off and let them handle it themselves. If they don't get smart

enough to know when to call the fireman—that's their agency. Not *yours!*"

"What's the next stop on our itinerary?" he asked the last almost jauntily, consciously trying to take Shreve's mind off the cinder that spun below the *Wallower*. He rose and stretched, as though from a profound sleep.

For a moment he stared in wonder. Then he stepped into the shaft and quietly left the control room.

He had never thought he'd see the day when Luther Shreve cried like a child.

THE END