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Author, Author!

TOM GODWIN will probably be associated for years to come with a fine story that John W. Campbell used for the purposes of illustrating his ideas of science fiction in an article he wrote for *Saturday Review*, in 1956. You remember "The Cold Equations", and we hope you'll remember, "The Wild Ones".

★ DICK HETSCHEL and NICHOLAS G. LORDI have one thing in common, besides their debut in SFS, this issue. Before we'd read their stories, we had never heard of them before. But I think we'll be hearing more from them.

DONALD FRANSON could be found in the "Science Discussions" departments of leading science fiction magazines, back in 1937. His last appearance with us was in a short story on language reform, called, "Comes The Revolution".

★ CALVIN M. KNOX is a great admirer of Robert Silverberg, and seems to follow Bob around in the magazines. Latest news is that Knox expects to follow Silverberg into the pocket-book novels market,



THE WILD ONES

Novelet of Earth's Frontier

by Tom Godwin

illustrated by EMSH

Once they'd been heroes, holding off a Reen attack. But now Earth had to show the Federation that man was mature, and the Reens were treated with courtesy. And Whitey Howard, who'd killed a Reen in self defense, would be hanged in the morning...

"H E'LL BE dead a long time and what will it gain any of you?" Clayton asked. "This is Freia not Earth. If you would only give him a chance..."

Colony Supervisor Martin tightened his lips, and Clay-

ton knew that his plea was hopeless. He looked out the broad window at the quiet, orderly city of Greendale. Children were running and playing in the green central park, and the little spires of churches could be seen lifting



above the cottages beyond. Very faintly, in the silence of the room, there came to him the tolling of their bells. It was a sweet, gentle sound, mocked by the gallows that stood new and ugly in the prison yard beyond Old Town. Shadows of near-sunset lay long across the city; in only ten hours it would be dawn again. They would lead Whitey Howard out to the gallows, handling him as they would some great, pale-eyed cat that had at last been captured and chained, and would soon cease to be a menace to those about him...

SUPERVISOR MARTIN spoke with deliberation: "John Howard knew, when he committed the crimes, what the penalty would be. He..."

"The crimes!" His mouth twisted in contempt. "Is refusal to step into the gutter for a pair of gobbling Reens worth a man's life?"

"The Reen witnesses claim he killed without provocation. It certainly cannot be denied that he killed the Terran policeman who would have settled the dispute."

"By accident—the policeman ran into the line of fire. Must a man be executed by his own government if he refuses to act humble before the Reens in his own town?"

"Howard killed a policeman who was trying to preserve the peace. He killed two Reen

military officers, and made an already-critical situation dangerously critical. It is a situation you consistently fail to understand. The issues at stake are far greater than the life of John Howard. The Galactic Federation is watching us now, waiting to see how we will handle this crisis with the Reens. If we are to convince them we are a civilized race, eligible for admittance into the Federation, we will have to conduct ourselves in a civilized manner. The era of violence is gone—times have changed since the days you and Howard and the others first landed on Freia. Surely you realize that."

"Yes," Clayton answered. "I realize it more each day."

Nostalgia for the past touched him, with the faint tolling of the bells drifting across the quiet city like a death knell for the wild, free days gone by. He had known that the wild days would go, for they always went whenever civilization followed the explorers into the frontier. But he had not expected them to go so quickly...

HOW SHORT and fleeting the years are in retrospect. Twelve years in the past, and the *Space Hound* crossed the first interstellar gap, carrying the men of his own selection—bold and determined men, restless and ungente men who were afraid

of nothing. They found three yellow suns, and fought their way up from three hostile worlds, before they came to the one for which they searched. It was an ideal world, untouched, with only the wild animals to contest their claim to it. Then the semi-humanoid Reens came in their ship and disputed the Terran possession. There was battle, the Reens fleeing back to their home planet. They named their new world Thor, after the Teutonic god of thunder and might; upon their return to Earth the government changed the name to Freia, after the more gentle goddess.

Ten years in the past, and the *Space Hound* went back to Freia with a survey group, men who were very similar to the men of the *Space Hound* in their way of thinking and acting.

SEVEN YEARS in the past, and the new immigrant ship, the *Constellation*, set down beside their lusty, rowdy little town. The colonists had been selected by the Terran Colonization Board for their soberness and reliability; they brought with them a law and order that looked with disfavor on the noise and drinking in Old Town. That had been the beginning of the end.

Six years in the past, and the Reens came again, in a

much larger ship and with military personnel, to build a garrison on the slope above Greendale. They calmly declared Freia to be their own discovery and the Terrans to be trespassers.

A massive ship of strange design appeared during the period of uncertainty following the Reen declaration, and a tall humanoid who called himself Valkaron made contact with both Terrans and Reens. He told them he represented the Galactic Federation, which held potential control over all the explored region of the galaxy, and that Freia would be kept under observation for an indefinite length of time.

HE HAD said: "So far, we have found more than one hundred different intelligent species within our sphere of exploration. Some of them have space flight, and some are near it; some are sufficiently mature in their philosophies to deserve admittance into the Federation. Some are not, and some are so immature that they represent a possible menace to the Federation and will be kept under control. Admittance into the Federation entitles that race to have free access to all the technological discoveries of the other member races; to trade freely with the member races; and to be assisted, whenever necessary, by the Federation Fleet in col-

onization of the new worlds along the Federation frontier.

"Your method of settling your dispute concerning the ownership of Freia will determine whether one of you, both of you, or neither of you is entitled to become a member of the Federation. The Federation will neither interfere nor give advice. You must, without assistance, prove that you are intelligent and mature in your reactions and decisions—that you are capable of coping effectively with such situations as the present one."

The Federation ship departed, leaving a multi-faceted object hovering in space just outside of Freia's atmosphere. A force field surrounded it, a field based on some science unknown to both Terrans and Reens; it ignored all attempts in later years to communicate with it.

Five years in the past... four... three... two... one... The *Constellation* brought more colonists to Freia in periodic voyages; the Reen ship brought more military personnel. The Terrans built their neat city and tended their green fields, while the Reens encroached farther and farther into Terran territory. The Terran population of Freia became sharply divided into two factions: the survey group and *Space Hound* group in Old

Town, who wanted immediate and violent action to end the cold war; and the colonists in Greendale, who still hoped and believed that diplomacy and the conference table were more effective defense than anger and the snarl of atomic rifles.

"I AM NEITHER a cruel nor an unjust man," Martin said. "I regret the necessity of punishing John Howard for his crime. But there can be no alternative; if Howard is permitted to go unpunished, it will encourage others like him in Old Town to flout the law. It might have even more serious results: it might cause the Reens to carry out their threat to place Greendale under Reen martial rule for their own protection. We could not permit that, of course, and there would be war."

"You and the Colonization Board on Earth keep shutting your eyes to the obvious: there is going to be war, anyway. Freia is ours, and the Reens are trespassers. We could take the offensive and hit them hard and quick with the *Space Hound*; its' guns are longer range than those of the Reen ship. But where is the *Space Hound*?" Clayton was unable to keep the resentment out of his voice. "You took it away from us and put it to hauling ore from the moon mines."

"The *Space Hound* will not be needed. It is inconceivable that the Reen situation should not have a non-violent solution. Slaughtering the Reens, as you recommend, would hardly make a favorable impression on the Federation. It is not impossible that such an action might cause them to consider us one of the races they must keep under control. It would almost certainly make us ineligible for Federation membership, and would deny us Federation protection along our future frontiers.

"FREIA IS only the beginning, Clayton. Our next objective, in the due course of time, would be the yellow suns beyond Orion. And there is all the galaxy beyond them, for thousands upon thousands of lightyears and lifetimes. Lone-wolf expansion is uncertain and dangerous, where expansion as a member of the Federation would be certain and steady and safe. That is our long-range goal, and it is best for us here on Freia to swallow our pride for a while and insure that we reach it."

"I can't agree with you," Clayton said. "We're supposed to turn the other cheek, and impress the Federation with our civilized patience. We're supposed to act humble before the Reens and thereby become a proud race, inspected, passed and approved by

the Federation. To hell with the Federation; we got this far without their help, and we can go farther."

Martin answered with a deliberation greater than that of before, finality in his tone: "The day of the wild and irresponsible individual is past, whether such individuals like it or not. I had hoped for your cooperation—at least to the extent that you would try to keep your malcontents and lawbreakers in Old Town under control. I can see my hope was in vain." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "The Reen commander is due here for another conference in twenty minutes and I must ask you to go now."

Clayton stood up. "And Whitey Howard?"

"HOWARD will go to the gallows; there will be no stay of execution. And one last thing, Clayton"—The eyes of the supervisor were as hard as blue steel—"For your own welfare and that of your friends, accept circumstances as they are and don't try to change them when you go back to Old Town. Do you understand?"

"Your threat is obvious enough," Clayton said; he turned away.

He almost collided with the supervisor's hurrying secretary as he went out the door. She rushed on past him, to say agitatedly to the supervisor as the door swung shut

behind him: "Sir, the Reen commander and his party are already here, so far ahead of the appointed time that the escort isn't ready, and no one is..."

Clayton went down the corridor; he was twenty feet short of the outside door when its automatic mechanism swung it open and the Reens strode through. They were almost human in form, but with an appearance that always reminded him of buzzards: scaly skin, beady reptilian eyes set toward the sides of their heads in the manner of birds, and a red, wattled neck like that of a turkey.

THE REEN commander walked in the middle of the group, his uniform resplendent with insignia. Two sub-officers preceded him and two heavily-armed soldiers walked on each side of him, atomic rifles slung from their shoulders. Clayton was suddenly, acutely, aware of his empty holster—a city ordinance forbade the carrying of deadly weapons, and he had considered it unwise to risk discovery in the Administration Building—but there was nothing he could do but keep walking and know what was coming next.

The Reen group was five in width, the flanking soldiers close to the walls of the corridor and giving no indica-

tion of making room for him to pass. He could, of course, shoulder one of them aside and then drop to the floor a second later, hole through him, while the Reens continued on without having lost a step in their advance.

Later, one of the sub-officers would say to Martin: "Reen soldier when attacked unprovoked by Terran must defend self and commander. Incident very regretful. In future avoid by meeting Reens with proper escort."

The two sub-officers in the lead passed Clayton, their black, yellow-rimmed eyes dismissing him with one arrogant glance. The commander seemed not to see him at all, but the broad feet of the outside soldier made a quick sideward shuffle so that the butt of the slung rifle would strike him across the stomach. Already, he was so close to the wall that his shoulder was brushing it; he could take the blow or ignominiously turn and run.

CLAYTON took it painfully, keeping his face expressionless. The face of the soldier was very close as he passed, the round little eyes gleaming with amusement. He felt an almost overpowering desire to smash the scaly face, to watch the amusement change to pain and hear the Reen squawk and gobble in fear as he bent its wattled neck back until it broke.

Behind the desire came the vision of Whitey's gallows, the sound of the dry voice of the Colonial Judge: *"A real or fancied slight to the dignity is not justification for deliberately taking the life of another intelligent being... the defense council's plea for clemency cannot be granted... this court sentences the defendant, James Frederick Clayton, to be hanged by the neck until dead..."*

The Reens passed on, and he resumed his own progress, recalling the first time Reens and Terrans had met in conflict, realizing the true extent to which the times had changed. Clayton would never have believed, twelve years before, that the time could ever come when he would let a Reen strike him...

He went out the door, the setting sun bright in his face. The Reen aircar had been set down near the door, its landing gear crushing the carefully-tended grass. Once Supervisor Martin had suggested the aircar be left in the nearby parking lot and had been told: "Is not necessary that Reens walk long distance from aircar."

II

IT WAS almost half a mile from the Administration Building to Old Town, with a long east-west trending strip of wooded land di-

viding Old Town from Greendale, and separating the rough buildings of the former from the trim, neat houses of the latter. The little prison was at the east end of the wooded strip and the spaceship field at the west end—a field now empty, with the *Constellation* gone back to Earth and the *Space Hound* off on its run to the moon lines. The Reen garrison set to the slope above Old Town, the Reen-Terran border within a stone's throw of Old Town's north side.

Clayton came to the wooded strip and found Red O'Hara waiting restlessly for him, his beard like flaming copper in the last rays of the sun.

"What did he say?" Red asked.

"No dice."

"They can't hang him," Red said. They walked together through the trees and into the clearing, where the broken stump of the piper tree had been. "Whitey was the one who went into that crater on Centauri Four and fought his way through the medusa-beasts to Ramon. Whitey was the one who stood back-to-back with me the day the Reens had us hemmed in. And it was Whitey, more than anyone else, who made the Reens pay five to one the night they broke the truce. Do you remember that night, Clay?"

IT WAS NOT a question that required an answer. None of them would ever forget that night. It had been a surprise raid by the Reens, the truce suddenly null and void, and only Billy Gaylord and three sentries between the Reens and the sleeping camp. They had held the attack off, Billy and De'mont and the others, crouched under the piper tree, hearing it sing to them with tiny, fairy flutings as the breeze drifted through its curiously shaped leaves and knowing the time had come for all of them.

They held back the Reens until the forces in camp could be organized, dying with grim stubbornness under a tree that no longer sang but had become a shattered stump. Whitey had led the counter-attacking force, going ahead of the others like a swift, silent ghost in the darkness, making no sound until he was among the Reens with his blaster swinging and hissing and lighting up the night and their startled buzzard faces.

They had buried Billy Gaylord and the others beside the shattered piper tree the next day. They had drunk a toast to them and turned down four empty glasses, setting them over the stump's jagged splinters so the wind would not move them. Later, when the *Space Hound* returned with the survey group, the glasses

were still there so they built a little fence around the tree and the graves.

Now, the broken tree and the glasses and the graves were gone, removed three months before by order of the city council. The council had stated: *A public display of this nature can serve only to remind Terrans and Reens alike of past enmity. In the interests of our efforts to establish friendly relations with the Reens, we find it advisable to order the bodies removed to a more suitable resting place.*

All that was left in the clearing was a lop-sided circle of transplanted sod, the grass as yet a little paler and shorter than the other grass.

"You can still tell that something used to be there," Red said. "But by late summer it will all look the same and the city council will be satisfied."

They went on across the clearing and up the gentle slope to the house by Old Town's edge where O'Hara lived, and where the others would be waiting for his return from his talk with Supervisor Martin.

"They can't hang him—we can't let them," Red said as they crossed the porch.

"First, we'll see if Johnny had any luck," Clayton replied.

THERE WERE six seated at the table in the room:

Johnny Merrit, dark-eyed and sombre; his wife, Doris, calm and composed; Al Bender, tall and lantern-jawed, an old blaster scar twisting his ugly face to one side; Doc Pavich, his glasses not concealing the worry in his eyes; Mike Shannon, grim-faced, his jaws clenched on the stem of a cold pipe; Steve English, his thin, almost esthetic face betraying no emotion, but with a partly-empty bottle of whiskey before him.

"He wouldn't listen to me," Clayton said, and disappointment ran like something dark and invisible down the length of the table.

"We were afraid he wouldn't," Johnny said. "It was our last hope. The city council wouldn't consider convening to hear us, and we only got twenty names on our petition out of all the people in Greendale we asked."

STEVE ENGLISH poured himself a drink. "Failure was a foregone conclusion. This is the new era of gentle law and order and brotherly love for all creatures—or else."

Al said, "To hang a man for that—and there wouldn't be any Terrans on Freia if we hadn't killed Reens in the old days."

"It could as easily have been any of the rest of us," Mike said. "None of us would ever let a Reen shove us to one side."

Clayton smiled without humor. "I did, only a few minutes ago. I didn't have much choice."

Steve filled his glass again. "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the galaxy, by order of the Terran Colonization Board."

"You're drunk," Mike said.

"Drunk?" Steve held up the glass and observed the whiskey in it. "No, not yet. I intend to be, though; I don't want to know what time it is when morning comes, and I don't intend to know."

"Damn it, Steve," Al said, "we can't help Whitey that way."

"Then you name it and we'll do it," Steve said. "I'll be there."

"They doubled the guards at the prison this afternoon," Doris said. "Johnny wanted me to tell Whitey what we were trying to do, but they wouldn't let me in."

THERE WAS the sound of quick, light steps on the porch, and Clayton knew before he turned that it would be The Stray—the *Constellation* stowaway who called herself Gail Smith and who had attached herself to Doris and the *Space Hound* group, calmly moving in and asking neither their permission nor pardon.

She ran into the room with a swirl of her blue skirt, her brown curls disarranged by

her hurrying, and her eyes bright with the excitement of what she had to tell them:

"The city council did meet again! They met, and they made another law, prohibiting the possession of arms. They're going to make a surprise search here in Old Town, and confiscate all weapons."

Unconsciously, the hand of every man moved to touch his concealed gun. They were all armed, with the temporary exception of Clayton. They had lived to lift their ship from three alien worlds only because their weapons were a little better, and their reflexes a little faster, than those of the aliens who opposed them. And for the past year they had lived with the Reen boundary, beyond which Ter-rans were forbidden to pass, a few hundred feet of where they slept.

Al cursed the city council in quick, brittle words and Mike's jaws bulged as he bit down on his pipe.

"So?" Doc said. "The search won't go any farther than here in Old Town."

"What time tonight?" Clayton asked. "Do you know?"

SHE SEATED herself beside him, as she had done so often of late. "At midnight; it's all supposed to be secret and catch us by surprise."

"Disarmed, they'd have us

as helpless as they want us," Johnny said. He looked up and down the table at the others and then at Clayton. "I think all of us knew all the time it would end in only one way of saving him.

"We had to make sure about it. Now we know. But there will be guards killed before we get him out. This is the last night in Old Town for any of us who take part in it."

"Freia is big," Al said. "We could go to the Western Continent."

"It would be better than any other place," Clayton agreed. "With luck, we could stay there a long time."

"How long?" Doris asked.

"Say ten years. Maybe fifteen."

"And then?"

"And then colonization of the Western Continent would be starting, and they would find it necessary to remove us."

"A lot might happen in ten years," Johnny said. Although he spoke to them all, it was obvious his words were intended for his wife. "We can have ten years for sure, or we can play it safe and let Whitey have ten hours."

She answered him with the calm determination typical of her. "I told you six years ago, Johnny, when I married you, that I would always go wherever you went. If I had wanted the quiet, safe life, I

wouldn't have married you."

"Nothing about this is going to be fun," Clayton said. "All of you know that. Anyone who doesn't want to get into this isn't obliged to; he can leave the house now, with nobody saying anything."

Al's ugly face twisted in a sardonic smile. "No, we wouldn't say anything; we'd just watch you as you walked to the door. Anybody want to step off that distance and see how far it is?"

RED SHIFTED impatiently. "We're wasting time. We've all lived together and fought together too long for any of us to want to back out. So let's get on with the important things—how and when."

"The woods reach almost to the prison," Clayton said. Red and I will go in, with you others putting up the cover fire from the woods. We'll have to move fast, but with luck we can have Whitey out of there before the police can be called in from the city. We'll have to have an aircar ready by then. Johnny, you and Mike can take care of that. Pop Gilbert's survey crew aircar is big, and as fast as anything the police have. Two aircars would be better—you can see what Pop has to say about the chances of getting them without the police getting suspicious. It will have to be timed just

right—you can't take them too far in advance."

"Well have an aircar, or aircars, ready on time, some way," Johnny said. "And that time would be...?"

"We'll start at eleven. That will give them time to think we've gone to bed. But the aircar plans will have to be made sure of before then."

GAIL TOUCHED Clayton on the arm and looked up at him in the gathering darkness. "Why not—why couldn't I tell all the ones we know we can trust to pretend to hold a party tonight? Then we could all be there for any police spies to see, right up until the minute it was time for us to slip out and go to the prison?"

No one seemed to want to hurt her feelings, and dampen her obvious enthusiasm, by telling her that her plan was impractical. So there was a little silence which Steve broke by asking softly, curiously: "Us?"

"Why—of course. Aren't we all in this together?"

"You don't have to be," Doc Pavich said. "Believe me, child, it's something too serious for you to want to be in."

Al said with rough kindness, "Stay out of it; and be dumb afterward and know nothing. If they ever found out you had known what we were going to do, and hadn't

squealed on us, they'd give you life."

She looked up at Clayton again and he said, "Thanks for telling us about the city council, but let that be the limit. Don't play with fire when you don't have to."

"But I thought..." she said uncertainly, then looked over to Doris to ask, "Doris?"

HE OBSERVED again the understanding that existed between the two women—an understanding so deep that one word was all the stray girl needed to convey a complete question to the older woman.

"I go with Johnny to the Western Continent," Doris said. "You can go with us if you want to, but you'll find that ten years can be awfully short when you're young and your life is before you."

"My life—what life? To try to marry one of those slow clods in Greendale and in-close myself in the big coffin they call a house until I'm sick of living and they can put me in a smaller coffin?"

"Don't hate the Greendale boys," Doris said. "Their way is different from our way, but they're good boys."

"Yes, they're good boys," she said. The words came so ugly with hatred that he was almost glad the deepening darkness hid the way her young face would be twisted and distorted with the same

hatred. "Good, clean, decent boys who go to church every Sunday, and sit there and look righteous and pious, and don't care what they did to somebody on weekdays."

It was the first time she had ever said anything about her past life. Doc violated the unwritten code by asking her, "Is that why you came to Freia and Old Town?"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes." Then the words came in a quick, defiant rush: "Now all of you know. It was one of the good, decent boys who gave me my start. It was the good, decent women who were so glad to tramp on me after I was down. At first I cared, then I didn't. I found better friends in the delinquent centers and in the prison. At least, they didn't pretend to be any better than they were. Then I hid on the *Constellation* so I could come here where I thought I would be"...the defiance trembled and almost broke... "would be welcome."

DORIS' VOICE was like the gentle, reassuring touch of a mother's hand: "You are welcome, honey. Always, wherever we go. But don't give your life's history like that again. It isn't done. Should everyone confess, you'd be shocked to learn what a den of thieves and murderers you're among."

"A debatable matter of

viewpoint," Steve said. He spoke very casually, and Clayton saw it was his way of making the girl feel at ease again. "By definition, a criminal is one who commits a crime. A crime, by Society's definition, is the commission of an act or the omission of a duty that is injurious to the public welfare. But the term 'injurious to the public welfare' has an amazing variety of interpretations.

"For example: civil war is injurious to the welfare of the entire nation, yet a soldier who refuses to commit acts contributing to that injury is imprisoned as a traitor—a criminal. You are a criminal if you rob and ruin a man with the threat of a gun; you are a respected businessman, and a pillar of the church and community, if you rob and ruin him with the fine print of a shrewd contract.

"Whitey killed two Reens and the policeman who would have stopped him; so Whitey is a condemned criminal, and the policeman a defunct hero. Had Whitey waited until Society formally admitted the Reens are our enemies, he would have been a hero for upholding Terran rights and dignity, and the policeman a criminal rat for interfering with a hero's duty. View the situation objectively and you will find we are not at all maladjusted individuals and

criminals—we are noble, up-standing characters who have the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

RED GRUNTED in his beard. "We're going to be in a wronger place a few hours from now, and the sooner, the better. What time is it, anyway?"

"Eight," Clayton answered. "And we had all better part company now, in case the police are watching. Everybody go home and look innocent while he gets together what he wants to take along. Which can't be very much. Well meet here again at eleven, or sooner if something goes wrong."

"Any time," Red said. There was the scrape of his boots as he rose to go and a general movement as the others followed his example. "Any time—just give us the signal."

They went out through the door, casually, as though their return would be to do no more than converse or perhaps play a game of cards. He went with them to the porch and watched them go their way through the starlight. Gail lagged behind, to stop beside him, and Steve paused to light a cigaret and say, "Don Quixote and the windmills."

"Don Quixote?" Clayton asked.

"What we're going to do to-

night is try to save something we lost when the *Constellation* brought the first load of colonists. We've reached the end of our trail, with our ship taken from us and no place for us to go. We don't belong here. We band together, and live in memories of the past and fret, because the days are so long. There's nothing for us to do—nothing but the old routine. Our group is an insignificant little minority and we know if we let them hang Whitey, it will be the opening act of the final scene for us."

"**WE** AREN'T alone," Clayton said. "The dissatisfied minority is larger than you think—all the ones in Old Town, and even a few among the colonists in the city. The minority has to conform now; but if there was some place for them to go, they would go there and set up their own brand of society. And if there was enough of them, the society they left behind would have to adapt when it caught up with them."

"Is that what you had in mind? That enough will want to follow us to the Western Continent?"

"No. The Western Continent is too close, too soon to be colonized by the others. But it's the only place we have to go."

Steve drew on his cigaret and its red glow lighted up

his thin face. "Well, it won't be long until part of us will be on our way to it, and part of us won't care anymore. Or maybe none of us if luck is against us tonight. Either way, this pointless existence in a place we hate will be over." His cigaret arced in a quick movement as he turned to go. "I'll see you at eleven."

III

HE STOOD after Steve was gone and watched the lights of the city; the stationary lights of buildings, and the moving lights of vehicles. Greendale was moving quietly about its business, with no sign of any undue activity on the part of the police. But there wouldn't be. The police were not fools, to advertize their actions.

There was a shifting brightness to the east, shining through the intervening trees, that had never been there before. It would be searchlights, of course, swinging back and forth across the area outside the prison fence. There had been a rumor that day that searchlights were being set up to help guard the prison during Whitey's last night. The presence of the searchlights, combined with Martin's warning, belied the quiet normalcy of the night. The feeling came to Clayton that they had waited too long, far too long. They had hoped to the

last that they could save Whitey's life without violence. They should have known better...

"Clay..."

He had almost forgotten about her, standing so silently on the porch beside him. "You had better go if you really think you want to get mixed up in this," he said. "Get together the little things you will want to take along."

"I don't have anything to take. Only the clothes I wear, and they belong to Doris."

"Then go home and spend the time reconsidering this deal. Make yourself see what you'll be getting into."

Her face was a pale oval in the starlight as she looked up at him. "Is it... that you don't want me along?"

IT WAS harder than he had thought it would be to maintain an aloof and impartial tone. "It doesn't matter to me, one way or the other. I'm speaking of what is best for you."

"Oh—of course." There was a little silence and then coldly, "Thank you for your advice." Then the coldness was replaced with a surge of anger. "You already know why I want to go along. I'm twenty-three years old, and I've been in five different kinds of prisons in that time. What kind of a life would I live among the decent people with them knowing that?"

"There can be worse and

shorter ways of living your life."

"Then why don't you take the best way—why don't you stay here?"

"Whitey," he answered. "They're going to hang him in the morning."

"Yes—Whitey. The symbol to you and the others of the freedom you've partly lost and will lose completely if you stay here. Isn't that what Steve said, and isn't it true?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"I've never had any freedom to lose. Only since I've been here in Old Town. It's good to be free and be among people who respect you for what you are, and don't care what you were. It's—it's something worth fighting for and that makes Whitey a symbol for me, too."

Something seemed to move just above the trees that separated Old Town from the city. He watched intently as she spoke, seeing it almost clearly against the stars for a moment.

It was an aircar, without lights, and only the police were permitted to fly without running lights.

"Quick," he said to her. "Go tell the others the police are here. Tell them I..."

A VOICE spoke with cold amusement from within the dark doorway behind them: "That won't be necessary. And don't move, Clayton

—don't move a muscle or make a sound until we have a little light here."

He spoke without turning: "The switch for the doorway light is on your left."

"Thanks," the voice answered dryly. "But I'll push this other one, since it's part of my business to know that the left hand switch turns on the floodlight for the lawn."

There was a click and the soft glow of the doorway light dispelled the darkness, disclosing Gail standing wide-eyed and tense, watching the person in the doorway. He turned without waiting for permission, to look into the muzzle of a gun, and the glittering black eyes of a man who were the plain clothes of the Colonial Police

"Delemar, captain, Colonial Police," the man said. He smiled thinly at Clayton. "I always like to introduce myself and make sure everyone knows I represent the law. Then if I'm resisted, I can take appropriate measures with a clear conscience."

"I see. Thanks for the warning. How long have you been hiding in that back room?"

LONG ENOUGH to hear the plans. The conversation was picked up and recorded, of course. We of the police department have known all the time you would attempt a prison break as the last resort. Today we planted

the story of the arms confiscation to bring things to a head early tonight. You will all have several years in the moon mines in which to ponder upon the fact that one should not too implicitly trust a stooge's statement."

"You lie—you lie!" The girl's words came quick and sharp with protest and hatred. She swung on Clayton, her tone changing. "I didn't know the story wasn't true—how could I know? He lies, and I didn't know." She clutched his arm when he did not answer. "It's the police way, Clay—divide and rule. Don't you see? I was only trying to help you..."

Delemar was smiling a little as he watched her, as though her protests were amusing to hear. He seemed to be in no hurry to handcuff them and take them with him. It was not the way a man like Delemar would normally act; it was as though he might be waiting on something...

"Where to now, Delemar?" Clayton asked. "You didn't come here to loaf in the doorway all night."

"Only a few minutes more, then the boys will pick up the others and we'll all go."

"Why the wait?"

Delemar flicked his black eyes to his watch and back to Clayton. "Then there will no longer be such a strong incentive for the others to resist us."

It seemed to him that understanding of the implications of Delemar's statement came slowly and then froze his own reactions for a moment. "You mean—they've moved up the execution time?"

"Yes. It was decided to do that in the interests of the public welfare."

CLAYTON moved a half step toward Delemar and the blaster stabbed forward to meet him. "When?"

"They'll be leading him to the gallows now."

There was an intense alertness in Delemar's manner as he finished speaking, and the gun was held very near and motionless. It occurred to Clayton that he and the others had consistently underrated the ineffectual bumbling of Society. Society was not at all ineffectual; Society employed men to protect it who were fully as violent by nature and dangerous as any who had ever ridden the *Space Hound*. Delemar was a wolf in the clothing of the Colonial Police, waiting with the killer lust in his eyes for some move that could be interpreted as an attack. Delemar had come to kill him, knowing that he would never wait meekly while they hanged Whitey. It was an efficient method of ridding Society of a menace, and very moral and legal.

HE CALCULATED the chances he might have and found them to be virtually nonexistent. The vines at the end of the porch concealed the three of them from the other houses in Old Town. There was only the dark woods to his back, curving a little on the eastern end so that the prison searchlights were screened. He saw that one light was no longer shifting; it had become a steady, bright glow through the trees. That would be the light they would have to illuminate the gallows.

"There's nothing you can do, is there?" The thin, mocking smile was back on Delemar's face. "Nothing, except wait while they hang him. But it won't take them long—only another minute or so."

Gail was indistinctly visible to him as he watched Delemar; dark hair and pale face above a white blouse, her hands lifted to her breasts and fumbled with the collar of her blouse. He shifted his weight so that he could move as quickly as possible and Delemar detected the movement, slight though it was. His eyes burned with anticipation.

"Only another minute or so, Clayton, and then he will be dead..."

Gail's hands jerked away from the low-cut collar of her blouse. For an infinitesimal instant there was the gleam

of metal before her, then a pale blue beam stabbed out at Delemar with a sharp hiss. He was flung backward by it, his eyes losing their glitter and going wide with surprise and disbelief. He fired as he fell, but his own beam went wide of Clayton and out into the night—a slender blue lance that was gone almost before it could be seen. Clayton knocked the weapon from his hand and saw that the beam had struck him very near the heart.

DELEMAR braced his hands on the floor and looked up at Gail with the surprise and disbelief gone, and on his face the bitterness of realization.

"I made a mistake," he said. "I should have watched you." He turned to Clayton and his breath rasped harshly as he tried to laugh. "I always wondered who would be the man good enough to get me. I always wanted to see the face of that man. I never thought it would be a scared little chipper. The ignoble end, Clayton, for a man who... who..."

He slumped forward and died in midsentence.

"He—he was waiting to kill you," Gail said. Then the gun dropped from her hand with a clatter and she wavered on her feet. "Clay, I'm—I'm sick. I was a lot of things but I never did hurt anybody be-

fore—I never did kill anybody before..."

He took her by the shoulders and swung her around, away from the sight of Delemar. "Go tell Red," he said. "Tell him I've already gone on." He gave her a little shove. "Run!"

She obeyed, staggering a step from the shove and then running across the porch and around it toward the house where Red lived. He scooped the guns off the floor and took the necklace-like police communicator that Delemar wore. He stepped over Delemar to seize an atomic rifle from inside the house and ran back out and on toward the distant searchlights. He glanced back once when he reached the trees and saw the dark form of Delemar lying shapelessly under the dim light, heard the voice of Gail calling from where she ran in the darkness beyond:

"Red—quick, Red—they're hanging Whitey..."

HE REACHED the eastern end of the woods and stopped, with the last trees concealing him as he looked across the bare and light-swept ground that reached for two hundred feet to the prison fence. Guards armed with atomic rifles stood post at the gate, and at the corners, while other guards patrolled the area outside the fence.

The gallows was clearly visible inside the fence,

bathed in the bright light of the searchlight. Whitey stood on it, under the projecting beam, his arms and legs bound. He was a tall man, so tall that the executioner was having to reach up as he adjusted the noose around his neck. Five men stood some distance from the gallows, watching the hangman and Whitey. Two Reens stood a little apart from the five men, their uniforms glittering with sub-officer insignia. It was very quiet, and Clayton could hear their twittering gabble as they talked to each other.

He set the atomic rifle to the lightest charge possible and slid the muzzle of it across a low limb, where he could hold it steady as he aimed at the rope above Whitey's head. He waited, hoping the others would not be too long in coming. The prison would be transformed into a savage killing machine when he fired—the searchlights would focus on his position; the guards would pour concentrated fire into it; the prison siren would whoop and scream for reinforcements from the city. He could not hope to live to reach Whitey unaided, yet he would have to fire when the hangman left the platform and the water began flowing into the tripping tank under the trapdoor.

A POLICE car passed overhead, almost brushing the tree tops, dark and silent and

betraying its passage only by the stars it obliterated. One of the Reens shifted impatiently on his stick-like legs and spoke to the five men in shrill complaint: "Why is it taking so long? Reen officers cannot wait all night to witness simple execution."

Someone in the Terran group made a reply he could not distinguish. Whitey looked down at the Reens and it seemed to him he could see Whitey smiling a little at them, could see the muscles of his arms bunch and ripple as he thought of gripping their necks in his hands.

It was no more than four hundred feet from the prison to the Reen border. Reen sentries patrolled it, as always; but this night their handlights were not stabbing inquisitively into Terran territory as was usual. There was something of much greater interest to observe. There was, he thought, a certain advantage to the bird-like location of the Reens' eyes—a sentry could walk his post facing straight ahead and still watch the hanging of a Terran.

THE HANGMAN finished with the rope and slid the black hood down over Whitey's face. Clayton nestled his cheek against the stock of the rifle and brought the sights in line with the rope, just under the beam. The hangman made a last ap-

praisal of his work and then stepped off the platform and down to the ground. Whitey was left alone on the gallows, a tall, black-masked figure in the searchlight's glare, and Clayton wondered what he would be thinking as he stood there cut off from the world; no sound for him to hear but the distant crunch of gravel as the guards patrolled the fence, no last sight of sky and stars for him to see through the heavy mask. He would be thinking of the others of the wild bunch, perhaps; wondering if they would be planning to free him before dawn and not knowing he already stood on the scaffold...

Clayton thought he heard the faint sound of Red and the others coming through the trees. He could not be sure, and he could wait no longer.

He fired. The quiet was shattered by the harsh snarl of the rifle and the cracking report as the underhalf of the beam above Whitey's head was shattered into splinters. Whitey was thrown to the floor, the severed rope flung like a whip by the explosion. For an instant, the guards were frozen in surprise, the men and Reens in the prison yard staring and motionless. Then the nearer guard flung up his rifle and Clayton leaped away from the tree and deeper into the protection of the other trees. There was a lick of flame from the guard's

rifle and the tree he had left disappeared in a thunderous explosion. A guard's whistle screeched and the two Reens ran toward the prison gate, one of them already gabbling shrill instructions to the staring Reen sentry, four hundred feet away.

THE OTHER guards joined in the firing, and explosions thumped and thundered around Clayton. A searchlight swiveled to pour down through the trees in blinding whiteness. He fired at it and it vanished, to be replaced a moment later by another. The leader of the guards yelled something at his men that was drowned out by the first wail of the prison siren, and a tree exploded so near him that he was struck numbly along the shoulder by one of the broken limbs.

The other searchlights swung to seek him out among the trees. The prison siren rose to a vibrating, warning scream; the siren of the police aircar whined an undertone as it swooped down toward the trees. He fired again, and at the same time there came the voice of Red somewhere behind him: "Now!"

Three rifles snarled in unison, and the searchlights suddenly ceased to exist; prison and yard and trees were plunged into blackness. A guard shouted in the darkness

and fired wildly. The aircar's spotlight flashed on to illuminate the trees and the blue beam of its heavy blaster lashed down. The red tongue of an atomic rifle reached up, and the aircar jerked in mid-air, spun, and dropped. The beam of its gun ripped a finger of destruction across the clearing as it fell, smashing the guards at the gate and the running Reens into shapeless, lifeless lumps on the ground as it passed.

The aircar struck the ground with a muffled crash and the blaster beam went dark. But the spotlight remained, pointing aimlessly against the wall of the prison and dimly lighting up the yard.

"RED?" CLAYTON called, trying to see back through the dark trees.

"Here—four of us," Red answered, hurrying toward him. "Steve, Al and Doc to cover us."

A guard shot at the sound of the voice and missed. One of the rifles behind Red fired in return and did not miss. The remaining guards opened up, then, and Clayton shouted to Red above the thunder and roar: "Let's go—the police are coming."

IV

THEY BROKE from the protection of the trees with the rifles behind them laying down a

protective barrage. The guards, deprived of the advantage of their searchlights, were picked off with methodical efficiency. The last guard was dead before he and Red had covered half the distance to the gate. The prison siren stopped, its scream dying into silence, and there came the distant sound of police aircar sirens in the city.

Something struck the ground close in front of them and ripped a jagged furrow through the rocky soil. At the same time he saw the flash of a Reen sentry's rifle. One of the rifles in the trees snarled in reply and the sentry disappeared in a cloud of disintegrated soil.

They went through the gate and past the formless shapes that had been men and Reens, past something else that had been a guard before one of the rifles in the trees caught him.

There had been eight guards; now, all of them were dead, killed in their line of duty. Clayton found neither regret nor pleasure in their deaths. They had been the representatives of a society that no longer wanted him or his kind to exist. Society had planned a grand coup for that night; had planned to hang Whitey in advance of the scheduled time, had planned his own death, had planned the exile of the others to the moon mines. Once he and the

others had been of value to Society. Now their purpose was served, and Society had no further use for them.

They leaped across a crater torn in the ground and ran faster toward the gallows, as the sound of the approaching police sirens swelled louder. They would have no more than one minute to free Whitey and return to the trees at best. And if the rifles in the trees failed to hold back the front wave of aircars, they would be blasted there in the prison yard.

He thought *Is this the goal we fought for across four different worlds?* And the voice of Supervisor Martin answered him in his mind, *You do not understand the situation.*

THE FIVE MEN were gone, and Whitey stood by the gallows. He had managed to remove the hood and he watched their approach with the light from the prison wall accenting the pale eyes under pale brows.

He smiled at them, almost casually, and said, "I'm glad to see you. I didn't know you were coming this early."

"We almost didn't," Red said.

Clayton cut the manacles and chains with his beam, and there was no further conversation; no time for anything but to try to get back to the trees before the police were

within range. There was one brief exchange of fire between the aircar in the lead and the rifles in the trees just before they reached safety, the police making the mistake of beginning the duel before they were in effective range. The aircar spiraled downward and the aircars behind it spread apart and sank lower so they would not be outlined against the stars.

"They're learning," Red observed.

THEY FOUND Al and Steve waiting for them in the trees. There was only a brief greeting to Whitey before they hurried on their way, with Steve saying, "We thought you might like the fire better than the frying pan."

There was no sign of Doc, and Clayton knew without asking what had happened. Nor did Red ask. They were halfway back to Old Town when Al said, "They got Doc tonight, Whitey."

Whitey walked on a little way before he said, "So we left Doc back there?" Another silence, and then, "The police—the damned police. They killed a better man tonight than all of them put together would ever make."

They stopped once to listen at a rumbling, clanking sound from toward the Reen garrison—a sound that seemed to be coming toward the border.

"Tanks," he said. "With three Reens killed, they finally have the excuse they're been wanting."

"Then it should be an interesting night," Whitey remarked. "No matter which side wins, they'll want our hides."

They went on again, with Red asking, "Where are those police cars? They should be ripping the woods apart for us by now."

"Maybe they'll be waiting for us in Old Town," he answered. "Or maybe they were called back to the city—maybe the city is already being mobilized for bigger game than us; the Reens."

OLD TOWN was a hornet's nest, with a constant coming and going on the single street. Most of the men were armed, and many of the teen-age boys. They met Pop Gilbert at the edge of town, a rifle in his hands. There was no longer about him the slow, gentle appearance that had given him his nickname.

"I see you made it," he said. "But Doc— I thought he went with you?"

"He did," Red answered.

"So they got him? We're going to need him before this is over—and nobody knows how it will all end."

"What happened?" Clayton asked.

"The police came in like they owned Old Town and

we were nothing but insignificant riffraff. They told us afterword they were only after you boys from the *Space Hound*, but it was too late, then. One of the police got rough with Mendivel when he thought Mendivel was hiding something, and Mendivel split him open with that knife he carries. King shot the one who would have killed Mendivel, and all hell was to pay after that. Foster and Sheridan and Ekhart were killed before the police were driven back, and Townsend is dying."

"Then all of Old Town is in this," Clayton said. "I didn't want that to happen. Were any more hurt?"

"Not bad enough to be serious. Except the girl, Gail Smith. She was nicked with a stray beam from a sneak gun; all the police were carrying sneak guns."

Al cursed softly and Steve said, "So they wanted us that bad?"

"Where did it hit her?" he asked.

"Along the shoulder."

HE ESTIMATED the length of time it would take the spreading paralysis produced by the sneak gun wound to reach her heart and found it to be five hours. There was a means of counter-acting the paralysis if treatment could be given in time; a treatment involving

drugs known only to police physicians. The sneak gun was not often used by the police; only when they were dealing with desperate criminals and wished to make certain of a clean sweep. The wounded who escaped could feel the slow, inexorable spreading of the cold paralysis and take their choice between surrender and unpleasant dying.

He spoke to Gilbert: "Those were the police who came at the same time Red and the others left?"

"Yes. We thought more would be back by now, but they haven't showed up yet."

"They've all been recalled to the city, I'm sure," he said. "Three Reens were killed a while ago, and we heard Reen tanks coming toward the border. There will be Reen soldiers behind the tanks. They may go across the border at any time, and Old Town will receive part of their attention. Get the women and children out. Red, you and Al help him and see to it that Gail goes with them so she can be treated. Don't let them stop for anything—not even their clothes. The Reens may advance any minute, and then it will be too late."

"WHAT DO the rest of us do?" Whitey asked when the other three were gone. "Do we skewer some

Reens to while away the time?"

"Remember that narrow swale that runs from Old Town up toward the Reen camp?" Clayton asked. "It's deep with grass most of the way; a man could crawl up it almost to the Reen headquarters building and not be seen if he was lucky, and if he had something like a heavy cloud of smoke for cover. There's a little drift of a breeze tonight, enough to carry the smoke up the swale."

Steve looked toward the invisible Reen camp and then back to the brightly lighted street. "So we burn Old Town?"

"There's nothing else that can give us enough smoke. If a few of us could manage to get into Reen headquarters, I think we might be able to persuade them to turn over their ship."

Whitey smiled. "I'm sure we could."

"Some of them in Old Town may object to your burning everything they own," Clayton went on. "It can't be helped. Tell them they won't even own their personal freedom by tomorrow if the Reens aren't stopped. And tell them a ship is leaving for Orion before morning, with room for all who want to go along."

"Orion!" Steve said. "I'll be damned—I was still thinking of the Western Continent. It goes to prove how limited a man's perspective can become

when he gets too much civilization."

"Beyond even the Federation's frontier," Whitey said. "When do we start the fire?"

"As soon as the women and children are cleared out. Use plenty of help so that the whole town will go up at once."

"Then off we go, we merry arsonists," Steve said. "But where will you be?"

"On the little knoll just northwest of Old Town. When you leave Old Town, head into the trees as if you were all going to the city. Then circle around to where I am."

HE WENT along the dark north side of Old Town and to the tree-covered knoll. There he found a position where he could view both the Reen camp and the city, as well as Old Town.

The Reen camp was dark but sounds were coming from it; the gabble of low-pitched commands, the mutter and rustle of wheeled vehicles moving without lights. There was a distinguishable southward movement of the sounds, toward the border. The tanks were no longer to be heard and he presumed they were stopped and waiting at the border where the best break-through point would be; past the prison.

There was a fast and orderly movement of southbound traffic in the city, both ve-

hicular and pedestrian. Apparently Martin was fully aware of the impending attack, as he had thought, and the north end of the city was being evacuated as rapidly as possible.

The hurried movements along Old Town's street were continuing, with women and children going in a thin line into the trees. The last of them were leaving Old Town when he pressed the activator button of the communicator that had belonged to Delemar.

IT CLICKED metallicly, burped as it went through some automatic relay, and a voice spoke: "Anzac. West by south."

"Never mind the identification code," he said. "Delemar is dead. This is Clayton. Connect me through to Martin."

There was a pause and the voice asked, "Why should I?"

"Because the Reens are massing now on the border and you're a fool if you waste any allies."

There was another pause, a faint sound of talking, and then the voice of Supervisor Martin, chill as ice: "Yes?"

"The Reens are coming a-calling," he said. "I see you already know that. You're going to need all the help you can raise. I suppose there are only about a dozen of us that you want dead or alive. I want you to tell me who they are; then the innocent in Old

Town can help fight the Reens without fear of the police landing on their necks the moment it's all over."

"And the guilty?" Martin asked.

"Will take care of themselves. The women and children have already been sent into the city. That includes a girl who was shot with a sneak gun, and will have to have immediate treatment. I would like your promise that she will be taken care of and that none of the innocent will be prosecuted. Give me that promise, name the guilty so we'll know where we stand, and we guilty ones will help fight the Reens until the tide turns in your favor and the Reens are ready to go under. Then our little truce will be over and you can have your police dogs bring us in if they can."

"**I**T IS NOT the policy of the police to prosecute the innocent, despite your biased views to the contrary," Martin said. "The following will face trial for mass-murder when apprehended: you, Howard, Merrit, English, O'Hara, Bender, Pavich, Shannon, and the two who killed the police in Old Town, Mendivel and King. No serious charges will be placed against any of the others. But the guilty ten are to be brought back, dead or alive, as soon as circumstances permit."

"Fair enough. None of us asked for fatherly forgiveness."

"Forgiveness?" Martin asked. "Can you really comprehend what you have done? Tonight you destroyed all hope for a peaceful solution of the Reen crisis. You have involved us in a war, and the Federation will hold all Terrens responsible for the actions of you irresponsible few. Tonight you killed, and set forces in motion that will continue to kill, and you feel neither guilt nor responsibility."

"We had no desire to kill. We were forced, by your own actions, to do so. The responsibility for what may happen tonight is yours, not ours."

THERE WAS a silence so long that Clayton thought Martin was not going to reply. Then Martin said: "Your viewpoint is typical of the outlaw. The persecution obsession. In a way, Clayton, I'm sorry. Once you and the others were of value to society, and were free and respected. It is unfortunate that you found it impossible to alter your emotions and way of thinking to fit the altered circumstances."

The sounds in the darkness indicated that the last of the Reens had reached the border and were waiting. There was only darkness at the Reen garrison but for the warship, which thrust its prow in black

silhouette against the stars, pointing like an omen at high Orion. "Maybe you're right, Martin," Clayton said, almost absently, his eyes still on the ship. "Or maybe we're both like the blind men who couldn't agree on how an elephant was shaped. Neither of us will ever know."

He switched off the communicator. There was nothing more to say to Martin, nothing more that Martin would want to say to him.

There was the sound of footsteps coming from Old Town and he watched until a small figure resolved itself out of the dimness. He saw that it was Gail.

"Clay—where are you?" she called softly, stopping to look about her.

"Here," he said.

SHE CAME to him, carrying a heavy atomic rifle, and said, "The others will be here pretty soon."

"You were supposed to go into the city—didn't they tell you that?"

"Red ordered me to," she said. "I told him I wouldn't and when he tried to make me, I kicked him in the shins. Then"—indignation came into her voice—"he spanked me, damn him. So I pretended to go and slipped back up here."

"You'll have to go," he said. "You were shot with a sneak gun and it will have to be treated by a police physician."

"No. It doesn't hurt at all

—I told Red it didn't. It's only sort of numb and cold there."

"The numbness will keep spreading. When it reaches your heart, you'll die."

"No! You and Red just say that. You say it because you still don't—don't want me along."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Gail," he said gently.

Her face was a pale oval in the starlight as it had been once before that night when she looked up at him. "Honest, Clay?"

"Honest. You only have about five hours."

"And how long before I could come back?"

He found the reply unpleasant to make. "The treatment takes a day and night."

"Not that long—surely not that long! I thought I could go into the city for a little while—but not for a day and night."

"You have to."

"You're going on to Orion, aren't you?" she asked. "Before morning you would be gone. If I go into the city now, I will never leave Freia, never see any of you again."

"If you don't go, you will never see anything again."

"It—does it hurt much when the end comes?"

"It hurts a lot during the last hour," he answered.

"FIVE HOURS ... five hours to help fight and pretend I will be going on to

Orion with you. Or all my life to live in that prison they call a city, with no way to ever leave it and find any of you again. Help me, Clay—tell me what I should do.”

“Go back,” he said. “You’ll find other friends in the years to come.”

“Not like the ones who will be gone—not ever friends like them. Tell me, Clay—whichever I should do, will anybody miss me and say to each other that they wished I could have come along?”

“We would miss you,” he said. “We would always remember you. And maybe someday we could come back.”

“No. Not come back. You know you will never come back.”

He knew she spoke the truth and he did not deny it. He took the rifle from her hands and leaned it against the tree. “You have to go now,” he said. “We don’t dare wait any longer.”

“I...” The one word was a little cry of terrible indecision, of helpless yearning, and she did not move to go. He took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face the city; her right shoulder soft and warm under his fingers, her left shoulder cold with the creeping death.

“Go,” he said. “Hurry, or it will be too late.”

She took a forward step, then stopped and turned. “No

—not yet. Let me wait a little while...”

V

A FLARE blossomed high in the sky with blinding brilliance, blazing like an intense white sun. It transformed the night into midday, etching the city and trees in vivid white and black. It exposed the Reen forces massed along the border and the tanks lunged forward with the Reen infantry close behind. Long-range atomic rifles in the city began to flash and the earth heaved and erupted in front of the tanks. They shuddered and lurched but did not stop, returning the fire with their own long-range rifles. The Reen troops added to the fire of the tanks, and they laid down a barrage that ripped and smashed into the edge of the city, the sound of the explosions a rolling thunder that filled the night and made the leaves of the piper tree tremble and whimper.

“Clay...” Gail was looking up at him, trying to laugh, with the harsh, bright glare pouring down on her face. “It’s already too late. I’m glad it will be this way. I would rather my own kind would drink to me in the morning, and turn down an empty glass, than to live forever in a prison city where I didn’t belong.”

He did not answer; there was nothing he could say to her.

Something red flickered in Old Town, a leaping tongue of fire that became a spreading sheet. Within seconds, Old Town was a roaring mass of flames, rolling fifty feet into the air. A heavy pall of smoke spread above the flames and around them, a pall that began to drift slowly to the north and hid the ground as it went.

WHITEY and Red came through the trees with the others not far behind; a large group with men in it as old as Pop Gilbert and as young as the eighteen-year-old McDonald twins.

"No trouble," Whitey said. He looked at Gail but did not comment on her presence.

Gail was facing Red defiantly and he said, "I wish you had believed me."

There was no change of expression on Whitey's face, no discernable compassion in his eyes, but he smiled in the way he had smiled the night the Reens killed Billy Gaylord. "We'll have to remember this, Clay," he said.

Gail went to her rifle and picked it up, not understanding what Whitey meant nor that he referred to the police who had shot her. "I didn't believe you," she said to Red. "I'm sorry—what I called you."

Johnny came up, Doris walking beside him as easily as though they were only out for an evening stroll. Then she saw Gail, and for the first time in the six years Clayton had known her she lost some of her composure.

"Gail!" she cried, and her voice caught in her throat on the word. She went to her and put her arm around her. "Gail—you little fool—why couldn't you have believed us?"

"I thought it was only that you didn't want me along—but it's all right," Gail said. "This is where I would want to be."

Doris led her a little to one side as the others came up. They looked at her as they came and then looked away again, trying to appear casual about her presence and overdoing it a little.

POP GILBERT spoke to Clayton about the task before them. "There are forty-four of us," he said. "Is that enough to get through the Reen guards?"

"I think we stand a good chance if the wind doesn't change and blow the smoke to one side," he said. "It looks as if they have almost their entire force in the city, and are depending on the ship's guns to turn back any counter-attack into Reen territory. If we can get close enough before they see us, they won't be able to use the

ship without killing their own guards."

"What if the commander considers the guards expendable?" Gilbert asked.

"No doubt, he will. But if we're in the building soon enough, any blast at the building to get us would get him, too. He wouldn't want anything like that."

Al, watching the city, said, "They're shoving right along. It doesn't look too good for our side."

"Our side?" Whitey asked. "You mean, it used to be our side before they decided we weren't gentle enough with the Reens."

"I know," Al replied. "But you can't blame them all. And it's still the Terran side and we're Terrans."

CLAYTON saw that the Reens were destroying with definite method as they drove their column into the edge of the city, the two tanks in the lead blasting residences to dust but leaving unharmed the shops and factories that the Reens would find of value after the battle was over.

The eighteen-year-old McDonald twins crowded forward with insolent disregard for their elders, each carrying a rifle. They confronted Clayton, identical twins with faces so equally freckled and homely that he could never tell which was Tom and which was Jerry.

"Let's go," one of them said. "What are we waiting for?"

Red stepped forward to turn the impatient boy around the other way with an effortless reach of one hand. "Get back," he said, not unkindly. "Both of you. Stay back and be patient. There will be plenty for everybody to do in a few minutes."

The twins obeyed with reluctant ill grace and Mendivel, the man who had killed the policeman with his knife, smiled at them. "Eet weel not be long, *muchachos mio*," he said in the soft accents of his native language. "Do not waste the last sight of trees and stars and sky. Thees weel not be fon, like the day you shot the hat off the mayor's head. Thees weel be real and eet ees not moch fon to die."

THE SMOKE was creeping steadily up the swale and was almost to the first Reen guard post.

"There are ten of us that Martin wants dead or alive," Clayton said. "One, Doc, is already dead. So the seven of us from the *Space Hound* will go in the try for the ship, plus Mendivel and King, plus Dennison, Angelo, Schmidt..."

He named the twenty who would go, leaving twenty-four to remain on the knoll under the leadership of Gilbert and supply the cover fire. The un-

spoken belligerence of the McDonald twins increased when they were not included among the twenty who would make the try for the ship. They went with the others to take up the positions Gilbert desired for them, however, with no more than a baleful stare in Claton's direction.

The twenty of them were left alone, with Doris and Gail still standing off to one side.

"I suppose," Al said, "the Reens aren't using their ship's guns to wipe out the city the easy way, because the Galactic Federation might think that was going a little too far. By using their ground forces, the odds are all in their favor; yet they can claim it was a fair battle and that the Terrans attacked first."

"Incident very regretful but Reens must protect selves," Red said. "They would use the ship if they saw they were going to lose, though. They've gone too far to back out now."

"I know," Clayton said. "It looks as if the city is lost, one way or another, unless we get that ship."

STEVE LOOKED up toward the ship and the Reen guards that stood between. "There are a lot of guards," he said, very matter-of-factly. "It will be a good try, but I don't think we'll quite make it."

"If not," Whitey said, "we'll get a good sandwich while they're having a full meal."

"If we do get the ship," Steve said, "we wipe out the Reen forces and save the city before we go. Then we depart forever into the starry void of space, martyred heroes, leaving Martin to be gnawed by his conscience. If we don't get the ship, Martin's conscience will do him no gnawing for what happened to us in the trying. One way our role is pathos, the other way it's only pathetic."

The sound of battle was drawing farther away as the Reen column drove deeper into the city. The fire in Old Town was not burning as furiously as before, but the smoke was denser, spreading out as far as the knoll where they stood and dulling the light of the flare. The Reen camp to the north was half hidden by the smoke with the denser portion of the smoke slowly approaching it.

"It's about time," Clayton said.

Doris came back, to stand beside Johnny, but Gail remained where she was.

"I wish you would wait here, Doris," Johnny said. "Wait here until we have the ship."

Doris smiled at him, serenely, her composure back again. "Let's be practical, Johnny. I married you be-

cause I wanted to be with you, no matter where you went."

"Then stay behind me all the way," he said.

WHITEY rubbed his hands restlessly and looked up at Orion, dim through the haze of smoke. "A hundred yellow suns, they say. We should have done this before, Clay, instead of wasting the years here on Freia."

"We let them take our ship away from us," Al said. "We should have know, when they did that, that our job was done."

"The *Space Hound* was a good ship," Red said. "It carried us a long way. But that Reen ship has a faster drive—a drive as fast as the *Constellation's*. It's not far to those yellow suns when you have a ship like that."

Clayton saw that Gail was listening the rifle sagging a little as she held it and her eyes dark-shadowed in the flare's light as she stood alone outside the group and heard them talk of the suns she would never see. She straightened when she saw he was watching her and went over to stand beside Doris, to try to appear as composed as Doris and not quite succeeding.

He took a last look at the fighting in the city, the red funeral pyre of Old Town, the dim outlines of the Reen garrison. The swale was com-

pletely hidden from view but for the extreme upper end.

"By the time we arrive, the smoke will be there," he said. "It's time to go."

PROGRESS was swift up the swale at first, with the smoke to hide them and the deep grass to muffle any sound they might make. Clayton and Whitey were in the lead, according to plan, with Red, Al, and Steve close to their right flank and the others spaced behind. There was no resistance until they came to the end of the grass and the first Reen guard. The guard swung up his rifle, mouth open to call the warning, and the beam from Clayton's gun doubled him over with a twittering gurgle. A guard farther on saw the flash of the gun, and his whistle sounded in frantic warning. There was a quick gabbling of orders, then the winking of the Reen guns as they were fired blindly into the smoke.

"Now!" Clayton called to Johnny behind him and Johnny fired the shot with his rifle that would be the signal to Gilbert.

There was a deep snarling of rifles on the knoll as Gilbert's men opened up with the cover fire and a rumbling and thumping from the area in front of the Reen command building.

"We'll circle to the left," Clayton said to Whitey, and

they began the charge. Reens met them, dim shadows in the smoke, their beams stabbing at them and frowning the ground with harsh ripping sounds. The other shadows were coming up from behind, running with blue flames lancing out toward the Reens, sometimes falling and leaving on less gun to meet the Reen fire.

THEY BROKE through the outer guards and swung to the left when they reached the danger zone of the atomic rifle barrage, the ones behind them no longer visible. There was little opposition—two guards running toward the battle from around a corner, the startled expression on their faces dissolved by blaster beams into nothing before they could fire. Then another pair of guards, warned by the deaths of the first pair, and a brief exchange of beams.

Clayton saw a red gash ripped along Whitey's cheek and felt a beam flick through his hair. It was over within seconds, with the guards down and the way clear for them. They came to a door that looked large enough to be one leading to the commander's office and went through it into a short corridor. There was a louder rumbling sound outside as they did so and it was evident that some of the rifle fire had been over-enthusiastic and caved in part of the front of the building.

They went up the corridor in silence, and when they reached the door at its end they could hear voices coming from beyond it. Clayton recognized one as the high-pitched voice of the commander and he nodded at Whitey, smiling. Whitey smiled back, the blood on his face accenting the eager anticipation in his pale eyes.

THE DOOR opened quietly and they stepped through, to stop just inside. There were three Reens in the room; the commander, standing with his back to them and listening to the reports coming in through a communicator, and two sub-officers who stood near him and were talking rapidly into other communicators.

A f o u r t h communicator beeped urgently and an excited Reen voice came through it. The sub-officers jerked up their heads at the words and they and the commander wheeled in unison, to freeze at the sight of the leveled guns.

"Don't make a single twitter or it will be your last," Clayton said. "And speak only in Terran."

The voice was still coming through the communicator that had beeped in urgency, seeming to be asking for some kind of acknowledgement.

"I think that must be the officer in charge of the

guards," Whitey said, "asking his commander to please lock the back door or something. He called a little late."

"Step this way," Clayton said to the Reens. "Away from those communicators."

They obeyed, but their first dismay changed into near confidence as the firing outside dwindled suddenly to a few scattered shots and then stopped.

"You will drop weapons at once," the commander ordered, "or face consequences."

"We will?" Whitey asked.

The commander's wattles reddened. "Guards have turned back foolish attack. Soon will note silence and enter. Will kill very painfully if finding commander prisoner."

"We came for your ship," Clayton said; "you're going to order your men out of it and go with us into it."

"Ship?" The commander's voice was an incredulous gobble. "Take ship—take ship? Are insane! How can take ship?"

THERE WAS the sound of running footsteps coming down a corridor; not the quick, short-legged steps characteristic of the Reens but the long strides of Terrans. Red and Al swung open the front door of the office, then lowered their guns at the sight of himself and Whitey.

"The others were mopping up the last of the guards when we left," Red said. "Do they"—he nodded toward the Reens—"know what they're going to do?"

The Reens exchanged quick glances and the commander spoke again, threateningly: "For last time, demand that weapons be dropped. Is war with Reen victory certain. If not obey, will be quickly captured by victorious Reen soldiers and executed very slowly."

"The three of you can go ahead and take care of this end," he said in answer to Red's question. "I want to see how things are going in the city; and tell Martin we'll soon be ready to lend him a hand with the ship before we go."

"Cannot take ship!" the commander shrieked. "Cannot force to give orders!" The little reptilian eyes glared at Clayton. "Is war with Reen victory certain and consequences for you very slow and painful. You failing to understand situation!"

It struck him as mildly amusing that the Reen's words should be almost exactly those of Supervisor Martin; that he, Clayton, should forever be trying to alter situations he was not credited with understanding.

"Persuade him," he said to Whitey. He went to the door and stopped to say, "Not

enough to keep them from being able to show us how to operate their ship, of course."

"Of course," Whitey agreed and he and the other two stepped forward to the Reens.

He heard the Reens bluster in threatening defiance as he started down the corridor, heard the defiance change to moans when he was halfway to the outside door, and heard the moans become the first yelping gobbles of pain as he stepped out into the smoky, flare-lit night.

GAIL WAS coming toward him through the rubble in front of the building, a gun in her right hand and her left arm hanging limp from the paralysis. There was a red smear of dirt on her face; her clothes were torn and she was limping from a bruised knee.

"Johnny didn't make it," she said. "And Steve didn't, and Chuck and Jimmy. The McDonald twins came with us, anyway; one of them is dead, and the other one badly hurt. And Mendivel and King were killed when it was almost all over with."

"How about the others?"

"Some of them are hurt, but not too bad," she answered, and then asked, "The ship—will we get it?"

"In a few minutes. They're talking the commander into the notion, now."

She followed him as he went on past the gobbles and

to the piper tree that stood on a slight elevation beyond. He saw that Mike Shannon and others had taken up guard positions around the building and were exploring the various doorways for possible hidden Reens. Everything was strangely quiet after the sound of battle, with only the distant sound of the fighting in the city to break the quiet. The night breeze was freshening, making the leaves of the piper tree sing like a thousand tiny fairy flutes. It moved some of the mass of smoke aside as he watched and exposed the city.

A CHANGE had taken place there. The Terran forces had closed in behind the Reens and the Terran fire was much heavier than it had been before. One tank was lying in wreckage in the city and the other was lumbering back toward command headquarters. It was apparent why the city had put up such ineffectual resistance during the first part of the attack: it had been planned to allow the Reens to drive far enough into the city so that they could be surrounded and cut off from any return to their garrison.

Old Town still burned, but the flames were not as high as before nor was the smoke from its burning as dense. The breeze was slowly moving the smoke out of the

swale as its direction shifted, making visible the still figures lying there and the things that no longer had human shape.

"Doris is down there with Johnny," Gail said. "She—I guess she wasn't as practical as she thought. She was holding Johnny's hand and talking to him and she didn't seem to see me or hear me at all when I spoke to her."

The returning tank lurched to a stop halfway between Gilbert's men and where he stood. Clayton presumed that its crippled drive had finally quit completely. But its presence blocked Gilbert and the others from reaching the ship, unless they detoured through the spaceship field to the west. Atomic rifles were powerful, but not powerful enough to penetrate the thick and resistant alloy of a Reen tank's armor plate.

He gave Gilbert the "Come on" signal, not wanting for any time to be lost waiting for them, and a few seconds later he saw them moving out toward the spaceship field.

THE AIRLOCK of the Reen ship slid open and a dozen bewildered Reens stepped out. Whitey and the others appeared from behind the building, hurrying the commander and his sub-officers before them.

"All right, Mike," Clayton called. "We have the ship."

The word was relayed around the building to the others: "Come on—we have the ship!"

Gail watched them all go into the ship, taking the Reen crew with them, disappearing inside and leaving the empty airlock, waiting for those who would soon follow.

"It's not like I thought it would be," she said. "Now that it's over, everything is so quiet, and Johnny and Steve are gone, and Doris is down there crying..."

Something twinkled like a star in the west, shining where no star had been before. He watched it and saw that it moved; knew it would be the *Space Hound* coming in, far ahead of schedule.

He pressed the activator button of the police communicator and the connection with Martin was made at once, as though Martin might have been waiting for him to call.

"We have the Reen ship," he said. "I was going to offer you the help of our ship's guns before we left but I see a ship coming in now. That's the *Space Hound*, isn't it?"

"**I**T IS," Martin answered.

"Your offer of assistance comes a little late. We no longer need it. We anticipated your actions; that you would try to seize the ship and insure your own escape while we were fighting in the

city. So the *Space Hound* has orders to prevent that Reen ship from leaving Freia."

"You paint us a little too black, Martin. We didn't intend to leave without first offering our help."

"None of your past actions have indicated any regard for the welfare of others," Martin said, and Clayton knew he had not been believed.

He estimated the time it would take the *Space Hound* to arrive and the time it would take Gilbert and his men to reach the Reen ship. He saw that the *Space Hound* would arrive too soon to permit waiting for Gilbert.

"Believe as you wish," he said. "I called you to ask another promise from you."

"Before you ask for favors from us, I suggest you review what you have done," Martin said. "Tonight you killed police and prison guards and involved us in a war that took an uncounted number of lives.

That included women and children, Clayton—there wasn't time to completely evacuate the north end of the city, and women and children were forced to pay for your actions."

"I'm sorry about the women and children," Clayton said. "I laid no satanic plans that included their deaths. There is one thing you will have in return for what happened tonight: tomorrow, for the first time in six years, Fre-

ia's sun will rise on a world that's your own, with no Reen to gobble the tune you dance to."

"YES—THE larger aspects of the situation. The Reens will claim to the Galactic Federation that we violated the non-aggression pact and forced them to attack us in self-defense. The facts are such that we cannot say we were attacked unprovoked. We can only claim extenuating circumstances, and we have no reason to believe the Federation will consider our extenuating circumstances more important than the facts put forth by the Reens. At best, our position will be one of apologizing for the actions of our criminal element, of having to admit we failed to keep that element under control, and yet have been hoping to be considered a race mature enough to be admitted into the Federation."

"Why do you bother to tell all of this to a member of the criminal element?"

"Because you are—you were—an intelligent man. I wanted you to realize fully what you have done."

"I'm afraid we're still two blind men arguing about how an elephant is shaped. Now it's time for us to be going. You will find a girl under the piper tree just west of the Reen command building—the one who was shot with

a sneak gun. I want you to see to it that she's taken care of. That's the one and only favor I have to ask of you."

"She will be given immediate treatment," Martin said. "As for you and the others I named: if you lift that Reen ship, the *Space Hound* will blast it into dust."

"Fair enough. And one last thing, Martin—I was the one who killed Delemar. Remember that in any future police investigations."

HE SWITCHED off the communicator and turned to the ship, where Whitey, or one of the others would be watching him in the view-screen as they waited for him. He gave them the signal they had used so many times before with the *Space Hound*: *Danger—prepare for immediate take-off.*

A signal light high up on the ship blinked in quick acknowledgement and then came the first faint hum as the drives were set in preliminary operation.

Gail was watching him, her face pale and resolute with decision.

"Thanks, Clay," she said. "Thanks for trying to help me. But it wouldn't work."

"You don't want to die tonight, Gail."

"No, I don't want to die; I'm scared and I wish I could live. But I can't let you leave me—I can't stay here and be smothered in that prison-city

through the endless years. Understand, Clay—if you go and leave me, you will take all my heart and soul with you. There must be drugs on the ship, maybe drugs like you would need for me. You could try.

The *Space Hound* was near the critical point after which escape for the Reen ship would be impossible. The hum of the drives was coming louder, higher, and the signal light on the bow was blinking: *Ready.*

"Now, Clay!" She tugged at his sleeve. "They're ready and it's time for us to go. Good-bye to Freia, good-bye to Johnny and Doris and Steve and all the others because we'll never see them again. It's time for us to go—quick, before it's too late."

He laid his arm along her shoulders and said, "I'm sorry, Gail."

IN THE MOMENT before his fist struck the base of her jaw, she realized his intentions. She tried to throw up her hand and ward off the blow, her voice a forlorn, anguished cry: "*No!*" Then his fist struck her soft flesh and she went limp and still in his arm.

He lowered her to the ground and straightened her crippled arm so it would not be hurting her when she awakened, paused a moment to brush the smear of dirt from her face. Then he ran

for the ship, its drives filling the night around him with their restless moaning and the *Space Hound* coming in like a meteor; remembering her as she lay like a little girl gone to sleep under the piper tree, and knowing the memory would go with him across all the worlds that waited beyond Orion.

FREIA SWUNG three times around its sun and the chief executive of Earth walked with Supervisor Martin in the Administration Area Park of a larger Greendale. The stars glittered overhead, with Orion at its zenith, silhouetting the ships in the spacefield to the north: the tall *Constellation*, its new sister ship, the *Nebula*, and the little *Space Hound*. The chief executive and the colony supervisor passed by the fountain where an always-burning light shone on a bronze plaque and the words of Galactic Federation Representative Valkar-on:

An intelligent and mature race is tolerant toward other, weaker, races and recognizes their right to live. But tolerance must be limited; it cannot be permitted to become meekness. To permit tolerance to become meekness is to face domination by races too immature to extend tolerance to those they have conquered. To permit tolerance to become meekness is

to face extinction, for the universe does not have and will never have a place of refuge for those unwilling to fight to survive.

"It is ironic," the chief executive said, "that the actions of Clayton and the others, and the resultant actions of our own, should have been the key to admittance into the Federation while our conservative and carefully-thought-out program was one that would have made us ineligible. We should feel indebted to Clayton and his irresponsible men, I suppose, although"—the chief executive smiled musingly—"I feel it would be better for all of us if none of them ever returns."

"THEIR KIND never does," Supervisor Martin said. "A considerable change has taken place here on Freia, with the wildest of them gone and the site of their burned town appropriated by the city for a park area. There was some trouble, at first, with them. Especially with the ones who had intended to go with the Reen ship, and were prevented from doing so by the arrival of the *Space Hound*. There were outbreaks of violence, defiance of the law, and even rumors of plans to steal the *Space Hound* and follow the others to Orion. Firm action by the police eventually quieted them all down and

now Greendale grows as a city should grow, steadily, peacefully."

"You might say that the wild ones were the catalyst we needed to produce the desired reaction with the Reens," the chief executive said. "But now our formula"—he smiled again—"is balanced and satisfactory. I trust you have seen to it that there is no possibility the no-longer-needed catalyst can intrude into it again?"

"I have," the supervisor said. "They are being kept under strict vigilance and control."

"And the *Space Hound*?" the chief executive asked. "I understand it was retired from the moon run two and a half years ago and has remained unused there in the field since then. Do you keep it well guarded?"

"A token guard, to avoid any suspicions on their part. The *Space Hound's* drive was secretly dismantled, shortly after its retirement, during the period when there were these rumors of stealing it. Should they suffer another outbreak of wanderlust and kleptomania, they will find we have quite effectively foreseen and forestalled their intended departure."

The chief executive nodded in satisfaction and looked up at Orion. "A wise precaution," he said. "This is only the beginning of our ga-

lactic expansion and it must proceed in an orderly, efficient manner. There in Orion will lie our next objective when the proper time comes: virgin, untouched worlds waiting for us, with no more than the bones of Clayton and his men to interfere in the establishment of our peaceful, orderly society. And bones lie quietly, do not resist the will of Society."

THE PIPER tree was singing in the starlight, as it had sung to her the flare-lit night when her world had ended for her. She stopped beside it and let the others pass her; Pop and Glen and Maynard, the Clinton sisters and the Angelo sisters, Jerry McDonald and Blacky Varish, Julia King and the Johnson boys...

There was a long column of them; she felt her heart beating hard with the fear they might be seen before they reached the ship. The last of them passed her and she fell in with the other rear guards; going with them onto the hard surface of the landing field, hearing the singing of the piper tree fading away behind her, in her right hand a gun, and under her left arm the books she had stolen for them with such ingenuity two years before: "*Star Systems Of Orion*" and "*Flight Operation Of The Cruiser 'Constellation.'*"