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Invasion of the metal marauders

NO TRUCE WITH TERRA

Philip E. High



Complete Novel

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Chapter One

LIPSCOMBE turned the car off the road and pulled up in the short drive leading to the garage.

"The place is in a bit of a mess I'm afraid. The wife's away for a week, you know, staying with her mother." He grinned faintly and slid open the car door. "It could be worse--her mother could have been staying with us.

Come in for a drink anyway."

"Thanks." Collard followed him up the drive, looking interestedly at the low detached building. "You live well, don't you?"

Lipscombe laughed. "I'll be near to retirement before I've finished paying for it. Mind you, these fibroplastic jobs are cheaper than the section-construction units, but in this case I'm paying through the nose for a country avenue estate and, of course, the interior equipment." He fumbled in his pocket for his keys. "I must say these automatic interior units are good. Just set the controls and the damn thing dusts and cleans itself; with the wife away it would be a horrible mess otherwise."

He inserted his key in the lock and turned. "Funny!" He pushed slightly at the door and turned the key again.

"What's up?" Collard had been studying the flower beds with a tinge of envy. He wished he had the time and money to devote to such exotics as Salamson-hybrids.

Lipscombe said, "The door won't open." He turned the key again, frowning. "Damn funny." He made three more attempts, then walked

quickly across the small lawn and peered through the window. "Strange, can't see a thing; looks as if the pane has been blacked on the inside. Hold on, I'll try the back."

He returned some seconds later, scowling. "Back door won't open either and I've tried the spare key. Blasted nuisance, I can't force the door or windows or the automatic alarm will ring the nearest police station." He lit a cigarette irritably. "Can't think what to do."

"Your best move would be to notify the police," said Collard practically.

"I should take a note of the type of lock and ask them to bring a locksmith with them."

Lipscombe nodded. "You're right, of course. Sorry about the drink."

"That's all right."

"You can borrow the car if you like. I promised you a lift home anyway."

"I'll hang on for a while." Collard smiled. "Candidly I'm rather intrigued."

Lipscombe looked at him suspiciously. "I know what you're thinking; you're thinking I mis-set those automatic controls before I left this morning."

Collard laughed. They were old friends and he knew the other would not take offence. "Well, I must admit the thought did occur to me. Your genius is confined to the department, you know."

"Ridiculous! The device is childishly simple."

"Nonetheless I'm intrigued. I can't help wondering if the device has cleaned the pattern off all the carpets or cooked and served meals for sixteen people instead of one."

Lipscombe said, "Thanks for the kind thought," sourly, then shrugged.

"I suppose I'd better get over to the call box."

A police car containing one constable and a sharp faced individual with a tool box arrived within ten minutes.

The constable first satisfied himself as to Lipscombe's ownership of the property then permitted the locksmith to attack the door.

"Rather awkward for you, sir."

"Very awkward." Lipscombe managed to smile and turned his attention to the smith who was busily removing tools from his box and assuring everyone that the job would be done in a trice.

Twenty increasingly profane minutes later, however, the door was still shut. "I can't understand it, sir. My firm not only installs but makes these locks. It should be easy to short-circuit the tumbler mechanism and-- He stopped and looked shame-facedly at Lipscombe. "With your permission, sir, I shall have to force it. Naturally, my firm will make good any damage caused by--"

"Go ahead and force it then," interrupted Lipscombe, savagely.

"Right, sir." The locksmith produced a large hammer. "This may look a bit crude, sir, but a sharp blow--"

At the tenth sharp blow, the man stopped, red faced. "Damn funny."

Lipscombe found it anything but funny. The incident was attracting attention and a group of interested and faintly amused sightseers stood at the gate.

"Move along, there," said the policeman without particular force.
"Move along, there."

The sightseers moved slightly to the left but failed to disperse.

"Clout it, man," said Lipscombe, furiously. "Clout it."

"Yes, sir, if you'll stand to one side, please." The man stood back and swung his arm.

There was a dull thud. The locksmith used an obscene word explosively, dropped the hammer and clutched at his wrist. "What the hell's that door made of?" He glared accusingly at Lipscombe. "Something new and clever?"

"It's the one that came with the lock as far as I know."

"Doesn't feel like it." The locksmith rubbed a swollen wrist "I'm not trying that again."

"Looks as if you'll have to break a window, sir," said the policeman.

Lipscombe glowered at him. "Anti-splinter--what with?"

"This is strange." Collard was bending down studying the door. "This resembles no plastic I know."

"What!" Lipscombe was shaken; Collard was a specialist in plastics.

"There are traces of the original substance." Collard's face was absorbed. "But it's permeated with something else. There's only

about five per cent of the old C4+10; God knows what the other ninety-five is composed of."

"I'm going to call an engineer," said Lipscombe, savagely. "I'm going to get into my own house if it's the last thing I do."

The engineer laid the cutting torch carefully on the step and made a helpless gesture. "Can't touch it, can't touch any part of the walls either; as for the windows--"

"I think," said Collard in a soothing voice. "You'd better spend the night at my place, old chap. It's nearly nine-thirty and getting chilly."

At the end of the week an army of experts equipped with drills, torches, a power-ram and even a small bulldozer had retired defeated. But the house had aroused other interest: experts measuring the surface reported that the structure did not conform to the plans provided by the local surveyor. Further checks showed that, slowly but surely, the house was changing shape.

Curiously, close to the walls, a peculiar growth of what looked like blades of grass was appearing. The shoots were an odd metallic blue in color and grew several inches in the course of a single night.

In the neighborhood there was, if not panic, general disquiet. Mothers kept their children indoors and one or two families stayed with relatives or took their holidays early.

There was something about this subtly misshapen house, something about the blue metallic grass for which there was no word. The house suggested something and, although there was no word to describe it, it gave them the creeps. People crossed to the opposite side of the road when they passed it with the uncomfortable, although, no doubt, over-imaginative feeling that from behind those blind black

windows something was watching.

The police cordoned off the house and the garden became filled with a variety of scientists who made constant but abortive tests of the walls or concerned themselves with soil samples.

One night, during their absence, and close to the front door, something grew. The scientists, after long conference, decided it was a plant but it didn't look like a plant.

It was a triangular mirror balanced on a cable-like stem as thick as a man's wrist. The "mirror" followed the sun and, at evening or on dull days, folded itself up geometrically into a neat square black box.

Two days later there was another growth. This was a small brass colored sphere about the size of a walnut perched on the top of a thin black rod about two feet in height.

An intrigued expert touched it with his hand and was flung untidily to the path. He was not dead but the local hospital had some difficulty bringing him round. A diagnostician pronounced near-lethal electric shock. It was then a witness recalled that there had been a shower of blue sparks and that the scientist's hand seemed badly burned.

Local authorities took action, the government was contacted and the army stepped in. There was no doubt now that something--no expert dare commit himself--had occupied Lipscombe's house.

"Damn the house, it's incidental." Lipscombe strode up and down Collard's living room, his face angry. "It's the disturbance round it which worries me. The army wouldn't let me get near enough to get a proper reading but some of the instruments went crazy; in two cases the needles ran clean off the dials. I've not spent half my life in electronics for nothing and, believe me, the kind of power piled up, or

more aptly, stressed round that building is unbelievable."

He sighed and pulled at the lobe of his ear. "How the hell can you stress power, stretch it and shape it like an elastic garment? The answer is, of course, you can't. Nonetheless the readings show--" He shook his head and did not finish the sentence.

"Well, we can rule out the automatics running wild," said Collard.

"Beamed power has been completely cut off in the vicinity."

"Now it's too late. Not that anyone realized at the time there might be danger."

"You have a theory." Collard was chain-smoking nervously.

"A thousand and one guesses, most of which will be quoted by someone else at the conference tomorrow."

Collard looked sour. "They would rope us in for that farce."

"Every available scientist was roped in; this business has become a crisis. You can't wonder--the whole damn garden is sprouting semi-electronic equipment in the guise of plants. Some have been destroyed but the rest can protect themselves and defy attack." He sighed.

"Presumably they're some kind of cell growth which derive their strength from solar energy; the fact that they resemble plants is, I think, confusing."

Collard ground out a half smoked cigarette. "Then you do have a theory?"

Lipscombe scowled at him. "Not one I propose to air at the

conference; they'd shut me up somewhere."

Collard lit another cigarette. "You don't suppose," he said, carefully, "that it might be some sort of... er... alien invasion?"

Lipscombe stared at him, then lowered himself carefully into the nearest chair. "It's nice to know we can both be mad --yes, the idea did occur to me." He frowned and fumbled in his pocket for his pipe. "Hell, so much has been written from that angle that one wonders and then one discovers the possible flaw. We are an imaginative race but, alas, a little short on visualization. We have always imagined an invasion from space, but suppose our stellar friends decided to come in from the back door."

Collard said, "Eh?" a little stupidly.

Lipscombe did not appear to hear him. "Yes, by the back door, slyly, while we're all watching the sky." He paused and began to push brown tobacco into the bowl of his pipe with his thumb.

"To continue, suppose our stellar friends had never considered or even visualized spaceships because they stumbled on something else before they got around to it. Suppose it was some sort of relativity device which made space/time meaningless. Assume, keeping this parallel in mind, they could swivel this bloody thing round until they found, somewhere, a receiver, some ready-made instrument to complete the circuit and establish contact."

"My God!" Collard had an agile and imaginative mind and was quick to grasp the implications. "Your house, with elaborate electrical equipment and complicated wiring provided the perfect receiver." He ground out his cigarette. "What a perfect method; the type of equipment alone must have told what they were up against in the way of a culture."

"Let's not jump ahead of ourselves," warned Lipscombe. "This is only a theory."

"I wish you hadn't thought of it, it makes a frightening kind of sense.

There's only one point; why haven't they done something?"

"With an impregnable beach-head, they can afford to take their time, can't they?"

Collard made a sour grimace. "That, too, makes a lot of sense but what about all this alleged foliage in the garden?"

Lipscombe lit his pipe and frowned at the bowl. "That, to me, is the most conclusive evidence of all. One day, perhaps we, too, shall be a stellar race and what is one of the first things we shall do if we find a habitable world? I'll tell you: we shall take Terran plants, seeds, tubers and what-not to grow our own natural food and try and make that planet look like Earth. Later, of course, it will be insects for pollination, cattle for livestock and God knows what else and, I can assure you, the colonization programmers won't give a second thought to local flora or fauna unless it proves useful or profitable." He paused, puffing at his pipe.

"These creatures have begun their conversion before they've taken control. It's a logical move, surely? Particularly so if you are confident that your kind of imported life is predominate in all respects."

Collard was silent, his face pale. "It looks as if we've got the hell of a fight on our hands. Let's hope something decisive emerges from the conference tomorrow."

The conference, however, never got under way. The government had also concluded, although it skillfully evaded saying so, that some sort

of invasion was beginning. In their opinion, certain un-named conditions constituted a threat to the community. The first and second Armored Brigades, Southern Command, had, therefore, been directed into the crisis area with orders to--

In the subsequent uproar, Lipscombe fought his way to a V.I.P. he knew by sight. Passes for scientific observers, he realized, would be strictly limited and he fought for two with unnatural savagery.

Damn it, it was his house, wasn't it? If the army were going to blast the damn place to bits surely he had a right to be there? In any case, it was he who had drawn the country's attention to the matter in the beginning It was he who--

Lipscombe got his two passes.

Chapter Two

THE OBSERVATION point for scientific observers was in the top room of an empty house at the far end of the avenue. The owners had hastily moved and the unfurnished rooms echoed hollowly to the sound of voices and the shuffling of feet.

Collard thought the position was too close for comfort and the untidy heap of sandbags against the lower half of the window more of a gesture than a protection.

Lipscombe clattered in behind him burdened with boxes, bags, trailing wires and equipment. He had no authority to bring it but he had bluffed his way through the security cordon by sheer personality and a handful of impressive-looking but quite meaningless documents.

Collard, after years of close friendship, was making a rapid re-appraisal of his friend. Lipscombe seemed to have acquired a new force and purpose and the helplessness he had displayed once beyond the walls of his laboratory seemed to have vanished completely.

Collard edged his way to the window and looked out. From this top room, the prohibitive cost of this particular estate, was clearly explained.

It consisted of a single road of modern but skillfully landscaped villas in completely unspoiled surroundings. Behind the villas, green fields, dappled with buttercups, rose upwards to the darker green of thick woodlands.

The road by which they had reached the estate, he remembered,

had wound its gentle rural way on the far side of those woods before sloping slowly downwards to the estate.

When they had passed the woods, soldiers had been filing through the trees and light armored vehicles and trucks had been parked at the side of the road.

No doubt, they were now lining the far hills among the trees. Mentally he could see them: the prone waiting figures, the khaki-clad groups round the rocket-mortars dragging quickly at nervous cigarettes. They would come down the hill, dispersed, clutching automatic weapons--a textbook assault by all units from all sides.

Then they arose and raced together Over an open stretch of herb and heather. Exposed. And instantly the whole sky Burned with fury against them...

The words seemed to drop unbidden into his mind and he had the feeling that they were a grim warning. The lines had been written in another age in the first world war, over a hundred years ago, but time had not altered their force or meaning.

He looked down at the once green lawn below. Directly beneath him, behind the low privet hedge was a squat, multi-barreled rocket launcher.

Three soldiers knelt behind it and a sergeant, eyes intent on his watch, crouched as if frozen, beside them.

At the opposite end of the avenue, about a quarter of a mile away, he could just see the squat outlines of one of the new Leviathan turretless tanks. The thin high whine of the four powerful turbos reached him faintly as the unseen crew tested in readiness.

Here and there, between the villas were other armored vehicles.

draped, he thought, optimistically, with a camouflage of green netting.

He turned his attention to Lipscombe's house. The change, although startling, was an inference rather than architectural change. There was a subtle blending of lines and angles. The door seemed lower and narrower, the windows longer and slightly recessed. Somehow the house reminded him of an insect and he had a sudden impression of creatures with faceted eyes building this house on a blurred wind-swept world of dust and heat.

Pull yourself together, he told himself, your imagination is running wild.

He was vaguely aware that Lipscombe was setting up his equipment and checking numerous dials. He seemed totally oblivious of the scene outside and the implied drama of the pending attack.

Collard sighed uncomprehendingly and turned his attention once again to the villa. More of the presumed plants sprouted from the garden. A huge thing about six feet in height had grown up just beneath the window.

It was a dull metallic green in color and looked like an ice cream cone stuck point first into the earth.

In front of the garage was the equivalent of a sunflower, with an eight foot black stem as rigid as a metal rod. Where the bloom should have been was a copper-colored shimmering thing like a bird cage which had been cut in half. The cage appeared to be revolving slowly and reminded him, frighteningly, of certain forms of radar equipment.

There was a stir of movement behind and he suddenly realized that the tank had begun rolling down the road towards the villa.

Momentarily he was impressed; the vehicle was so huge that it filled the road and brushed the opposite curbs. He knew the Leviathan could touch sixty over open ground and packed the fire-power of a small battle ship.

He saw the weapon ports blink open like blind square eyes and, below him, the sergeant raised his arm and suddenly dropped it.

"Fire!"

Collard's ears were stunned by the racket of rocket-assisted mortar bombs and, at the same moment, fire stabbed from the ports of the approaching tank.

Perhaps it was the noise which shocked Collard's senses and gave the scenes which followed a curious clarity and detail as if he were observing everything through the medium of a slow-motion camera.

The front of Lipscombe's villa vanished abruptly in a tower of flame, a peacock's tail of flaring scintillating color which seemed to hang there for an immeasurable fragment of time, then died suddenly in a rising column of black smoke.

Slowly the smoke cleared and he was conscious of gasps of disbelief behind him. The villa still stood; there were circular discolorations on doors and windows testifying to the accuracy of the fire but nothing else.

No cracks, no perforations, no pitting.

Collard felt no surprise; perhaps, subconsciously he had expected it, but dully he was aware that those same missiles had been designed to penetrate thirty-six inches of armor plate before exploding.

He became suddenly aware that behind him men were backing

slowly, edging towards the door and staring nervously past him. What--

Then he saw it: something was coming out of the thing like an ice cream cone. At first it looked like smoke but he saw at once that it was not smoke. It was motes or midges, metallic, glittering frost crystals.

"I'm getting out of here." There was a scramble for the door and he heard feet go clattering down the stairs.

The glittering smoke rose higher, bunched together, and he had the certain impression it was alive and knew what it was doing. Panic touched him briefly but he did not move. He never knew what kept him there, perhaps sheer frozen panic.

He saw the glittering cloud curl slowly, arch like a snake, then rush downwards at the tank and envelope it.

Collard thought he heard screams but was never sure. He saw the tank slur suddenly, crushing the curb; then it demolished a low wall, lurched into a garden and stopped.

Suddenly there was silence.

Bright motes drifted lazily from the weapon ports and observation slots of the vehicle and sailed like individual clouds back to the cone.

Below him, the rocket mortar still stood behind the hedge but the crew had gone. He never found out what happened to them, but, perhaps, being sensible men, they had run away.

From far up the road an automatic weapon chattered briefly and a few explosive pellets burst on the roof of Lipscombe's villa like bright rain drops; then there was silence again.

"What's going on out there?" Lipscombe was still crouched below the level of the window studying his instruments.

"Good God!" Collard had a sudden urge to kick him viciously and bit back an obscenity. "Are you dead or something?"

"Sorry, had to get these readings; it may be our only hope."

Collard was aware that he understood, but the other's calm infuriated him. "Let's hope we live long enough to use them. Let's hope--" He stopped.

From the woods on the distant hills tiny khaki colored figures were advancing. Good God, didn't they know? Had no one warned them?

It was too late in any case. Even as he watched, there was a flicker of light, like a mirror catching the sun, then another and another. The advancing soldiers were vanishing, flashing up in light like exploding match heads. Where they had been were only patches of vapor which drifted a little in the wind and vanished.

He turned to Lipscombe. "Damn your blasted readings, damn--"

Feet pounded suddenly on the stairs and soldiers burst into the room, burdened with equipment.

"What the hell are you people doing here?" A red faced major with a streak of dirt down one cheek and a torn right sleeve, glared at them from the door. "Didn't you hear the warning?" He strode forward. "We're blowing this place up to give a clear field of fire." He glanced at Lipscombe's equipment. "Oh, bloody brain-boys, eh? That explains it.

Pack up that muck and get out of here."

He strode quickly out of the room and shouted down the stairs.

"Sergeant Hewitt, detail three men for an escort; we've a couple of civilians up here."

A second later he was back but seemed to have calmed down and was almost civil. "It's lucky we came in and that the R-A. decided they wanted a clear field. Six heavy launchers are already sited and in place. Ah, good sergeant, get those civilians back through the lines and out of danger at the double. And watch it, they're scientists. Looks as if we'll need every damn one before this business is over." He turned to Lipscombe. "Where's your car?"

"In the official car park at Dane Field."

"Well, that area is still inside our lines, or was. When you get there, get in and drive like hell. That is an order, gentlemen, and don't forget it."

Twenty minutes later, Collard eased the car on to the main road but there was no hope of driving fast. The road was packed with civilian cars going in the same direction as he, while long columns of military vehicles proceeding towards the crisis area frequently blocked the road.

As they approached London, traffic grew thicker. Civil and military police were laboring frantically to keep the traffic moving, but there were frequent and infuriating halts.

The signs, too, were ominous. Most of the cars were packed with personal possessions and there were many seventy-seater turbo-coaches filled with wide-eyed frightened looking children. This, he realized, was part hasty evacuation and part panic. The population was heading North and away.

Lipscombe still appeared oblivious of his surroundings. He sat hunched in the back of the car, unlit pipe clamped between his teeth, scribbling busily in a notebook.

Finally he sighed, closed the book and slipped it into his pocket. "I'm sorry," he sounded genuinely contrite. "I must have behaved like a robot but I had to get those readings. What happened exactly?"

They were motionless in a traffic jam and Collard told him in detail.

"What the hell do you think those motes were from the cone--some sort of controlled radio-active dust?"

Lipscombe, filling his pipe, shook his head. "Who can say? We don't know the type of life form opposed to us, do we? It may have been a weapon, on the other hand, and just as likely they may have, figuratively speaking, set the dog on us."

Collard felt a coldness at the back of his neck. His friend could be right.

One tended to forget that the invaders were wholly alien and did not necessarily rely entirely on super weapons. "See them off, Rover," might be just as true and contained a frightening implied contempt. "Chase those damn savages away, the noise is getting on my nerves."

It was then that Collard remembered something else. As they had been hurried out of that top room he had taken one last look through the window. He had caught only a glimpse, but he could see everything in his mind vividly.

The door of Lipscombe's house had been open and on the path was-- It had looked like an oxygen cylinder some six feet in length

and supported itself on thin legs like black cables. On top, near the thicker end, something spun rapidly, catching the sunlight. He'd had the curious impression that something was watching through it and the thought radar vision had occurred to him before the soldiers had hustled him out of the room. He shook himself; perhaps he had dreamed it.

It was dark when they reached his house. The normal fifty minute journey had taken just on nine hours.

Inside Lipscombe checked his equipment carefully, then dropped into the nearest chair. "God, I'm tired."

"So am I, but food and drink would help." He went into the kitchen, found four tins of ham sandwiches, opened them, pressed the stud of a can of self-heating coffee and poured the steaming liquid into two plastic cups.

"This should help." He laid the tray on the table between them. "I've a couple of jars of standard whisky for later, but we'd better get this lot down first."

"Thanks, I'll take a sandwich with me; got to phone Dyson."

Collard made a gesture. "Help yourself, you know where the phone is..."

Dyson? You mean the Dyson, Stanley."

Dyson?" He was shaken; Dyson was one of the greatest names in science."

"Er... yes." Lipscombe grinned faintly. "I don't brag about it, but we once shared rooms near the university. As a matter of fact we used to tour the pubs together and once spent a rather depraved holiday

on the continent. I think I have enough in my note book to get him interested and I'm praying he'll remember my name."

Dyson did remember his name although it took some time to get through. Finally his face appeared in the screen. "I'm only seeing you for friendship's sake and the code in your message. I hope, for your sake, it's important; I have a defense conference in five minutes."

Lipscombe held his note book up to the screen. "I took these readings on the spot. What do you make of them?"

Dyson frowned and squinted slightly. "If you get your damn thumb off the corner I might be able to form an opinion. Ah!" He was silent for several seconds, forehead creased in concentration.

Lipscombe saw that he had read the page and turned over. "Here are the instruments I used, listed in order."

"Yes, and your conclusions?"

Lipscombe showed him and Dyson's eyes widened. "You can't have an irresistible force and an immovable object. The two conceptions cannot exist together in the same plane."

Lipscombe turned over another page. "Look here, using dimensional equations, they exist together on adjacent planes."

Dyson's eyes widened slightly, then his face became withdrawn and guarded. "Anyone else know about this?"

"My best friend, Collard, knows a little; don't worry, he's a top flight plastics expert and they've had him through the security mill."

Dyson nodded curtly. "I'll get in touch with you. I'll want your present address and any possible future ones."

When Lipscombe returned, Collard was breaking the plastic skin on a standard whisky jar. "Your coffee must be stone cold. I'd better lace it a bit."

"Thanks. Damn." He snapped his fingers irritable. "Then I forgot to phone Carol."

"Better take some coffee and sandwiches with you. Oh, by the way, if it isn't already classified information, what is the importance of these readings--some sort of counter weapon?"

Lipscombe paused in the act of placing three sandwiches on his plate, then shook his head slowly. "No, it isn't a weapon, I wish to God it was. At best it may prove an escape route. He sighed and picked up his coffee cup.

"At the worst, if it works at all... well, to be candid, it's a refuge."

Chapter Three

"SO YOU'RE alive?" His wife's face in the screen was as distant and as cold as polar snows. "It's nice to know you remember me, sometimes." "I'm sorry, Carol, it's been--"

"I could fight a mistress," she said, sadly. "Tell me what land of excitement do you get out of committing adultery with a laboratory? Or is it that your work is your wife and I'm your fancy piece?"

"Darling, you don't understand."

"Does understanding help?"

"You've been crying," he accused.

"Women are permitted to cry, didn't you know?" Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. "I've been so alone. I knew things were bad but I kept calling and calling for news. They said you were all right but you never answered the messages I left."

"But listen, darling. I never got near the office, not once. If I had--"

"If you had you would have known Mother died last week. Perhaps you couldn't get away, Michael; I would have understood that, but to forget me completely--" In the screen she averted her face. "Just how damned indifferent can you get?"

Ten minutes later, Lipscombe replaced the receiver slowly, conscious both of inadequacy and a certain amount of guilt. He had always been more or less helpless in the face of suffering and the familiar comforting cliches seemed hollow and insincere. How did he know it was probably for the best or that the old lady might have

lingered painfully? Of course he didn't and such comforting phrases sounded empty even to himself.

He sighed. He supposed he'd more or less smoothed things over but he could understand Carol's viewpoint. The news services were deliberately playing events down and, in the remote Welsh village where her mother had lived, it must have looked like an event on the other side of the world, particularly so in the face of unexpected and immediate death.

The thought struck him suddenly that, in the near future, Carol would probably have to face much more than immediate death and he felt a pang of despair. He loved Carol, loved her so much that he still felt a tightness in his throat when he looked at her but he had no illusions about her. She fulfilled to the utmost the subtleties a man expects with his wife but usually finds with his mistress, but beyond that... beyond that Carol was purely decorative. God alone knew what she would do without gadgets to cook for her and devices to keep her skin flawless and her body beautiful. The day was near now when things would become rough and charming acquaintances no longer civilized.

He pushed the thought with some effort from his mind and went back into the living room.

Collard had fallen asleep in his chair, a half eaten sandwich still clutched in his hand. The sight made Lipscombe realize how tired he was himself. He dropped into the nearest chair and almost instantly fell asleep.

He had no idea how long he slept but was awakened by the door chimes which played Brahms Lullaby until he climbed stiffly to his feet swearing horribly. He thought the selection ill-chosen and singularly inappropriate.

"Milkman." Collard, half awake sounded slurred and out of touch.

It was not the milkman.

"Mr. Michael Collard?" The two well dressed men at the door might have been the directors of a prosperous business concern but there was an alertness about them which belied their outward smoothness.

"Yes?" Lipscombe blinked at them still half asleep.

One of them produced documents. They were not business men, they were from MI-5.

"We have been instructed to escort you to a research center in the North. We have open given to understand that Mr. Dyson will be there to greet you with all the necessary equipment."

Lipscombe said, "I see," vaguely, and, "oh please come in." He went through to tell Collard.

Once ready they were conducted with considerable skill through a jammed metropolis which was resisting stoically a panic exodus from the south. Nonetheless the signs of growing contagion were clearly visible; many shops were shuttered and numerous business houses closed and out of business.

Finally they reached a small airport and hustled into a small vertical take-off transport which was so packed with supplies it nearly failed to live up to its name.

North, they quickly learned, really meant North; it was in one of the most sparsely populated areas of Scotland.

"It's a confounded concentration camp," said Collard in horror as

they descended.

Lipscombe laughed. "Not really. It's one of the old research centers for biological warfare; dates back to the bad old days of the cold war. I'm told it's quite sumptuous inside."

"I hope you're right." Collard was looking dubiously at the low, long buildings surrounded by double barriers of obviously electrified barbed wire. Outside were armed sentries and deceptively casual looking men strolling about with Alsatian dogs.

After much security checking they were finally admitted to a pleasantly furnished recreation room where a group of obvious scientists were arguing fiercely.

"But, my dear fellow, why should such a conclusion strike you as pure fantasy?"

"That's Dyson shouting his head off as usual," said Lipscombe with a nudge.

They waited, listening.

"Because the conception in itself is preposterous--the term natural electronic life is a sheer absurdity."

"Why should it be? When one considers the incredible complication of normal organic life why should not a simpler, less complex life form evolve in a different environment. A planet with a highly radioactive crust, a chemical atmosphere and, possibly, rich surface metal deposits and you have the perfect incubator for electronic life to develop. Consider, an almost pure copper deposit, a few drops of acid from the chemical atmosphere, a natural vein of metallic ore and you have not only natural electricity, but the basis for a natural circuit, or, if you prefer it, an electronic nervous system. Have you

read what Mayer deduced during his experiments with radio-active crystals, for example?"

"I have, but the fact that these artificial cells developed apparent reflexes is no basis for presupposing the preposterous."

"My God, man, you conceded yesterday that we can make organic life cells in a laboratory. You must also concede, therefore, that this same organic life has evolved naturally on this planet. Why, then, knowing also that electrical life has also been constructed in a laboratory will you not admit the possibility of electronic life evolving naturally?"

"I still find the conception of intelligent life housed in a metallic body and based on series of circuits wildly improbable. The theory of outworld invasion by what you call an electronic life form is, in my opinion, sheer imagination and owes nothing whatever to applied science."

"They love each other, don't they?" said Collard in an undertone.

Lipscombe grinned. "It looks that way but try supporting one of them.

They gang up instantly and present a united front. No, candidly, I think they get into scrums like this for mental exercise."

"You think Dyson's opinion is sound?"

"Too sound for my own peace of mind. I, too, had considered some form of electronic life."

It was then that Dyson saw them and came over. "My dear fellow, dreadfully sorry, I was not expecting you so soon."

He was a tubby little man with a round brown face and wispy thinning

hair. He was also, Collard soon learned later, something of a character and refreshingly direct.

After the formalities of introduction, Dyson plunged instantly into serious business. "I've managed to beg, borrow or scrounge all the equipment I think we'll need. I don't know if we'll really be able to copy this kind of power field but we'll have a damn good try." He paused, frowning. "It's going to be dicey; our friend here must keep a wary eye on some of the plastics. We'll want something pretty good with the kind of voltage we'll be playing around with."

Lipscombe nodded. "One thing before we get down to business. My wife was going to meet me today at Collard's house; I'd like her picked up and brought up here to safety."

"I'll see to it right away. Things are getting rough out there. The crisis area, whatever the powers-that-be mean by that, is expanding rapidly."

The Security people were quick; Carol arrived that evening accompanied by two studiously polite men and a mountain of luggage.

"They picked me up," she said. "Picked me in front of everyone as if I were a common criminal or a street woman. What on Earth is going on?"

Lipscombe frowned. He had been going to say, "Thank God you're safe,"

but the words wouldn't come. Decorative, yes, that was the word, decorative and self-centered. She's still beautiful, he thought detachedly, the pale, full-lipped face, the dark eyebrows in striking contrast to the natural ash-blond hair but--

He was silent until they reached the room which had been set aside for them, then he said, "Look, Carol, I know things have been rough and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for you and I'm sorry about your mother but surely you don't think I had you brought here for amusement. I had you brought here for your own safety and because I have to work here now."

She shrugged slightly and with indifference. "Shall I make any difference by being here? Or does it salve your conscience, knowing you've had me brought to safety?"

He was suddenly angry. "All right, I'm wrong, I'm always wrong and I always do the wrong thing but I do try however ineffectual my efforts may appear to you. So, once more, I'll make a final attempt even if it's wrong."

"It probably will be."

"That's right, needle me." He was forcing himself not to shout at her but his voice cracked annoyingly. "We've been drifting apart for years now. I don't know why because you won't tell me, but I'll tell you this: I had you brought here for your own safety, because you're my wife, and if it's of any interest to you, because, despite everything I still love you."

She looked at him, her expression suddenly softening. "You might have said that first, Mike."

He stared at her. "What?"

"My dear, you are slow." She placed a cigarette between her lips and lit it carefully. "A wife wants to be told that her husband loves her -first." She exhaled smoke. "Again, a wife wants to know that her husband needs her and you don't; that's why we've drifted apart."

"That's a damned lie," he said furiously.

"No." She shook her head. "You think I'm stupid. Too stupid to share your life with me. How often have you said, 'It's a technical problem; you wouldn't understand.' As if I were some sort of idiot-wife who must be shut out or locked up in a place of safety. It's true I'm not an electronics expert but you could have given me the chance to learn and help. You could have taught me enough to help you with all those papers you used to bring home, but no, I should mess them all up." She sighed, faintly. "You never tried to know me, did you, Mike? You bought a house we really couldn't afford, crammed to the roof with gadgets because you said it would help me. What you really meant was that I'd leave the place a pigsty if I had to manage on my own."

He stared at her, feeling lost and shocked. It was true, every word of it was true but he'd thought--He said, weakly, "Carol, I--"

"Mike, another thing, I know what's going on outside. We're up against it, aren't we?"

"Yes." He was still shaken, then; "Oh God, Carol, I'm sorry, I didn't think. I do love you."

Suddenly her eyes were filled with tears. "Mike, darling."

"Carol, I understand, and from now on I'll--"

"Later." She held out her arms to him. "Later, not now--"

Twenty four hours later, the device based on Lipscombe's figures was beginning to take shape.

Collard, squatting on a packing case, saw the maze of circuits, tubes, wires and a collection of wholly incomprehensible spares

slowly rise on a specially made plastic framework to form a huge arc which nearly reached the laboratory ceiling.

"Well, it looks impressive," he said. "I hope you blokes know what it's supposed to do."

Dyson in unconventional shirt sleeves and grubby corduroys, grinned faintly and straightened his back. "We know what it's supposed to do but we don't know if it will do it. On the other hand, if it does come up to scratch and performs the miracle, we won't know how."

"What is it supposed to do?" Carol, permitted into the laboratory on Lipscombe's request, had sat quietly in the corner until now.

"I'd like an answer to that one, too," said Collard.

Dyson sighed. "Do you understand dimensional equations?"

Collard said, "No," flatly.

"I was afraid of that, in which case I am afraid I must over-simplify.

That contraption will, we hope, warp the fabric of the space/time continuum."

"I'm as wise as I was before," said Collard honestly.

"I hope, rather crudely, to explain by demonstration. In the universe are countless billions of worlds and solar systems. Most of these are light years or light centuries away in normal space/time but relatively adjacent in the continuum. In short, if we had a way of twisting or warping time/space, these worlds are close. Now, before you say anything grant me the pleasure of my crude illustration."

"Imagine a pea in the center of a piece of typing paper. On the

opposite side of the paper, but exactly in line with the pea is a bean. As you appreciate, the pea and the bean are adjacent but separated by the paper.

For the pea to reach the bean it must travel the breadth of the paper, over the edge and back along the opposite side--follow? Good, you can call that, for illustration, a journey in normal space/ time. Now, suppose we burn a hole or, more aptly, warp the fabric of the paper between the pea and the bean so that they are no longer separated by it; can you see how relatively close they are?"

Dyson paused and lit a cheroot. "To come back to the beginning. We hope that this device will warp the fabric of the continuum--the paper--in this world and grant us access to another."

Collard made a curious noise in his throat but when he spoke his voice was almost normal. "Why?"

"We think our alien friends got here by that method; in fact we hope we have copied that method. Access to another world would provide an escape route if the enemy occupation force breaks out and starts a conquest of the entire planet. It will also provide a secret base in which we may construct counter weapons and prepare for a counter attack without interference. It sounds a wild and perhaps melodramatic method but candidly it's the only lead we have. So far, according to secret reports, our most powerful weapons leave the aliens indifferent and already their area of control covers the whole of Sussex and extends well into Kent."

Collard looked at him and shook his head slowly. "So all we have left, our only hope, is, figuratively speaking, digging a damn rabbit hole."

Chapter Four

IT'S READY." Dyson straightened and held his back. I must be getting old. Why did all those final connections have to be at ground level!"

"What happens now?" Collard was lighting one cigarette from the stub of another.

Dyson grinned. "We light the blue touch-paper and stand well away. In short, we go into the main building and switch on from there."

"It occurs to me," said Lipscombe, "that we are fishermen casting into the unknown." He began to fill his pipe. "We don't know what we're going to catch, do we? I mean, our alien friends no doubt knew exactly what they wanted to catch and the kind of set-up which would complete their circuit. They are like experienced fishermen with the right kind of bait and one of the new stun-hooks. We, on the other hand, are like a kid with a bent pin. Our instruments are cruder and designed--because we lack the know-how--for less complicated prey. A vein of radio-active ore would complete our circuit, the right kind of arrangement in the bars of metal gate." He lit the pipe and sighed. "The only difference which I can see is that no kid with a bent pin was ever so scared as we are."

In the corner Carol put down her book. "I don't know if I'm speaking out of turn, Mike, and I make my apologies to your colleagues in advance, but don't you think you ought to have some sort of safety device. Some sort of cut-out I mean, in case the fish was too big."

"Mrs. Lipscombe." Dyson looked at her with respect. "You have a point there." He paled suddenly. "Hell, suppose something in a boiling sun completed our circuit."

"Yes." Lipscombe felt himself coloring. The word "decorative" and the phrase "You wouldn't understand" were beginning to link themselves with an unpleasant feeling of guilt. How could he have been so blind! Carol was obviously quick and intelligent. Not only blind but conceited, bluntly, an intellectual snob.

He said, "Thanks, Carol," and was genuinely contrite.

"Out of the mouths of babes," she said gently and without triumph.

"Well have to fit in another circuit somewhere." Dyson was clearly resisting a temptation to scratch his head. "Just where is the problem."

Two hours later they retired to the recreation room of the main building and Dyson sat down beside the switch. "Ready?"

"A second or two more please." Lipscombe was checking up on the instruments he had set up in advance. "Right, ready."

"Here goes then." Dyson pulled down the switch.

"Nothing seems to be happening." Collard hoped his voice sounded normal and had counted mentally up to ten before speaking. When Dyson had pulled down the switch the temptation to put his fingers in his ears had been almost overwhelming. He had expected to see the whole laboratory shoot skywards on a fount of blue flame. With the kind of voltages they'd been talking about anything might have happened.

Dyson joined him at the window. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know but there might have been an explosion."

"True, there might have been but the stress field, is, or should be, confined to the immediate area of the device."

"Again, when I switched on, the voltage was relatively low; this is an accumulative device and the voltage builds up in the opposing stress fields."

Collard said, "I see," but didn't. "What happens now?"

"We must wait. As Mike has already remarked, we're casting a bent pin into the unknown and must wait for a bite."

"It's working." Lipscombe's voice was hoarse with excitement. "Some of the cycles are a good deal cruder than those I took from the aliens device but they're balancing out--take a look at the Dohlman tube and look at this Sperrey recorder."

They waited and time passed. Someone turned on the news and here and there they heard snatches.

The crisis area is now contained within a heavily fortified--

"Rot," said Dyson who was pacing restlessly up and down. "Sheer propagandist drivel. The crisis area, as they call it, is now expanding at the rate of two miles a day and pushing us back."

Collard missed most of the actual front line report but he caught most of the rest and thought it ominous and far more in need of security censorship than the optimistic crisis report.

As a safety measure, these children are being evacuated to Canada for the period of crisis. Already two hundred thousand expectant mothers--

The first contingent of United States Marines arrived at--

Russia, too, has extended the offer of all possible aid. These experts which arrived at Gatwick this morning were--

Collard got up and turned it off. "Sorry, it was getting on my nerves."

"And mine." Dyson was still pacing restlessly up and down. "What good do they think all these troops and weapon experts will do? They're still thinking in terms of an outworld alien invader with super weapons and they're not. Why the hell can't they see that? This is a minor occupation force sitting on its presumed backside in one of the safest conquests it's possible to conceive. They've introduced their own ecology into this environment and, because it's dominant in respect of our own, we're going under. Oh yes, I know it looks horrible and alien to our own but the principle is the same. We have sparrows and they introduce hawks. We have oak trees but along comes a strangling ivy; it's as simple as that.

Some of the alleged machines our troops are now reporting may be equivalent of wolves or tigers and not armored vehicles at all. Once or twice they have opened up with something new, but this, I think, is reflex.

At times we may be an irritant and the aliens take a smack at us like a dozing man slapping at a fly. They can afford to doze, chuck a few seeds out of the window, let loose some hawks and nature will do the job for them. Not too far in the future they can step out of the front door into world which is seeded, prepared and ready for them. Their peculiar ecology will have removed anything alien which might once have cluttered up the place."

Dyson turned and stared moodily out of the window. "Candidly, I don't think we stand much chance."

One hour and ten minutes later the alarm above the door clanged

once and stopped.

When they reached the laboratory, slightly out of breath, there was a coating of ice on the interior of the windows and frost crystals nearly an inch deep covered the floor.

Lipscombe shivered. "Thank God for that cut-out."

"Yes and pray fervently." Dyson was staring at a retort which had once been filled with distilled water. The water was now ice and the bright shards of the retort lay round it as if to emphasize the brief but lethal cold.

"It looks as if our bent pin isn't particularly selective." Collard was doing his best to sound casual as if this sort of thing happened every day.

"In my opinion--" Dyson never finished the sentence.

There was no sound but all of them sensed that behind them something had happened. Then, from the main building, the steady jangling of the alarm became clearly but faintly audible.

Lipscombe, who had instinctively clutched his wife's hand protectively, turned stiffly and stared.

"No!" Dyson licked his lips and swallowed. "No... I'm becoming hysterical." He laughed a little uncertainly. "I just didn't expect this."

The arc of wires, circuits, tubes, electro-arcs and all the other devices they had so painstakingly linked into a single unit was gone and in its place was--

It took Dyson a long time to find a word and then the only one which came to him was negation. In the place of equipment was an arc of

nothingness which was neither black nor white nor light nor dark. It seemed to wrench the eyes painfully to look at it too long and yet there was nothing to see. You looked and there was nothing; yet, although there was nothing, it was impossible to see through it to the opposite wall.

It was Collard who recovered first. He shook himself visibly and walked stiffly round it. "Odd." He lit a cigarette unsteadily, found a long plastic rod and thrust it into the 'negation' cautiously.

"Is it through to your side?"

"It doesn't come through." Lipscombe was too numb with shock to sound anything but factual.

"I've pushed at least four feet of this rod in; it must be through."

"If it is, we can't see it."

Collard withdrew it carefully and examined the end. It appeared undamaged.

"It would seem," Dyson was trying to sound casual but was having immense difficulty extracting a cheroot from his case, "that we have to some extent succeeded. I'd better switch off that damned alarm and call a few other experts in."

"Tell them," Collard sat down heavily on an empty packing case, "to bring something with them, preferably a dirty great flagon of brandy."

"I second that," said Lipscombe. "Tell them to bring two."

The experts arrived and they, too, refused to believe it. Probes were sent for and a technician arrived with numerous instruments and long plastic rods.

The experts listened to what had happened, made derisive noises in their throats and pushed in the rods.

They became worried. They joined two rods together and pushed them in nine feet.

"They must be through; use your eyes."

"I am using them and they're not."

"It's impossible." Four of them were now sweating visibly.

Finally they became unhappily convinced and got down to business.

They began to attach instruments to the rods and insert them for brief periods.

"Temperature--sixty-three degrees centigrade."

"The oxygen content of the atmosphere is one and half per cent above the norm."

"Damn telemike won't function; you really can't expect it to in a force field like that."

"The camera got something but the light is appalling, looks like a couple of small windows."

"Don't be a damn fool--windows!"

"I've got a couple of bugs here I've never seen before."

A man in a white laboratory coat arrived with a white rat in a small cage. They tied the cage to a rod, pushed it gently into the nothingness and left it there for three minutes.

When they withdrew it the rat looked up at them in mild surprise then busily scratched its ear with its hind paw. It appeared unharmed and perfectly healthy.

One of the scientists shook his head and approached Dyson.

"Congratulations! It's there for me to see and study but I still don't really believe it."

Dyson drained his glass. "Candidly, neither do I. That's why I'm trying to drink myself back to sobriety."

The scientist looked at the empty glass. "That's an angle I hadn't considered until now. It's worth a try, I think, but personally I hope it makes me forget the whole damn business."

At the end of an hour Dyson cleared the room and looked at them.

"Well?"

"I suppose we'd better make out a report," said Lipscombe.

"On what?" Dyson poured himself another drink. "What do you propose to report--that we've got an arc of damn-all? That will sound really impressive."

"All right." Collard refilled his glass, drained it at a gulp and rose from his seat on the packing case. "I get the drift, someone has to go into that arc of vacancy."

"Easy, Pete, don't rush things." Lipscombe looked alarmed.

"Easy, hell." Collard drained another glass. "We can't ask for a volunteer can we, not unless we want to lie awake for nights trying to

justify expediency. Again, you're married so you're out. My friend Dyson is far too important to risk and, if anything happened to him, we'd all take the can back, so you can work out the rest for yourselves. I... I am exsh-pen...

expendable and therefore the logical volunteer-- right?"

"You're drunk," said Dyson coldly.

"You don't think I've the guts to volunteer for a job like this sober, do you? No, my friend, as a matter of fact, I am not quite drunk. I always begin to slur my words after the first drink, ask Mike. No, to be honest, I have, at the moment, just enough inside me to walk into that thing without my heart coming to a full stop from fright. Well, what about it?"

"I don't know, I really don't know." Dyson shook his head worriedly.

"My, Dyson, you're becoming a damned old woman. A couple of hours and your chance will have gone. Dutch courage is a fine thing while it lasts."

"It's such an appalling risk."

"Look, the rat survived; we know we can breathe. We've got to take a chance sooner or later and time is running out fast"

Dyson scowled at him. At that moment he almost hated him. Why should such a decision rest with him? Why should he suddenly be held responsible for a man's life, and yet, time was running out, no doubt about that.

He sighed inwardly. He supposed army commanders had to make such decisions, decisions possibly involving thousands of men but now that he was faced with it-- Could he ask the chap for his

signature, thereby absolving-- Good God, no, what the devil was he thinking of?

He said evenly. "Is there anything you want? I mean, you know the risks, I mean--" He stopped; words would not come.

"Yes." Collard looked almost cheerful. "I'd like to take that other bottle of brandy. I may need it." He paused, frowning. "I think I'd like an automatic rifle too. If I get through I may run into monsht... monsters or something."

Lipscombe said, savagely. "You're drunk, you fool. Sober up first and think about it."

"Then I shall never go. Got that rifle yet, Dyson?"

"I'm ringing through for one now." Dyson lifted the receiver. Now that he had made his decision he was going through with it. After all, he told himself, they had to do something. They couldn't go on staring at that damned arc of nothingness forever. It had to be tested. "Hello armory?"

"I'd like to get my wife out of here, if you don't mind." Lipscombe's voice was thin and sounded like a stranger's.

"No!" She clung to him. "No, darling. If he goes and doesn't come back you'll go in after him. If we have to go, we'll go together."

A sergeant arrived with the rifle and five spare magazines. "One of the new Brandon's, sir. If you'll just sign here, please. You see I have to account to--"

"I know." Collard signed. "Same old bull. Thanks."

"Good luck." Dyson held out his hand but stared past him. "Damn

good luck. Honestly, I'm sorry, I wish to God--"

"Forget it." Collard slung the rifle over his shoulder. He looked at Lipscombe but did not speak. He knew that if he did he'd break up and he couldn't afford to break up, not now.

"One more drink, eh?" He gulped it down. "Give me ten minutes."

He turned abruptly, almost ran at the arc of negation and stepped directly into it.

For a few seconds his shadow seemed to hang there; then it slowly faded and he was gone.

Chapter Five

COLLARD EXPERIENCED a brief period of nausea and a peculiar sensation of wrenching and then he stumbled into semi-darkness.

I forgot to tie a rope round myself, he thought in sudden terror. How will I find my way back?

He turned. Behind him in the half-light was the arc of nothingness into which he had just stepped. So that was how it worked. Whatever this thing was, it reached into both worlds and linked them.

Slowly his eyes became accustomed to the light.

He was in a hut, a stone hut about twenty feet wide. High up in the walls were long weapon slots like narrow windows letting in bright but limited shafts of light.

Slightly to his left and against the wall was a rack containing weapons.

There was a thing like a huge scimitar with a wickedly serrated cutting edge, there were long knives also serrated, several spears and a contrivance which looked like a cross between a club and a four bladed axe.

Perhaps this lot completed our circuit, he thought, wonderingly. Then he dismissed the matter from his mind abruptly. Right in front of him was a door.

He approached it cautiously. It appeared to be constructed of slats of wood and metal tightly bound with gut. It was hinged at the top and, when he tried to open it, extraordinarily heavy.

After a long struggle he managed to raise it and found that there were simple but efficient pegs near the top to hold it open.

Collard bent down and peered out. Then he sat down on the ground and stared.

It was there but he did not believe it.

The ground, thick with a moss-like grass, sloped slowly downwards to wide beach of silver sand. There was a wide bay of clear, colorless water, a blazing bluish sun which hurt his eyes and a strange greenish sky dotted with wispy pink clouds.

On the opposite side of the bay, vast pink cliffs rose in uneven tiers and were finally lost in haze.

Beyond the bay the colorless water met the green of the sky in a sharply defined horizon.

Close at hand and near to the hut were trees. He presumed they were trees; they looked like blue inverted pines. The branches, wide at the top, pointed up instead of down and reminded him strangely of tattered umbrellas blown inside out by the wind. Here and there were things which looked like huge and improbable sticks of candy-floss. He supposed they were bushes or what passed for bushes on this world.

It was hot. The whole scene shimmered and blurred in the heat and he was conscious of sweat crawling steadily from his body. He had once stayed a week in Aden but this made Aden feel like a mountain resort.

Something undulated past his line of vision. It had the body of a tropical centipede and the gay wings of a butterfly—he counted—it

had twelve sets of wings. Now what the hell do I call that, he asked himself, a centifly or a butter-pede? And realized suddenly that he was becoming slightly hysterical.

He rose unsteadily and went back into the hut "Did you have to cut it so bloody fine?" Dyson looked ragged and emotionally exhausted. "Nine and a half minutes you've been gone. We've all been sweating blood."

Collard grinned at him. Now that it was over he felt triumphant and emotionally light headed.

"It's safe; I'm sober, but you won't believe me, so you'd better come and see for yourselves. Oh, and yes, you'd better bring some more guns. It looks safe and beautiful but so do sleeping tigers."

They stood gazing wonderingly at the array of weapons, the stone walls, the shaft of sunlight from the open door.

Dyson examined the scimitar. "Corresponding to the early Roman Empire, perhaps? Unfortunately I am no historian but-

"Excuse me for interrupting." Carol's voice was light and almost casual.

"But I think the owners are returning. There's something coming up the slope."

They peered cautiously through the open door. Crawling laboriously up the slope was a huge squat animal. Four human-shaped beings sat on its back, guiding it by the simple process of hitting it, none too gently, with long poles.

Collard lit a cigarette and wondered if this world was composed of half things. First the "butterpede" and now a vast creature which

seemed unable to make up its mind as to whether it was an elephant or a tortoise.

It was a dull brown in color, had a thin, whisp-like trunk but after that something had happened--someone had dropped a heavy weight on it.

Already he was referring to it mentally as the "squashed elephant."

The creatures sitting on its back were pale blue, impossibly thin and quite naked. Ornaments, possibly metal rings, gleamed on their arms and legs and they carried short cutting spurs with serrated edges.

"I think," said Lipscombe quietly, "We'd better deter them. They may be thin but they're damn tall and I don't like the look of those spears."

Collard nodded and dropped to one knee, raising the rifle. "How about dropping that tree on their right?"

"Fine."

Collard sighted and squeezed the trigger. He must have hit the tree just right or, perhaps, it was already suffering from some inner decay for the result was spectacular. The brief burst of explosive pellets flung out a visible gout of flame and the lower trunk exploded into fragments. Then the whole ninety foot growth toppled impressively sideways, breaking into two pieces as it fell.

The effect on the natives was instantaneous. They hurled themselves from the animal's back and went sprinting down the slope in what was obviously complete and utter panic.

The animal, however, made a piercing whistling noise and rolled itself up in a ball like an enormous hedgehog. In this position the dull

brown hide arranged itself into a series of points and viciously jagged edges which looked dangerous enough to deter anything.

"They didn't stay to investigate." Lipscombe was grinning cheerfully.

Collard rising to his feet, looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't know if the thought has occurred to you but it has to me--in a reverse kind of way, isn't this where we came in?"

Although the natives of the planet were unaware of visitors within the tribal hut, the sudden eruption of power prior to their arrival had by no means gone unnoticed elsewhere. Color flared luridly in more than a dozen instruments immediately triggering silent but wholly effective alarms.

In a different kind of way the recipients--the living recipients, that is--were almost as shocked as the natives.

Worse, everything had been so peaceful until then. A peace which, in the last year, had begun to shift imperceptibly from content to boredom.

Specialists were beginning to invent research angles, new hobbies appeared daily, and all were secretly counting the days to the return of the Mother Ship.

In the recreation room of the base, intelligence no longer exchanged opinions; they were back to gossip. A considered and sympathetic exchange but, nonetheless, gossip; it concerned one of the specialists at the base.

/+--)3deg. (a phonetic translation would give the letters D.A.X) made a sorrowful gesture. "Yes, I suffer in sympathy with Vrayle, it is sad to be a virtual outcast. Not that I question her ability--in her particular field of research she's outstanding, nonetheless--"

"I suppose," said Avrin, "it happens sometimes. If there's no one with complimentary physical and psycho responses you're alone, that's all there is to it. It is hard to believe that among our countless trillions there is no complimentary male."

"The matter has been referred to the computers. If they were unable to find one, then hope has gone; she must spend her days dis-united, which is a tragedy."

"Has she considered a short term liaison?"

"A female of such integrity! I doubt it. And, come to think of it, would you? Did ever seek union with a non-responsive in adolescence?"

"Too often. The revulsion increases as one matures." "Ah, yes." Dax made a gesture of agreement. "One soon learns that each facet of the one must respond completely to each facet of the other or the union is doomed. I still find it strange, however, that only the females of our species possess the faculty of recognition and, in normal cases, draw the male's attention to the affinity."

Avrin said, "How can she feel, knowing she's doomed to life-long unfulfilment? For, however brilliant her work, she--"

It was then that the silent alarms sent them hurrying to their emergency stations.

"It is not a natural phenomena, that is perfectly clear." Dax studied the swirling colors in the detector prism. "What do you make of it, Kel?"

"It's an application of the continuum shift we use in our star-drive." Kel was interpreting the changing colors rapidly. This is far in advance of our own application, static, crudely applied and, in my

opinion, highly dangerous. To warp the fabric of the space/time continuum one needs an energy dispersal unit of peculiar variations; we have yet to perfect such a unit. These intelligences, however, have either willfully or from ignorance, failed to incorporate such a device."

"What conclusions do you draw from that?"

"They have either stumbled upon the principle of the warp and are experimenting blindly or it is a copy. In either case, they are clearly unaware of the danger."

"I must contact Vrayle." Dax made a gesture which was instantly recognized by a receptor circuit and Vrayle's department became visually adjacent to their own. "Any contacts?" he asked.

"Some." She was clearly concentrating intensely. "They are facing us, directly across the bay."

"How many?"

"It began with one, then four, but now there are sixteen."

"Intelligence level?"

"I am still tuning and the pathersense has yet to warm up but, at a guess, thirty-six."

"It fits," said Kel. "No intelligence above forty would be so blind as to use this warp device so crudely. As I said, they stumbled on the principle or stole it."

Dax made a gesture of agreement and turned to Vrayle again. "How do they communicate?"

"Sound/image primarily, although there are many obscure abstracts and implied implications. Listen--"

"The sooner we get more troops through here, the better--"

"We'll get more than troops; the R.E.'s are breaking down four light armored vehicles and manhandling them through in sections."

"How long before you can translate?"

"The selector is seeking a suitably responsive subject now; then I can tune into the brain cycles--say about three ver."

"I'll call you back." Dax was a precise intelligence and was already clear as to his position. An intelligence level twelve below his own was, militarily speaking, a class four threat but, if their numbers increased, his chances dropped with each increase. They could overwhelm or destroy the base by sheer fire power particularly so if they were a warrior race. There were only fifty of the Shaldron including nineteen females, and all they possessed to defend themselves were six incinerators and three warrior robots.

His thoughts were interrupted by a call from Vyen, head of the anthropologist section. "I've a native here. He claims that a demon has occupied the tribal house and called down lightning upon a tree as he approached. From what he is able to tell me, the tree was at least twenty sekin to the right of his party, so I interpret the act as a deterrent not direct attack."

Dax thought, Thank Shirin for that; these creatures may have some sense of responsibility. He said, "I wish we knew their techno/military level."

"We may find out. Remember what happened to us when we first arrived."

"The Schlen!"

"Precisely. I wish I knew what instinct guided those creatures to a possible food source."

"Well at least they learned their lesson quickly; they never attacked us a second time. I only wish I could be sure our friends on the opposite side of the bay will not hit first and fail to learn from that."

He broke contact, made a swift tour of the base and returned to Vrayle who was just removing the contact terminals from her primary nerve centers.

"Well?"

"It was wearying but profitable. The device they are using is, as suspected, not their own. It is a copy; they have no conception whatever of its possible dangers. But, in mitigation for their folly, they are a desperate people, refugees, and their world has been invaded by another race who, presumably, know how to use a static warp in complete safety." She paused and went into details.

Other departments immediately made themselves adjacent for first hand information.

"A dangerous situation," commented Dax when she had finished. "And did you confirm their intelligence level?"

"As a level it was thirty-six, but individually I recorded variations from as low as thirty to as high as our own. This is, strictly speaking an ingenious technical/extrovert culture."

"You mean, I assume, the technical know-how is far in advance of self-understanding?"

"With one or two notable exceptions, yes."

"What of their background from a military point of view?"

"Alas, that is not comforting. They are emotionally a warrior race with a particularly violent inheritance. Intellectually they despise war but their emotional make-up is such that they are easily swept into it. Once committed, they are the most savage and most courageous fighters our race has ever met."

"You raise my flagging spirits," said Dax, bitterly. "How many are there now?"

"There are now one hundred and sixty-three, many of whom, from my readings, are the equivalent of regular militia."

Avrin said, "Sui-ip, mi?"

Vrayle looked at him. "Shar-sor, ma-ten tu." Then, with pardonable pride. "Yes, I speak the language fluently now."

Avrin registered shock. "What a revoltingly guttural tongue. I despair for your vocal organs, Vrayle."

"This is no time for mutual sympathy," interrupted Dax sharply. "In the very near future this race will discover our base and, from what we have learned, they may attack."

"Why should they? We have offered them no harm."

"They may see in our presence a potential danger. Remember, they are a desperate people in flight from a superior aggressor. Our presence here might be regarded as a threat which must be removed before it is allowed to develop."

"You are a pessimist."

"I am in charge of this project and I am a realist. We must consider some form of safe contact before an incident occurs. By Shirin I wish we knew their military potential."

"It looks," interposed Vyen, softly, "as if your wish may be granted, Director."

"How?"

"We discussed the matter earlier, if you remember--the Schlen."

"They have sensed the presence of the visitors?"

"Alas, yes."

"Can we help these aliens? They may not be equipped to deal with the Schlen."

"We can help," interposed Jeel, of security, quietly, "if you are prepared to betray not only the number but exact range of our weapons."

Dax used a word which in his culture was regarded as obscene and said to Vyen, "Are there many Schlen?"

"They are approaching in groups varying from ten to thirty from every point of the compass."

Chapter Six

ON THE OPPOSITE side of the bay Dyson and Collard stood on the shore guarded by two nervous-looking soldiers. It was clear that although they were seeing an alien world all around them they had no faith in its reality. They wore the disbelieving expressions of men who knew it was some sort of trick but were unable to prove it.

Dyson smiled faintly, lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes and studied the opposite shore of the bay. "I wonder if this planet is larger or smaller than Earth. It would be interesting--" He stopped in mid sentence.

"Something up?" Collard was absently gouging a channel in the sand with the toe of his shoe.

"Yes." Dyson handed him the binoculars. "Tell me if you see it, too. See where the cliffs leave the shore line and the sand begins? Follow in from the right by that clump of trees--got it?"

Collard held the glasses to his eyes for what seemed endless seconds then slowly lowered them. "It looks like a huge oil tank connected by pipes to several smaller tanks."

"I'd say those pipes were connecting corridors. I don't like it."

"Neither do I. Something intelligent must have built it, something which has climbed far above the primitive weapons we found in the hut."

Dyson said, "Let's get back; I feel horribly exposed out here. Further, I have the unpleasant feeling that we may have jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire."

They walked slowly back towards the hut. Beyond lay the forest of inverted pines and beyond the forest the now familiar pink cliffs rising into the haze.

Like the soldiers, I don't really believe it, thought Collard dully, and yet there was so much to confirm all that had gone before. Soldiers were now emerging from the hut in a steady line, plastic tents dotted the slope and already there were emplacements for quick-firing weapons. Close at hand a Signals unit had already set up one of the new transistor radar packs with its circular portable screen.

"Excuse me, sir." One of the soldiers was pointing nervously across the bay. "Excuse me, but what do you make of that?"

They turned and followed the line of his pointing finger. Far out beyond the bay, where the colorless water met the green of the sky was a number of small black clouds, only somehow they didn't look like clouds.

Dyson opened his mouth to say something but never began to speak. At that moment the corporal in charge of the radar unit pressed the stud of the klaxon air-raid alarm.

For a few seconds there was almost panic and then discipline came to the rescue.

A young lieutenant with the fresh face of a public school boy grew suddenly to manhood and began to bark crisp orders into a hand-mike.

"Close up all gun crews. You men, there, get over behind that mound.

Sergeant Pearce, get that battery behind that rock and cover the shore line. All civilians, take cover or if you can't find cover lie flat.

Swing that battery up, Sergeant."

Collard who had obeyed the order to lie flat, had turned over and now lay prone with the glasses to his eyes. In the lenses, the clouds became groups of black dots. He raised the glasses, sweeping the sky. Far away to the North and, at an incredible height, were long converging lines of dots which stretched away beyond the range of his glasses.

On the opposite side of the bay alien intelligences watched the approaching Schlen with something akin to shock.

"I have never seen so many." Avrin stared into the visualizer in disbelief.

"Migratory period." Vyen sounded assured. "It is a biannual event and bodes ill for these aliens. Only at such periods do the Schlen fly in such numbers."

"How many aliens are there now?"

"At our last check," said Dax, "there were two hundred and forty-three."

I perceive that our query concerning their military potential will soon be answered."

"And if they survive this?"

"Then our position will be precarious in the extreme. We shall be compelled to put our plan into operation without delay. It is not unlikely that they will hold us responsible."

"Has Vrayle succeeded in establishing contact?"

"I understand that the pathersense is linked to a suitably responsive intelligence but I have received no further reports."

In the psychological sector Vrayle, linked to the pathersense, was absorbing countless alien thought-forms. It was not a new experience for her; as a pathersense operator she was repeating a function she had performed on many worlds. It was, however, one thing to receive a language, but extremely difficult to receive and retain the countless thought images together with their motivations which gave a true insight into the alien psychology. At the moment she was pleased. The selected subject had a vivid and concise mind which made her task easy. The information she was able to store away was, however, less pleasing; there was a blind tenacity of purpose about these creatures which boded ill for possible enemies. They possessed an extraordinary single-mindedness and a peculiar faculty, when pressed, of ignoring the obvious. They would go on fighting even when their cause was hopeless and the only possible outcome complete defeat.

Across the bay, despite intense preparation, the first assault caught the garrison by surprise.

A single Schlen, flying at twelve thousand feet, suddenly folded its wings and dropped like a stone. It did not open those wings until the last possible minute and then it came in against the glare of the sun, the fixed claws beneath its body extended like four curved hooks.

A guard, looking in the opposite direction, caught the curved claws in his body before he knew what hit him and died before he had a chance to scream. He was carried upwards beneath the Schlen's belly like a broken khaki doll, automatic rifle still clutched in his hand.

The Lieutenant, however, despite his boyish face was quick to react. "All units, pick your targets--fire! Wake up, number three battery!"

In the sky the Schlen were- folding their wings and beginning to come down like projectiles.

A hail of fire rose to meet them, the chatter of automatic weapons rose to a crescendo, and the rocket batteries exhaled rapid trails of flame.

Twenty-four descending Schlen were blown to fragments in the air, eighteen more failed to open their wings and plunged into the sand or sea like enormous black darts.

To Collard lying flat on his back, it seemed that the whole world was suddenly filled with explosions, the beat of huge leathery wings and a dull shaking impact of heavy things striking the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two enormous leathery things flapping frantically in the water, dragged suddenly down by something unseen beneath the surface.

He thought, inconsequently, this is the hell of a ripe world, and realized very slowly that the battle was nearly over.

Long lines of black things were flapping desperately away, surrounded and pursued by the exploding black puff balls from the rocket batteries.

In the bay the water boiled as unseen things fought for the possession of the dead or wounded creatures on the surface. The black things, with a hundred and twenty foot wing spread, looked like overturned yachts or tattered umbrellas tossed carelessly into a village pond.

On the slope and on the shore were more. Some, wings still unfolded, protruded tail first from the soil like darts from a dart board.

"My God." Dyson climbed shakily to his feet beside him. "My God, I'm not cut out for this sort of thing. I've got the shakes."

"You're not alone." Collard tried to grin but was conscious that he had succeeded only in an idiotic lopsided grimace. "I'm no hero."

"I am an arrant coward. Let's go and look at one of these things."

They walked together to the nearest one and tried to inspect it detachedly. It wasn't easy. It was too much like a flying shark for comfort.

The body was six feet thick near the head and tapered slowly to a spiked tail thirty feet distant. The wings were like those of a bat and, at close quarters seemed impossibly huge.

Above a curved, shark-like mouth, three little red eyes, although glazed in death, seemed to stare up at them hungrily.

Dyson shuddered. "Let's get into a tent or something where we don't have to look at these things."

"Right." Collard turned with him, still a little dazed and uncomprehending, still trying to assure himself of reality. Sounds and pictures seemed to come to him in a curiously fragmentary land of way as if he were a little stunned.

Somewhere near the shore a voice was calling, "Stretcher bearers; stretcher bearers, over here!"

More soldiers were coming from the hut; some carried coils of barbed wire on long poles, several more appeared to be constructing an armored vehicle. There were wheels on the grass, a turbo engine, part of an armored turret.

Voices, came from far away and it seemed without real meaning.

"Just one burst, mate, and the bastard blew to pieces in the sky."

"Eighteen casualties, sir, six dead, three missing, presumed--"

"Are you all right, Collard?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, thank you, just a bit shaken I suppose."

Somehow it seemed more than that. It was as if something were probing inside his head, searching, prying for information.

"Sure you'll be all right? They want me for something."

"Yes, thanks, I'll just sit here a couple of minutes and join you later."

He did not know if it was more than a few minutes but he rather thought it was. The sun was sinking into the sea and, across the bay the pink cliffs were hazy with blue shadow. The few minutes had clearly been two or three hours and in that time much had taken place.

The armored vehicle was nearly complete. Numerous work parties with automatic diggers were rapidly burying the remains of their recent attackers and a hundred yards of shore line was sealed off by recently erected barbed wire. More was being brought and laid and plastic tents were being erected in neat lines against the trees. Behind the tents was more wire, tautly erected and obviously electrified.

He shook his head in a puzzled way. The sense of probing and mental constriction had vanished as quickly as it had come but he wondered briefly if the tension of the last few days had been a little too much for him.

He looked again at the tents, the weapon pits, the guards, the wire.

There were great weals across the grass of the slope where equipment had been dragged; much had been worn away by the passing of many feet and in places burned brown by the discharge of rocket weapons. God, it had looked a good world when he had first seen it but now-- What next? Their little playmates in the oil tanks across the bay?

He shook his head wearily and some lines from Matthew Arnold struck him suddenly as singularly appropriate:

For the world which seems To lie before us like a land of dreams, So various, so beautiful, so new, Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

And here we are, as on a darkling plain, Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Collard realized he was still a little lightheaded and capped the lines with some mediocre ones of his own which he had written after seeing an historical film of the British invasion beaches in 1943.

Breathe, Oh, night upon our wilful show Our armored lands And iron trellised sands Twined with the brambles where no berries grow.

He felt suddenly embarrassed; a love of verse and his own limited talent were intimate secrets he kept to himself. Collard had been educated at a public school which applauded sport and frowned on the arts with the result that he had been compelled to keep his creative inclinations a secret.

They turned me into a kind of schizoid, he thought sadly. Trouble is I've never really grown out of it. Like most Englishmen I secretly

regard it as effete, yet still do it. I'm weak willed and thank God no one knows.

There he was wrong. On the opposite side of the bay, a certain intelligence knew all his secrets and had made plans accordingly.

"Calling Mr. Collard, calling Mr. Collard. Will you please report immediately to Mr. Dyson in tent three."

Collard scowled. Trust the army to get a tight-beam caller into operation so that they could keep you on the jump.

He sighed and began to search for the appropriate tent.

"Ah, here you are." Dyson looked up from the small plastic table.

"Feeling better?"

"Time." Collard was deliberately brusque. He objected, on principle, to the slightest suggestion of orders or regimentation.

"Good." Dyson did not appear to notice the tone of voice. He lifted a paper from the table and held it out. "This concerns you; it was received by the normal receiving units this morning and repeated ten times."

Collard took the paper, glanced at the heading and nearly dropped it.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"I was about to suggest that. Sorry."

Collard sat, lit a cigarette nervously and stared at the paper again. It said:

From: The Shaldron Race To: The Human Race Greetings. Your presence on this planet has been noted and the reason for your visit analyzed by our instruments, your language, together with the printed word and other modes of communication, have also been broken down and studied by experts. We are, therefore, able to communicate with you now without a barrier of misunderstanding.

We note, also, that our base on the opposite of the bay has been observed with some distrust and, it is to dispel these misgivings we decided to communicate with you directly.

We, the Shaldron, are a scientific team engaged on the peaceful study of this planet and, as such, need cause you no alarm. Despite this assurance, however, and with an appreciation of your own urgent domestic problems, we feel that the first contact between our two races should be arranged with discretion.

As you will understand our viewpoints and motivations are different from your own in many respects. We have, therefore, taken the liberty of selecting one of your party for first contact, one whom we feel is best suited to grasp the motivations of both our races and arrange for future group contacts.

Needless to say we shall be happy to place our scientific resources at your disposal in joint effort to defeat the invader who now menaces your home world. Signed... Dax. Project Head and Director of Research.

Collard laid the paper slowly on the table. "They're mind readers--telepaths."

"We thought so too. I've been constantly in touch with the Cabinet since the message was received. They're sending a man down but want me to go ahead; general opinion seems to be that the offer of

help seems too good to miss although there are many doubts as to its sincerity."

"And have you contacted these aliens?"

"Yes, there has been a considerable exchange of messages. Details of the contact are now being arranged."

"Who is this selected contact?"

"Ah, now." Dyson became suddenly interested in the papers on the table. "Well, I'm sorry and all that, but, as a matter of fact, they want you."

Chapter Seven

DYSON PASSED through the warp a little warily. He was becoming used to the wrenching sensation of inter-world transit but, somehow, whichever way he went, he always seemed to step out into trouble.

His conscience was none too easy at the moment; Collard seemed to have become his personal catspaw. If there was any dirty job to be done it always seemed to be Collard who had to do it. Not that it was anyone's fault that the aliens made their own selection. It was just one of those things which, nonetheless, left an uneasy feeling both of personal relief and personal responsibility. Let's face it, he was glad it was Collard and not himself; on the other hand--

An orderly saluted. "A Mr. Proctor from the Ministry is waiting to see you in room seven, sir."

"Thank you." Dyson was curt. The Ministry! What the hell did that mean? It was a nice way of saying that the man was some sort of government investigator, wasn't it?

He was suddenly aware that his clothes were stained, his shirt filthy and that he was badly in need of a shave. God, and the man was waiting; there was no time to wash and change.

I'm at a disadvantage before I start, he thought, sourly. If this bloke has arrived with an axe I am in no condition to be impressive or convincing.

When he arrived at room seven his fears of a psychological disadvantage were instantly confirmed. Mr. Proctor, from the Ministry, looked as if he had stepped straight from his office into the room. Dyson noted the bowler hat on the peg, the perfectly furred

umbrella in the corner and the impressive brief case on the desk."

Why, Dyson wondered, do the civil and diplomatic services remain so traditionally and archaically somber, retaining a mode of dress which went out of fashion well over--

"Do sit down, Mr. Dyson." Proctor's voice exuded a pleasant and almost studied friendliness. "Just a few small matters to clear up before we proceed to more important things."

Dyson sat. Proctor had a clipped moustache, a pink smooth face and bright blue expressionless eyes. His movements seemed casual and easy but he held his shoulders well back like an ex-guardsman.

Dyson put him down as dangerous, impersonal and impossible to fool.

"Just what Ministry do you represent?"

Proctor smiled briefly. "Not a familiar one I am afraid, but I will explain its position. My ministry holds a position midway between the War Office and the Cabinet and exercises much the same influence over both offices as the treasury does over national expenditure--you are beginning to see its importance, Mr. Dyson?"

He paused, pressed the tips of his fingers together but obviously did not expect an answer. "My department is a kind of liaison office interpreting the needs of the Cabinet to the War Office and vice versa. That is why I am here: to interpret the demands and, it must be admitted, the apprehensions of both offices."

"I see. It sounds ominous."

"All government demands are phrased in ominous terms, even those dealing with trivialities. It is a habit and probably originated to

impress minor clerks with their urgency." Proctor smiled.

Dyson didn't smile back. "Let's get down to business shall we. I take it you have some business with me."

"Well, yes." Proctor removed a document from the brief case and cleared his throat. "Both the Cabinet and the War Office feel, although applauding your immense scientific success in the present project, that you should now turn your attention to the world's immediate problems."

"You are relieving me of my position as Director of Research on this project?"

Proctor raised pink hands in protest. "Really, Mr. Dyson, nothing so drastic. There is no question of... er... dismissal. It is merely felt that the project is functioning so well that you should take time off to study the invader at close hand."

"Why? My first theories were the cause of more than a little amusement."

"Regrettable, but since retracted, Mr. Dyson. The behavior patterns of some of the supposed armored vehicles of the invader have been carefully studied and found to be instinctive rather than organized, in many ways comparable to the instinctive behavior of wolf packs."

"What is the position exactly?"

Proctor looked at him, his suave pink face suddenly bleak. "Bad, very bad. Half London is now, to use a familiar phrase, enemy occupied territory. Six different counties are now involved and one... er... salient stretches well into Dorset."- He sighed. "There seems no set plan; in some places the contagion is advancing three miles in every twenty-four hours and in others only a few inches. In Kent, for

example, there is one spot where one can land on the coast and travel inland for two miles without seeing the slightest alien manifestation. This spot, incidentally, had been suggested as an excellent place for you to begin your preliminary check.

All other observation points are either held by troops or can only be observed from off-shore."

Dyson frowned slightly. "How do you propose to get me there?"

"A jet torpedo boat is already prepared. You will be accompanied by a picked unit of commandoes when you land."

"Got it all worked out haven't you? Very well, it seems reasonable enough, but when?"

"The government feels that for the moment we should wait to see the results of this contact with the aliens." Proctor paused then changed the subject abruptly. "We have one consolation: for once Britain does not stand alone; every nation on Earth is contributing aid in one way or another and several countries have sent troops."

Dyson's eyes narrowed slightly. He sensed that the other was leading up to something but wisely decided not to betray the fact.

"Surely we lack the room to deploy huge armies?"

"We do, we do." Proctor nodded vigorously. "These are demonstration forces, political gestures, if you prefer the term. They demonstrate to their own nationals the unity of mankind against an alien invader and their very presence acts as an assurance against world panic." He smiled a little wanly. "Things change, do they not? A Russian brigade became encircled near Eltham and the Americans threw in an entire battalion to get them out." He sighed again. "I

suppose it is human nature to respect an ex-potential enemy. Again, they have to prove to themselves that they are without bias, particularly now."

Damn cynic, thought Dyson, savagely. He said, tonelessly, "Encircled?"

Sorry, I'm afraid I'm not quite with you; how did this happen?"

"It often happens. The roads behind the defending troops suddenly explode with a multitude of alien plants which grow at terrifying speeds.

Within a few hours the entire highway is choked with roots which can only be cut with welding torches. Again, there is often infiltration by alien lifeforms such things as... er... I must quote forces slang-Battle Beetles, Tin Tigers and... ah, yes, Gobble Cans."

Dyson nodded but made no comment. It appeared to him, however, that the world couldn't afford to wait too long although this long-winded man from the Ministry behaved as if they had months.

"Now concerning these other aliens." Proctor removed some printed papers from the brief case. "The Cabinet and the War Office are more than a little concerned regarding their offer of aid."

Here it comes, thought Dyson. This is what he has been leading up to all along. He said, "It seems to me we don't have much choice. We've an invader at our throats, or had you forgotten?"

Proctor raised his brows slightly but his voice remained friendly. "Mr.

Dyson, allow me to explain. You as a scientist think in terms of science, but soldiers, that is heads of armies, think in terms of tactics, in terms of defense and offence, in terms of military strength

and military weakness.

Their minds are just as precise in their particular field of activity as yours in terms of mathematics and applied stress. Their minds, having observed the offer from a military viewpoint, tend to a certain distrust."

He paused and cleared his throat. "Allow me to simplify. These aliens are clearly our technical superiors and, on the surface, it appears a bona fide offer, but, I regret to say, the military tends to a certain cynicism.

They see it this way and again I must apologize for oversimplification.

The cowboy with the six gun is the technical superior of the Red Indian but that cowboy can still go down before a hundred arrows. The War Office regards the alien as the cowboy and points out, quite logically that we can launch the arrows. I think you will agree that, due to our recent build-up, we now hold a numerical advantage. But let us follow through with the cowboy; clearly his position is precarious so he must use his head. He must make peace signs, trade tawdry goods, anything to gain time until the wagon train arrives with perhaps, two hundred cowboys, many more six guns, and, no doubt, several rifles and a gatling thrown in for luck."

Proctor paused and cleared his throat, then leaned forward suddenly.

"They didn't just grow there did they, Dyson? Something brought them.

Somewhere out there in their space is a supply vessel and, sooner or later, it's coming back to pick them up."

Dyson felt himself pale but was conscious of a mounting anger which was directed more against himself than against Proctor. Why hadn't he seen it for himself? But like that the logic was inescapable; it might be a genuine offer but... and hell, there was a but.

He said, thickly, "What do you propose?"

Proctor smiled. It was a curiously greasy and sly grimace. You must play host; you must invite as many cowboys as possible into the camp and then you must watch. If they give genuine assistance, well and good, but if they stall-- he smiled again--"hostages are a military asset, Mr. Dyson, even in the face of Gatlings."

"Yes." Dyson was more than a little shocked at the other's cynicism but he forced himself to take the initiative. "It seems to me we must get moving and if possible have something to show these people in the way of specimens or something. You say a J.T.B. is ready and waiting?"

"Er... yes, yes."

"I need a good biologist with me, let's see, Peel is a damn good man, and I think he'd come if I asked him personally." He half rose. "I'll be ready as soon as I've cleaned up."

"Excellent." Proctor beamed but Dyson was pleased to note he was slightly irritated. He was drumming his fingers on the edge of the desk.

"There's just one other thing."

"Oh?" Dyson resumed his seat with just enough impatience to be offensive. "What is it this time?"

Proctor frowned slightly but maintained his outward calm. "It's this

choice; it's this chap Collard."

Dyson's mouth thinned. "I have every confidence in Mr. Collard."

"I'm sorry." Proctor removed a folder file from the brief case. "Neither the Cabinet nor the War Office share your confidence, Mr. Dyson." He opened the file. "His record on the surface is above reproach, security clearance, commission in the Territorial Army and so on, but not alas, a realist, more of an idealist--it heightens official apprehension considerably."

"What does?" Dyson was almost savage.

Proctor sighed and shook his head sadly. "Are you aware that Collard has had three books of verse published under the pseudonym of Peter Allard?" He leaned forward, suddenly. "Now, think Mr. Dyson; they had you as a choice, a mathematical brain perhaps capable of grasping their technology or shall we say, too capable. There was Lipscombe, but perhaps he was too much of a realist... so they selected an idealist. Doesn't it strike you as significant that-- and I'll put this directly and vulgarly--that faced with two first class brains they choose a bloody poet."

Collard walked slowly along the shore feeling more than a little numb.

The shock of being chosen by the aliens as first contact had left him in a curious state of mental uncertainty which made him inclined to treat the whole matter as a dream.

The surroundings did not help. The glittering silver sand, the bluish sun burning down mercilessly from a greenish sky upon an ocean which was completely colorless.

One question kept repeating itself in his mind, a question made all

the more more irritating by the fact that he could find no satisfactory answer. Why him? Why had they chosen him? Basically he was an industrial chemist with a specialization in plastics; they, the aliens, must be centuries ahead in that field. Why not Mike, who at least might be able to meet them half way technically or, more obviously, Dyson.

He sighed and tried to forget the subject but he knew it would crop up again. In any case this subject was preferable to the now rapidly approaching contact with the aliens. He was already inventing a variety of excuses, some almost convincing, for turning round and going back. He was, at that moment, acutely aware that he was not a hero. In the company of Dyson and Lipscombe he had put up a show of confidence which had almost convinced him, but now, out on this alien beach, alone--

Even then I was drunk, he thought sadly; now I've nothing, not even a damned aspirin.

He knew that behind him men were following his progress closely through binoculars and ahead some alien intelligences were, no doubt, reading every thought in his mind.

He licked dry lips and tried to swallow saliva which somehow wasn't there. God, he was sweating like a pig and shivering at the same time.

For ahead of him something like a silver tube dropped from the sky, hovered near the shore and rose again. Where it had hovered was now a minute black speck which, no doubt, was coming towards him. A speck representing an alien being, which, to judge by its knowledge of him and his race, was primarily telepathic.

"Shaldron representative has landed and is coming to meet you as

arranged," said a voice from a two-way clip-mike attached to his collar.

Collard muttered an obscene word; the factual voice had made him jump nervously. "Yes, so I see." He hoped his voice sounded normal.

The figure of the alien was closer now. It appeared to walk on two legs and looked almost human. It was blue, wasn't it, or was it dressed in blue?

He couldn't tell.

He decided nervously that he wouldn't look until he was right on top of it. It was far better than straining his eyes and torturing his imagination with possibilities. Maybe it was human or maybe it walked on stems or tentacles. What would he say to the thing, or would it read his mind?

He clutched the gun he carried a little more tightly. The Shaldron knew about the gun; it was to protect him against the local carnivores, not that he had any faith in it for anything else. A telepath could knock him off before he had even raised it to his shoulder and, in any case, compared with this technology he was like a savage armed with a club.

He began to count his steps. At a rough estimate they were about a hundred yards apart. One... two--funny, a colorless sea; one would think it would reflect the sky. Three... four--but no, colorless as a glass of drinking water. Five... it was five wasn't it? Hell, what did it matter?

Six--tremendous tides here he'd been told. Mike, who had been out during the planet's nine hours of darkness, said there was a giant moon which looked as if it had an atmosphere.

Where was he? Call it fifteen, give it another twenty paces and then look up. Sixteen--suppose I turned round and ran back... Seventeen--oh, to hell with it!

He looked up.

No!

He stopped so suddenly he almost fell.

Chapter Eight

ON ANOTHER beach in another world, a jet torpedo boat grated on the shingle and stopped.

Dyson looked at the desolate sand and shivered slightly.

"Excuse me, sir." A tall commando Captain with a lean saturnine face saluted politely. Thought I'd better brief you on this additional equipment." He opened a small pack. "This is a nasal mask, covers the mouth and nose. At the moment we're up-wind so you may not need it, but should it veer you'll have to put it on in a hurry. The air over occupied territory is thick with a kind of metallic midge, you see. If you breathe too many it causes a kind of racing tuberculosis and you're dead in twelve hours." He paused and grinned mirthlessly. "Doesn't help much militarily either, the R.A.F. can't mount a low level air strike. Anything below seven thousand feet is suicide; intakes become choked, bearings over-heat and the crate usually crashes. If the pilot is lucky enough to get back, his ship is usually a write-off anyway."

Peel came forward. He was a stringy little man with a predominant adams apple and a straggly but aggressive black beard. "Mass bombing?"

The captain shrugged. "You blow a lot of big holes and within an hour they're recovered with this alleged vegetation. It's not like trying to clobber an army, you see. It's a kind of guerilla affair. We're trying to hold fixed lines against a number of almost invulnerable armored vehicles or, if you prefer the theory, armored creatures all of which operate independently of each other. Usually they manage to infiltrate somewhere and, before you know where you are, the damn things are coming at you from behind."

"You cheer me up," said Dyson, sourly.

Peel held up a pair of dark glasses. "Are these part of our special equipment?"

The Captain nodded. "Definitely. You'll see why for yourself when we get there. Ready to go ashore?"

Dyson nodded without speaking. The commandoes were already over the side and spreading out warily along the beach.

He glanced at Peel. "Right, come on." His voice suggested a briskness which he was far from feeling. The desolate sands depressed him, at this time of year they should have been crowded with holiday makers and echoing to the shouts of children. Again, there had been far too many dead fish in the sea for his peace of mind. It was clear that the alien ecology was by no means confined to the land.

They crossed the beach and mounted a high sea wall. At the top of the steps a pile of striped deck chairs lay in disorder as if someone had started to stack them neatly, suddenly panicked and never completed the task.

Beyond lay the town.

The seaside resort of Relton was typical of many, which had sprung up in the last half century and were completely seasonal. Normally it was overcrowded in summer but completely deserted in winter, save for a few watchmen and a small number of maintenance specialists.

Its buildings were mostly of the chalet type, the only solid structure being the combined store and post office. It had one main road, innumerable minor ones and very little else.

They left the sea wall, crossed a short strip of grass containing some wilted flower beds and stepped onto the plastic surface of Seaview Highway.

Beyond, the low temporary hotels, the restaurants and amusement arcades seemed to stare at them with blind blank eyes.

Ghost town, thought Dyson uneasily and was glad of the bodyguard of commandos.

They marched down the main street, a street thick with dust and strewn with torn paper and refuse.

The silence was frightening and familiar signs and directions served only to emphasize the town's complete emptiness.

CAR PARK. FISH AND CHIPS. MINIATURE GOLF COURSE. ICES.

To Dyson the signs seemed like half-forgotten jests or a language which he had once understood but not could now recall.

Slowly they left the buildings behind, crossed a small field of withered grass and began to climb a small slope. There was no grass on the slope and the soil had a curious oily sheen.

Dyson unslung a detector from his shoulder, switched it on and advanced slowly, holding the wide sense-plate about six inches above the soil.

Before he had walked six feet the needle jumped and he stopped.

"About four inches down." He took a trowel from his pack and went down on one knee.

The soldiers waited in a wide but alert circle while he dug.

In a few seconds he said, "Ah!" and held something out on the trowel.

Pell, crouching beside him, leaned forward. "My God!" His eyes protruded slightly. "It's a worm; I suppose you could call it a tin worm.

Did you expect to find this?"

"I expected an alien insect world but I had no idea what form it would take."

"I can't believe it." Peel inserted a watchmaker's glass in his eye and studied the creature closely. His beard quivered.

"It is almost exactly like a worm, a segmented chromium-plated worm."

He became absorbed. "The segments are flanged, I notice, and appear to revolve independently, thus providing purchase and boring pressure. I still can't believe it's alive; are you sure it's not radio controlled or something?"

"Quite certain." Dyson lifted it with a pair of tweezers and dropped it into a reinforced container. "I'll prove it to you later."

"Let's hope the damn thing doesn't bore its way out before we get it back to a laboratory." Peel looked vaguely disgruntled.

They rose and went on. At the top of the slope was a major highway, beyond which was a ditch and a high bank.

They climbed the bank and stopped as if by mutual consent. Here the familiar world ended and an alien one began.

There was half a mile of naked and oily looking soil, a kind of barren no-mans-land; beyond it the blades of metallic blue grass sparkled in the sunlight.

Beyond the grass--Dyson swallowed and tried to describe what he saw--were... trees? He supposed they were trees. They were slender silver poles from which branched thinner poles. From the thinner poles hung foot-wide strips of what looked like tin foil or uncreased silver paper, bright on one side and black on the other. Even where they stood they could hear it rustling harshly in the warm summer breeze.

Peel said, "I don't believe it." It sounded like a challenge.

The Captain came over. "Put on your glasses, please, gentlemen, and make quite certain your masks are handy." He flicked off the safety catch of his rocket rifle. "From here on you're under my orders and if I say 'run', you damn well run --is that quite clear?"

"About specimens--" began Peel.

The Captain smiled sardonically. "Don't worry about finding specimens; out there you have to worry about them finding you. Let's hope it's a type we can handle, eh?"

They walked out across the barren no-mans-land but before they had gone a hundred yards they realized that the alien world was already in control of it. Clusters of tiny transparent rubes grew from the soil and beetle-like creatures moved out of their way in lines like columns of brightly polished ants.

They found a thing like a bronze hedgehog save that it was headless and had a thin black rod protruding from the center of its back.

Peel picked it up with some long tweezers and dropped it in the specimen box.

The Commandoes, Dyson noticed, were becoming increasingly wary.

They walked springily, narrow-eyed, fingers hooked about the triggers of their weapons.

Exactly twenty seconds later, a man at the far end of the line shouted; "Tiger!"

It didn't look like a tiger. To Dyson it was a six foot oil drum racing towards them on six spidery legs. Only later did he discover that its blackness was in subtle variations giving the appearance of stripes, but he had no time to consider the matter then.

Near him a rocket rifle made a sound like suddenly rent canvas and he saw the projectile rush towards the oil drum and strike its side.

The creature staggered; flame and smoke enveloped it briefly and then it was racing towards them again.

The Captain dropped to one knee. "You have to hit these bastards just right, full in front." He sighted carefully, the rocket rifle uncannily steady, and squeezed the trigger.

The discharge made a plume of white smoke behind him and the missile raced away like a flaming arrow.

In the drum face of the tiger a hole appeared suddenly. The creature lurched sideways and split down one side.

Flame and smoke geysered from the opening and almost, but not quite, it fell in half.

"Got it!" The Captain patted the rifle with obvious affection. "Nice work, Greta."

Dyson barely heard him. He was still staring at the black oil drum, the wiry legs now limp like damp rope but the dead creature still conveying a suggestion of menace.

They, walked over and inspected it. Peel looked pale but his voice when he spoke was quite steady. "What I can't understand is why they attack. I mean they don't eat us, do they?"

"They don't eat us, no." The Captain sounded resigned. "It doesn't matter much when you're dead. They run you down, crush you or just kick you to death."

"It could be reflex." Peel was frowning. "A dog will attack a strange animal simply because it's alien." He sighed. "Doesn't help much, does it, Captain?"

"Unless it can be used to stop them, no." The Captain was a realist.

"Surely to God there must be some way. What about nuclear weapons?"

The Captain laughed sardonically. "Do you think they haven't been tried? You fire the damn things in and nothing happens." He paused and lit a cigarette. "The scientists think the invader is using--what was the expression--oh, yes, a damper field, which prevents the devices becoming critical." He exhaled smoke and grinned twistedly. "Well, gentlemen, game to go on?"

Peel scratched his beard. "Candidly, no, but we'll go."

"Good." There was a hint of respect in the Captain's voice. "Stick

close to me; mobile horrors are not the only thing we have to contend with. See that clump of black rods over there sprouting copper-colored pin pong balls?"

They nodded dumbly.

"Avoid them like a plague. We call them spark apples; they carry a lethal electrical charge. Then there's mustard grass, porcupine bushes--they spit needles at you--and, of course, bind wire. Get too close to bind wire and it wraps a tendril round one of your limbs and contracts fast. Usually that's your lot but you'll be minus a hand or foot anyway."

They went slowly forward. The need for dark glasses was now all too clear. Ahead of them the tinfoil trees flashed blindingly in the sunlight and the searing reflection from the mirror plants seemed to strike directly into their eyes.

When they reached the blue grass they found it almost unyielding. It was like walking on a bed of springy knife blades and made a grating sound beneath their feet.

Dyson was aware of a tang of ozone in the air and an increase in heat.

The numerous reflections and counter reflections from the polished metallic growths was raising the temperature in the immediate area considerably.

In a few years, he thought, this planet will no longer support human life.

The air will be unbreathable, the oceans polluted and the temperature far above endurable limits. Already in this small--It was then that a distant voice shouted: "Gobble Can! Alert! Gobble Can!"

The Captain slapped his shoulder. "Sorry, this is the end of the line.

This is where you turn and run."

Dyson did not argue. With Peel at his side he turned and sprinted back across the blue metallic grass.

The high bank concealing the highway seemed an enormous distance away and he had the uncomfortable feeling that something was already close behind him.

There's one thing about danger, he thought, with sudden insight. It's self-revealing. He didn't care much for what he saw, he was panic-stricken to the point of hysteria. He, the world's greatest mathematical mind, was a physical and moral coward. A human computer but with a yellow streak which went right through.

Peel tripped, fell to his knees, managed to get to his feet again but was now lagging some thirty feet behind.

Dyson did not stop to help him or wait for him to catch up. He was now so terrified that he did not attempt to justify his cowardice or rationalize his actions. Blast Peel, blast everything; it was everyone for himself. After all, he was valuable; the nation, the world needed him. At that moment Dyson almost believed it himself.

"Ease up... ease up, we're clear of the grass." Peel had finally drawn level.

Dyson heard him but it was another hundred yards before exhaustion overcame panic and he stopped, gasping for breath.

"Whatever it is, it's not clear of the trees yet. Take it easy."

Dyson nodded, unable to speak and forced himself to stop and turn. He thought that Peel was looking at him strangely or was it a little accusingly? He avoided his eyes and looked back, still gasping for breath.

The Commandos were retreating in a wide arc, in perfect discipline and, clearly, with a skill born of bitter experience. It was clear, however, that the thing they could see among the trees was an enemy they knew to be almost invulnerable. The constant bursts of diversionary fire and the care they took to avoid becoming a selected quarry showed they were no strangers to the unseen creature.

It was then he saw it himself. It rolled out of the tinfoil trees like a section of glittering bicycle chair.

Dyson was so fascinated by it that, for the moment, he forgot his fear. It was like the chromium plated worm in his specimen jar save that there were only eight segments and that each segment was six feet in height and four feet across. The thing didn't wriggle like a worm; it rolled sideways, each segment adjusting itself to variations in the level of the ground.

Faintly he could hear that it emitted a curious humming sound of variable pitch which might, with a little imagination, be called a gobble such as a turkey might make.

The rocket weapons lashed streamers of fire and, around the creature, the ground erupted in pillars of black smoke. It rolled out of the concentrated fire apparently unscathed, received a direct hit which jolted one segment but failed to slow its speed and charged the nearest commando. Instantly the man ran and a heavy diversionary fire was laid down which finally distracted the thing from its chosen quarry.

It was not as fast as the tiger; Dyson could see that. He estimated its average speed at about eight miles an hour, to which one could add another six in a charge. It was, however, fast enough to overtake and run down a running man unless he had only a short sprint to safety.

"Let's get out of here." Peel turned and ran.

Dyson followed him, feeling a flood of something which was half relief and half affection. Peel was almost as frightened as he was himself.

Dyson was forty-three and badly out of training but it seemed to him as he ran that he had no limbs, that the ache in his straining chest belonged to someone else and had no real meaning.

He never remembered crossing the highway, running through the deserted town or jumping from the high sea wall to the beach.

He knew he must have done, for seconds later he was lying full length on the deck of the J.T.B., panting for breath and soaked with perspiration.

Peel lay beside him, one limp hand dangling in the water, conscious that his wrist watch was beneath the surface but too exhausted to care.

The Commandos began to come in, appearing briefly on the sea wall, firing, then dropping to the beach.

"Stay flat!" The voice had the rasp of authority.

Flat? thought Dyson, wearily. I couldn't raise my head, move my little finger, couldn't--

It was then that the gobble can rolled to the edge of the sea wall.

Chapter Nine

ON ANOTHER shore of another world, Collard stopped his mouth falling open by an effort of will.

"Greetings from the Shaldron race." The words were clear, perfectly pronounced, but had a softly liquid sound which inferred rather than conveyed the subtleties of an accent.

Collard heard himself say, "Er... how do you do?" formally and in a hideously unnatural voice, and he knew he was staring rudely.

He hadn't expected this; he hadn't expected anything like... like a woman.

She looked about twenty-five and had her blue-black hair swept to the left and hanging down over her left shoulder. He guessed she was about five feet tall, slender, full breasted and strangely lithe and graceful. She wore a light blue tunic which reached just to the knee but left her arms and shoulders bare. Her feet were encased in a sort of transparent sandal so non-reflective that, at first, he thought she moved fractionally above the level of the sand without actually touching it.

She held out both her hands to him. "Hello, Peter. Don't be alarmed; I'm quite real." She smiled; her face was heart-shaped, full-lipped but dominated by amazingly large and expressive dark eyes.

"You're... you're human!" He knew he sounded stupid and slightly uncouth but was past caring.

She laughed. The sound to him was husky and strangely attractive. "Let us be practical. To you I am human and to me you are

Shaldronoid.

Biologically, it may interest you to know, there is no difference in our respective races whatever."

He swallowed, unaccountably delighted with the information and more than a little embarrassed to discover that she did things to him. When he looked at her there was an uncomfortable tightness in his throat and-- He felt himself coloring; she could read minds, couldn't she?

He said, awkwardly, "Do I have to talk? I mean, you people are telepaths aren't you?"

She laughed again. "Alas, no, but we have an instrument-- the pathersense--which we can tune in to the brain cycles of an intelligence.

One could, I suppose, refer to it as a telepathic instrument but, without it, we must, like you, rely on the spoken word."

"Thank God for that." For the first time he managed to smile, then suddenly remembered his two-way mike. "Excuse me--Collard here, phase one successfully accomplished." He broke contact hastily before they started asking questions.

"Our ferry will be here very soon," she said and held his hand unselfconsciously. "Everyone is eager to meet you."

Collard was shocked to feel a tingling sensation from the contact. Hell, he was thirty-five not a gangling adolescent Furthermore, he had never regarded celibacy as a virtue; there had been many women in his life, perhaps too many. Nonetheless he made no effort to break the contact, despite an intense and mounting embarrassment.

She said, "Dax, our director of research, will try and help your race."

"Yes... er... thank you." He hesitated. "There's just one question, a personal question, I'd like to ask first Miss... er--"

"Vrayle," she supplied. "We do not select our names as does your race."

Our names are based upon the findings of the psycho-assesor. When I tell you my name in our culture I also tell you the kind of person I am at the same time. In our culture, your name would be Serron."

"Serron, eh?" He rather liked it but doubted if the liquid syllables were as flattering in fact as they were in sound. He remembered his question.

"Why me? Why was I selected as contact?"

She looked up at him directly with her amazing dark eyes. "You were the only empath."

"Empath?"

"The only one sufficiently sensitive to place himself mentally in the position of another and see a situation from that viewpoint. It was essential that this contact should be a success." She smiled. "It's not unique to a given culture but it's usually part of a creative intellect." She smiled again, mischievously. "One can be an empath and not a poet but one cannot be a poet and not an empath."

"You make it as clear as mud." For some obscure reason he now felt boisterously cheerful and almost at ease. "I suppose you know everything about me?"

"Not everything; the pathersense cannot convey motivation or forgotten incidents, only the surface activity of the reasoning mind. Nonetheless, through this activity we have learned your language, classified your race and seen your world through the medium of your active memories." She paused and smiled gently. "Yours is a beautiful world, Peter, a blending of pastels, of lights and darks and brightness and shadows. Ours, although equally beautiful, is less restrained, less subtle, a series of landscapes by Van Gogh."

Collard winced slightly at the Van Gogh; surface thoughts or not, they seemed to have gone through his mind too damn thoroughly for comfort.

Before he could answer, however, a long gleaming tube dropped silently from the sky and landed on the sand beside them.

Collard remembered little of the journey to the Shaldron base; he was too busy hanging on. There was no sense of speed or movement apart from the purely visible, but the vessel was constructed from a substance so transparent that it lacked both reality and visible limits. The sensation of being whisked across the sky in nothing made him nervous and a little uneasy in his stomach.

Inside the Shaldron base he was even more disconcerted. They passed along a brightly lit corridor and emerged on a bright lawn terminating in a clear silver lake. Huge scarlet blossoms bordered the lake and there was a huge tree with blue star-shaped leaves.

Vrayle squeezed his hand understandingly. "Don't worry, this is all done with mirrors or their electronic equivalent. This is one of our favorite spots on our home world. The trouble is, of course, that after a time, scenes like this make us homesick. Ah, here comes Dax."

A man was striding towards them across the apparent lawn, a lithe man, small boned, but such was the power of his personality that Collard, six inches taller, felt dwarfed before him.

"Welcome." Dax shook his hand vigorously. "Forgive me if my English is, at first, imperfect. I have only just absorbed the oral hypno-impressions. Do sit down." He waved Collard to a protuberance which, when he sat on it, changed shape disconcertingly beneath him and became a comfortable full length chair which adjusted itself immediately to every change of position.

"Thank you." Collard, aware that Vrayle had withdrawn discreetly, was suffering curious and inexplicable pangs of emotional loss, but he studied the other covertly. He saw a small, dark-skinned man with straight black hair and a thin subtly humorous mouth. The small slightly beaky nose and deeply set black eyes gave him, however, the curiously brooding alertness of a hawk.

Dax said, "Before anything else, my friend, I must know more about this warp. With due respect, it is far beyond the technical ability of your race and, to be frank, far beyond ours. How was it created?"

Collard frowned. "I am an industrial chemist, not a scientist but as near as I can tell you we copied it. Lipscombe took output and energy readings with standard instruments and managed to duplicate the effect with existing equipment."

"I see." Dax stroked his cheek with the tip of his finger in meditative but peculiarly alien gesture. "You know, Mr. Collard, by science I can duplicate the visible area of an iceberg but the greatest area lies beneath the surface."

"What are you getting at?" Collard had a sudden premonition of danger.

"Precisely this: the most important part of this static sub-continuum warp lies beneath the surface and cannot be duplicated by your technology or mine. Although we use a similar principle in our star ships, our science is incapable of building or even understanding the complicated inter-dimensional dampers needed for safe operation. Bluntly, Mr.

Collard, out there is the equivalent of a high pressure steam engine without a safety valve. We do not know how to build such a valve and neither do you. Oh, yes, it will run safely for a while, the surplus energy dissipating normally, but there are exact and precise limits to this process. After a given period a nucleus forms and then the energy becomes accumulative."

"You mean it will explode or something?" Collard had a cold feeling inside.

"Explode!" Dax raised and dropped his hands loosely. "Mr. Collard, in such titanic releases of energy entire galaxies are often destroyed and reborn."

"How long before--" Collard licked dry lips and did not finish the sentence.

"Our instruments inform us that you have exactly eighteen days. Within and up to that period the warp may be deactivated in safety but if you are unwise or desperate enough to continue beyond that point--" Dax spread his thin brown hands in a gesture which was all too expressive.

"What do we do?" Collard's voice was thin and a little shaky.

"Well." Dax smiled suddenly. "Clearly we must settle the problem of your invader within eighteen days."

"Can you?" Collard was filled with an overwhelming despair. "You have already admitted that the invader surpasses even your science."

Dax nodded. "True. The invader is technically far superior to my own race but it is an extravert culture and, as such, may have many psychological weaknesses."

Collard shrugged. "If I understood it might help."

"We will explain as we go along. Your invader has yet to be studied at close quarters and their numbers and methods assessed by our instruments. We are doubtful if the pathersense can tune in to an electronic intelligence but we are confident that we can obtain a clear picture of their psychology by studying their methods of conquest."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Naturally we shall accompany you through the warp and place all our scientific resources at your disposal."

"Why?" Collard was suddenly suspicious.

Dax met his eyes. "You would like a frank answer? Yes, I see you would.

Very well, in the first place, the existence of the warp threatens the existence of both our races and must be de-activated as swiftly as possible.

The second reason you may not like but I promised you a frank answer.

Your race, as a whole, is at a stage of development where

desperation, suspicion or emotional pressure might over-ride its good Judgment.

Numerically we should stand little chance if you choose to attack us."

"So you're buying us off?"

"Please, it is not quite such naked expediency as it appears. We, as a race, would deplore the entire annihilation of your people and, ethically and morally, are duty-bound to offer you assistance. Again, who knows, one day this electronic lifeform may select a Shaldron world for conquest and it is well to be experienced and prepared."

Collard said, "Thank you for your honesty." Then, with a twisted smile.

"You don't rate us very highly do you?"

Dax smiled gently. "Again I will be frank; cultural levels are general levels but there are many of your people, including yourself, equal to, if not above the general level of our culture. You, for example, on the basis of your creative ability would be an admirable and welcome addition to our culture, not to mention your specialization in a realm of chemically constructed substances about which we know little."

Collard looked at him and laughed almost rudely. "Know little! You must be centuries ahead of us."

"You are mistaken. Our worlds are so abundant in natural resources that the need for chemically contrived substitutes is only just arising. We are specialists in alloys but veritable infants in the field of plastics. You could teach us much."

Collard looked at him suspiciously. "Is this an invitation?"

"If our efforts prove unsuccessful you could call it that"

"And if they are?"

"Then it is a sincere invitation; we should prefer you to come of your own free will."

Collard frowned. "It's clear you don't hold out much hope."

Dax smiled. "You have the soaring hopes and abysmal pessimisms of the true creative."

Collard ignored the remark. "Tell me, would you have any objection to us running here, evacuating our population via the warp to this world?"

"None whatever. The Mother ship will be picking us up within a week or so and then this planet will be entirely yours except for a small number of natives. On the other hand, my friend, let us be practical: your warp is restricted; only three people may pass through it at once. How many, or more tragically, how few of your people will you be able to evacuate within eighteen short days? On what will you feed them and how will you accommodate them? Unless, of course, you include the necessary supplies and equipment to maintain them, in which case you will cut down their numbers even more."

"Thanks for nothing." Collard felt sick with despair.

Dax looked at him sympathetically. "I perceive that you are emotionally exhausted. May I suggest a few hours rest before we leave? If you lean back, your chair will change into a bed."

Collard never discovered if Dax used some form of hypnosis or was making a plain statement of fact, but suddenly he was utterly weary. He leaned back and seemed to fall into soothing darkness.

Dax waited until his breathing was regular, then called Vrayle. "Well?"

he said in his own tongue.

She looked at him with troubled eyes. "Can we help them?"

"You know the facts as well as I. Perhaps, when we have made a more thorough study from the vantage point of Earth we may learn something helpful, but, at the moment, the data is not encouraging." He paused, frowning. "What is troubling you, Vrayle? I have known you long enough to recognize the signs."

"Do they show so much?"

"Yes, I'm afraid they do."

"Don't you know?" Her eyes were suddenly filled with tears. "All the hundreds of trillions of Shaldron males and it had to be a human."

"You mean he's your responsive affinity?" His voice was gentle and without surprise.

"You do not oppose?"

"On what grounds could I oppose? There are no biological differences between our two races and, I must confess quite unconsciously, I have been preparing the ground for you."

"But the Supreme Elect."

"The Elect would much rather have you united even to a human. The failure of the Board of Eugenics to find you a responsive mate has been a sore point at all committee meetings for some time." He

smiled. "Feel better now?"

"Much better, thank you." She nodded vigorously but her eyes were still filled with tears. He was human; would he know, would he understand?

Would he be repelled to discover that the females of her race had developed certain intuitive faculties in respect of a suitable mate. Again, did he or would he feel the same way?

At that moment all Vrayle's training and all her vast experience of the functioning intelligence had gone by the board. It had been swept away by an overwhelming emotion. The years of hopelessness, of her friends' sympathy and compassion had gone on so long and now, of all things, he wasn't Shaldron, he was Human.

At that moment she was not sure if love was a sweet or bitter thing.

Chapter Ten

ON THE OPPOSITE side of the warp, Dyson stared at the gobble can with a feeling of absolute despair. They were trapped; they would never get away in time unless they backed out and left half the commandos. The Navy wouldn't do that, he knew, which meant--

"Keep your heads down."

What the devil was the man shouting about?

"Number one battery fire!"

Dyson's ears were suddenly numbed by an appalling rending sound.

Acrid smoke and fiery particles swirled about him and the vessel bucked like a live thing beneath him.

The gobble can vanished in a tower of flame; smoke billowed across the beach and a huge section of concrete fell out of the sea wall.

Dyson was still half stunned by the noise but he got a rough outline of what happened.

The gobble can, although impervious to side arms, was by no means invulnerable to a four inch bazooka battery. The ship had been prepared, perfectly positioned and the commander, firing over open sights, had let fly with all eight barrels.

Three segments of the creature were blown to fragments; a fourth had a hole right through it, while another segment, apparently undamaged, was blown sixty feet clear of the parent body.

The remainder wobbled uncertainly, rolled slowly off the sea wall and

crashed to the shingle. Twice it rolled towards the sea and twice back and then, suddenly, it was still. Stray wisps of bluish vapor crawled upwards from it and, in some strange way, it seemed to lose luster. It was as if the bright surfaces had suddenly become tarnished and no longer reflected the light and, somehow, somewhere, there was a hint of invading rust.

"It's dead." The saturnine captain had appeared from somewhere and was now standing by the vessel up to his knees in water. "Yes, I've seen it happen before. Once they lose that sort of sheen we know they're well and truly knocked out." He grinned, showing very white teeth. "Damn good show; we never lost a man."

Peel raised himself slowly to his knees. "We could use that undamaged segment on the sea wall. The interior might be intact and, if so, we need it in the laboratory."

"I'll see to it at once; then we'd better get away from here. These things seem to have some kind of special sense and will come looking for us. It always happens when you knock one of them out."

"A sort of reprisal, I suppose." Peel sounded exhausted, yet calm, but, at that moment, Dyson despised him. A feeling which he sensed but refused to recognize was reaction from his own feelings of guilt.

He said, wearily. "No, not a reprisal. We're not dealing with the occupation force, we're dealing with their ecology."

"But-

"Oh for God's sake, man, think. If you had let loose a pack of wolves in a world of defenseless sheep, would you care what happened to one wolf? I doubt if the invaders know or care what happens to individual life-units."

Hours later, back in the laboratory, scientists scowled disbelievingly at the interior of the gobble can.

"We haven't a science to deal with this." It had taken them two hours to cut the segment open with electro-torches and now they were confronted with a functioning mechanism which Dyson claimed stubbornly was alive.

"I'll agree it's an independent functioning unit." A cybernetist waved his arms angrily. "But I cannot agree it's natural. Are you seriously asking me to believe in the equivalent of living armored vehicle." He glowered.

Dyson glowered back. "My God, your brain is small, Cheavers. You accept, without thinking, the incredibly hard chitin of beetles which, when boiled down, is an organic substance. Why, for heavens sake, can't you visualize a life-form with a metallically based defensive shell?"

Peel and another biologist came in with a pile of notes. "We've made tests; the creature has an intelligence level comparable to the large carnivores." He looked at the cybernetist almost with sympathy. "I'm sorry, old chap; to all intents and purposes it is alive." He pointed at the dissected fragments. "These veins of metal in the interior shell are conducting mediums and correspond to the organic nervous system. They convey electrical impulses in just the same way that the human nervous system conveys nerve impulses when the brain gives orders to the body."

"All right, all right." Cheavers voice was petulant. "Photocell nerve centers, transistorized responses, radar vision, the lot. Only I built a simpler version of this blasted thing in my laboratory four years ago."

Peel looked at him. "Last August an international team of British,

Russian and American scientists built artificial life cells in a laboratory. I am still prepared to concede, however, that life cells occur naturally." He turned away.

Dyson, listening, also turned away. Somehow it had all become meaningless and quite without purpose. What could one do against a lifeform like that? Some sort of inhibitor field, for example, a sort of jamming device, would stop only one type of creature and let another through. In any case, the device would only stun, not kill. They had no known method of beaming a voltage of sufficient power to burn out the electrical nervous systems of these things.

It was at that moment that Collard came in. Dyson saw him almost without recognition; it seemed centuries ago that they had shaken hands selfconsciously on the alien beach and the other had gone off to make contact with the aliens.

Lipscombe was there also and, good heavens, Proctor. The man was smiling and rubbing his hands in a manner which could only be described as obsequious.

There were two strangers also. A dark, hawk-like man in an ill-fitting gray suit which in no way detracted from the power of his personality and a striking looking girl in a simple but effective costume.

The aliens--the Shaldron! Dyson knew it without being told, yet somehow he was shaken. He hadn't visualized them as being humanoid.

He went over and Collard performed brief introductions. "Had to dress them up; security measure, you know." He smiled. "They're here to help but we'll have to hurry; time is running out fast." He explained as rapidly and as concisely as possible what Dax had told him about the warp.

"Energy dispersal!" Dyson felt himself pale. Of course, he should have seen it, should have known the surplus energy had to go somewhere, but it had never occurred to him it could build up and become accumulative. He could see it in his mind; the nucleus would expand, contract and finally become unstable. Only mathematics gave him an outline of what would happen but he visualized a flash which would light the universe from one end to the other.

He turned to speak to the aliens but the man was deep in conversation with a group of experts. The girl, a small glittering instrument in the palm of her hand was studying a pile of reports.

"What is she doing?"

"Studying battle reports." Collard stood near her, almost, Dyson thought, as if he were protecting her.

"What the hell for?"

"She hopes to be able to classify the invader by the functioning and behavior of his imported ecology."

"I see." Dyson shrugged and turned his attention to the other alien. Dax was asking precise questions and expecting precise answers.

"And you say nuclear weapons have been used without effect?"

"They never became critical; they seem to be using some sort of damper field which inhibits a chain reaction."

"Of what type are these nuclear devices?"

"What we call restricted. That is to say, designed for small specialized targets. The area of complete destruction although limited is far more intense in the immediate area."

"I see, and pollution and contamination factors?"

"They are all 'clean'. International science has succeeded in cutting out harmful radiations and subsequent pollution of the atmosphere almost completely."

Dax nodded gravely. "Thank you. The information may be of great use later."

Dyson managed to get near him at last and after some preliminary politeness asked a pointed question himself. "Can you stop this invasion?"

Dax looked at him thoughtfully. "If you mean have we a weapon capable of ridding your planet of this invader, the answer is no. Neither have we the facilities for constructing such a weapon. We have a limited number of small arms, some of which may be capable of stopping some of the life forms described to us, but, by no means, all of them."

"Have you a plan?"

"We have a tentative plan which cannot be completed until Vrayle has classified your invader." He paused and smiled. "We have been given to understand that a closer study involves an ocean journey in a small war vessel. Our little group which I believe includes Mr. Lipscombe, Mr.

Collard and yourself, can get down to real details on the outward journey."

Dyson would normally have reacted vigorously to the implied evasion but his mind was already occupied with more personal problems. An ocean journey in a small war vessel? They were going back; they

were sending him back. They were going to sail blithely into all those bloody dangers again, probably land on the same beach, march through the same holiday town, meet the same damn gleaming horrors. Suddenly he was sick with fear.

It was almost the same but it was bigger this time. There were four J.T.B.'s, an L.C.I, carrying a large detachment of commandos and two L.C.T.'s carrying some light vehicles, rocket artillery and a number of half-tracks. Later they would rendezvous two nuclear destroyers and a cruiser whose business it would be to stand off-shore and provide supporting fire where necessary.

In the cramped space of the leading J.T.B. Dyson argued bitterly and nervously. "But how the hell can you hope to knock out a superior technology with an admittedly inferior one?"

"We have a three point plan." Dax the alien was infuriatingly calm. "We have brought with us certain equipment which, we hope, will inhibit this alien life over a limited area. We have also managed to put together a device which, for short periods, will render the means of access to this planet unstable."

"I don't get it." Dyson was inclined to raise his voice but managed to keep it level. "What point is there in a limited inhibitor field?"

"The alien imagines his ecology to be almost invulnerable; the discovery that it is not may give him cause for thought." Dax smiled faintly. "He will be in the position of a man with a nice green lawn who has taken the precaution of protecting it against all known pests with a multiple insecticide. What happens when, one morning, he awakes to find his cherished lawn has a large brown patch? Might he not come out to find out why?"

Dyson snorted inwardly but made no comment. It seemed a pretty

negative sort of move to him. "And this unstabilizer or whatever it is, what does that do?"

"Your invader has gained access to this planet by means of a warp similar to your own. While not claiming that our device will sever that link, we do know it will suffer from periods of instability. It is like an army which has invaded an island by the use of a strong bridge; our device will render that bridge, for brief periods, unsafe for transit."

"Is that all?" Dyson was shocked and incredulous.

"By no means. The two factors hinge on a psychological assault. Your invader is, by our standards, a non-participant aggressor and, as such, has certain weaknesses. He has, for example, little or no direct military experience. He is not versed in tactics, combat techniques and other skills common to most warlike races. He is, by nature, a parasitic intelligence, content to sit back and allow his violent imported ecology to do the work of conquest for him."

Dyson nearly said, "We had that worked out for ourselves" but checked himself in time. He had the frustrated feeling that the whole business was pointless and that Dax was making a gesture of co-operation and nothing more. As far as he could see, it was a formality; they were going to shake their fists at the aggressor, pull faces and run away. How the hell had this damned alien convinced Proctor he was sincere and really intended to do something? No doubt the answer was fairly simple--that overwhelming personality. Dax had charmed Proctor into acceptance, dominated him by superior intelligence and force of character.

Dax turned to Lipscombe. "I have been studying your figures and readings by which the static warp was duplicated. I note, with great interest, that a few seconds prior to switching them off completely, the readings having by then been noted, two of the more sensitive

instruments were burned out. The Miezzer-graph also jumped clear of the paper and the indicator needle of cyclometer visibly bent as if it had come up hard against the stop maximum. Can you account for this?"

Lipscombe shook his head. "Sorry, it was such a damned mix-up at the end."

Collard said, "I should say that that was when our blokes started flaring up like match heads, damn near a whole regiment copped it. Is it significant?"

"Indirectly, yes. According to your battle reports, this is the only recorded instance in which the aggressor directly applied his own weapons. The enormous application of power and, incidentally, enormous waste of energy only goes to confirm our previous findings of inexperience and military inefficiency. In our opinion, this is a clumsy, wasteful and inefficient weapon."

"It did the job." Dyson was almost savage. Dax smiled tolerantly. "I can use a ten ton crane to lift a paper bag but it's hardly an efficient or economical way of doing the job."

An hour later they landed on the same beach. Two L.C.I.'s were already there and there was a large contingent of commandos already on the beach.

"Well, well, we meet again, sir." The saturnine Captain saluted, grinning.

Dyson almost scowled at him. It seemed there were certain incomprehensible mentalities who reveled in this dangerous sort of business.

"A woman!" The Captain looked both shocked and pleased. "Isn't

that damn risky?"

"She's a specialist." This time Dyson did scowl.

"Nice, very nice indeed. Is she English?"

"Her presence here is classified information," said Dyson stiffly. "I must ask you not to refer to the matter again."

The Captain said, "Yes, sir." But he winked.

They climbed the sea wall, passed through the town and crossed the highway, but there they had to stop. Beyond the low bank was nothing but the blue metallic grass; the no-mans-land had been swallowed completely.

There were more tinfoil trees, more mirror plants and the reflected brightness struck painfully at their eyes even through the dark glasses. It was like looking at a surrealist landscape in the center of a white hot furnace.

"We'll set up our equipment here." Dax was brisk and authoritative and no one thought to question his decision. It was as if he had been tacitly promoted to complete commend.

The commandos spread out along the road and two halftracks rolled onto the highway. They turned in unison and stopped, presenting their backs to the alien terrain. A second later the retractable tailboards slid back exposing in the rear of each vehicle, two three-point-nine multiple rocket batteries.

This time we're prepared, thought Dyson, but then remembered, grimly, that the entire army had been prepared but, despite that, had been in constant retreat ever since.

Chapter Eleven

"NOTHING YET." Lipscombe was leaning against the bank studying the alien landscape through binoculars.

"We hope not." Collard was standing by Vrayle. She had a curious instrument on a tripod which appeared to consist of numerous prisms which swirled with color.

"Now we'll see, shall we?" She smiled up at him and placed a gold colored metal band round her head. She touched the prisms with the tips of her fingers, closed her eyes and concentrated.

"Twenty." She removed the band from her head slowly. "As we feared, it is impossible to read an electronic mind."

"What do you mean by twenty?" Dyson was frowning.

She looked at him, her brilliant dark eyes direct unwavering. "I was referring to my readings and, of course, the numbers of aliens."

"Twenty!" Dyson almost exploded.

"I am sorry but that is the truth; eleven structures only are controlled by the invader. The entire occupation force consists of exactly twenty intelligences."

Dyson half raised his hand in protest then nodded somberly. It could make sense: a group of specialists, invasion experts, preparing an alien world for future colonization. Thank God it wasn't two thousand; Earth would have gone under in a single day.

He glanced at Dax. The alien was busily constructing a compact mechanism which was beginning to bear a curious resemblance to a

toy fort. Visually, at any rate, it appeared to be constructed of crystal and brightly polished copper.

Pretty, thought Dyson, sourly. I wonder if it does anything.

He turned and looked at the alien landscape and past experience came rushing back to him. It looked quiet enough now, but at any minute-- This time I am going to die, he thought. The idea struck him as particularly sad and there was the nagging realization that he would be unable to read his own obituary and the various tributes in the scientific journals. God he was cracking up fast, wasn't he?

It was then that someone shouted, "Unicorn!" and the rocket, batteries opened up with an appalling series of rending noises a bare thirty feet away. He strained his eyes but a swirl of smoke gave him only a blurred impression of something glittering which was racing towards them across the grass.

Lipscombe, up-wind with the binoculars, was better placed, but what he saw gave him a cold feeling inside.

The unicorn was twenty feet long and looked like a bejewelled beetle.

Protruding from the front of the creature was a black rod about nine feet long terminating in a small copper-colored ball. He was unable to see how it moved; the bejewelled shell was so close to the ground it was impossible to tell whether it ran on innumerable legs or, for that matter, wheels or tracks.

He stiffened abruptly, realizing that most of the projectiles had ricocheted off the creature and were exploding in its immediate vicinity.

It was then that Dax stepped forward quickly with something in his hand which looked like a black pencil. He pointed it like a gun and a shimmering green sphere about as big as a golf ball appeared at the pointed tip. There was no other reaction, no sound, no flash and no apparent recoil, but the effect on the unicorn was immediate if not spectacular.

It halted its headlong charge and slithered abruptly sideways. A movement which, to Lipscombe, conveyed both pain and shocked disbelief.

Dax kept the weapon pointed steadily and the unicorn raced back towards the tinfoil trees.

There was a glowing red spot on the creature's back as it slithered the other way, charged again, veered off then retreated and two or three of the commandos cheered delightedly.

"Far too slow." The green sphere disappeared from the end of the 'pencil' and Dax returned it to his pocket.

"It ran." Dyson sounded jubilant.

"A deterrent only." The alien returned to his equipment.

They waited but the unicorn did not re-appear and nothing came out of the alien jungle.

Lipscombe was conscious of a curious feeling of foreboding which Collard obviously shared. His troubled expression showed that he, too, thought that this was too easy, too quiet, and that this was the calm before the storm.

No one else seemed to feel it. The saturnine Captain divided his time between keeping a careful watch through his binoculars and

looking appreciatively at the alien girl.

The commandos leaned on the bank, checked their equipment, conversed in low voices and smoked continuously.

Dyson, chewing a cheroot, was troubled only by the time factor. When was this blasted alien going to finish fiddling with his blasted equipment.

Surely such an advanced technology could expedite matters with greater efficiency. Was all this testing really--

Dyson never finished his angry thought. A scant seventy feet away the surface of the highway exploded suddenly and a thing like a metal fire hose rose thirty feet into the air and stood there swaying like a headless brass cobra.

Near it, Lipscombe ducked, as someone let fly with an automatic weapon. There was a futile spatter of explosive pellets and then the thing toppled sideways across one of the half-tracks.

There was a crumpling of metal, a choked scream from the driving cab, but, before they could do anything, three more brass cobras rose from the roadway and fell towards them.

Somehow the whole incident fell into Dyson's mind in a series of brief and vivid pictures.

He saw Dax jump sideways, pulling his miniature mechanism with him.

He saw Lipscombe leap wildly and avoid death by a hair breadth.

He saw Collard leap forward, sweep the alien girl off her feet, and sprint to a safe distance with her in his arms.

He had no clear recollection of moving himself but he found himself, breathless, at least a hundred feet away from his original position.

There was silence; dust drifted away with the wind. A commando lay face down in the road with one of the metallic things across his back.

Clearly he was dead; blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and he stared sightlessly at a still smoking cigarette a bare inch from his outstretched finders.

Suddenly, despite his terror, Dyson had the answer to something which had been nagging at his mind for a long time. He knew why the alien things attacked. This was a unified ecology and reacted in much the same way as the human body to foreign substances or virus invasion. They, the human defenders, were an irritant and, as soon as they offered resistance, the alien ecology brought pressure to bear in exactly the same way that the human body reacted to the invasion of dangerous virus through a cut in the skin.

Dyson knew he was right. The alien ecology had advanced most rapidly where the armed forces had put up the heaviest resistance and, only slowly, where it had been impossible to offer resistance in time. God, what an ingenious way of conquering a planet.

Collard lowered the alien girl slowly to the ground and was conscious of a certain unsteadiness of movement. Her body had felt soft and yielding in his arms and he had experienced an almost overwhelming urge to kiss her mouth.

"I am quite capable of running." She smoothed her costume carefully.

"Further, I am unused to being handled. Nonetheless, I suppose you meant well. Thank you." Her tone was severe but there was something glowing and excited in her eyes which belied her words.

Had he noticed it he would have felt less chastened and crestfallen but his mind was occupied at that moment with himself.

God, I'm in love with her, he thought savagely. In love with a woman, an alien woman, he had known only a few days. It was hopeless, of course; it was like an apeman asking a human woman for her hand in marriage.

The whole thing was laughable, grotesque and doomed before it began.

He said, awkwardly, "I'm sorry, it was reflex. In my culture it is incumbent upon the male to protect the female."

She laid her hand gently on his. "Yes... yes, I know, I'm sorry I was abrupt. It is the same in my culture, too, but... but less violent. You took me by surprise."

At the point of attack, it was, as usual, the saturnine Captain who reacted first.

"Hold your positions and watch that damned jungle! Corporal Miles, take three men and get those cutting torches out of the half-track."

He had, it seemed, a torch in his own equipment, for already he was directing the foot long, blue-white electro-flame at the thickest part of the hose pipe, which was, all too clearly, a root. It writhed as the flame touched it and lashed savagely backwards.

The Captain swayed his body adroitly out of the way. "Missed, you brass bastard!" He almost looked as if he were enjoying himself.

Dyson, his back pressed to the bank, felt a thrill of admiration which was almost resentment. Intellectually, he could make the saturnine

Captain look like a gibbering idiot, but he and the blasphemous commandos were men. What the hell was he?

"Stand back, please." It was Dax, curt and authoritative. The 'pencil' had appeared again with the green sphere shimmering at the point.

A section of the brass colored root glowed white hot, began to melt, then suddenly ceased to exist. The root became two sections, one of which lashed frantically and ineffectually at nothing while the other fell limply to the road. Almost instantly it began to tarnish and there was a spreading greenish discoloration resembling verdigris.

The success of the alien weapon was, however, short lived. On the seaward side of the highway the soil exploded again and three more alien growths swayed upwards between them and safety.

In the undamaged half-track a speaker began a warning in futile code.

"Neptune calling Spearhead--attention! Wolf Pack, bearing W.2 and heading E.5. Do you hear me? Over."

From the sea came the sudden rending sound of rocket salvos. Debris and columns of black smoke leapt upwards from the distant shore.

The Captain shook his head. "It looks impressive but they won't get many. They'll spread out, disperse, run for cover; they've been clobbered before. You only have to catch them once and the next time they're ready."

He saluted Dax. "What do we do, sir? They're behind us; we don't stand a chance against a whole pack. If we start now, with a radio controlled barrage from the ships, we might just make the beach."

"We stay here." Dax sounded almost casual. "Hold them off if possible for ten minutes, by which time I shall be finished."

The Captain made rapid mental calculations. "Try and make it five, sir."

These things are fast and damned difficult to hit."

"Ten." Dax handed him the 'pencil'. "Press the flat end to activate, press again to shut off. Point the weapon and squeeze. The invisible beam narrows to hard pressure, widens to light pressure--clear?"

"Quite clear, sir." The Captain saluted again. He looked like a child who had been presented with a long cherished toy, then was suddenly grim again. He touched the command amplifier attached to his belt "Attention please, all non-coms and protected personnel are to keep close to and behind the troops. In a few moments we shall be under attack by a large wolf pack. These creatures are very fast so do not attempt to run, whatever the circumstances." He paused. "Spare weapons are being issued at number one halftrack to those of you with weapon certificates or regular, territorial, or forces reserve identity letters. Thank you." He went over to the opposite side of the highway, leaned on a sign which said, JUNCTION ONE MILE AHEAD, and began to give brisk orders to his men.

Dyson breathed an inward sigh of relief. Thank God he was not a territorial and had no weapon permit. Someone else would have to do the actual fighting.

As if in answer to his thought a dark-skinned private appeared and saluted, "I've been detailed to take care of you, sir." He had a rocket rifle beneath his arm and several grenades dangled from his belt, but Dyson derived little comfort from his presence. Only one bodyguard?

He climbed a little way up the steep bank and edged closer to a small group of soldiers who were digging a shallow slit trench. Somehow the bank gave an illusory sense of protection which he was unable to resist.

"What are these... er... wolves like?"

The private, lighting a stub of cigarette frowned. "They're a bit difficult to describe, sir. We only call them wolves because they come at you in packs, not singly like the others. Fortunately they're soft-skinned; you can knock 'em out with an automatic if you hit them right. Trouble is they run so funny, sort of veering like and they're so bloody fast."

"What..." Dyson swallowed nervously, "what do they do if they get close?"

The private shrugged. "Run you down, lash with their legs, even roll on you--they're not fussy. They weigh about a quarter of a ton so you've had your chips either way."

Dyson scowled and thought, but did not say, thank you very much, bitterly.

He turned away. Two men had cut a hole in the cab of the damaged half-track and were now lifting something out. The something looked like a limp and battered toy, but, to his surprise, it managed to grin bloodily and jerk a defiant thumb at its rescuers.

"Alert... wolves!" The announcement, through a command amplifier, was so toneless it was almost indifferent but Dyson felt sudden ice in his stomach. Instinctively he looked towards the sea.

They came racing out of the holiday town like impossible toys on long bright legs and he had the sudden feeling that he had seen something like them somewhere before. Yet there had never been

anything like this on Earth at anytime, anywhere. They were huge dull brown eggs racing out of the town on two silver cables.

Dyson, rigid with terror, realized suddenly where he had seen them-- in a nature film. There was something in the position, something in the way the bright legs rose and fell that gave them a fantastic resemblance to a headless ostrich.

Dully he was aware of the sound of weapons. Four of the racing things fell over, six were blown to fragments, but more poured from the deserted town and the surrounding countryside. Numbly he appreciated the private's words. Not only were the creatures fast, but they moved erratically and with a curious swaying motion which made them difficult targets even for a skilled marksman.

Two more blew to fragments, then four went down together in a heap.

"Four wolves with one pencil." The Captain, his face streaked with dirt and sweat, was grinning wolfishly. "Watch your right flank, Miles!"

It was then that Dyson became aware of a single creature, which seemed to have come from nowhere, racing down the highway directly towards them. God, it was coming straight at him.

The private stepped forward. "All right, sir, I'll--"

Dyson never heard him finish the sentence and was never quite sure what happened. Perhaps the bank was slippery or perhaps he put his foot on a loose stone but before he could lift the rifle he stumbled and fell heavily to the ground.

Dyson looked wildly round for a way of escape and realized he would never get clear in time. He had nothing with which to defend himself, no hope of-- It was then he saw the pickaxe lying by the half-finished

slit trench. He snatched at it wildly, knowing he was clutching at a straw, and raised it high above his head.

The thing was nearly on him. God it was huge, a good nine feet.

He swung with all his strength.

There was a curious crumpling noise, the pickaxe was snatched from his hands, and he was flung spinning against the bank.

Dazed, conscious of an aching numbness in his right cheek, he saw the creature pitch forward and go slithering along the highway, the bright legs trailing limply behind it. Protruding from a jagged hole in its side was half the pick.

Chapter Twelve

"I'M SORRY, I slipped or something. You all right, sir?" The private was at his side, fumbling for his first aid pack. "You took a swipe on the side of the face, nasty broken bruise." He paused, powdered the wound and looked at Dyson with marked respect. "You did something there, sir; knocked out a wolf with an axe. I don't think that's ever been done before.

I know they're relatively soft skinned compared to some of the horrors, but hell, you must be strong."

"I was scared sick." Dyson was suddenly afflicted with an overwhelming modesty. "I swung at it in a panic." Deep down inside him, however, was the growing realization that he had regained his self-respect. For once, although terrified, he had stood his ground and fought back.

Some distance away, Collard pushed the alien girl almost roughly behind him. "You stop there, you're not even armed." He fired at a racing wolf, missed, fired again and had the satisfaction of seeing a jagged hole appear in its side. It pitched sideways and rolled over and over like an egg.

"What am I to you?" Her voice was direct and almost challenging.

"What?" He shrugged suddenly. More and more of the things seemed to be coming and it was clear that they could not hold out much longer.

"Well, since you ask and since I don't expect to come out of this alive--"

He stopped, suddenly bitter. "This is the hell of a laugh but I suppose I'm in love with you."

She looked at him directly. "Thank you, I was afraid... afraid you were never going to tell me about it. You see, I love you, Peter; I knew the day we met, the first time I held your hand."

"I am ready." Dax, surrounded by a small circle of grim faced commandos, leaned down and touched one of the gleaming crystals of his toy-like instrument. "Now let us see."

There was no sound. Four tiny spheres changed from smoky green to violet and one of the crystals slowly turned scarlet.

"My God!" The Captain lowered the alien weapon slowly and nearly forgot to de-activate it. "Look, just look at that."

The racing hordes of the wolf pack were slowing, stumbling, pitching forward and rolling over like advancing troops caught in the concentrated cross-fire of automatic weapons.

"They're done for." He blinked as if to assure himself that his eyesight was not at fault. "They've really bought it, the whole damn horrible lot."

Some distance away Lipscombe rose slowly to his feet, dazed and disbelieving. It had happened. Over this area, at least, the alien ecology had been brought to a sudden halt. Metallic midges were drifting down in clouds, forming a coating of coppery dust on the surface of the highway.

He approached Dax. "What is the area of the inhibitor field?"

"It extends about six miles in every direction. It is not a new idea but an adaptation of one of our ancient weapons of war. In the old days

we used a device like this, projected along a directional beam, to cripple the electronic equipment of enemy vessels. Directed along a beam, of course, it had a far greater range." He smiled suddenly. "We'll give this time to register shall we?"

Around them the realization of local, if not whole scale victory sank into numerous minds. There was a ragged cheer and several tin hats sailed high into the air.

Lipscombe turned and stared at the alien jungle and saw that that too was affected. The metallic grass had a tarnished look and the tinfoil trees looked limp and greasy. The numerous mirror plants no longer reflected the sun; many were dull and succumbing to a spreading blackness.

"Yes, now, I think." Dax leaned forward and touched his device again.

"They have had time to note an incomprehensible set-back in their occupation program; now to disturb the stability of their warp."

He looked about him, then directly at Lipscombe and Dyson, his thin hawk's face thoughtful and a little troubled. "I must warn you, there may be danger. Undoubtedly, he has noted the presence of the inhibitor field and has already pin-pointed the whole area. There is also the added danger that he may panic completely and lay waste vast areas of the surrounding countryside. This, I fear, is a chance we had to take when we took counter measures against him. In any case, I advise immediate and wide dispersal, confined to groups of not more than two at the very least three hundred yards apart."

Dispersal took place quietly and without haste. It was abundantly clear that the Captain, acting under Dax's orders, had a genius for quiet leadership and considerable skill in organization.

Collard found himself with Vrayle by a small clump of trees. There was a dead wolf close by, rapidly tarnishing and spotted with rust, but it didn't seem to matter.

"God, you know I love you, but it wouldn't work, Vrayle. It wouldn't be fair to you. What would your own people say? They'd-"

"I know my own race, Peter, truly."

"I still think I'd let you down somehow."

"So you will be thoroughly terrestrial and do the noble thing?"

"Please, darling, it's so damned hard."

"Have you thought of all the empty and hopeless years ahead, our years, yours and mine?"

Lipscombe, finding himself on the edge of the holiday town, sat down on a convenient door step and lit his pipe. He was beginning to suffer from the uncomfortable feeling that this was a permanent nightmare from which he would never wake. Too much had happened in too short a time and his feelings were heightened by this familiar although frighteningly unreal stage. There were dead wolves in the deserted streets and, in the midst of them, a small motor-powered three wheeled vehicle with transparent sides on which blue letters had been superimposed. The letters said, "Mobile-ice" and slightly below, in smaller lettering, "Nelsom's Hygienic Ice Cream--All Factory Packed."

Lipscombe shook his head slowly. No, no, it couldn't really be true, it must be a dream.

They waited. Ten minutes passed, another ten, a further fifteen and

then it happened.

Lipscombe had become nervous, weary of his pipe and was studying the terrain through his binoculars.

Directly in front of him, in the center of the highway, a single commando leaned negligently against the ruined halftrack. The man had a rocket rifle tucked beneath his arm and a limp cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. His face was tough, hard, and mahogany colored.

Lipscombe had the impression he was humming to himself, completely relaxed—he died before he had a chance to tense.

One moment he was there; the next, his body gushed sudden steam, flared brightly and was gone. The twisted remains of the rifle fell slowly to the ground and a puff of vapor drifted away with the wind.

A second later, another soldier, full length in a hollow in the ground, flared like a heated match head. When the vapor drifted away only a patch of blackened grass remained.

Lipscombe felt a paralyzing terror. There was nothing one could do against this, nowhere to run and no hope of escape.

He was aware of another flare of fire some distance to his right, a single soldier running wildly across the grass and throwing away his rifle as he ran.

There was a single slapping report and the running man staggered in mid-stride and pitched forward on his face.

Lipscombe guessed, dully, that the man had been shot out of hand.

Panic was infectious and, no doubt, the commando Captain had

made sure by his action that the trouble did not spread.

He had no time to moralize for, at that precise moment, the horizon lit with a searing whiteness which seemed to dim the sun and he closed his eyes involuntarily.

When he opened them an ominous but familiar mushroom was boiling skywards. Before he could hazard a reason, there was another flash, then another and another.

He put both hands over his eyes and tried to press his prone body into the surface of the road.

There was a gigantic and metallic clap of thunder and a remote but clear impression of heat. Wind howled over his head, swirling dust stung the exposed parts of his body. Somewhere there was a tinkling of glass and something crashed heavily into the roadway. The building beside him groaned, swayed and straightened and then the wind slowly subsided.

Cautiously he opened his eyes and raised his head. The air was still thick with dust and the sun looked blurred and sullenly red. On the horizon, seven gigantic pillars of black smoke were already leaning sideways with the wind.

Seven! Seven H bombs. But how?

He became aware of cheering in the distance, of men running together and embracing, of rifles, tin hats and equipment being tossed high in the air.

On the highway three soldiers and a civilian were dancing and waving their arms wildly.

He thought, It's all over. Nothing could stand up to seven H bombs.

The invaders are gone--gone.

He was too stunned to join the others. Suddenly there was a future again, there was hope. Carol, a new life to build together, a new understanding, perhaps--dare he think it-- a better world.

Dyson lit a cheroot and glowered unseeingly out of the window. It was all over now: the cheers, the processions, the speeches. The Shaldron with much shaking of hands and official but still classified blessings had departed via the warp four hours ago. It was over, finished, done, a triumphant victory which had left him feeling bitter and frustrated.

They were going to give him a knighthood; they called him architect of victory and what had he done? Officially or, more aptly, for the benefit of the general public, there had never been a warp, and the Shaldron had never existed. It had all been done by himself and his scientific team. He had argued and argued but to no avail. "In the interests of a stable society, the public are not ready etc., etc." They had swamped him and towed him under a flood of official cliches. I did nothing, he thought. Worse, I was so obtuse and distrustful that when Dax handed me all the clues on a platter I couldn't see them, let alone put them together.

It was all so simple, really and what made it worse was the fact that had he tried to reason it out.

The facts possessed by Dax had been possessed by himself but he had been unable to add two and two.

Clearly the invader had assessed Earth carefully before invading. Had studied her technical and cultural level and knew she incapable of real resistance to a violent imported ecology.

Then along came Dax with a device which had stopped that ecology dead in its tracks. Understandably the invader became alarmed: how had the defenders come up with a device far beyond their technical capabilities? Before they could get down to causes, however, another device, also beyond the capabilities of the defenders, began to threaten their means of retreat to their home world.

The invader, as Dax had pointed out, was a non-participant aggressive and, as such, had no military background for reference. The result was, faced with two incomprehensible dangers at the same time, near panic.

Here, of course, was the point where the readings on aliens direct weapons became important. They required enormous and wasteful power, so much power in fact, that all other devices had shut off to supply them. One such device, was a damperfield which prevented nuclear weapons from becoming critical.

In a nutshell, by brilliantly applied psychology, Dax had bluffed the invader into committing his major weapons knowing full well what would happen if he did. A noose had been held up, the invader panicked into sticking his head in it and then panicked again into pulling it tight.

Looking at it from any angle the invader had rushed into destroying himself and had obligingly complied.

A knighthood, thought Dyson, bitterly and what the hell did I do to earn it.

Had he but known it, there were compensations. Dyson had been enriched and remoulded by his experiences. In years to come he would pass from the mathematical genius' of the day to one of the greatest philosophical thinkers of the age. He would join the ranks of

the immortals, but that was to come, that was not today.

He sighed and glanced across at Lipscombe, Carol and Collard who were talking quietly in the corner. They had to be here, of course; it was only proper that they should be present when he de-activated the warp forever.

God, Collard looked sick lately, looked as if he hadn't slept for weeks.

Strain probably, but he'd done a magnificent job. really magnificent.

Dyson smiled suddenly. He'd really given it to Proctor on Collard's behalf, viciously and deliberately below the belt "Mr. Collard did a wonderful job for humanity," Proctor had said.

He, Dyson, had smiled unpleasantly. "Not bad for a poet, perhaps, Mr.

Proctor? By the way, I've three names for you or your friends at the war office--Richard Church, Alun Lewis and Wilfred Owen. They were all fighting soldiers and all poets; think about it because I took the liberty of quoting your opinion to the Prime Minister."

He had left Proctor with his pink self-satisfied face drawn and frightened. It was a mean and petty triumph but it had eased a great deal of his bitterness. Anyway, Proctor deserved it.

He glanced at his watch. "Four minutes, ladies and gentlemen."

"Be with you in a minute." Lipscombe was almost offhand. He turned back to Collard. "My dear chap, you can't go on like this; you look as if you're wasting away."

"Please, darling." Carol edged him gently out of the way. "Let me

Speak to him."

Dyson couldn't hear what they were saying but after three minutes he became impatient. "Hang the lot of you, ceremony or not, this is it."

"Wait, please." Collard stepped forward quickly. "There was something I had to decide, I suppose I knew all along really but--" Suddenly he held out his hand. "Good-bye, Dyson, all the best." Then, very deliberately, he turned and walked straight into the warp."

Dyson tried to shout at him, realized the uselessness of the effort and looked accusingly at Lipscombe. "Is he mad? I must run this thing off almost immediately, he can't possibly get back in time. I daren't risk--"

"Don't worry." Carol's voice trembled a little. "We shall both miss him dreadfully but he had to go to her."

"But he won't have time." Dyson could feel his face flushing. "I dare not take the risk of holding this thing open a few minutes longer."

Lipscombe sighed and when he spoke his voice was flat and expressionless. "You don't understand, old chap. Peter has gone for good; he isn't coming back."

Collard stumbled out of the tribal hut, blinking in the sudden brilliance of the bluish sun and someone took his hand. "I knew you would come to me."

"How did you know?"

"I knew." She pressed her lips to his cheek. "Cornel" She took his hand and he thought, perhaps this has to be, the first link between the stars.

Perhaps, centuries hence, Earth will reach out to meet us and, who knows, that same ship may be commanded by a man called Dyson or Lipscombe. He was romancing, of course, but it was rather pleasant to romance now. Possibly a Shaldron, a direct descendent of a human called Collard, might go out to meet them.

She touched his hand and pointed. "Look, the mother ship. We must hurry; it is waiting for us."

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