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SIGNET
BOOKS

BRIAN ALDISS

Galaxies Like Grains of Sand

The exciting chronicle-novel of eight distant tomorrows—each another step forward into the future reaches of time and space.

A SIGNET BOOK

Galaxies Like Grains of Sand Brian Aldiss



"The thing in the synthesizer . . ." he said to Jandanagger, through the new-found medium of communication. "The thing that surrounds the Galaxy—if man can never get out, cannot it get in at us?"

For a long minute Jandanagger was silent, searching for the key phrases of explanation.

"You have learned as much as you have very rapidly," he said. "By not-understanding and then by well-understanding, you have made yourself one of the true citizens of the Galaxy. But you have only taken leap X; now you must take leap X¹⁰. Prepare yourself."

"I am prepared."

"All that you have learned is true. Yet there is a far greater truth, a truer truth. Nothing exists in the ultimate sense: all is illusion, a two-dimensional shadow play on the mist of space-time. Yinnisfar itself means 'illusion.'"

"But the clawed thing . . ."

"The clawed thing is why we fare ever farther ahead into the illusion of space. *It* is real. Only the Galaxy as you previously misinterpreted it is unreal, being but a configuration of mental forces. That monster, that thing you sensed, is the residue of the slime of the evolutionary past still lingering—not outside you, but *in your own mind*. It is from that we must escape. We must grow from it."

More explanation followed, but it was beyond Farro. In a flash, he saw that Jandanagger, with an eagerness to experiment, had driven him too far and too fast. He could not make the last leap; he was falling back, toppling into not-being. Somewhere within him, the pop-thud-pop sound of bursting arteries began. Others would succeed where he had failed, but, meanwhile, the angry claws were reaching from the heavens for him—to sunder, not to rescue.

And now the lemmings were scattered over a considerable area of sea. Few of the original column were left; the remaining swimmers, isolated from each other, were growing tired. Yet they pressed forward as doggedly as ever toward the unseen goal.

Nothing was ahead of them. They had launched themselves into a vast—but not infinite—world without landmarks. The cruel incentive urged them always on. And if an invisible spectator had asked himself the agonized Why to it all, an answer might have occurred to him: that these creatures were not heading for some special promise in their future, but merely fleeing from some terrible fear in their past.

THE MUTANT MILLENNIA

To see the universe, and see it whole . . . Nothing in it was man's, yet at that time it could only appear that he had inherited it. For Earth itself—or Yinnisfar, as it was henceforth called—nothing but buoyant optimism suited the day. Terrestrials, having been granted federation, now possessed Galingua, which looked like the ultimate key to everything.

They sped out into a Galaxy peculiarly vulnerable to new forces. As has been observed, galactic civilization had reached a point of stasis; though its resources were inexhaustible, its initiative was not. The patterns of the Self-perpetuating War wove unceasing artistry of circumstance capable of carrying whole societies along in a mirage of meaningful existence. The Yinnisfarians did not burst, therefore, into a dynamic system but into a glorified Land of Nod.

The results might have been predicted. Over the next six hundred generations, Yinnisfarians amassed more and more power to themselves. By peaceful means, or by means little better than piracy, they worked their way into the highest galactic positions, succeeding less through their own intrinsic superiority than through the indifference of their rivals. This was a halcyon age, the age of the fulfillment of Yinnisfar.

As the years passed, and Yinnisfar conquered by commerce, its attitudes insensibly underwent a modification. Then came the blow that forced man to alter his attitude toward himself. His metaphysical view of being had of course been continually subject to change; but now the terrible moment arrived when he was revealed to himself in an entirely new light, as an alien, in a hostile environment.

It is useful that this next fragment reminds us incidentally that if the universe appeared to rest in human hands, humanity was never alone or unregarded. There were always things that could see though they had no faces and understand though they had no brains.

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE UNLIKELY ACCIDENTS THAT ARE LIKELY to occur anywhere. The undersea trawler *Bartlemeo* was approaching the support of Capverde at four hundred and ninety fathoms when it developed engine trouble. I am not a technical man, so that I cannot exactly describe the fault; apparently uranium slugs move slowly through the piles of these ships, and the dispensing mechanism which shoots the used slugs into the separators became jammed. Instead of using manual remote control to tackle the fault, the chief engineer, a man called Je Regard, went in himself to clear the slugway. As he climbed through the inspection hatches, Regard snagged his protective suit on a latch without noticing it. He was able to repair the congestion in the slugway without trouble, but collapsed as he emerged again, having collected a near-lethal dose of radiation in his kidneys.

The *Bartlemeo* carried no doctor. A general call for one was sent out immediately.

I have said I am no technician; neither am I a philosopher. Yet I can see in this trivial episode which began so many centuries of trouble the pattern of all great things which start as something fairly insignificant.

In the midst of the shifting and immemorial sands of the Sara Desert crouches the Ahaggari plateau, breasting the dunes like a liner in a sullen sea. On the edge of the plateau stands Barbe Barber, the Institute of Medical Meditation, an elaborate and ancient building in the grand fifty-first epoch manner, as fugal as Angkor Wat, as uncompromising as the Lunar Enterventual. Set about with palms, which lend shade to its wide, paved walks, Barbe Barber thrusts its towers and upper stories above the trees to scan the mighty continent on which it stands—just as its occupants, the doctors, scan the interior of the body, the inner continent of man.

Gerund Gyres, neckcloth perpetually mopping his brow, stood before the main steps of the institute, waiting. His air-car, which had brought him, stood some distance off in the park. He waited humbly in the rocking heat, although he was a proud man; no layman was ever allowed in Barbe Barber.

At length the figure Gerund expected to see appeared at the top of the wide steps. It was his wife, Cyro. She turned back, as if to bid someone behind her farewell, and then commenced to descend the steps. As always when Gerund met her here, he was conscious of how Cyro, as she came

down those steps, had to force her mind out from the cloister of Barbe Barber back into the external world. While he watched with anxiety and love, the curve of her back straightened, her head came up, her pace increased. By the time she reached Gerund, her eyes held that familiar expression of detached amusement with which she faced both life and her husband.

"It feels like weeks since I saw you," Cyro said, kissing Gerund on the mouth and putting her arms around him.

"It is weeks," he protested.

"Is it really?" she said playfully. "It doesn't seem as long!"

Gerund took her hand and led her around to the massive triangle that was their air-car. The month of meditation which Cyro, as a doctor, was compelled to undergo every year was undoubtedly beneficial for her; based on high-ega systems, the disciplines of Barbe Barber were courses of refreshment for brains and bodies of the medical fraternities of the world. Cyro looked younger and more vital than ever; Gerund told himself that, after six years of marriage, he was less a source of vitality in his wife's life than was high-ega; but it was irrational to hope for any change in that respect.

Walking together they reached the air-car. Jeffy, their bonded servant, was leaning against the metal hull, awaiting them, arms patiently folded.

"It's nice to see you again, Doctor Cyro," he said, opening the door for them and standing back.

"And you, Jeffy. You're looking brown."

"Baked right through," he said, smiling broadly. His homeland was a bleak Northern island lying under frost most of the year; equatorial tour suited him well. Though it was thirty years since he had been brought from that distant land, Jeffy still spoke its simple patois, Ingulesh; he had been unable to acquire the Galingua in which Gerund, Cyro, and most civilized people of the day thought and conversed.

They climbed into their seats, Jeffy taking the pilot's throne. He was a great, slow man who moved purposefully. His sluggish mentality had left him fit for nothing but the role of a bonded servant, yet he handled the heavy flier with delicacy.

Jeffy now brought them over to one of the semicircular take-off collars which would absorb their exhaust gases. The orange signal came through on the collar beacon and they burst immediately into vertical flight. At once the trees and the white-and-gray walls of Barbe Barber dwindled away be-

low them, as inconsiderable as a child's charade between the limitless sandwich of sky and sand. The plane headed due west, on a course that would bring them eventually to the Gyreses' home in the Puterska Islands—or would have brought them there but for the sick man a thousand meters under the bland surface of the Lanic Sea, a sick man of whose very existence they were as yet unaware.

"Well, Gerund, what has happened in the world since I've been out of it?" Cyro asked, settling herself carefully opposite her husband.

"Nothing very exciting. The Dualists wish to register every planet in the Federation. The Barrier Research City has been opened with due pomp. And the world of learning is at loggerheads over Pamlira's new work, *Paraevolution*."

"I must certainly read it," Cyro said, with a trace of excitement. "What's his theory this time?"

"It's one of those things that don't summarize easily," Gerund told her, "but briefly Pamlira accepts the Pla-To position of the Dual Theory and claims that evolution is working toward greater consciousness. Plants are less conscious than animals, animals less conscious than men, and men came after the animals which came after the plants. Plants, animals, men, are only first steps in a long ladder. Pamlira points out that man is by no means fully conscious. He sleeps, he forgets, he is unaware of the workings of his body—"

"Which is why we doctors exist," Cyro inserted.

"Exactly. As Pamlira himself says, only certain unusual individuals, associated together into our present Orders of Medicine, can to some extent participate consciously in somatic activity."

She smiled a neutral smile.

"And where does he go from there?" she asked.

"He postulates that the next evolutionary step would be something—a being—conscious in every cell; and that Nature may be already preparing to usher it onto the stage. The time, apparently, is ripe for the new being."

"Already?" She raised a quizzical eyebrow. "I should have thought he was a few million years early! Have all the permutations of which man is capable been played through already?"

"Pamlira spends half the book explaining why the new species is due," Gerund said. "According to him, evolution accelerates like scientific progress; the more protoplasm avail-

able for modification, the sooner the modification appears. On thirty thousand planets, you have quite a weight of protoplasm."

Cyro was silent. With a slight ache in his heart, Gerund noticed that she asked him nothing about his personal opinion of Pamlira's book, though it must have been clear from what he said that he had read it. She would consider that his opinion as an industrial ecologist was not worth having, and refuse to yield enough to convention to ask him anyway.

Finally Cyro said, "Whatever this superconscious new species might be, man would give it little chance to establish its supremacy—or even to survive. It would be blotted out before it had a chance to multiply. After all, we could hardly be expected to be hospitable to the usurpers of our comfortable place in the cosmos."

"Pamlira says," Gerund told her, "that evolution would take care of that if it really wanted man out of the way. The new species would be given some sort of defense—or weapon—to render it invulnerable against the species it would be superseding."

"How?" she asked indignantly, as if he had said something stupid. "Evolution is a completely neutral—blind—process."

"That's what worries Pamlira!" Gerund said. He could see she considered this remark superficial. So it was; it had been designed to cover his uncertainty of what Pamlira had actually said on that point. *Paraevolution* was stiff reading; Gerund had only waded through it for Cyro's sake, because he knew the subject would interest her.

Paraevolution and its attendant woes were to be driven out of both their minds. Jeffy appeared, framed bulkily in the door dividing the control room from the cabin, while the aircar roared on above the Sara on autopilot.

"There's a call coming in for a doctor," he said, trundling his words out one by one. "It's coming from Capverde subport, almost dead ahead. They've got an underseaman in urgent need of healing." He looked at Cyro as he spoke.

"Of course I'll take it," she said, getting up and brushing past him into the control room.

The call was coming through again as she reached the wireless. She listened carefully to it, and then answered.

"Thank you, Doctor Gyres," the Capverde operator said relievedly. "We'll wait for your arrival."

They were now only some six hundred miles from the Capverde Islands; already they had covered nearly twice

that distance from Barbe Barber. Even as Cyro left the wireless, the Lanic Sea showed ahead. On this desolate stretch of the continental coast, the saddest on Yinnisfar for all its blinding sun, the desert stretched right to the water's edge—or, to take it conversely, the beach extended from here to Barbe Barber. They flashed across the dividing line between sand and sea and headed WSW. Almost at once, cloud formed like a floor below them, blotting out the turning globe.

Within ten minutes, checking his instruments, Jeffy took them down, finally skimming under low nimbo-stratus to find the fourteen islands of the Capverde archipelago to their left ahead.

"Nicely calculated," Gerund said. Jeffy played the metal think-box like a child genius conjuring Britziparbtu from a cello-organ; he had that flair for machines only granted to the half-witted.

The aircar banked to port around Satago and plunged toward the sea, dropping vertically. The gray waters came up to meet them like a smack in the face, boiled around them, swallowed them, and the altimeter finger on the instrument panel, swooping past the Zero sign, began to read fathoms instead of feet.

Jeffy was in radio contact with the subport again. Beacons at ten-fathom intervals lit their way down to the underwater city. Finally a hangar, poised above a hundred-fathom gulf, loomed whale's-mouth wide in front of them; they jetted in and the jaws closed behind them. Powerful valves immediately began to suck the water from the hangar, replacing it with air.

Already mentally composing herself for what was to come, Cyro was out of the flier before the dock hand on the vacobile could collect the trapped fish and blow the floor dry. Gerund and Jeffy were left to follow as best they could.

Outside the hangar, two port officials greeted Cyro.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Doctor Gyres," one of them said. "They probably told you the details of the case on the wireless. It's the chief engineer of the undersea trawler *Bartlemeo* who's in trouble. . . ."

As he related the cogent facts of the case, the official ushered Cyro, Gerund and Jeffy aboard a small, open vehicle. The other official drove, and they sped along the

strange waterfront where, despite all the usual bustle connected with a dock, no water could be seen.

For ages, the human species had regarded the seas as either a perilous highway or a suitable place in which they could make hit-and-run raids on shoals of fish; then, belatedly, it had taken the oceans in hand and tended them with the same care it bestowed on the land; now they were farmed rather than fished. As more and more personnel turned to work on the savannas of the deep, so the subports had grown up, underwater towns that paid little homage to their softer counterparts on dry land.

Capverde subport, because of its favored position in the Lanic and its proximity to Little Union, the second greatest of Yinnisfar's cities, had been one of the first such ports to be established. The quarter of the city in which the open machine now stopped was more than ten centuries old. The hospital into which they were ushered presented a crumbling façade.

Inside were the monastic arrangements usual to hospitals everywhere. From a cloister, doors gave onto a waiting room, a primitive kitchen, a radio room, small cells; in one of the cells lay Je Regard, chief engineer of the *Bartlemeo*, with a dose of hard radiation in his kidneys.

An ancient bondman, bent and gray-bearded, announced himself as Laslo; he was on duty. Apart from him and the sick man, the musty-smelling place was empty.

"See what you can do for the poor fellow, doctor," one of the officials said, shaking Cyro's elegant hand as he prepared to depart. "I expect the captain of the *Bartlemeo* will call through soon. Meanwhile, we will leave you in peace."

"Thank you," Cyro said, a little blankly, her mind already far from them. She turned away, went into the sick man's cell and closed the door behind her.

For some time after she had gone and the officials had left, Gerund and Jeffy stood aimlessly in the cloister. Jeffy wandered to the archway and looked out at the street. Occasionally a bonded man or woman passed, looking neither to the right nor to the left. The dully lighted fronts of the buildings, many of them carved from the rock, looked like the dwellings of the dead.

Jeffy wrapped his great arms about his torso.

"I want to go home," he said. "It's cold here."

A bead of moisture fell from the roof overhead and

splashed on his cheek. "It's cold and *damp* here," he added.

The gray-bearded guard regarded him speechlessly with a sardonic eye. For a long while there was no more speech. They waited almost without thought, their level of consciousness as dim as the lights outside.

As soon as Cyro Gyres entered the cell, she climbed onto the bunk with the sick man.

Regard was a heavy fellow. Under the single blanket, his vast frame labored up and down with the effort of breathing. The stubble on his face thrust up through three great, pallid jowls. Lying beside him, Cyro felt like Mahomet visiting the mountain.

That the mountain was unconscious only made Cyro's task easier. She placed her bare arm over Regard's bare arm and closed her eyes. She relaxed her muscles, slowing her breathing rate. This was, of course, all standard professional procedure. Efficiently, Cyro reduced the rate of her heart's beat, concentrating on that vital pulse until it seemed to grow and grow, and she could submerge herself in it.

She was sinking down through a dull red haze, a featureless haze, a haze stretching from pole to pole. But gradually, a mirage forming in a distance, striations appeared through the haze. As her viewpoint sank, it magnified; the islands of the blood slid up to meet her. The islands moved with the clerical purpose of vultures, expanding, changing, ranging, rearranging, and still she moved among them. Though she moved, all sense of direction was entirely shed. Here the dimensions carried no sense of up or down; even near and far were confused to her sight, which was no longer sight.

Not only sight had she lost. Almost every other ability except volition had been stripped from her when she took this plunge into the somatic world of her own bodily universe, as a man throws off all his clothes before diving into a river. She could not think, remember, taste, touch, turn, communicate, or act; yet a shadow of all these things remained with her; much as the dragonfly larva, climbing its reed out of the ooze, carries a vague image of the creature it will become, Cyro had some memory of herself as the individual she had been. And this pale memory stayed with her by dint of the years of training she had received in Medical Meditation at Barbe Barber, otherwise she would have been lost in that most terrible trap of all: the universe of one's own body.

Almost without will, she headed down her bloodstream.

It was swimming—flying? crawling?—through an endless everglade, flooded above the treetops, treacle-thick with fish, minnow, mackerel, mace and manta ray. It was creeping—climbing? drifting?—down a glass canyon, whose walls flickered with more-than-earthly firelight. So, so, until before her loomed a wavering cliff.

The cliff ran around the universe, tall as time, insubstantial as muslin, pock-marked with rabbit holes, through which phantasmic creatures came and went. She drifted through it almost without resistance, like plankton sucked through a sponge.

Now she had passed her lobe of consciousness, her psyche, into Je Regard's arm, into his soma.

Her surroundings were as weird, as strange, as familiar, as they had been before. Submerged on this cellular level, there could be no difference between his body and hers. Yet a difference was there. From the forests of his flesh, strange and always unseen eyes watched her, and a silent and malevolent regard traced her course; for she was an intruder, venturing into the interior of an alien world especially designed to show an intruder no mercy. Little jellies of death twinkled as she passed, and only the confidence of her step held the defending powers at bay.

As she moved on, corpuscles like stars about her, the surrounding activity grew more intense. She was swept along, as by a glutinous current, moving under arches, among branches, past weed tangles, through nets, and the way ahead grew dark and stagnant; though she still drifted forward, the half-live things about her were squirming away, repulsed, flickering with crude blueprints of pain.

She was nearly at the infected kidneys now.

Only the stern disciplines of Medical Meditation now prompted her on. The atmosphere was so thickly repellent that she might have been wallowing in a sewer. But medicine had long ago discovered the powers of self-healing that lie within a body; high-ega and the yogas on which it was founded had pointed the way to releasing those powers. Nowadays, with the psyche of one of the Order of Medicine to spur it on, a patient's body could be made to regenerate itself: to grow a new limb, a new lung, a new liver. The doctors, the modern skin-divers, submerged to marshal the forces of the anatomy against its invaders.

Cyro called to those forces now. About her, layer on layer, horizon high, the cells of the invaded body, each with

its thirty thousand genes, lay silent and seemingly deserted. Then, slowly, reluctantly, as her summons persisted, reinforcements came to her, like rats crawling out of a ruined city. *The enemy is ahead!* she pulsed to them, moving forward into the tattered darkness. More and more, they were coming to her cause, lighting the sewer with their internal fires.

Things like little bats hurtled, chittering, out of the heart of the darkness, were struck down, were devoured. And then the enemy launched his assault. He struck with the suddenness of a closing trap.

He was one, he was a million!

He was nothing the textbooks know of—unknown, unknowable.

He fought with laws and powers entirely his own.

He was monstrous, bestial, occult, a greed with fangs, a horned horror, newly hatched. He was so overwhelming that Cyro hardly felt fear: the puissance of the unknown can kill everything but calm in us. She was aware only that a random radioactive particle had struck down and buried itself in a random gene, producing—with a ferocious defiance of the laws of chance—a freak cell, a mutant cell with unfamiliar appetites; nothing in her training prepared her to understand what the appetites were.

Those appetites had lain dormant until *she* approached. *She* had triggered them, woken them. She had breathed her touch of consciousness onto them, and at once the cell had filled with its own awareness. And its awareness was of the desire to conquer.

She could see, feel, hear, sense, that it was tearing through cell after cell, a maniac through empty rooms, filling them with its rebellion. The healing forces about her turned and fled in panic, winging and swimming against a wind which held them helpless. Cyro, too, turned to escape. Her own body was her only refuge, if she could get there.

But the nailed streamers came out of the darkness and wrapped themselves about her. She cracked open her jaws to their toothed extremes, struggling to scream; at once her mouth was filled with sponge, from which little creatures flung themselves and scampered wildly through her being, triumphing. . . .

Gerund and Jeffy sat smoking on a bench under the eyes of the gray-bearded bondman, Laslo. Empty mugs stood

beside them; Jeffy had boiled them a hot drink. Now they sat waiting uneasily for Cyro to reappear, their uneasiness growing as the time slipped away.

"I've never known her to take so long on a case before," Gerund said. "Five minutes is generally all she needs. As soon as she has organized the powers of recovery, she comes back."

"This engineer—he sounded pretty bad," Jeffy said.

"Yes, but all the same . . . Five minutes more and I'm going in to see her."

"That's not permitted," declared the graybeard; it was almost the first time he had spoken. What he said was no less than the truth. The etiquette governing doctor and patient was strict, in their own interests; they could not be viewed together, unless by another doctor. Gerund was perfectly familiar with this rule; he had, indeed, a reluctance to see his wife in a trance state, knowing that the sight would only serve to emphasize the constraint he felt between them. All the same, Cyro had been in that room for half an hour; something must be done.

He sat there for two more minutes before getting up and going over to the cell door. Laslo also rose, shouting angrily. As he started to intercept Gerund, Jeffy blocked his way.

"Sit down or I'll pull your nose off," Jeffy said unemotionally. "I'm very strong and I got nothing better to do."

The old man, taking one look into Jeffy's face, went obediently back and sat down. Gerund nodded at his servant, opened the cell door, and slipped inside.

One glance told him that something was wrong—gravely wrong. His wife and the massive engineer lay side by side on a bunk, their arms touching. Their eyes were open, bulging coldly out into space like cod's eyes on a slab, containing no life whatsoever. But their bodies were alive. Every so often, their frames vibrated and bulged and settled again. Cyro's right heel kicked briefly against the bunk, beating a meaningless *rat-tat* on the wooden bed foot. Her skin was gradually suffusing with a crimson blush like a stain; it looked, thought Gerund, as if every shred of flesh in her body had been beaten to a pulp. For a while he stood there transfixed with horror and fear, unable to collect his wits and decide what to do.

A cockroach swarmed up the leg of the bed. It passed within six inches of Je Regard's foot, which protruded bare from under his blanket. As the cockroach moved by, a section of the sole of the foot suddenly grew into a stalk, a

dainty thing like a blade of grass; the stalk licked out as quickly as a tongue and caught the cockroach, its legs waving. Gerund slid quietly to the ground in a faint.

Now the flesh on the bed began to change more rapidly. It had organized itself. It slid and smeared out of shape, or flowed in on itself with smacking noises. The cockroach was absorbed. Then, compressing itself, the mass formed back into one human form: Cyro's. Face, body, color of hair, eyes—all became like Cyro's, and every drop of flesh was squeezed into her making. As her last fingernail formed, Gerund rolled over and sat up.

Surprise seized him as he stared about the cell.

It had seemed to him that he had been senseless only a second, yet the sick man had gone! At least Cyro looked better now. She was smiling at him. Perhaps, after all, his anxiety had produced some kind of optical illusion when he entered the cell; perhaps everything was all right. But, on looking more closely at Cyro, his returning sense of reassurance vanished.

It was uncanny! The person sitting on the bed was Cyro. And yet—and yet—every line of her face, every subtle contour Gerund loved so well, had undergone an indefinable transmutation. Even the texture of her flesh had changed. He noticed that her fingers had grown. And there was another thing—she was too big. She was too thick and too tall to be Cyro, as she sat on the bed looking at him, trying to smile.

Gerund stood up, faintness threatening to overwhelm him again. He was close to the door. He could run, or he could call for Jeffy, as his instincts bid him.

Instead, he conquered his instincts. Cyro was in trouble, supreme trouble. Here was Gerund's chance, possibly his final one, to prove his devotion to her; if he ran from her now, his chance would have passed forever—or so he told himself, for Gerund could not believe his wife's indifference rested on anything but a distrust of his integrity.

He turned back to her, ignoring her frightfulness.

"Cyro, Cyro, what is wrong?" he asked. "What can I do? Tell me what I can do to help. I'll do anything."

The creature on the bed opened its mouth.

"I shall be better in a minute," it said huskily. The words did not quite coincide with its lip movements.

With a heave, it stood on its feet. It was over seven feet tall, and burly. Gerund stared at it as if hypnotized, but

managed with an effort of will to hold out a hand to it. "It's my wife," he told himself, "it's only my wife." But as it lumbered toward him, his nerve broke. The look on its face was too terrible. . . . He turned, too late to get away. It stretched out its arms and caught him almost playfully.

In the cloister, Jeffy was growing bored. For all the affection he bore his master, he found the life of a bond servant a tedious one at times. Under the fishy eye of the old guard, he spread himself along the bench, preparing for a nap; Gerund would call him soon enough when he was wanted.

A bell rang in the radio room.

Casting one last suspicious look at Jeffy, the old man went to answer the call. Jeffy settled back to doze. In a minute, scuffling sounds made him open an eye. A monstrous form, its details lost in the feeble lighting, lumped along on eight or ten legs and vanished into the street. Jeffy was on his feet instantly, a wave of cold horror brushing tenderly over his skin. He turned and made at a run for the sick cell, instinctively connecting this monster with a threat to those he served.

The cell was empty.

"Here, what are you up to?" asked a voice behind him. The graybeard had come up at the sound of Jeffy's footsteps. He peered past Jeffy's elbow into the room. As soon as he saw it was empty, he pulled out a whistle and began to blow wildly on it.

Judge: "You offer as an explanation of the disappearance of your master and mistress the possibility that they may have been—er—devoured by this monster you claim you saw?"

Jeffy: "I didn't say that, sir. I don't know where they went to. I only say I saw this thing slipping out of the hospital, and then they were gone."

Judge: "You have heard that no one else in the subport has seen any such monster. You have heard the evidence of Laslo, the hospital guard, that he saw no such monster. Why, then, do you persist in this tale?"

Jeffy: "I can only say what happened, can't I?"

Judge: "You are *supposed* to say what happened."

Jeffy: "That *is* what happened. It's the truth! I've no secrets, nothing to hide. I was fond of my master. I would never have done away with him—or my mistress."

Judge: "Bonded servants have expressed such sentiments

before, after their masters were dead. If you are innocent of what you are accused of, why did you attempt to escape when old Laslo blew his whistle for the police?"

Jeffy: "I was rattled, sir, do you understand? I was frightened. I'd seen this—thing, and then I'd seen the empty cell, and then that fool started blowing. I—I just hit him without thinking."

Judge: "You do not reveal yourself as a responsible man. We have heard already the witness Laslo's account of the way you threatened him with force soon after you arrived at the hospital."

Jeffy: "And you've heard me tell you why I did so."

Judge: "You realize, I hope, the serious position you are in? You are a simple man, so I will put it to you simply. Under world law, you are charged with the double murder of your master and mistress, and until their bodies are recovered or further evidence comes to light, you are to be housed in our prison."

There were two ways up from the subport to the surface of the Lanic. One way was the sea route, by which both the *Bartlemeo* and the Gyreses' plane had arrived. The other was a land route. An underground funicular railway climbed through three thousand feet of rock from the submerged city to the station in Praia, the capital of the island of Satago. It was by this route that Jeffy was brought to prison.

Overlooking a dusty courtyard sheltered by a baobab, Jeffy's cell window allowed him a glimpse of the sea. It was good to be above ground again, although the cloudy overcast created a greenhouse atmosphere which was particularly oppressive after the cool air of the subport; Jeffy sweated perpetually. He spent a lot of his time standing on his wooden bed, staring out into the heat. Other convicts, out for exercise, talked to each other under his window in the local *lingua crioula*, but Jeffy understood not a word of it.

Toward the evening of the second day of his confinement, Jeffy was at his usual perch when a wind arose. It blew hotly through the prison, and continued to blow. The heavy cloud was shredded away, revealing the blue of the sky for the first time in days. The chief guard, a swarthy man with immense mustaches, came out into the courtyard, sampled the air, approved, and strolled over to a stone seat under the

baobab tree. Dusting it carefully with his handkerchief, he lay down and relaxed.

On top of the wall behind the guard, something moved. A thing like a python uncoiled itself and began to drop down into the courtyard; it seemed to spread over the wall like a stain as it came, but the heavy foliage of the baobab made it difficult to see what was happening. It looked to Jeffy now as if a rubbery curtain set with jewels and starfish were gliding down the wall. Now it landed behind the guard.

Whatever the thing was, it raised a flapper like a snake about to strike and clamped it over the unsuspecting guard's face. Then the rest of its bulk flowed over the man, damping his struggles and covering him like a cloak. Jeffy cried out furiously from his cell, but no one answered, no one cared; most of the staff were down on the waterfront with their girls.

When the thing slid off the chief guard, only a limp and flattened body lay on the bench. The hot wind trifled with its mustaches. The thing grew fingers and expertly removed the ring of keys from the dead man's belt. A segment of it then detached itself from the main bulk, which remained in the shadows as the segment scampered across the yard with the keys. It looked like an animated stool.

"My God!" Jeffy said. "It's coming here."

As he backed away from the window to his cell door, the creature, with one bound, appeared between the bars and dropped the keys into the cell. It jumped in after them.

Bit by bit, more of the thing arrived, dropping down before Jeffy's petrified gaze and finally building into—Gerund, or an intolerable replica of him.

Gerund put out a hand and touched his servant, almost as if he was experimenting.

"It's all right, Jeffy," he said at last, speaking with obvious effort. "You have nothing to fear. No harm will come to you. Take these keys, unlock your cell door, and come with me up to the warden of the prison."

Gray in the face, shaking like a leaf, Jeffy managed to pull himself together enough to obey. The keys rattling in his hand, he tried them one by one in the lock until he found a key that fitted. Like a man mesmerized, he led the way into the corridor, the pseudo-Gerund following closely behind.

No one was about. At one point a guard slept in a tipped-back chair, his heels resting high above his head on the white-

washed wall. They did not disturb him. They unlocked the big, barred door at the foot of a private staircase and so ascended into the warden's office. Open doors showed them the way to a balcony overlooking the bay and the central peaks of the island.

On the balcony, alone as usual, drinking wine as usual, a man sat in a wicker chair. He looked small and—yes, alas!—infinitely tired.

"Are you the prison warden?" Gerund asked, stumping into the room.

"I am," I said.

He looked at me for a long while. I could tell then that he was not—what shall I say?—not an ordinary human being. He looked what he was: a forgery of a human being. Even so, I recognized him as Gerund Gyres from the photographs the police had circulated.

"Will you both take a chair?" I asked. "It fatigues me to see you standing."

Neither servant nor master moved.

"Why have you—how have you released your man?" I asked.

"I brought him before you," Gerund said, "so that you may hear what I have to say, and so that you may know that Jeffy is a good servant, has never done me harm. I want him released forthwith."

So, this was a reasonable creature which had compassion. Human or no, it was something I could talk to. So many men with whom I have to deal have neither reason nor compassion.

"I am prepared to listen," I said, pouring myself more wine. "As you see, I have little else to do. Listening can be even pleasanter than talking."

Whereupon Gerund began to tell me everything I have now set down here to the best of my ability. Jeffy and I listened in silence; though the bondman undoubtedly understood little, I grasped quite enough to make my insides turn cold. After all, was not my copy of Pamira's work on paraevolution lying at my elbow?

In the quiet that fell when Gerund finished, we heard the sunset Angelus ringing out from a Praia steeple; it brought me no anodyne, and the hard, hot wind carried its notes away. I knew already that a darkness was falling that no prayers would lighten.

"So then," I said, finding my voice, "as warden, the first

point I must make is that you, Gerund Gyres, as I must call you, have committed murder: on your own admission, you killed my chief guard."

"That was an error," Gerund said. "You must realize that I—who am a composite of Je Regard, Cyro Gyres and Gerund Gyres, to say nothing of the numerous fish absorbed on my swim up from the subport—I believed I could absorb any human being. It would not be death; we are alive. But your guard defied absorption. So did Jeffy, here, when I touched him."

"Why do you think that is?" I asked stiffly.

He grew a smile on his face. I averted my eyes from it.

"We learn fast," he said. "We cannot absorb humans who are not conscious of themselves as part of the process of nature. If they cling to the outmoded idea of man as a species apart, their cells are antagonistic to ours and absorption will not take place."

"Do you mean to tell me you can only—er—absorb a cultured man?" I asked.

"Exactly. With animals it is different. Their consciousness is only a natural process; they offer us no obstacle."

I believe it was at this point that Jeffy jumped over the balcony rail into the bushes below. He picked himself up unhurt, and we watched his massive frame dwindle from the road as he ran away. Neither of us spoke; I hoped he might go to bring help, but if Gerund thought of that he gave no sign.

"Really, I don't think I understand what you mean at all," I said, playing for time. And I don't think I did grasp it then; to tell you the truth, I was feeling so sick that the whole prison seemed to reel around me. This heavy pseudoman made me more frightened than I knew I could be. Though I fear neither life nor death, before the half-alive I was shivering with the chill of horror.

"I don't understand about absorbing only cultured people," I said, almost at random.

This time it did not bother to open its mouth to answer.

"Culture implies fuller understanding. Today there is culturally speaking only one way to that understanding: through Galingua. I can only liberate the cells of those who are able to use that semantic tool, those whose whole biochemical bondage has already been made malleable by it. The accident that happened to Je Regard releases abilities already latent in every Galingua-speaking person throughout the Gal-

axy. Here and now on Yinnisfar, a giant step ahead has been taken—unexpected, yet the inevitable climax to the employment of Galingua.”

“So then,” I said, feeling better as I began to comprehend, “you are the next evolutionary step as predicted by Pamlira in *Paraevolution*?”

“Roughly speaking, yes,” he said. “I have the total awareness Pamlira spoke of. Each of my cells has that gift; therefore I am independent of fixed form, that bane of every multicelled creature before me.”

I shook my head.

“You seem to me not an advance but a retrogression,” I said. “Man is, after all, a complex gene hive; you are saying you can turn into single cells, but single cells are very early forms of life.”

“All my cells are *aware*,” he said emphatically. “That’s the difference. Genes build themselves into cells and cells into the gene hive called man in order to develop *their* potentialities, not man’s. The idea of man’s being able to develop was purely an anthropomorphic concept. Now the cells have finished with this shape called man; they have exhausted its possibilities and are going on to something else.”

To this there seemed nothing to say, so I sat quietly, sipping my drink and watching the shadows grow, spreading from the mountains out to sea. I was still cold but no longer shaking.

“Have you nothing else to ask me?” Gerund inquired, almost with puzzlement in his voice. You hardly expect to hear a monster sound puzzled.

“Yes,” I said. “Just one thing. Are you happy?”

The silence, like the shadows, extended itself toward the horizon.

“I mean,” I amplified, “if I had a hand in modeling a new species, I’d try and make something more capable of happiness than man. Curious creatures that we are, our best moments come when we are striving for something; when the thing’s achieved—la—we are full of unrest again. There is a divine discontent, but divine content comes only to the beasts of the pasture, who regardlessly crop down snails with their grass. The more intelligent a man is, the more open he is to doubt; conversely, the bigger fool he is, the more likely he is to be pleased with his lot. So I’m asking, are you, new species, happy?”

“Yes,” Gerund said positively. “As yet I am but three peo-

ple: Regard, Cyro, Gerund. The last two have struggled for years for full integration—as do all human couples—and now have found it, a fuller integration than was ever feasible before. What humans instinctively seek, we instinctively have; we are the completion of a trend. We can never be anything but happy, no matter how many people we absorb.”

Keeping my voice steady, I said, “You’d better start absorbing me then, since that must be what you intend.”

“Eventually all human cells will come under the new regime,” Gerund said. “But first the word of what is happening must be spread to make people receptive to us, to soften further what Galingua has already softened. Everyone must know, so that we can carry out the absorption process. That is your duty. You are a civilized man, warden; you must write to Pamlira for a start, explaining what has occurred. Pamlira will be interested.”

He paused. Three cars swept up the road and turned in at the main gate of the prison. Jeffy, then, had had enough intelligence to go for help.

“Supposing I will not aid you?” I asked. “Why should I hurry man’s extinction? Supposing I acquaint the Gal-Fed Council with the truth, and get them to blow this whole island to bits? It would be a simple—get out!—a simple matter—confound it!”

We were suddenly surrounded by butterflies. In impatiently brushing them away, I had knocked over my bottle of wine. The air was full of thousands of butterflies, fluttering around us like paper; the darkening sky was thick with them. The angriest gestures of the hand could not clear them away.

“What is this?” Gerund spluttered. For the first time, I personally saw him out of shape, as he grew another attachment to wave the dainty creatures off. It sprouted from what had been his ear, and flailed the air about his head. I can only say I was nauseated. It cost me the greatest effort to keep a grip on myself.

“As a creature so aware of nature,” I said, “you should enjoy this spectacle. These are Painted Lady butterflies, blown in thousands off their migratory tracks. We get them here most years. This hot wind, which we call the marmtan, carries them westward across the ocean from the continent.”

Now I could hear people running up the stairs. They would be able to deal suitably with this creature, whose reasonable words were so in contrast to his unreasonable appearance. I continued, speaking more loudly, so that if possible he would

be taken unawares. "It's not entirely a misfortune for the butterflies. There are so many of them, no doubt they have eaten most of their food on the mainland and would have starved had they not been carried here by the wind. An admirable example of nature looking after its own."

"Admirable!" he echoed. I could scarcely see him for bright wings. The rescue party was in the next room. They burst out with Jeffy at their head, carrying atomic weapons.

"There he is," I shouted.

But he was not there. Regard-Cyro-Gerund had gone. Taking a tip from the Painted Ladies, he had split into a thousand units, volplaning away on the breeze, safely, invincibly, lost among the crowd of bright insects.

So I come to what is really not the end but the beginning of the story. Already, a decade has passed since the events in the Capverde Islands. What did I do? Well, I did nothing; I neither wrote to Pamira nor called Gal-Fed Council. With the marvelous adaptability of my species, I managed in a day or two to persuade myself that "Gerund" would never succeed, or that somehow or other he had misinterpreted what was happening to him. And so, year by year, I hear the reports of the human race growing fewer and I think, "Well, anyway, they're happy," and I sit up here on my balcony and drink my wine and let the sea breezes blow on me. In this climate, and at this post, nothing more should be expected of me.

And why should I excite myself for a cause in which I have never believed? When Nature passes a law it cannot be repealed; for her prisoners there is no escape—and we are all her prisoners. So I sit tight and take another drink. There is only one proper way to become extinct: with dignity.

THE MEGALOPOLIS MILLENNIA

It is ironical that when men could finally have liberated themselves from dependence on the machine with the help of that philo-somatic tool, Galingua, they should have found themselves facing an overwhelming danger for which Galingua itself was responsible.

By no means all of them faced this danger with the weary resignation of the prison warden. Give a man an enemy and you bring out both the best and the worst in him. With its hackles up, humanity went in to fight. Yet it is worth noting that even in this crisis there were many people who took the long view and resigned themselves—not from indifference but for finer reasons—to what they saw as their inevitable fate.

These reasons were set forth cogently enough by Chize Dutremey, writing some five hundred years after Pamira's time, when a quarter of Yinnisfar's population had faded into individually sentient cells and the whole complex structure of stellar intercourse was disintegrating.

"The Dual Theory, that religion most generally accepted by enlightened men throughout the Galaxy," Chize wrote, "claims that the universe was created by two similar but opposed forces, To and Pla-To. To created nonsentient matter; Pla-To, coming later, created sentient matter. The two forces are hostile to—or at best indifferent to—each other. Pla-To is by far the less powerful, for sentient matter must always depend to some extent upon nonsentient.

"The objectives of the two forces are as opposed as their natures. As far as man can comprehend To at all, his objectives may be described in the word endurance. He must endure through the matter he has created, perpetuating himself as it is perpetuated; and its perpetuation is only challenged by Pla-To.

"The sentient forces of Pla-To are infinitely weaker than his opponent's. For one thing, the very nature of sentience is transient, for sentience entails development, which in its turn entails decay. Sentient objects, moreover, are easily overcome by nonsentient ones: floods, earthquakes, novae. And not only overcome, but totally destroyed—and in that destruction, converted into nonsentient objects.

"Pla-To has only one effective defense against the vast opposed ranks of nullity. The total material in the universe is finite and (eventually) exhaustible; the forces of To cannot therefore increase. But the forces of Pla-To can, for life and sentience are created out of the nonsentient, thus increasing themselves and decreasing the enemy. Man is one of Pla-To's finest instruments, for through him sentience is spread from planet to planet, banishing nullity."

So said Chize Dutremey, in her exposition of the Dual Theory. Put briefly, it may be said that total feeling was to the total good, while the total triumph of To would bring the evil of total nonfeeling. Many men were quick to observe that the evolution of sentient cells was a further, major step toward To's defeat; it represented an increase in feeling: for every small beacon called man, there could now be thousands of thousands of small lights launched against To's darkness.

The Dual Theory was the first galactic religion. From its inception of the hub world of Rolf, it stood as cool and aloof from men as a tall mountain and as distant from their affairs as a Phutonian Hill. It recognized life and the finish of life; it recognized the chill of the night and the length of its ultimate duration; it recognized the shortness of day and its beauty. It knew that beyond all joy lay a curtain of something too cruel to be called sorrow, too noble to be called misery; that all flesh was air, breathed and finished in a minute—but that in that minute, in that time for doing, lay all the truth that was. It was a galactic religion, hard to grasp and uncomfoting when grasped, for which very reason the true adults of those days turned to it. It offered them no afterglow beyond the grave, nor did it speak of golden voices from other spheres; it bestowed no rewards for virtue or punishments for weakness. It had no altars. No one decked its shrines with flowers; no one set its tenets to a trumpeting music. Yet their hearts took on strength and depth from its sober truth.

The believers were accordingly not afraid to demonstrate that the Dual Theory set little store by man and his

glories. Man was an incidental in Pla-To's path to full sentience. The prime sentient unit was the cell. Now that it had learned to be itself by itself, it was forsaking that grouping called man to which it had so long adhered, just as man had long since abandoned the tribe structure necessary to his primitive days. Therefore believers could not, had no right to, oppose a step which according to their faith furthered the aims of Pla-To.

All of which, for many men, smacked of stupidity and suicide. Whatever theories they held or did not hold, in practice they believed in the survival of man—and, more particularly, of themselves.

The use of Galingua was prohibited. This meant the severing of those close bonds with which the planetary concourse had joined itself. Even the Self-perpetuating War lost impetus, ceasing entirely in many regions. Although the old "solid" system of space travel by spaceship was slowly reintroduced, the Galaxy—even like man himself—began disintegrating into its individual members.

War against the conqueror cell was on. Mainly it had to be a defensive battle. At the same time religious strife broke out, nonbelievers fighting the Theorists who, as we have seen, were bound to oppose those they regarded as unwitting agents of To.

Eventually the believers were massacred almost to a man. The legions which overcame them, driven by fear, gave no quarter; clothed in fantastic antibiotic armors which lent them some protection against vagabond cells, they filled their already threatened worlds with death.

On Yinnisfar, the strife was particularly bitter, dying down only when the menace of the cells itself became no longer a vital issue.

Many ways of combating this menace were introduced, but the most effective were the aerostomas. The aerostomas represented a compromise between To and Pla-To. They were semisentient flying things made of Pyrocathus 12, a malleable material susceptible to human thought impulses. Little more than airborne stomachs, the aerostomas flew low over land and sea on every planet threatened with cellular disintegration, swallowing the vagabond cells, compressing and stifling them. Of noncellular origin, the aerostomas were immune to disintegration.

A new princely order arose on Yinnisfar, the Triumphant Men, who went forth like knights to battle with the in-

visible foe, aerostomas perching on their shoulders or circling restlessly in the air above.

Hard the Triumphant Men were, hard and brave. In the millennia that followed, they became a legend, and the legend was embodied in Thraldemener. Thraldemener's exploits were many and his victories frequent, although there seems little doubt that his deeds have gained in the retelling.

Whether humanity would ever have succeeded in vanquishing a foe which swelled its ranks from humanity is debatable. A rapid form of cancer destroyed the cells. In their struggle for survival, they had overreached themselves. Virtually a new form of life, they were unstable, and their instability was their undoing. When diseased matter was first incorporated into their ranks, they had no way of combating it. The cancerous cells were a ravening enemy in their midst, maiming, destroying, obliterating. Man awoke one day to find himself again master of his worlds, with only a thin ash in the meadows to mark the end of one of nature's strangest experiments.

This is no place to describe in detail the reconstruction of a federated Galaxy, which man undertook in a mood compounded at once of savagery and despair. It took more than a million years, for something of his old thrust had gone. He had learned a new lesson: that he could be superseded from within, that even in his keenest hour of triumph those cosmic chess players, To and Pla-To, regarded him simply as a seedbed for future experiment. The Federation was patched; its old easy confidence lay beyond mending.

Yinnisfar, under the Galingua regime for a far shorter period than most of its sister planets, had solid spaceships still in commission. With these, it was able to take a lead in galactic trade. The spirit of its people, hardened under the regime of the Triumphant Men, rendered it fit to compete with the most mercenary of rivals.

—Its banks swelled like overfed bellies. Its merchants walked in golden slippers. The city of Nunion sprawled and lost its shape like a gorged python. Mammon was back on his throne, and the following fragment reflects only a tiny portion of his face.

THE MIGHTY CREATURE WAS REELING. THE HUNTER'S LAST shot had caught it right between its eyes. Now, all fifty graceful tons of it, the beast reared up high above the treetops, trumpeting in agony. For a moment the sun, beautiful and baleful, caught it poised like an immense swan, before it fell

—silent now, no more protesting—headlong into the undergrowth.

"And there lies another triumph for Man the Unconquerable," proclaimed the commentator. "On this planet, as on others, all life finally bows before a man from Yinnisfar. Yes, every one of these monsters will be slaughtered by the time—"

By this time someone had warned the projectionist of the new arrival now waiting to use the little editing theater, and the projectionist, in a panic, cut everything. The 3-D image vanished, the sound slicked out. Lights came on, revealing Big Cello of Supernova Solids standing by the entrance.

"Hope we didn't disturb you," Big Cello said, watching everyone hustling up to leave.

"Not at all, Cello 69," a subdirector replied. "We'll solidify this one tomorrow."

"I wouldn't like to think we'd interrupted," Big Cello said blandly. "But Rhapsody 182 here has something he seems to want to show us." And he nodded, not without easy menace, at the lean figure of Harsch-Benlin, known to the inmates of Supernova as Rhapsody 182.

Two minutes later, the last minion had fled from the theater, leaving the intruding party in occupation.

"Well, Rhapsody, let's see what you have to show us," Big Cello observed heavily, settling his bulk in one of the armchair seats.

"Sure thing, B. C.," Harsch-Benlin said. He was one of the few men on the Supernova lot allowed to call the chief by initials, rather than by the full United name. He jumped now, with a parody of athleticism, onto the narrow stage in front of the solidscreen and smiled down at his audience. It consisted of some twenty-five people, half of whom Rhapsody knew only by sight. The company broke down roughly into four groups: the chief and his orgmen; Rhapsody's own orgmen, headed by Ormolu 3; a handful from Story and Market Response with their orgmen; plus the usual quota of attractive stylus recorders.

"The idea's imbedded in a solid," Rhapsody began, "that's going to give Supernova a terrific boost, because it's going to have our studios as background, and some of our personnel as players. At the same time, it's going to pack colossal punch in terms of human drama and audience appeal. Not only that—it's backdrop is Nunion, the greatest planetary capital in the Galaxy."

Rhapsody paused for effect. Several members of his audience were lighting up aphrohaes. All were quiet.

"I can see you're asking yourselves," Rhapsody said, essaying a smile, "just how I intend to cram so much meat into one two-hour solid. I'll show you."

He raised a hand eloquently, as a signal to his projectionist. A solid appeared on the screen.

It was the face of a man. A man in his late forties. The years that had dried away the flesh had only succeeded in revealing, under the fine skin, the nobility of bone structure: the tall forehead, the set of cheekbone, the justness of the jaw. He was talking, although the sound was off, leaving the animation of the features to speak for themselves. The countenance completely dwarfed Rhapsody 182.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," Rhapsody said, clenching his fists and holding them out before him, "is the face of Ars Staykr."

The audience began sitting up, looking at one another, gauging the climate of opinion. Rhapsody had deliberately called Staykr by his true rather than his United name. It was customary in big combines like Supernova to use people's district plus block number as names. Not only did this serve to present a united front to confuse outsiders; it helped insiders to place you financially, for districts in Nunion were islands divided according to grandeur. You had to be a credit king to live on Cello, whereas on Pelt and Trickle no one but deadbeats were permitted to live.

Ars Staykr had been an individualist. Somehow, his United name of Bastion 44 had never fitted, as Rhapsody now emphasized. Gratified at the audience's response, he continued.

"The face of a great man. Ars Staykr! A genius known only to a narrow circle of men, here in this very studio where he worked; yet all who knew him admired and—why don't I say it?—loved him. I had the honor to be his right-hand man back in the days when he was boss of Documentary Two. I plan this solid to be his biography—a tribute to Ars Staykr, Bastion 44."

He paused. If he could swing this one on Big Cello and Company he was made, because if it boosted Ars Staykr it was also going to boost Harsch-Benlin until that erstwhile Rhapsody ended up mellow on the Cello levels.

"Staykr ended up in the gutter!" someone called out. That was Starfield 1337, a troublemaker.

"I am glad someone raised that point," Rhapsody continued, carefully snubbing Starfield by omitting his name. "Staykr finished up in the gutter. He couldn't make the grade. This solid is going to show why. It's going to show just how much grit is needed simply to stay sane in Nunion. It's going to show how much grit is needed to serve the public as we serve them—because, like I said, it's going to be a solid not just about Ars Staykr, but about Supernova, and about Nunion, and about Life. In short, it's going to have everything."

The gentle face faded from the screen, leaving the small figure of Rhapsody standing on the platform alone. Although thin to the point of emaciation, Rhapsody perpetually consumed slimming tablets for the luxury of hearing his underlings refer to him as "gangling," which he held to be a term of affection.

"And the beauty of this solid is," he continued dramatically, "the beauty's that it's already half-made! Written, directed, solidified."

Images began to grow in the seemingly limitless depths of the cube. Something as intricate and lovely as the magnification of a snowflake stirred and seemed to drift toward the audience. It enlarged, sprouting detail, elaborating itself, until every tiny branch had other branches. It seemed, thanks to clever camera work, to be an organic growth; then the descending, slowing viewpoint at length revealed it to be a creation of concrete and impervious and ferrolite, molded by man into buildings and thoroughfares, into levels and mazes, stabbing into the air or burrowing into the earth.

"This," Rhapsody pronounced, "is the fabulous city—our fabulous city—the city of Nunion. Nunion—jelled by Unit Two under Staykr at the height of his powers, twenty years ago. This solid was to be his greatest work; it was never completed, for reasons I will tell you later. But the sixteen reels of unedited cathusjell he left behind as his greatest memorial have lain in our vaults all that time. I dug them out the other day.

"Now I'm not going to talk for a while. I'm going to ask you to sit back and appreciate the sheer beauty of these shots. I'm going to ask you to try and judge their value in terms of aesthetic reaction and viewer appeal. I'm going to ask you to relax and watch a masterpiece, in which I'm proud to say I had something of a hand."

The image continued to sink gradually, below the highest towers, through the aerial levels, the pedestrian (human and

ahuman) esplanades, the various transport and service strata, down to the ground, the impervious pavement, at which point a convex glass traffic guide reflected in miniature the whole of that long camera descent from the skies. Then the focus shifted laterally, taking in the vermilion boots of a Flux officer.

Almost unnoticed, a commentary had begun. It was a typical Unit Two commentary: quiet, unemphatic, spoken in Ars Staykr's own voice.

"On the seventy thousand planets which occupy the single Galaxy inhabited by man, there is no more vast or diverse city than Nunion," the commentary said. "It has become a fable to all men of all races. To describe it is impossible without descending into statistics and figures, and this is to lose sight of the reality; we ask you to explore some of the reality with us. Forget the facts and figures: look instead at the fluxways and mansions and, above all, at the individuals which comprise Nunion. Look, and ask yourself: How does one find the heart of a great city? What secret lies at the core of it when one arrives?"

Nunion had grown over the ten islands of an archipelago in the temperate zone of Yinnisfar, spreading from the nearby continent. Five hundred bridges, a hundred and fifty subfluxes, sixty heliplane routes, and innumerable ferries, gondolas and sailing craft interconnected the eleven sectors and forty-five districts. Lining the water lanes or breaking the seemingly endless phalanxes of streets went avenues of either natural or polycathic trees, with here and there—perhaps at some focal point like the Ishrail Memorial—the rare and lovely jenny-merit, newly imported, perpetually flowering. The camera swept over Clive Amethyst Bridge now, hovering before the first block beyond the waterway. A young man was coming out of the block, springing down the outer steps three at a time. On his face were mingled excitement, triumph and joy. He could hardly contain himself. Buoyed with exultation, he could not walk fast enough. He was the young man in any large city: the man about to make his mark, to score his first success, confident beyond sense, exuberant beyond measure. In him one could see the drive that had reached out to seventy thousand planets and dreamed of seventy thousand more.

The commentator did not say this. The picture said it for him, catching the young man's strut, his angular shadow sharp and restless on the pavement. Sharp and restless, too,

the scene changed, angular shadows becoming angular shapes. Down billions of miles of pipe that were Nunion's veins and drains swam the changing ghost shapes of pseudo-leucocytes. With eerie mobility, they preyed on the sewage of the megapolis, ingesting it, cleaning it. Sealed away from human sight, the half-live phantoms went about their needs, which also served the city's.

Others of the capital's servitors paraded through the illusory emptiness of the cube: The ahuman menials whose immunity to hard radiation had earned them the task of tending the universal air-conditioning. The mechanical brains out at Starfield. The human-brain culture under Peach Bosphorus that handled a guaranteed two billion decisions every day. The Undead of the Communications Exchanges, where pepped nerves routed with mindless precision the messages of every district.

The pictures were brilliant, at once clear but nonliteral. No commentary was used, for none was needed. But Rhapsody 182 could not stay silent. He came forward so that his figure bit its silhouette out of the solid.

"That's the way it was with Staykr," he said. "Always digging for what he called 'the exact, revealing detail.' Maybe that's why he got no farther than he did; he drove us crazy for the sake of that detail."

"These are just shots of a big city," a man from Story called up impatiently. "We've seen this sort of cubage before, Harsch. Just what does it all add up to?"

"Use your eyes. See the pattern forming," Harsch replied. "That was how it was where Staykr was concerned; he let the thing evolve, without imposing a pattern. Watch this coming shot now for gentle comedy. . . ."

Young lovers had come sweeping up a Bastion water lane in a powered float. They moored, stepped ashore, and walked arm in arm across a mosaic walk to the nearest café. They chatted animatedly as they found a table. Background music changed tempo; the focus of attention slid from the lovers to the waiters. Their smoothness of manner while serving was contrasted with their indifference when they were behind scenes, in the squalor and confusion of the kitchens. A waiter was followed off duty down to subterranean Pelt, where he submerged himself in a two-credit tub of dyraco and slept.

"Get the idea?" Rhapsody asked his audience. "Ars Staykr is digging. He's peeling off stratum after stratum of

the mightiest city of all time. Before we're through, you're going to see just what he found at the bottom."

Hardly for a moment had he taken his eyes off Big Cello, whose deadpan countenance was partially hidden by wreaths of aphrohale. The chief now crossed his legs; that could be bad, a sign perhaps of impatience. Rhapsody, who had learned to be sensitive about such things, thought it time to try a direct sounding. Coming to the edge of the stage, he leaned forward and said ingratiatingly, "Can you see it building, B. C.?"

"I'm still sitting here," Big Cello answered. It could be called a relatively enthusiastic response.

"Those of you who never had the privilege of meeting Ars," Rhapsody continued, "will be asking, 'What sort of man could reveal a city with such genius?' Not to keep you in suspense any longer, I'll tell you. When Ars was on this last assignment, I was just a youngster in the solid business. I learned a lot from him, in the matter of plain, everyday humanity as well as in technique. We're going to show you a bit of film now that a cameraman of Unit Two took of Ars without his knowing. I believe you'll find it—sort of moving."

The solid was suddenly there, seeming to fill all the audience's vision. In a corner of one of Nunion's many starports, Ars Staykr and several of his documentary team sat against junked oxygenation equipment, taking lunch. Ars was sixty-eight and passing his middle years. Hair blown over his eyes, he could be seen devouring a gigantic kyfeff sandwich and talking to a youth with a space cut. Looking around at the solid, Rhapsody identified his younger self with some embarrassment and said, "You have to remember this was taken all of twenty years back."

"You weren't so gangling in those days," one of the audience called.

Ars Staykr was speaking. "Cello 69 has given us the chance to go through with this," he was saying. "So let's see we use the chance properly. Anyone in a city this size can pick up interesting faces, or build up architectural angles into a pattern with the help of a background noise. Let's try for something deeper. What I want to find is what really lies at the heart of the greatest metropolis ever known to man."

"Supposing there is no heart, Staykr?" the youthful Rhapsody asked. (He had been only a Tiger dweller in those days.) "I mean—you hear of heartless men and women; couldn't this simply be a heartless city?"

"A semantic quibble," Ars Staykr replied. "All men and women have hearts, even the cruel ones. Same with cities. I'm not denying Nunion isn't a cruel city in many ways. People who live in it have to fight continually. The good in them gradually gets overlaid and lost. You start good, you end bad just because you—oh, hell—you forget, I suppose. You forget you're human."

Ars Staykr paused and looked searchingly at the blank young face before him. "Never mind watching out for Nunion," he said, almost curtly. "Watch out for yourself."

He stood up, wiping his big hands on his slacks. One of his compo crew offered him an aphrohale and said, "Well, that's it on the starport angle, Staykr; we've jelled all we need to here. What sector do we head for next?"

Ars Staykr looked around smilingly, the set of his jaw noticeable. "We take on the politicians next," he said.

The youthful Rhapsody scrambled to his feet, his manner noticeably more aggressive.

"Say, if we could clear up the legal rackets of Nunion," he said, "why, we'd get our solids and be doing everyone a favor, too. We'd be famous, all of us!"

"I was just a crazy, idealistic kid back in those days," the mature Rhapsody, at once abashed and delighted, protested to the audience. "I'd still to learn that life is nothing but a kind of co-ordination of rackets." He smiled widely to indicate that he might be kidding, saw that Big Cello was not smiling, and lapsed into silence.

In the cube, Unit Two was picking up its traps. The cumbersome polyhedron of a trans-Burst freighter from far Lapraca sank into the landing pits behind them and blew piercingly.

"I'll tell you the sort of thing we want to try and capture," Ars Staykr told his team as he shouldered a pack of equipment. "When I first came to this city to join Supernova, I was standing in the lobby of the Justice Building before an important industrial case was being tried. A group of local politicians about to give evidence passed me, and I heard one say as they went in—I've never forgotten it—'Have your hatreds ready, gentlemen.' For me, it will always symbolize the way that prejudice can engulf a man. Touches like that we must have."

Ars Staykr and Unit Two trudged out of the picture, shabby, determined. The solid faded, and there before the screen stood Rhapsody 182, spruce, determined.

"It still doesn't begin to stack up, Rhap," a voice spoke up. It was Rhapsody Double Seven, a rival of Rhapsody's, and Big Cello's personnel manager. You had to be careful with a man like that.

"Perhaps you missed the subtleties," Rhapsody suggested instantly. "The thing's stacking fine. That little cameo has just demonstrated to you why Ars never made the grade. He talked too much. He shot off his mouth to kids like I was then. He wasn't hard. He was nothing more or less than just an artist. Right?"

"If you say so, Rhap," the answer came levelly, but Double Seven turned at once to say something inaudible to Big Cello.

Rhapsody made a brusque signal to the projection box. He would swing this deal on Supernova if he had to stay here all afternoon and evening to do it.

Behind him, Ars Staykr's Nunion was re-created once more, a city which administered the might of Yinnisfar's growing dominance and magnetized the wealth of a galaxy, assembled as the mind of Ars Staykr had visualized it two decades before.

Evening was falling over its maze of ferroline canyons. The sun set; great globes of atomic light tethered in the sky poured their radiance over thoroughfares moving with a new awareness. The original commentary dimmed, giving Rhapsody the opportunity to provide his own.

"Night," he said briskly. "Ars caught it all as it's never been caught before or since. He used to tell me, I remember, that night was the time a city showed its claws. We spent two weeks looking for sharp, broken shadows. The craze for significant detail again."

The clawed shadows moved in, fangs of light etched against the dark flanks of side alleys. An almost tangible restlessness, like the noisy silence of a jungle, moved across the ramps and squares of Nunion; even the present onlookers could feel it. They sat more alertly in their seats.

Behind a façade of civilization, the night life of Nunion had a primitive ferocity; the Jurassic wore evening dress. In Ars Staykr's interpretation it was essentially a dreary world, the amalgam of the homesicknesses and lusts of the many thousand nations that had drifted to Yinnisfar. The individual was lost in an atom-lit wilderness where ninety million people could be alone together within a few square farlings.

It was quite clear that the thronging multitudes, waiting in line for leg shows and jkey joints, were harmless. Living

in flocks, they had developed the flock mentality. They were too harmless to tear anything of value out of the matter of Nunion; all they seemed to ask for was a good time.

Into the cube came the hard-steppers—the ones who could afford to buy solitude and a woman or pneuma-dancer to go with it. They drifted above the sparkling avenues in bubbles; they ate in undersea restaurants, nodding in brotherly fashion to sharks swimming beyond glass walls; they wined in a hundred dives; they sat absorbed over games of chance. Always, at the imperious signal of an eye, there was someone to come running, a man who sweated and trembled as he ran. In short, a galactic city; power must remember it is powerful.

The scene changed. The view swept over the Old Jandanagger and began to investigate Bosphorus Concourse.

The Concourse lay at the heart of Nunion. Here the search for pleasure reached its peak. Barkers cried rival attractions, polyhermaphros signaled, liquor flowed in never-ending streams, cinema vied with participation hall, quirps and quaints beckoned from drifting floats, women of the night moved sleek and busy, a thousand sensations—the perversions of a galaxy—were available at a price. Man, conscious as never before of all of his cells, had invented a different thrill for each.

Rhapsody 182 could not resist adding a word.

"Have you ever seen such realism?" he demanded. "Ordinary folks—folks like you, like me—getting down to having themselves a time. Think what promotion these shots are for Nunion! And where've they been these last twenty years? Why, down in our vaults, neglected, almost lost. Nobody would ever have seen them if I hadn't hunted them up!"

Big Cello spoke.

"I've seen them, Rhapsody," he said throatily. "They're just too sordid to have popular appeal."

Rhapsody stood absolutely still. A dark stain rose in his face. Those few words told him—and everyone else present—exactly where he stood. If he persisted, he would rouse the chief's anger; if he backed down, he would lose face.

In the solid behind Rhapsody, men and women jostled for admission to an all-sense horror show, *Death in Death Cell Six*. Above them, gigantic, was a quasi-live jell of a man being choked, head down, eyes popping, mouth agape.

"We needn't show all this sordid stuff, of course," Rhapsody said, grinning as if in pain. "I'm just giving it a runover

to put the general idea before you. We'll settle on the final details later, naturally." Naturally.

Big Cello nodded. "You're too sold on Bastion 44, though, Rhap," he said kindly. "He was only a bum with a camera, after all."

Ars Staykr's city was emptying now. Crumpled aphrohale packets, minni-newscasts, tickets, programs, preventos, sick-sticks, handbills, and flowers lay in the gutter. The revelers were straggling home to sleep.

A fog settled lightly over Bosphorus Concourse, emphasizing the growing vacancy of the place. A fat man, clothes unbuttoned, reeled out of a participation hall and made for the nearest moveway. It spun him off like a leaf in a drain.

Three and one half sounded from Pla-To Court. Lights snapped off in a deserted restaurant, leaving on the retina an afterimage of upturned chairs. Even the Cello pleasure domes went dim. One last drab clattered wearily home, clutching her handbag tightly.

Yet the Concourse was not empty of humanity. The remorseless eye of the camera hunted down, in sundry doorways, the last watchers of the scene—the ones who had stood, motionless, not participating, when the evening was at its height. Watching the crowd, they waited in doorways as if peering from warrens. From the shadows, their faces gleamed with a terrible, inexpressible tension. Only their eyes moved.

"These men," Rhapsody said, "really fascinated Ars Staykr. They were his discovery. He believed that if anyone could lead him to the heart of the city, these people could, these subterraneans in doorways. Night after night they were there. Staykr called them 'the impotent specters of the feast.'"

The solidscreen blanked, then filled with form once again. An overhead camera tracked two men down a canal-side walk. Ars Staykr and his young assistant, Rhapsody 182. They had movewayed down to the quiet side of Tiger.

The two figures paused outside a shabby boutique, looking doubtfully at the sign, A. WILLITTS, COSTUMES AND VESTMENTS.

"I have the feeling we're going to turn up something," Ars was saying as the sound came on. "We're going to hear what a city really is, from someone who must have felt its atmosphere most keenly. With this fellow, we're digging right down into the heart of it. But it won't be pleasant."

Darkness. It seemed to seep out of the black G-suits; they were the antique tailor's specialty, hanging stiff and bulky

around the walls, funereal in the gloom. The costumier, Willitts, was a newt of a man; his features were recognizable as those of one of the Concourse night watchers, now trailed to his lair.

Willitt's eyes bulged and glistened like those of a drowning rat. He denied ever going to Bosphorus Concourse. When Ars persisted, he fell silent, dangling his little fingers against the counter.

"I'm not a flux officer," Ars Staykr said. "I'm simply curious. I want to know why you stand there every night the way you do."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Willitts muttered, dropping his eyes. "I don't do anything."

"That's just it. You don't do anything. Why do you—and others like you—stand there not doing anything? What are you thinking of? What do you see? What do you feel?"

"I've got business to attend to," Willitts protested. "I'm busy. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I want to know what you feel, how you tick, Willitts."

"Leave me alone, will you?"

"Answer my questions and I'll go away."

"We could make it worth your while, Willitts," young Rhapsody added, with a knowing look.

The little man's eyes were furtive. He licked his lips. He seemed so tired, his tiny frame devoid of blood.

"Leave me alone," he said. "That's all I ask—leave me alone. I'm not hurting you, am I? A customer might come in any time. I'm not answering your questions. Now please get out of here."

Unexpectedly, Ars Staykr jumped, pinning the little man backward across the counter. Of the two, Staykr's face was the more desperate.

"Willitts," he said, "I've got to know. I've got to know. I've been digging into this cesspit of a city week after week, and you're the thing I've found at the bottom of it. You're going to tell me what it feels like down there or, so help me, I'll break your neck."

"How can I tell you?" Willitts demanded with sudden, mouselike fury. "I can't tell you. I can't. I haven't got the words. You'd have to be me—or my kind—before you'd understand."

In the end they gave it up and left Willitts panting, lying behind his counter in the dust.

"I didn't mean to lose control," Ars Staykr said, pressing

his brow, licking his knuckles, as he emerged from the shop. He must have known the camera was on him, but was too preoccupied to care. "Something just went blank inside me. We've all got our hatreds far too ready, I guess. But I must find out. . . ."

His set face loomed larger and larger in the cube, eclipsing all else. One eyelid was flickering uncontrollably. He moved out of sight.

Everyone was talking in the audience now, except the chief; they had all enjoyed the beating up.

"Seriously," Ormolu 3 was saying, "that last scene had something. You'd resolidify, of course, with proper actors, have a few broken teeth. Maybe finish with the little guy getting knocked into the canal."

Timing his exits was a specialty with Rhapsody. He had them awake and now he'd show them no more. He came slowly down the few steps into the auditorium.

"So there's the story of a man called Ars Staykr," he said, as his right foot left the last step. "He couldn't take it. After he beat up that little tailor, he dropped everything and disappeared into the stews of Nunion. He didn't even stay to round off his picture, and Unit Two folded then and there. He was a quitter."

"How come we've had to wait twenty years to hear all this?" came a shout from Rhapsody Double Seven.

Carefully, Rhapsody 182 spread his hands wide and smiled.

"Because Ars Staykr was a dirty word when he first quit," he said, aiming his voice at Big Cello, "and after that he was forgotten. Then, well, it happened I ran into Staykr a couple of days back, and that gave me the idea of working over the old Unit Two files."

He tried to move in front of Big Cello, to make it easier for the chief to compliment him on his sagacity if he felt so inclined.

"You mean Ars is still alive?" Double Seven persisted. "He must be quite an old man now. What's he doing, for To's sake?"

"He's a down-and-out, a bum," Rhapsody said. "I didn't care to be seen talking to him, so I got away from him as soon as possible."

He now stood before the chief.

"Well, B. C.," he said, as calmly as he could, "don't tell

me you don't smell a solid there—something to sweep 'em off their feet and knock 'em into the aisles."

As if deliberately prolonging the suspense, Big Cello took another drag on this aphrohaile, then removed it gently from his mouth.

"We'd have to have a pair of young lovers in it," Big Cello said.

"Sure," Rhapsody exclaimed, scowling to hide his elation. "Young lovers! There's an idea! A great idea!"

"I see it as a saga of the common man," Hurricane 304 suggested. "We could call it *Our Fair City*—if that title isn't legally sequestered."

"It's a vehicle for Edru Expusso!" someone else suggested.

They were playing with it. Harsch had won the day.

He was hustling out of the little theater when a hand touched his arm and Rhapsody Double Seven pulled him back.

"How did you happen to find Ars Staykr again?" he asked.

"Well," Rhapsody said happily, "I happened to have a rendezvous a couple of nights back. I was looking for a helibubble afterward when I happened to walk through Bosphorus Concourse. This old wreck hanging about in a doorway recognized me and called out."

"It was Ars?"

"It was Ars. I kept on going, of course. But it put me onto the concept of this solid."

"Didn't you ask Ars if he'd found out what was at the heart of the city? That was what he'd gone looking for, wasn't it?"

"What's it matter? That quaint had nothing we'd want to buy. His clothes were in rags, I tell you; why, the crazy fool was shivering with viro! I was lucky that bubble came when it did!"

They made the solid—one of Supernova's big-budget productions for the year. It took in credits on every inhabited planet of the Federation, and Rhapsody 182 was a powerful, respected man thereafter. They called it *Song of a Mighty City*; it had three electronic orchestras, seventeen hit tunes and a regiment of pneuma-dancing girls. The solidization was jelled in the studios using the pastel shades deemed most appropriate, and they finally selected a more suitable city than Nunion for backgrounds. Ars Staykr, of course, did not come into it at all.

8

THE
ULTIMATE
MILLENNIA

Again we must use the symbol: Time passed. Time is stretched to its limits, extended almost beyond meaning, for Time now rolls down a gentle decline of innumerable centuries toward the sunset of Yinnisfar and its Galaxy.

It was a time of contrast. Those planets and systems which, while the Self-perpetuating War was in full spate, had once been linked by the bond of enmity had now not enough in common even to be rivals. It was a time of discovery and consolidation; of experiment and abdication; of hope and resignation; of the historian and the prophet. It was a time of the exploration of the inner resources of man; with his last frontiers tamed, man turned in toward the self. There he went on foot, alone, without that gray steed Science in which he had trusted for so long, alone into the labyrinth of his own devices.

Humanity had multiplied. Every world bore a mighty crowd of people, but the crowd no longer jostled and shouted. Each individual remained by choice to himself, an island. It was the silver period of the Age of Splendor and Starlight. Soon only the starlight would remain.

Toward the end of a great pageant, it may be, the stage is at its most crowded; a sea of faces, brightly lit, greets us even as the curtains begin their final downward sweep. Toward the end of a symphony, it may be, the whole orchestra puts forth its full efforts only a minute before silence falls and the music becomes a memory.

Throughout one vast arena, silence was falling, the last silence of all.

YOU NEVER KNEW THE BEGINNING OF THAT TRAIN OF EVENTS which led you to Yinnisfar and a world of shadows.

You never knew Shouter by name. He operated far from

what most men reckoned as civilization, right out on the rim of the Galaxy, so that on his frequent sweeps from one planet to another he rarely saw stars on both sides of his cabin. There they would be, a whole galaxyful on one side, burning bright and high, and, on the other—a cliff of emptiness that stretched from eternity to eternity, the distant island universes only accentuating the gulf.

Shouter generally kept his eyes on the stars.

But not on this trip. Shouter was a spool-seller by trade; his little star craft was packed with rack upon rack of microspools. He stocked all kinds, new and antiquarian; philosophical, sociological, mathematical; if you went through them systematically, you could almost piece together the eon-old history of the Galaxy. It was not, however, on these learned spools that Shouter made his best money; they paid for the fuel, but not the drinks. The spools that really brought in the profits dealt with a subject older than history, and with figures more ineluctable than any in the mathematician's vocabulary; their subject was Desire. Erotic spools depicting the devices of lust formed Shouter's stock in trade; and because such items were illegal, Shouter stood in perpetual fear of the customs officials of a hundred worlds.

Now he was elated. He had just neatly outwitted the petty guardians of morality and sold about half his holdings under their very eyes.

That he took too much drink in celebration was to influence your entire life. An empty merrit bottle rolled by his feet. It was hot in the small cabin of his ship, and he dozed off, sprawling over the controls. . . .

Shouter woke muzzily. He sensed something was wrong and his head cleared at once as he peered anxiously into the forward vision tanks. No clouds of accustomed stars were in view. Hurdledly, he flipped on rear vision: there lay the Galaxy like a tinsel disc—far behind him. Shouter swallowed, and checked fuel. Low, but enough to get back on. Fuel, however, was in better supply than air. His oxygen tanks had not been replenished in the hurry of his last departure. He would never get back to the Galaxy alive on the thimbleful that remained.

With an abyss opening in his stomach, Shouter turned to the forward ports again to examine an object he had previously ignored. Apart from the distant phantoms of other galaxies, it was the only object to relieve the inane ubiq-

uity of vacuum—and it was showing a disc. He checked with his instruments. Undoubtedly, it was a small sun.

It puzzled Shouter. His astronomical knowledge was negligible, but he knew that according to the laws there was nothing between galaxies; that long funnel of night shut off galaxy from galaxy as surely as the living were cut off from the dead. He could only suppose this sun ahead to be a tramp star; such things were known, but they naturally roved inside the giant lens of the home Galaxy, in conformity with its gravitational pull. Shouter threw the problem aside unsolved. All that vitally concerned him was whether the sun—wherever it came from—had one or more oxygen planets in attendance.

It had. The sun was a white dwarf with one planet almost as big as itself. A quick stratospheric test as Shouter glided into breaking orbit showed a breathable nitrogen-oxygen balance. Blessing his luck, the spool-seller sped down and landed. A valley fringed by hills and woods embraced him.

He walked out of the airlock in good fettle, leaving the compressor-analyzer systems working to insure full tanks of purified oxygen drawn from the planet's air.

It was hot outside. Shouter had an immediate impression of newness everywhere. Everything seemed fresh, gleaming. His eyes ached at the vividness.

The shores of a lake lay a few yards away. He began to walk toward it, conscious at the same time of a vague discomfort in his breathing. With deliberate effort, he inhaled more slowly, thinking the air might be too rich for him.

Something rose to the surface of the lake a distance away. It looked like a man's head; but Shouter could not be sure; a mist rising from the surface of the lake, as if the waters were hot, obscured detail.

The hurt in his lungs became more definite. He was conscious, too, of a smart spreading across his limbs, almost as if the air were too harsh for them. In his eyes, all things acquired a fluttering spectrum. He had had the assurance of his instruments that all was well, but suddenly that assurance meant nothing: he was in pain.

All in a panic, Shouter turned to get back to his ship. He coughed and fell, dizziness overcoming him. Now he saw it was indeed a man in the misty lake. He shouted for help once only.

You looked across at him, and at once started to swim in his direction.

But Shouter was dying. His cry brought blood up into his throat, splashing out over one hand. He choked, attempting to rise again. You climbed naked out of the lake toward him. He saw you, turning his head heavily, and flung one arm out gesturing toward the ship with its imagined safety. As you got to him, he died.

For a while you knelt by him, considering. Then you turned away and regarded the small starship for the first time. You went over to it, your eyes full of wonder.

The sun rose and set twenty-five times before you mastered all that Shouter's ship contained. You touched everything gently, almost reverently. Those microspools meant little individually to you at first, but you were able to refer back to them and piece the jigsaw of their secrets together, until the picture they gave you formed a whole picture. Shouter's projector was almost worn out before you finished. Then you investigated the ship itself, sucking out its meaning like a thirsty man.

Your thoughts must have moved strangely in those twenty-five days, like sluice gates opening for the first time, as you became yourself.

All you learned then was already knowledge; the way in which you pieced it together was genius, but nevertheless it was knowledge already held by many men, the results of research and experience. Only afterward, when you integrated that knowledge, did you make a deduction on your own behalf. The deduction, involving as it did all the myriad lives in the Galaxy, was so awing, so overwhelming, that you tried to evade it.

You could not; it was inescapable. One clinching fact was the death of Shouter; you knew why he had died. So you had to act, obeying your first moral imperative.

Just for a moment, you looked at your bright world. You would return to it when duty had been done. You climbed up into Shouter's ship, punched out a course on the computer, and headed toward the Galaxy.

2

You came unarmed into the warring city. Your ship lay abandoned on a hill some miles away. You walked as if among the properties of a dream, carrying your own sup-

plies, and demanded to see the leader of the rebel army. They put innumerable difficulties in your way, but eventually you stood before him because none could gainsay you.

The rebel leader was a hard man with an eye missing, and he was busy when you entered. He stared at you with deep mistrust through that single eye; the guards behind him stroked their fusers.

"I'll give you three minutes," One Eye said.

"I don't want your time," you said easily. "I have plenty of my own. I also have a plan bigger than any plan of yours. Do you wish me to show you how to subjugate the Region of Yinnisfar?"

Now One Eye looked at you again. He saw—how should it be said?—he saw you were not as other men, that you were vividder than they. But the Region of Yinnisfar lay long light years away, impregnable, in the heart of the Galaxy; for twice ten million years its reign had been undisputed among twice ten million planets.

"You're mad!" One Eye said. "Get out! Our objective is to conquer this city—not a galaxy."

You did not move. Why did the guards not act then? Why did not One Eye shoot you down before you had begun your task?

"This civil war you wage here is fruitless," you said. "What are you fighting for? A city. The next street! A powerhouse! These are spoils fit only for scavengers. I offer you the wealth of Yinnisfar!"

One Eye stood up, showing his teeth. The unkempt hair on his neck rose like prickles. His leather cheeks turned mauve. He jerked up his fuser and thrust it toward your face. You did nothing; there was nothing you needed to do. Confounded, One Eye sat down again. He had not met such relentless indifference to threats before, and was impressed. "Owlenj is only a poor planet with a long history of oppression," he muttered. "But it is my world. I have to fight for it and the people on it, to protect their rights and liberties. I admit that a man of my tactical ability deserves a better command; possibly when we've brought this city to its knees. . . ."

Because time was on your side, you had patience. Because you had patience, you listened to One Eye. His talk was at once grandiose and petty; he spoke largely of the triumph of human rights and narrowly of the shortage of

trained soldiers. He wanted heaven on earth, but he was a platoon short.

He was a man who won respect from his fellows—or fear, if not respect. Yet his principles had been old-fashioned a million millennia ago, before the beginnings of space travel. They had worn wafer thin, used over and over again by countless petty generals: the need for force, the abolition of injustice, the belief that right would win through. You listened with a chill pity, aware that the age-old and majestic intricacies of the Self-perpetuating War had shrunk to this pocket of trouble on Owlenj.

When he stopped orating, you told One Eye your plan for conquering Yinnisfar. You told him that living on Owlenj, on the cold rim of the Galaxy, he could have no idea of the richness of those central worlds; that all the fables the children of Owlenj learned in their meager beds did not convey one-tenth of the wealth of the Suzerain of Yinnisfar; that every man there had his destiny and happiness guarded imperishably.

"Well, we were always underprivileged out here," growled One Eye. "What can anyone here do against the power of the Region?"

So you told him, unsmilingly, that there was one aspect in which Yinnisfar was inferior; it could not, in all its systems, command a general who displayed the sagacity and fearlessness that One Eye was renowned for; its peoples had lost their old lusty arrogance and had declined into mere reverie-lopsters.

"All that is so," One Eye admitted reluctantly, "though I have never cared to say so myself. They are a decadent lot!"

"Decadent!" you exclaimed. "They are decadent beyond all belief. They hang like a giant overripe fruit, waiting to drop and splash."

"You really think so?"

"Listen. How long has there been peace throughout the Galaxy—except, of course, for your little difference of opinion here? For millions of years, is that not so? Is it not so peaceful that even interstellar trade has dwindled almost to nothing? I tell you, my friend, the mighty nations of the stars have nodded off to sleep! Their warriors, their technicians, have been untested for generations. Their science men beneath a pool of complacency!"

Now you had One Eye on his feet again. This time he was

yours, the first of your list of conquests. He let out a roar of excitement.

"By Thraldemener, it is as you say!" he shouted. "They wouldn't know how to fight. They are degenerate! Come, there is no time to be lost. We will begin the liberation of the peoples of Yinnisfar tomorrow, my friend. Why couldn't I have thought of the idea myself?"

"Wait!" you said. You touched his tattered sleeve as he came around the desk; he felt something of your vitality course through him, and waited obediently. "If Owlenj is to conquer, it must be united. Your forces are not sufficient in themselves to match the dying might of the Region. The civil war must end."

At this One Eye frowned, looked uncertain. Above all else he had wanted to reduce this little city to ashes.

"You can't stop a civil war just like that," he protested.

"You and I go and see the enemy commander," you said.

And although he protested and swore, that was what you and One Eye did.

Treading carefully over the debris, you left by what had been the West Gate and came to the improvised shields of lead and sand which marked One Eye's present forward position. Here One Eye began to argue again; you silenced him. With one man to accompany you and bear the white flag of truce, you put on a radiation suit as One Eye had done and climbed out into the street.

This had once been a fine avenue. Now the tall exoquag trees were splintered like bone, and the fronts of many buildings demolished. Several robotanks lay locked together on the scarred pavements. Nothing moved. But as you walked, you must have been aware of the unseen eyes of the enemy watching you behind their leveled sights.

At the top of the avenue, a mechanical voice halted you and asked you what you wanted. When its attendant echoes had gone chattering away among the ruins, One Eye bellowed out his name and demanded to see the enemy general.

Within two minutes, a transparent disk using beamed power dropped out of the sky. A door slid open and the mechanical voice shouted, "Please get in."

Entering with your two companions, you were at once lifted to a height just above the rooftops. The disk flicked two blocks to the north before sinking again. The door opened and you climbed out.

You were in a slaughter yard. No animals were here now, although a wall with a line of fuser marks heart-high showed that the place had not entirely abandoned its ancient purposes.

Two captains met you under a white flag. They saluted One Eye and led you out of the yard, down a deep ramp. You descended to a part of the old-fashioned pneumatic running under the city, where you removed your radiation suit. Here a maze of new corridors had been constructed; down one of them you were led until a white-painted door was reached. The grim captains indicated you were to go in.

You entered.

"Well, you traitor, what makes you think you will leave here alive?" the enemy general asked One Eye. His uniform was trim, if worn, his eyes had a quelling fire to them; he walked as true soldiers have walked since time immemorial—as if the disks of his backbone had all been welded together. And Welded had a little mustache, which now bristled with triumph at the sight of his foe.

Temporarily forgetting all but his old feud, One Eye advanced as if he would tear that mustache from the other's upper lip.

"Shake hands, you two," you said impatiently. "Come to terms immediately. The sooner arrangements are made, the better."

Welded looked at you for the first time; he seemed instantly to comprehend that it was you rather than One Eye with whom he had to deal. Welded was an intelligent man. Instantly, he was ice cold; his voice ground straight off a glacier.

"I have no idea who you are, fellow," he said, "but if I have any suspicion of impertinence from you, I'll have you beamed. With your friend here I must be more careful—his head is destined for the city gate. You are entirely expendable."

"On that I reserve my own opinion," you said. "We do not come here to bandy threats but to make you an offer. If you are prepared to listen, listen now."

In the scale of emotions, there is a stage beyond fury when fury cools, and a stage beyond anger where it merges into fear. As Welded reached this point, he stiffened as if he would snap. He could say nothing. You began to talk of Yinnisfar.

Welded was a harder man to deal with than his enemy, more seasoned, more sure of himself. Though a faint, conspicuous smile curled his lip when you spoke of the richness of the Region, he never unbent. When you had finished, he spoke.

"Are you a native of Owlenj, stranger?" he asked.

"No," you said.

"What is your world, stranger?"

"It is a planet beyond the Galaxy."

"There is nothing between the galaxies. What is the name of the world of yours, stranger?"

"It is unnamed," you said.

Now Welded snapped a finger angrily.

"You have an odd way of trying to win my confidence," he said. "What do the inhabitants of your world call it?"

"There are no inhabitants," you said. "I am the first. It is unnamed because I have not named it."

"Then I will name it," Welded snarled. "I name it Lies! All Lies! Every word a lie! You are a spy from distant Yinnisfar, a dupe, an assassin! Guards!"

As he shouted, he wrenched a fuser from its holster. One Eye kicked out, caught Welded's wrist with the toe of his boot, and sent the weapon flying across the room.

"Listen, you lunatic!" he roared at Welded. "Would you kill this man who offers us so much? Suppose he is a spy from Yinnisfar—would that not make him the ideal man to lead us back there? We need not trust him. Let us seize the advantage of having him in our hands!"

Even while One Eye was speaking, the ceiling had lifted three feet; through the widening gap, armed men catapulted themselves into the room, pinning you and the rebel leader into different corners. In no time, you were enmeshed in clawed metal nets.

Welded stayed them with a raised hand.

"There is a grain of truth in what you say," he admitted reluctantly. "Guards, leave us. We will talk."

Two hours later, when orderlies brought in wine for you and the commanders, the arguing was over and plans were being discussed. By tacit agreement, the question of your origin was abandoned; both men had decided that wherever you came from it was not from the Region of Yinnisfar. No one from that vast empire had bothered with the outer rim of the Galaxy for millennia.

"I came to you," you told them, "because this is one of the few planets near my world on which any form of military organization still survives."

At that they were flattered. They failed to see that you regarded them merely as remnants of an outdated creed. The only advantage of a military organization over any other, from your point of view, was its ability to get into action without inordinate delay.

Two hours later still, when one of Welded's orderlies entered with food, Welded was just making the last of numerous calls to the garrisons of Owlenj.

"How many interstellar vessels do you hold that can be put into active service at once?" he asked into the speaker. "Yes, all told. . . . I see: fifteen. How many of those are light-drive? . . . Only five. What type are those five?"

He wrote the answers down, reading them out as he did so, for your benefit and One Eye's.

"One freighter, one liner converted to military use, one trooper and two invaders. Good. Now give me their tonnages."

He wrote the tonnages down, scowled, nodded, and said with authoritative sharpness to the unseen commander, "Excellent. You will receive instructions in the morning as regards fueling and equipping of those five ships. As for the other ten, get your electronics arm on them immediately. I want them equipped with light-drive and ready to bust vacuum within forty-eight hours. Is that understood? . . . And please confine all your men to camp until further orders. Is that understood? . . . Good. Any queries? . . . I leave it all to your ingenuity, commander. Good night. A jolt in the teeth for him," Welded said with satisfaction as he signed off.

For the first time, he regarded the orderly who had brought in the food.

"Is the general cease fire being obeyed?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," the orderly said. "The people are dancing in the streets."

"We'll give them something to dance about soon," Welded said, rubbing his hands. He turned to One Eye, who was juggling with pieces of paper.

"What's our strength?" he asked.

"Depends how many of these light-drive conversion craft actually materialize."

"With our present shortage of men and materials, say fifty per cent," Welded said.

"Right." One Eye scanned his one eye over the sheet of figures.

"Including my own fleets, say a hundred and ten starships, about two-thirds of which will be military."

They looked at each other briefly. Provincial though they were, the number still sounded faintly small.

"It is ample," you said confidently.

They turned to the formidable problem of rations. The fleet could reckon on being vacuum-borne for two weeks before reaching the margins of the Region; another two and a half weeks to reach the heart; another three days to the pivotal world of Yinnisfar itself.

"And that allows no time for delay caused by evasive action or battle," Welded said.

"They may capitulate before we reach Yinnisfar itself," you said.

"We must have a safety margin," Welded insisted. "Let's call it a six-week journey, eh? And we'll be five and a half thousand strong. . . ." He shook his head. "We can cope with air supply. The calorie intake is going to be the snag. Those men'll eat their heads off in that time; there's just not that amount of food on all Owlenj. Deep freeze is our only answer. Everyone below the rank of major not on essential ship's crew travels frozen. Get me Medical, orderly. I want to speak to the physician general."

The orderly hastened to obey.

"What's next?" Welded asked. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Weapons," One Eye said. "First, fissionable material. My forces can't help much there. Our stocks happen to be lower than usual."

"Here's a report on our holdings as of last week," Welded said, tossing a stereoeed list over. "Stocks are meager, I'm afraid."

You glanced at the list over One Eye's shoulder.

"It is ample," you said encouragingly.

4

At first it must have seemed as if the scheme might succeed. Again the feeling must have assailed you that you lived in an unlikely dream whose scenery you could puncture with a finger, as you sat in the flagship with the two commanders. You had no nerves; you did not worry. Welded and One Eye, in their individual ways, both showed strain now

that they were embarked on the journey. The captain of the ship, Fleet Commander Prim, had to endure much quiet nagging.

The early days passed uneventfully. Beyond the ports, space hung becalmed, its blazing stars mere specks in the distance, its ancient splendors nothing more than points to navigate by. The other ships were not visible to the unaided eye; the flagship might have been traveling alone. When they had blasted from Owlenj, the ships in the invasion fleet had numbered 117; by the end of the first week five had had to give up and limp home again, their too hastily contrived light-drives burned out. It would take them, under normal thrust, half a year to regain port; by then, their crews would be asphyxiated or the survivors breathing the oxygen of murdered men. The rest of the fleet sailed on, holds full of soldiers in suspended animation, all neatly stacked and racked like bottles.

They had been vacuum-borne sixteen days, and were past those stars generally regarded as outposts of the empire of Yinnisfar, when they were first challenged.

"A station calling itself Camoens II RST225," the communications chief reported, "asks us why we have passed Koramandel Tangent Ten without identifying ourselves."

"Let it keep on calling," you said.

Other challenges were received and left unanswered. The fleet stayed silent as it startled to life the worlds about it. Communications began to intercept messages of alarm and warning between planetary stations.

"Galcondar Saber calling Rolf 158. Unidentified craft due to pass you on course 99GY4281 at 07.1430 Gal. approx—"

"Acrostic I to Schiaparelli Base. Look out and report on fleet now entering Home Sector Paradise 014—"

"Peik-pi-Koing Astronomical to Droxy Pylon. Unidentified ships numbering 130 approx now crossing Scanning Area. Code Diamond Index Diamond Oh Nine—"

"All stations on Ishrail Link Two. Procedure BAB Nine One into operation immediately—"

One Eye snorted his contempt.

"We've certainly set these provincial globes in a flutter," he said.

As the hours passed, he grew less easy. Space, almost silent a watch ago, now became murmurous with voices; soon the murmur grew into a babel. The note of curiosity, at first indicating little more than mild interest, showed a corresponding rise through irritation into alarm.

"Perhaps we ought to answer them," One Eye suggested. "Couldn't we spin them some tale to keep them quiet? Tell them we are going to pay homage, or something?"

"You need have no worry about the messages we can understand," Prim said. "We are picking up several in code now; they are the ones which should cause us most concern."

"Haven't we some sort of yarn to keep them quiet?" One Eye repeated, appealing to you.

You were looking out into the darkness, almost as if you could see through the veil of it, almost as if you expected to see the messages flashing like comets before the ports.

"The truth will emerge," you said, without turning around.

Two days later, the parasond picked up the first ship they had detected since leaving Owlenj.

"It *can't* be a ship!" the communications chief was saying, waving a flimog with the report on it.

"But it must be," his sub almost pleaded. "Look at its course: you plotted it back yourself! It's definitely turning. What but a ship could maneuver?"

"It *can't* be a ship!" the chief repeated.

"Why can't it be a ship?" Prim asked.

"Beg pardon, sir, but the thing's at least thirty miles long."

After a silence, One Eye asked, "Which way's it coming?"

The sub spoke up. He alone seemed delighted at the fish they had caught on their screen. "It has turned since we had it under observation through thirty to thirty-two degrees northerly from a course about due nor-nor'west with respect to galactic quadrature."

One Eye grasped the back of the sub's couch as if it were the sub's neck.

"What I want to know," he growled, "is if it's going away or coming toward us."

"Neither," said the sub, looking at the screen again. "It now seems to have finished turning and is moving along a course which is . . . at ninety degrees to ours."

"Any signal from it?" Prim asked.

"Nothing."

"Put a shot across its bows," One Eye suggested.

"You are not groveling along the streets of Owlenj now, taking pot shots at all and sundry. Let it go!"

One Eye turned angrily, to find Welded there. The latter had come up on the bridge early. He stood and watched the

blob fade from the parasond screen before he spoke again. Then, beckoning One Eye aside and looking to make sure you were not then present on the bridge, he said in a low voice, "My friend, I have something to confess to you."

He looked anxiously and with distaste at One Eye's whiskery countenance before continuing.

"My early fears are coming back to me," he said. "You know I am a man of courage, but even a hero does wisely to be afraid at times. Every hour we dive deeper into a hornet's nest; do you realize that? Why, we are only two and a half weeks from Yinnisfar itself! I cannot sleep for asking myself if we are not running into something from which there will be no escape."

Reluctant as he was to agree with an old enemy, One Eye could not miss this chance of confiding his own anxieties.

"Ships thirty miles long!" he exclaimed.

Nodding mysteriously, Welded persuaded the other to come down to his cabin before he would say more. Then he thumped the bulkhead.

"Only a watch's journey from here," he said, thumping again for emphasis, "are many rich planets. They will be as plunder-worthy as the planets in the heart of the Region—but less well guarded. Can't you just picture them at this very moment: loaded with plump semiblondes with rings on every finger, and fat little men dallying with big bank accounts? They're wide open! Defenseless! Why go on to Yinnisfar, where undoubtedly we shall meet with resistance? Why not stop here, plunder what we can, and get back to Owlenj while the going's good?"

One Eye hesitated, his lip thrust out. He liked the suggestion every bit as much as his ex-enemy had expected he would. But there was one major obstacle.

"He's set his heart on getting to Yinnisfar itself."

"Yes! I think we've put up with *him* long enough," Welded replied.

They did not need to mention your name. When away from the aura of your presence, their misgivings about you were mutual. Welded crossed to a cupboard, taking out a small and tightly stoppered bottle.

"This should solve *that* problem," he said.

It contained a deadly venom; to smell one drop of it a yard away would give a man headaches for a week.

"Something to flavor his wine with tonight," Welded said.

When the wine went round the captain's table after dinner, One Eye accepted his glass but could not drink. He felt sick with suspense, and with the sickness went a loathing for Welded; not only did he disapprove of poisoning, as a devious method of killing, but he understood clearly that the little bottle held more than enough to spare for him, too, should Welded feel like disposing of all his opposition at once.

You had no such qualms. You took your glass when it was filled, toasted, as you did every night, the success of the expedition, and drained down the wine.

"This wine tastes flat," you said. "We will stock up with better vintages on Yinnisfar!"

Everyone around the table laughed with you, except for One Eye; the muscles of his face contorted. He could not even force himself to look at Welded.

"What did you make of the thirty-mile-long object we sighted earlier?" Prim asked you, taking his wine at a more sedate pace.

"It was a Yinnisfar ship," you said easily. "But don't worry about it. Evolution will take care of it, just as evolution took care of the prehistoric monsters that once roved Owlenj and other planets."

The captain spread his hands.

"For a practical man, that seems a strangely unpractical remark," he said. "Evolution is one thing, superships quite another."

"Only if you forget that evolution is nature's scientific method, and starships, not being organic creatures, are a part of man's evolution. And man himself is but a part of nature's scientific method."

"I trust you don't imagine, at this late date in time, that man is not the end product of evolution?" he asked you. "We are constantly being told that the Galaxy is too old for anything but final extinction."

"I imagine nothing," you told him pleasantly. "But remember—what triumphs ultimately is something too vast for comprehension—yours or mine."

You stood up, and the others followed suit. Soon the dining room was empty except for two very puzzled conspirators.

For just over four weeks, the Owlenj fleet had been vacuum-borne. Now the craft were deep within the star-clotted

heart of the Galaxy. Suns which carried as an incidental burden hundreds of millions of years of the histories and myths of man burned on all sides like funeral torches. The graveyard air was reinforced by silence over all wave bands, the chatter of alarmed planets had died away to nothing.

"They're waiting for us!" One Eye exclaimed, not for the first time. He lived on the bridge of the flagship now, staring for hours at a time at the seemingly motionless spectacle of the universe.

Much to the captain's unstated disapproval, the bridge had also become Welded's living quarters. He spent most of the time lying on his bed with a fuser under his pillow, and never looked out of the ports.

You came frequently to the bridge, but seldom spoke to the two. You were detached; it might have been all a dream. Yet, for all that, you were at times noticeably impatient, speaking abruptly, sometimes clicking your fingers in suppressed irritation, almost as if you wished to wake from the tedium of your sleep.

Only Fleet Commander Prim remained completely unchanged. The routine of command stayed him. He seemed to have absorbed all the confidence One Eye and Welded had lost.

"We shall ground on Yinnisfar in six days," he said to you. "Is it possible they intend to offer us no resistance?"

"It is possible to think up excellent reasons for their non-resistance," you said. "Owlenj has been isolated from the Federation for generations and has little knowledge of current intellectual attitudes within the Region. They may all be pacifists, eager to prove their faith. Or, at the other end of the scale, their military hierarchy, without war to thin its ranks, may already have collapsed under our unexpected pressure. It's all speculation—"

At that second, the parasond exploded. An icy clatter rang along the floor as ruptured metal and glass showered out of the panel, while gusts of acrid smoke settled like mesh over the bridge. A babble of voices broke out.

"Get the communications chief," Prim barked, but the chief was already on the job, calling over the intercom for a stretcher party and the electronics crew.

Welded was inspecting the damage, fanning away smoke, which still siphoned out of a red-hot crater in the panels. His spine arched as tensely as a prestressed girder.

"Look!" called One Eye. The hysterical edge to his voice was so compelling that even in this moment of crisis every eye present swiveled to where his finger pointed. Out, out they stared into the hard pageant of night beyond the ports. Their eyes had to probe and focus before they saw.

Flies. Flies, rising in a cloud from a dark stream on whose surface sunlight glittered, so that between dark and light the insects were almost lost to view. But the stream was space itself and the glitter a spangle of suns, and the flies spread across them—a cloud of ships. The ancient forces of Yinnisfar were rising to the attack.

6

"You can't count them!" One Eye said, glaring aghast at the swarm of ships. "There must be thousands. *They* blew out the instrument panel; it was a sort of warning. By Pla and To, they'll blow us into eternity at any moment!"

Turning on a heel, he crossed the promenade and confronted you.

"You brought us into this!" he shouted. "What are you going to do to get us away? How do we save ourselves?"

"Leave that to the captain and be silent," you said. You moved away before he touched you and stood by the captain.

The short wave was unimpaired, and he spoke rapidly to the squadron leaders of his fleet. On a live schematic above his head, the results of those orders immediately became apparent. The Owljenan fleet was deploying into its individual squadrons, spreading into a fan parsecs wide. They moved toward the curtain of flies like an opening hand. At maximum speed they moved, straight for the enemy navies.

"They're too ready for us," Prim said to you out of the corner of his dry mouth. "There aren't enough of us to be effective. It's nothing but suicide."

"What else do you suggest?" you asked him.

"If every ship made for a planet, orbited it, held it under threat of demolition— No, they'd pick us off one by one . . ." He shook his head. "This is the only possible way," he said quietly, again turning all his attention to the maneuver.

Further talk was impossible. The waiting ships and the handful of charging starcraft slid together. The gulf between them suddenly became trellised with blue flame—electric, blinding. Square links of force opened and shut like champing mouths. Whatever its power source, the drain must have been

phenomenal, consuming the basic energies of space itself.

The Owljenan ships found themselves on the defensive before evasion was more than a panicky thought. That chopping trellis flared before their ports, snapped, was gone, flared and snapped again, bathing every bridge in its eccentric luminance, dazzling, consuming. It was the last light thousands of eyes ever saw. The ships on which those blue jaws closed burned magnesium-bright; they burned, then sagged into limbo, leached of life.

But the invaders were tearing through space at formidable speeds. Nor was the terrifying trellis properly in phase; whoever controlled it could not control its precise adjustment. Its scissor action was too slow—many ships hurtled through its interstices and into the ranks of the Yinnisfar fleet.

A glance at the schematic showed Prim he had only about forty ships left, raggedly out of formation.

"Superfusers—fire!" he roared.

No one in that immense melee of armor had ever been in a space battle before. The Galaxy in its tired old age had long since hung up its swords. Of all the astute minds following the rapid interplay of strategy, Prim's was the quickest to seize advantage. The mighty ranks of Yinnisfar had placed too much reliance on their trellis device; they were temporarily numbed to find survivors on their side of it. Owljenan shook them out of their numbness.

Sunbursts of superfusers cascaded among them, leaping and feeding from ship to ship, coruscating with cosmic energy, while the attackers plunged through their devastated ranks and were away. The Yinnisfar vessels were also in rapid movement. In no time they had dispersed, safe from the fusion center, where twenty score of their sister ships had perished.

"We're through!" you said. "On to Yinnisfar itself. It will ransom our safety!"

The enemy fleet was not so easily outdistanced, however. Several units were already overtaking the invaders at staggering velocity. Among them was the thirty-mile-long craft they had sighted some days earlier.

"And there are three more like it!" Welder yelled from his position at the ports "Look! How can anything travel that fast?"

Prim wrenched the flagship into a spin south. They altered course just in time; the overtakers launched a black mass

like smoke directly ahead of their old position. The smoke was molecularized ceetee, capable of riddling the flagship like a moth in a carpet, leaving it mere gravel over the spaceways. In this maneuver, sight of the four giant vessels was lost. Then they spun into sight again, and with mind-wrenching turns formed the four points of an enormous square ahead of the flagship.

"No human could stand G's like that. They are robot-controlled," you said, gripped by the fascination of battle.

"And *they* put out the trellis screen!" Prim said. It was a flash of inspiration, shortly to be proved correct. He turned and barked orders at bombardment, telling them to hit the giants at any cost. By now the flagship was on its own, the rest of its company disintegrated or scattered far away.

The four giants were in position. Again the hellish blue pattern scissored across the flagship's course. Prim had no time to swerve away—they racketed toward the dazzling pattern. At the last moment, bombardment fired a superfuser dead ahead.

Superfuser and trellis met.

The two insensate energies clawed each other like vast beasts of prey. Instead of spreading its usual explosion, the fusion climbed the writhing squares of trellis, gobbling as it mounted. At the center it left a widening circle of nothingness, through which the flagship shot unharmed. It climbed to the trellis corners, barbed fire-devouring fire. It reached the four giant vessels.

Just for a moment they remained intact, each radiating a three-dimensional rainbow which flickered magically up and down the spectrum and was visible hundreds of light years away. Then that blinding beauty fused, the four rainbow orbs merged and became antilight. They sucked, guttered and went out—and a great gap in the nothingness of the universe appeared and spread. The ineluctable fabric of space itself was being devoured.

Several Yinnisfar ships were engulfed in this cataclysm. The flagship was spared no time to rejoice. The moment of its greatest triumph was also the moment of its destruction. A translucent globe from an enemy destroyer caught its dorsal vane.

Like an electronic monster, the globe spread tentacles of light and engulfed the flagship.

Prim swore furiously.

"Nothing responds any more," he said, dropping his hands to his sides.

It was doubtful if anyone heard him. A continuous sizzle filled their ears while their body electricity jumped in protest at what was taking place. The scene was rendered in unforgettable hues of orange and black, as the light penetrated everything. Faces, clothes, floor, instruments, all were ravaged.

Then it was over, that moment of near madness. They were left in darkness, only pale starlight touching their faces. Prim staggered for the controls. He swept his hand wildly over banks of instruments. All were dead.

"We're finished!" he announced. "Not a whisper of life anywhere. Even the air purifier is finished."

He sank down, covering his face with his hands. For a while no one spoke; all were emotionally drained by the apocalyptic rigors of battle, the sag of defeat.

"They must be chivalrous on Yinnisfar," you said at length. "They will have some residual code of battle. They will come and take us. We shall be honorably treated."

Welded said harshly from a corner, "You still find room for cockiness! We ought to destroy you now."

"Let's kill him," One Eye said, but made no move. They were all just lumps against the wall of starlight, lumps that spoke without relevance.

"I only feel relaxed," you said. "The battle is over. We have lost honorably. Look at your captain here, half-dead with fatigue. He fought well, resourcefully. No blame lies with him that we lost the gamble. Now he can sit back without remorse—and we can do the same—knowing the future is not in our hands. Soon they will be here to collect us and give us an honorable trial on Yinnisfar."

The others made you no answer.

7

The air was growing foul when the emissaries of Yinnisfar arrived, as you had predicted. They cut their way rapidly through the hull, rounded up all of the dazed men aboard and transferred them to their own ship. Full speed was then made toward Yinnisfar. The flagship was left to its own ruined devices.

You had been given a separate room with Prim, One Eye, and Welded. The latter two had been quite drained of all life

by the magnitude of recent events. They sat together now like a pair of dummies, not speaking. Prim was in better shape, but reaction had hit him now, and he lay shaking on a couch. So you alone stood by the port and took in the spectacle as Yinnisfar approached.

The planet which for so long had played such a prominent role in the Galaxy was a curious spectacle at this late date in its history. About its equator circled two splendid rings, one beyond the other. Of these rings, the first was natural and consisted of the debris of Luna, disintegrated when an antique craft embedded in Iri had suddenly exploded. The other ring was nothing more or less than a scrapyard. Breaking up spaceships on the ground had been forbidden ages ago on Yinnisfar, where piles of rusting metal were considered unsightly; instead, every fragment of scrap was thrown into the orbit of the ring. Over a vast period of time, this ring had grown until it was fifty miles deep and several hundred wide. Far from being ugly, it was a thing of beauty, one of the seventeen wonders of the Galaxy. It gleamed like an array of countless jewels, every inch of metal polished eternally by the ceaseless wash of meteoric dust.

When the ship in which you were held landed on the day side of the planet, the second ring was still faintly visible, straining like an arch around heaven.

This was Yinnisfar of tears and pleasures, stuffed with forgotten memories and protracted time.

After some delay, you and the others were disembarked, transferred to a small surface ship and taken to the Court of the Highest Suzerain in the city of Nion. The flagship crew was spirited off in one direction and the troops, still in suspended animation, in another, while you and the three officers were ushered into a room little bigger than a cubicle. Here again was more delay. Food was brought, but you alone were inclined to eat it, supplementing it with supplies that you carried on your person.

Various dignitaries visited you, most of them departing gloomily, without speaking. Through a narrow window you looked out onto a courtyard, brightened in one corner by a beautiful flowering jenny-merit. Groups of men and women stood about aimlessly, and no face was without its stamp of worry. Counselors walked as if climbing a dark stair. It became clear that some grave crisis pended; its threat hung almost tangibly over the whole court.

Finally and unexpectedly, an order reached your guards.

With a flurry of excitement you and the three with you were brought into a marble hall of audience and so into the personal presence of the Highest, Suzerain Inherit of Yinnisfar and the Region of Yinnisfar.

He was a pale man, dressed austere in dark satins. He reclined on a couch. His features were leached, yet his eyes spoke of supreme intelligence and his voice was firm. Though his general pose suggested lethargy, his head was carried with an alertness that did not escape your attention.

He looked you over in leisurely fashion, weighing each of your group in turn, and finally addressed you as the leader. He spoke without preamble.

"You barbarians, by the folly of your actions, have wrought havoc."

You bowed and said with irony, "We regret it if we disturbed the great empire of Yinnisfar."

"Pah! I do not refer to the empire." He waved his hand as if the empire were a bauble, beneath his interest. "I refer to the cosmos itself, by whose grace we all exist. The forces of nature have become unknit."

You looked at him interrogatively, saying nothing.

"Let me explain the fate which now threatens," the Highest said, "in the hope you may die knowing a little of what you have done. Our Galaxy is old beyond imagining; philosophers, theologians and scientists combine to tell us that its duration, vast but not infinite, is nearing an end."

"The rumor has circulated," you murmured.

"I am pleased to hear that wisdom travels. We have learned in these last few hours that the Galaxy—like an old curtain crumbling under its own weight—is dissolving; that this, in fact, is the end of all things, of past and future, and of all men."

He paused in vain, to watch for any shadows of alarm crossing your face, then continued, ignoring the frightened responses of your fellow captives.

"Peace has reigned in the Region for millennia. But when we learned your fleet was coming with hostile intent, our ancient ships and engines of attack—unused since the breakdown of the Self-perpetuating War—were resurrected. Systems of production, schemes of battle, organizations of fighting men—all had to be resurrected from the long-dead past. It required haste such as we have never known, and regimentation such as we detest."

"That's worth a cheer anyway," One Eye said, with an attempt at courage.

The Highest regarded him for a moment before continuing.

"We found, in our hurried search for weapons to use against you, one which was invented eons ago and never used. It was considered dangerous, since it harnessed the electrogravitic forces of the complex of space itself. Four gigantic machines called turbulators activated this force; they were the four ships you destroyed."

"We saw one of them on the margins of the Region days ago," Prim said. He had been following the Highest with excitement, enthralled by his description of a gigantic military organization grinding into action.

"The four turbulators had to be called from the distant quarters of the Region, where our ancestors had discarded them," the Highest explained. "They were stationed across the course of your fleet with the results that you saw. The trellis is the basic pattern of creation itself. By ill chance you destroyed it, or rather caused it to begin consuming itself. Our scientists suggest that such is the antiquity of our Galaxy, it no longer retains its ancient stability. Although the process is invisible, the disintegration you began continues—is spreading rapidly, in fact—and nothing known can stop it."

Prim staggered back, as if struck.

The Highest stared at you, expecting a reply. As if uncertain for the first time, you looked searchingly at One Eye and the others; they stared blankly ahead, too absorbed with the prospect of catastrophe to notice you.

"Your scientists are to be congratulated," you said. "They are late with their discovery of instability, but at least they have found it out for themselves. It is a catastrophe my friends here and I did not begin; it began long ago, and it was about that that I came to Yinnisfar to tell them—and you."

For the first time, the Highest showed emotion. He rose from the couch, clutching its back fiercely. "You impertinent barbarian, you came here to rape and loot and pillage. What do you know of these matters?"

"I came here to announce the end of things," you told him. "How I arrived, whether as captive or victor, was no concern of mine, so long as the peoples of every world had been roused to know of my coming. That was why I staged the invasion; such a thing is easily done, provided you can

read and provoke the few basic human passions. If I had come here alone, who would have known or cared? As it is, the whole Galaxy has its myriad eyes open and I focused them on Yinnisfar. They may die knowing the truth."

"Indeed?" The Highest raised an imperial eyebrow. "Before I have you erased, perhaps you might care to tell me about this truth over which you have gone to such trouble?"

"By all means," you replied. "Perhaps you would care for a demonstration first?"

But the Highest brushed the suggestion aside, snapping his fingers. "You are a braggart!" he said energetically. "You waste my time, and there is little enough left. Guards!"

The guards advanced in a half-circle, eager at an unprecedented chance to try their art on living flesh.

"This is the sort of demonstration I had in mind," you said, turning to meet them.

Fourteen men comprised the guard. Their uniforms were laced, epauleted and braided; but their antique swords looked functional.

Without hesitation you advanced toward the nearest soldier. He, with equal decision, brought down his sword with a heavy blow at your head. You flung up your arm and caught the blade full on it.

The sword rang and crumbled into bits, as if turned to dust. The swordsman fell back in alarm.

The other guards were on you, thrusting and slicing. Their swords crumpled and snapped against you; not one but wrecked itself against your body.

When it was realized that you had—how would they think of it?—a secret power, they fell back. You saw then that from a balcony the snout of a machine was trained on you.

"Before you are annihilated," the Highest said, glancing pointedly up at the balcony, "tell me what form of trickery this is."

"Try out your own trick first," you suggested. To hasten matters, you stepped toward the Highest. You had taken perhaps two paces before the machine on the balcony burst into action. A fusillade of beta pellets screamed toward you, only to fall uselessly to the ground at your feet.

At last the Highest seemed daunted.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"That is what I wish to tell you," you said. "What I have to say must go out to every one of your people; when a great history ends, it ends most fittingly with everyone knowing

why; a man who perishes without reason makes a mockery of all he stands for.

"I come from a new world beyond this Galaxy—new because there the process of creation still goes on. New galaxies are forming out of the fathomless night, rising out of the margins of emptiness. My planet is new, and I am the first man upon it; it is nameless."

Welded said, "So all you told me back on Owlenj was true?"

"Certainly," you said. You did not bother to tell him how you had learned to pilot the dead Shouter's ship. You turned instead to Prim. "Do you recall a conversation we once had about evolution? You claimed that man was its ultimate product."

Prim nodded.

"Man is evolution's fittest fruit—in *this* Galaxy," you told him. You looked at the Highest, at Welded, at One Eye. Without smiling, you said, "You are evolution's highest flowering here. Think of the multitudes of experiments nature undertook before evolving you. She started with amino acids, then the amoeba, a simple cell. . . . She was like a child at school then, but all this while she has been learning. I use analogies without subscribing to the pathetic fallacy, understand. Many of her experiments—even late ones like the sentient vagabond cells—are failures; man, on the whole, is her best so far.

"In the new galaxy from which I come, she *begins* with man. I am the earliest, most primitive form of life in my galaxy—the new amoeba!"

You went on to tell them how in you radical changes had been made; you were, in truth, a different species. Your waste system was fundamentally altered. Your digestive processes had been changed. Genetically, not only were the old characteristics transferable from one generation to another; walking and language genes insured that those simple human skills were also inheritable. The psychological basis of your mind had been improved; much of man's old random emotionalism had been eliminated entirely. Yet you had a range of altruism and identity with things surpassing man's capabilities.

The Highest heard you out in silence and then said, "As the first of your—ah—species, how is it you can know so much about yourself?"

You smiled. It seemed a simple question.

"Because all our other improvements are merely in some way a modification of the pattern used in man's designing, I have in addition one priceless gift: an awareness not only of my psychological actions—thoughts, if you will—but of my physiological ones. I can control the working of my every enzyme, see into each last blood cell. I am integrated as you could never be. For instance, diseases can never touch me; I should recognize and check each at its inception. Nor do I freeze in a moment of crisis and get taken over by automatic reflexes; knowing myself, I am, quite literally, my own master. Though you have mastered your environment, you have never mastered yourselves."

8

The Highest came down from his dais.

"There was enough to worry about before you arrived," he said. "Though I have lived five centuries, I am as a child again. Why, you must feel quite the superman on Yinnisfar!"

The derision in his tone pricked.

"Didn't you understand me?" you flashed. "In my world, I rank as the amoeba. Should that make me proud? As to what supersedes me—"

The Highest raised a manicured hand, and said, "I concede your point; you are suitably humble about your own might."

"What's the good of all this talk?" It was One Eye. He had stood helplessly by with Welded and Prim, his mind filled with fruitless plots of escape. Now he came up to you with a mixture of defiance and cajolery.

"You got us here, you can get us back," he said. "And let's not wait. Get us back to Owlenj if you're such a superman."

You shook your head.

"You'd be no better off on Owlenj, of that I can assure you," you told him. "I'm sorry you had to be involved in this, but it's been no worse for you than hiding out in the ruins of a city. And I'm no superman—"

"No superman!" One Eye said angrily. He turned to the Highest and exclaimed, "No superman, he says. Yet he drank down enough poison for an army, he fended off those swords—you saw him!—he withstood a bombardment just then—"

"Listen to me!" you interrupted. "Those things belonged to a different principle. Watch this!"

You walked over to a wall. It was built of solid blocks of marble, polished and selected for their delicate patterning. You placed one hand with extended fingers upon it and pushed; when you withdrew your hand, five short tunnels had been pierced in the marble.

It was a simple demonstration. They were properly impressed.

You wiped your hand and returned to them, but they shuffled away from you, their lips pale.

"Yet I am no stronger than you," you told them. "The difference is only this: that I come from a freshly created world, new minted by the inexorable processes of continuous creation. And you—come from an old world. Think of your Galaxy. How old is it? You do not know exactly, but you know it is incredibly old. The truth is, it is wearing out, as everything wears out in time. Nothing is meant to last. Ask yourself what everything is made of. A tissue of energies which outcrops and becomes matter. That tissue of energy, since the beginning of time, has been running down, wearing thin. All matter, which is composed of it, has worn thin with it. The great magical batteries of your Galaxy are slowing, so all protons and neutrons lose their polarity. Their charges have run low, they cannot combine as they once used to. Steel has not the strength that paper once possessed, wood is water."

Prim interrupted.

"You're trying to deceive us!" he told you in a trembling voice. "It's only *you* who can pierce marble with a finger, or withstand poison, swords, or bombardment. *We* would die! Do you take us for fools?"

"No," you replied. "You would die, as you say. You are composed of the same exhausted nuclei as everything else; that is exactly why you could not detect this process long ago. I can withstand almost anything you have to offer only because the very stuff of which I am made is new. I am the one fresh factor in an exhausted galaxy."

You paused and went over to the Highest. He had become very pale. "This ravaging monster we loosed between us out in space—I suppose that merely hastens the exhaustion process?" he asked.

"Yes. The fabric is torn; the gap widens to embrace your island universe."

The Highest closed his eyes. When he raised his lids again, his regard fixed on you with the alertness of a bird.

"Our poisons cannot affect you," he said. "Yet you manage to live among us. How can our food nourish you?"

"I brought my private supply of calories with me when I left my own world. I was not unprepared. I had even to bring oxygen concentrates."

You then told the Highest of the effects your unexhausted air had had on Shouter, the spool-seller, how he had been riddled as if by unseen radiations. And you told him how useful Shouter's microspool library had been.

"An opportunist," the Highest said. "My congratulations to you."

He pulled at his lip and looked, for a moment, almost amused.

"Have you a moment to spare, if the question has meaning any longer? Perhaps the others will excuse us."

Something in his manner had changed. He motioned to you with a sharp gesture and made for a door. What did you do? You took a last look over your shoulder at the desolate group whose function in life had abruptly vanished, gave One Eye a mocking salute and followed.

The Highest walked down a corridor at a pace which belied his earlier languor. He flung open another door and you both emerged onto a balcony overlooking the proud city of Nion. A cool evening wind blew; clouds masked the setting sun. The great panorama of avenue and river lay strangely deserted, from distant spires to the pavements of a nearby concourse. Nothing stirred except a fabric far below in a mansion window.

"How long would this exhaustion process have taken had we not accelerated it?" the Highest asked almost casually, leaning on the rail and looking down.

"It must have worsened for centuries," you told him. "It might have gone on for centuries more. . . ."

You felt a softness for him, and for all men, all the myriads of them, whether they cheated or played fair, loved or hated. All their follies and limitations were forgiven; they were primitives, coming from the dark, fading back into the dark, with a glimpsing of awareness to give poignance.

The Highest took a deep breath of evening.

"It's ending! Now comes the time to adventure into death." He took another lungful of the darkening wind.

"And you have a ringside seat, my friend. It will indeed be a sight to see. But you must get back before our craft disintegrate. They won't be capable of carrying you much longer."

You said, gently, "Everyone must be told what is happening. That seems imperative."

"I will not forget."

He turned and faced you.

"What impulse brought you here? Nostalgia? Curiosity? Pity? What feelings do you have for—us shadows?"

And what unexpected weakness was it that choked the words in your throat? Why did you turn your face away so that he could not see your eyes?

"I wanted man to be aware of what is happening to him," you said at last. "That much was owed him. I—we owed it. You are—our fathers. We are your heirs. . . ."

He touched you gently, asking in a firm voice, "What should be told to the people of the Galaxy?"

You looked out over a city now pricked with lights, and up to the evening sky. You found no comfort there or in yourself.

"Tell them again what a galaxy is," you said. "Don't soften it. They are brave. Explain to them once more that there are galaxies like grains of sand, each galaxy a cosmic laboratory for the blind experiments of nature. Explain to them how little individual lives mean compared to the unknown goals of the race. Tell them—tell them that this laboratory is closing. A newer one, with more modern equipment, is opening just down the street."

"They shall be told," the Highest said, his face a shadow as night fell upon the old city and the stars.

We who have already superseded you record these scenes now in your honor, as you once honored man. REQUIESCAS IN PACE.



FROM THE SLIME TO THE STARS

It was logical, once one accepted the basic premise. Life evolved.

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BRIAN ALDISS is the brilliant young author of *Starship* and *No Time Like Tomorrow*. Born and educated in England, he spent the war years in the service and the next eight years as a bookseller. Since 1957 he has been Literary Editor of the *Oxford Mail*.

Cover Printed in U.S.A.

Published by THE NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY