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The Palace of Eternity

GRAFTON BOOKS

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PART ONE

The Humans

1

In spite of all his efforts, Tavernor was unable to remain indoors when it was time for the sky to catch fire.

Tension had been gnawing at his stomach for most of the evening, and the repair job on the boat turbine seemed to have grown progressively more difficult, although he knew it was simply that his concentration

was failing. Finally, he laid his welding pistol down and switched off the lights above the workbench.

Immediately there was a nervous fluttering among the caged leatherwings at the opposite end of the long room.

The compact, bat-like creatures disliked any sudden change in light intensity. Tavernor went to the cage and steadied it with his hands, feeling the wires vibrate like harpstrings under his fingers. He put his face close to the cage, swallowing as the cool air from the wingbeats caught in his throat, and projected his thoughts towards the squeaking, silver-eyed mammals.

Be calm, little friends. All is well. All is well. . .

The clamour within the cage ceased almost at once, and the leatherwings returned to their perches, the mercury-specks of their eyes shining at him in the similitude of intelligence.

'That's better,' Tavernor whispered, aware that the creatures' telepathic faculties had picked up the undercurrents of his own edginess.

He locked the workshop door behind him, crossed the living room and went out of the single-storey building into the warm October night. The year on Mnemosyne had almost five hundred days, and there were no seasons, but men had carried their own calendars into space.

Back on Earth's northern hemisphere, trees were being transmuted to copper and gold - so it was October on

Mnemosyne, and a hundred other colonized worlds.

Tavernor checked the time with his watch. Less than five minutes to go.

He took his pipe from his pocket, loaded it with moist strands of tobacco and lit up. The ignited glowing shreds on top writhed upwards and Tavernor pressed them down with a work-hardened fingertip, calming himself with the rites of patience. He leaned against the wall of the darkened house while the smoke carried its message of sanity away on the night air. Tavernor imagined the fragrance reaching into nests and burrows in the surrounding forest, and wondered what their furry inhabitants would make of it. They had had barely a hundred years to get used to humanity's presence on their world, and - with the exception of the leatherwings - had maintained a sombre, watchful reserve.

At two minutes before zero hour Tavernor transferred his attention to the sky. The heavens above Mnemosyne were unlike those of any planet he had ever visited. Many geological ages earlier two large moons had coursed overhead, drawing closer and closer together until they had collided. Traces of that cosmic impact could be found all over the planet in the form of vast meteorite craters, but the main evidence was in the sky.

A shell of lunar fragments - many of them large enough

for their irregularity of outline to be visible to the naked eye - constantly drifted on the background of fainter stars, forming a curtain that reached from pole to pole. The pattern of brilliant shards never repeated itself, and adding to the spectacle was the fact. that the screen was dense enough for eclipses to take place on a continuous basis. As Mnemosyne's shadow swept across the sky groups of moonlets would pass from white right through the colours of the spectrum, vanish into blackness, then reappear, to run the penumbral gamut in reverse.

Against a sky like that, even a first magnitude star was difficult to pick out, but Tavernor knew exactly where to look. His eyes fastened on the single, wavering speck of light that was Neilson's Star. Almost seven light years distant, it was lost in the kaleidoscope of Mnemosyne's night sky, but its insignificance was soon to be a thing of the past. -

As the final seconds ticked away, the tension inside Tavernor's guts increased until he could feel it as a hard' bullet of apprehension. I'm indulging this thing, he told himself. After all, the event itself took place seven years ago. That was when Earth's Stellar Engineering Corps (the vast egotism of the title never failed to dismay Tavernor) had selected Neilson's Star, noting with approval that it was of the classical type for their purpose. A close binary, the popularized reports had stated. Princi-

pal component, in the giant sequence of the Hertzsprung-Russell diagram; secondary component, small and dense; planets, none. Prognosis for modification: excellent.

That was when the Corps' great butterfly ships had come swarming on their magnetic wings, surrounding the doomed giant, raking its surface with the spiteful stings of their lasers, pouring in energy at gamma ray frequencies until the flux reached insupportable intensities, until. . .

Tavernor's teeth clenched on the mouthpiece of his pipe as - with the suddenness of a room lamp being switched on - the house, the surrounding forest, the distant mountain ranges, the whole sky, were bathed in hard white light. Its source was Neilson's Star, which was now a point of searing brilliance so fierce that he had to jerk his eyes away from it. Even at the distance of seven light years the nova's initial fury could have pricked through his retinas. Forgive us, he thought, please forgive us.

The forest lay still for a disbelieving moment, as though stunned by the nova's intangible hammer-blow, then it erupted in protest against this supremely unnatural event. A billion wings beat the air in a kind of diffused explosion. The flood of light pouring down from the transformed sky was dimmed momentarily as every creature capable

of flight projected itself into the air, wheeled, and darted for safety. Their concerted defiance of gravity gave Tavernor the fleeting sensation that it was he that was sinking; and then the sound reached him. Screams, squawks, whistles, whimpers, roars, clicks, hisses, combined with the flurry of wings, clatter of dry leaves, scampering of feet, followed by . . .

Utter silence. .

The forest watched and waited.

Tavernor found himself gripped by the ghastly stillness, reduced to the level of one of Mnemosyne's forest creatures, virtually mindless, yet he had in that moment a sense of being aware of Life's relationship to the space-time continuum in a way that men no longer understood.

The vast and transparent parameters of the eternal problem seemed to parade on the surface of the gestalt mind of which he might suddenly have become a part. Life.

Death. Eternity. The numinous. Panspermism. Tavernor felt a tremendous elation. Panspermism - the concept of ubiquitous life. Justification for believing that every mind in existence was linked to every other mind that had ever been? If so, then novae and supernovae were only too well understood by the quivering inhabitants of the dark burrows and shielded nests around him. How many times in this galaxy alone had a star gone berserk? A million times? And in the eternity of galaxies? How many civiliza-

tions, how many incomputible billions of lives had been blasted out of existence by the star-death? And had each being, intelligent or otherwise, in that last withering second, fed the same message into the panspermic all-mind, making it available to every sentient creature that would ever exist in the continuum's dark infinities? Look out, little brother, whether you walk, crawl, swim, burrow or fly - when the sky suddenly floods with light, make your peace, make your peace. . .

Tavernor felt his elation increase - he was on the brink of understanding something important - and then, because the emotion was a product of his individuality, the nebulous contact was lost, with an accelerating yearning slide into normalcy., There was a moment of disappointment, but even that vanished into something less than a memory. He re-lit his pipe and tried to get used to the altered appearance of his surroundings. Statements issued by the War Bureau had said that for two weeks Neilson's Star would become about a million times brighter than before, but would nonetheless still be ten thousand times less brilliant than Mnemosyne's own sun. The effect was similar to bright moonlight on Earth, Tavernor realized. Only the suddenness of the illumination had made it awesome, after all- the suddenness and his knowledge of

the deadly purpose behind it.

The sound of a ground effect machine approaching from the direction of the Centre disturbed Tavernor's reverie. Tuning his ears to the engine note, he recognized

the smoothly expensive whine of Lissa Grenoble's personal machine even before he saw its headlights splaying their topaz fingers through the trees. His heart began to thud steadily and peacefully. He remained immobile until the vehicle had almost reached the house, then became aware that he was deliberately trying to display the attributes she most admired in him - solidity, self-sufficiency, brooding, physical power. There's no fool like a middle-aged fool, he thought, as he shouldered himself off the wall.

He caught the handle of the passenger door and steadied the machine as it sank to the ground. Lissa got out at the far side, smiling whitely. As always, the sight of her almost-too-rounded body and almost-too-full lips turned his inside into a volcano which had its base somewhere in his loins and its flame-belching apex right behind his eyes. 'Engine still sounds good,' he remarked, for want of something better to say.

Lissa Grenoble was the daughter of Howard Grenoble,

the planetary administrator, but Tavernor had met her in the same way that he usually met people in Mnemosyne - through being asked to repair a machine. The planet was virtually without metallic deposits, and no butterfly ship could ply through its shell of lunar fragments with cargo from Earth or any of the nearer manufacturing centres.

So even Mnemosyne's first family, which was also its richest, preferred to pay for repeated repairs to an older vehicle, rather than go to the fantastic expense of importing a new one by way of butterfly ship, orbital station and reaction-powered stage ship.

'Of course the engine sounds good,' Lissa replied lightly. 'you made it better than new, didn't you?'

'You've been reading my promotion literature.' Tavernor was flattered in spite of himself.

Lissa came round the vehicle, caught his arm and leaned against him, purposefully. He kissed her once, drinking in the incredible reality of her the way a thirsting man gulps his first draught of water. Her tongue felt hot, hotter than any human's ought to feel.

'Hey!' He broke away from her. 'You started early tonight.'

'What do you mean, Mack?' Lissa pouted beautifully.

'Sparks. You've been drinking sparks.'

'Don't be silly. Do I smell of sparks!'

Tavernor sniffed doubtfully, twisting his head away as she playfully tried to nip the end of his nose. The volatile, meadows-in-summer aroma of sparks was absent, but he was not quite satisfied. He never drank the dream-liquor himself, preferring whiskey - another reminder that Lissa was nineteen and he was exactly thirty years older. People no longer showed their age much, so there was no physical barrier between them; but the years were there in his mind just the same.

'Let's go inside,' he said. 'Away from this ghastly light.'

'Ghastly? I think it's romantic.'

Tavernor frowned. Lissa was laying it on too thick.

'Romantic. You know what it means?' He glanced up at the intense point of light, now easily the most prominent object in the sky, which Neilson's Star had become.

'Yes, of course. It means they're opening a high-speed commericallane to Mnemosyne.'

'No.' Tavernor felt his tension return. 'The war's coming this way.'

'Now you are being silly.'

Lissa tugged his arm and they went into the house.

Tavernor reached for the light switch, but she stayed his hand, closing with him again. He responded instinctively, then that part of his mind which never relaxed its guard

injected a niggling little idea through the emotional turmoil. This, he thought, is the clumsiest attempt at a seduction I've ever seen.

Feeling somehow like a cheat, Tavernor abstracted himself sufficiently to be able to review his relationship with Melissa Grenoble, from the time they had met three months earlier until the present moment. Although the attraction had been both instantaneous and mutual, the friendship had been an uneasy one, mainly because of the difference between their positions in Mnemosyne's tightly knit social structure. Howard Grenoble's appointment was perhaps the least political of its kind in the Federation - thanks to the planet's numerous peculiarities - but he still carried the rank of Administrator, and his daughter was not expected to become involved with. . .

'Just think of it, Mack,' Lissa was whispering. 'Ten whole days on the south coast. Just the two of us.' Tavernor tried to focus on her words. 'Your father would love that.'

'He won't know. There's a painting expedition going south at the same time. I told him I was going on it. Kris Shelby's organizing the trip, and you know he's the soul of discretion. . .'

'You mean he can be bought like a stick of gum.'

'What's that got to do with us?' There was the faintest edge of impatience in Lissa's voice.

'Why are you doing this?' He used calculated stolidity, trying to anger her. 'Why now?'

She hesitated, then spoke with a matter-of-factness he found strangely disturbing. 'I want you, Mack. I want you, and there's a limit to how long I can wait. Is that so difficult to understand?'

Standing with her in the confined darkness, breast to breast, thigh to thigh, Tavernor felt his detachment begin to crumble. Why not? The blood-red thought hammered at him. Why not? Aware of his capitulation, Lissa snaked her arms around his neck and sighed comfortably as he lowered his face to hers. He froze for a second and abruptly pushed her away, filled with a sudden bleak anger.

In the open mouth, visible only because of the room's utter blackness, he had seen golden fireflies spinning.

'You shouldn't have stopped me switching on the lights,' Tavernor commented a few minutes later as they drove towards the Centre, following the glittering surface of a forest stream.

'Mac! Are you going to tell me what's the matter?'

'You can kill the smell of sparks easily enough - the

luminescence is a little tougher.'

'I . . . !

'What's it all about, Lissa?'

'I've told you already.' Her voice was dull.

'Of course. Our beautiful ~atural relationship. But you had to tank up on sparks first.'

'I don't see what difference my having a drink makes.'

'Lissa,' he said impatiently. 'If we can't be honest with each other, let's not speak at all.' Listen to me, he thought. Old Man Tavernor.

There was a long silence during which he concentrated on keeping the fast-skimming vehicle in the centre of the stream. The trees on each bank were limned from above with silver from Neilson's Star, and on their undersurfaces with gold from the machine's powerful headlights, giving them a look of unreality. Tinsel trees lining a fairy highway. Tavernor edged the throttle forward and the finely tuned engine responded immediately.

Travelling at close on a hundred miles an hour, the

something to do with the blowing of Neilson's Star? So soon?

When they reached Jamai's, Lissa went in first. Tav-

ernor followed her into the long, redly-lit room and glanced around, concealing his caution, while Lissa greeted a group of her friends ranged at the bar. They glittered and tinkled like human mobiles, exuding the joyful complacency of intellectuals out for a night on the town. All around them, the mirrors surged and shrank.

'Darling! How nice to see you!' Kris Shelby unfolded his tall, immaculate figure from the bar with a progressive wave-like movement which reminded Tavernor of someone twitching a silk rope.

'Hello, Kris.' Lissa smiled and, still holding Tavernor's hand, brought him into the space the group had made for her at the bar.

'Hello, Mack.' Shelby pretended just to have spotted Tavernor. He smiled thinly. 'And how's my jolly artisan tonight?'

'Don't know - I never take much interest in your playmates.' Tavernor stared blandly into the taller man's face and had the pleasure of seeing the smile disappear. Shelby was rich, had real graphic talent, was a leading light in the art colony which made up so much of Mnemosyne's permanent population. All these things, in his own estimation; gave him a natural claim on Lissa and he had not been fully able to conceal his irritation when she brought Tavernor into the circle.

'What are you hinting at, Mack?' Shelby had become

majestic, pulling rank.

'Nothing,' Tavernor said seriously. 'You asked me how your jolly artisan was, and I said I didn't know the gentleman in question. I was suggesting that you should ask him yourself. Perhaps if you rang your apartment

Shelby adopted a bored expression. 'You have a tendency to overdo things.'

'Sorry. I didn't realize I'd touched on a sensitive area,' Tavernor said obstinately, and a girl at the rear of the group giggled, causing Shelby to glance coldly at her.

'I'd like a drink,' Lissa said quickly.

'Allow me.' Shelby signalled a barman with a lacy flourish. 'What will it be, Lissa?'

'Sparks.'

'Any special variety?'

'No - just straight relaxers.'

'I'll have Bourbon,' Tavernor put in, unasked, aware he was allowing his dislike for Lissa's friends to push him into a record display of churlishness. When the drink arrived he swallowed half, set the glass on the bar and put an elbow on each side of it. He glared at his reflection as it flowed and distorted in one of the mirrors that completely sheathed the walls. The mirrors were flexible and changed their shape as solenoids behind them exerted

pressures radiated from the customers' skins, cigarettes or drinks. On a night when business was good at Jamai's the walls went mad, convulsing and pounding like the chambers of a gigantic heart.

Tavernor disliked the place intensely. He leaned on the bar, wondering what it was that Lissa thought she had in common with Shelby and his crew of cultural gadflies. For them, the war simply doesn't exist, he thought - and was intrigued by the irrationality of his emotions. He had come to Mnemosyne to forget the war and what it had done to him, yet was angered by people who succeeded in remaining untouched as the great butterfly ships of the Federation sailed out on the ionic winds of space. . .

He was so deep in his own thoughts that the argument had been going on for several minutes before he became aware of it.

A red-haired giant in the pale grey whipcords of the Interstellar Mobile Divisions had been sullenly drinking beer at the far end of the long bar. Tavernor had noted the man's presence as soon as he came in, but he had missed the arrival of a second soldier who had taken a position at the opposite end, close to the door. The latter was dressed in the darker greys of the Tactical Reserve. He was as tall as the other man, but leaner, and had a white desperate face.

'Lousy reservist,' the redhead was snarling drunkenly as Tavernor tuned in on the argument. 'Nothing to do but eat, drink and screw real soldiers' wives.'

The Reservist looked up from his drink. 'You again, Mullan. How can you be in every bar I go into?'

Mullan repeated his original remark, word for word.

'Wouldn't have thought any woman would marry you,' the Reservist commented acidly.

'Waddya say?' Mullan's deep-throated bellow brought a sudden silence to the whole room.

The Reservist apparently had traces of imagination. 'I said that any woman who would marry you would be safe in a cell full of rapists.'

'Waddya say?'

'I said. . . ah, get lost.' The thinner man made a contemptuous gesture and returned to his drink.

'Say that again.'

The Reservist rolled his eyes towards the ceiling but said nothing. Tavernor glimpsed a white-jacketed bartender disappearing into a phone booth at the other side of the room. The redhead gave an inarticulate roar of fury and began making his way along the bar. He did it by putting one huge, orange-fuzzed hand on the chest of the man next to him, hurling him backwards, and moving on to the next. By the time he had removed four of

Jamai's clientele from his path the others had got the idea and there was a rush to get away from the bar. Nobody thought of objecting to the giant's impropriety. The group centring on Lissa and Shelby moved out of the line of action in a flurry of excitement, with a ripple of laughter from the glittering, tinkling girls. This isn't real, Tavernor thought, it's part of a bad movie. He picked up his glass and was preparing to rejoin Lissa when he caught the triumphant look in Shelby's eyes. 'That's right, Mack,' Shelby said soothingly. 'Come over here - where it's safe.' .

Numbly, swearing inwardly, Tavernor set his glass down again.

'Don't be silly, Mack.' Lissa's voice was taut with alarm. 'It isn't worth it.'

'That's right, Mack - it isn't worth it.' Shelby mimicked.

'Stop it,' Lissa half-screamed.

Tavernor turned his back on them and leaned on the bar, staring down into his whiskey, while self-recrimination raged in his brain. What's wrong with me? Why do I allow people like Shelby to . . .

A hand like a scoop of a crane closed over his left shoulder and dragged him backwards. He locked his muscles, clamping himself to the smooth wood of the counter, and the hand slipped off him. The redhead gave an incredulous grunt and took a fresh grip on Tavernor's

shoulder. During the first contact Tavernor had sized the big man up, judged him to be a proficient but not especially gifted hand-to-hand combatant, and had decided on a mode of fighting which should put him away quickly and without any lasting damage. He allowed himself to be pulled sideways and his right fist came round in a blurred arc which terminated in the bulge of flesh just below the other man's ribs. The redhead was too big and heavy to be knocked backwards. He sank vertically as though being lowered into the base of the tent, then the light returned to his eyes and he straightened up again and made to grab Tavernor's throat.

Tavernor ducked under the converging hands and was shifting his balance to deliver another blow when the familiar, querulous whine of a stungun sounded behind him. He had time for the startled realization that he had been shot by the white-faced Reservist.

Then it got very dark in Jamai's.

By all the rules, Tavernor should have lost consciousness immediately - but he had stopped stungun charges many times in his life and his nervous system had almost learned to sustain the brutal shock. Almost, but not quite. There was a mindless period during which light was non-directional, swirling over him like sound; voices, the noises of

the bar, suddenly acquired polarity, became meaningless radial sprays of vibration.

Aeons later came a moment of sensibility. He was out in the street, where the night breezes were seeded with salt water, and rough hands were lifting him into a vehicle. The interior had an evocative smell - dust, engine oil, rope. An Army vehicle? On Mnemosyne?

'Is he all right?' The voice was that of a woman.

'He's all right. How about the money?'

'Here you are. Are you sure he isn't hurt?'

'Yeah. I'm not sure about Mullan though. You didn't say anything about this guy being a gladiator.'

'Forget about Mullan,' the woman said. 'You're both being well paid.'

Tavernor groaned. He had recognized Lissa's voice - and the pain of betrayal was something that stayed with him as he fell down the dark, echoing well of night.

2

The cell was eight foot square, windowless, and so utterly new that Tavernor was able to find little spirals of bright, clean metal in the corner behind the toilet facilities. It smelled of resin and plastic, and appeared never to have had a previous occupant.

He found the last fact vaguely disturbing - there was no way of knowing where he was being imprisoned. This certainly was not the cell block in either the Centre's police building or the Federal administration complex south of the city. Tavernor had seen both while working on maintenance contracts, and remembered that the cells were bigger, older and had windows. Besides, neither the police nor the Federal men would have left him alone for so long. His watch showed that almost five hours had passed since he had regained consciousness to find himself lying fully clothed on an oblong of resilient green plastic that served as a bed.

He got to his feet and kicked the door with the flat of his foot. The featureless white metal absorbed the blow with a sound that suggested massive solidity. Tavernor swore savagely and lay down again, staring into the luminescent plane of the ceiling.

It had been Lissa's voice, all right. It had been Lissa who had paid the Reservist to set Tavernor up and then knock him down. The whole melodramatic scene at Jamai's had been contrived - but for what reason? Why should Lissa go out to his place, primed with sparks, try to seduce him, and when that had failed manoeuvre him into a bar where she had set a trap. Could it be a joke?

He had known Shelby's crowd go to some pretty fantastic lengths when they thought they were on to something funny, but surely Lissa would not have gone along with them. Or would she? Tavernor suddenly realized there was much he did not know about Melissa Grenoble. And at the moment, he could not even tell whether it was night or day. . .

His rage spilled over once again. He leaped up from the bed and was hurling himself at the door when he saw that a small panel had opened in it. A pair of hard grey eyes was staring at him through the aperture.

'Open the door.' Tavernor spoke harshly to cover his surprise. 'Let me out of here.'

The eyes regarded him unwinkingly for a moment, then the panel snapped shut. A few seconds later the door swung open. Beyond it were three men in the dark green uniforms of infantrymen. One was a heavily built sergeant with a closely shaven yet blue chin, down which an old laser scar spilled like porridge. The other two men were experience-looking pfc's who carried rifles with a carelessness which did not deceive anybody. All three looked hostile and ready for any trouble Tavernor might care to offer.

'What the hell's going on here?' Tavernor demanded, deliberately using inflections which would let a practised ear know that he had once held military rank.

The sergeant's grey eyes abruptly became more stony than ever. 'Lieutenant Klee will see you now. Move.'

Tavernor considered being awkward about it, but he could see that the sergeant would not be impressed and, in any case, Lieutenant Klee would probably be the best source of information. The direction in which he was to go was indicated by the fact that the three men had closed off the corridor to the left. He shrugged and began walking. The corridor continued for some fifty paces past doorways which looked as though they led into cells similar to the one in which he had awakened. At its end was an elevator operated by another fully-armed infantryman. The sergeant did not need to give any instructions; the elevator hummed upwards for a very short distance as soon as the doors had closed.

When the elevator had stopped moving they stepped out into another corridor, but this one was lined with glass-walled offices, sloping prisms of morning sunlight broke up the continuity of distance. Uniformed clerical workers moved busily inside their glazed cubes, and columns of cigarette smoke shone in the air like insubstantial trees. The abundance of light gave Tavernor a cold pain in the upper part of his eyeballs, and he realized he was still weak and shaky. He followed the sergeant to a reception area which had a high desk flanked by more

uniformed men. Everything about the building had the same smell and appearance of complete newness. A glance through the entrance doors showed the pastel geometries of The Centre curving away to the south, following the line of the bay.

But being able to pinpoint his location did not reduce Tavernor's bafflement - he was certain there had been no large building in the area a day or so earlier. It would be quite possible, on any other planet, for military engineers to throw a sizeable structure together in a matter of hours if the requirement was sufficiently urgent. But massive equipment would be needed, and the only way to bring it into Mnemosyne was an old-style reaction-carrier stage ship, the fuel for which had been aptly described as liquid money. Tavernor found it impossible to visualize any development on Mnemosyne which would justify even moderate expenditure by the Federation's armed forces. And yet, he remembered uneasily, they had blown Neilson's Star. . .

Lieutenant Klee came out of an office behind the big desk. He was a bony-shouldered youngster, with crewed black hair so thick and so soft with washing that it looked like fur.

'Lieutenant,' Tavernor began immediately, 'I hope you're the one who's going to explain all this?'

Ignoring the question, Klee consulted a piece of

paper. 'You are Mack H. Tavernor?'

'Yes, but. . .'

'I've decided not to proceed against you any further.

You can go.'

'You've what?'

'I'm letting you go, Tavernor. But realize I'm doing this only because martial law had been declared a very short while before the incident, and there's a chance you hadn't heard the announcement.'

'Martial law?' Tavernor's brain was numb.

'That's what I said. From now on steer clear of uniforms. Don't go looking for trouble.'

'Who looked for trouble?' Tavernor was depressingly aware that he sounded like any small-time hoodlum who had been dragged into a precinct station. 'I was minding my own. . .'

'The soldier who disabled you says you struck the only blow. Other witnesses confirmed this.'

'They would,' Tavernor muttered inadequately. His head was pounding painfully now, his mouth was dry and he felt the need for strong coffee followed by food.

'Martial law, you say? What's the reason for it?'

'We can't say.'

'You must give some reason.'

Klee's mouth twisted sardonically. 'There's a war on.

Okay?' One of the pfc's gave an appreciative chuckle and the sergeant silenced him with a movement of his hand.

Klee looked at his piece of paper again, then raised speculative eyes to Tavernor's face. 'Miss Grenoble will be here at ten hundred hours to pick you up - that's in about four minutes from now.'

'I won't be here. Tell her to . . .'

'To what?' Klee sounded interested.

'Forget it.' Tavernor walked to the door, his mind boiling with anger and unanswered questions. His attention was caught by some indefinable strangeness in the section of street he could see beyond the entrance. The passers-by looked normal enough, and the traffic was shuttling in its usual way, but the scene struck him as being curiously unreal. There was, perhaps, a subtle wrongness in the quality of the light, as if the world was lit by stage lamps which were not quite able to simulate the sun. He shook his head slightly and pushed open the door.

'Oh, Tavernor,' Klee's voice was impersonal.

Tavernor halted. 'Yes?'

'I almost forgot. Call and see our civil compensations officer two doors along the block. He's got some money for you.'

'Tell him to . . .'

Tavernor strained his mind for some-

thing new in obscenities but had to content himself with a disgusted wave. He left the shade of the entrance canopy and headed downtown. Viewed from the outside, the building he had just left was shocking in its newness. The huge glassy cube looked as though it might have been dropped into place in a single unit, crushing whatever had been there before. Around its perimeter were small groups of army engineers tidying up the rim of the excavation, compacting the raw clay and fusing it into banks of polished marble with squat olive-green machines. The ozonic air was filled with a fretful crackling of energy, and an occasional extra-loud splat as a rock temporarily refused to yield the molecular structure it had held for billions of years.

People on the sidewalks looked curiously at the activity, but they kept on walking. Tavernor tried to remember what had been on the block previously, but all he got was a vague impression of cluttered small buildings which might have been stores. He had noticed before that no matter how familiar he was with a street or intersection, as soon as he had seen its redeveloped configuration the memories of the original immediately faded away. For all he-knew, he told himself illogically, this might have been one of his favourite haunts before the army messed it up. His resentment increased out of proportion.

At the corner he turned towards the ocean and walked for a few minutes until he found a diner. He was dialling coffee from a dispenser when he glimpsed his darkly stubbled face in the machine's mirrored surface. The bristles felt longer than he had expected, and an unpleasant suspicion dawned in his mind.

'What day is this?' he demanded of an elderly man sitting in the nearest booth.

'Thursday.' The man's grey eyebrows twitched and hovered in surprise.

'Thanks.' Tavernor took his coffee to a vacant booth and sat down. His suspicions were confirmed - he had lost two days. A regulation stunner could be set for a low charge which would put a man out for the space of ten minutes, but he had been given the full blast, stretching his synaptic gaps to within microns of permanent disablement. He recalled the face of the Reservist who had shot him and made a special slot in his memory for it. Martial law or no martial law, he owed the Reservist something.

With the coffee warming his stomach, he decided to postpone eating until he had reached home, cleaned himself up and tended to the leatherwings. They would be hungry and nervous after not seeing him for two days.

For a moment he debated phoning for a cab from the diner, then decided it would be as quick to hail one in the street. He went outside and - for the first time since he

had been freed - turned his gaze inland towards the forest.

The forest was not there.

In its own way, the shock to Tavernor's nervous system was as severe as the stungun charge had been. He stood stock still while people brushed impatiently by him, staring at the strangely naked horizon. The Centre skirted the bay for a distance of eight miles, but on average it was less than a mile wide, so the forest could always be seen at the end of the cross-town thoroughfares. Its multitudinous greens and muted blues clothed a five-mile plain, and beyond that rose upwards in verdant waves which fell back only when they had reached the bare rock of the continental plateau. On hot days the groves of broad-leaved gymnosperms known as tiethes released columns of water vapour high into the sky, and at night the flowers of the moonseekers sent a sweet heady perfume rolling down through the quiet avenues.

But now there was nothing between the western edge of the city and the grey ramparts of the plateau. Forgetting about finding a cab, Tavernor walked towards the missing forest while the resentment that had been surging inside him turned into a vast, aching dismay. i

This then was what had caused the odd quality of t the daylight he had noticed earlier - its familiar green"

component, reflected from the palisades of trees, was absent. As Tavernor began to clear The Centre's commercial belt and pass between apartment blocks he saw ahead of him an untouched expanse of parkland which looked reassuringly normal. Civilian hovercars drifted across it or lay like bright petals on the grass, while family groups picnicked nearby. Feeling that he had strayed into a dream, Tavernor kept walking and gradually reached a low crest from which he was able to get a better view of the plain.

Two separate fences spanned the plain a short distance ahead. The nearer was very high and angled outwards at the top to make it climb-proof; the further had flashing red-and-white posts which meant it was electrified, or something worse. Beyond the fences - where the forest should have been - was a shimmering, glass-smooth plain.

Honey-coloured, whorled with silver and pale green, it was a frozen fairy sea, a ballroom floor created for the revels of myth-kings.

Tavernor, who had seen such things before, sank to his knees.

'You bastards', he whispered. 'You filthy, murderous bastards!'

'Come on - get up,' the icecream man said.

Next door, in another universe, a woman sobbed in panic. The sky began to fracture, and Mack thought of starry fragments tumbling down into neat gardens.

'Too slow, too slow,' the ice cream man said. He reached down with big questing hands. The fingers were dry icicles, and they seared Mack's ribs through his pyjamas.

'I don't want a popsicle,' Mack screamed. 'I've changed my mind.'

'Sorry, son.' The ice cream man's face flowed, and suddenly he looked like Mack's father. He raised Mack into the air and threw him across his shoulder. Mack's face struck something hard, and the pain brought his eyes fully open. It had been the barrel of his father's hunting rifle, slung over his shoulder. Abruptly, the bed-warm sleepiness deserted Mack. He began to feel excitement and the first stirrings of alarm.

'I'm ready,' his mother said. She was wearing a hastily-tied dressing gown. Her features were smudged, melting with fear. Mack wanted to protect her, but remembered regretfully that he had broken the string on his bow and lost most of the arrows.

'Then run, for God's sake.' His father went down the

stairs in three bounding strides. Sensing the adult strength Mack felt both secure and proud. The Syccans were going to be sorry they had ever come near Masonia. His father was a good fighter, the best rifle shot on the whole agproj. In less than a second the door was open and they were out in the cool night air, pounding towards the copter parking circle. The undulating howl of a siren - which he had been only faintly aware of in the house - dinned into Mack's ears. Other agproj families were running towards their own machines. The flashes and reports of small arms splintered awareness into compartments in which Mack heard shouts, screams and a peculiar shrill whine which seemed to come from the trees to the north of the village.

'Oave!' It was her mother's voice, but scarcely recognizable. 'Over there! They're at the copters already!'

Mack felt rather than heard his father's low moan. He found himself dropped to the ground, then he was being dragged along faster than he could run. His father unslung the rifle with his free hand and began firing at something.

The familiar jolting thunder of the weapon reassured Mack - he had seen it punch holes in half-inch steel plate - but his father began to swear bitterly between shots.

Mack became really afraid.

Ahead, close to the copters, spindle-shapes of unearthly tallness moved in the darkness. Green flashes sped from

their limbs, and the ground heaved and shuddered. Somebody whimpered close to Mark. In the fitful garish light he actually saw the Syccans, and he tried to cover his eyes. Miraculously, the copter bulked up in front of him. He leaped for the handle of the door and caught it, but his fingers slipped off the dewy metal. His father came from behind him, wrenched open the door and heaved Mack up on to the deck.

'Spin her up, son - the way I showed you.' His father's voice was hoarse. 'You can do it.'

Mack threw himself at the control console, tumbling switches with the flat of his hand, and the starter cartridge exploded, spinning the turbine into life. The copter stirred expectantly. !

'Come on, Dad!' Mack's voice faltered as he saw that his father was alone. 'Where's Mom? Where is she?' i
i

'I'll be with her - that's all I can do for her now. You get out of here!' His father turned away and walked towards the spindle-shapes, pyjamas flapping in the down-draft of the rotors, rifle blazing hopelessly. Mack half-rose from his seat, but an elongated figure appeared in the open doorway, mewing and clicking. In the dim light of the instruments Mack saw that it seemed to be part bone, part slime, and part exposed gut that glistened like

pale blue satin. The choking stench of it filled the cabin instantly.

Mack had no real control over what happened next - his instincts and reactions took over. He twisted the throttle savagely and moved the collective pitch lever, and the copter lurched skywards. The alien warrior fell outwards and away.

Within a few seconds the eight-year-old Mack Tavernor had left the battle - and his childhood - far behind.

It was almost exactly forty years later that Tavernor revisited his home planet of Masonia.

As the sole survivor of the Syccan sneak-raid on Masonian Agproj 82 he had been - although he was too young at the time to understand it - a gift to the propaganda arm of the War Bureau. Survivors of any raids were rare enough, as the Syccans had no discernible object other than to kill human beings. They made no attempt to capture or destroy material. Even stranger was the fact that the Federation ships-of-the-line had fallen into their hands on a number of occasions, and had been left just as they were found; unharmed and - more important from the Federation's point of view - with their technical secrets unexploited.

The Syccans, arbitrarily named after the planet on which they had first been encountered, had psychologies

which baffled all the efforts of Earth's xenologists; but their failure to learn anything from the butterfly ships was perhaps the greatest mystery they posed. They were familiar with tachyonics, the branch of science which held a mirror to Einsteinian physics, dealing with particles which could not go slower than light. They had mastered the even more difficult 'tachyonic mode' - the technique of creating microcontinuum within which a spaceship composed of normal matter could display some of the attributes of tachyons, and thus travel at huge multiples of the speed of light. But - and in the early years the Federation had scarcely been able to believe its luck - the Syccans had never taken the next logical step in interstellar travel.

That step had been the development of the butterfly ship, known on Earth as the Bussard interstellar ramjet. A butterfly ship could weigh as little as a hundred tons, and got its name from the huge magnetic fields with which it swept up interstellar ions to be used as reaction mass on long range flights. Spread to their full span of several hundred miles, the magnetic wings enabled the lightweight ship to boost itself efficiently to the speed range above $.6c$ at which the tachyonic mode becomes viable. The butterfly ship was fast, economical to build and operate, and highly manoeuvrable - yet the Syccans

continued to use vast unwieldy vessels which carried their own reaction mass. Even with the assistance of tachyonic physics and efficient conversion of mass to propulsive energy, a Syccan ship could weigh over a million tons the beginning of a flight. Lumbering through space on a course that was virtually unalterable, because of the fortune in kinetic energy that would be squandered, one of these ships would consume itself section by section until its reaction mass was exhausted - at which point it had to be close to a fuel depot or become a useless hulk.

The war had been in its second year when Tavernor's parents had died with their fellow colonists on Masonia. It was then becoming apparent to COMsac, the Federation's High Command, that - in spite of the inferiority of the Syccan ships - disposing of the aliens was going to be a long and costly affair. There was a problem in that the planets suffering the Syccan attacks were on the edges of the Federation, whereas the money and resources to wage war were tied up in the home systems.

That was where Tavernor - an eight-year-old boy who had seen his parents slaughtered by the aliens - came in. His face and voice were featured on every tachyonic communications media, in a propaganda campaign which employed every trick the experts knew. For the purposes of the sustained onslaught on the public mind, his escape in the helicopter was represented as his first flight,

although his father had allowed him to handle the controls several times previously. Later he made personal visits to everyone of the home systems. By the time Tavernor was fifteen his propaganda potential was exhausted, but at that stage it did not matter - the Syccans had begun to make deeper forays into Federation-controlled regions of space.

Tavernor went into the army almost automatically.

During his cadetship and years as a junior officer, his desire simply to destroy Syccans - coupled with intelligence and a kind of remorseless efficiency - dominated his personality and all his official assessments. He put in ten years in what were known as 'maximum interpenetration areas', reaching the rank of major in an environment where the ability merely to stay alive demanded an instinctive genius. Then MACRON was born.

The new computer - satellite-sized, yet as dense as opto-electronics could make it - had been co-ordinating the Federation's war effort for less than a week when Tavernor was posted to Earth. He learned that assessment files and aptitude test cards, which had lain for years in 'obscure offices on a dozen worlds, had been collated and scanned by MACRON. They showed that Tavernor had extraordinarily high gradings in categories such as mechanical aptitude, divergent cerebration (engineering), con-

vergent cerebration (engineering) and weapons theory.

MACRON had decided he would best serve the Federation in its Weapon Design and Experimental Department, admirable though his combat record had been.

After a short adjustment course on Earth he was shipped to the Department's Light Weapons (Inert Projectile) Division on McArthur. During the short trip Tavernor, still baffled and dislocated, had turned his mind to the problem of what contribution he could possibly make in a specialist field. Next morning he awoke in his bunk, sweating and shivering at the same time. An old nightmare had come back with renewed force. He was a child again, running in the hellish darkness, stumbling . . . and swinging as his father dragged him along with one hand. Tall spindle-shapes moved up ahead. His father's rifle was blasting away - but it kept missing, missing, always missing. Save Mom, the child Tavernor was screaming silently, don't wait for me! But his father was swearing sadly and bitterly, and the rifle-thunder continued, the voice of the emasculated god, impotent, futile. . .

Tavernor lay quietly under the sheets for a long time, his eyes fixed unmovingly on the cross-members of the

bunk above. He was in the grip of an idea, paralysed by the sense of vaulting exultance that accompanies true inspiration.

A year of routine drafting and machine shop experience was behind Tavernor before he dared put his idea forward. Almost to his surprise, it was received sympathetically. He had been gloomily certain, once his initial ecstasy had worn off, that the Division would have been too preoccupied with a thousand more advanced and better-formulated projects than his own amateurish musings. But a section superintendent listened to his diffident presentation, meetings were held at various levels, and before he knew it Tavernor found himself promoted to section leader, with not only a superb workshop at his disposal, but the services of a team of specialists who were prepared to translate his first blurry vision into functional hardware.

The hardware was a stubby and incredibly ugly weapon which looked like a cross between a bazooka and a sub-machine gun. It differed from guns in that only the butt, trigger and fat outer casing were in physical contact with the user. The remaining working parts - barrel, breech, magazine and sights - floated in a tightly contained magnetic field which damped out vibration. Other components not found in a conventional rifle were a gyro

stabilization unit, and an analogue computer which analysed the frequency and intensity of vibrations imposed on the system and modified the magnetic field accordingly. The gyro stabilization was not used continuously, but was engaged by pressing a button when a target had been selected. As an extra facility on some models, a digital computer and an inertial memory unit were added to accommodate gross movements of the marksman.

Although useful in a number of applications, the refinement was introduced, to some extent, as an indulgence to Tavernor by a department which did not really appreciate the need for a rifle with which a man could hit a target one-handed, while running, dragging a child. . .

The weapon was officially named the Tavernor Compensating Rifle - a label from which he derived a wry satisfaction. Nobody but he understood what it compensated for; and even he did not quite see how the years of work on it eased the nagging guilt, the conviction that his mother had died because his father had been able to save only one. All he knew was that, for the first time in his adult life, he could live and talk and smile like any other human being. He could breathe without the stench of a Syccan warrior filling his nostrils.

With the TCR Mk.1 safely into the production phase, Tavernor turned his attention to other projects, but his inventive spark seemed to have been quenched and now

the work bored him. He struggled against his inclinations for a further three years, then began making applications for transfer back to combat service. At that point, even in wartime, it would have been possible for him to resign - there was no scarcity of men - but he found it difficult to imagine life outside the army.

Eventually, at the age of forty-two, Colonel Mack H. Tavernor was returned to active duty - but not in the maximum interpenetration areas where he had learned his trade. He discovered, with a sense of shock, that the Federation was engaged in more than one conflict. The war against the Syccans had dragged on for four decades, long enough to have become a permanent background to political life, and the Federation's internal problems began to re-emerge. Some systems - particularly those well away from the human-Syccan frontier - began objecting to paying for a distant war. The reduced-taxes platform promptly exhibited its age-old ability to sustain political leaders of any shade, and the Federation found itself obliged to conduct a series of costly police operations.

Tavernor endured seeing his TCR used against humans for four years - but the breaking point came on Masonia, his home world. The frontier had writhed painfully across that sector three times in all. And each time the planet

had been hit - not seriously, otherwise there would have been no political problem left, but hard enough to convince the population they were foolish in allowing their world to be used as a marshalling centre for strategic supplies. A politico-religious leader called Chambers rose to power with the theory, absurd yet attractive to a weary populace, that the Syccans were a scourge for nobody but the unjust. He reinforced his brand of neo-conciliation with well-calculated reminders that the just - in his sense of the word - would not have to pay war taxes.

Before Earth could do anything to prevent it, Chambers was in power and had ordered the removal of all war material from Masonia. During the resultant police action, a population which had broken under occasional Syccan raids quirkishly refused to be subdued by Imperial Earth.

Tavernor, who was elsewhere at the time, knew only the broadest details of the affair; that the planet had been secured by Earth with the minimum bloodshed compatible with maximum speed. He was in the sector when the opportunity for a week's leave arose, and seized the opportunity to spend a few days among the scenes of his boyhood, in the forest around Agproj 82.

The forests were still there - but in vastly different form. They had provided good cover for Masonia's guerilla fighters, and it had been necessary to turn a reducer

on to them. Tavernor spent a day walking across the green-and-silver lakes of cellulose. Towards evening he found an area where the flux had run clear.

And from below the amber surface a dead woman's face looked up at him.

He knelt on the glassy surface for a holy moment, staring down at the pale, drowned ovoid of her face. The black swirls of her hair were frozen, preserved, eternal - like the guilt he had deceived himself into thinking he had shed.

That night, exercising his thirty-year option, he resigned from the army and went looking for somewhere to hide.

4

Tavernor walked north following the line of the fences. As he stumbled through the tufted grass, he shielded his eyes and tried to see past the glare from the surface of the plain. The intense light made his headache worse, but he was able to discern signs of activity. Far out across the cellulose lake mirages shimmered. Behind and among them, great buildings were being constructed. The dragonfly shapes of workopters - large even at that distance

- drifted through the air, lifting entire walls into place,
and the eddies from their rotors churned into the mirages,
scattering light and colours into the sky.

By taking bearings from the larger buildings of The Centre, Tavernor was able to calculate that the activity was taking place roughly where his house had stood two days earlier. Later he would find out whether it had been reduced to disassociated polysaccharide chains and free-flowing pectins along with the rest of the forest, or whether it had been lifted and transported out of harm's way. The house was unimportant - but millions of small dumb creatures must have perished. His mind went back to the woman he had found on Masonia, staring upwards from her amber prison. Unfortunate, they had said, but we warned all of Chambers' guerrillas to get out of there. Ten minutes brought Tavernor to a wide gateway in the fences. It was complete with all the military paraphernalia of barriers, checkpoints and armed guards. A newly made road leading from the plain cut straight across the parkland and neatly aligned itself with one of The Centre's main cross-avenues. Already a two-way flow of wheeled and air-cushion vehicles had begun. The sheer quantity of equipment staggered Tavernor - merely getting it down from the translunar orbital station through the screen of moon fragments and on to the ground must have cost millions. Whatever was happening on

Mnemosyne, it was something big. Something that had been planned well in advance.

He could have been right when he had guessed the war was coming this way. The blowing of Neilson's Star was flooding the entire region with charged particles, creating a volume of space in which the big ships could reach maximum velocity. The fantastically expensive operation of destroying the star had been carried out seven years previously, so what he was witnessing could be the culmination of seven years' planning on the part of COMsac. But what interest could COMsac have in Mnemosyne? Why should the army invade a backwater world three hundred light years from the nearest combat area?

Tavernor reached the road and approached the entrance.

'Hi, there.' A dapper young guard came out of the nearest checkpoint kiosk. He was smiling patronizingly from under the rim of his helmet. 'Looking for something?'

'Information,' Tavernor said. 'What the hell's going on here?'

The guard's face went blank. 'Piss off.'

'No information?'

'You heard me.'

'Then I'm coming through - my house is over there.'

Tavernor pointed out across the plain, moving forward at the same time. The guard shrugged his rifle down into his hand, but he did it too slowly. Tavernor caught the rifle and twisted it, locking the sling around the other man's wrist. The guard made to grab Tavernor with his other hand, but Tavernor pulled the muzzle of the rifle forward! and downwards, gaining leverage on the arm.

'Easy,' he said quietly. 'Or do you want your elbow converted to a universal joint?'

The guard's face turned grey. 'You'll pay for this.'

'You do it for money?' Tavernor injected a note of wonderment into his voice, then a tide of self-disgust rose! in him like bile. He was beginning to enjoy humiliating men - and it was a poor substitute for slaughtering Syccans. 'I'm a thirty-year man myself. Weapons specialist. And four Electrum Stars.'

The guard gave no sign of recognizing the words as a form of apology. 'What do you want, mister?' -

Tavernor released the rifle. 'I want to talk to whoever's! in command here.'

'Piss off,' the guard said. He swung the rifle by the sling. Tavernor smothered the blow, but hurt his left arm in the process. He drove his right shoulder up into the guard's armpit, lifting him clear of the ground to go sprawling in the dust. The guard rolled over on his side, levelling the rifle. Tavernor could have kicked it out of

his grasp, but he stood perfectly still. Go ahead, he thought.

'What's going on here?' A sergeant and two other men spilled out of the kiosk into the sunlight. The sergeant's helmet was askew, showing he had just clapped it on to his head. He was a little old for the rank, going paunchy, with reddish bristles growing in the cleft of his chin.

'I own a plot of land out there,' Tavernor said quickly.

'I want access to it.'

The sergeant came close. 'Are you Tanner?'

'Tavernor.'

'Well, I got news for you, Tanner. You used to own a plot of land out there. It's been vested by the Federation's 73rd Army.'

'How about my house? Did you move it?'

'No time. Our boys reduced the lot.' The sergeant appeared to be enjoying himself. Behind him the guard got to his feet and pressed forward but the sergeant waved him back. This was going to be an object lesson in handling civilians who thought they were hard men.

'Well, how about the contents?'

'All gone. Make out an inventory and take it to the compensations officer in our downtown building. He'll pay you as much's the stuff was worth.'

Tavernor selected the spot where his fist was going to land. The cleft chin was tempting, but the region of the fourth shirt button - the one that was taking most strain from the belly behind it - would be the most effective.

The mention of a compensations officer reminded him of his earlier conversation with Lieutenant Klee. That was what the lieutenant had been talking about.

'Were you there, sergeant? When they checked the house?'

'Yeah, I was around.'

'Do you know if anybody let my leatherwings out before the place was reduced?'

'You mean those Goddam bat-things?' The sergeant seemed genuinely perplexed. 'If you want them you can chip 'em out of the cellulose after the army pulls out.

They're still out there.' The other guards grinned broadly.

Tavernor's heart began a massive adrenalized pounding. The leatherwings, he thought as a red haze rose around him, had never like being caged. Three, four times a day he had had to sit by the cages, projecting feelings of warmth and security until the nervous movements of wings subsided. How did one explain to the watchful silver eyes that their telepathic facility was very rare and therefore had to be studied? And how had they reacted when soldiers had come near, looking on them with revulsion, surrounded by auras of death? The

leatherwings would have sensed what was going to happen to them, and perhaps they would have been able to communicate their foreknowledge to the billion other dumb furry creatures who must have died in the forest. . .

The single blow was nothing more than an expression of Tavernor'S anguish - in that instant he would have punched a stone wall had it been in front of him - but the sergeant fell like a dead man just the same. A whistle shrilled nearby, and other guards closed with Tavernor.

Their faces had shocked, wary expressions; but Tavernor was engaged in only a ritual fight. Stepping over the fallen man, he felt like a statue with solid iron limbs impervious to the impact of fists, boots or rifle butts. He saw and heard his flesh sustain blows, yet he felt no pain.

There was only an increasing numbness, a sense of gathering darkness on the fringes of which faces circled like two-dimensional masks, hostile but insignificant.

. Mack!

The voice reached him across a gulf of yellow sunlight. Lissa's frightened face beseeched him from the open door of her crimson hovercar which was suddenly wallowing and dipping beside him, its road rudder spraying dust and pebbles as it scribed a sharp turn. Her eyes jarred him into something approaching sanity.

He dived into a cushioned seat, the turbine screamed and the little vehicle went bounding and jockeying across the parkland.

Standing at the window, Tavernor was able to look across the bay and see headland after headland receding into the distant south. The dying sun was softening the seriate escarpments with a red-gold light which made him think of rich old oil paintings, and some of the larger moon fragments were already visible in the deepening blue vaults of the sky. Tavernor, responding to the almost palpable sense of peace, filled his pipe and lit it. He winced slightly at each movement of his bruised arms, but the sane fragrance of the tobacco seemed to allay the pain, and he smoked contentedly until the door of the big marble-walled room opened behind him.

Lissa and her father came in. Howard Grenoble was only ten years older than Tavernor, but apparently he was one of the rare people on whom the nutrient shots had little effect. His hair was theatrically streaked with grey and the skin of his long dignified face was deeply creased. The only feature which had retained its youth was his mouth, which had a red-lipped, almost-womanly mobility. With his slim height and immaculate dress he was a perfect elder statesman, and Tavernor wondered for an instant if Grenoble deliberately did not use the

nutrients.

Wearing a flame orange dress, Lissa looked almost childish beside her father. Her face showed immediate concern at seeing Tavernor on his feet instead of on the couch where she had left him.

'Well, I managed to fix it, young man.' Grenoble's lips pouted humorously for a second, exactly like Lissa's.

'Not without difficulty, I might add.'

'Thank you, sir.' Tavernor felt a genuine gratitude at escaping a return to the clinical prison. 'I've given you a lot of trouble.'

'Yes, you have.' Grenoble's eyes twinkled. 'You didn't tell me you were a colonel in the army, young man.'

Tavernor glanced at Lissa. Her eyes wide. 'When I retired I retired completely.'

'Then your repair business is just a hobby?'

'More or less. I like working with machines.' Tavernor did not mention that he had cashed in his pension and blown the lot on a two-year interstellar binge which had ended only when he heard the legends of Mnemosyne, the poet's planet. He felt uncomfortably like a suitor being quizzed by his prospective father-in-law.

'Interesting. I suppose you'll be expanding the business some day, taking on staff?'

'I would think so,' Tavernor said compliantly.

Grenoble nodded. 'Well, I must leave you now. I've a dinner in Federation House this evening with the new C-in-C General Martinez. You must stay here till you find new accommodation - my secretary's arranging for a bedroom to be prepared.'

Tavernor tried to protest, but Grenoble vanished through the doorway with one silencing hand raised, palm outwards. In the ensuing quietness, Tavernor decided he ought to have remained on the couch after all. He limped across the room and lay down, suddenly recalling an old lesson learned many times in the past - that rest is more important to the weary than food, drink, love or freedom. Lissa sat down beside him and pulled a blanket up to his chin. Tavernor looked into the beautiful full-lipped face, and now she no longer seemed like a little girl.

'Oh, Mack,' she whispered. 'You almost did it, after all.'

'Did what?'

'Got yourself killed - and I took so much trouble to get you out of the way.'

'You knew about the martial law and everything else in advance?' Tavernor was beginning to feel drowsy.

'Yes, Dad told me.'

'That's why you asked me on that trip south.'

'Yes, but I guessed you'd go all moral on me, so I had

to arrange. . . the other method.'

'A little drastic, wasn't it?'

Lissa's grey eyes became anxious. 'I had no idea, Mack . . . but at least you're still alive. Would you have quietly left your home when the engineers told you to?'

'Not likely.' He felt a flicker of anger disturb his slide into unconsciousness. 'But they wouldn't have killed me.'

'That's what you think. They killed Jiri Vejvoda.'

'What?'

'Jiri refused to leave his studio - you know he's been working on a mural there for two years. I don't know exactly what happened - I heard he threatened them with an antique pistol - but he's dead. It's all so hideous.'

Lissa's eyes brimmed.

Tavernor raised himself on one elbow. 'But they can't do that! The army just doesn't behave that way on its own ground. There'll be a court martial.'

'Dad says there won't. The project has ten priority points.'

'Ten! That's the. . .'

'I know - the maximum.' Lissa spoke selfconsciously, reciting new knowledge. 'Dad says when a project has ten priority points anybody who holds it back even for a minute can be shot.' She leaned downwards and laid her face against his. Tavernor could feel the pressure of her

breasts, but suddenly he was impatient with her woman's ability to bemoan disaster, shed tears over death, and - at the same time - retain all her own certitudes, all the universal preoccupations of a womb-carrier.

'Did your father tell you what the project is?'

Lissa shook her head. 'The President hasn't sent anything in the diplomatic bag yet, and Dad's been so busy arranging official functions he hasn't had a chance to make any enquiries. Perhaps General Martinez will say something during dinner.'

Tavernor groaned and lay back. Official functions.

Dinners. Lissa had inherited more than just a few facial expressions from her father. Howard Grenoble was playing games, calling the tachyonic communicator a diplomatic bag, dressing up for the part, wearing his hair grey and addressing Tavernor as 'young man' although they were the same generation. Lissa played similar games.

There had to be something lacking in a person if the only way she could handle riches was by pretending poverty, if she couldn't look beyond the marble walls of the Administrator's residence and recognize the end of her world.

'The war's coming this way, Lissa,' he said tiredly.

'Haven't you or your father tried to find out why? Is Mnemosyne going to go out with a bang or a whimper?'

'Try to get some sleep,' Lissa soothed. 'You're getting all tensed up for nothing.'

'Oh, Christ,' Tavernor said helplessly, as the room tilted ponderously away.

Minutes later, it seemed, he was awakened by a peculiar sensation in his feet.

Tavernor lay still for a moment after opening his eyes, wondering if he had been dreaming. He was in a bed, and wearing dark green pyjamas instead of his blood-stained jacket and pants. The segment of bedroom he could see was suffused with lemon-coloured morning

light, and he was rested. But his feet still felt strange, immobilized by an insistent warm pressure.

He raised his body and discovered that muscles which had throbbed with pain the previous day had stiffened like sun-dried rawhide. Tavernor fell back then tried it again, more cautiously, and got his head above the level of his chest.

'Hello,' the little girl said.

'Hello.' Tavernor lowered himself back on to the pillow. 'You must be Bethia.' Lissa rarely mentioned

Bethia, but he knew they were cousins, and that the child had been living with Howard Grenoble ever since her parents had died in an accident.

'How did you know?' Bethia sounded disappointed.

'Move off my feet and I'll tell you.' He waited until Bethia had wriggled to one side, stoically enduring the pain in his bruised legs.

'Well?'

'Lissa told me. I know all about you, Bethia. You're Lissa's cousin, you live here, and you're three years old.'

'Three and a half,' Bethia said triumphantly. 'That shows how much you know.'

'You're really three and a half! How could Lissa have made such a mistake?'

'Lissa makes lots of mistakes. I fear for her.' Both the manner of delivering the words and their content startled Tavernor. Even the timbre of the voice was at variance with what he would have expected from a three-year-old, subtly but unmistakably, as the echoes in a theatre differ from those in a cathedral. He decided to have a longer look at Bethia and struggled into a sitting position, grunting as further muscles were brought into play.

'You feel pain.'

'I feel pain,' Tavernor agreed, eyeing the child curiously. She was thin, but with a healthy youngster's easy uprightness and pearl-glowing skin. Large grey eyes, like Lissa's, stared back at him from a round face which already hinted at disturbing perfection to come. Her hair was the colour of polished oak, set off by a simple lime green tunic.

'Let me feel the pain.' Bethia slipped off the end of the bed, approached Tavernor and laid minute fingers on his left arm. Her eyes grew owlsh with concern.

'Pain doesn't work that way,' Tavernor laughed. 'I can feel it, but you can't.'

'That's what Lissa says - but she's wrong. You hurt here, and here, and here. . .' Bethia's flitting fingers began to move down his torso under the sheets towards his bruised groin.

'Hey!' He caught her wrists. 'Nice little girls don't behave that way with strange men.' Part of his mind registered the curious fact that, although his bruises were hidden by pyjamas, each touch of her fingertips had been on a major pain centre.

'Well, turn it off by yourself then.' Bethia scowled at him with childish ferocity, and flounced away from the bed.

'Come back. Bethia.'

She turned to face him, but stayed at the opposite side of the room. Looking at the tiny fleck of humanity - fragile yet indomitable vessel, unperturbed by the vastness of the space-time ocean it had only begun to cross - he felt a rare longing for a child of his own. Too late for that now, he reminded himself. Now that it's becoming so obvious that the Syccans are coming.

Tavernor hopefully put on his best smile. 'Lissa didn't tell me you have a temper.'

'Lissa gets everything wrong.' Bethia sniffed as loudly as her toy-sized nose would allow.

'Would she like to hear you saying that?'

'She can't.'

'I mean, you shouldn't say it.'

'Even if it's true?'

'You shouldn't say it because it isn't true.' He felt himself getting deeper into a hole. 'Lissa's a woman, and you're still a child.'

Bethia's jaw dropped and her eyes bulged with accusation. 'You,' she squeaked. 'You're just like everybody else.' She vanished from the room in a blur of leggy movement, leaving Tavernor with a crushing sense of inadequacy.

You balled that one up, he thought ruefully, getting out of bed. Investigation of his room revealed his own

clothes hanging in a closet. His underclothing and the durable permacords had been cleaned and dried. Another door led into a spacious shower room. Tavernor turned on the hot water, tested it, eased himself out of the pyjamas and stepped gratefully into the cone of warmth. He had soaped himself all over before noticing that his left arm, which had suffered most in the previous day's unpleasantness, was no longer hurting him. The black contusions were still there, but the pain was gone, as was the case with the ugly dark mound where a rifle butt had connected with the left side of his chest. Taut swathes of agony still covered the rest of his body.

'Well, I'll be damned,' he said aloud.

'Yes, you will,' Bethia's voice piped jubilantly from the doorway. Her round face was gleeful as she peered into the shower room, tiny frame poised for flight.

'Don't run away,' Tavernor said, determined not to

put a foot wrong this time. 'Did you do this?' He stepped out of the shower, flexing his left arm pleurably.

'Course I did.'

'But that's marvellous. You're a healer, Bethia,' She looked gratified and came farther into the room. 'How

do you do it?'

'How?' Bethia looked puzzled. 'It isn't a how-thing.

You just do it. Like this.'

She approached him again, solemn-eyed. Tavernor knelt and allowed her hands to pass all over his moisture-beaded body, feeling no embarrassment even when the doll-fingers briefly handled his genitals. When he stood up again every trace of pain had vanished from his system, and his mind was filled with a sense of communion unlike anything he had ever known. Bethia smiled at him and suddenly he was almost afraid of her. He dried himself as quickly as possible, went into the bedroom and dressed. Bethia followed him, watching with intent eyes.

'Mack?'

'So you know my name?'

'Course I do. Are you a soldier?'

'No.'

'But you were fighting.'

'If you don't mind, Bethia,' Tavernor fenced. 'I'd rather talk about something else.'

'I don't mind. Mack?'

'Yes.' He concentrated on brushing his hair.

'Will the Syccans ever come here?'

'Never.' At least, he thought, not until you're a lot older.

'Are you sure?'

'Bethia - they don't even know where this place is. I'm

,

sure.

'I guess that explains it.'

'Explains what?' Tavernor looked down into the luminous grey eyes with an odd sense of premonition, but Bethia shook her head and backed away from him. Her eyes, brilliant only a second before, had dimmed to leaden discs. She turned and left the room, slowly, drifting like thistledown in the morning air.

Tavernor called her, but she appeared not to hear. He decided to learn as much as he could about the child during breakfast. But the meal had scarcely begun when he learned, from Lissa, the incredible reason for the army's urgent invasion. Mnemosyne - the poets' planet - was to become the operations and planning centre for the war against the Syccans.

5

The tiny letters hovered in the air several feet above floor level. Glowing ruby red and topaz, they spelled out a

simple message - JIRI VEJVODA HAS NOT DIED.

'Now to step up the scale.' Jorg Bean, who was one of the best light sculptors in the Centre, made an adjustment at the side of his portable projector. The solid image suddenly magnified itself and rose higher to blaze along the ceiling, filling Jamai's long bar with garish light. Wall mirrors multiplied the words in every direction, stretching and twisting the letters as the hidden solenoids executed their random dance. The room flared with unaccustomed brilliance.

'What do you think of it?' Bean looked anxiously around the group.

'It's perfectly adequate, and that's all we need,' Kris Shelby said. 'It's meant to be a message - not a work of art.'

He spoke with a clipped forcefulness which surprised Tavernor, who had just entered Jamai's. Tavernor settled himself on a stool and watched the group of almost twenty artists with some curiosity. They appeared to be planning a protest march, and were dressed for the occasion in businesslike permacords. His attention was distracted by a disturbance at the bottom of the room.

Old Jamai himself - big, fat, sweating freely in a gold suit - had made one of his rare appearances.

'The light,' he screamed. 'Turn out the light!' He came storming along behind the counter, brushing white-

jacketed barmen out of the way.

Shelby turned to him. 'What's the trouble, monsieur?'

'Mr Shelby,' Jamai breathed. 'You're an old and valued friend, but my customers don't want floodlighting with their drinks. . . and I don't want any protests in my bar.'

'Bad for business, monsieur?'

'Regrettably, Mr Shelby, many of us do have to work for a living.'

'Of course, I'm sorry - this isn't your fight.' Shelby gave one of his characteristic lacy flourishes and Bean switched off the projector. The chunky letters dimmed and retreated into the machine, shrinking through spurious perspectives. At the mention of a fight Tavernor had, given an almost involuntary snort, attracting Shelby's attention. As soon as Jamai had retreated, grumbling, into his mirror-hidden den Shelby turned to Tavernor. His long aristocratic face was slightly flushed with excitement.

'Back again, Mack?'

Tavernor nodded, biting back an automatic sarcasm.

'Look, I'm sorry about the way things worked out the other night. None of us had heard the proclamation of martial law, and we didn't realize you were up against a madman. . . I just want to say we all regret what happened.'

'It was mainly my fault.' Tavernor was surprised at the

man's obvious sincerity.

'They floored me too, you know.' Shelby fingered a bruise on his jaw and smiled ruefully.

'You! No, I didn't know.'

'Yes - I tried to make the one you slugged give me his name and number. I never saw what hit me.'

Tavernor stared at Shelby, seeing him in a new light.

'Drink?'

'I have one over there. May I buy you a whiskey?'

'I think I'll have sparks for a change.' The news about COMsac moving to Mnemosyne seemed to have paralysed Tavernor's digestion, and the meal he had eaten with Lissa was lodged high in his stomach. He felt that sparks, with its negative calorie value, would go down better than alcohol. Shelby signalled a bartender who set up a slim glass of pale green liquid then added a single drop of glucose. As the carbohydrate dispersed through the liquor, curtains of golden sparks began to swirl in the glass. Tavernor took a sip and felt it run ice cold to his stomach. The dream-liquor always felt chilled because it was greedy for heat and hydrocarbons alike, converting them into luminescence which was then released into the air.

'Wonderful stuff,' Shelby said. 'I'd probably be as fat as a pig without it.'

'I prefer to work off my excess weight.'

Shelby held up one be-ringed hand. 'Must you be so pious? I was hoping we could call off the class war for a while.'

'Sorry.' Tavernor took another sip. 'I project old resentments.'

'Don't we all? The thing is - what are you going to do about this brand-new resentment we all feel?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing! You've heard the Federation's planning to move the war headquarters to Mnemosyne.'

'It isn't Mnemosyne to them - the army uses the official cartographic name.'

'That's as may be, but it's the Mother of the Muses to us.'

'To you,' Tavernor emphasized. 'I'm not an artist or a writer.'

'But you'll join the demonstration.' Shelby's friendliness was beginning to wear thin. 'Christ, man, they destroyed your house.'

'I've already carried out a private demonstration about that, and I've got the lumps to prove it. Take my advice,

Kris - keep your little band of marchers away from that field.'

'It won't be such a little band - this is only one group.'

Tavernor's temper began to fray too. 'Kris! Stop playing democracies. Come down into the real world, the one where the war's going on. COMsac has decided to move in here - I don't know why - but they've already blown a star to do it. Are they going to rearrange this part of the universe, then pack up and move out because you wave a few banners at them?'

Shelby looked disdainful. 'You're going to lie down.'

'So are you, friend.' Tavernor drained his glass and set it down. 'In hospital.'

When he had checked into a small hotel on the south side, Tavernor suddenly realized he had very little money. Practically every penny he owned had been tied up in his house and workshop. He wrestled with his pride for a moment then took a cab to the new military block. The work of tidying up the perimeter of the building had been completed, and over the main entrance was a sign which simply said: 73RD ARMY.

He went in through a separate door marked 'Civilian Compensations Officer', identified himself and within ten minutes emerged with a draft on the First Centre Intersystem bank for almost thirty thousand stellars.

There had been no haggling because Tavernor privately estimated his property as twenty thousand and had been prepared to settle for fifteen. Marvelling at the ways of bureaucracy in a hurry, he took another cab to his own bank, deposited the draft and withdrew a thousand in cash. With the money buttoned into his pocket he felt a surge of childish glee and realized the single glass of sparks he had downed was having its effect on him.

Analysing his feelings, he discovered he felt exactly as he had done in his cadet days, arriving back at camp after a cross-country run through flame-coloured trees, with the prospect of a hot shower, a meal and a free week-end.

There was not one thing in the whole wide universe which could have depressed him. He decided he approved of sparks after all, but the other Tavernor - the one which always watched from a higher level of consciousness - coldly instructed him never to touch the dream-liquor again.

Remembering that Lissa still had no idea he was moving out of her home, he hailed another cab and told the driver to take him to the Administrator's Residence. The machine hummed northwards on its single wheel for two blocks then was forced to wait at an intersection where there was a pile-up of traffic and a gathering crowd.

Looking past the driver's head, Tavernor saw that a slow

procession was moving west on the cross-avenue towards the new military field. In the air above the marchers bobbed a series of solid-image slogans. Most of the light-sculptors had contented themselves with straightforward messages in varying degrees of starkness, but one had executed a realistic deathmask of the dead artist, Jiri Vejvoda, complete with a delta of blood from one corner of the mouth. The glowing head, twenty feet across and rendered slightly translucent by the afternoon sun, made drunken balloon-like swoops, magnifying the movements of its hand-held projector.

'Look at that,' the cab-driver said disgustedly. 'Don't those guys think about women out shopping with their kids? What's a kid going to make of a thing like that?'

'Couldn't say.' Tavernor still felt serene.

'Would you like your kids to see it?'

'I guess not.'

'There you are then - but those guys don't think of that. They get in the way of the war effort, then they squeal if one of them gets hurt. Lousy artists!' The cabby's fluted neck began to turn red with anger. 'I hope our boys give them a hot reception at the field.'

Our boys, Tavernor repeated to himself in surprise, then remembered Jamai's inordinately violent reaction earlier in the day. He conceived what, to his sparks-filled brain, seemed a shrewd idea.

'How's business been in the last day or two?' he asked.

'Pretty good?'

'Great. These soldier boys throw money around like it was. . .' The cabby turned to face Tavernor, and his face darkened with suspicion. 'What are you getting at, mister?'

'Nothing,' Tavernor assured him. 'Why don't you just drive the cab?'

He was interested in the discovery that, although he regarded himself as a 'practical' man with no interest in any branch of the arts, he identified Mnemosyne solely with its colony of artists, writers, poets, musicians and sculptors. The legends that could be heard on a hundred worlds, provided one listened in the right places, called it the Poets' Planet. Almost by accident, Tavernor had listened in some of the right places during his two-year Federation-wide drunk. His first clear memory of hearing Mnemosyne's name was in a flat city on Parador, which was also the first place he had ever tried viewing a cortstim 'painting'. The moulded pillow, feeding light and colour patterns straight through the visual cortex, had produced an indistinct image of Mnemosyne's prismatic night sky; and keyed to the visual impulses was a couplet from Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty':

'Sudden the shadow fell on me;

I shrieked and clasped my hands in ecstasy.'

The artist, an iron-grey woman with one milky eye, had explained her vision while they killed a bottle of off-world Bourbon. . . an immortal work of art for every moon-shard in the fragmented sky. . . the last redoubt from which the beacon of Man's genius threw aureate rays across a darkening galaxy. . . a world which basked in inspiration's long, long summer. . . Seeing the insupportable yearning in the woman's unspoiled eye, Tavernor had impulsively offered to pay her ticket to Mnemosyne. She had walked away from him without a word, as though she had been struck, and it was not until long afterwards he realized she had been afraid of finding she had nothing to offer, that Mnemosyne's crucible would reduce her soul-diamonds to worthless dust.

But others had made the pilgrimage, to lose themselves on a world which was doomed to remain an obscure backwater because the butterfly ships, the pollen-carriers of the Federation's commerce, could not alight there. Yet distance, and the growing spindle-shadow of the Syccan warrior, had failed to obliterate the names of many of these pilgrims. The home systems had heard of them again and again across the light years. Even Tavernor had known the names of Stamfli and Hungerford,

the poets; Delgado, who single-handed had conceived and pioneered light sculpture; Gaynor, whose furniture was the ultimate synthesis of art and function; and many more. It was in the footsteps of these men that he -for reasons he could not understand, but only feel - had imagined himself walking when he drifted towards Mne-mosyne. And in a way he had scarcely acknowledged the fact that the planet had its politics, its business sections, its light industries, and people who were happy to see an army breach the moon-shell as long as it meant extra cash for their pockets. . .

'Here we go at last,' the cabby called over his shoulder.

'Next time I see those bums in front of me I keep right on motoring.'

The youngest-looking and most immaculate lieutenant-colonel Tavernor had ever seen was stepping down from a military transport when the cab reached the Administrator's Residence. While Tavernor was paying the cabby the young officer gave his army driver instructions to wait, then walked slowly up the broad steps, tilting his head back to examine the building's green-and-white marble fa~ade like a prospective buyer. At the top of the steps he turned and scanned the view, nodding his approval of the terraced lawns and the blue-shimmering

waters of the bay. He was tall and lean, with Latin good looks that somehow were accentuated by the premature thinning of his black hair. Something in his face, perhaps a fraction too much white glowing around the brown eyes, gave Tavernor the impression that here was a volatile, unstable and perhaps dangerous man. There was also something familiar about the face.

Suddenly conscious of the fact that he should have bought new clothes to replace his well-worn permacords, Tavernor mounted the steps and was surprised to find his way blocked by the lustrous grey uniform.

'Are you sure,' the officer said, 'that you've come to the right entrance?'

'Quite sure, thank you.' Tavernor sidestepped, remembering his resolve to behave in a more adult manner in encounters with strangers.

'Not so fast.' The officer moved sideways, still blocking the way. His white-rimmed eyes were intent, angry.

'Listen, sonny,' Tavernor said evenly. 'You're disgracing that nice doorman's uniform you've got on.' He made another effort to get by, the the officer grabbed his arm with such snakelike force that it was almost a blow.

Anxious to avoid an outright scuffle on the steps of the Grenoble house, Tavernor bent his arm - compressing the restraining fingers between bicep and forearm - and exerted pressure. He saw the officer's face turn pale with

pain or anger, or both. The two men had been locked together for several arctic seconds when the main doors swung open beside them and Howard Grenoble emerged into the daylight, followed by a group of secretaries and civil servants. Tavernor released his hold.

'How good to see you again, Gervaise!' Grenoble spoke quickly, holding out his hand.

'It's a pleasure to see you again, sir,' the officer said, turning back to Tavernor with a purposeful look. 'But before. . .'

'Allow me to introduce you two,' Grenoble interrupted.

'Lieutenant-Colonel Gervaise Farrell - Colonel Mack Tavernor. Mack is a friend of my daughter's, and he's staying with us for a few days.' If Grenoble was embarrassed by Tavernor's presence or by what he might have seen, he gave no sign.

Farrell was unable to conceal his surprise. His eyes traversed Tavernor's highly unmilitary dress before he spoke. 'I'm sorry if I . . .'

'I'm no longer a colonel,' Tavernor put in. 'I retired from the army several years ago.'

'That's right. Mack has an engineering concern right here in The Centre.' Grenoble smiled pleasantly, with a quizzical twist of his brows which Tavernor read as

meaning. 'I can't very well introduce you as a handyman.'

Giving a barely perceptible nod to show he understood, Tavernor excused himself and slipped by the group. As he was crossing the reception hall towards the stair which led to the private suite, he heard Grenoble began speaking to Farrell with a marked degree of warmth.

'Well now, Gervaise, how has your uncle been since I saw him last? It seems a lifetime since we . . .'

Tavernor passed through the doorway and was halfway up the stairs when his laggard memory, triggered by Grenoble's use of the word uncle, supplied Farrell's identity. Tavernor faltered in mid-stride. The impossibly young colonel he had come so closely to tossing down the steps was a nephew of Berkeley H. Gough, Supreme President of the Federation. Tavernor had seen his picture in army magazines and occasional newscasts, but had never paid much attention, his own childhood having given him an aversion to anything bearing the taint of propaganda. Farrell's background helped explain his almost possessive attitude towards the Administrator's Residence; although it was special personal qualities which had led him, on the instant of arrival, to start throwing his weight around. And none of those qualities appealed to Tavernor.

He found Lissa on the wide verandah which overlooked the turquoise waters of the pool. She was leaning over

the tripod of a large-screen electronic telescope, setting it up to face south-west towards the painfully bright silver lake of the new military field, visible through a stand of native trees. He allowed his eyes to gorge themselves for a moment on the unintentional voluptuousness of the pose, the black hair, brown skin glowing in the afternoon sunlight and contrasting with the throbbing whiteness of a simple dress.

'Guess what I almost did,' he said.

'Oh, Mack!' She looked up, startled, and smiled.

Against the tan of her face her teeth seemed to fluoresce.

Tavernor felt the familiar stirring at the core of his being and suppressed it, concentrating on making his forty-nine-year-old mouth form words for her nineteen-year-old ears. He described the incident on the steps.

'Gervaise Farrell,' she said. 'I don't think I ever met him, unless it was so long ago I've forgotten. Dad wants him to stay here.'

'Here?' Tavernor was annoyed by the intensity of the pang of jealousy which struck through him. 'Is that necessary?'

'Necessary? No, but it seems a good idea.' Lissa spoke carelessly, as she adjusted the tripod, and he wondered if she had sensed his jealousy and was making him pay for his steadfast refusal to accept the great gift. After several

months, he knew enough about Lissa to suspect that the higher his motives for not bedding her, the greater her resentment was likely to be. He studied her face as he announced he had found another place to stay and was moving out.

'I talked to Kris on the phone this morning,' she said, apparently unaware he had been speaking. 'I asked him not to go ahead with his protest march, but he wouldn't listen.'

'Does it matter all that much?'

Lissa looked at him with her father's troubled eyes. 'It changes everything. Dad represents the Supreme President on Cerulea.' It was the first time he had heard her refer to Mnemosyne by its official cartographical name.

'So?'

'So, I'd never betray him by becoming identified with an anti-Federation movement. It's strange, Mack - I'd have guessed that you'd have made a more dedicated protester than Kris.'

'I've been dedicated to a number of propositions in my time, but never one so demonstrably untrue as "liri Vejevoda has not died".'

'It isn't funny.' Lissa turned back to the electronic telescope and activated its screen. The foliage of distant trees blossomed on the glass, magnified, rippling silver in

the faint breezes.

'I'd like to say goodbye to Bethia.' Tavernor felt he had been snubbed.

'She's having her afternoon nap. Look into her bedroom.'

'Right.' Wounded by the indifference in Lissa's voice, he left the verandah and wandered through the hushed shafts of sunlight until he had found Bethia's room. It was large and styled exactly as the other rooms, with no nursery furniture or sign of toys. Her tiny figure lay straight and motionless in the centre of the bed, composed and self-possessed, yet lonely. Again he felt the urge to own the child. He went into the polarized dimness and stood beside the bed, staring down at the flushed, defenceless face, trying to reconcile its childish normalcy with the aura of strangeness, precociousness and the healing touch of a Biblical saint. Bethia's eyes were closed, but suddenly he had a distinct impression she was not asleep. He whispered her name. There was no response, and he backed away from the bed with an uncanny sense of having been guilty of some vast sacrilege.

Returning to the verandah, he heard Lissa's voice in conversation, punctuated by unfamiliar male laughter.

He went out through the curtains of sunlight and found

Gervaise Farrell standing at the telescope close to Lissa.

'Here he comes now,' Farrell exclaimed enthusiastically. His dark features were transformed with excitement. 'Where've you been, Mack? Howard has just introduced me to his beautiful daughter, and I've been telling her how I nearly threw you out of the house.'

Tavernor blinked. 'That's odd - I've been telling her how I nearly threw you out.'

'Beautiful!' Farrell laughed delightedly, as though Tavernor had said something priceless, and all the while his gaze roved over Lissa's face, inviting her to join with him. Tavernor was surprised when Lissa did respond, with a brittle peal of amusement, but he was even more intrigued by Farrell's performance, so much at variance with the obstinate stony dislike he had seen in the man's eyes after Grenoble had intervened on the steps.

'I've been saying goodbye,' Tavernor said. He looked at Lissa. 'Thanks for the hospitality. Perhaps. . .'

'But this is ridiculous,' Farrell interrupted. 'I feel as though you were being forced out by my moving in.'

'Set your mind completely at rest on that score,' Tavernor replied.

'There he goes again.' Farrell's eyes beamed their jubilation. 'Seriously though, I've just arrived on Cerulea after two weeks' voidside and I'd love some good company. I've got it! You two must be my guests tonight at

the opening of the new officers' mess. It'll be a night to remember, I assure you.'

'Sorry - I'm not quite persona grata at the base, and in any case I've an appointment to keep.'

'Too bad.' Farrell's acquiescence was immediate. He turned to Lissa with a boyish grin. 'But you'll come, won't you? The other men will be . . .'

He stopped speaking as he realized Lissa's attention had been gripped by the scene in the telescope's screen.

It was a distance of some two miles to the base's main entrance, but in the image from the scope's six-inch objective lens, translated into a high-definition CRT display, it was possible to see detail as fine as the buttons on the guards' uniforms. The screen was filled with graceless~swarming movement of humans in riot. As far as Tavernor could interpret it, the column of protesters had reached the checkpoint and actually tried to force their way through. Military vehicles and soldiers on foot were converging on the dark wave of humanity outside the gate, above which light-sculpted slogans swung crazily, streaking the air with coloured fire.

As Tavernor watched, the wave fell back. The people farthest from the gate, sensing the change of direction, turned and ran, their unhampered strides allowing them

to gain ground on their less fortunate fellows. Those left behind created a seething helpless pool into which the Juggernaut of a huge air-cushion vehicle charged at full speed, bowling men over, swallowing them under its pulsing skirts. Behind the vehicle came the orderly robot-like figures of the soldiers, fighting machines unhindered by any real opposition - push with both hands on rifle, swing butt diagonally upwards, push, swing, push, swing. . .

'It's an attack!' Farrell's voice was incredulous and almost gleeful. 'Where did that mob come from?'

'That mob is a part of this planet's famous art colony,' Lissa said dully, hands covering her mouth, eyes held by the screen.

'But this whole area is under martial law - the poor fools could die for this.'

'That's what it's all about,' Lissa told him. 'One of their number - a man we all respected - has already been killed. He refused to leave his home before the forest was liquified.'

Farrell's eyes darted across Lissa's face, noting her emotional involvement. 'You knew this man?' His voice had become sympathetic as he put his hand on her arm.

'I'm so sorry. I know it's too late for me to help the man who died, but I'll have the matter investigated. And if there's any culpability, the men involved will pay.'

'Bravo,' Tavernor said ironically, as he walked away.

He had seen Farrell's eyes drinking the distant scenes of violence, and their flaring coronas of excitement told him that Mnemosyne's long, long summer was drawing to a close.

6

A single week had brought big changes.

Inland from The Centre, where the forest once stood, a new city was being built at fantastic speed. Giant workopters circled continuously on slow-churning rotors, putting twenty-storey blocks together in hours, while others shuttled between the site and the spacefield, bringing prefabricated sections. The southern sky in the region of the spacefield, once disturbed only by the weekly stage ship's modest blowtorch, became a suburb of hell. It was constantly torn and punished by the nuclear fireballs of mass-carried ships which rivalled the sun by day and painted stygian cityscapes in the clouds of night.

As each new building was completed, military and civilian personnel arrived to fill it. The road linking the base to The Centre thronged with traffic, while the stores, bars and nightclubs did unprecedented business.

At first Tavernor felt as though he was living in a vacuum. His old pleasure haunts had become unfamiliar places, appropriated by loud-talking strangers. The television and radio stations carried on exactly as always, with no reference to the invasion. Tavernor belatedly recalled that the money he had received for his property was not all his own - the workshop had contained several repair jobs, including a fairly expensive boat turbine. He spent a day contacting the various owners and making settlements, then he was at a loose end again.

The few people he recognized as being survivors of the disastrous protest march were strangely evasive when

questioned about it, but finally he got a few facts - the most startling of which was that one of the base guards had been killed in the clash. Nobody was sure how it had happened, but the most prevalent rumour was that Pete Troyanos - a pottery designer with the build of a sumo wrestler - had twisted the soldier's head right round on his neck. Nor did anybody know what the extent or severity of the casualties had been on the marchers' side, because all those not able to get out of the vicinity in a hurry had been dragged into the base. It was an open guess whether they were in cells, hospitals or morgues.

About that time Tavernor began to notice parties of red caps grimly working through The Centre, checking identities, and suddenly he understood why the marchers had been so reluctant to talk to him. Some of their members - possibly a fairly large group - were on the run.

As if to confirm his guess, the broadcasting channels then made their first mention of the changed state of affairs in The Centre. It took the form of repeated trailers for an important announcement to be made by the officer in charge of external security at 'Cerulea Army Base no. 1'. Tuning in to the broadcast, Tavernor was only half-surprised to see Farrell's da Vincian features - hardly lighter in colour than his brown field uniform - making the announcement.

'Citizens of Cerulea,' Farrell began, 'as you all know, the Federation has established an important military base close to this planet's major city, The Centre. It is no secret that this base is being set up as the principal operations and planning centre for the conduct of the war against an alien species which, from all the evidence we have, has dedicated itself to the complete annihilation of human life.'

Farrell paused for effect, and Tavernor noted that the overtones of confidence and optimism - invariably a feature of public statements about the war - were absent. He also knew from first-hand experience that all the connotations, the positions of all the commas in official announcements, were calculated by high-powered semanticists. The conclusion was that the war situation had deteriorated. Tavernor's mind returned to the stupendous mystery lying behind all the events of the past few days - why, why was COMsac transferring its centre of operations to the most inconvenient, expensive and improbable location in the entire Federation?

'... who does not offer his utmost co-operation is a traitor not merely to a political concept or national ideal - but to every man, woman and child in the human race.

It is my sad duty to inform you that a young soldier of the Federation's 73rd Army has been killed, not on the Syccan battle front, but right here on Cerulea - by the very traitors to which I have referred, by fellow men whose lives he was dedicated to protect.

'Many of those responsible for this outrage have been dealt with already, but a small group have not yet been apprehended. I know that you are no less anxious than I to see justice done, but I would be failing in my duty to you if I did not make one thing absolutely clear. Anybody found assisting this very small group of seditionists in any

way will be treated exactly as though he were guilty of the original crime.'

The announcement ended abruptly, on the warning note, and the three-dimensional image of Farrell's head and shoulders faded from the set's projection focus.

Tavernor seemed to see the white-rimmed stare hanging in space when the rest of the picture had gone, reminding him of a scene from a classical childhood story. He lit his pipe thoughtfully. The group of wanted men would not have remained in The Centre unless they were even more naive in this kind of business than Tavernor suspected.

That left only the forest, a fringe of which still remained between the army base and the near-vertical walls of the plateau. To the north of The Centre, the littoral plain widened for some thirty miles before ocean and plateau drew together again. The triangular area was thickly forested and scored laterally with dozens of arroyos, making it an excellent hideout for a group who wanted to escape from a well-equipped army. Had Tavernor been on the run he would have headed north. Luckily, he reminded himself, it wasn't his fight - yet when he got to bed that night a familiar loathsome smell was beginning to reach his nostrils.

In the morning the smell was still there, and curiosity prompted him to spend an hour or two seeing if any

military activity could be seen in the north. After all, he reasoned, I've nothing else to do now. He breakfasted early, then rang a car hire firm and had a ground-effect machine delivered to the hotel. Before setting out he bought a pair of lightweight binoculars, and some sandwiches and beer. It took longer than usual to get clear of The Centre by road, because of the crowded streets, but he decided that travelling on the open sea could make him too conspicuous. If the amateur outlaws were where he deduced it was likely that all northbound traffic would be scrutinized. Once clear of the city he retracted the roadrudder and drove along the shore road at the ageing vehicle's top speed.

It was one of the diamond-sharp mornings so common on Mnemosyne. The silent forest on his left and the empty blue ocean on the right made it easy for him to relax and begin thinking more deeply about the direction of his life. His first eight years had been perfect, but they did not count - they seemed to belong to another's memories. What then had gone wrong with the remaining forty-one years? Other people had lost their parents under equally traumatic circumstances, yet got over the experience and achieved their normal state of happiness. Was it that he felt responsible? He had been the sole survivor of the Syccan raid, but only through his father's efforts - efforts which might, had Tavernor not been

there, have enabled both his parents to get away. Had he been unconsciously trying to die in the same manner as his father and mother? Electrum Stars were awarded only to men who had gambled their lives against suicidal odds in the maximum interpenetration areas. And he had won four - twice as many as any other combatant, living or dead, he had ever known.

And when his military career had been diverted, so gently, so imperceptibly he was unaware of the change, into the destruction of human beings, had his guilt welled up again with redoubled force? The theory fitted, because since then things had become worse. Deliberately squandering the army pension which would have brought security for the rest of his life had been an exercise in pure futility. Burying his head in Cerulean sands had not helped either, for here he was - the realization heaved icily in his belly - considering joining the most hopeless insurrection in human history.

Tavernor threw the vehicle into reverse thrust and it slithered to a halt, road rudder and emergency brakes tracing dark smears on the highway.

'No, you don't,' he muttered. 'There must be easier ways of committing suicide.'

He swung the vehicle around with the intention of driving back to The City at a more leisurely speed, but something dark and huge appeared close overhead with frightening suddenness, and his thoughts were scattered in a blast of sound. The air filled with churning dust clouds, the reek of burnt fuel. As he hit the emergency brake again, his numbed senses told him he had been hawkdived by a patrol helicopter - coming down from observation height in a virtual free fall checked only in the last few yards by a blast of retrorockets. The technique was a standard one in copter warfare, but scarcely justifiable in the present circumstances. He rolled down his window as the helicopter straddled the road ahead, wallowing on its oleo legs, and a lieutenant in full battle kit jumped down with a drawn pistol.

'Enjoyed that, did you?' Tavernor spoke first.

'Where do you think you're going?' The lieutenant's eyes were unfriendly.

'Until you almost put my car off the road, I was driving into town.'

'Before that you were driving north. Fast. Then you turned back.'

'I wasn't emigrating, you know,' Tavernor said with mock reasonableness. 'Stopping and turning back is a little trick I've worked out for getting home again.'

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. 'Did you turn back because you saw our patrol?'

Tavernor shook his head. He had been about to invent another sarcasm, but his eyes had focused themselves on the soldiers at the helicopter's open doors. The weapons they held were specially designed for firing from vibrating gun platforms. As he took in the fat, stubby barrels of the TCRs, his nostrils flared with the synaesthetic stench of a Syccan warrior, the odour of his own guilt. And this burden of guilt - the thought brought the spare satisfaction that comes with finality - was one he could lay down only in death.

7

The perfume of Lissa's body was still with him as he left the parklands behind and began working through the fringes of the forest.

Only a few hundred yards behind, and extending west towards the black wall of the plateau, was the northern boundary of the military base. Occasional shafts of ruddy light from the inner fence reached him in the darkness, but as he moved deeper into the forest the tree lanes

closed up and the meagre evidence of civilization disappeared. He continued to move carefully, using nothing but the ambient light of Mnemosyne's moon-shell and the now-fading radiance of Neilson's Star. It was likely that listening stations would have been set up on the base's perimeter and he had no wish for anyone to come after him with nightflies under the dismal, wavering glimmer of infra-red flares.

Entering the forest this close to the field had been a risk, but he had chosen to do so rather than be seen again travelling north on the coastal highway. The lieutenant who had hawkdived him in the morning had let him go reluctantly, and only after a thorough search of his car had revealed nothing too suspicious. They must be building quite a dossier on me, he thought. And soon its going to get thicker. Rejecting any consideration of the immediate future, his thoughts returned to the three hours he had spent with Lissa . . .

Tavernor's only conscious intention was to say goodbye.

Lissa sounded surprised and slightly distant when he rang her at home, but there was only the slightest hesitation when he suggested a meeting. She called for him at the hotel, and they pointed the nose of her hovercar into the east where Mnemosyne's shadow and entourage of

prismatic moon lets was beginning its slow journey up the sky. He did not tell her where he was going - only that he was leaving The Centre - but she sensed the resignation in him and seemed, intuitively, to interpret it correctly. Her tears surprised him. He put the vehicle on autosteer, took her by the shoulders, and tried to find the right words with which to end a love that had never been. But, somehow, all he did was confirm its existence, independent of and beyond words.

Later, as they helped each other dress with clumsy fingers, Lissa wept again, but this time her tears flowed freely and without bitterness. . .

Dawn was beginning to over-paint the fainter moon-fragments when Tavernor stopped to eat and rest. He opened the camper's knapsack he had bought the previous afternoon, took out sandwiches and a thermos flask of coffee, and settled down on a moss-covered root. At the outside he had covered five miles, but it was a respectable distance for the kind of terrain he was in. The green and blue-green foliage overhead provided perfect concealment from aircraft, and no vehicle yet invented could penetrate such a barricade of trees. After eating he tried to sleep but, tired as he was, the idea seemed ridiculous. He began walking again and within an hour reached the first of the numerous dried-up rivers which traversed the

plain, presenting himself with the problem of moving west along its bed or crossing it and continuing northwards for several miles.

From previous excursions into the area, he remembered

that one of the ancient rivers still carried a stream of clear water down from the plateau. It was well known to the painting and sketching community because on the last part of its descent from the uplands the water made a two-hundred-foot drop into a spoon-shaped depression which sent it feathering skywards again in glittering plumes which changed shape with the wind. The stream was the best source of drinking water in the whole thirty-mile triangle, and Tavernor was certain he would find the wanted men somewhere along its length. Once Gervaise Farrell was acquainted with the geographical details he would be able to make the same deduction, which was why Tavernor wanted to find the fugitives with no loss of time.

There was no telling how far inland they would have retreated, so he decided to go north and intersect the stream as close to the coast as possible. Selecting a spot where there were no spearweed on which to impale himself, he leaped down into the channel, crossed it and

climbed the other side. The heat of Mnemosyne's long day was building up, even in the arboreal shade, and the air began to pulse with the wingbeats of insects.

Mnemosyne had remarkably few venomous creatures, but some of the larger insects kept blundering into Tavernor's face with a kind of amiable carelessness he found more disconcerting than a wasp-like attack would have been.

As he sweated his way across the uneven forest floor he relearned a truth discovered a thousand times in the past; that a planet did not become another Earth merely because it had been mapped, measured and colonized.

On a friendly globe like Mnemosyne man could live in an Earth-style city, develop an Earth-style society, grow Earth-style food - but let him walk a few paces from his own back door, overturn a rock, look at what crawls out and, in that instant, Earth is far away. The flicker of unreasonable, uncontrollable fear tells him that space is too big and he is light years from home, facing something that none of his ancestors has ever seen. Even on Earth the sight of a familiar creature, such as a spider, could fill some people with a panic so violent as to suggest that arthropoda and related creatures had an extra-Terrestrial origin. How would the same people feel if moving a stone was likely to reveal something even more alien?

Soldiering on a dozen raw worlds had hardened Tavernor to many of nature's practical jokes, but once he had wakened to find a white, fat, puffy hand crawling up his chest in a trail of slime. But it had been nothing more menacing than a multiform grub which had scented the saliva in his mouth and was coming to drink. The insects which were now thudding into his face as he walked sounded like bumblebees, but he did not want to look too closely at them because he knew perfectly well they were not bumblebees, and knowing exactly how they differed might make the fleeting contacts unbearable.

It was almost noon when he reached the stream and turned west along the vegetation-blurred edge of the ravine in which it ran. As the sun reached its zenith the heat became more insistent and the forest grew quiet as its denizens lapsed into stillness. Here and there white columns of vapour began to ascend from the tie the trees, their broad dark leaves giving up the moisture they had drunk during the night. Walking became a meaningless endless drudgery. He occupied his mind by trying to picture what sort of reception he would get when, and if, he met up with the fugitives. Supposing they had had enough already and were on their way to give themselves

up? Supposing they had chosen to go south, or up over the. . .'

His speculations were ended by the lazy clack-clack-clack of a cruising helicopter. Tavernor spun and saw the machine briefly, framed in the cluttered vee of the ravine, as it drifted in from the coast. He snatched the binoculars from his pack and trained them on the notched horizon. Again the machine swept across his field of view, rotors turning lazily, and the magnified image confirmed his fears. Projecting from the fuselage sides were the spidery arms of a tele-thermopile unit. The military version, Tavernor knew, could detect the heat from a human body at up to three hundred feet, depending on conditions. It could also act as a fire control system for anything from a cluster of machine guns to a mortar battery.

The helicopter was now less than a mile away - which meant he had perhaps thirty seconds before it was directly overhead. His forehead prickled icily as he scanned the ravine, looking for an overhanging bank under which he could shelter. Its sides were smooth for as far as the eye could see, and the water was only a few inches deep, ruling out any chance of submerging himself. The non-chalant sound of the helicopter swelled as it completed another and closer diagonal pass above the gully.

Tavernor's gaze fastened on the motionless columns of

white vapour rising from a tiethe tree about fifty yards away. He ran for it, wildly zigzagging among the intervening trees, bursting through one wall of vines by sheer kinetic energy.

The sound of the helicopter had become a rhythmic thunder as he reached the base of the tiethe. He threw himself behind its trunk and crouched there, peering up into the vast blue-green umbrella of suspiring leaves. The branches shook as the aircraft swept by, seemingly just above treert)p level, and Tavernor's breathing stopped.

He was counting on the cooling effect of the evaporation from the tiethe to make the tree register as a cold spot in the thermopile's peculiar vision, and thus cancel out the radiation from his own body, but what if. . . ?

The sound of the copter altered abruptly, showing that the rotors had changed pitch for manoeuvring. Tavernor scrambled round to the opposite side of the tree. Again the ground vibrated and he knew the aircraft was back-tracking. Suddenly the throb of rotors and engine was lost in the hammering fury of multiple machine guns. He tensed, waiting to be engulfed in a racing wall of earth-spouts.

Miraculously, the firing ceased before the helicopter slewed overhead, clawing for height. To his numbed brain the conclusion that the helicopter must have been firing

at something else was a difficult one to accept. He got to his feet and tried to see what lay farther up the ravine where the target area seemed to have been. His view was obscured, but there could be only one answer. Behind him, the copter had soared to the top of a figure-of-eight and was curving into its downward swoop. Shedding his pack, he sped through the trees in a series of wild bounds, risking the loss of an eye in the gamut of lashing twigs.

He crossed a low knoll and reached a clearing at exactly the same time as the helicopter. It threshed across the patch of blue sky in a second, but in that second its guns whipped the forest floor into a semblance of seething liquid, through which figures ran in aimless panic. The sound of the aircraft retreated and was masked by the crackling slide of sheared-off branches methodically, almost gently, making their way to the ground.

'This way,' Tavernor shouted. 'Head for the tie the trees.'

He kept shouting as he ran into the clearing, waving his arms, trying to shepherd the bewildered men towards safety. Some followed his directions; others stared at him with shock-dulled eyes.

'Hurry up all of you,' another voice cried. 'Do as he says.'

Tavernor turned and saw Kris Shelby. Even in the emergency, his tall roby form had retained some of its studied elegance, but his left arm hung limply and twists of blood ran from the fingers.

'Stop shouting and start running' Tavernor caught Shelby's good arm and steered him towards the nearest tieth.

'You're a fool, Mack.' Shelby grinned with pain as they began to run. 'You don't even belong to Mnemosyne.'

'I will someday.' As he spoke, Tavernor glanced up through the vaulted trees to where the helicopter's rotors flamed, briefly, in the afternoon sun as it prepared for another pass over the clearing. He could imagine no escape from the trap which had begun to close around him from the moment he was born.

8

The leatherwing squeaked apprehensively as Tavernor opened its wickerwork cage.

He projected feelings of reassurance and the compact body relaxed, the silver eyes gleaming at him in the dim light of the cave. That's the way, little friend, he thought, just relax. He carried the leatherwing across to the bale

of dried grass which served as his bed. On the floor beside the bed was a six-foot-long arrow. Its shaft was roughly an inch thick and made from one of the steely spearweeds which grew profusely in many of the ravines. Apart from its size, the oddest thing about the arrow was the warhead which was disproportionately large, bulbous and carved from close-grained wood. The warhead had been partially hollowed out, creating a niche into which Tavernor was able to fit the leatherwing's body. He did it gently, then checked that the creature's domed head was not constricted and that the glossy wings could move freely. Satisfied, he took the creature back to the cage and locked it in.

'When do you think they'll come in after us, Mack?'

Shelby was barely visible at the mouth of the cave.

'Tomorrow for sure.'

'You don't think they'll risk a night attack? I mean they have infra-red gear and we haven't.'

'Not a chance.' Tavernor was emphatic. 'We haven't seen that blue-starred copter of Farrell's all day, and they won't move in unless he's here.'

'You seem very certain.'

'I am. It's a game with Farrell, you see. How long have they been gunning for us now?'

'Two months.'

'And how many men have we lost?'

'Eight.'

'See what I mean? If Farrell had been really anxious we'd have been dead within minutes. He could have dusted the whole area, or burned the forest, or melted it down around us. He could have put tactical atomics in the helicopters, in which case we'd all have gone up together that first day.'

'That'd be bad public relations, wouldn't it, mon ami?'

'The base personnel like to relax in town.'

'Bad private relations, too.' Tavernor thought of Lissa, and the way in which Farrell had set out to overwhelm her right from the moment they met. Knowing her attitude to the art colony. Farrell would do his best to keep Lissa from learning exactly what was happening in the triangle of forest.

Aloud he said, 'It would look bad on that glittering army record - the man who had to use atomic bombs to squash a few insurrectionist fleas. Even so, I still believe it's a game with him. This is Farrell's private deer park, and the kill will have to be made in clear daylight, with him right there calling the shots.'

'He sounds a real charmer.' Shelby came back into the

cave. 'Have a drink, Mack.'

'No, thanks.' Tavernor stood his arrow in a row with five others. 'How much of that stuff did you bring with you, anyway?'

Shelby chuckled. 'Just the one flask - but I've been saving it, and I think perhaps that if I don't drink it tonight I may not drink it at all.'

'People've got out of tighter corners than this.'

'Perhaps - but if we do break through that line out there, we're not going to have much of a life up in the archipelago. It all seems a little pointless.'

Tavernor knew what Shelby meant. The cave was at the base of the cliffs along the western rim of the forest, hidden deep in a cleft cut by a waterway that had long since dried up. The army still did not know its exact location, but they had narrowed it down to a two-mile stretch of cliffs and had cordoned the area. Tavernor's plan, such as it was, was to break through the cordon and head north into the wilder and uninhabited part of the continent. He had a slim hope that if they were to get out of the army's backyard they might gradually be forgotten, but he could appreciate that to a man like Shelby, the scheme merely substituted a slow death for a quick one.

'Remember Gauguin,' he said.

'Gauguin?' Shelby sat down on the bed. 'Oh, I see

what you mean. That isn't it. I can live without painting.

I'm good at it, but that's all I am - just good. It's a relief to be able to acknowledge the truth and give up trying, as a matter of fact.'

Shelby's voice had a peculiar note which reminded Tavernor of the milky-eyed woman who had not dared to come to Mnemosyne. 'What did you mean then?' He felt a sense of relief that he had never shown artistic tendencies.

'I meant that. . . nothing any of us does has any point these days. How long before the Syccans get here, Mack?'

'They may never get here.'

'Don't play games with me. The war's been going on since before we were born and we're losing it.'

'You think so?'

'I know it - in spite of the War Bureau's coyness about these things. You know, Mack, Mnemosyne's a strange world. It has the highest proportion of artists, poets and musicians of any human colony anywhere. Nobody knows for sure why they came here - they just did it, like lemmings. And do you know what they brought with them?'

'Go on. I'm listening.' Tavernor reached for his pipe, and the pouch containing his last shreds of tobacco.

'They brought humanity's soul. Or what's left of it.

Does that sound crazy to you?'

'Not at all,' Tavernor assured him, concealing his wonderment at the workings of the artistic mind.

'You overdid the earnestness that time, man ami.'

Shelby unscrewed the top of his flask. 'I've grown to love you in the past two months, Mack - but you really are an artisan. The things I'm telling you are just as true and valid as your precious second law of thermodynamics, but on another plane of reality. Does that offend you?

Are you going to accuse me of homosexuality again?'

Tavernor snorted. 'Not after hearing you down at the back of the cave with Joan M'wabi.'

'In times of peril the life force grows stronger - it's nature's way.'

'Most nights it sounds more like an all-in wrestling match.'

Shelby yelped with delight. 'That's exactly what it is - and I've scored more submissions than any other man in the company. But I was talking of other things. Art, whether you accept the idea of not, mirrors humanity's soul. The artist is nothing without inspiration, and when inspiration does come to him he is still merely an instrument - which is why art is so valuable. A true work of art tells you how things are, provided you know how to look at it. A supremely intelligent being looking at, say, poor Vejyoda's mural would have been able to read in it the

totality of human experience, even though Jiri himself -
being nothing more than an instrument - would have
been incapable of such complete interpretation.'

'What's the point in painting if it can't be understood?'

Tavernor interest was beginning to stir. Shelby's words
were striking faint silvery echoes far back in his mind,
glancing off the half-formed idea about the ubiquity of
life which had come to him during the ghastly silence
following the transformation of Neilson's Star.

'But it can be partially understood - and the only
meaningful course a man's life can take is one which
increases his degree of understanding. A classical abstract
such as "To Emit Painless Light" contains exactly the
same information, infinitely multiplied as does von Hoer-
ner's table of arbitrary values for the lifetimes and proba-
bilities of destruction of technical civilizations.'

'And did Vejvoda's mural contain an up-to-the-minute
report on the war situation?'

'Believe it or not - yes. It would have told you that
Man has almost lost his soul, that his genius has been
blighted, that he is losing the war against the Syccan
because he has forfeited the right to win it.'

'You were right about me,' Tavernor said. 'I am an
artisan.'

'You're a human being like the rest of us, but a single
beaker of sparks can make the condition more bearable.'

Shelby took a small piece of sugar from his pocket and dropped it into his flask. The green liquid immediately began to swirl with motes of golden light, a microcosm in creation. Some of the fireflies drifted into the air from the neck of the flask, but Shelby trapped them with his mouth and inhaled.

'Olympus waited a thousand years for this and it never came,' he whispered, almost to himself. 'A potion of green ice, lotus perfumes, sunlight and dreams. . . I won't offer it you again.'

'I'll stick to this.' Tavernor lit his pipe. 'There's work to be done.'

The cordon was roughly semi-circular and about three miles in length. It consisted of six laser fences strung out end-to-end at half-mile intervals. Each fence was an array of laser beams, reflected between two projector stations, and because the beams were low-powered they were invisible even at night. But if a moving body interrupted one of the rays it automatically caused a power spike in the projector and the lasers struck with their blinding swords. The energy levels reached could be gauged from the fact that when setting up the projection stations it had not been necessary to fell any trees to get a line-of-sight connection. All that had been required was for the

technicians to feed in one power spike. Every tree that stood directly in the line of the cordon had a vertical line of neat circular holes right through its trunk.

Tavernor knew from experience that the only weak points in such a cordon were the projector stations where the two laser units stood back-to-back. The standard technique was either to put a physical barrier between the units, or to leave a tempting 'gate' and a squad deployed outside each station with instructions to direct convergent fire on anything that tried to pass through. It was in this respect that, in Tavernor's estimation, Farrell and his men had been slightly careless. They had left two gates, each guarded by four men and two machine guns - the assumption being that it would be impossible for the virtually unarmed fugitives to break through. . .

Tavernor got to his feet and tapped his pipe out on the cave wall. He had been smoking his last golden nut of tobacco, saved - like Shelby's sparks - for their last few hours in the cave. It was too dark to see anything, but he heard expectant stirrings among the twenty-three men and four women with whom he had lived for the past two months.

'Speech!' someone called ironically. He identified the gruff voice of Pete Troyanos.

Tavernor hesitated, clearing his throat. He wanted to tell them a number of important things - how much he

had come to admire their courage and adaptability, how bitterly he regretted the deaths they had suffered, how much he felt their frustration over the fact that having practically no weapons had prevented them from becoming real guerrilleros, how grateful he had been to feel warmed and fecundated by their friendship when he had come to believe himself incapable of normal human relationships. But he knew the words were beyond him.

'This is no time to stand around making speeches,' he said. 'You all know exactly what you have to do - so let's get the hell out of here.' The words were greeted with utter silence, in which he sensed disappointment, and he knew he would have to answer their demand, that he had to pay the fee for his belated membership of the human race. . .

'And listen. . .' He blinked desperately into the darkness, fighting a battle against the cold sterile tide of his past. 'You've got to take care of yourselves, because. . . because. . .'

. 'That's enough, Mack,' a man's voice said quietly.

'We're ready to go now.'

They filed out of the cave into a cool night. The moonshell tumbled motionlessly overhead, a frozen stream of broken diamonds, pierced once by the planet's shadow, around which were seeded concentric rings of amethyst,

emerald, topaz and ruby. Stars shone faintly beyond the glittering screen, giving the sky an impression of infinite depth lacking on other worlds. Tavernor br~athed deeply, forcing himself to relax, as the others began moving off into the wide belt of scrub which separated the forest proper from the cliffs.

A mile away, straight across the brushwood, was the central station of the cordon - the one at which the breakout was going to i?e made. The first step in the plan involved the group getting to roughly four hundred yards from the station and waiting for Tavernor's signal to advance. He would have preferred them to go even closer, but the risk of being picked up by a listening device would have become too great. When the last silent figures were disappearing into the scrub Tavernor and Shelby gathered up the six huge arrows and six woven cages. They followed the main group for some time, then bore slightly to the south aiming for a small bald knoll which Tavernor had previously selected.

As he walked he could feel the nervous flutterings of the caged leatherwings, and guessed they could smell death and were unhappy about it. He felt a surge of affection for the hardy little mammals whose instinctive morality was superior to the grandest ethical edifices produced by humanity. The leatherwings were no strangers to killing, but they took only their exact portion

from the ecological banqueting table, as he had discovered when he had tried to train them to kill small game. It had been their method of dispatching prey which had given him the idea that they could be incorporated into a new kind of weapon.

The first time he had seen a leatherwing in action he thought he was watching a spectacular suicide. It came winging down out of a red sunset and smashed like a bomb into a colony of pseudo-lizards basking on a rocky outcropping. The brutal impact was audible for a hundred yards. Tavernor, curiosity aroused, scrambled towards the rocks and was just in time to see the leatherwing flap skywards again with a dead reptile in its claws. Apparently a deceleration force of perhaps a hundred gravities had left the leatherwing unscathed.

Tavernor studied the leatherwings for several months before discovering he was wrong in one of his most basic assumptions about them. Their nocturnal habits and general bat-like appearance had deceived him into thinking they used some form of sonar to navigate in darkness, like an Earthly bat, but the truth was that they had a limited form of telepathy. Predators which could home in on the mind-glow of their prey were not unknown in the Federation's variegated domains, but Tavernor suspected the leatherwings of having the facility in an

unusually high degree. He conducted experiments which proved they could do more than detect cerebral radiation.

One series consisted of Tavernor fixing his thoughts on one of a group of objects, then hurling a leatherwing at them with all his force. As soon as he learned the trick of projecting the image clearly the proportion of direct hits on the chosen object rose to one hundred per cent.

The idea of a biologically-controlled guided arrow came to him shortly afterwards, amid the same paralysing sense of revelation he had last experienced on the transit ship to McArthur. He had worked on the idea only intermittently - there were long spells of revulsion against the trade his hands seemed to follow of their own accord - but the work had a positive aspect in that it showed just what the leatherwings could do. Preliminary tests showed that a leatherwing could be trained to accept the joyride in the arrowhead, to control the point of impact within the limitations set by the projectile's mass and the creature's wingspan, and to break free just before the strike. Tavernor had just begun work on a suitable stand-mounted crossbow when his house, workshop and the surrounding forest had been reduced to their constituent chemicals by the army. . .

From the top of the knoll it was possible to see a faint glimmer of light coming from the projection station.

'They're making things easy for us,' Shelby said

contemptuously.

'The light doesn't matter.' Tavernor put his load down.

'I set the bows up today, during daylight. My only worry is that I couldn't fire a couple of zeroing-in shots - it's asking a lot from our little featherless friends here.'

'I'm not worried. I've seen you fire those things.'

'Yes, but only in the daytime. Bows like these - with wooden limbs and fibre strings - change their characteristics with the temperature and humidity. And there's a limit to the dispersion the leatherwings can handle.'

'My mind is completely at ease, man ami.'

'Let's give it something to do then. You check the fistmeles while I string the bows.'

'Check the what?'

'The fistmele is the distance between the back of the arrow rest and the string. It's a handy indication of tension.' Tavernor gave Shelby a stick with a notch cut near one end. 'Put this end on the arrow rest, and the string should cross at the notch. If it doesn't reach the notch the bow's too slack, and we have to twist the string to shorten it.'

'Is all this necessary?'

'I'm an artisan, remember? Take my word for it.'

Tavernor began stringing the six massive bows, grunting furiously with the effort needed to conquer their implac-

able resistance. Two of the fistmeles proved to be too small and those bows had to be restrung when their strings had been shortened. By the time he had finished, Tavernor was bathed in sweat and his heart was pounding unpleasantly, reminding him he was only a few weeks off his fiftieth birthday. He secured the bows on their ramp-like stands, then came the even more strenuous task of drawing each one - by lying prone on the ramp, gripping the bow with both hands and forcing the string right back to the trigger with his feet. When the sixth bow was strung he lay down and breathed steadily until the pounding in his chest eased.

'I wish I could help,' Shelby said. He slapped disgustedly at his left arm which had never recovered from having the tricep torn in two by a bullet.

'Save your strength for running.'

Tavernor got to his feet, checked that the bow ramps were on the bearings he had marked out earlier, then set the arrows into position. He opened the cages one by one and put the leatherwings into their tailored niches, stroking and kissing the warm hard bodies and domed heads, whispering reassurance. The silver eyes shone at him in the darkness, saying things he might have understood had he not been trapped inside a human shell. He knelt behind the first bow and gathered his thoughts, shaping and clarifying the mental image just as he had

done when throwing the leatherwings at targets. While
. visualizing the four faceless soldiers whose lives he had to
take, he humbled himself for the brief communion with a
mind that had never known evil or guilt, trying to put
a.cross the concept of destroying life to preserve life, in
spite of his dull certainty that understanding on that level
would be impossible.

'Is everything all right, mon ami?' Shelby whispered
anxiously.

'Don't speak!'

Tavernor pulled the trigger and the big arrow soughed
upwards into the night sky, flicking its feathered tail to
clear the bow limb for a clean flight, testimonial to the
fact that its length-stiffness ratio had been well matched
to the power of the bow. Without wasting any time,
Tavernor worked his way along the line of bows, sending
the big arrows off on their five-hundred-yard journeys. It
was necessary to movt;: quickly to prevent the soldiers
raising an alarm when they found themselves under
attack. When the fifth and sixth arrows, the reserves, had
gone he stood up and stared at the faint gleam of light
from the projection station. It continued to shine steadily,

without any indication of whether it illuminated life or death.

'Give the signal,' Tavernor said. 'The issue's been decided.'

Shelby sounded a short blast on his reed whistle and they began to run. Moving through the scrub at any speed above a slow walk was dangerous, but Tavernor was haunted by the spectre of the command post making a routine radio check of the stations and discovering something wrong. He ran determinedly, just ahead of Shelby, using his extra weight to beat a way through clumps of undergrowth. Crackling sounds to the north told him he had drawn abreast of the main group.

Tavernor lengthened his stride. If the arrows had failed to do their work he was going to be the first to feel the consequences. The light of the station began to be visible ahead, and he estimated its distance at about two hundred yards.

All at once, the sky blossomed with warning flares.

Tavernor slid to a halt and Shelby blundered into him.

His first impulse was to give the prearranged signal to head back to the cave, then he noticed that the flares had been sent up to the north and south - but not from straight ahead. It looked as though the arrows had taken out the target station as planned. There was no time to waste in deducing how the men in the other stations had

been alerted.

'Keep running,' he shouted, urging Shelby forward.

'Keep going.'

'Run? Watch me fly!' Shelby came abreast of Tavernor and they flailed their way through the darkness, muscles supercharged by fear. A prolonged explosion and ascending streaks of orange fire to the south told Tavernor that two helicopters had made jet-assisted take-offs. He tried to run faster but was already beyond the limit of what his thick-set frame was designed to do. Bright motes of light arced across the sky - the helicopter crews were clearing their guns.

Tavernor reached the station just ahead of the leaders of the main group. He burst through the narrow gap between the projection units and sprinted the final fifty yards to the still-glowing light, which turned out to be a field lamp at the entrance to a ridge tent. From the nearer slope of the tent projected the notched ends of two arrows. Tavernor dropped on his knees, looked inside and saw two sprawled forms, one of which appeared to have been crawling to the door when the end came. Both had bloody messes where their heads should have been. He got to his feet and looked around. Other members of the party were filing through the gate and stumbling on past him into the forest. Shelby was standing at the

gate, pulling men through and pushing them on their way. The sound of the helicopters began to fill the air

9

By the time Tavernor neared the coast he was strangely weak and dizzy. At first he put it down to nervous shock - it had been too many years since his case-hardening on the Syccan battle line, and the events of the night had been enough to shake any man. But when his knees began to buckle in spite of his conscious efforts to control them, there came the belated suspicion that the hole in his left boot was more than just an inconvenience.

He sat down and tugged at the boot. It came off with an unpleasant sucking sound, and the first light of dawn showed that his whole foot was glistening with dark red blood. When he pulled off his sock, the second toe came with it.

Stunned, he gazed at his damaged foot reproachfully for a long moment - the gap where his toe should have been was oozing thickly. He had been leaking blood the whole way across the forest. Realization that he was wounded seemed to lift a neural block, allowing pain to burn its way up his foot and leg, and with it came alarm over the fact that the wound was anything but hygienic.

During the two months of hiding there had been scarcely

enough water for drinking, let alone washing. And, in addition to the accumulated grime, every possible variety of natural dirt had forced its way into his boot during the walk.

He picked up the gruesomely weighted sock and hurled it off into the trees, then searched his pockets for the reasonably clean piece of rag which had held his tobacco.

With the rag wadded into the gap in his toes, he put the boot on and started walking again. The others were to head north until they ran out of forest, then keep going by night till they had passed the effective limits of civilization, but Tavernor estimated he had no more than an hour left before he would have to lie down and recuperate from the loss of blood.

Already the thought of sleep filled him with yearning, but the forest was no place to rest - unless one was prepared to risk being entombed in cellulose. Memories of dark hair swirling, frozen. The loss of twelve or more men and a late-model helicopter was going to change the whole nature of the operation as far as the army was concerned. Farrell had been made to look a fool, would be out to put the record straight as quickly as possible.

Tavernor broke into a lop-sided run.

The sun was rising through pewter mists when he cleared the treeline. Ahead of him the ground sloped

downwards gently for several hundred yards to the highway which connected The Centre with a chain of small communities along the coast. Beyond the road was a broad strip of grassland which - with the suddenness typical of a moonless planet - terminated in the ocean. Mnemosyne was fabulously endowed with satellites, but their even distribution in an orbital shell cancelled out their gravitic pull. Scattered along the strip between the highway and the ocean were high-income dwellings of various sizes and architectural styles. Tavernor was reasonably certain he would be able to find a doctor somewhere along the strip, if he could cross the highway unseen. There was no traffic at such an early hour, but a sentient throbbing in the sky above the forest suggested aerial patrols - and anyone crossing the white ribbon of highway from the forest would stand out like a spider in a bathtub.

He walked south a short distance, keeping among bushes and the tallest grass, and reached the nearest storm drain. Several times during the crawl through the tunnel beneath the highway unseen creatures awoke under his hands and darted away in front or became entangled in his legs. Cerulea is almost completely free of venomous lifeforms, he kept reminding himself, but gained little comfort. The fat hand-like grub he had found crawling up his chest had been a non-poisonous, even

amiable, creature.

By the time he got to his feet on the seaward side of the highway he was coated with filth, and his foot was pulsing warmly and steadily. He moved along the line of young trees which screened the feeder road from the highway. The dreaming houses shone with morning sunlight, pastel-coloured, clean, normal - and curiously unreal to Tavernor's eyes. Or was it he that was unreal? He was the one who did not belong in this or any other society, the cold ghost of a man who might have been, devoid of nearly all the warm and positive emotions, a negation of humanity, orientated towards guilt as other men were to joy, to hatred as others to love. The moments of contact with people like Lissa, Shelby, and even little Bethia, served only to remind him of his own deficiencies, because they had been giving, while all he could do was take, with the uncomprehending fingers of a child stealing eggs from a wild bird's nest and robbing them of their nascency. . . .

The swinging movement of a shingle caught his attention from a distance of several hundred yards. He drew close, saw the doctor's name on it, and felt a pang of gratitude towards the nostalgic traditionalism which invariably led people in quiet hamlets on alien worlds to put mail boxes at their gates and green shutters at their

windows. This man - 'Norman R. Parsons, MD' - probably had a plush office suite in The Centre's Medical Arts Building, but still he nailed up his shingle at his own front door. Tavernor hoped that Dr Parsons' sentimentality would not bring too much trouble down on his head.

The single-storey house was smallish and its main entrance was well-recessed into a porch. He decided he could make as much fuss as necessary to waken the doctor without neighbours being able to see what was going on. The doorbell chimed musically - more nostalgia - as he depressed the button with one hand and unsheathed his knife with the other. A full five minutes went by without an answer before he began to accept his good luck. Dr Parsons must be dead, blind drunk or not at home. He limped quickly round to the side of the house and looked into the garage. It was empty.

Tavernor gathered his ebbing strength and - praying there were no burglar alarms - put his shoulder to the rear door of the house. The doorpost splintered and he heard the keeper of the lock go bouncing across the interior floor. Closing the door behind him, he made a quick tour of all the rooms to check that he had the place to himself. It was empty, but personal effects belonging to a man and woman were plentifully in evidence, suggesting that the owners would not be away for long.

One of the rooms was furnished as a study-cum-office.

Tavernor opened a white-painted cupboard in it and extracted surgical dressings, a tube of artiflesh and a variety of antibiotics. In a bedroom closet he found a row of suits which looked a little too narrow in the shoulders and long in the legs, but which would be infinitely more

-

. presentable than his own ragged outfit. A chest of drawers revealed shirts, underwear and socks; and he found shoes which were only fractionally too large.

Gathering up his treasures, he went into the bathroom, stripped naked and cleaned his injured foot. The toe had been amputated cleanly at the joint, but removing dirt from the flesh and ensuring there were no bone splinters in it was a nauseating task, even with his high tolerance for pain. He got through by pretending that hands other than his were doing the work. It's this toe, Or Parsons. I don't know the correct medical designation for it - but it's the little piggy that stayed at home. Not very appropriate in this case, I'm afraid. For Christ's sake, Or Parsons, stop that hysterical giggling and watch what you're doing. . .

With the wound tidied, dusted with antibiotic, sealed by artifice and encased in a waterproof dressing, he opened the shower cubicle and almost moaned aloud with pleasure when he saw that it combined a spacious sunken tub. He filled the tub with hot water, eased his way in, scrubbed himself all over, then changed the water. The second tubful was hotter than the first. He set the thermostat to keep it that way and allowed himself to relax, to float, to rest. A tiny, niggling voice told him it would be dangerous to relax too much, but the idea seemed meaningless.

Sleep is all, he thought. Food would be nice too, but that can come later. Sleep is all. Sleep is. Sleep.

He awoke, suddenly, to the ambience of diffused afternoon sunlight.

Lost, disorientated, he thrashed in the water until memory and identity flooded back into his mind. Sleep, the little death, had really claimed him, he realized g~iltily. He got out of the tub, rubbed down and dressed as quickly as possible. Obviously the owners of the house had not yet returned - but it had been a matter of chance, and in soldiering or engineering only a fool trusted his luck. A fool, or someone who subconsciously wanted to fail.

He gathered up his old clothes and removed his knife,

battered pipe and the thick roll of bank notes, the outside of which was now completely black with dirt and grease.

His arms and legs trembled with weakness induced by the loss of blood and the long immersion in hot water. His principal requirement now was food. He took the old clothes to the disposal chute and consigned them to the furnace - they might have been evidence to somebody.

In the refrigerator he found beefsteaks, fish steaks and syntheeggs, all of which would require cooking. He hesitated - feeling the delicious, shameful pleasure that comes from lowering one's standards of self-preservation - then took out two steaks and six plastic-shelled syntheeggs.

The grilling steaks smelled good. While waiting for them to brown he drank two cartons of milk. The milk, machine-made from native grass, had a strong yeasty flavour, but he swallowed it eagerly. When the steak and eggs were ready he used more precious time to put them on a platter and sit down at the table with a knife and fork. Running down the hill is good, a warm voice said, because your strides are long and easy, and entropy is a following wind, speeding you to dissolution, which is merely rest under a different name.

There was a radio on the kitchen table. Tavernor switched it on and listened to the music while he ate, creating an atmosphere of secure domesticity. He got to

his feet, peeled a hundred-stellar bill from his roll and set it on the table. With rest, clean clothes and a full belly, he suddenly felt confident about tackling the journey north to meet up with the others who were heading north to the rendezvous on the shores of distant Lake Bruce. Trusting to his luck had been a good idea, after all - had he pressed on he would have been weak, hungry and exhausted. All that remained now was to hit the road and keep going.

As he was reaching for the door handle the radio emitted a time signal and the deejay announced a newscast. Tavernor paused, wondering if he would hear anything about the army's reaction to the night's activities. 'Today's big news is that the society wedding of the year is shortly to take place right here in The Centre - between Miss Melissa Grenoble, daughter of the Planetary Administrator, and Lieutenant-Colonel Gervaise R. Farrell, now attached to Cerulea No 1, and who is of course a nephew of Supreme President Berkeley H. Gough.' The professionally enthusiastic voice paused for breath.

'The engagement was announced personally this morning by Administrator Grenoble, who said that a tachygram of congratulations had already been received from President Gough. More details later from our. . .'

Tavernor switched the radio off, shaking his head

stupidly, emphatically. Lissa and Gervaise Farrell! It was impossible. His mind went back to the last night with Lissa on board her hovercar. She had been his. Now she was to be Farrell's. She had been his. Now she was to be Farrell's. The idea rebounded inside Tavernor's head, and still he was unable to accept it. He went out, closing the door behind him, and stood for a moment staring out at the complacent blue ocean beyond the trees. Can't blame her, he rationalized. What choice did she have? On the one hand there was Farrell - young, handsome, rich, famous, a social equal, one of the most eligible bachelors in the entire Federation. On the other hand there was Tavernor - a middle-aged fugitive with veins full of ice water and a soul that had been shrivelled by hatred and self-pity.

'Can't blame her,' he said aloud, then closed his eyes and sagged back on the splintered doorframe as anguish seethed up in him. And with the pain came a new insight. His frequent bouts of indulgent self-analysis - these too were a sham, a devious way to erect another screen around the real Tavernor. For the plain truth was that he did blame Lissa. Of course he was too old for her, of course marriage was out of the question - but he had wanted her to spend the rest of her life in solitary mourning for him, like a princess imprisoned in a high

tower, unreachable by any other man. It was a ludicrous Arthurian vision - Lancelot mused a little space. He said she has a lovely face - but it was exactly what the swollen, tremulous ego of Mack Tavernor had been demanding.

He walked slowly away from the house.

Some time later he realized he was going in the wrong direction - walking south to The Centre and Lissa Grenoble - but he was unable to turn back.

10

The Administrator's residence was a large, dignified hexagon - faced with local marble - which covered the top of a rounded hill, like icing on a cake. Tavernor despised its daytime aspect for the patent reliance on Terran-Colonial-gubernatorial architecture of the past, but at night it looked very much better.

He jumped down from the wall which surrounded the hill, winced at the stab of pain from his foot, and made his way upwards through banks of night-scented shrubs. The building, floodlit and spilling radiance from many of its windows, hung in the darkness above him. It looked stagey and two-dimensional; irrelevant. Wondering if Howard Grenoble was holding one of his cherished din-

ners, Tavernor slanted across the hill towards the rear of the house. The jewel stream of Mnemosyne's night sky tumbled motionlessly overhead. He tried once again to decide what he was going to say to Lissa, assuming he was able to make contact with her without being caught. That he knew instinctively that Farrell was the wrong man for her in spite of his being young, rich, handsome and famous? That he, Tavernor, had generously reconsidered his earlier decisions and she could now join him as the wife of a man running from a probable death sentence? Or was it going to be, simply, goodbye? Whatever they were, the words had to be said.

The residential suite at the rear of the building was in darkness except for wan beams of light straying into the rooms from other areas. Tavernor skirted the swimming pool, crossed a garden and a patio. He tried all the doors and french windows, found them locked and climbed a moulded steel column on to the balcony. One of the bedrooms on this floor belonged to Lissa, but from the outside he could not say which, and in any case she was unlikely to be in it at this time if there was a late dinner. The best plan might be to hide somewhere until everyone was in bed, then go inside and find Lissa's room. He looked along the balcony. Several groups of chairs and

slowly-gyrating moonseeker plants were ranged close to the ornate railing, but looked as though they would provide doubtful concealment.

'Nobody ever goes into my room,' a tiny familiar voice said. 'Why don't you hide in there?'

'Bethia!' Tavernor concealed his shock as he turned.

'What makes you think I want to hide?'

The diminutive straight-backed figure, wearing an ankle-length dressing gown, watched him from an archway at the end of the balcony, and for a moment he felt a rage against the circumstances which forced her to grow in loneliness.

'Come through here,' Bethia said.

Tavernor noted the way in which she had dismissed his counter-question, and he smiled. To a three-year-old child, he suddenly recalled, there was nothing particularly strange about someone needing to hide occasionally.

He nodded and followed her through the archway. She clopped along just in front of him in loose slippers, checked there was nobody in the corridor and beckoned him on, with a conspiratorial wave. Her room was the first on the right. It was lit by one bedside light. Again he was struck by the fact that not one item in the room gave evidence of childish occupation.

'Where do you keep your toys, Bethia?'

'In a chest, of course.' She seemed surprised.

'Why don't you keep some on your bed? A doll or something.'

'That wouldn't be tidy.'

'It would help keep you company.'

Bethia snorted violently, then cupped a hand round her nose. 'A doll for company!' Still nursing her nose, she rocked with silent laughter, and Tavernor felt himself overwhelmed by an emotion he was unable to identify.

Love, perhaps, but heavily shaded with - he sought a word - respect. This tiny speck of humanity had, in three short years, developed intelligence, wisdom, humour, self-sufficiency. The ability to produce children like

Bethia, he suddenly felt, was Man's major claim to the right to bestride the universe, to ascendancy over the

Syccans. Except that something had gone wrong somewhere and - a thought he invariably suppressed leaped into the forefront of his mind - with every passing hour

hundreds of frail brave Bethias died at the feet of Syccan warriors as the Federation's borders contracted. Tav-

ernor's brow prickled coldly while the synaesthetic stench filled his nostrils. How many years would this particular

Bethia have before the aliens reached Mnemosyne?

Twenty? Perhaps less. No communication, no idea, no word had ever passed between human and Syccan; but the transference of COMsac's headquarters to Mnemosyne

might be noticed by the aliens - in which case the planet would become a prime target. . .

'Have you come to take Lissa away?'

'No. I would like to, but that's impossible now. I just want to talk to her.'

'Why aren't you taking her away?'

'I can't.' Tavernor hesitated. 'Besides, isn't she getting married to Colonel Farrell?'

'Yes, but. . .'

'But what?'

'He's a dark man.'

'Dark?' Tavernor detected a strange emphasis on the word, and decided to probe. 'Lissa's dark, too.'

A look which might have been disappointment flitted across Bethia's doll-face. 'He's a dark man,' she repeated quietly, 'but you and Lissa have. . . one light. It's so strange.'

'What do you mean, Bethia?'

'I'm going to sleep now,' she said determinedly, wriggling out of her gown. Tavernor helped her into the big bed and covered the straight little body. She lay in the centre, arms by her sides, a look of peaceful concentration on her face.

'Goodnight, sweetie,' Tavernor said, but there was no reply. He studied the miniature, pearl-glowing lineaments

of her face for a moment, with a growing sense of sadness, then turned off the light. The futility of his own life, of all human life, seemed to close in around him with the walls of darkness. He went to the window and parted the heavy drapes. Moon fragments glinted on the surface of the pool, shivering and merging. Beyond the trees the lights of The Centre and the more garish brilliance of the new city proclaimed Man's presence in this part of the galaxy - but for how long? Even without the menace of the Syccans, for how long would humanity's caravan have been able to wend its way through the crazy sparkling of treasures that was the universe? How many centuries? The spirit demanded that the answer should be an infinite number, for nothing else would satisfy, but the mind knew differently. Strange how a minor event like the detection of one elementary nuclear particle, in a small laboratory on Earth at the beginning of the twenty-first century, should have had the power to blight Man's hopes of collective immortality.

The tachyon, unable to exist at speeds below that of light, gathered velocity as it shed energy, accelerating until it could cross the galactic wheel in a fraction of a second. It had opened space to mankind, and at the same time had closed the doors of the future - for the continuum was silent. With the tachyonic communicator,

civilization could have spoken to civilization across distances measured in thousands of light years, the only limitation being in the particles' diminution of energy with increased speed. But instead of an ether throbbing with the voices of intelligence the questing tachyonic aerals had found nothing. The spread of time was too great. Civilizations could rise, flower and die in their profusion, but the fleeting moments of galactic time when neighbours were at their technological crest rarely coincided.

Only a handful of pulsars - artificially triggered beacons - signalling with patiently creeping light, whispered of cultures which had enjoyed their brief hour and had vanished into the unimaginable past. And the new information meant that the values used in von Hoerner's awesome table for the lifetimes and the probabilities of destruction of technical civilizations had had to be drastically revised. Earth's civilization was entering the phase of development described as Type 11 - capable of utilizing and channelling the entire radiation output of its star - in which, according to von Hoerner's original table, its life expectancy should have been 6,500 years.

But the post-tachyon revision had reduced the figure to a mere 2,(XX) years. And the wry cosmic joke which had placed the human and Syccan civilizations so close together in time and space seemed to have reduced even

that pitiful span to vanishing point. . .

The figures, the mathematics of- ultimate despair, were swirling in Tavernor's head like dead leaves in a vortex when he heard Gervaise Farrell's voice outside the window.

He looked to the right, through the parted drapes, and saw that the balcony ended only a few feet from Bethia's window. Farrell was leaning on the railing, staring south towards the new city. He was wearing mess whites, and a thin cigar glowed in his mouth.

' . . . confessing that you've shocked me, my boy.'

Howard Grenoble's voice was distinct although he was out of Tavernor's line of sight. 'I find the whole thing very difficult to accept.'

'Really?' Farrell sounded cool. 'I'm not accustomed to having my word doubted.'

'No, no, I didn't mean to imply. . . It's just. . . It's just that I had no idea COMsac placed such reliance on MACRON'S decisions.'

'MACRON is a logic machine with the totality of human knowledge at its disposal. And it doesn't make decisions. It's a reliable instrument for assessing probability values, but it never makes decisions.' There was a rising note of irritation in Farrell's voice. 'Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly clear, thank you.' Grenoble spoke precisely.

'But why here on Cerulea? What were the factors which influenced MACRON in making its. . . recommendation?'

Farrell sipped from a glowing tube of sparks. 'Not more than six men in the entire Federation know the answer to that question.'

'I see,'

'You understand the necessity?'

'Of course - such knowledge must be restricted. Forgive

me for asking. . .' Grenoble had begun to sound ill. 'The war always seemed so far away from Cerulea, and then to have the entire COMsac headquarters descend on

,

us...

'Descend on you. That makes me think of locusts.'

'Not at all. I feel honoured. All my staff feel honoured.'

It's just that MACRON seems to have. . .'

Farrell gave a sharp, sarcastic laugh. 'MACRON sticks in your gullet, doesn't it, Howard? I'll tell you what's annoying you about this whole business. It's the fact that the decision to place the planning headquarters here didn't come about through my uncle saying something like "I know the ideal planet, gentlemen. You'll enjoy a stay on Cerulea - old Howard Grenoble has an excellent

table and a first-class cellar".'

'You go too far, Gervaise.'

'I'm simply trying to introduce you to reality. We in the army are conducting a war against an unimaginably powerful and dangerous enemy. . .'

'Oh, yes,' Grenoble put in. 'I heard they shot down one of your helicopters last night.'

During the ensuing silence, Tavernor smiled his appreciation of the older man's practised use of the stiletto. He must have realized that Farrell would be vulnerable to a reminder that he had never been within ten light years of the maximum interpenetration areas.

'Your friend Tavernor was responsible for that,' Farrell riposted. 'I've no authorization to use heavy weapons, but I saw to it that five of his raiders won't bother us again, and I'll get the rest soon.'

'You'll get the rest? I understand from General Martinez that you were being assigned other duties.'

'We will get the rest - it's of little account.' Farrell's cigar glowed fiercely, bellying the casualness of his words.

Tavernor breathed deeply with relief. The five 'raiders' Farrell had mentioned must have been Shelby and the four others, including loan M'wabi, who had been annihilated while trying to slip through the gate. Remembering their deaths was painful, but at least he now knew

that none of the others had been picked up. The two months of intensive survival training he had given them was, apparently, standing them in good stead. They would all be well on their way to Lake Bruce by this time, and once past it could lose themselves in the northern archipelago. That much had been lifted from his conscience.

'Well, that's enough fresh air for one night,' Farrell said.

'I thought we were going to discuss the wedding arrangements. There isn't much time, you know. It's all been so hurried.'

'I'll leave all the details to you, Howard.' Farrell finished his drink. 'That's the kind of thing you excel at. Now our guests must be wondering where we are. . .'

The two men left the balcony. Tavernor remained standing at the window for a few minutes then pulled the drapes together. There could be several hours yet before he would have the chance to slip across to Lissa's room, and a slight uncertainty in his knees told him he had not yet made up for the heavy loss of blood. He crossed to the bed and listened to Bethia's breathing. Satisfied that she was asleep, he lay down on the floor at the side of the bed furthest from the door and forced himself to relax.

He awoke with a start to find the house absolutely

silent. His watch said it was two of Mnemosyne's lightly stretched hours past midnight. He got stiffly to his feet, went to the door and eased it open. The corridor nightlights were on, but the utter stillness of the air convinced him it was safe to come out of hiding. With a last look at Bethia's lonely figure in the bed, he closed the bedroom door and went towards the stairs. Lissa's room was on the same floor, but in the opposite wing, and to reach it he had to go round three sides of a large hexagonal stairwell. Where the carpeted corridor opened into the well he hesitated, swearing at the brilliance with which the stairwell was lit. Someone had neglected to turn off the powerful light in the ceiling and his agoraphobia, carefully nurtured during the past two months, made the exposed and brilliantly illuminated landing look decidedly unsafe.

As he paused he noticed a pair of switches on the corridor wall, several inches from the corner. The inner one would be for the corridor lights, but did the other control the light in the stairwell? Hoping that the lights going out would not attract more attention than if he simply sneaked across the landing he depressed the outer switch. The light in the stairwell flickered, but remained lit.

Tavernor stared at the switch in wonderment, trying to

visualize an electrical circuit which would cause lights to dim momentarily and then come on again at full strength.

Perhaps the outer switch operated some unit which caused a power drain when it came into action - in which case he would have been far better to have left it alone. He flicked the switch to its original position. This time the ceiling light went out for a full second before returning to full intensity.

Alarm stirred in his subconscious. This is ridiculous, he thought. A freak fault in the. . .

The answer hit him suddenly.

There was one very common electrical circuit which

would account for the phenomenon he had just witnessed.

A two-way switch would have done it - provided there had been someone at the other end of the circuit, pressing his switch fractionally later than Tavernor's. And that someone must be in the opposite corridor, only a few yards away, screened from his view by the angling of the walls!

'Who's there?' a man's voice demanded loudly.

Tavernor turned and sprinted silently along the corridor, past Bethia's room and the now-closed doors leading to the balcony, until he had rounded another of the building's obtuse angles. He pressed himself against the wall and waited. A few seconds later he heard the whisper

of approaching footsteps on the heavy carpet. He ran along the new stretch of corridor, opened a door at its end, stepped out on to the landing at the top of the building's main staircase and found himself face-to-face with an armed guard. The guard's rifle was slung over his shoulder and he was carrying two steaming cups of coffee.

'As you were, soldier,' Tavernor used his best commanding officer's voice. 'Lucky for you the colonel's asleep.'

He walked past the guard to the head of the stairs, his mind racing. Armed guards in the Administrator's Residence? The guests Farrell had mentioned must be VIPs, military or otherwise - he had picked a great night to try visiting Lissa. He reached the stairs and began walking down towards the main entrance hall which looked deserted. The guard on the landing was staring at him uncertainly. Tavernor resisted the urge to run. He was still near the top of the stairs when the corridor opened and a heavy-set sergeant burst out on to the landing. It was the same red-haired oldster Tavernor had stunned at the gates of the army base.

'Stop that man!' the sergeant bellowed.

Tavernor launched himself down the long staircase in a kind of controlled fall, touching the steps halfway down

and once near the bottom. A flying leap took him out into the centre of the hall - just as a second guard came running out of the porter's office. They collided, and Tavernor's caroming course carried him straight into a marble pillar. He stepped back, apparently unhurt, then toppled like a felled tree.

The porter's room was long and narrow. It was lit by a single, coldly luminescent strip which shed a baleful light on the meagre furniture. Tavernor sat on a hard chair with his hands cuffed behind his back and tried to master the pain which geysered through his body at every breath. My ribs, he thought hazily. I've smashed my ribs. He focused his eyes with difficulty. The red-haired sergeant was standing at the door, with a drawn pistol. Shifting his gaze, Tavernor saw Gervaise Farrell sitting on the edge of a table. Farrell's hair was rumpled and his brown, thickly-matted chest showed beneath the unbuttoned tunic of his mess uniform. His eyes glowed with white coronas of excitement.

'All right, sergeant,' he said. 'You can leave us alone now. I don't think there'll be any trouble.'

'Yes, sir.' The sergeant moved to the door.

'Oh, sergeant.'

'Sir?'

'Come back in again as soon as the box arrives.'

'Yes, sir.' The sergeant disappeared.

'I don't like you, Tavernor,' Farrell said when they were alone. 'And do you know why I don't like you?'

'Could it be,' Tavernor repressed a powerful urge to be sick, 'because you're going bald and I'm not?'

'Very good, colonel - wisecracks right to the end.'

Farrell swung his legs nonchalantly. 'The reason I dislike you - apart from the fact that you are, if I may use an archaism, a churl- is that you keep getting in my way.'

'Going to toss me down the steps again?'

'Keep it up, colonel. As I was saying, you keep getting in my way, and I can't afford to have people trying to trip me up because the path is already stony enough for a relation of the President who wants to build an army career through his own efforts.'

Tavernor tried to cluck in mock sympathy, but something bubbled in the back of his throat. He suspected it was blood. .

'The little affair of the helicopter last night has been forged into a lever against me. General Martinez is using it as an excuse to transfer me to other duties.'

'Rough,' Tavernor managed thickly.

'A thing like that would look bad on my record. But now that you've so kindly placed yourself in my custody the record's going to read differently.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, because you're going to tell me where I can pick up your friends, all at once, without any fuss.'

'Sorry - I don't know where they are.' Tavernor suddenly found it easy to forget the pain in his chest. Coming to Lissa's home under the circumstances had been a crazy, indulgent flirtation with death - but it had also been unforgivably selfish. He knew exactly where the others were planning to rendezvous. And the days in which a determined man could withhold information from inquisitors had long since passed.

'You don't know where they are?' Farrell said easily, pulling a cigar from his breast pocket. 'Then you'll have nothing to worry about - on that score anyway. 'He lit the cigar and sat confidently pluming smoke into the air. His darkly rakish good looks and unbuttoned white tunic reminded Tavernor of a character from a classical opera, and his mind - escaping into irrelevancy - began striving for the opera's title.

There was a knock at the door and it opened, giving Tavernor a glimpse of uniformed figures milling in the hall. The sergeant came into the room with a small black box in his hand. He closed the door quickly.

'Well now, sergeant.' Farrell stubbed out his cigar.

'Has the provost-marshal's detail arrived yet?'

'No sir. They're on their way though.'

'Fine - this won't take long. You know how to use a needle?'

'No, sir.' The sergeant looked uncomfortable.

'There's nothing to it. Just push it into his neck and depress the plunger. Here - give me that.' Farrell pointed at the sergeant's pistol and fluttered his fingers impatiently until it had been unholstered and placed in his hand.

'Now go ahead.'

The sergeant opened the black box and gingerly removed a hypodermic syringe. His eyes, fixed on Tavernor's, were apologetic. Tavernor's heart was thudding steadily. He was not certain exactly what was in the syringe, but he knew that within seconds of receiving it into his bloodstream he would babble everything Farrell wanted to know. He fought with the handcuffs while his nerves shrilled their unbearable message of despair over and over again: Father, Mother, pale face and black hair swirling, forgive me, forgive me, forgive. . . The silent stridence faded as he found the single door of escape, yawning, a merciful night without stars.

He sat with his head lowered and allowed the sergeant to run the needle into his neck. There was no pain, only a sensation of tingling warmth. He waited until the needle was being withdrawn, and the sergeant's hands had relaxed, then propelled himself headlong from the chair

with all the power of his bunched thighs.

Farrell, still on the edge of the table, was too surprised to get out of the way. Tavernor bore him backwards, exposing the other man's throat, and before he could be thrown aside his teeth had closed on the windpipe.

As he bit inwards, he heard Farrell's frightened sob, felt the muzzle of the pistol jam against his side. The pistol exploded once, twice. As the heavy bullets sledged their way through his chest, death blossomed before Tavernor's eyes like a black rose, unfolding petals of night.

He tumbled into it, gratefully surrendering a life he felt he had never really owned.

Melissa Grenoble had no idea how long she had been standing at the high window, her forehead pressed to its cool glass.

Dawn had been sketching ghostly grey arches across the sky when she saw them carry out the metal casket in which Mack Tavernor's body lay. And it was as the military truck was driven away with careless jouncing speed that her tears had begun to flow. Since then she had relived every moment of her time with him, multiplying them over and over, enduring bitter aeons of grief - yet the world outside had not changed. Still it was dawn.

A luminous silver mist lay across the world, somehow destroying perspective so that the buildings of The Centre were featureless cut-out silhouettes, one row strung across the middle distance, with another - lighter in colour - placed just beyond it.

The glass seemed to be draining all heat from her body, but she was unable to move away. A single word reverberated in the cryogenic chill of her mind - why, why, why? What had been the point of Mack's whole life? Why did death have to touch him so early, claiming him for its own long before the final act of futility?

Underlying the sorrow was a dull sense of astonishment. When she met Mack first she had been impressed by his physical power and brooding self-sufficiency; and, like most others, repelled by his exaggerated wariness of emotional involvement, his apparent determination to make himself disliked by everyone he met. But she had sensed another Mack Tavernor underneath - a different man who looked on every aspect of life with a limitless compassion. She had fought to realize this other Mack, and had found a new level of fulfilment in her growing success in this ultimate form of creative art. Their final night together had been all the proof she needed. . .

Now, in the timeless grey dawn, she was asked to accept the idea that the death-orientated Mack had gained

the upper hand, that he had come out of the forest like a killer wolf, to be shot down in the bestial act of slaying.

Gervaise had bared his torn throat to her; yet while looking she had remembered Mack's calm, tortured eyes, and had shaken her head, instinctively, backing away.

On the intellectual level there was another factor - her knowledge of Mack's fantastic competence. Had he come during the night as an assassin, he would have achieved his aim, quickly, silently and efficiently. But what was the alternative? The answer came whispering from deep within her body - tremulous, thrilling, sad, persuasive.

Had the news of her engagement to Gervaise reached him, and caused him to throw every instinct of self-preservation to the winds? Had Mack lost his life through love of her? If that was the case, she would not marry Gervaise, nor anyone else, ever. . .'

'Lissa?' The small voice came from close behind her.

'Lissa?'

She turned and saw Bethia's upturned grey eyes, huge with tears, and remembered that the child and Mack had seemed to share a curious affinity.

'What is it, Bethia?' She knelt, bringing the solemn, absurdly perfect face level with her own, and suddenly they were in each other's arms.

'Don't cry, Lissa. I feel you crying. I feel the pain.'

'I can't help it, darling. I can't help it. You don't

understand.' Lissa felt her self-control slipping as emotional pressures built up inside her. Bethia, strange little Bethia, was the only person in the world to whom she could confide her thoughts. 'I think Mack came to see me last night. I think I'm responsible for. . . Oh, Bethia, I can't stay here any longer.'

'But. . . Where will you go?'

'I don't know - Earth, perhaps. I must get away.'

'Does that mean you won't marry Colonel Farrell?'

'Yes. I . . .' Lissa felt Bethia's wispy body stiffen as the child pulled away from her.

'Mack was in my room last night. I talked to him.'

Bethia's face had become composed, with a strangely haughty look, like that of an infant empress.

'In your room!' Lissa's throat constricted with nameless fears. 'But why?'

'He was hiding there. He had a knife. He said he would hit me if I made a sound.'

'I don't. . .'

'It's true.' Bethia suddenly seemed taller. Her eyes were unseeing, and her voice was inexorable, relentless.

'He had a knife. He told me he had to kill Colonel Farrell'

PART TWO

The Egons

1

Pain, swiftly climaxing, swiftly fading.

Dislocation. Transition. Awakening.

The stars can be tasted. And heard. The stars can also be seen, in a way that is not immediately understood.

Space is not black. It runs, shivers and spins with a thousand colours, of which the visible spectrum covers only a minute fraction. Most prominent in this region are beautifully pulsing and transient flowers, spallation products of heavy nova-driven particles colliding with the ubiquitous hydrogen of interstellar space. The process by which this knowledge is gained is not immediately understood either.

Nearby, the generous sun swims in slow majesty, making its nourishment freely available. Closer still, a planet burns with the special, divine neural fire of an inhabited world. And the mother-mass drifts all around; vast, awesome, eternal. . .

J think, therefore I'm alive. The incredible realization is not accompanied by shock - there are no triggering glands, no bloodstream, no organic pump - but Tav-

ernor's consciousness suddenly contracts, iris-like, to the adjacent environment.

A silver-blue cloud moves closer. It is a tenuous ovoid of faintly glowing gas, yet - because of his new perceptions - appears as a human face. It also looks like a heavily-muscled young man in warrior's harness, a stooped old man, a smiling boy, an involute foetus - merging manifestations of a single entity.

Welcome to life

Don't be afraid

I am Labienus

the entity communicates

three ideas simultaneously.

I don't understand. Tavernor is aware of his thoughts bridging space. He feels the entity's warmth and there is reassurance - but to be alive? Other ovoid clouds draw near. He attunes his perceptions, and awareness shifts. Space is filled with luminous faces, identities, personalities. Uncountable millions of them.

I will help you

Adjustment is quick

Give me yourself

Labienus moves closer.

Tavernor has time to deduce that he too is one of the luminous ovoids, then another mind is merging with his own. In the first instant of contact he knows Labienus better than he has known anyone in his entire life, experiences his childhood in northern France in the time of Augustus Caesar, soldiers with the Seventh Legion in Gaul, Britain and Africa, retires with the rank of centurion to a small farm in Tuscany, raises four sons late in life, dies in the open air on a warm summer evening beneath an oak tree, just as the first star is beginning to pierce the cobalt canopy of heaven. . .

Tavernor withdraws uneasily.

Relax

Trust

Give

Labienus says.

Tavernor permits the contact to be made again, and this time there is no sense of strangeness, for Labienus and

he are brothers who have shared birth, life and death.

He understands dimly and gratefully that Labienus has absorbed his own twisted world-line, and is not repelled.

They mingle as the spallation flowers blossom and flicker around them, staining space with nameless hues of energy, and hard stars crackle, and soft stars whisper, and food-stuff spurts from the sun, and Mnemosyne burns with life, and the mother-mass spreads its ethereal fronds all around. . .

Knowledge, impersonal and wordless, floods through Tavernor.

The most basic and universal units of life are the egons, Labienus communicates. These are organized clouds of energy which live in interstellar space, feeding on the minute amounts of energy in starlight. They are born continuously - because an egon in its primary state cannot help but impress its pattern on the primeval energy fluxes, thus creating others of its own kind.

You're an egon? Tavernor's mind races ahead.

Yes.

And/.. . .

Yes.

A self-sustaining energy pattern. Tavernor makes an intuitive leap. Does that mean. . . ?

Yes - you are immortal.

Immortal! Galaxies seem to pause in their flight. But if

I was born in space. . . to this. . . why did I live as a
human being?

In the primary state an egon has no awareness of
identity, Labienus continues, but being the essence of life
it has a counter-entropic drive towards a higher degree of
organization.

It achieves this by establishing a rapport with a newly-
created being existing on a more physical plane. The host-
being can be human, animal, fish, bird - any creature
which has a certain level of inherent complexity in its
nervous system, and is capable of development. There are
so many egons inhabiting the space-time continuum that
every intelligent or semi-intelligent creature that has ever
existed has had an egon attached to it.

I still don't understand.

Being part of its own environment, perfectly matched to
the interstellar medium, the egon is not forced to develop.

It would remain for ever as a selfless monad of the
panspermic mind-mass, but the instinct towards a higher
state of being drives it to form a liaison with a being born
into inimical surroundings which force it to develop its
powers in order to exist.

Then the egon is a duplicate?

As the physical host grows and matures, his central
nervous system becomes increasingly complex through

the interaction of his body with his environment. This development is matched in every detail by the development of the egon.

But when the host dies, the egon - instead of dying too - is set free of its voluntary enslavement. Equipped with an identity, a highly complex pattern of self-sustaining energy, it is reborn to its heritage of endless life.

And, as far as the host is concerned, death is merely the doorway to this new life - because he is the egon.

Tavernor feels himself swamped by the torrent of knowledge, and again he withdraws a short distance from Labienus, breaking the direct mental contact. The universe crowds around him, flowing with myriad energy colours, replete with movement and life.

Too much, too much, he says.

Don't be dismayed. You will adapt. There is time.

! The thoughts directed to him by Labienus are not really simultaneous, Tavernor realizes, feeling his mental processes quicken to match the other's. An arctic elation stirs through him as he begins to assimilate the truth about the phenomenon called Life.

I must get this clear, he says. Mack Tavernor, my physical body, is dead - yet I live on.

Yes. One copy of a book has been burned - another copy is untouched.

And I'll never die?

You'll never die. A shadow falls across Labienus. Not from natural causes. . .

Which means, Tavernor races on, that my parents are alive.

Wait! A pause. Yes, your parents are alive.

I can speak to them?

Eventually - they are part of a sub-mass.

Tavernor's elation increases. It is a strangely cold flame and he finds this disturbing, but his mind is vaulting upwards into eternity amid a blaze of neural energy springing from the fusion of the two great streams of human thought - spiritualism and materialism. The classical religions of Earth, formulizations of Man's ancient instincts, are vindicated by networks of pure force spawned between the stars. Life is eternal, linked to the flesh in the beginning, yet independent of it. Timidity and fear suddenly invade Tavernor's being - eternity, infinity. . .

You don't travel alone, Labienus says kindly, and behind his thoughts is a shimmering of concepts even more vast than those already pounding in Tavernor's mind.

The mother-mass! Tavernor looks into the awesome luminous cloud which surrounds Mnemosyne and a need, which has always been so much a part of his life that he

was unaware of it, is suddenly gratified. In its place is
"born a sense of fulfilment and completeness, mingled
with emotions beyond human counterpart. Tell me, he
says.

You don't need to be told, my friend. All the things you
have wanted to believe are true. Labienus prepares to
withdraw. Go with Life.

You'll come with me?

Later. There are always others to receive.

Tavernor feels himself drawn towards the mother-mass,
slowly at first but with increasing speed. The intervening
space is crowded with egons. He passes through them,
and they through him. At each contact life is exchanged,
Tavernor's consciousness swells with the memories of a
thousand existences, and still he is in the outer fringes of
the mother-mass. The knowledge of his destiny burgeons
inside him, spontaneously. . .

The egons are gregarious beings, linked together with
something approaching infinite connectivity through the
interaction of their identities. They never desert the living
species of their rebirth planet until all life is extinct on
that world. At that stage, when the story of life has been
ended for yet another planet, the inconceivably vast
corporate identity - composed of every intelligent being
ever to have lived on the expended globe - casts off.

Then comes the endless pilgrimage across eternity,
towards intellectual adventures far beyond the grasp of
any single mind; perhaps to ascend through the other
continua as this one succumbs to the heat-death, fecundat-
ing new universes, breathing life into a billion times a
billion fresh planets; perhaps to unite with other world-
minds, and unite again, and again, in search of Ultimacy.
Tavernor's yearning for absorption grows, and with it
his speed. The glowing fronds of the egon-mass open
around him, enfolding, enveloping. Then comes pain.
Tavernor is halted.

Life, he cries in abject fear, am I rejected?

The answer comes instantaneously, from all sides. No,
my friend, you are not rejected -look inwards.

He turns his mind inwards. The pain is being generated
deep within his own being, and yet it comes from outside.

Not from the real outside, where the spallation flowers
.. glimmer all around, but from another outside, from the
circumscribed, wistful dream-existence he had known
before. . . before. . . a sense of reluctance and distaste,
yet the psychic tug is too great, and he is forced to
remember. . . before Gervaise Farrell pulled the trigger.

Farrell had killed him, but there was more to it -
something which had seemed important at the time.

Tavernor's resentment grows as the unknown power

increases its hold on him, anchoring him to the circumstances of the shadow play in which he had once participated. He had wanted. . . that was it . . . he had forced Farrell to kill him because. . . because he was about to be made to reveal information which would have led to the deaths of others.

Related memories return, against his resistance -

COMsac moving its headquarters to Mnemosyne, the war against the Syccans, the vision of a beautiful female face, strangely obscured. Lissa!

Tavernor makes the identification with a sense of bewilderment. Lissa. She is holding him - but how? And why? Is it possible that the dimly-remembered thing called love could have forged a bond so strong that he would be unable to break it? A cold fury spreads through him. Release me, he pleads. I must live. I demand my life.

I refuse to be linked to darkness any longer.

Patience, the nearby egons whisper. Eternity is yours.

How can I wait now that I know Life?

You must wait. The thoughts are compassionate. Until the link is broken.

But/don't.. .

Tavernor's thought is lost as the universe explodes into chaos around him. Egons storm through him in sudden flight, fear spurts like arterial blood, the colours of space

shift menacingly, the mother-mass writhes and screams with a million silent voices, and two death-black wings beat their swift cruel course through the centre of the maelstrom.

The wings furl abruptly. And vanish.

In their wake comes silence and a sense of unbearable grief. Regaining contact, Tavernor feels the sorrow pulse through him, and with it comes the incredible realization that egons have died. Egons - inheritors of eternity - have been slain by the pulsing black wings, and the pain felt by their fellows is infinitely greater than could ever be known by a human kneeling at a loved one's deathbed.

The grief engulfs Tavernor, wiping his mind clear of thought.

An indeterminate time later he returns, purged, to the realms of consciousness.

I saw two black wings, he says. Is there. . . an enemy?

There is no enemy.

I don't understand. There is a pause, and Tavernor senses he is about to learn of something worse than the existence of an implacable foe.

The only beings who can destroy egons are men - and they do it without even knowing we exist.

But the wings. . .

The wings were those of a Federation spaceship arriving at Mnemosyne, my friend. The wings of a butterfly ship.

In a way which Tavernor cannot exactly define, the visitation of death strengthens his psychic link with Lissa. Unchanging elements of his character, responding to the plight of the egons, seem to recreate for him the emotions of the shadow play. There is intense pain in the formless contact and he is reminded that humanity, too, faces its equivalent of the black wings spreading - the Syccan warrior. The principal difference is that the Syccan's psychology, his culture, the motives behind his driving desire to destroy humanity are not understood - whereas the egons know the nature of their scourge only too well.

The Bussard interstellar ramjet, named after the twentieth century physicist who conceived it, uses - in a spatial context - the principles of the jet aircraft, in that it depends on the presence of a surrounding medium. Two intense magnetic fields extend hundreds of miles into space from the ship itself, sweeping up ionized matter to be used both as a working fluid, to provide reaction mass, and as an energy source for the ship's thermonuclear reactor. The superconducting flux pumps which create the fields are designed in such a way as to deflect the

charged particles away from the living quarters and other sensitive areas of the spacecraft.

In Bussard's original design it was envisaged that extra equipment would be carried to ionize the medium ahead of the ship, but the development of laser power techniques has provided another answer. By pouring energy at gamma ray frequencies into suitable stars it is possible to make them go nova, thus flooding thousands of cubic light years of space with energized matter. The trade lanes of the Federation are littered with cosmic wreckage of ravaged stars; the very nature of the galaxy is being altered to meet the dictates of Man's commerce. But in those unnaturally active regions, ships can efficiently boost themselves to the speed zone of $.6c$ in which the tachyonic mode becomes viable - so nobody, but for a handful of philosophers and poets, ever protests at mankind's stupendous insouciance in superimposing his own design on the fabric of continuum.

The wing-like magnetic fields give the spacecraft their popular name - butterfly ships. A pretty, whimsical name, Tavernor thinks, for the greatest tragedy ever to befall the human race.

As his contact with the fringes of the egon-mass becomes firmer and more multi-faceted he finds a bleak understanding of the tragedy growing within himself, not in terms of thoughts or ideas, but as pure concepts.

Drifting through strange perspectives of beauty and new dimensions of colour, he examines these concepts. A key turns in his mind, a door opens, and harsh light from an unfamiliar angle spills over his past life, over the whole pageant of human history. . . .

From the time when intelligent life first moved on the face of the Earth an egon-mass has been building up around it, centred not so much on the planet itself as on its biosphere swarming with variegated, yet related, life forms. The egon-mass contains every mind ever to have existed on Earth. Genius, fool, scowling ape, dreaming dog, murderer, saint, savage, physicist - all are there.

Tremulously beautiful egons of infants who died in the womb mingle on equal terms with Caesars, giving as much as they receive, making their own special contribution to the egon-mass, for - to achieve completion - Earth's world-mind must assimilate every fragment of eligible life.

This vast reservoir of consciousness cannot be tapped directly by man's relatively coarse neural systems, nor .. can the tenuous and delicate energy clouds communicate with living beings. Yet there is a degree of contact on the sub-conscious level. The age-old phenomenon of inspiration is an example. Artists, writers, engineers, scientists infuse their whole beings with the desire to

solve their own problems, and sometimes - if they are lucky - the fore-brain stirs, reaches out, makes contact with the egon-mass and extracts what it needs to know. Human thought is a chronicle of such borrowing from the race's stored experience and wisdom. Many men visited by inspiration sense the existence of a greater outer power which presents them, often when they are asleep, with a complete solution to a problem. Inspired people lay stress on the given nature of the message. Musicians and poets repeat how compositions will come to them complete in every detail, instantaneously, without any effort on their part - the real work of creation consists of getting as much as possible on to paper before the vision fades. Thus it was that, sustained in the intangible womb of his racial genius, Man was able to claim the stars as his own - until the development of the butterfly ship.

The flickering magnetic wings, reaching hundreds of miles into space, cut great swathes through the egon-mass, destroying egons by the million, wiping out Man's world-mind, his genius, his heritage of immortality, everything. . .

Tavernor suddenly understands why mankind's war against the Syccans is going so badly. For the first time in their history, men are being forced to stand naked against a powerful adversary - and without their genius are unequal to the test. The ghostly outlines of an even

greater truth hover for an instant on the horizons of
Tavernor's mind, but his stream of thought carries him
headlong to the legend of Mnemosyne, the poets' planet,
the last redoubt of Man's soul. . .

The only planet in the Federation where the butterfly
ships cannot operate!

Earth's wounded egon-mass, and the counterparts from
the Federation's other worlds, have migrated to Mnemo-
syne, and there a small number of men can think and
create and snatch inspiration from the skies more or less
as they used to. Tavernor's mind flames as renewed
memories fuse with newly-gained knowledge.

MACRON! The moon-sized computer used in the conduct
of the war had caused the COMsac headquarters to be
moved to Mnemosyne. Is it, with the totality of recorded
data at its disposal, beginning to achieve a dim, bloodless
understanding? Is the pseudo-consciousness stirring in its
metal-and-ceramic brain capable of deducing the truth
underlying every manifestation of life? On an empirical
basis perhaps. It had been able to pick Tavernor out of
the war front and put him into weapons design - surely it
would note Mnemosyne's unusually high ratio of inven-
tiveness. But would it be able to correlate that ratio with
the peculiar astronomical feature which bars the planet to
butterfly ships?

Would it have the motivation or authority to issue
the one command which might rescue mankind from
extinction?

Tavernor finds anguish curling through him as he
realizes that humanity's time - Lissa's and Bethia's time-
is running out, that Man has to put away his superb but
deadly ships, and fight with other weapons until his genius
returns to him, recreated. If, the thought hammers at
him, it isn't already too late.

Abruptly, he finds himself separated from the surround-
ing egons. They have withdrawn from contact. He looks
at them through the distinctive shifting colours produced
by soft X-rays mingling with the synchrotonous radiation
of a spray of protons spiralling along a magnetic field at
close to the speed of light. The beauty is lost on him. His
thought bridges space to the nearest egon - Kystra-Gurl,
dead four thousand eight hundred years, a member of a
briefly-flowering north-African civilization whose exist-
ence had never even been suspected by archaeologists,
sword-smith, died in the early-middle age of appendicitis.

What am I to do?

Do? Dystra-Gurl projects cool sympathy. I feel your
pain, Mack Tavernor, but I cannot help. Be patient - the
link will dissolve in time.

But there is no time. I'm not concerned with myself.

Your pain stems from the link. When you are free of it

you will cease to see through the dark glass of phy_sical eyes. You will realize it would be better for all of humanity to die now - before the winged ships destroy any more of the world-mind.

I can't think of it that way, Tavernor protests.

It is the link. Remember that you are alive now only because your egon was lucky enough to escape destruction.

Each time a ship passes through us many egons - those who cannot be accommodated with the moon-shell - die the true death. People still alive on Mnemosyne are also condemned to the true death - because once the egon of a developed being is destroyed it is too late for another to attach itself. We must develop step by step with our hosts.

I know. I know it is wrong to put proto-life before true life. . . What is this link? Has it happened to others!

Kystra-Gurl's thoughts tinge with wry humour. It has occurred to others before you, but the phenomenon grows increasingly rare, since science vanquished romanticism.

Hauntings! I couldn't. . . Tavernor breaks off. Why do you withdraw? He sees the space between himself and the surrounding shell of egons increase until he is at the centre of a luminous sentient sphere.

Something is happening. Kystra-Gurl's thoughts are faint. Undercurrents of awe surge through his mind. I think you are being summoned, Mack Tavernor. The

mother-mass is calling you.

No! Tavernor reacts in sudden fear as the hollow sphere around him becomes egg-shaped, then conical, then opens into a tunnel which curves down through the egon-mass, down through Mnemosyne's moon-shell, deep into the heart of the world-mind. He struggles to retreat, but an irresistible force hurls him down the glowing tunnel, faster and faster, while a thousand million identities stream past him; body-images, faces, mind-images, of men, women and children, birds, porpoises, animals of every description, mingling, running together, gathering speed, merging into one corporate personality uniquely that of Earth, a citizen of the inconceivable super-community which inhabits all of eternity.

I'm not ready, Tavernor sobs as he feels his descent slacken.

He stops.

Blinding radiance flows around him, suppressing his awareness of everything but the perfect sphere poised at the centre of the world-mind. As his senses adjust he perceives that the sun-blazing entity is not a single egon, but many - perhaps thousands - absolutely congruent, forming one awesome gestalt mind. Identity-images coalesce and intermingle continuously. As the sheer psychic pressure overwhelms his power of thought he recognizes some of the entity's component beings - da Vinci,

Christ, Aristotle. . .

Tavernor's overloaded consciousness contracts.

, The thoughts of the super-ego are prismatic crystals,
diamond-sharp.

This man is linked to the prime instrument?

He is linked.

Will the link sustain precise two-way communication?

No. It is as we predicted.

He is prepared to return?

He is prepared.

The physical requirements are satisfied?

They are.

He is compatible with the Type Two gene structure?

He is compatible.

Proceed then. William Ludlam shall communicate for

us,

Tavernor feels the crushing bonds of intellect relax
slightly. A single ego advances on him, makes contact
and he absorbs its identity - William Ludlam, dead a
little over four hundred years, born London in 1888 into
bitter poverty, sold to a chimney sweep at the age of six,
died three years later of suffocation in the twisting flue of
a banker's home in Kensington. Pity rises in Tavernor,
but is quickly checked. He is touching an intellect of
serene, limitless power which - born into other circum-

stances - would have dominated and transformed twentieth-century history; and, as an egon, is attaining levels of fulfilment unguessed at by ordinary minds.

Mack Tavernor, comes Ludlam's thought, you are aware of why you have not been absorbed into the mother-mass?

Yes. I. . .

Do not be alarmed. We share your continuing concern for the fate of humanity.

Surprised at the apparent contradiction of all that he had learned from other egons, Tavernor tries to explore further into Ludlam's mind, but encounters a shining, impassable barrier.

I must tell you, Ludlam continues, that- certain circumstances prevailing - it is possible for a developed egon to be returned to the physical plane.

But how?

If we offer to return you to physical existence on Mnemosyne - so that you may try to correct the fatal error embodied in Man's use of the interstellar ramjet - will you agree to go?

You know I will. The thought of surrendering his existence as an egon is repugnant to Tavernor, but he sees a woman's face, strangely obscured, and again he feels her pain. I must go.

Regardless of what it may involve? I mentioned that

certain conditions apply to such a transfer.

I'll go under any conditions.

Good. Unexpectedly, Ludlam's thoughts suffuse with sympathy. The physical conditions under which a transfer can take place are these: a developed egon can revisit the physical plane when the genetic structure of the second host closely matches that of the former. In other words, the requirements can be met only when the secondary host is a direct descendant of the first.

Disappointment floods through Tavernor. Then it's impossible. I have no . . . The thought ends abruptly as premonition numbs his mind. Do you mean that Lissa . . .

A son, Ludlam confirms. The embryo is now two months advanced.

I didn't know. I had no idea.

She is the only one who knows. The extreme social pressures of her position, her concern for her father's career and mental well-being, have prompted her to conceal the pregnancy.

Farrell! Realization hits Tavernor like a physical blow.

That's why she's marrying Farrell.

Correct. Now - has your decision been affected?

I . . . Tavernor finds coherent thought almost impossible. I'd be denying life to my own son.

Proto-life only. His egon will be recalled. We guarantee him a place close to the centre of the mother-mass. Tavernor hesitates on a fulcrum point of eternity, and again he sees the woman's face, strangely veiled. I accept. The vast intellect of the egon-mass gathers him up, and his identity is focused on the dreaming bud-brain of the foetus in Melissa Grenoble's womb.

PART THREE

The Syccans

1

Gervaise Farrell was not sure what had awakened him. He lay on his side, staring dreamily towards the high windows beyond which the ocean, blue-black in the coolness of morning, was striated with white wavecrests. Between him and the light, footprints on the bedroom's pale green carpet showed as faint silvery streaks. The room was silent - what then had disturbed him? He felt relaxed, so there had been no nightmares of the pistol jarring his wrist, of the dead body pressing down on him, bleeding, staining.

Farrell's thoughts flicked away from the hideous moment in the porter's room and focused on the bright scenes of his wedding, five days earlier. What a pity Melissa had been so impatient - a trip to Earth and the full ceremony in the capital buildings in Westberlin would have been something to remember all his life. Still, the fact that he had been married on station and had not even taken honeymoon leave had created favourable impressions in the right places. And Melissa's impatience had been a compliment in itself, even if her subsequent performance had been slightly disappointing. Obviously she was going to require gentle, careful tutoring before that magnificent body would yield of its best. The thought of the warm jellyweight of her breasts descending stealthily into his hands and pressing outwards through the fingers triggered a hungry stirring in his body. He rolled over on to his back, and discovered what had disturbed him. Melissa was gone.

He stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. This was the third time in their five days he had awakened to find himself alone in the bed, and it was beginning to seem strange. He got up silently, strode to the door of Melissa's dressing

room and pulled it open. The room was empty. He crossed it, snatched open the door of the bathroom beyond. Melissa was slumped across the washbasin, retching silently, transparent ribbons of tears on her cheeks.

'Darling!' He ran to her. 'What is it?'

'Nothing.' She straightened instantly and smiled at him.

To Farrell her reaction seemed completely unnatural.

Something monstrous heaved in a lower level of his mind.

'You're ill- what's wrong with you?'

'It's nothing.' Melissa continued to smile desperately.

'Nerves, perhaps I'm all right now.'

'And it happens every morning,' he accused.

'Don't be silly.' Melissa tried to brush past his naked body. He caught her shoulder with one hand, and with the other dragged the black film of nightgown down to her waist. The veins of her breasts glowed blue in the morning brilliance, and the puckered nipples were tinged brown.

Beneath his feet, the bathroom floor rocked crazily, and his hands began to swing vicious open-handed slaps, while all his consciousness was drowned in the harsh regular sound of his lungs pumping like the bellows of an archaic engine.

When sanity returned, he led Melissa back to the bedroom, lowered her on to the bed and, with a frozen tenderness, drew the sheets up to cover the angry hand-

prints on her torso. He took a cigar from the case on the bedside table and lit it with trembling fingers. Melissa sobbed steadily, and with a curious lack of effort which suggested to him she was relieved at what had happened.

'Who's the father?' He tried to make his voice smooth;

'It's all in the past. I want to forget his name.'

'I see.' Farrell studied the ash on his cigar. 'Lose it.'

'Never!' Melissa gave a shaky laugh, and in that

moment he was afraid of her.

'You've no choice.'

'Haven't I?'

Farrell thought of the reactions of his family, his exalted merciless family, and of the obstacles which had already been placed in his way as he traversed the long lonely path which only he knew was going to lead him to the Supreme Presidency.

'All right,' he said finally. 'Keep the bastard. But I'll tell you something - you'd be doing it a favour if you got rid of it now.'

Halbert Farrell was born in the Cerulea base hospital in the early hours of a calm September morning. The birth was easy and uncomplicated, and two days later Melissa was able to move from the hospital to the white villa her husband had built on the cliffs south of The Centre.

Gervaise Farrell greeted the arrival of the child with the intense enthusiasm for which he was known throughout the services. On the rare occasions when it was necessary, he justified the baby's early arrival to his fellow officers by reminding them he had been living under the same roof as Melissa for over two months before the marriage. He had posed proudly for the cameras of the army's public relations division, holding the child high above his head, or over the balcony railings of his home. Not once did he let Halbert slip, or even come close to it, but Melissa watched him constantly, with troubled eyes. And by the time the boy was a year old she had the haunted, abstracted look of a woman in full retreat from life.

2

Perhaps the presence of his teacher would save him. Hal Farrell was not sure, but he hoped so with all the fervency of which a six-year-old boy is capable. He wriggled into his pyjamas, went into the bathroom and began brushing his teeth, being very careful with the loose one at the front. Sometimes, if he brushed too vigorously, a bristle would get in between the gum and

the base of the tooth. That always hurt, and then he got into trouble because any kind of pain made him vomit. Even the thought of pain made Hal feel a little dizzy. He braced the tooth from the rear with a fingertip, and gave it a feather-flick with the brush. Satisfied he had done all that could reasonably be expected for a tooth due to fall out anyway, he left the bathroom.

On the way down to the lounge he had to pass the open door of his own bedroom. He hesitated just before reaching it, his throat going dry as the dark oblong loomed. The new rhyme, bought in school that day from Billy Seuphor for a quarter, sprang to his mind. In spite of the guarantees Billy had issued while negotiating a price, the words seemed to have lost their magic. But they were all he had, and he breathed them reverently.

'One, two, three,
You can't touch me,
In the name of Jay Cee,
You can't touch ME!'

He sprang past the bedroom door on the last word and sped downstairs, his slippered feet barely touching the treads. At the door of the lounge he paused to steady his breathing, and heard Miss Palgrave's clear melodic voice.

'I know Hal is highly strung, Colonel Farrell,' she was saying, 'but that's the whole point. I'm certain that being in the junior drama group would help him relax. After all, acting has been found to be an excellent therapy for. . .'

'Therapy!' His father laughed indignantly. 'My son isn't a disturbed child.'

'I'm not implying that he is, Colonel. It's just that he has such an aptitude for the language, and it would be a good outlet for him. You know that his grades in verbal comprehension and reading are far beyond. . .'

'Hal can talk and read as much as he wants at home.'

'But it would be nice for Hal to get out a little more,'

Hal's mother said, and his heart leapt with excitement. perhaps he would be allowed to go to the social centre after all.

'We appreciate your interest, Miss Palgrave,' his father continued unheedingly, 'but we really do feel that we understand our son's special problems better than - with all due respect - someone who sees him only for an hour a day.'

Sensing the finality in his father's voice, Hal realized he would have to go in immediately if he wanted to say goodnight while Miss Palgrave was still present. He opened the door. The three adults were seated around the circular coffee table. Miss Palgrave turned her burnished

brown head towards Hal, smiling, looking strangely different when not in the surroundings of the classroom.

'I . . . I'm going to bed now,' Hal said, remaining at the threshold.

'This is early for you.' His father looked up from stirring his coffee, and his mother froze in the act of reaching for a wedge of cake, a look of concern on her pale plump face. 'Feeling tired?'

'Yes. Well. . . goodnight.'

'Just a minute, big fellow.' His father laughed, eyes blazing white in the darkness of his face. 'Where's our goodnight kiss?'

Hal knew his plan had failed. He went to his mother first. She held him briefly against the massive slopes of her bosom, and he could feel the steady movement of her jaws, the munching which never seemed to cease, night or day. Her lips were sticky and sweet when she kissed him. He turned to his father, who hugged him with ostentatious friendly roughness and rubbed his bristly chin against Hal's cheek, while he whispered the dread words.

'They're up there waiting for you - I saw them.'

Hal glanced at his mother, silently, pleading with her to have heard, but she was selecting another piec~ of cake with frowning concentration. Long ago, he remem-

bered, she seemed to believe him when he told what his father said and there had been terrifying rows, but now her mind was always somewhere else and he had ceased to try.

'Goodnight, Hal,' Miss Pal grave beamed, and he wished she would take him away with her. 'See you bright and early on Monday morning.'

'Goodnight.'

Hal left the room slowly and went up the stairs to his room. It was in darkness except for the faint reflected light from the landing. He chanted his new rhyme once, ran to the bed and scrambled under the sheets. The room looked quite cosy in the dim orange glow, but he strained his ears and in a few seconds heard a well-recognized sound from below - that of his father opening the lounge door and crossing the hall to the light switches. The landing light clicked out and the room filled up with darkness. Hal made no sound, nor did he try to turn a bedroom light - he was only too familiar with the punishment given to boys who were afraid of the dark.

He pulled the sheets over his head, and presently heard the faint hissing, bubbling sound which told him they were standing around his bed - the headless men and women who came out of the walls.

They were real, Hal knew. Standing all around him, their robes drenched with blood, gurgling through severed

pipes in their necks. The first time they had ever come out of the walls he had thought it was a nightmare, and had told his father, seeking reassurance. His father's face had become grim, accusing. Boys who were born in sin, he had said, are surrounded by the headless people every night, as a punishment for evil. Ever since then, Hal had been able to hear them, even when he was wide awake, and he knew he must be very evil indeed.

One afternoon when the war news was bad - the first Syccan robomb ever to slip through the Federation's flux screens had exploded a planet - his father had drunk a lot, and had kissed Hal and told him, through harsh sobs, that the headless men and women were only a bad dream.

But by then Hal knew differently. . .

Curled up in a lonely ball beneath the sheets, he felt the grisly figures crowd round his bed once again - and once again he survived by summoning his protector.

Mack had a peculiarly equivocal position in Hal's scheme of existence. He was as real as the headless people, yet unreal because usually he could be summoned or banished at will; he was a separate person, yet at times he and Hal were the same person. Mack was black-haired, solemn, immensely powerful, with arms almost as

thick as Hal's body, and he was afraid of nothing in the whole wide universe, not even the Syccans, not even the nightly visitors.

The headless people might come into the room, but they would never try to do anything more than that because Hal/Mack carried a strange fat-barrelled rifle which never missed its target, even when he was running, firing one-handed, trailing Hal to safety with the other. Coming as close to contentment as had ever been possible for him, Hal drifted off into a restless sleep.

He was awakened by the touch of cold fingers encircling his chest, lifting him upwards from the warmth of his bed.

'I've changed my mind,' Hal shouted, struggling. 'I don't want any.'

'Any what?'

'Ice. . .' Hal stopped speaking as he recognized his mother's voice. Feeling vaguely that he had just escaped a hideous danger, he allowed her to get him into his special underpants and the rest of his clothes, while he yawned, blinked, and tried to emerge chrysalis-like into yet another day. 'I'll do my shoes - you make them too loose.'

'All right, son, but you must hurry.'

Hearing the strain in his mother's voice, he looked closely at her. The plump face was paler than ever and her eyes were red. Suddenly alert, he looked at the clock and saw it was barely past six.

'Lissa?'

'Yes, son?'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. I . . . Your Aunt Bethia's coming here to stay for a while. Isn't that nice?'

'I guess so,' Hal said uncertainly. Bethia was four years his senior, and he resented her having a grown-up title like aunt. He met her about once a year on average and was not particularly anxious to see her again. His suspicion that something was wrong persisted. 'Is Gramps Grenoble coming as well?'

'No.' The word was almost a sob, and suddenly he knew what was wrong.

'Is he dead?'

'Yes.'

Hal thought of the distant, incomprehensible figure of his grandfather. 'Who killed him?'

'Hal!' His mother shook his arm. 'People can die without anybody killing them.'

'Can they?' Hal considered the idea briefly, then dismissed it as one of the obvious untruths upon which the

whole structure of adult society seemed to be based. Life, he knew, was endless unless some force brought it to a close. Some dark force. He allowed himself to be led downstairs and to be given hot milk and a dish of proties. There was no sign of his father. A few minutes later an army limousine driven by a sleepy-eyed soldier arrived at the house. Hal got into the back with his mother and they were driven away without having to give any instructions, a fact which filled Hal with a sense of machinery in motion, the cumbersome and senseless machinery of the grown-up world. He nestled against his mother and watched the moon-fragments fading from the dawn sky as the vehicle skimmed northwards towards The Centre, between sea and land.

Suddenly Mack was with him, or he was Mack - Hal was not sure which - and he was surprised, because there was no danger. Then he recalled that Mack had been appearing more often lately, and each time there had

been a feeling of urgency, of vast works left undone. It was from Mack that he had learned to call his mother Lissa - that was how he thought of her when he was Hall Mack - but he used the name infrequently because it seemed to startle and upset her.

This time Mack's presence was stronger than ever before, and Hal did what Dr Schroter had suggested during his session at the clinic. He tried to get closer to Mack, to sink inside his mind completely until he would know Mack's thoughts as though they were his own. The first thing he discovered was that Mack saw Hat's mother in a different way. She was much thinner than in real life, and her eyes were alive, and she could laugh. There was also a suggestion of love more voluptuous than Hal could fathom.

Fascinated, he submerged himself even further. He began to feel Mack's controlled strength flowing in his own veins. Mental horizons wavered and retreated, taking in the panoply of mysteries and wonders that made up the universe. Hal/Mack breathed unsteadily with excitement, reaching further and further. He saw spaceships flying on black wings, men locked in combat, then there came memories of pain, and Hal retreated, cringing. . .

The familiar sensation of hot urine bathing his loins returned him to reality. He fought against the flood for a moment, then surrendered to it, shuddering as the tension drained out of his body.

'Oh, Hal!' His mother's voice was anxious. 'Are you upsetting yourself again?'

'Leave me alone - I'm all right.' He knew she would

discover the lie when she examined his absorbent under-clothing, but anything was better than another hopeless discussion. His mother's approach to every problem was to offer it a piece of candy. Hal grinned as he felt her reach into the pocket of her coat.

'Here, son. Would you like a chocolate bar? You didn't have time for a proper breakfast.'

'Thanks.' He took the gift mechanically.

'Your grandfather was old and sick, Hal. I don't want you to upset yourself at . . .'

'I'm not upset.' Hal was vehement. 'I couldn't care less. Huh!'

'Hal! Don't speak like that!'

'But it's true. If he was so old and sick, he's far better. . .'

'That'll do!'

Hal shrugged as the chocolate bar was snatched from his unresisting fingers, and a moment later he heard a furtive crackling as his mother undid its wrappings. He pressed himself down into the limousine's thick upholstery and closed his eyes.

The driver took them unhesitatingly to the rear of the big hexagonal house and parked at the entrance to the private suite. Many lights were on and the house was filled with activity in spite of the earliness of the hour. Hal got out

and stood trembling in the cool searching breeze while his mother spoke to the driver in a low voice, making obscure arrangements. He disliked the Administrator's Residence intensely, and normally used every trick he knew to avoid being taken to it.

'Mrs Farrell.' One of the men who worked for his grandfather appeared in the doorway. 'First of all may I offer the condolences of myself and the rest of the staff?'

'Thank you. My husband said it was. . .'

'Sudden. Very. In his sleep, and there was no pain.

I've sent a tachygram to President Gough and we're expecting. . .'

Hal tuned the conversation out. He followed the grown-ups into the house, permitted himself to be installed in a large armchair and inspected with varying degrees of curiosity and kindness by more of the nameless men, while his mother went away with others. Nobody asked him for his coat, and he deduced that his visit to the big house was going to be a short one. His mother came back to him and knelt at the chair, looking at him with tired eyes.

'Your father's got someone to stay with you and Bethia at home, so he's going to take you back to the house now.'

Hal nodded and got down from the chair. He headed

for the door by which he had come in but his mother steered him in the opposite direction, towards the main entrance. As far as Hal could remember, he had never been in the main entrance hall, and was surprised to discover how familiar it looked to him. Familiar, yet dreadful. Premonition stirred in his abdomen as he looked around the marble colonnade.

A door at the rear of the hall opened and his Aunt Bethia came through, carrying a small case. To Hal she looked too tall and self-composed for a ten-year-old. Her hair was drawn back severely and it looked as smooth as ice. She came towards him and her eyes shone with a devouring luminosity. He decided he did not want her to stay with him.

'Hello, Bethia.' Hal listened to the words issuing from his own mouth with amazement - it had been Mack speaking. He backed away from Bethia, evading his mother's grasp. A door opened beside him and his father appeared, a tall figure almost filling the frame. Nothing was visible in the small dark room beyond, except for a table with cigarette burns around the edges. Hal felt his bladder open again. He whimpered and darted through the tall main doorway, out into the thick grey air, and saw the yellow petal-shape of his father's car sitting at the bottom of the steps. He flew to it in a dizzy swoop, got in, slammed the door and huddled in the rear seat.

Fragmented images wheeled through his mind as he listened to his father making taut apologies to the group of nameless men. A minute later his father opened the door, let Bethia in and then got into the front seat.

'That was just great,' his father breathed as he spun up the engine. His eyes blazed whitely in the rearview mirror. 'What a pantomime! What came over you, you little worm?'

Hal remained silent while his expended bladder underwent painful contractions. He glanced sideways at Bethia, expecting her to complete his humiliation, but her face was compassionate.

'Won't talk, eh?' His father's lips barely moved as he spoke. 'We'll see how you feel after a day in bed.'

Hal nodded in defiant mock-eagerness, but his heart quailed as he thought of a successive day and night in the darkened room, ringed by patiently bubbling figures in drenched robes. He covered his face. One tortured sob had ripped upwards in his throat when he felt Bethia's hand slip between the buttons of his coat. He froze into stillness as the delicate fingers worked past his shirt to reach the skin of his stomach and crept downwards, sliding without hesitation under the sopping plastic pants. There was a moment of pressure and the fingers withdrew, leaving behind them a glow of strength and warm

security. Hal turned in the seat and stared wordlessly at the perfect, dreaming profile.

By the time the car reached his home he was asleep.

3

While waiting for breakfast, Hal pulled the current news-sheet from the fax machine. The sheet was so damp that it clung round his fingers. He had pressed the 'repair call' button on the machine before remembering that its radio bleeper, which would have summoned a maintenance man, was inoperative, and that it had become just about impossible to get service anyway. Carrying the sheet carefully, he went back into the kitchen, spread it on the table and settled down to read.

War intelligence and related topics filled almost the entire page. It seemed to Hal that the news had been getting steadily worse during the whole eighteen years of his life, but lately there had been a new pessimism abroad. When he went into The Centre to his Bible class he could feel the despair flowing through the streets like a dark wind.

There was no concealing the fact that the sixty-five-year conflict was drawing to a close, and that mankind was marked down for extinction. The Federation's propa-

ganda machine still functioned, in a negative fashion, so that nobody knew how many colonies were left out of the original hundred, but the exact number was unimportant. Ordinary people could read their fate in portents which had been ancient in the days of Homer - food was less varied and more expensive, machine parts were scarce or unobtainable, extremists of every kind acquired large followings overnight and flourished. As life expectancy decreased, the birth rate soared.

Hal disliked reading war news. It caused his feeling of blind urgency, of vast works left undone, to reach unbearable proportions; yet he continually scanned the sheets and watched telecasts. Names of strange planets would send sprays of brilliant memory shards swirling in his mind. Sometimes the shards would coalesce into complete pictures of alien landscapes - always his haunting sense of exigency would grow greater and greater until he felt his skull would explode with the pressure. Yet the nature of what was demanded of him remained obscure. He was driven to try joining the army, but was rejected for multiple reasons including poor eyesight and being hopelessly underweight for his six-foot-two frame. For a time the Bible classes had looked like providing a reliable signpost, especially when he had discovered

that beneath the exterior certitude of his tutors there lurked doubt and fear. Hal knew his soul was immortal, but could advance no theology to support his faith, and eventually his calm indifference to death - as an abstract concept or hard fact, in particular or in general - turned everyone connected with the classes away from him.

('You're an emotional cripple,' one rosy-cheeked and usually phlegmatic minister had assured him, eyes icing over with disgust. 'The reason you aren't afraid to die is that you've never been alive.')

Collecting his wandering thoughts, Hal concentrated on the fresh sheet. The lead story carried the news that another city had been obliterated - the third inside the year. With the contraction of the Federation's frontiers it had been practicable to intensify the neutron flux screens which made it impossible for any nuclear device to pass without a spontaneous detonation. But the Syccans apparently were learning to evade the defences - one theory was that their latest robombs were, in effect, space-going ore-refining factories which produced their first batches of fissionable material just as they arrived on target.

The second story was that General Malan had been summarily dismissed from his job as head of Project Talkback, which employed half-a-million men and had an annual budget running into billions. Malan was the latest

in a long succession of men who had tackled one of the most dismally unproductive missions of the war - that of exchanging even a single thought with the Syccans. The aliens' tachyonic transmissions were monitored as thoroughly as possible, and their language had long ago been analysed and deciphered. Along the Federation's frontier were huge transmitters which beamed messages in the Syccan language deep into alien territory, but there had never been a reply of any kind. At this late and desperate stage of the war it was felt that achieving any vestige of communication would be a significant breakthrough - but the enemy remained utterly enigmatic.

Interrogation of prisoners was impossible, because, obeying the same ferocious ethic which prompted them to destroy captured humans to the last infant, the Syccans had never allowed themselves to be taken alive. A large part of Talkback's budget went into developing means of capturing Syccans alive, but no technique yet tried had been successful. A few aliens with no signs of physical damage had been taken, and were found to be just as dead as all the others - apparently their control of their superbly developed nervous systems was such that they could simply will themselves to stop living.

Hal was turning the news-sheet over when the uncomfortable emptiness in his stomach reminded him

that breakfast was unusually late. He went to the refrigerator and looked in, but there was nothing available which did not require cooking. Wishing that the age of servants had never passed, or that Bethia was home from university on vacation, he wandered around the kitchen for several minutes. The idea of preparing something for himself occurred once or twice, but his profound distaste for any kind of work led him to dismiss it immediately.

Finally he went to the foot of the stairs and called his mother. There was no reply. He frowned at his watch - it was mid-morning - and sprinted up the stairs, his long loosely-jointed legs taking the steps four at a time.

Opening the door of her darkened room, he halted on the threshold and sniffed the air suspiciously, an incredible idea dawning in his mind. When his eyes had adjusted to the gloom he made out his mother's arms, pale still flesh, against the deeper colours of the bedspread. Hal approached the bed and saw the plastic sedative tube on the floor. He picked it up and knew by its weight that it was empty.

'Mother?' He turned on a light and knelt by the bed.

'Lissa?'

'Hal.' Her voice seemed to come from far away. 'Let me sleep, Hal.'

'I can't let you die.'

Her eyes turned to him, but they were inert, shuttered

by drugs. 'Die? This is something you can do for. . . The first time in your. . .' She gave up the struggle, and her eyes closed.

Hal got to his feet. 'I'm going to call father at the base.'

'Your father is . . .' The ghost of an emotion flitted across the once-beautiful face which had drowned in fat.

'Your father isn't. . .'

'Tell me, Lissa.'

Hal waited, pressing his knuckles against his trembling lips, but she had slipped away from him. He touched her forehead. It was dewy cold. He picked up the telephone, then set it down and left the room. In his own bedroom he lifted another extension and punched out the number of his father's office at the base, but rang off before he got a reply. To let Lissa die? Of her own free will? No more of the endless struggle between her and his father; no more of the mutual destruction, like huge reptiles locked together and mortally torn by each other's jaws, staring at each other with curious but uncomprehending eyes; no more afternoons of self-defiling gluttony behind shaded windows, of bitter nights with his father whispering that she should be pleased he had never turned to other women. . .

Hal sat down at his bureau, opened a folder and started

arranging and shuffling small cards covered with his fine backhand writing. They were notes for the book he had begun to write earlier in the year, after dropping out of college. The Miracle of Inspiration, as it was tentatively titled, was playing a dual role in his life. Writing it seemed the best approximation yet of the achingly elusive mission with which he had been entrusted - and selling it would be the first step towards the financial independence without which he would not be able to escape his father.

In the house's utter silence minute air currents seemed to hiss in his ears like waves storming a beach, and the words on the cards were alien symbols, devoid of meaning. Taking a deep, quavering breath, he forced himself to concentrate, shutting out the image of her dark hair swirling. The cards slid and clicked in his fingers.

'William Blake, 1757-1827, English poet and artist.

Among Blake's final utterances, as he lay dying, was that poetry w~ a gift from elsewhere - even in his last hours he kept reaching for pencil and paper - when his wife asked him to rest he cried, "But it is not mine; it is not mine".'

'John Keats, 1795-1827, English lyric poet - said of his description of Apollo in his third book of Hyperion, that it arrived by chance or magic - "as if it were something given to me" - admitted that he did not recognize the

beauty of the expressions until after they were on paper - struck with astonishment, for they seemed to be the work of another person.'

'Viktor Elkan, 2142-2238, Martian mathematician and writer - said of his famous tachyonic mode transformations, "The math isn't mine. It doesn't belong to any other man either, but I can take no credit. The figures appeared behind my eyes and I threw them on to paper in a frenzy. When I had finished I was weak and covered with sweat, not from the effort of creation, but from my fear that the symbols would be taken away from me again before I could copy them down."

'For further enquiry: Robert Louis Stevenson and the "Brownies" (little people) he claimed did all his creative work for him - Mozart ("Nor do I have in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them as it were, all at once" - Kekule and the benzene molecule - Oelgado's instantaneous conception of light sculpture.'

An hour had passed when Hal laid the cards aside and put a sheet of paper into his typewriter. The great truth he planned to extract from his researches seemed closer to him than ever before. He could sense its nearness, its imminence. A bright luminary rising. His fingers hovered over the machine keys as a vast pre-orgasmic tension built up within him, his breathing became shallow and

rapid, his heart lapsed into a lumping unsteady rhythm.

He watched in fascination as his fingers dipped towards the keys.

'Mellissa!' His father's voice, from the landing, was like a grenade exploding.

Hal had not even heard him enter the house. He jumped to his feet, numb with regret as the inner light faded and fled. The chair fell behind him, and a second later the bedroom door opened. Gervaise Farrell came in, his brown face almost black in places from the shadow-beard which the most careful shaving could not erase. His gaze fastening on Hal for a moment, then moved away.

'Where's your mother?'

'In bed,' Hal said stonily. He tried to add something, but the right words were difficult to find, and before he could speak his father vanished from the doorway, lips working in silent profanity. Hal waited without moving. The door opened again, and this time his father came right into the room and across to the bureau. Hal was astounded to see that a lacquer of tears had brought the whites of his eyes to near-fluorescence.

'She's dead. Your mother's dead.'

'Dad, I . . .' Hal struggled to force the words out, but his throat refused to respond. As always when a personal encounter put him under stress, a whirling confusion scattered his powers of thought, organic valves opened and the skin of his cheeks began to heat up. He tried to hold back the warmly rising tide, but within a second his face was on fire, pulsing painfully.

'What's the . . . ?' His father came even closer. 'You know.'

'Dad, I . . . I wanted . . .'

'Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you call me? Somebody? Anybody?' His father walked quickly to the door, but paused to look back. 'You useless great bastard,' he said with a level stare of disgust, and went out, pulling the door closed.

'She wanted to die,' Hal screamed after him, shocked at the discordant childishness of his own voice, but unable to control it as the words tumbled out. 'She wanted to get away from you.'

There was a long period of silence and Hal began to think his father had gone on down the stairs. Then he noticed that the door was opening again, slowly, inch by inch. He backed away instinctively. Gervaise Farrell's face appeared in the opening, and muscles around his mouth were white with strain, like those of a flyer in a

high-gee turn, dragging the lips into a ghastly downward curve.

'You knew. . .' The words were metal bars snapping, ' . . . before she died.'

His father came towards him on rigid legs, hands reaching stiffly with clawed fingers. Hal looked around for a means of escape, but he was hemmed into a corner. He cringed back and then, moaning with desperation, hurled himself at the advancing figure, long arms whirling. His father took the blows without even blinking. One of his hands gathered the lapels of Hal's jacket, and the other thudded into his face, the first of a series of measured, ritualistic blows with which Gervaise Farrell sought to cleanse himself. It seemed an eternity before Hal was able to escape into unconsciousness.

4

The first direct attack on Mnemosyne came within a year of Lissa's death.

A million-ton spaceship came storming in from the depths of space at an incredible 30,000 times the velocity of light - twice the top speed ever to be attained by a Federation vessel. The cri ss-crossing fans of the planet's

tachyonic radar picked up the Syccan ship when it was ten light years out. Under normal circumstance there would have been ample reaction time, but the fantastic frightening speed of the intruder meant that it would cross the planet's orbit in only twenty-eight minutes. The ship represented something new in Syccan strategy. However those in command of the translunar defence system were able to reach a number of conclusions immediately. Its direction - 1800 from the bearing of Sycca - indicated that the Federation had been englobed; and its astounding speed, which could only have been built up over a distance of hundreds of light years, showed that the encasing enemy screen was no flimsy affair. The speed also meant that the ship was either automated or operated by a suicide crew - a reaction mass carrier entering the 30,000C speed zone would be unable to shed enough velocity to normalize itself with the galactic drift and thus reach a base.

Finally, at the rate of one light year every 2.8 minutes it would be impossible for the Syccans to use any known kind of armament - the ship itself had to be the weapon. A computer check confirmed that it would intersect the Cerulean orbit in the precise instant in which the planet would be occupying the same space, so no armament would be required. A million tons of matter colliding

with the planet, touching a moon-fragment, or even grazing the atmosphere at 30,000C would convert a substantial proportion of its mass to energy - enough to wither all six planets in the Cerulean system.

Only a handful of worlds in the Federation had the ability to survive such an attack. Cerulea lived because, in the brief time available, she was able to detonate more than eight thousand nuclear devices in the alien ship's path, creating a gaseous barrier many times denser than the interstellar medium through which it had been traveling. The eroding ship smeared nuclear fire across two light years before her power units failed. She tried to lapse from the tachyonic mode into relativistic flight, and vanished into the galaxy's distant past.

On Cerulea itself, the civilian population was completely unaware of what had happened - laggard light would take over a year to paint the sky with the alien's death trail - but in the military city of the base there was feverish activity as the implications of the attack were considered. There were two possibilities - neither of them pleasant to contemplate. Either the Syccans had pinpointed Cerulea as the planning centre for the conduct of the war; or blind chance had led them to test their new weapon in, from the human point of view, the worst possible place. The latter possibility was scarcely more encouraging than the first, because the very fact of

Cerulea's survival proclaimed it to be a vital target.

The sound of his father getting up during the night and leaving for the base gave Hal his initial inkling that there had been grave developments. He raised himself on one elbow, put on a light and held the clock close to his face, forcing his eyes to a blurry focus. The time was a little after three. He lay back, now wide awake, and listened to the patient drumming of the sea against the cliffs below the villa. His spectacles were on a dresser at the other side of the room and there was nothing he wanted to read anyway, so he let his mind rove out. In The Centre itself and in all the quiet hamlets along the coast men, women and children would be asleep, sailing their dreamships on the glassy dark fides of night, heedless of the waves measuring their lives. There was the great enigma - that the brevity of a man's life did not drive him into continuous swarming activity. The ability to surrender gladly to sleep, the death of each day's life, was one of the best intimations of immortality that Hal could conceive. But, if man's spirit was immortal, what was the purpose of the transient glimmer of physical existence? A hundred years of life, ten years, one year - measured against the eternities to come, one span was as good as the other; yet there was pain in the thought of Syccan

warriors stalking Mnemosyne, visiting death on all the men and women and pearly-faced children. Could it be that some aspect of physical life transcended all other considerations? Evolution, perhaps. The counter-entropic drive towards higher and higher degrees of organization, leading. . . leading. . . Hal's breathing grew shallow and his heart pounded massively as he felt his yearning mind reach for the concept that, somehow, was going to provide justification for his whole life.

Hal Farrell closed his eyes.

The beautiful spallation flowers blossom against the background of space, which runs, shivers and spins with a thousand colours, of which the visible spectrum covers

only a minute fraction. And the mother-mass drifts all around; vast, awesome, eternal. . .

In the sun-blazing entity that is the super-ego, a thousand identity-images coalesce and intermingle continuously. Thoughts - prismatic crystals, diamond-sharp - flash across the surface of the gestalt mind.

The prime instrument may be lost to us.

That cannot be permitted.

Tavernor must be translated to the conscious level immediately.

It is slightly premature - a postponement of another

five years would be preferable in the interest of physical compatibility.

There is insufficient time. We shall act now.

Agreed. We shall act now.

The spallation flowers continue to flicker, blossom and fade, and proton sprays swirling through galactic tides of electromagnetic radiation stain the surrounding space with a million different, nameless colours.

Mack Tavernor opened his eyes.

5

Tavernor pushed back the sheets and got out of bed.

Lifting the spectacles from the dresser, he put them on and went to stand before the room's full-length mirror.

He knew exactly what he looked like - Hal's memories were his memories too - yet he felt the need to assess the body in which he found himself, to reorientate spirit and flesh. The mirror showed a tall, narrow-shouldered figure with lank hair and a long, nervous face. His chest was slightly concave and his limbs had minimal muscular development, the elbows and knees standing out like

knots in rope.

As the image in the glass blinked back at him and moved its hands in response to his, Tavernor felt himself overwhelmed by a sense of awe, and of his own inadequacy. What was he supposed to do now?

Twenty years had passed since his 'death'. Twenty years! The time lapse had been so great, and there was so much to be done. He realized, belatedly, that he had not understood the mechanics of the super-ego's proposal. In his mind had been a notion that his complete identity would somehow have been transferred instantaneously, if not into the brain of a newly-born baby, at least into that of Hal as a child.

But perhaps it had been necessary to wait until the brain had become sufficiently convolute, until the central and peripheral nervous systems were sufficiently complex.

And, in any case, what could a child have done? What was a youth of nineteen going to do now? How was he to

convince the hard-pressed generals of COMsac that their single faint hope of defeating the Syccans lay in abandoning the butterfly ship? That the insubstantial maws of the interstellar ramjets were feeding on men's immortal souls?

Tavernor's legs suddenly felt weak. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to control the trembling in his limbs.

As an ego he had accepted the concepts and experiences

of the ego plane with little more than a cool intellectual wonderment, but in the body of an under-developed boy the knowledge was almost more than he could handle. It was all too. . . immense. He held both hands in front of his face and willed the fingers to stop their twitching. The nervous movement continued unabated and he slowly realized that gaining mastery of this frail skittish body was going to be a difficult and perhaps impossible task. In his previous life he had at times been dimly aware of his good luck in having a powerful, healthy and apparently-nerveless physique; he now knew he had never appreciated the difficulties with which some others lived. But was this uncontrollable phrenesis normal? He reached into Hal's childhood, played the spotlight over a series of grim tableaux and got his answer. The screaming chaos in his nervous system grew worse as he saw, in the distorting mirror of Hal's memory, the characters who had shaped his life twenty years earlier. Gervaise Farrell - cold, frightening father-image, dispensing his fury in precisely measured doses. Lissa - dominated, self-destructive eater, allowing her flame to gutter into extinction. Bethia - now in her early twenties. . .

The thought of Bethia introduced the first note of calm. Hal's memories told him she was resident at the University of Cerulea, doing post-graduate research in

psycho-history. She had grown into a tall, too-perfect beauty with direct searching eyes which had always made

Hal uncomfortable. Yet she sometimes revealed traces of the childish Bethia - the fairy princess with healing magic in her fingers and eyes fixed on strange horizons - and at these times Hal loved her with a shy hopelessness.

Tavernor's own memories of Bethia as an even younger child reinforced Hal's picture of her as someone to whom the ordinary laws of nature and human behaviour hardly applied. If he could speak the truth to anybody, it would be Bethia.

Gradually Tavernor was able to bring his nerves under control. He put out the light, lay back on the bed and stared out through the window at the jewelled rivers of Mnemosyne's night sky until sleep had claimed him.

Opening his eyes in the light of morning, Tavernor experienced a wild moment of disorientation. The blurriness in the details of the ceiling tiles above the bed reminded him that he now needed spectacles, and the universe clicked into place around him. He got up immediately and went to the bathroom. The house felt empty - obviously something important had cropped up

to detain Farrell at the base all night.

While washing, he examined himself again in the mirror, fascinated by the contrast between his new body and the one he had known only a few hours earlier, subjective time. The experiences of the egon plane had an air of timelessness about them which suggested they might all have taken place in microseconds, and his nineteen years of 'storage' in Hal's unconscious mind had passed like a dream. He forced his shoulders back and began the measured Yoga breathing which would expand his rib cage and in time regulate his nerves.

As he was dressing a pang of weakness brought slight giddiness, which alarmed him until he realized it was

simply that his new body was hungry. He went downstairs to the kitchen and put some syntheeggs and yea-steaks into a pan, and while they were heating went to the fax machine for a news-sheet. Again, the sheet was soggy with moisture. He screwed it into a ball, removed the service panel from the machine and, after a moment's study, adjusted the recirculation rate of the developing vapour. A minute later he dialled for another sheet. It came out crisp and dry. He carried it into the kitchen just as the light on the pan's timer flashed that the food was ready.

Tavernor found the high-protein food difficult to get down, even with copious drafts of milk - Hal had lived mainly on cereals - but he persisted. The subsequent queasiness in his stomach he dispelled with a few minutes Pranayama, timing the breaths to suit the inadequate respiratory system he had inherited. This body would never be as hardy as the former, but he was going to pay it the same attention he would give to any inefficient machine.

He was dropping his used plate and cup into the disposer when a car swept past the kitchen window. A few minutes later Gervaise Farrell walked into the kitchen. His eyes were heavy-lidded and his chin was blue-black with stubble. Tavernor eyed him curiously, surprised at how little hatred or any other emotion he felt - his one glimpse of eternity had changed many things.

'Fix me some coffee.' Fa~rell's gaze slid away from Tavernor as he spoke.

'All right.' Tavernor switched on the coffee machine as the other man sat down. 'Rough night?'

Farrell was examining the news-sheet. 'Don't tell me the fax machine's been serviced?'

'Ah. . . yes.'

'Christ! It just shows you.' He spoke bitterly, shaking his head. 'They do it now!'

'What's wrong with now?' Tavernor felt apprehensive.

'Hurry up with that coffee.'

'Any new development in the war situation?'

Farrell looked surprised at the question, and in a strange way, almost grateful. 'You're waking up to it, are you? I expect you're planning to beat the Syccans off with a Testament.'

'They're in this region then?'

Farrell hesitated, then shrugged. 'The situation, general, is that we seem to be surrounded.'

'Seem to be?' Tavernor felt his body begin its discordant yammering as the possibility that he was too late occurred to him.

'It's supposed to be a secret, but the panic's about to start anyway. . . Last week they tried to hit us with one of those big boilers of theirs. It was doing thirty-thousand-
cee and it took most of our translunar stockpile to stop it.' Farrell leaned back in his seat and smiled unpleasantly.

'What's your analysis of the situation, general?'

Tavernor was too shocked to notice the sarcasm.

'Either they already knew about the COMsac headquarters being here - or we've just advertised it.'

'Very good.' Farrell looked up with something

approaching real warmth, but the puzzlement in his eyes had grown more noticeable. 'And what's the next move?'

'Mass evacuation. Withdraw to the home stars.'

'That would take time, and there's a complicating factor. The Syccans have made big strides in the suppression of tachyon emissions, but we've been picking up stray echoes all around the planet. The particles have shed most of their energy and their speeds are approaching infinity, so we're not certain, but there could be a

shell of Syccan ships right round us. Three fleets are on their way right now but it'll take six days for them to get here from the frontier, so if the Syccans are already here . . .' Farrell suddenly looked weary, losing interest in playing father and son.

'So we go out and look for them ourselves.' Tavernor poured a cup of coffee and set it on the table.

'We can't look for them. At stellar distances the only useful way to see is with tachyons, and if the Syccans have learned how to suppress those, or to absorb the particles emitted by our tachyonic radar lamps. . .'

Tavernor was appalled, both by what Farrell was saying and all the implications behind the words. 'It seems to me,' he said slowly, 'that COMsac is getting tired - and scared.'

'That's what you think, is it, tiger?' Farrell sipped his

coffee and pushed it away disgustedly.

Tavernor began to reply, then felt his cheeks start to flame, a legacy from Hal, putting him - by some quirk of biological logic - at a disadvantage. Trying to control the flow of blood to his face caused the throbbing warmth to increase. He hurried out of the kitchen, followed by Farrell's laugh, and went to the phone in his bedroom.

The number of the University of Cerulea was stored in Hal's memory, so he punched it in quickly while his cheeks cooled down. After several transfers, a woman in the Psychohistory Department informed him that Dr Bethia Grenoble would not be in the university until the afternoon, as she was reading in The Centre's Eisenhower Library. Tavernor had to look up the library's number and when he finally got through to Bethia his composure had returned.

'Bethia Grenoble here.' Her voice sounded cool, faintly annoyed.

'Hello, Bethia.' Tavernor floundered temporarily as he remembered that the adult voice he heard belonged to the sleeping child whose bedroom he had shared, as far as he was concerned, only a day earlier. 'Hello, this is

. . . Hal.'

'Oh, Hal.' The annoyance grew more pronounced.

'What did you want?'

'I must talk to you. It's important.'

There was a long pause. 'Must it be today?'

'Yes.'

'Well, what's it about?'

'Not on the phone.' Tavernor checked his voice from ascending into an excited squawk. 'I'd like to call and see you.'

Bethia sighed audibly. 'Very well, Hal. I'm returning to the university after lunch. Supposing you call at the library around two and we drive back - we can talk in the car. All right?'

'That's fine.'

The phone clicked dismissively before he had a chance to say anything further. He went downstairs and found Farrell sprawled on a chair in the lounge, half-asleep, a bottle of gin on the table beside him.

Tavernor coughed. 'Will you be using the car this afternoon?'

'Why?'

'I'd like to borrow it.'

'Go ahead,' Farrell said carelessly. 'Wreck it if you want.' His eyes had a heavy, nostalgic look, as if peering into the past, or into a future which was never going to

exist.

It was a bright but slightly oppressive afternoon. Objects and buildings seemed to have acquired potentiality, to shine with a stored light of their own, and the air was restless, scurrying aimlessly. White plumes of cloud trailing across the sky told of fast-moving winds at higher altitudes.

Tavernor drove carefully with the top down, and let his senses have full rein. Even with the inferior vision of his new eyes, he was seeing Mnemosyne as he had never seen it before. The perceptions of his body were basically the same as those he had always known, yet it was possible to interpret all their signals in a slightly different manner. Particularly noticeable was the way in which certain colours - the green of a patch of grass or the ice-blue reflections of the sky in a window - would trigger seemingly unrelated emotional responses and fleeting memory-images. The difference he realized, was that between a poet and a mechanic.

As the car neared The Centre he noticed the way in which the old city had scarcely altered in twenty years, whereas the military base had sprawled out on all sides. Its double fence was visible in several places near the

coastal road long before he reached the city. The anonymous buildings beyond the fence gleamed with electrostatic newness - and somehow contrived to look shabby at the same time. Tavernor guessed this was another manifestation of his new senses.

He reached the Eisenhower Library at exactly two, just as Bethia was coming down the steps, and slid the car into place at the kerb. She gave him the ghost of a smile, in which he glimpsed her as a child, and called to him in a confident melodious voice.

'Why you're on time, Hal- are you ill or something?'

Tavernor shook his head. He was discovering that having inherited all of Hal's memories was not the same

thing as knowing all about Hal. There were no recollections of habitual unpunctuality, for example, yet Bethia's attitude left no doubt she regarded him as being undependable - which did not help things. While he was thinking, Bethia walked right round the car to his door, opened it and waved him away from the wheel. He looked up at her, puzzled.

'Well, move over,' she said impatiently.

'I'm driving,' he stated, and was relieved to hear the words emerge without any trace of the nervous glissando

to which his present voice was prone.

Bethia shrugged. 'All right - if you want to risk wrecking the car. I'll sit in back, though. It's safer.' She opened the door and got in behind him.

Tavernor almost laughed. Farrell had jibed about damaging the vehicle too, but Hal's thought-picture of himself held nothing to suggest he was a bad driver. There were a few memories of unlucky collisions, all of them most definitely caused by other people's carelessness. The car was of the turbine-driven, wheeled type which Tavernor preferred to ground-effect machines, because of their more precise control. He swept it smoothly out into the traffic flow, matching velocities effortlessly, turned south on to the main boulevard along the bay and accelerated to high cruise, controlling the big machine with the precise certitude possible only when the driver understands the functions and performance limits of every component.

The exhibition was intended to modify Bethia's opinion of him, and to give him time to get used to her metamorphosis into disturbing womanhood. Also, there was the problem of what he was going to say. How could he get anyone to believe the story he had to tell? Looking "round him as he drove, Tavernor knew with one half of his mind that the space between Mnemosyne's surface and the moon-shell was filled with egons, an insubstantial

frog-spawn of racial consciousness; but the other half found the concept too bizarre for acceptance. And he had been there - unless it was all a delusion. He jerked his mind away from an avenue of thought which could lead only to madness.

'Very well, Hal,' Bethia said behind him. 'I'm impressed. Have you been taking lessons from a racing driver?'

'No.'

'It seems that way, but if you don't slow down we'll be out at the university before we have our little talk.'

'Of course.' Tavernor eased up on the throttle. They had left The Centre behind and now the southbound highway was cutting inland from the line of the cliffs. He saw a branch road ahead on the left, swung down it for a short distance and parked the car on yellow turf with its nose pointing towards the ocean.

'This wasn't part of the deal' Bethia spoke alertly. 'I've work to do this afternoon.'

She was wearing a simple lime-green tunic dress which would have reminded him of the one he had seen on her as a three-year-old child, except that it was stretched taut on a maturing body which combined femininity with a look of superb physical fitness. Her hair was like polished oak, grained with parallel strands of old gold and chestnut, and her eyes watched him with an amiable contempt

which he found dismaying. He was unsure if his consternation sprang wholly from fears of not being able to convince her, or if there was a trace of wounded male pride in it.

'Just listen to what I've to say - it won't take long to reach the university.'

'Let's have it then.'

'Bethia.' He turned in the seat and tried to hold her with the sheer force of his concentration. 'Do you remember a man called Mack Tavernor?'

She looked away from him on the instant. 'Why did you bring me here?'

'Do you remember him?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's what I have to talk to you about.' Tavernor was filled with a desperate conviction she would laugh in his face. 'You see, I . . .' He broke off as he realized that Bethia's fascinated eyes were staring at something behind him, something out over the ocean where there should be nothing but empty sky. Almost unwillingly, he turned his head.

Spanning the sky from horizon to near zenith; limned

in the metallic radiance of a moon seen in daytime; far out, yet so inconceivably vast that its hulk was crossed again and again by intervening cloud layers; was the gnarled, dreadful shape of a Syccan warship.

6

There were a few seconds in which Tavernor thought he might die.

His heart seemed to cease beating entirely as shock blasted through his inherited nervous system, and the horizon heaved drunkenly, then with a massive effort his own will took command. He sat absolutely still, taking deep measured breaths, as the apparition moved silently across the sky, blotted out the sun, and then vanished below the plateau to the west.

'Oh, God,' Bethia breathed. 'What was that?'

'A Syccan warship.' Tavernor's lips felt numb, but his mind was seething with questions. How could it be?

Where were the planet's defensive forces? An enemy ship coming within a light year of Mnemosyne, let alone into the atmosphere, should have been vaporized in seconds. Bad though the war situation was, he would have staked his life that no intruder could have penetrated the moon-shell, unless after months of attrition during which entire fleets would have been lost. Yet here was a

Syccan ship tunnelling through the upper atmosphere as calmly as if on one of its home worlds.

'What does it mean?'

'That's what I'd like to know.' He looked north towards The Centre and the encompassing base. The clustered rectangles of distant buildings shone quietly in the afternoon sun, and there was no sign of unusual activity. No sign, he suddenly realized, of any movement at all - not even the swarming glint of traffic on the freeways. He put his hand out and turned the ignition key of the car. It rotated with its normal springy resistance, but there was no response from the vehicle. Along the instrument panel all the dials were dead. He had an urge to check one of the car's batteries by shorting the terminals, but a grim intuition made the test unnecessary.

'Look, Hal!' Bethia sounded bewildered rather than afraid. 'There! I can see more of them.'

Looking upwards, he saw a number of silver flecks in the sky, seemingly at orbital height, then his eyes detected other movement in lower levels of the air. Criss-crossing vapour trails sprang into being against the washed blue which was visible between the clouds. The trails were generated by rapidly descending specks, which meant that the passing warship must have sowed the sky with landing craft. An invasion, he thought, but why bother?

This was no sneak raid like the one in which his first parents had died - so why not simply bomb the planet, or dust it, or irradiate it, or take one of the other relatively simple steps which would erase all traces of life?

'Get out of the car,' he said. 'We'll have to walk.'

'Walk? But why?'

'The car won't go any more.' He got out and opened the rear door for her. 'Look back there on the highway - no cars are moving.'

He pointed at the road, where four automobiles were visible. The hoods of three were raised and men were leaning into the engine compartments. Beside one of the cars two small children were jumping excitedly, pointing into the sky, and Tavernor felt a fierce pang of anguish. Death for them, he knew, would be the beginning of their real lives, but they would scream in terror and pain before that door opened, and he was filled with a futile longing for some way to spare them. Hatred of the Syccans, main-spring of his previous life, flared inside him.

'I don't understand.' Bethia was leaning over the back of the front seat, reaching for the ignition key.

'Come on.' He caught her wrist and his stringy frame somehow found the strength to drag her out of the car.

She stumbled as he pushed her towards the road.

'Hal! What are you doing?'

'Save your breath.' He took her arm and began walking quickly. 'How do you think the Syccans were able to sail in like that? They've developed a new toy - something which . . . a field perhaps. . . which inhibits electron transfer in metals. That's why there was no warning and no defence. We've nothing heavier than a machine gun which doesn't depend on electricity.'

'But is it possible to . . . ?'

'It must be possible - they've done it, haven't they?'

There was a time when we would have been first. . .'

Tavernor was unable to get the words out, to express what humanity had done to itself with the invention of the butterfly ship. As they passed the car with the brightly-clad children beside it, he called to the parents, advising them to quit the car, head for the trees at the base of the plateau and keep going south. The father's face emerged from under the yawning hood, stared blankly and disappeared again. Tavernor averted his eyes from the children's wondering faces and kept walking. There was no time to stay and argue.

'Look, what makes you think you know so much?'

Bethia demanded. 'Where are we going anyway?'

'Back to the villa. It's only about two miles from here and Farrell . . . my father. . . has three or four rifles.'

'What good will they do?' She looked flushed and

indignant, unable to appreciate the significance of what was happening. Tavernor almost became angry with her, then remembered it was impossible for a civilian in her position to visualize Syccan warriors in action. She had never walked through the cities and villages left in their wake.

'The rifles will provide us with food if we manage to get far enough south to escape being dusted.' Again the thought obtruded - why had the whole area not been purged of human life already? - but Bethia was breaking away from him, her face pale with fury.

'I'm not going into any forest with you, Hal Farrell. If you think. . . .' She stopped speaking as he slapped her on the upper arm and pushed her along. Turning on one heel she launched herself at him. As their bodies locked, he realized at once that she was actually the stronger of the two, but the combat training he had received in another lifetime guided his hands. He caught her wrist, slid automatically into a submission hold and pushed her forward again.

'I'm sorry about this, Bethia, but I do know what I'm doing.'

She glanced at him in silent hatred and he felt a perverse flicker of satisfaction. He had graduated from being an object of contempt to one worthy of hatred. As they walked, the air began to rumble with distant sonic

booms. He looked back and saw the black gnat-like shapes of the Syccan landing craft slicing in across The Centre. The city and military base lay helpless beneath the aircraft which must have been specially designed to ! operate within the inhibiting field. Some of them appeared to be fanning out towards landing sites around the city. Ignoring the labouring of his lungs, Tavernor urged Bethia to move even faster.

By the time they had reached the white villa set between the road and the cliffs he was sweating freely and his legs were trying to fold under him. Cursing his physical weakness, he pushed Bethia into the porch and fumbled the door open. Farrell met them in the hall with a sports rifle in his hand. His dark features looked strangely immobile.

'I'm taking a rifle and some food,' Tavernor snapped. 'Be my guest,' Farrell said in a blurred voice, standing to one side. Passing him, Tavernor detected the smell of gin. He went into the lounge, took a rifle and four packs of cartridges from the already-open gun cabinet and went back to the hall.

'... seems to have gone mad,' Bethia was saying. She looked deliberately at Tavernor. 'I'd much rather stay here until we see what's going to happen.'

'You may as well - there isn't much point in trying to

run,' Farrell replied.

'We're running,' Tavernor said. 'It's our only chance.'

'I'm staying.' Bethia moved closer to Farrell.

'Believe me, Bethia, we've got to get out of here,'

Tavernor said urgently. 'You don't know what these monsters are like. They'll go through every building with a fine comb.'

Farrell laughed. 'Listen to the combat veteran! What do you know about these things, sonny boy?'

'I know you'd better pick a different rifle if you're planning to do any shooting. That one fires surface-burning slugs ignited by an electrical charge - and electrical charges are a thing of the past as far as we're concerned.'

Farrell raised the rifle with one hand, pointed it at the front door and squeezed the trigger. It clicked faintly. He gave Tavernor a hard look and brushed past him into the lounge.

'We'll pick up food somewhere else. Let's go, Bethia.'

Tavernor opened the door and motioned her to go out.

She shook her head. He snatched her wrist and pushed her in front of him through the porch and part-way down the drive. There was a familiar metallic sound from

behind him - that of a rifle bolt being operated. He turned slowly.

'How about this one, general? Will it work all right?'

Farrell had another rifle, and it was pointed at Tavernor's face.

'You're being ridiculous,' Tavernor said carefully. He pushed Bethia away from his side. 'You don't need a rifle to stop me, do you, father?' He stressed the final word in full knowledge of its connotations for the other man.

White flares of incredulity blazed in Farrell's eyes. He set his rifle against the wall with exaggerated care, and came at Tavernor, his hands grasping eagerly. Tavernor let his own rifle fall to one side, and instinctively dropped into the fighting crouch taught him in basic training, synthesis and optimization of all the traditional unarmed combat modes of Earth.

His face stiff with joy, Farrell walked straight in scorning to defend himself. Tavernor stopped him with chops to the heart and throat. Thanks to the imperfect coordination of Hal's body, neither blow landed exactly as he had intended it to, but they were good enough to bring Farrell to his knees.

Farrell shook his head disbelievingly, staring at the ground. 'What... do you think you're...?' He straightened up, massaging his throat, and came in again.

'This time he was more wary, obviously determined to take advantage of his superior strength. He circled Tavernor once, his eyes accusing, he drove forward. Tavernor received the weight of the charge and rolled under it, guiding Farrell's body to hit the ground in a way that exploded the breath from his lungs. The same movement brought Tavernor on top again. His thumbs had found their own way to the major blood vessels in Farrell's throat and his mind was pulsing with images of hatred - headless figures crowding around a frightened child's bed, tall Kris Shelby and the others who had died in the forest, an automatic pistol sledging cavernous holes through his own chest, Lissa crushed like a moth. . .

'What is this?' Farrell mumbled almost sleepily, as they lay face-to-face in the intimacy of combat. 'Hal? Hal?' 'I'm not Hal,' Tavernor whispered savagely. 'The name is Mack Tavernor.'

Farrell's glazing eyes widened with shock.

'Stop it, Hal!' Bethia's voice was shrill. 'You're killing him.'

Tavernor had forgotten about her. Looking up, he saw the panic in her face and released his hold on Farrell's throat, suddenly appalled. He got to his feet and was lifting Farrell upright when a deafening banshee wail filled the air.

The ground shook and the sky darkened as a Syccan

landing craft materialized over the road in front of the house under full deceleration, its braking jets throwing up clouds of earth and stones which thudded all around the group in the driveway.

Tavernor snatched his rifle as they ran for the cover of the house. He grabbed Farrell's rifle from the porch and slammed the door. The roar of the jets cut off abruptly, with a burbling cough, and the house filled with a stupefied silence punctuated by the sound of windows being shattered by bounding stones. Moving like a man in a dream, as though trying to run through clear syrup, Tavernor went to the lounge door and looked obliquely through the french windows. The dust clouds were settling outside and he could discern figures of unearthly tallness leaping from the open ports of the aircraft.

He turned back into the hall. Farrell was looking at him in dull bafflement; and Bethia seemed not to be aware of anything. She was standing absolutely still, lips slightly apart, and her eyes were unfocused. Shock, Tavernor thought, briefly glad of anything which would make the next few minutes easier for her. He pulled Farrell into the lounge and pushed a rifle into his hands. Something moved just outside the window.

He spun and saw the elongated black-gleaming figure of a Syccan peering in. Mist spraying from the nozzle

mounted above its brain-case immediately blurred the window, but Tavernor - for the first time in many years - glimpsed the wide-set eyes, the two breathing mouths fluttering in the shoulders, and the vertically-slitted eating mouth on the central abdomen. He fired from the waist and the window blossomed into angular petals centred on the Syccan's head. The alien fell backwards - but not before it had lobbed a metallic object through the window.

Tavernor took one step towards the angrily-hissing object, with the intention of hurling it out before it could detonate, but he never reached it.

The room spun around him once and then he was lying with his face pressed into a rug, unable to move. Close by, he heard Bethia and Farrell going down. He tried to turn his head and found even that slight movement was impossible. The gas from the grenade had brought complete paralysis as a prelude to death. As the bitter knowledge of failure - on every level of everything he had attempted - welled through him. Tavernor tried to close his eyes, but the lids remained open. He waited to die.

A few seconds later shadows moved across the section of floor he could see, and he heard the french windows being burst open. Four-toed black feet with traces of webbing between the splayed bones appeared in his field

of view, and he felt himself being lifted to a standing position. Two Syccans were holding him upright, and others were dragging Bethia and Farrell in through the door. The mist from the overhead nozzles attached to tanks on their backs billowed over everything in the room, filling it with a foetid humidity, condensing on and lubricating the exposed, palpitating lungs and other organs of the aliens. Mewing and clicking sounds came from their shoulder-mouths as they worked, and their weapons harnesses rang metallically.

Tavernor watched Bethia's face as she and Farrell were ranged against another wall, wondering what was going on behind the beautiful numb face. He at least had seen the Syccans at close quarters before, although never under conditions which made their loathsome alienness so apparent. Each was over seven feet tall and roughly human in general configuration, except that a second pair of arms sprouted from the mid-section. The secondary arms were greatly atrophied and were usually folded across the obscene vertical gash of the eating-mouth. Musculation was light and largely confined to the triple-segmented working-arms and legs. The vital organs were externally positioned around the central spine, black and pale blue rubbery sacs which heaved and glistened wetly in the spray which simulated the Syccan atmosphere. And

the aliens stank - with the sweet rancidity which Tavernor had never been able to purge from his nostrils.

Three more Syccans came in through the french windows, and one part of his mind noticed they were not armed. The mewling voices of the aliens grew louder, then faded away. Standing in the centre of the room, the three newcomers examined the humans with smeared eyes, which swivelled independently on the flat and otherwise featureless braincases. A valve in the central alien's lower gut popped loudly, spattering the other two with grey-and-white excrement which was gradually washed away by their sprays, and the silence resumed. With the silence came a cessation of all movement. For a full minute the Syccans' lungs and shoulder fronds froze, transforming them into black monoliths hewn by patient ram.

Finally, one of the aliens pointed at Farrell with a black-webbed hand, and the warriors holding him upright moved away. Farrell fell face downwards. One of the warriors unhooked a straight knife from its harness, put the point at the base of the prostrate man's skull and bore down on it, severing the spine. Both then moved away, unconcernedly, leaving puddles on the floor where their feet had been.

Tavernor raged silently at the Syccans, cursing them for making such a prolonged ritual of the act of killing.

He realized, belatedly, that the single shot he had fired ought to have been put to better use. I'm sorry, Bethia, he thought, as he saw one of the unarmed aliens gesture towards her. Please forgive me.

Then something incredible happened.

Gently, and with every appearance of tenderness, the two warriors holding Bethia lifted her rigid body and carried it out through the windows towards their landing craft. Tavernor tried to cry out, but his paralysed throat made no sound. Watching Bethia disappear from his sight, he was so astounded that he was hardly aware of what was happening when he too was lifted and carried out of the room.

After seventy years of warfare - in which they had slaughtered more than two billion human beings - the Syccans were taking their first two prisoners.

7

There were times when Tavernor watched Bethia's nude body with a hunger which arose not from sexuality, but from pure loneliness.

He would awaken out of a restless sleep to a world of meaningless dim shapes, crawling darkness and the sound

of rain. But sometimes there would be a distant square of yellow radiance. And Bethia would move across it, slowly and abstractedly, the perfection of her nakedness translated to blurred highlights and areas of shadow by the streaming glass which intervened. Diminished by perspective, she might have been the languid inhabitant of an aquarium, or even an abstract pattern, a mobile, reflections of a candle flame stirring in the heart of a crystal. At these times Tavernor would put on his own light, but succeeded only in increasing his loneliness, for Bethia seemed never to look his way. . .

The Syccan ship was still in something close to its maximum-mass configuration.

As the voyage progressed the forward sections would be dismantled, reduced to billets and fed to the mass converters in the stern. The rate of self-consumption would be greatly increased if the flight profile proved to be irregular, involving retardations which took the ship below the critical $.6C$ speed zone. With a total mass of a million tons or more, moving faster than light, even the slightest change of course involved a prodigious expenditure of precious reaction mass. For this reason

the Syccan astrogators chose to fly in vast loxodromic curves. And where rhumb-line flights had to be modified

they employed, as far as was practicable, stellar gravitic fields; sometimes ghosting past beyond the creeping, ice-covered worlds on the outermost limits of planetary systems, at others crossing orbit after orbit to swing within a few million miles of solar infernos.

In the early days of his imprisonment Tavernor had constantly to remind himself of these facts because he had no sensory evidence of movement. From what he could see of it, the section of ship where he had been housed was a circular room, some two-hundred yards across and fifty feet high. Artificial rain swirled almost continuously from overhead ducts and was collected, presumably for recirculation, by channels in the deck.

And visible through the shifting blankets of moisture were the watchful spindle-shapes of the Syccans, sometimes feverishly active, sometimes eerily immobile, nightmares realized in oosidian.

The glass cube in which he lived was about twenty feet across. It was heated, and had a bed, table and chair, and toilet facilities. All these items had been designed for human use, but were of alien manufacture. There was one other artifact in the cube - a micro library which appeared to be of human origin although he could find no nameplate. The library's cassettes contained enough reading matter to last him - uneasy thought - a full

human lifespan.

Bethia lived in an identical cube, slightly less than a hundred yards away. The existence of the cubes had given Tavernor almost a severe a shock as the realization that he and Bethia were being taken alive. While they were in transit between the villa and the mother-ship he had convinced himself it was a temporary aberration on the part of the Syccans to delay the death blows. But the glass cells had obviously been prepared in advance. The aliens had known they were going to take two prisoners long before they attacked the planet. Now the ship was transporting them to a destination which could only be in Syccan-controlled space - but why?

Why?'

The question thudded in Tavernor's brain as he lay on the featureless plastic rectangle of the bed, waiting for the meal he thought of as lunch. His watch had been removed with his clothing, and there were no clocks in the cubes, but the meal was the middle one of the three brought to him during each light/darkness cycle. A sound at the cube's entrance told him the food had arrived. He got to his feet and went to the inner door. The outer one had just swung open and a Syccan was in the enclosed space, setting his tray of food on the floor. Highlights moved with oily slowness on the alien's complicated body, and the breathing-mouths fluttered in its shoulders.

Tavernor examined the creature through the glass, satisfying himself it was the same one which had brought all his other meals. It stood facing him for a moment, blurred eyes staring down into his from the flat braincase, and as before he felt a sense of awe. This biped with the opaque lifeless eyes was a member of the species which had proved itself superior to humanity in the way that men best understood - force of technological arms. But by the same token it had displayed its inferiority, because Man - past history regardless - would not have exterminated the only intelligent neighbour to have been granted him by a grudging continuum. The despair embodied in von Hoerner's modified table was so all-enveloping that men would have accepted the Syccan and striven for cultural intercourse. Project Talkback's goal had been to exchange a single thought, and Tavernor suddenly understood the desperate necessity. If the Syccan on the other side of the glass would make a sign, one gesture of recognition of Tavernor as a fellow-voyager in space-time, then. . .

The alien turned and walked away with the peculiar camel-like gait caused by the complicated action of its triple-segmented legs. Watching it closely, Tavernor saw the twisting scar on the back of its left working-arm, and knew it was the same one as before. He nodded in

satisfaction. No man before him had had the chance to study a live Syccan, and although the results of his modest experiments would never be known on Earth, the mental activity helped keep him from going insane.

When the inner door swung open he carried the tray to the table and pulled the trigger-tabs on the self-heating cans. All labels had been removed from the containers but they were obviously of human manufacture, and he knew they contained a well-balanced meal. The Syccans seemed well aware of human nutritional requirements, and - ironically - the body he had taken over from Hal was now in better health than ever before. Constant abdominal breathing had expanded his rib cage; adequate protein supplies and careful exercise were beginning to strengthen his muscles, although they showed little sign of development as yet.

While the cans were heating he turned and looked across the channelled, rain-soaked deck towards Bethia's cell. Her meal had arrived, but the procedure there was different. As usual, three Syccans had gone right into the cube and were clustered around the bed. The first time it had happened, Tavernor had bled his fingers trying to force open his door and go to her aid. But then the truth had dawned - the Syccans were forcing her to eat. At a distance it was impossible for him to tell if she was positively refusing food, or simply had lost interest in

eating.

He watched impassively as the curious mime was enacted all over again. Bethia had not been herself since the moment of the Syccan landing when, apparently, she was shocked into a withdrawal condition. It was a fairly natural reaction for a sensitive woman, yet she reminded him forcibly of the three-year-old Bethia - the strange precocious child who so easily lapsed into trance-like states in which she would float like thistledown, with light-blinded eyes. A thorough search of Hal's stored memories indicated that the adult Bethia had no history of such withdrawals, so it seemed she could be regressing, retreating through time. The theory was the best that Tavernor's limited knowledge of psychology could produce, but he found it vaguely unsatisfactory. Bethia, from what he knew of her, had an uncommonly high degree of mental resilience; and there was something else about that mystical communion, something elusive and disturbing . . .

The lid of a food container popped open, signifying that its contents were ready to eat. Tavernor took his gaze away from the water-blurred tableau in Bethia's cell and began his meal. As he ate, he studied his own cube for perhaps the hundredth time. It was a fairly complex piece of engineering. A power cable was connected to

the underside of one edge, and from there a thinner lead ran up to a box-like unit on the roof. The unit appeared to reduce the humidity and increase the oxygen content of the Syccan air, feeding the modified mixture into his cell by way of ceiling louvres. Both the inner and outer doors were power-operated, controlled from an unseen source. Tavernor had examined them closely during his

first hours in the cell, but he had not been able to discover what force held them in place, and they were strong enough to be escape-proof.

When the food was finished he carried the tray and the four empty cans to the entrance and set them on the floor between the two doors. He stacked the cans at one side of the tray and slide the topmost one outwards until it was on the point of toppling, then went back and sat on the cube's single chair. A few minutes later the inner door swung shut, the outer one opened and the Syccan emerged from the mists. It stooped to lift the tray and the precariously balanced can fell to the floor. The alien set the tray down again, retrieved the can and moved off without looking into the cube.

Tavernor stroked his chin thoughtfully and lay down on the bed. He had no idea what the other Syccans were like, but the one which brought his food was - by human standards - none too bright. It had fallen into his little

trap with the cans five times in succession. The Syccans undoubtedly did not measure intelligence in the same way as a human but the ability to learn quickly from experience was, in Tavernor's estimation, bound to be one of its vital ingredients. He considered the possibility that his captors were determinedly evaluating his own intellect in the context of the nonsense with the cans, and wondered what they would make of him. It was the old trouble with cultural first contacts - no matter what object the explorer pointed at he risked being given the word for finger.

On the other hand, the average Syccan might well be a near-moron, for all that was known about the race. There was no real need for their intelligence to be distributed as evenly as among humans - some kinds of society would function most efficiently if they were composed of mindless serfs guided by a few brilliant demagogues. The Syccans could be like that - a finely honed blade for the destruction of all other forms of life. Perhaps that was the key to their behaviour. Could it be that they were dedicated not only to the extermination of humanity, but to ridding the universe of every sentient being but themselves? Psychosis on a cosmic scale?

Tavernor moved restlessly on the bed. If the hypothesis were correct - was Man very much different to Syccan in

his ultimate ambitions? Cosmo-biologists, or those of them who were optimistic about the Terran civilization's chances of survival, had estimated that even one spacefaring culture could spread right through the Milky Way in a time much shorter than the age of the galaxy, setting up colonies of colonies of colonies as had been the case in the Mediterranean in classical times. No matter how he tried, Tavernor was unable to be objective about the concept - if one life form was going to best ride the galaxy he would prefer it to be Man. A Syccan would prefer it to be Syccan. So who was psychotic? All that any intelligent being could do was back its own kind to the hilt, against all corners, believing implicitly in its own destiny

Hating the Syccans more than ever, Tavernor escaped from the logical corner he had painted himself into by trying to sleep. Without the comfort of bed coverings, sleeping was not easy and his loneliness returned. It was at times like these that he remembered the brief spell on the egon plane. His parents and Lissa and Shelby were alive there, but he had not tried to find them - it had not seemed all that important to the cool impersonal mind of an egon. There shall be no marriage, he thought sleepily, nor giving in marriage.

The huge ship made landfall, or its orbital equivalent, on

the twenty-third day of the flight. Two days earlier Tavernor had experienced a momentary queasiness as the vessel on quitting the tachyonic mode, had switched over from simulated retardation, which provided weight, to real retardation. He had been watching carefully for any change in routine which would indicate that the ship had completed its voyage. The first sign came when a group of aliens surrounded his cube and attached lashing fitments to the corners. They anchored it to the deck, and roughly an hour later the ship entered the free fall condition.

In orbit around a Syccan planet - the thought gave Tavernor a gloomy satisfaction. No matter what the aliens were planning to do with him, it would at least mean an end to the silent boredom of life in a glassy cell. At first he had avoided using the micro library - feeling it represented a subtle acceptance of the Syccans' plans for him - but he had discovered he could not sustain the early sense of wonder and alarm which had fully occupied his mind. He had begun reading at random, taking no interest in the content, using the words as a means to avoid thought. The brown, dimly-seen reaches of the ship beyond the walls, disturbed here and there by the black ambling shapes of aliens, could have been the bottom of a warm muddy sea. Exercising his slowly developing body

filled in several hours a day, but in the end he had come to rely on the library.

Now the long wait was at an end. He swam backwards and forwards across his cube, waving to Bethia each time he thought she was looking his way. She remained seated at the anchored table and gave no answering signal.

Tavernor's concern for her deepened. The distance and the distorting effect of the streaming glass made it difficult to be certain, but she seemed to have lost weight on the journey. She rarely moved, and on the infrequent occasions when she crossed her cell there was an uncharacteristic listlessness in her step.

After a few minutes in free fall the aliens returned, propelling themselves with easy skill in the weightless condition, and attached a flexible wire somewhere beneath the base of Tavernor's cube. They ran insulated power cables from what appeared to be a portable generator, disconnected the existing leads from the cube's environment-control units and replaced them with the new lines. As they did so, the doors of the cell clicked, quivered uncertainly for a moment, then sprang back rigidly into line.

The flexible wire suddenly sprang into tautness and the cell moved slowly towards a white light wavering in the distance, still lashed to its section of deck. Bethia's cell moved in the same direction, surrounded by slowly drift-

ing silhouettes. The light ahead grew brighter and Tavernor realized it was a view port. His cube moved ahead of Bethia's, passed through a constricting arch of metal and halted in a tightly enclosed volume which he decided was the hold of a shuttle craft. He swam as close to the port as possible, ignoring the protest from his inexperienced stomach, and looked out.

The Syccal } world was a featureless orb of blinding whiteness, completely enveloped in cloud. He knew immediately that from the surface of the hidden planet it would be utterly impossible ever to see the stars. Day would consist of a general brightening of the enveloping vapours, and night would be a return to blackness unreleived by the points of celestial brilliance which had caused primeval men to look upwards and wonder. Tavernor felt a numb despair as the last vestige of his belief

in the superiority of Man to Syccan withered away. From the springboard of Earth, getting into space had been easy. The planet might have been designed for that express purpose - with a transparent atmosphere to display the treasures which lay waiting, a moon so large that it was virtually another world hanging within an astronomical stone's throw, other planets in easy telescopic range to confirm the heady whispered promises of

the night sky.

But the Syccans had known nothing of those advantages. For them there could have been only a blind outward urge, or a calm determination to vindicate the philosophical notion that, by the Law of Mediocrity, their world could not be alone. Under the same circumstances, Tavernor was certain, Man would still have been trapped on the planet of his birth. He turned away from the port and saw that Bethia's cube had been shunted to within a few feet of his own. She was still at the table, bracing herself between it and the chair. Her body looked thin. He launched himself towards that side of his cell and the movement caused Bethia to raise her head. Tavernor found himself looking at the wan, tired faced of a stranger. She eyed him impersonally for a moment, then lowered her head, and the oak-coloured hair swirled weightlessly around her shoulders.

'Bethia,' he shouted, searching for the right words.

'We still must live.'

The words echoed impotently in his glass prison and pictures of Lissa sprang unbidden to his mind. He tried pounding the wall and floated backwards from it, just as the shuttle craft lurched and separated itself from the mother-ship. It began decelerating almost immediately and he sank to the floor, aware that Bethia had deliberately shut him out. He lay on the bed and watched the

brilliant reflected light from the port shifting as the craft selected its course. Drifting stars became visible and presently he felt faint vibrations coming up through the floor as the craft began resisting the pull of gravity. It made a gentle low-gee descent until, quite abruptly, the port darkened. The ship rocked as it lowered itself down through mile after mile of gradually thickening cloud.

Tavernor almost failed to notice the final jolt which told him they had touched down. He had just realized why Bethia's spontaneous trances had the power to fill him with brooding unease.

They reminded him of the way in which the black alien forms of their captors would periodically freeze into stillness, while their great blurred eyes fixed themselves on other horizons.

8

The Syccan landing field was different from what Tavernor had expected.

On the way down through the murky atmosphere the light from the single porthole had diminished so steadily

he had been convinced the visibility would be close to zero at ground level. But as the shuttle's cargo hatch dropped away, he saw the cloud ceiling was several hundred feet up and, in spite of parading curtains of rain, he could see for two or three miles. The concrete of the field stretched away into the distance, and vehicles moved among the upthrust hulls - a view surprisingly similar to a hundred space terminals he had seen on Federation planets. Beyond the concrete plain was a hint of foliage-covered slopes reaching up into the clouds. They could have been low hills or the beginning of a mountain range. Closer to the shuttle a covered truck was waiting with an entourage of Syccans, some of which were in warrior's harness, while the others were completely naked. The truck, too, could have been the product of a Federation world. Tavernor's brain was seething with worry about Bethia, but the engineer in him could not help studying the different vehicles and their equipment, and noting how the designers had reached the same solutions to the universal problems as their Terran counterparts. The waiting truck was particularly interesting. Its bed had two square depressions ringed with locking devices - which suggested it had been custom-built for transporting the cubes from the shuttle. Tavernor filed the observation

away with others concerning the painstaking design of the prison cells.

The Syccans wired the cubes to a winch in the interior of the truck and went through the same procedure. of reconnecting the environment-control units to a generator at the front of the vehicle. Tavernor's bafflement increased as he watched them. Analysis of samples of the Syccan atmosphere found trapped in captured alien equipment had shown Terran scientists that it was not a good mixture for humans, but it could be breathed for a week or more before undesirable symptoms would appear. The Syccans were bound to have the same information - after all, they could move freely on the human-inhabited worlds - yet they continued to treat their prisoners with an almost excessive solicitude which Tavernor found distinctly unsettling.

With all the connections made, the cubes were drawn into the truck as a crowd of aliens clustered around with every appearance of animated interest. Bethia remained slumped over her table, but Tavernor watched the black figures with sombre eyes. When exited, the Syccans were less prepossessing than ever - the secondary arms unclasped themselves from the vertical gashes of the eating-mouths and waved feebly, while grey-and-white

excrement splattered from their lower guts. Tavernor was almost glad the thickness of the cube's walls prevented him from hearing whatever kind sounds they were making. But at the same time he was uncomfortably aware that he was the alien on this rain-swept world.

Resisting the desire to shake his fist at them, he stared at the Syccans until the closing door of the truck screened them from his view.

The vehicle moved off and there followed a smooth ride lasting about ten minutes. There was very little space

between the cubes and the windowless sides of the truck, and no aliens were riding in the back with them. Tavernor guessed it was the first time he had been beyond observation since his capture. He tried the doors of the cube, found they were as immovable as before, then did his best to attract Bethia's attention.

When he had been pounding on the wall for several minutes she got up from the table and stood facing him through the dewy glass, the highlights on her shoulders and breasts, and the darker triangle of pubic hair, making a misty composition of archetypal femininity. He waved eagerly but she turned and walked unsteadily to the bed, and he knew she had not even seen him. His concern for her increased, and with it a sense of responsibility - he had been the one who had made her flee to the villa, to

the exact spot where the Syccans were going to land in search of prisoners. Had he not done so she would be dead, as all the other inhabitants of Mnemosyne were bound to be by this time, but death would have been an escape to the egon plane, and preferable to what she seemed to be going through now. Like Lissa, Bethia appeared to have a latent weakness in her will to live. She was wilting visibly, like an uprooted flower, under the strain and the Syccans had not even revealed their plans for what was left of her future.

Tavernor clenched his fist helplessly and paced his cell until the truck gave a final shudder as its engines were switched off. When the door was lowered he saw that the journey had been uphill. The cloud ceiling was sagging low overhead and vision was limited to a few hundred yards of steep hillside spilling downwards on either side of a massive windowless building. Its buttressed walls were of mottled blue stone, and the structure was moulded to the slope. At the elevated side, where the truck had halted, it was only one storey high, but a square opening in the wall revealed cavernous depths of descending levels. The building looked uncompromisingly functional, but Tavernor was unable to guess its purpose. It could have been anything from a prison to a xenological research station, Syccan-style.

The lowered door of the truck formed a platform which was level with the bottom edge of the square opening in the wall. Syccans appeared from the interior, entered the truck and attached more wires to the undersides of the cubes. Tavernor's was drawn out first and he felt his heart lurch as the slow progress took him into the dimness of the enigmatic building. Now, at last, he was bound to get an inkling of what the aliens' intentions were.

As his eyes adjusted to the poor illumination, he saw that the cube was crawling across a broad bare floor. At the far edge was a yawning emptiness, subdivided vertically by massive metal columns. A high mesh fence ran along the edge between the columns, and there were rectangular patches here and there on the floor which suggested that machines had recently been removed.

Tavernor wondered if the building was some kind of workshop which had been converted. But converted for what purpose? Was it that the Syccans, never before having taken prisoners, had no facilities. . . ?

His gaze picked out two square depressions in the floor ahead - depressions ringed with the now-familiar clamps that were used to anchor the cubes. Between them was a low wall from which dangled short power cables, and Tavernor suddenly understood at least part of the Syccans' plans.

He and Bethia were to be kept in this artificial cave for

an extended length of time - perhaps for the rest of their lives.

He could think of no alternative reason for the aliens going to such lengths to provide life-support systems and obviously permanent installations. His mind maliciously began spinning theories around the observed facts. Supposing the Syccans wanted to keep a couple of members of the vanquished human race for their records? As a living exhibit? Supposing they wanted to study human behaviour by starting a captive colony? He turned to look at Bethia's cube. She was lying perfectly still on the bed, apparently oblivious to the black figures silently moving around her.

As he watched, his own cube jolted downwards into its depression and hers was drawn out of sight behind the central wall. Two aliens had begun securing the perimeter anchors before Tavernor realized that the wall had been put there for the specific purpose of denying Bethia and him the minimal comfort of seeing each other. Life, from now on, was to consist of solitary silent days and nights in a glass box, eating from cans, staring through the streaming transparencies at nightmare shapes moving in the gloom, not knowing if Bethia was alive or dead on the other side of the wall. . . .

Hatred gouted up through Tavernor, knotting his muscles, impelling him to take action where no action could be taken. He leapt at the kneeling figures of the Syccans and clawed the intervening glass, shattering his nails - then he saw that the aliens were on the point of connecting the cube to its new power supply. And the last time they had done it the doors had quivered momentarily.

He ran to the centre of the cube, spun just as the inner door was giving a barely perceptible tremor, and threw himself at it with all the speed his lanky frame could muster. There was a sharp pain in his shoulder, a blow

on his unprotected chest from the outer door, and suddenly he was out among the looming, mewling spindle-shapes of the Syccans.

The dimness erupted into movement all around him as his lungs snatched at the chill humid air. An alien wrapped itself around him and he chopped inwards with both hands on the ballooning lungs. The alien slithered inertly down him, and he realized it had not been a warrior or its lungs would have been shielded by a harness. He turned just as a warrior reached him, kicked upwards at the clustered organs of its lower body, missed and went

off balance, expected the alien to take its chance either to blast or stab him. Instead it grabbed for his arms, giving him time to pull its legs out from under it. Tavernor snatched its knife, evaded the grasping fingers, made a backhanded swing at the face and ran.

A Syccan came for him with open arms and impaled itself on the outthrust knife. The secondary arms beat feebly at his wrist as the alien went down. He jumped over it, beat his way between two more aliens, reached the other cube and severed the power cables with a single sweep of the knife. The jolt of current passing up the blade seemed to propel him through the doors of Bethia's cell. He turned, gasping, prepared to defend the doorway, then discovered he was not being pursued. At the same time came the realization that his progress through the throng of Syccans had been a little too easy - not one had struck an actual blow. It was as if they had been concerned not to hurt him. . . 'Mack!' Bethia's face was pale as she raised herself on one elbow.

Tavernor ran to her. 'This is the last chance I'll get to talk to you, Bethia, and there isn't much time.' He spoke urgently as he knelt at the bed and took her hand. 'I . . . it's important for you to go on living. Important to me. I think the Syccans are planning to keep us alive. Alive, Bethia, and I want you to promise me that you'll. . .' He

paused, hearing again in his mind the single word she had uttered. 'What did you call me?'

'You are Mack Tavernor, aren't you?'

'How . . . how did you know?'

'I heard what you said to your father. . . and since then. . . the old dreams I thought would never come back. . . Is it all true, Mack?' Her eyes were alive, as he had never seen them before. Her face was the face of Bethia the child.

He nodded and pressed her cold fingers to his lips. 'I was dead, Bethia. Believe me.'

'And there is a blinding white sun? A sun which speaks?'

'There is. Some day we'll be part of that sun.'

'Mack!' Bethia sat up, and her fingers closed around his with surprising strength. 'Get me out of this cell. I must get away.'

Tavernor looked through the transparent wall. Some of the Syccan were frozen into immobility, but others were running through the ambient dimness.

'I don't know, Bethia. What chance is there? You know we're on a Syccan world. . .' He stopped speaking, overwhelmed by her wide, warm smile.

'You asked me to run away with you into a forest once before, Mack,' she said vibrantly, and her eyes shone with something that looked strangely like compassion.

'Now there's another forest only a hundred yards from us
- let's take what chance there is. No matter how small.'

Tavernor suddenly remembered how he had looked at
the infant Bethia and thought that the ability to produce
children like her was Man's ultimate justification - for
everything. The feeling returned again, exalting him, and

he learned what it was to fly far beyond all considerations
of individual life and death.

'All right,' he said gratefully. 'Let's go.'

He pulled Bethia to her feet and they ran to the doors.

More Syccans had ringed the cube, but he remembered
their curious reluctance to harm him earlier. And the
mist had clamped down further outside the building - if
they could get past the truck there might actually be a
prospect of getting into the surrounding forest. Gripping
the Syccan knife tightly, he burst through the doors and
speared into the wall of black bodies. They fell away
before him and the mirage of hope began to flicker crazily
in his head - then he felt Bethia's hand slip away from
his.

'I'm sorry, Mack,' she seemed to cry, and her pale
figure was fleeing in the opposite direction, weaving and

twisting, slipping through the grasp of black webbed hands like wind-blown smoke.

'Bethia!' Tavernor shouted her name hoarsely as he saw where she was heading, but already she was climbing the high mesh fence with supernatural speed. She poised for an instant on the top rail, a luminous crucifix, and leaped into space.

Tavernor covered his face as he heard her body smash on to the concrete floor far, far below.

Strangely, it was Tavernor who recovered first. The p'lpny impact seemed to paralyse the Syccans - even the smeared pupils of their great eyes ceased to move for a second.

Tavernor shouldered straight through them and ran for the fence. The wire of the mesh cut into his feet as he climbed, but he reached the top and leaned over the rail.

Bethia lay, like a crumpled handkerchief, at least fifty feet-below, in the shadow of dark machines.

Tavernor stood up on the top rail and ran along it to the nearest column, just as the Syccans reached the fence. He threw his arms around the sweating metal flanges and slid downwards within a few inches of his pursuers, but on the outside of the wire. The intersection of floor and column reduced his grip and he almost fell outwards, saving himself only by letting go of the column and

gripping the bottom rail of the fence until his legs had locked around the unseen metal below floor-level.

Syccans' fingers plucked at his through the mesh, and the breathing-mouths in their shoulders mewed frantically.

He disengaged himself and slid downwards, unaware of the column's rough edges tearing through his skin. On the lower floor he ran to Bethia and threw himself down parallel to, but not touching, her broken body. Her face was relaxing into the long sleep. He put his head on his arms and a harsh, bitter sob tore his throat.

'Mack?' An infant's voice came from the bruised lips.

'I'm here, Bethia.'

'Stay with me, Mack. Don't let them. . . get me again until there's no chance. . . of them bringing me back to life.'

'But why, Bethia? Why did you do it?'

Her eyes opened, as if by a great effort, and her lips moved slowly. He put his ear to her mouth and heard her last painful breath shape itself into a single, incredible sentence. When the Syccans reached him he was still lying beside Bethia. His knife was somewhere on the upper floor, but he defended the lifeless body with his bare hands until a gas grenade burst at his feet. And as consciousness fled, Bethia's last words pounded over and over in his head like the oceans of her native Mnemosyne.

'I'm a new type of human being, Mack,' she had said,
'and it was vital for the Syccans to keep me alive.'

9

Many hours later, Tavernor's sewn and bandaged body stirred slightly on the simple plastic bed within his glass cell. He moaned faintly as his mind made the transition from the deep inertia of drugged unconsciousness to the enhanced receptiveness of normal sleep. Dream landscapes of impossible colours and complexities shimmered, spun and shivered all around him.

A blinding white sun spoke with the voice of William Ludlam.

'Well done, Mack Tavernor,' it said.

'Please,' he cried. 'I don't understand.'

'You will.'

A face appeared in the centre of the sun, beautiful, child and woman at the same time. Bethia.

'Sleep well, Mack,' she said. 'You have other work ahead of you.'

Tavernor willed himself towards her, egon-wise, but he was locked into his physical body. 'Bethia?' he pleaded, 'why did you leave me alone?'

'Poor Mack - it was necessary. Others before me were born to die, but they were premature - the Way could

not be opened.'

'The way?'

'Yes, Mack - I am the Way.' The glory of the egon-sun
burned around her. .

'I still don't understand.'

'Man has been incomplete. But he is on the way to
completion - now that the individual mind of a man on
the physical plane can communicate with the mother-
mass through me.'

'Through you!' Tavernor suddenly remembered the
veiled woman's face he had glimpsed during the aching
contacts between his egon existence and the shadow play
of proto-life. 'It was you who called me back - not Lissa.'

'That is so.'

'But if you could do that. . .'

'The ability was latent. My life on Mnemosyne was
nothing but an intermediate stage. I know now that its
only purpose was the evolution of a new kind of egon. I
was the first human being born with the potential to
develop an egon which has the integral power to com- .
municate with the living man. I am the Way.'

Bethia seemed to smile as Tavernor's mind rose, hesi-
tantly at first and then soaring, through new levels of
understanding.

'Evolution,' he said. 'Then you are. . . different.'

'My body was different. The super-egon of which I am now a part had looked beyond the barriers of the present and foreseen the necessity to prepare humanity for its ultimate test. The egons, as you know, have a physical existence, but are so attenuated that the energy of the entire mother-mass was sufficient only to disturb the structure of a single gene. Their final attempt to alter the course of Man's development was made when my grandfather was being conceived. And, as a result, I was born - slightly ahead of evolutionary schedule - with a nervous system equivalent to, or better than, that of a Syccan.'

'You mean the Syccans can. . .' Tavernor was unable to speak as the first dim understanding of what the Syccan war was all about swamped his mind.

'Yes. The Syccans have been complete for many thousands of years, able to communicate directly and continuously with their own world-mind. Their mind structure is not compatible with that of Man, so they might have fought humanity to the death anyway - even without the threat of the butterfly ships.'

'The ships again,' Tavernor breathed.

'Yes. You have reason to hate the Syccans, Mack, but

think how we must have looked to them. No obscenity could describe us in their eyes - hideous, pale-skinned mongers of true-death. And their egon-mass warned them that Man's instinct was to occupy the whole volume of space, filling it with dark wings which would eventually scour the galaxy of true life, robbing the Syccans of their immortality.

'They dedicated themselves to preventing this, and their mother-mass guided them every step of the way - while Man was savaging his own mother-mass, driving it away, robbing himself of even the vague contact possible at that stage of his development. I was born ahead of evolutionary schedule, but in another respect I was late.

Very late.'

'And,' Tavernor guessed, 'the Syccans were aware of you.'

'They were aware, through their egon-mass. That was why they took Mnemosyne, and why I had to be isolated. They were afraid I might be killed accidentally - they intended to keep me alive, not for another seventy or eighty years as you feared, but until the last of the human race had been obliterated.

'That possibility has now been averted - armed with genuine knowledge of his own nature, Man can win the war against the Syccans. It was never possible to get an

armed vessel through their flux screens, but all along men

were using their most awful weapon against themselves.

All that is necessary to reach the Syccans' home worlds with unarmed butterfly ships, and shuttle them through the Syccan egon-masses. This would reduce the Syccans to relying on their unaided intelligence. . . '

Tavernor was shocked. 'But so much death - true death. Would you. . . ?'

'It won't be necessary,' Bethia said gently. 'The war is, in fact, already over. The Syccan mother-mass had prepared them for failure. too. They are vacating this entire sector of space. It is extremely unlikely that Man and Syccan will ever meet again - on the physical plane. . . '

Elation burst like a starshell in Tavernor's mind, then its light abated. 'But how can COMsac be convinced of all this? Who will tell them?'

'You still don't see the truth, Mack.' Bethia smiled again amidst the blinding glory. 'Man has crossed a threshold. I have already fed this information into thousands of the most important brains in the Federation. It has been accepted and is already being acted upon. From now on, every human being has all the knowledge and wisdom of the entire racial consciousness at his disposal. 'There are exciting times ahead, Mack. Man will have

other struggles, but it may be that no problem will be too great for him to solve, no distance too great for him to cross. Awake or dreaming - the true function of sleep has ever been to let the individual mind commune with the world-mind - Man will never be the same again.'

Unable to speak, Tavernor fought to contain the immensities of space and time, then - somehow surpassing them in its infinite poignance - came the memory of Bethia's pale broken body, and the human relationship he would never experience. He knew that his thoughts were her thoughts.

'I'll wait,' he vowed. 'I . . . I'll never love anyone else,' 'You can't love me, Mack,' Bethia's voice was kind. 'I am the Way.'

'But. . .'

'But why do you think the Syccans didn't kill you along with Gervaise Farrell? My grandfather had two sons - one of them my father, one of them Howard Grenoble. The genetic strain was recessive in Howard and in Lissa - your mother. It is only partially recessive in you - the Syccans were aware of this too - and it will become dominant in your children or their children.

'Humanity needs your seed, Mack, to help it up the next step in its evolution - and that is a duty you cannot evade. You will now go forth. . .'

Tavernor awoke abruptly, shivering in the chill humid air of the Syccan world. He stood up painfully and looked ~round him. The interior of the cube was foggy, and the presence of the alien atmosphere inside it told him the power supplies to the environment-control unit had been cut off.

He tried the cube's doors and they swung open easily, allowing him to step outside. The floor was cold beneath his naked feet and the dim building was stagnant, utterly deserted. At once he knew the Syccans had gone.

He walked around the dividing wall and looked into Bethia's cube. Her discarded body glowed whitely beyond the misted transparencies, and he turned quickly away.

Outside the building the world was still, except for the barely perceptible motion of the all-enveloping cloud.

Tavernor shivered again, and realized he had work to do immediately. He would have to locate the food stores and find a way to keep his cell warm until a Federation ship arrived - and that could take a considerable time.

The butterfly ships would be discarded, and the big reaction mass carriers could not be built quickly. Also, he would have to prepare Bethia's grave.

He could not imagine ever getting over the pain of losing her, but the future stretched ahead of him, into infinity.

And it would be a future beyond Man's wildest

ImagIning.