

# JEAN DUPRES

by Gordon R. Dickson

*Anything that man can imagine is theoretically possible. We have made the first giant-step of space flight to the moon. The planets will be next and then—the stars? We have the feeling that, unreasonable as it appears to be in the light of present knowledge, this voyage will someday be possible. What will we find there? What kind of life forms? These are classic science fiction questions that have been answered in exhausting detail down through the years. Yet very rarely is the more important question asked: What will happen when our culture brushes up against an alien culture? "Jean Dupres" is a well-considered, moving answer to that question. For there will be people who will form a bridge between ours and theirs.*

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The way I met Jean Dupres for the first time, I was on independent patrol with a squad of six men, spread out, working through the green tangle of the Utword jungle. I came up to the edge of a place where the jungle was cut off sharp, and looked through the last screen of scroll-edged, eight-foot ferns at a little room of pounded earth, the vestibule of a larger, planted field I could see beyond. Near the opening in the larger field sat a riding macerator with no one in its saddle; and right before me—not five feet beyond the ferns—a boy not more than four years old stood leaning on a rifle that was such a good imitation of the real thing that I could hardly believe that it was a fake.

Then I saw it was not a *fake*.

I went through the last screen of ferns with a rush and took the gun away from the boy even as he tried to swing it to his shoulder. He stood staring at me, blinking and bewildered, trying to make up his mind whether to cry or not; and I looked the rifle over. It was a DeBaraumer, capable of hurling out anything and everything, from a wire-control rocket slug to any handy pebble small enough to rattle through its bore.

"Where did you get this?" I asked him. He had decided not to cry and he looked up at me with a white face and round, desperate eyes.

"My daddy," he said.

"Where's your daddy at?"

Without taking his eyes off my face, he half-turned and pointed away through the opening into the larger field.

"All right," I said. "We'll go see him about this." I unclipped the handmike from my belt and told my six men to close up and follow me in. Then I set my telemeter beacon and turned to go with the boy to find his daddy—and I stopped dead.

For there were two of the Klahari young men standing just inside the edge of the small clearing about twenty feet off. They must have been there before I stepped through the last ferns myself, because my scanner would have picked them up if they had been moving. They were seniors, full seven feet tall, with their skins so green that they would have been invisible against the jungle background if it hadn't been for the jewels and weapons and tall feather headdresses.

When you were this close it was obvious that they were humanoid but not human. There were

knifelike bony ridges on the outer edge of their fore and upper arms, and bony plates on their elbows. Their hands looked attenuated and thin because of the extra joint in their fingers. Although they were hairless their greenish-black crests were rising and quivering a bit. Whether from alarm or just excitement I couldn't tell. They were nothing to bother me, just two of them and out in the open that way—but it gave me a shock, realizing they'd been standing there listening and watching while I took the gun from the boy and then talked to him.

They made no move now, as I nudged the boy and started with him out of the clearing past them. Their eyes followed us; but it was not him, or me either, they were watching. It was the DeBaraumer. And that, of course, was why I'd jumped like I had to get the weapon away from the boy.

We came out on to a plowed field and saw a planter's home and buildings about six hundred yards off, looking small and humped and black under the bright white dazzle of the pinhole in the sky that was Achernar, old Alpha Eridani. The contact lenses on my eyes had darkened up immediately, and I looked at the boy, for he was too young to wear contacts safely—but he had already pulled a pair of goggles down off his sun-cap to cover his eyes.

"I'm Corporal Tofe Levenson, of the Rangers," I said to him as we clumped over the furrows. "What's your name?"

"Jean Dupres," he said, pronouncing it something like "Zjon Du-pray."

We came finally up to the house, and the door opened while we were still a dozen paces off. A tall, brown-haired woman with a smooth face looked out, shading her eyes against the sunlight in spite of the darkening of her contacts.

"Jean..." she said, pronouncing it the way the boy had. I heard a man's voice inside the house saying something I could not understand, and then we were at the doorway. She stood aside to let us through and shut the door after us. I stepped into what seemed to be a kitchen. There was a planter at a table spooning some sort of soup into his mouth out of a bowl. He was a round-headed, black-haired, heavy-shouldered type, but I saw how the boy resembled him.

"Corporal—?" he said, staring at me with the spoon halfway to the dish. He dropped it into the dish. "They're gathered! They're raiding—"

"Sit down," I said, for he was half on his feet. "There's no more than four Klahari young men for ten kilometers in any direction from here." He sat down and looked unfriendly.

"Then what're you doing here? Scaring a man—"

"This." I showed him the DeBaraumer. "Your boy had it."

"Jean?" His unfriendly look deepened. "He was standing guard."

"And you in here?"

"Look." He thought for a minute. "Corporal, you got no business in this. This is my family, my place."

"And your gun," I said. "How many guns like this have you got?"

"Two." He was out-and-out scowling now.

"Well, if I hadn't come along, you'd have only had one. There were two Klahari seniors out by your boy—with their eyes on it."

"That's what he's got to learn—to shoot them when they get close."

"Sure," I said. "Mr. Dupres, how many sons have you got?"

He stared at me. All this time, it suddenly struck me, the woman had been standing back, saying nothing, her hands twisted up together in the apron she was wearing.

"One!" she said now; and the way she said it went right through me.

"Yeah," I said, still looking at Dupres. "Well, now listen. I'm not just a soldier, I'm a peace officer, as you know. There's laws here on Utword, even if you don't see the judges and courts very often. So, I'm putting you on notice. There'll be no more letting children handle lethal weapons like this DeBaraumer; and I'll expect you to avoid exposing your son to danger from the Klahari without you around to protect him." I stared hard at him. "If I hear of any more like that I'll haul you up in Regional Court, and that'll mean a week and a half away from your fields; even if the judge lets you off—which he won't."

I understood him all right. He was up out of the chair, apologizing in a second; and after that he couldn't be nice enough.

When my squad came in he insisted we all stay to dinner and put himself out to be pleasant, not only to us, but to his wife and boy. And that was that, except for one little thing that happened, near the end of dinner.

We'd been comparing notes on the Klahari, of course, on how they're different from men; and the boy had been silent all through it. But then, in a moment's hush in the talk, we heard him asking his mother, almost timidly... "Mama, will I be a man when I grow up?—or a Klahari?"

"Jean—" she began, but her husband—his name was Pelang, I remembered and hers was Elmiere, both of them Canadian French from around Lac St. John in Quebec, Canada, back home—interrupted her. He sat back in his chair, beaming and rubbing the hard fat of his belly-swell under his white glass shirt, and took the conversation away from her.

"And what would you like to be then, Jean?" he asked. "A man or a Klahari?" and he winked genially at the rest of us.

The boy concentrated. I could see him thinking, or picturing rather, the people he knew—his mother, his father, himself, struggling with this macerated earth reclaimed from the jungle—and the Klahari he had seen, especially the senior ones, slipping free through the jungle, flashing with jewels and feathers, tall, dark and powerful.

"A Klahari," Jean Dupres said finally.

"*Klahari!*" His father shouted the word, jerking upright in his chair; and the boy shrank. But just then Pelang Dupres must have remembered his guests, and caught himself up with a black scowl at Jean. Then the man tried to pass it off with a laugh.

"Klahari!" he said. "Well, what can you expect? He's a child. Eh? We don't mind children!" But then he turned savagely on the boy, nonetheless. "You'd want to be one of those who'd kill us—who'd take the bread out of your mother's mouth—and your father's?"

His wife came forward and put her arms around the boy and drew him off away from the table.

"Come with me now, Jean," she said; and I did not see the boy again before we left.

As we did leave, as we were outside the house checking equipment before moving off, Pelang was on the house steps watching us, and he stepped up to me for a moment.

"It's for him—for Jean, you understand, Corporal," he said, and his eyes under the darkened contact glasses were asking a favor of me. "This place—" he waved an arm at cleared fields. "I won't live long enough for it to pay me for my hard work. But hell be rich, someday. You understand?"

"Yeah. Just stay inside the law," I said. I called the men together and we moved out in skirmish order into the jungle on the far side of the house. Later, it came to me that maybe I had been a little hard on Pelang.

I didn't pass by that area again that season. When I did come by at the beginning of next season I had

a squad of green recruits with me. I left them well out of sight and went and looked in from behind the fringe of the jungle, without letting myself be seen. Pelang was seeding for his second crop of the season, and Jean, grown an inch or so, was standing guard with the De-Baraumer again. I went on without interfering. If Pelang would not give up his ways on the threat of being taken in, there was no point in taking him in. He would simply pay his fine, hate me, and the whole family would suffer, because of the time he was absent from the planting and the place. You can do only so much with people, or for them.

Besides, I had my hands full with my own job. In spite of what I had told Pelang, my real job was being a soldier, and my work was not riding herd on the planters, but riding herd on the Klahari. And that work was getting heavier as the seasons approached the seventeen-year full-cycle period.

My squad had broken out mealpaks and were so involved in eating that I walked up on them without their being aware of it.

"And you want to be Rangers," I said. "You'll never live past this cycle."

They jumped and looked guilty. Innocents. And I had to make fighting men out of them.

"What cycle?" one of them asked. All of them were too young to have remembered the last time it came around. "That and more. You are going to have to understand the Klahari. Or die. And not just hate them. There is nothing evil in what they do. Back on Earth, even we had the Jivaros, the headhunting Indians of the Amazon River. And the Jivaro boys were lectured daily while they were growing up. They were told that it was not merely all right to kill their enemies, it was upstanding, it was honorable, it was the greatest act they could aspire to as men. This code came out of the very jungle in which they were born and raised—and as it was part of them, so the way of the Klahari young men is out of their world and part of them, likewise.

"They were born outside of this jungle, well beyond the desert. They were raised in cities that have a civilization just above the steam-engine level, boys and girls together until they were about nine years old. Then the girls stayed where they were and started learning the chores of housekeeping the cities. But the nine-year-old Klahari boys were pushed out to fend for themselves in the desert.

"Out there, it was help one another or perish. The boys formed loose bands or tribes and spent about three years keeping themselves alive and helping each other stay alive. Their life was one of almost perfect brotherhood. In the desert, their problem was survival and they shared every drop of water and bite of food they could find. They were one for all and all for one, and at this age they were, literally, emotionally incapable of violence or selfishness.

"At about twelve or thirteen, they began to grow out of this incapability, and look toward the jungle. There it was, right alongside their sandy wastes with nothing to stop them entering it—nothing except the older Klahari from age thirteen to seventeen. At this stage the young Klahari males shoot up suddenly from five to about six and a half feet tall, then grow more gradually for the remaining four years in the jungle. And, from the moment they enter the jungle, every other Klahari boy is potentially a mortal enemy. In the jungle, food and drink are available for the reaching out of a hand; and there is nothing to worry about—except taking as many other lives as possible while hanging on to your own."

"*Klahari* lives," a worried Ranger protested. "Why should they trouble us?"

"Why shouldn't they? It's eat or be eaten. They even join into groups, of up to a dozen, once they get older and more jungle-experienced. In this way they can take single strays and smaller groups. This works well enough—except they have to watch their backs at all times among their own group-members. There are no rules. This jungle is no-man's-land. Which was why the Klahari did not object to humans settling here, originally. We were simply one more test for their maturing young men, trying to survive until manhood, so they can get back into the cities."

They digested this and they didn't like it. Jen, the brightest in the squad, saw the connection at once.

"Then that makes us humans fair game as well?"

"Right. Which is why this squad is out here in the jungle. Our job is simply that of a cop in a rough neighborhood—to roust and break up Klahari bands of more than a half-dozen together at once. The young Klahari know that their clubs, crossbows and lances are no match for rifles, and there has to be at least a half dozen of them together before they are liable to try assaulting a house or attacking a planter in his fields. So the arrangement with planters, soldier squads and Klahari is all neat and tidy most of the time—in fact all of the time except for one year out of every seventeen that makes up a generation for them. Because, once a generation, things pile up.

"It's the five-year Klahari that cause it. Post-seniors some people call them, as we call the younger Klahari freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, according to the number of years they have been off the desert and in the jungle. Post-seniors are Klahari who are old enough to go back to the cities and be allowed in—but are hesitating about it. They are Klahari who are wondering if they might not prefer it being top dog in the jungle to starting out on the bottom again, back in the cities. They are Klahari toying with the idea of settling down for life in the jungles and their impulse to kill any other Klahari is damped by maturity and experience. They, unlike those of the first four years of jungle experience, are capable of trusting each other to gather in large bands with a combined purpose—to seize and hold permanently areas of the jungle as private kingdoms."

They were listening closely now—and no one was smiling.

"In the old days, before we humans came, this process once a seventeen-year generation would end inevitably in pitched wars between large bands largely composed of post-seniors. These wars disposed of the genetic variants among the Klahari, and got rid of those who might have interrupted the age-old, cities-desert-jungle-cities-again pattern of raising the Klahari males and eliminating the unfit of each generation. Before we came, everything was tidy. But with us humans now in the jungle, the post-seniors in their bands every seventeen years turn most naturally against us."

My talk had some good effect because the ones who stayed on made good Rangers. They knew what they were doing—and why.

One season followed another and I had my hands full by the time I saw young Jean Dupres again. My squad of six men had grown by that time to a platoon of twenty, because we were now closing the second and final season of the sixteenth year of the cycle and we were having to break up Klahari gangs of as many as fifty in a group. Not only that, but we had the cheerful thought always with us that, with the post-seniors running things, most of the groups we broke up were re-forming again, the minute we'd passed on.

It was time to begin trying to hustle the planters and their families back into our Regional Installations. Time to begin listening to their complaints that their buildings would be burned and leveled, and half their cleared land reclaimed by the jungle when they returned—which was perfectly true. Time to begin explaining to them why it was not practical to bring in an army from Earth every seventeen years to protect their land. And time to try to explain to them once again that we were squatters on a Klahari world, and it was against Earth policy to exterminate the natives and take over the planet entire, even if we could—which we could not. There were millions of the mature Klahari in the cities, and our technical edge wasn't worth that much.

So by the time I came to the Dupres' property, my patience was beginning to wear thin from turning the other cheek to the same bad arguments, dozens of times repeated. And that was bad. Because I knew Pelang Dupres would be one of the stubborn ones. I came up slowly and took a station just inside the ferns at the edge of one of his fields to look the place over—but what I saw was not Pelang, but Jean.

He was coming toward me, a good cautious thirty yards in, from the edge of the field this time, with

his scanner hooked down over his eyes and that old, all-purpose blunderbuss of a DeBaraumer in his arms. Three years had stretched him out and leaned him up. Oddly, he looked more like his mother now—and something else. I squatted behind the ferns, trying to puzzle it out. And then it came to me. He was walking like a Klahari—in the cautious, precise way they have, swinging from ball of foot to ball of other foot with the body always bolt upright from the hips.

I stood up for a better look at him; and he was down on his belly on the earth in an instant, the DeBaraumer swinging to bear on the ferns in front of me, as my movement gave me away to his scanner. I dropped like a shot myself and whistled—for that is what the Klahari can't do, whistle. The muscles in their tongue and lips won't perform properly for it.

He stood up immediately; and I stood up and came out onto the field to meet him.

"You're a sergeant," he said, looking at my sleeve as I came up."

"That's right," I said. "Sergeant Tofe Levenson of the Rangers. I was a corporal when you saw me last. You don't remember?"

He frowned, puzzling it over in his mind, then shook his head. Meanwhile I was studying him. There was something strange about him. He was still a boy, but there was something different in addition—it was like seeing a seven-year-old child overlaid with the adult he's going to be. As if the future man was casting his shadow back on his earlier self. The shadow was there in the way he carried the rifle, and in his stance and eyes.

"I'm here to see your daddy," I said.

"He's not here."

"Not here!" I stared at him, but his face showed only a mild curiosity at my reaction. "Where is he?"

"He and my ma—mother"—he corrected himself—"went in to Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen for supplies. They'll be back tomorrow."

"You mean you're here alone?"

"Yes," he said, again with that faint puzzlement that I should find this odd, and turned back toward the buildings. "Come to the house. I'll make you some coffee, Sergeant."

I went to the house with him. To jog his memory, on the way I told him about my earlier visit. He thought he remembered me, but he could not be sure. When I spoke to him about the Klahari, I found he was quite aware of the danger they posed to him, but was as strangely undisturbed by it as if he had been a Klahari himself. I told him that I was here to warn his father to pack up his family and retire to the Strongpoint he was currently at for supplies—or, better yet, pull back to one of our base installations. I said that the post-senior Klahari were grouping and they might begin raiding the planters' places in as little as three weeks' time. Jean corrected me, gravely.

"Oh, no, Sergeant," he said. "Not for the rest of this season."

"Who told you that?" I said—snorted, perhaps. I was expecting to hear it had been his father's word on the subject.

"The Klahari," he said. "When I talk to them."

I stared at him.

"You *talk* to them?" I said. He ducked his head, suddenly a little embarrassed, even a little guilty-looking.

"They come to the edge of the fields," he said. "They want to talk to me."

"Want to talk to you? To *you*? Why?"

"They..." He became even more guilty-looking. He would not meet my eyes, "want to know... things."

"What things?"

"If..." he was miserable, "I'm a... man."

All at once it broke on me. Of course, there could only be a few children like this boy, who had never seen Earth, who had been born here, and who were old enough by now to be out in the fields. And none of the other children would be carrying rifles—real ones. The natural assumption of the Klahari would of course be that they were young versions of human beings—except that in Jean's case, to a Klahari there was one thing wrong with that. It was simply unthinkable—no, it was more than that; it was inconceivable—to a Klahari that anyone of Jean's small size and obvious immaturity could carry a weapon. Let alone use it. At Jean's age, as I told you, the Klahari thought only of brotherhood.

"What do you tell them?"

"That I'm... almost a man." Jean's eyes managed to meet mine at last and they were wretchedly apologetic for comparing himself with me, or with any other adult male of the human race. I saw his father's one-track, unconsciously brutal mind behind that.

"Well," I said harshly. "You almost are—anyone who can handle a scanner and a rifle like that."

But he didn't believe me. I could see from his eyes that he even distrusted me for telling such a bald-faced lie. He saw himself through Pelang's eyes—DeBaraumer, scanner, and ability to talk with the Klahari notwithstanding.

It was time for me to go—there was no time to waste getting on to the next planter with my warnings. I did stay a few minutes longer to try and find out how he had learned to talk Klahari. But Jean had no idea. Somewhere along the line of growing up he had learned it—in the unconscious way of children that makes it almost impossible for them to translate word by word from one language to another. Jean thought in English, or he thought in Klahari. Where there were no equal terms, he was helpless. When I asked him why the Klahari said that their large bands would not form or attack until the end of the season, he was absolutely not able to tell me.

So I went on my way, preaching my gospel of warning, and skirmishing with the larger bands of Klahari I met, chivvying and breaking up the smaller ones. Finally I finished the swing through my district and got back to Regional Installation to find myself commissioned lieutenant and given command of a half company. I'd been about seventy percent successful in getting planters to pull back with their families into protected areas—the success being mainly with those who had been here more than seventeen years. But of those who hesitated, more were coming in every day to safety, as local raids stepped up.

However, Jean turned out to be right. It was the end of the season before matters finally came to a head with the natives—and then it happened all at once.

I was taking a shower at Regional Installation, after a tour, when the general alarm went. Two hours later I was deep in the jungle almost to the edge of the desert, with all my command and with only a fighting chance of ever seeing a shower again.

Because all we could do was retreat, fighting as we went. There had been a reason the Klahari explosion had held off until the end of the season—and that was that there never had been such an explosion to date. An interracial sociological situation such as we had on Utword was like a half-filled toy balloon. You squeezed it flat in one place and it bulged someplace else. The pressure our planters put on the maturing Klahari made the five-year ones, the post-seniors, organize as they had never needed or wanted to do before.

The number of our planters had been growing in the seventeen years since the last Klahari generation. Now it was no longer possible to ignore the opposition, obvious in the cleared fields and houses and

Strongpoints, to any post-senior Klahari's dream of a jungle kingdom.

So the Klahari had got together and made plans without bunching up. Then, all in one night, they formed. An army—well, if not an army, a horde—twenty to thirty thousand strong, moving in to overrun all signs of human occupancy in the jungle.

We, the human soldiers, retreated before them, like a thin skirmish line opposed to a disorganized, poorer armed, but unstoppable multitude. Man by man, sweating through the depths of that jungle, it was hardly different from a hundred previous skirmishes we'd had with individual bunches—except that the ones we killed seemed to spring to life to fight with us again, as ever-fresh warriors took their place. There would be a rush, a fight, and a falling back. The half an hour, or an hour perhaps, in which to breathe—and then another rush of dark forms, crossbow bolts and lances against us again. And so it went on. We were killing ten—twenty—to one, but we were losing men too.

Finally, our line grew too thin. We were back among the outermost planters' places now, and we could no longer show a continuous front. We broke up into individual commands, falling back toward individual Strongpoints. Then the real trouble began—because the rush against us now would come not just from the front, but from front and both sides. We began to lose men faster.

We made up our ranks a little from the few planters we picked up as we retreated—those who had been fool enough not to leave earlier. Yes, and we got there too late to pick up other such fools, too. Not only men, but women as well, hacked into unrecognizability in the torn smoke-blackened ruins of their buildings.

... And so we came finally, I, the three soldiers and one planter who made up what was left of my command, to the place of Pelang Dupres.

I knew we were getting close to it, and I'd evolved a technique for such situations. We stopped and made a stand just short of the fields, still in the jungle. Then, when we beat back the Klahari close to it, we broke from the jungle and ran fast under the blazing white brilliance of distant Achernar, back toward the buildings across the open fields, black from the recent plowing.

The Klahari were behind us, and before us. There was a fight going on at the buildings, even as we ran up. We ran right into the midst of it; the whirl of towering, dark, naked, ornamented bodies, the yells and the screeches, the flying lances and crossbow bolts. Elmiere Dupres had been dragged from the house and was dead when we reached her.

We killed some Klahari and the others ran—they were always willing to run, just as they were always sure to come back. Pelang seemed nowhere about the place. I shoved in through the broken doorway, and found the room filled with dead Klahari. Beyond them, Jean Dupres, alone, crouched in a corner behind a barricade of furniture, torn open at one end, the DeBaraumer sticking through the barricade, showing a pair of homemade bayonets welded to its barrel to keep Klahari hands from grabbing it and snatching it away. When he saw me, Jean jerked the rifle back and came fast around the end of the barricade.

"My mama—" he said. I caught him as he tried to go by and he fought me—suddenly and without a sound, with a purposefulness that multiplied his boy's strength.

"Jean, no!" I said. "You don't want to go out there!"

He stopped fighting me all at once.

It was so sudden, I thought for a moment it must be a trick to get me to relax so that he could break again. And then, looking down, I saw that his face was perfectly calm, empty and resigned.

"She's dead," he said. The way he said them, the words were like an epitaph.

I let him go, warily. He walked soberly past me and out of the door. But when he got outside, one of

my men had already covered her body with a drape a Klahari had been carrying off; and the body was hidden. He went over and looked down at the drape, but did not lift it. I walked up to stand beside him, trying to think of something to say. But, still with that strange calmness, he was ahead of me.

"I have to bury her," he said, still evenly empty of voice. "Later we'll send her home to Earth."

The cost of sending a body back to Earth would have taken the whole Dupres farm as payment. But that was something I could explain to Jean later.

"I'm afraid we can't wait to bury her, Jean," I said. The Klahari are right behind us."

"No," he said, quietly. "We'll have time. I'll go tell them."

He put the DeBaraumer down and started walking toward the nearest edge of the jungle. I was so shaken by the way he was taking it all that I let him go—and then I heard him talking in a high voice to the jungle; words and sounds that seemed impossible even from a child's throat. In a few minutes he came back.

"They'll wait," he said, as he approached me again. "They don't want to be rude."

So we buried Elmire Dupres, without her husband—who had gone that morning to a neighbor's field—with never a tear from her son, and if I had not seen those piled Klahari dead in the living room before his barricade, I would have thought that Jean himself had had no connection with what had happened here. At first, I thought he was in shock. But it was not that. He was perfectly sensible and normal. It was just that his grief and the loss of his mother were somehow of a different order of things than what had happened here. Again it was like the Klahari, who are more concerned with why they die than when, or how.

We marked the grave and went on, fighting and falling back—and Jean Dupres fought right along with us. He was as good as one of my men any day—better, because he could move more quietly and he spotted the attacking Klahari before any of us. He had lugged the DeBaraumer along—I thought because of his long association with it. But it was only a weapon to him. He saw the advantage of our jungle rifles in lightness and firepower over it, almost at once—and the first of our men to be killed, he left the DeBaraumer lying and took the issue gun instead.

We were three men and a boy when we finally made it to the gates of Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen, and inside. There were no women there. The Strongpoint was now purely and simply a fort, high, blank walls and a single strong gate, staffed by the factor and the handful of local planters who had refused to leave before it was too late. They were here now, and here they would stay. So would we. There was no hope of our remnant of a band surviving another fifty kilometers of jungle retreat.

I left Jean and the men in the yard inside the gates and made a run for the factor's office to put in a call to Regional Installation. One air transport could land here in half an hour and pick us all up, planters and my gang alike. It was then that I got the news.

I was put right through to the colonel of the Rangers before I could even ask why. He was a balding, pleasant man whom I'd never spoken three words to in my life before; and he put it plainly and simply, and as kindly as possible.

"... This whole business of the jungle Klahari forming one single band has the city Klahari disturbed for the first time," he told me, looking squarely at me out of the phone. "You see, they always assumed that the people we had here were *our* young men, our equivalent of the Klahari boys, getting a final test before being let back into our own civilization elsewhere. It was even something of a compliment the way they saw it—our coming all this way to test our own people on their testing ground here. Obviously we didn't have any test area to match it anywhere else. *And, of course, we let them think so.*"

"Well, what's wrong with that, now—sir?" I asked. "We're certainly being tested."

"That's just it," he said. "We've got to let you be tested this time. The city Klahari, the older ones, have finally started to get worried about the changes taking place here. They've let us know that they don't intervene on the side of their boys—and they expect us not to intervene on the side of ours."

I frowned at him. I didn't understand in that first minute what he meant.

"You mean you can't pick us up from here?"

"I can't even send you supplies, Lieutenant," he said. "Now that it's too late, they're working overtime back home to figure out ways to explain our true situation here to the Klahari and make some agreement on the basis of it with them. But meanwhile—our investment in men and equipment on this world is out of reach—too much to waste by war with the adult Klahari now." He paused and watched me for a second. "You're on your own, Lieutenant."

I digested that.

"Yes, Colonel," I said, finally. "All right. We'll hold out here. We're twenty or so men, and there's ammunition and food. But there's a boy, the son of a local planter..."

"Sorry, Lieutenant He'll have to stay too."

"Yes, sir..."

We went into practical details about holding the Strongpoint. There was a sergeant with the remnants of a half company, maybe another twenty men, not far west of me, holding an unfinished Strongpoint. But no communications. If I could get a man through to tell that command to join us here, our situation would not be so bad. One man might get through the Klahari...

I finished and went outside. Three new planters were just being admitted through the gate, ragged and tired—and one was Pelang Dupres. Even as I started toward him, he spotted Jean and rushed to the boy, asking him questions.

"... but your mama! Your mama!" I heard him demanding impatiently as I came up. One of my men, who had been there, pushed in between Pelang and the boy.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Dupres," he said, putting his hand on Pelang's arm and trying to lead him away from Jean. I could see him thinking that there was no need to harrow up Jean with a rehearsal of what had happened. But Pelang threw him off.

"Tell me? Tell me what?" he shouted, pushing the man away, to face Jean again. "What happened?"

"We buried her, Daddy," I heard Jean saying quietly. "And afterward we'll send her to Earth—"

"Buried her—" Pelang's face went black with congestion of blood under the skin, and his voice choked him. "She's dead!" He swung on the man who had tried to lead him away. "You let her be killed; and you saved this—this—" He turned and struck out at Jean with a hand already clenched into a fist, Jean made no move to duck the blow, though with the quickness that I had seen in him while coming to the Strongpoint, I am sure he could have. The fist sent him tumbling, and the men beside him tried to grab him.

But I had lost my head when he hit Jean. I am not sorry for it, even now. I drove through the crowd and got Pelang by the collar and shoved him up against the concrete side of the watch-tower and banged his head against it. He was blocky and powerful as a dwarf bull, but I was a little out of my head. We were nose-to-nose there and I could feel the heat of his panting, almost sobbing, breath and see his brown eyes squeezed up between the anguished squinting of the flesh above and below them.

"Your wife is dead," I said to him, between my teeth. "But that boy, that son of yours, Dupres, was there when his *mother* died! And where were you?"

I saw then the fantastic glitter of the bright tears in his brown squeezed-lip eyes. Suddenly he went

limp on me, against the wall,

and his head wobbled on his thick, sunburned neck.

"I worked hard—" he choked suddenly. "No one worked harder than me, Pelang. For them both—and they..." He turned around and sobbed against the watchtower wall. I stood back from him. But Jean pushed through the men surrounding us and came up to his father. He patted his father's broad back under its white glass shirt and then put his arms around the man's thick waist and leaned his head against his father's side. But Pelang ignored him and continued to weep uncontrollably. Slowly, the other men turned away and left the two of them alone.

There was no question about the man to send to contact the half company at the unfinished Strongpoint west of us. It had to be the most jungle-experienced of us; and that meant me. I left the fort under the command of the factor, a man named Strudenmeyer. I would rather have left it under command of one of my two remaining enlisted men, but the factor was technically an officer in his own Strongpoint and ranked them, as well as being known personally to the local planters holed up there. He was the natural commander. But he was a big-bellied man with a booming voice and very noticeable whites to his eyes; and I suspected him of a lack of guts.

I told him to be sure to plant sentinels in the observation posts, nearly two hundred feet off the ground in treetops on four sides of the Strongpoint and a hundred meters out. And I told him to pick men who could stay there indefinitely. Also, he was to save his men and ammunition until the Klahari actually tried to take the Strongpoint by assault.

"... You'll be all right," I told him, and the other men, just before I went out the gate. "Remember, no Strongpoint has ever been taken as long as the ammunition held out, and there were men to use it."

Then I left.

The forest was alive with Klahari, but they were traveling, not hunting, under the impression all humans still alive were holed up in one place or another. *It* took me three days to make the unfinished Strongpoint, and when I got there I found the sergeant and his men had been wiped out, the Strongpoint itself gutted. I was surprised by two seniors there, but managed to kill them both fairly quietly and get away. I headed back for Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen.

It was harder going back; and I took eight days. I made most of the distance on my belly and at night. At that, I would never have gotten as far as I did, except for luck and the fact that the Klahari were not looking for humans in the undergrowth. Their attention was all directed to the assault building up against Strongpoint Hundred Fourteen.

The closer I got to the Strongpoint, the thicker they were. And more were coming in all the time. They squatted in the jungle, waiting and growing in numbers. I saw that I would never make it back to the Strongpoint itself, so I headed for the tree holding the north sentinel post hidden in its top (the Klahari did not normally climb trees or even look up) to join the sentinel there.

I made the base of the tree on the eighth night, an hour before dawn—and I was well up the trunk and hidden when the light came. I hung there in the crotch all day while the Klahari passed silently below. They have a body odor something like the smell of crushed grass; you can't smell it unless you get very close. Or if there are a lot of them together. There were now and their odor was a sharp pungency in the air, mingled with the unpleasant smell of their breath, reminiscent, to a human nose, of garbage. I stayed in that tree crotch all day and climbed the rest of the way when it got dark. When I reached the platform, it was dark and empty. The stores of equipment kept there by general order had never been touched. Strudenmeyer had never sent out his men.

When morning came, I saw how serious that fault had been. I had set up the dew catchers to funnel drinking water off the big leaves in the crown of the tree above me, and done a few other simple things I could manage quietly in the dark. With dawn the next day I set up this post's equipment, particularly the

communication equipment with the Strongpoint and the other sentinel posts. As I had suspected, the other posts were empty—and Strudenmeyer had not even set a watch in the communications room at the Strongpoint. The room when I looked into it was empty, and the door closed. No one came to the sound of the call buzzer.

I could see most of the rooms of the Strongpoint's interior. I could see outside the buildings, all around the inside of the walls and the court separating them from the buildings and the watch-tower in the center. The scanners set in walk and ceilings there were working perfectly. But I could not tell Strudenmeyer and the rest I was there. Just as I could get radio reception from the station at Regional Installation, but I could not call R.I. because my call had to be routed through the communications room in the Strongpoint, where there was nobody on duty.

A hundred and eighty feet below me, and all around the four walls that made the Strongpoint what it was, the Klahari were swarming as thickly as bees on their way to a new hive. And more were coming in hourly. It was not to be wondered at. With the group to the west wiped out, we were the forward point held by humans in the jungle. Everything beyond us had been taken already and laid waste. The Klahari post-seniors leading the horde could have bypassed us and gone on—but that was not their nature.

And Strudenmeyer was down there with twenty men and a boy—no, seventeen men. I could count three wounded under an awning in the west yard. Evidently there had already been assaults on his walls. There was no real discipline to the young Klahari, even now, and if a group got impatient they would simply go ahead and attack, even if the leaders were patient enough to wait and build up their forces.

So either there had been premature assaults on the walls, or Strudenmeyer was even more of a bad commander than I had thought, and had been putting men up on the walls to be shot at, instead of using rifles through the gunports on automatic and remote control. Even as I thought this, I was putting it out of my mind. I think that at that time I didn't want to believe that the factor could be that poor a leader, because I had the responsibility for him, having put him in charge of the Strongpoint. Just at that moment, however, something else happened to help shove it out of my mind, for I discovered a new wrinkle to this treetop post that they hadn't had back when I was learning about sentinel duty.

In addition to the wall scanners that gave me an interior view of the Strongpoint, I found there were eight phone connections inside its walls from which the commander there could check with the sentinels. All he had to do was pick up a phone and ask whatever question he had in mind. But the damn things were oneway!

I could activate the receiver at my end. In other words, I could hear what anyone was saying in the immediate vicinity of the phone. But I couldn't make myself heard by them until someone lifted down the phone at that end. And there was no bell or signal with which I could call them to lift a phone down. I jammed the receivers all open, of course, and several different conversations around the fort came filtering into my post to match up with the images on some of the scanners before me. But nobody was talking about trying a phone to one of the sentinel posts. Why should they? As far as they knew they were unmanned.

I lay there, protected by the shade of the crown leaves, as Achernar climbed up into the sky over the jungle and the Strongpoint, and more Klahari filtered in every moment below me. I was safe, comfortable, and absolutely helpless. I had food for half a year, the dew catchers supplied me with more pure water than I could drink, and around me on my pleasantly breezy perch were all modern conveniences, including solar cookers to heat my food, or water for shaving if it came to that. I lay there like an invisible deity, seeing and hearing most of what went on below in the Strongpoint and entirely unsuspected by those I was watching. A commander without a command, spectator to what, it soon became plain, was a command without a commander.

You might think the men who would delay longest before pulling back in the face of a threat like the Klahari would be the bravest and the best of the planters. But it was not so. These men were the

stubbornest of the planters, the most stupid, the most greedy; the hardheads and unbelievers. All this came out now before me on the scanners, and over the open phones, now that they were completely cut off and for the first time they fully saw the consequences of their delaying.

And Strudenmeyer was their natural leader.

There was nothing the factor had done that he ought to have done, and there was nothing he had left undone that he had ought not to have done. He had failed to send out men to the sentinel posts, because they objected to going. He had omitted to take advantage of the military knowledge and experience of the two enlisted men I had brought to the Strongpoint with me. Instead he had been siding with the majority—the combat-ignorant planters—against the military minority of two when questions of defending the Strongpoint came up. He had put men on the walls—inviting premature assaults from the Klahari that could not have taken the Strongpoint in any case, but that could whittle down his fighting strength. As they already had by wounding three of his able men, including Pelang Dupres. And, most foolish of all in a way, he had robbed himself of his best rifle and his most knowledgeable expert of the Klahari, by reducing Jean Dupres from the status of fighting man to that of seven-year-old child.

He had done this because Pelang, lying under the awning, groaning with self-pity at the loss of his wife, and a lance-thrust through his shoulder, and abusing his son who was restricted to the single duty of waiting on the wounded, treated the boy with nothing but contempt. Jean's only defenders were my two enlisted men, who had seen him in action in the jungle. But these two were discounted and outcast anyway in the eyes of the planters, who would have liked to have found reason to blame them, and the military in general, for the whole situation.

So—fools listen to fools and ignore the wise, as I think I read sometime, somewhere. The booming-voiced, white-eyed factor, his big belly swelling even larger with fear and self-importance, listened to the shortsighted, bitter and suffering father who knew nothing but his fields—and ignored the quiet, self-contained boy who could have told him, day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute, what the Klahari response would be to any action he might take inside the Strongpoint. The afternoon of the first day I was in the sentinel post, there was another premature assault on the walls of the Strongpoint, and another planter, a man named Barker, was badly wounded by a crossbow bolt in the chest. He died less than an hour later.

Just before the sun went down, there was a calling from the jungle. A single, high-pitched Klahari voice repeating itself over and over. I studied the scanners that gave me an outside view of the Strongpoint and the jungle surrounding, but could not locate the caller. In fact, from what my scanners showed, the scene was peaceful. Most of the Klahari were out of sight under the jungle greenery, and the Strongpoint seemed to swelter almost deserted in its small cleared area, its thirty-foot-high concrete walls surrounding the interior buildings dominated by the watchtower which rose from them like a square column of concrete some fifty feet into the air. Strudenmeyer had a man on duty up there, in the air-conditioned bubble under the sunshade, but he had been napping when the calling started.

Then the sound of Jean's voice from a scanner screen drew me back to the bank of them showing the inside of the Strongpoint. I saw him, halfway between the awning-covered wounded's area and the west wall. Strudenmeyer had caught his arm and was holding him from going further.

"... what for?" Strudenmeyer was saying, as I came up to the scanner screen.

"It's me they're calling," said Jean.

"You? How do *they* know *you're* here?" The factor stared uncertainly down at him.

Jean merely stared back, the blank stare of the young when explanation is hopeless. To him—and to me, watching—it was so obvious why the Klahari should know not only that he was there, but that everyone else in the fort who was there, was there, that words were a waste of time. But Strudenmeyer had never risen to the point of giving the Klahari credit for even simple intelligence. He ignored the cities

and the schools from which these ornamented young natives came, and thought of them as savages, if not near-animals.

"Come back here. We'll talk to your father," said the factor, after a moment. They went back to Pelang, who listened to Strudenmeyer's report of the situation and cursed both the factor and his son.

"You must be mistaken, Jean. You don't understand Klahari that well," decided Strudenmeyer, finally. "Now, stay away from that wall. Your father needs you and I don't want you getting hurt. That wall's a place for men and you're just a little boy. Now, mind what I say!"

Jean obeyed. He did not even argue. It is something—inconceivable—the adaptability of children; and it has to be seen to be testified to. Jean *knew* what he was; but he *believed* what his father and the other adults told him he was. If they told him he did not understand Klahari and he did not belong on the wall of the Strongpoint, then it must be so, even if it was against all the facts. He went back to fetching and carrying cold drinks to the wounded, and after a while the voice from the jungle ceased and the sun went down.

The Klahari do not as individuals try to kill each other at night. So, automatically, they did not try to storm the Strongpoint under cover of darkness, when their chances of taking it would have been best. But the next morning at dawn, two thousand of them threw themselves at the walls from the outside.

They were not secretive about it; and that alone saved the Strongpoint, where the angle sentry on the watchtower was sleeping as soundly as the rest below. The whole men in the fort manned the walls and began firing, not only the guns under their hands, but a rifle apiece to either side of them on automatic remote control. I ought to say instead, that about three quarters of them began firing, because the rest froze at the sight of the waves of dark seven-foot bodies swarming up to the base of the wall and trying to lean tree trunks against it, up which they could clamber. But the remaining three quarters of able men, multiplied three times by the automatic control rifles, literally hosed the attackers from the wall with rifle slugs until the assault was suddenly broken and the Klahari ran.

Suddenly, under the morning sun, the jungle was silent, and an incredible carpet of dead and dying Klahari covered the open space surrounding the Strongpoint on four sides. Inside, the fighters—and the non-fighters—counted one man dead and five wounded in varying degrees, only one badly enough to be removed to the hospital ward under the awning.

The fallen Klahari lay scattered, singly and in piles, like poisoned grasshoppers after their swarming advance has been met by the low-flying plane spraying insecticide. The others in the jungle around them dragged a few of the wounded to cover under the ferns, but they had no medicines or surgical techniques and soon there was a steady sound from the wounded natives outside the wall and the wounded humans within. While shortly, as the sun rose, unseen but felt, the heat climbed; and soon the stink of death began to rise around the Strongpoint, like a second, invisible outer wall.

I am sorry to make a point of this, but it was this way. It is this way such things have always been and I want you to know how it was for Jean Dupres. He was seven years old, his mother was dead, he was surrounded by death and facing it himself—and he had lived through all that had happened to the men around him so far. Now he was to see many of those within the Strongpoint with him recovering their birthright as men before his eyes.

For most did recover it. This too always happens. The full assault of the Klahari on the Strongpoint had been like a flail, striking the grain from the plant and chaff. When it had passed, Strudenmeyer was no longer in command; and several among the wounded like Pelang Dupres were up and carrying a gun again. Strudenmeyer had been one of those who had not fired a weapon during the attack. He and one other were never to fire a gun right up to their deaths, a few days later. But where the Strongpoint had been manned by civilians two hours before, now it was manned by veterans. Of my two enlisted men, one had been the man to die in the assault and the other was badly wounded and dying. But a planter

named Dakeham was now in charge and he had posted a man on the watchtower immediately the attack was over and had gone himself to the communications room to call Regional Installation Military Headquarters, for advice, if not for rescue.

But he found he could not make the radio work. Helpless, watching from my sentinel post through the scanner in the room wall, I raged against his ignorance, unable to make him hear me, so that I could tell him what was wrong. What was wrong, was that Strudenmeyer, like many operators living off by themselves, had fallen into careless individual ways of handling and maintaining his set. The main power switch had worn out, and Strudenmeyer had never put himself to the trouble of replacing it. Instead he had jury-rigged a couple of bare wires that could be twisted together, to make power available to the set. The wires lay before the control board, right in plain sight. But Dakeham, like most modern people, knew less than nothing about radio—and Strudenmeyer, when they hauled him into the communications room, was pallid-faced, unresisting, and too deep in psychological shock to tell them anything.

Dakeham gave up, went out, and closed the door of the communications room of the Strongpoint behind him. To the best of my recollection, it was never opened again.

That evening, the Klahari hit the walls again in another assault. It was not as determined as the first, and it met a more determined resistance. It was beaten off, with only two men slightly wounded. But that was just the first day of full-scale attack.

Twice and sometimes three times a day after that, the Klahari attacked the Strongpoint. The odor of death grew so strong about the fort that it even got into my dreams, high up in my treetop; and I would dream I was wandering through fields of dead of the past and forgotten wars I had read about as a student in school. The Klahari lost unbelievably with every assault—but always there were more coming in through the jungle to increase their numbers. This one Strongpoint was holding up all the Klahari advance, for psychologically they could not break off a contest once it was begun, though they could retreat temporarily to rest. But inside the Strongpoint, its defenders were being whittled down in number. It was almost unbearable to watch. A dozen times I found my gun at my shoulder, my finger on the trigger. But I didn't pull it. My small help would not change the outcome of the battle—and it would be suicide on my part. They would come up after me, in the dark, watching me, waiting for me to sleep. When I dozed I would be dead. I knew this, but it did not help the feeling of helplessness that overwhelmed me while I watched them die, one by one.

Daily, though neither the besieging Klahari nor the humans in the Strongpoint could see or hear it, a reconnaissance plane circled high up out of sight over the area, to send back pictures and reports of the fight there to Regional Installation. Daily, swaying in my treetop sentinel post, I heard over my voice receiver, the steady, clear tones of the newscaster from Regional Installation, informing the rest of the humans on Utword.

"... the thirty-seventh attack on the Strongpoint was evidently delivered shortly after dawn today. The reconnaissance plane saw fresh native casualties lying in the clearing around all four walls. Numbers of Klahari in the surrounding jungle are estimated to have risen to nearly forty thousand individuals, only a fraction of whom, it is obvious, can take part in an attack at any one time. With the Strongpoint, pictures indicate that its defenders there seem to be taking the situation with calmness..."

And I would turn to my scanners and my phones showing me the inside of the Strongpoint and hear the sounds of the wounded, the dying, and those who were face-to-face with death...

"... They've got to quit sometime," I heard Bert Kaja, one of the planters, saying on my fifteenth day in the tree. He was squatting with the wounded, and Dakeham, under the awning.

"Maybe," said Dakeham, noncommittally. He was a tall, lean, dark individual with a slightly pouting face but hard eyes.

"They can't keep this up forever. They'll run out of food," said Kaja, seated swarthy and crosslegged

on the ground. The jungle must be stripped of food all around here by this time."

"Maybe," said Dakeham.

They discussed the subject in the impersonal voices with which people back home discuss the stock market. Jean Dupres was less than eight feet from them, and possibly he could have answered their questions, but he was still in the occupation to which Strudenmeyer had assigned him—caring for the wounded.

Eight now he was washing the lance wound, the original wound in his father's shoulder. Pelang watched him, scowling, not saying anything until the other two men rose and left. Then he swore—abruptly, as Jean tightened a new bandage around the shoulder.

"—be careful, can't you?"

Jean loosened the bandage.

"You..." Pelang scowled worse than ever, watching the boy's face, tilted downward to watch his working hands. "You and she wanted to go back... to Earth, eh?" Jean looked up, surprised.

"You said she wanted to be buried back tome? You told me that!" said Pelang. Still staring at his father, Jean nodded.

"And you, too? Eh? You wanted to go back, too, and leave me here?"

Jean shook his head.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not!" Jean's voice was injured.

"Ah, you lie... you lie!" snarled Pelang, unhappily. "You don't lie to me with words, but you lie anyway, all the time!" He reached up with his good hand and caught the boy by the shoulder. "Listen, I tell you this is a terrible place, but me, your daddy, worked hard at it to make you rich someday. Now, answer me!" He shook the boy. "It's a terrible place, this jungle, here! Isn't it?"

"No," said the boy, looking as if he was going to cry.

"You..." Pelang let go of Jean's shoulder and clenched his fist as if he were going to strike his son. But instead his face twisted up as if he were going to cry himself. He got to his feet and lumbered away, toward the walls, out of range of my immediate scanner. Jean sat still, looking miserable for a moment, then his face smoothed out and he got to his feet and went off about some business of his own to do with the wounded.

In that evening's assault they lost two more men to the attacking Klahari, one of them Dakeham. It was the fifteenth day of full-scale assaults and they were down to eight men able to man the walls, each one of them handling half a wall of rifles on automatic remote, instead of one rifle direct and the rest on automatic. They had found that it was point-blank massed firepower that beat back the attacks; and that what was to be feared were not the Klahari rushing the walls, but the one or two natives who by freak chance got to the top of these barriers and inside the Strongpoint. A Klahari inside the walls could usually kill or wound at least one man before he was shot down.

The one who killed Dakeham did so before any of the others noticed it and went on to the wounded under the awning before he could be stopped. There, Jean killed him, with a rifle one of the wounded had kept by him—but by that time the wounded were all dead.

But there were fresh wounded. Pelang had been lanced again,—this time in the side, and he bled through his bandage there, if he overexerted himself. Kaja had been chosen to command in Dakeham's place. Under the lights, once night had fallen, he went from man to man, slapping them carefully on unwounded back or shoulder.

"Brace up!" he said to them. "Brace up! The Klahari'll be quitting any day now. They must be out of food for miles around. Just a matter of hours! Any day now!"

No one answered him. A few, like Pelang, swore at him. Jean looked at him gently, but said nothing. And, voiceless as far as they were concerned, up in my sentinel's post, I understood what Jean's look meant. It was true that the Klahari were out of food for kilometers about the Strongpoint, but that made no difference. They were able, just like humans, to go several days without food if it was worth it to them—and in this case it was worth it. Going hungry was just the price of being in on the party. After several days the hungriest would break off, travel away in search of fruit and roots and when they were full again, come back.

"... the season's not more than a week from being over!" said Kaja. "With the end of the season, they always move to a new place."

That was truer. It was a real hope. But two weeks was a long way off in a Strongpoint under two or three assaults a day. The evening radio news broadcast came on to emphasize this.

"... this small jungle outpost holds all the Klahari young men at bay," recited the announcer calmly. "The native advance has been frustrated..."

I dozed off in the rocking treetop.

Sometime in the next two days, Jean finally returned to the walls. I did not remember, and I think no one in the Strongpoint remembered when it happened exactly. He must have taken over a bank of rifles on automatic fire when the man handling them was killed by a Klahari who had gotten over the wall. At any rate, he was once more fighting with the men. And the men were now down to three able to fight and two dying under the awning, so no one objected.

They did not lose a man for two days. Jean not only manned his section of the walls, but shot the three Klahari that got over the walls, in that time. It was as if he had eyes in the back of his head. Then, suddenly, in one morning assault, they lost two men and Pelang went down from loss of blood—the wound in his side having reopened and bled during the fighting. Later on that day, the two wounded died. At the evening assault, Pelang lay useless, half-dozing under the awning, while Jean and the remaining planter in fighting shape stood back-to-back in the open middle of the Strongpoint, scanners set up in front of them, each handling two adjacent walls of guns on automatic remote fire.

Half a dozen Klahari made it over the walls and into the Strongpoint. Jean and the planter—whose name I do not remember—grabbed up hand weapons and shot them down. By what amounted to a wild stroke of luck, the man and the boy were able to get them all killed without being wounded themselves.

Night fell, and brought an end to the day's fighting. But later on, about the middle of the night, there was the single, sharp report of a handgun that woke me in my treetop. I turned to the scanners, lifted their hoods one by one, and located Jean standing in the open space before the awning, half in shadow above something lying in an interior angle of the walls. As I looked, he turned, crossed under the lights and came back underneath the awning. I had a scanner there, as I may have mentioned, but the night contrast between the shadow and the interior lights was such that I could barely make out the darkly upright shape of Jean and the recumbent shape of a man, who would be Pelang. Pelang had been half-unconscious earlier, but now his voice came weakly to the phone connection nearby.

"—what is it?"

"He's *shot*," answered Jean; and I saw the upright shape of him fold itself down beside the larger darkness of his father.

"Who...?" Pelang barely whispered.

"He shot himself."

"Ah..." It was a sigh from the man's lips, but whether one of despair or just of weariness or exhaustion, I could not tell. Pelang lay still and silent, and Jean stayed sitting or crouching beside his father... and I almost dozed off again, watching the screen. I was roused by the whispering sound of Pelang's voice. He had begun to talk again, half to himself, just when, I was not sure.

"... I am a man... I can go anywhere. Back home... look at the stars. I told myself, Elmore and me... Nobody farms better than me, Pelang. Nobody works harder. This is a terrible place, but it don't stop me. Elmore, your mama, she wanted to go back home; but we got earth here you can't match, on them stony old fields, *bord la rive* Mistassibi. Man don't let himself be pushed from his crops—no, they don't get away with that, you hear?" He was becoming louder-voiced and excited. I saw the shadow of him heave up and the shape of Jean bowing above him.

"Lie down, Papa..." it was the boy's whisper. "Lie down..."

"This terrible place, but I make my boy rich... you'll be rich someday, Jean. They'll say—"Hey, Jean, how come you're so rich?" then you say—"My daddy, *mon père* Pelang, he made me so.' Then you go back home, take your mama, also; you let them see you way up beyond Lac St. John. 'My daddy, Pelang,' you say, 'he don't never back down for no one, never quits. He's a man, my daddy, Pelang...'"

His voice lowered until I could not make out the words and he rambled on. After a while I dozed; and a little later on I slept deeply.

I woke suddenly. It was day. The sun was up above the leaves over me—and there was a strange silence, all around.

Then I heard a voice, calling.

It was a calling I recognized. I had heard it once before, outside the walls of the Strongpoint, the first day I had been in the treetop sentinel post. It was the calling of the Klahari, that Jean had told Strudenmeyer was for him, days before.

I rolled to the scanners and flipped up all their hoods. Jean still sat where I had seen his indistinct form in the darkness, above the shape of his father, under the awning. But now Pelang was covered with a blanket—even his face—and unutterably still. Jean sat crosslegged, facing the body under the blanket—not so much in the posture of a mourner, as of a guard above the dead. At first as I watched it seemed to me that he did not even hear the calling beyond the walls.

But, after a while, as the calling kept up in the high-pitched Klahari voice, he got slowly to his feet and picked up the issue rifle beside him. Carrying it, he went slowly across the open space, climbed to the catwalk behind the west wall and climbed from that on to the two-foot width of the wall, in plain sight of the Klahari hidden in the jungle. He sat down there, crosslegged, laying the rifle across his knees and stared out into the jungle.

The calling ceased. There came after that a sound I can't describe, a sort of rustling and sighing, like the sound of a vast audience, after a single, breath-held moment of uncertainty, settling itself to witness some occasion. I switched to binoculars, looking directly down into the clearing before the west wall. Several tall Klaharis came out of the jungle and began clearing the dead bodies from a space about twenty feet square before the west wall. When they had gotten down to the macerated earth below the bodies they brought out clean leaves of fern and covered the ground there.

Then they backed off, and three Klahari, feathered and ornamented as none I had ever seen before, came out of the jungle and sat down themselves on the ferns, crosslegged in their fashion—which Jean had imitated on the wall above. Once they were seated, Klahari began to emerge from the jungle and fill in the space behind them, standing and watching.

When as many were into the open space as could get there without getting between the seated three and their view of Jean, another silence fell. It lasted for a few seconds, and then the Klahari on the end

got to his feet and began to talk to Jean.

In the Rangers we are taught a few Klahari phrases—"you must disperse—"

"lay down your weapons"—and the like. A few of us learn to say them well enough to make the Klahari understand, but few of us learn to understand more than half a dozen of the simplest of Klahari statements. It is not only that the native voice is different—they talk high and toward the back of a different-shaped throat than ours; but the way they think is different.

For example, we call this planet "Utword," which is a try at using the native term for it. The Klahari word—sound rather—is actually something like "*Ut*," said high and cut off sharp, toward the back of your mouth. But the point is, no Klahari would ever refer to his planet as simply "Ut." He would always call it "the world of Ut"; because to the Klahari, bound up in this one planet there are four worlds, all equally important. There is the world that was, the world of all past time. There is the world yet to be, the world of time to come. There is a sort of Klahari hell—the world populated by the dead who died in failure; and whose souls will therefore never be reincarnated in Klahari yet to be born. And there is the world of the physical present—the world of *Ut*. So "Utword" is "Ut"-tied onto the human word "world" minus the l-sound the Klahari can't pronounce.

Therefore I understood nothing of what was said by the Klahari who was speaking. From his gestures to the Strongpoint walls and the jungle behind him, I assumed he was talking about the conflict here. And from the way Jean sat listening, I guessed that Jean understood, where I did not. After the speaker was finished, he sat down; and there was a long silence that went on and on. It was plain even to me that they were waiting for some answer from Jean, but he simply sat there. And then the middle Klahari stood up to speak.

His gestures were more sharp and abrupt, more demanding. But aside from that he was as incomprehensible to me as the first, except that something about the gestures and the talk gave me the impression that a lot of what he said was repeating what the first speaker had said. At last he sat down, and again there was the silence and the waiting for Jean to speak.

This time Jean did speak. Without standing up, he said one short phrase and then sat still again, leaving me with the tantalizing feeling that I had almost understood him, because of the simpleness of his statement and the fact that it was made by a human mouth, throat and tongue.

But the response was another rustling sigh from the audience, and when it died, the third and tallest Klahari got slowly to his feet and began to talk. I do not know if the few words from Jean had sharpened my wits, or whether the last speaker was himself more understandable, but without being able to translate a single word, I felt myself understanding much more.

It seemed to me that he was asking Jean for something—almost pleading with the boy for it. He was advancing reasons why Jean should agree. The reasons were possibly reasons the first two to speak had advanced—but this speaker seemed to take them with a deeper seriousness. His gestures were at arms' length, slow and emphatic. His voice rose and fell with what seemed to me to be a greater range of tone than the voices of the others. When at last he sat down, there seemed to be a deeper, more expecting silence, holding all the listening jungle and the silent Strongpoint.

Jean sat still. For a moment I thought he was not going to move or answer. And then he said that phrase again, and this time I understood why I had almost felt I could translate it. The first sounds in it were "*K'ahari* ..." the native name with the throat-catch in the beginning of it that we replace with a more humanly pronounceable "l" to get the word "Klahari." I had almost had the whole phrase understood with that identification, it seemed to me.

But Jean had risen to his feet and was finally beginning to talk, his high-pitched child's voice matching the pitch of the native vocal apparatus.

He spoke impassionedly—or maybe it was because he was as human as I was that I could see the

passion in him, where I hadn't been able to see it in the Klahari. He gestured as they had, but he gestured in one direction that they had not gestured, and that was back the way they had come to the Strongpoint, back toward the now overrun fields of his family farm, the deep jungle and the desert beyond. Twice more, I caught in his speech the phrase he had used to answer the second and third native speakers—and finally it stuck in my head:

"*K'ahari tomagna, manoi...*"—or that at least was what it sounded like to my human ear. I sat back, staring at him through my binoculars, for his face was as white as if all the blood had drained out of it; and suddenly, without warning, tears began to brim out of his eyes and roll down his cheeks—silent tears that did not interfere with the violence of his words but continued to roll as if he were being secretly tortured all the while he was speaking. The words poured out of him to the listening natives below—and suddenly I was understanding him perfectly.

For a second I thought it was some kind of a miracle. But it was no miracle. He had simply broken into English, without apparently realizing it. It was English geared to the rhythm of the Klahari speech:

"... I am a man. This is a terrible place and my mama did not want to stay here. My daddy did not like it here, but he was making me rich. Nobody works harder than my daddy, Pelang. I don't want to stay here. I will go home and be rich with the old people above Lac St. John; and never see any more K'ahari and the jungle. And the K'ahari will go back to the jungle because a man don't let himself be pushed from his crops. No, you don't get away with that, and you don't come into this Strongpoint, because I am a man and I don't let the K'ahari in..."

He went back into their tongue, and I lost him. He went on standing there with the tears rolling down his face, no doubt telling them over and over again in Klahari that he would not surrender the fort to them. He wound up at last with the same phrase I had heard before; and finally, this time, I understood it, because it was so simple and because of what he had said.

"*K'ahari tomagna, manoi!*"—"I am no brother to the Klahari, but a man!"

He turned with that and jumped down off the top of the wall to the catwalk inside and crouched there, immediately. But no crossbow bolts or lances came over the wall. He went crouched over to the steps at the point where the walls made a corner and went down the steps to back before the awning. There, he pulled the scanners showing the outside views of all four walls into a battery facing him, and sat down on a camp chair with his rifle over his knees, looking at them.

On his scanners as on mine, the Klahari were fading back into the jungle. After they had all gone, there was silence, and after a little he wiped his eyes, laid down his rifle, and went to get himself some food. As if he knew that since they had not attacked immediately, they would not attack again for some little time. I sat back in my treetop with my head spinning.

I remembered now how I had seen the boy walking his own plowed fields as a Klahari walks. I remembered how his reaction to being under possible attack alone at the place, and even his reaction to the killing of his mother, had baffled me. I understood him better now. The jungle with its Klahari was something he took for granted, because it was the only world he had ever known. Not Earth, the place he had only heard about, but this all around him was the real world. Its rules were not human rules, but Klahari rules. Its normal shape was not the grass and sun of home, but the searing white light and fern and macerated earth of Utword. He believed his father and the rest of us when we talked about how alien Utword, and its people were—but they were not alien to him and it was the only world he had.

Now the Klahari had come calling on him as a brother to take up his birthright, by joining them and opening the Strongpoint to them. So that they could destroy it and move on against the rest of the human outposts. He had refused to do so, and now he was down there, alone. The thought of his aloneness abruptly was like a hard shock all through me. Alone—down there with the body of his father and the other men, and the Klahari outside, ready to attack again. I told myself that I had to get him out of there,

whether I got myself killed trying or not.

The only reason I did not start down the tree trunk right then in broad daylight was that I wanted some kind of a plan that had at least a faint chance of success. I was not concerned about saving myself, but I did not want to waste myself—for Jean's sake. I got up and paced my comfortable, safe perch, two paces each way, swing, and back again... thinking hard.

I was still at it, when the Klahari assault came. An explosion of yells and noise almost right under me. I jumped for the scanners.

Jean was standing with his back to the west wall of the watch-tower, his own bank of scanners before him, handling all the rifles in all the walls on remote automatic. If the rifles had not been self-loading, as they were, not a half-dozen years before, he never could have done it. But as it was, he stood holding the Strongpoint alone, a faint frown of concentration on his face, like a boy back home running a model train around its track at speeds which come close to making it fly off on the curves. Two of the attackers made it over the wall hidden from him by the watchtower at his back; but still it seemed as if he had eyes in the back of his head, because he abandoned his scanners, turned and crouched with a rifle in his hands, just as they came together around the side of the watchtower after him. The lance of the second one he shot thudded against the wall of the watchtower just above his head before the native fell dead. But Jean's face did not change.

The assault failed. The natives drew off, and Jean abandoned his scanners to go to the heavy task of dragging the two dead Klahari back around the corner of the tower out of his way. He could not have dragged grown men that way, but the Klahari are lighter-boned and -bodied than we, and by struggling, he got them cleared away.

There was another, lighter assault just before sundown that evening, but none of the natives got over the walls. Then darkness covered us—and still I had worked out no plan for getting the boy out of there.

My general idea was to get him away, and then leave the gates of the Strongpoint open. The Klahari would enter, ravage the interior and move on—to points better equipped than we to continue the fight with them. Perhaps, with the Strongpoint taken, they would not look around for Jean—or me.

But I was helpless. I raged in my treetop. Up here and unnoticed, I was safe as I would have been at home on Earth. But let me descend the tree trunk, even under cover of darkness and I would not live thirty seconds. It would be like coming down a rope into an arena jammed with several thousand lions. Dawn came... and I had thought of nothing.

With it, came the post-dawn attack. Once more, Jean fought them off—almost more successfully than he had the attack of the evening before. It was as if his skill at anticipating their actions had been sharpened by the pressure on him to defend the Strongpoint alone. He even walked away from his automatic rifle controls in the heat of the battle to shoot a Klahari just coming over the north wall.

There was a noon attack that day. And an evening one. Jean beat all of them off.

But that night I heard him crying in the darkness. He had crawled back under the awning, not far from the body of his father, and in the gloom next to the ground there, I could not pick out where he lay. But I could hear him. It was not loud crying, but like the steady, hopeless keening of an abandoned child.

When dawn came I saw his face seemed to have thinned and pinched up overnight. His eyes were round and staring, and dusted underneath with the darkness of fatigue. But he fought off the dawn attack.

A midday attack was beaten back as well. But I had not seen him eat all day, and he looked shadow-thin. He moved awkwardly, as if it hurt him; and after the midday attack was beaten off, he simply sat, motionless, staring at and through the scanners before him.

Just as the afternoon was turning toward evening, the Klahari calling from the jungle came again. He answered with a burst of automatic fire from the wall facing toward the location of the voice in the jungle.

The voice ceased as abruptly as if its possessor had been hit—which he could not have been.

The evening attack came. A full eight Klahari made it over the walls this time, and although Jean seemed to be aware of their coming in plenty of time to face them, he moved so slowly that two of them almost had him.

Finally, this last and hardest assault of the day ended, with the dropping of the sun and the fading of the light. The lights inside the Strongpoint came on, automatically, and Jean abandoned his scanners and controls to crawl under the awning. As with the night before, I heard him crying, but after a while the sounds ceased, and I knew that he had gone to sleep at last.

Alone, safe in my treetop, still without any plan to save the boy, I drifted off to sleep myself.

I woke suddenly to the sounds of the dawn assault. I sat up, rubbed my eyes—and threw myself at the scanners. For, on the screen of the one with its view under the awning, I could see Jean, still stretched in exhaustion-drugged slumber.

Already, the Klahari were at the walls and clambering over them. They poured into the open area before the watchtower as Jean woke at last and jerked upright, snatching up his rifle. He looked out into a semicircle of dark, staring faces, halted and caught in astonishment to find him unready for them. For a second they stood staring at each other—the Klahari and the boy.

Then Jean struggled to his feet, jerked his rifle to his shoulder and began firing at them. And a screaming wave of dark bodies rolled down on him and bore him under...

Behind them, more Klahari warriors all the time were swarming over the walls. The gates of the Strongpoint were torn open, and a dark, feathered and bejeweled river of tossing limbs and weapons poured into the open area. Soon, smoke began to rise from the buildings and the flood of attackers began to ebb, leaving behind it the torn and tattered refuse of their going.

Only in one area was the ground relatively clear. This was in a small circle around the foot of the watchtower where Jean had gone down. Among the last of the Klahari to leave was a tall, ornamented native who looked to me a little like the third of those who had spoken to Jean before the wall. He came to the foot of the watchtower and looked down for a moment

Then he stooped and wet his finger in the blood of Jean, and straightened up and wrote with it on the white, smooth concrete of the watchtower wall in native symbols. I could not speak Klahari, but I could read it; and what he had written, in a script something like that of Arabic, was this:

—which means: "*This was one of the Men.*"

After which he turned and left the Strongpoint. As they all left the Strongpoint and went back to their jungles. For Jean's last two days of defending the place had held them just long enough for the season to end and the year to change. At which moment, for the Klahari, all unsuccessful old ventures are to be abandoned and new ones begun. *And* so the threat that had been posed against all of us humans on Utword was ended.

But all ends are only beginnings, as with the Klahari years and seasons. In a few weeks, the planters began to return to their fields; and the burned and shattered Strongpoint that had been besieged by forty thousand Klahari was rebuilt. Soon after, a commission arrived from Earth that sat for long talks with the mature Klahari of the cities and determined that no new planters would be allowed on Utword. But those that were there could remain, and they with their families would be taboo, and therefore safe from attacks by young Klahari attempting to prove their jungle manhood.

Meanwhile, there being no other heirs on Utword, the Dupres property was sold at auction and the price was enough to pay for the shipping of the bodies of Pelang and Elmire home for burial, in the small

Quebec community from which they had emigrated. While for Jean, a fund was raised by good people, who had been safe in the Regional Installations, to ship his body back along with his parents'.

These people did not believe me when I objected. They thought it was all I had been through, talking, when I said that Jean would not have wanted that—that he would have wanted to have been buried here, instead, in his father's fields.