

# The Plague

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## I

The man faced the monster at a distance of twenty feet.

Dr. Reed Nolan, khaki-clad, gray-haired, compactly built, dark-tanned by the big sun of the world called Kaka Nine, would hardly have been recognized by his former colleagues at the university where he had spent the earlier decades of his life.

The creature confronting him would have been even less familiar. Massive as a rhino, horned, fanged like a warthog, with a mottled hide and slim, curiously jointed legs, the tusker lowered its head and gouged at the turf.

“Well, Emperor,” Nolan said genially, “you’re here early this year. That’s fine; I have a lush crop of pest-weed for you. I guess the herd’s not far behind you . . . ?”

He plucked a stalk of wild-growing leatherplant, stripped off the tough husk, offered the succulent pith to the beast. The native omnivore ambled forward, accepted the offering, regarding the man with the same tolerance it did any other nonnutritive substance.

At their first encounter, three years before, Nolan had had a few bad moments when the tusker herd had arrived like a sudden plague, charging down from the hills. The big beasts had sniffed at his heels where he roosted in the only perch available: a stunted tree from which the monster could have plucked him easily had it been so minded. Then they had passed on. Now, better educated, Nolan was deeply appreciative of the thoroughness with which the big animals rooted out the native plant and rodent life from his fields and the scrupulous care with which they avoided any contact with the alien Terrestrial crops. *As* self-maintaining cultiv-

ators, weeding machines, and fertilizer spreaders, the tuskers left little to be desired.

The communicator at Nolan's wrist buzzed softly.

"Reed—there's a surface boat in the lagoon," a woman's voice said, rather excitedly. "Quite a big boat. Who do you suppose it could be?"

"In our lagoon, Annette? Beats me. I'm in the high pasture, over beyond North Ridge. I'll buzz over and have a look. By the way, Emperor's here; the herds ought to be along in another week."

Nolan remounted his soft-wheeled range cart and trundled upslope to a point from which he had a wide view of the planted fields and seedling orchards sweeping down toward the mile-distant beach and the island-dotted sea beyond. The boat was a few hundred yards offshore, obviously making for the landing wharf Nolan had completed the previous month. It was a big, wide, gray-painted vessel, clumsy but powerful looking, riding low in the water. Annette heard his grunt of surprise.

"Maybe we're on the tourist routes now. Take it easy, girl. Don't start rushing around making sandwiches. It's probably some kind of official survey party. I can't think of anyone else who'd have an interest in our homestead."

"What are they doing out here, twelve hundred miles from Toehold? The Bureau's never paid us any attention before . . ."

"For which we're duly grateful. Never mind; I'm on my way down. Maybe it will be nice to talk to strangers, after three years."

It was a fifteen minute trip down from the heights to the hedge fine delineating the limits of the tilled acreage. The perfume of the force-grown gardenias was sweet on the air. For all their beauty, the imported plants were no luxury; Nolan had discovered early that their fragrance was an effective deterrent to the tuskers. The hedge system had been laid out with care to channel the big animals' seasonal migration—stampede might be a better word, Nolan reflected—as they swept down from the winter heights to graze their traditional meadows along the shore—meadows now under intensive cultivation. The herds, Nolan admitted to himself, had probably made the difference between bare survival and the success of the plantation.

Timmy, Nolan's twelve-year-old son, met him on the path above the house. Nolan paused to let him hop aboard.

"They're tying up at the pier, Dad," the boy said excitedly. "Who do you s'pose they are?"

"Probably some junketing bureaucrats, Timmy. Taking a census or

something of the sort.”

There were men down on the pier now, making cables fast. The sound of a turbine started up. A tracked vehicle, bright yellow in color, was trundling down the gangplank.

Annette, a petite brunette, emerged from the house to meet her husband and son.

“They look awfully busy,” she said, glancing toward the shore. “Reed, did you order any equipment that I don’t know about . . . ?”

“Nothing. Someone’s made a navigational error, I suspect.”

“Dad, look!” Timmy pointed.

A deck boom, probing in an open hatch, had lifted a laden pallet, swung it over the side to deposit it on the dock. A forklift picked up the pallet, advanced along the length of the pier; it rolled off onto the grassy shore, gouging deep parallel ruts through the planted turf as it went.

“Dad, we spent all spring getting that grass to grow—”

“Never mind, Timmy, we can replace it. You two stay here,” Nolan said to Annette. “I’ll go down and see what this is all about.”

“Aren’t you going to wash up, Reed? They’ll think you’re the hired man . . . .”

“Don’t I wish I had one,” he said as he headed for the dock.

The path down from the crest where he had built the house led close under a dense stand of blue-needled spruce-like trees. Native wild flowers in many shades of yellow grew in profusion here; a stream splashed down across goldmossed rocks. The Terrestrial birds that Nolan had released—and fed daily—had thrived: mocking-birds, robins, and parakeets chirped and twittered comfortably in the alien shade of the forest. Next year, he might be able to bring in a few dozen seedlings of pine and cedar to supplement the native woods, since this year’s crops would, for the first time, show a handsome profit . . . .

As Nolan emerged from the shelter of the trees the vehicle he had seen earlier was churning briskly across the grass in his direction. It halted and a bulky bundle tumbled from it to the ground. The machine drove on, dropped a second package fifty feet from the first. It continued on its way, depositing the loads at regular intervals across the wide lawn. Nolan angled across to intercept the vehicle as it stopped again. Two men, one youngish, with a thinning crew cut, the other middle-aged and bald, both dressed in badly cut but new-looking coveralls, looked down at him without visible interest.

“Better hold it, fellows,” Nolan called. “There’s been some mistake.

That cargo doesn't belong here."

The men exchanged glances. The elder of the two turned and spat carelessly past Nolan.

"Ha," he said. The vehicle moved on.

Nolan walked over to the nearest bundle. It was a tailored plastic casing, roughly cubical, two feet on a side. Markings stenciled on the side read:

SHELTER, PERSONNEL (MALE)  
cat 567/09/al0 CAP 20. APSC. CL II.

Nolan continued down to the pier. Vehicles were rolling off it in a steady stream, some loaded with men, others with equipment. The growl of turbines filled the air, along with an acrid stink of burned hydrocarbons. A small, slender man in sub-executive coveralls stood amid the confusion, clipboard in hand. He looked around sharply as Nolan came up.

"Here," he snapped, "what are you doing here, fellow? What's your crew and unit number?" He riffled the papers on the clipboard as if the answer to his question was to be found there.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Nolan said mildly. "What you're doing here, I mean. I'm afraid you're in the wrong place. This is—"

"None of your impertinence, now! Stand over there; I'll get to you presently." The small man turned his back to Nolan.

"Where can I find the man in charge?" Nolan asked. The man ignored him. He turned toward the boat; the little man shouted after him, but he went on.

At the pier, a harassed-looking fellow with a tight, office-pale face stared him up and down.

"In charge?" he echoed Nolan's inquiry. "Don't worry about it. Get back to your crew."

"I'm not a crew member," Nolan said patiently. "I'm—"

"Don't argue with me!" the man snapped, and motioned to a bigger man overseeing the maneuvers of the forklift. "Grotz; take his number." He turned away.

"All right, you, let's have that number," Grotz demanded tiredly.

"Number one," Nolan said.

"One what? One-ten?"

"If you say so."

“All right.” Grotz jotted. “They were looking for you, one-ten. Better get busy now, before I dock you.”

“I think I’ll do just that,” Nolan said, and left the pier.

## II

Back at the house, he went directly to the study, switched on the callbox.

“Some kind of official snafu,” he told Annette. “I’ll have to place a call to Toehold and see what they know about it.”

“Reed—that’s so expensive . . . .”

“Can’t be helped. They seem to be too busy to talk to me.” Nolan looked up the code for the Office of Colonial Affairs, punched it out.

“Reed,” Annette said from the window. “They’re putting up some kind of big tents on the lawn!”

“I know . . . .” An operator came on the line; another minute passed before Nolan reached the OCA.

“Nolan, you say?” a harassed official voice said. “Oh, yes, I recall the name . . . .”

Briefly, Nolan outlined the situation. “Someone’s apparently got his coordinates confused,” he finished. “If you’d put a call through on the IC band to whoever’s in charge—”

“Just a minute, Nolan. What was that number of the boat again?”

Nolan told him.

“Mm. Just a moment . . . . Ah, yes. I see that the vessel is chartered to the Union for Human Privileges. They’re only semiofficial, of course—but they’re a powerful organization.”

“Not powerful enough to legally pitch camp on my land,” Nolan said.

“Well—I think it’s more than a camping trip, Mr. Nolan. The HPU intends to set up a permanent relocation facility for underprivileged persons displaced by overcrowding from the Welfare Center.”

“On *my* claim?”

“Well, as to that, your claim isn’t actually finalized, you realize. The five year residency requirement hasn’t yet been fulfilled, of course—”

“Nonsense. That approach wouldn’t hold up in court for five minutes!”

“Perhaps—but it might be some years before the case appeared on the agenda. Meanwhile—well, I’m afraid I can’t offer much encouragement,

Mr. Nolan. You'll just have to adjust."

"Reed!" Annette gasped. "There's a man with a power saw; he's cutting down one of the sycamores!"

As Nolan turned to the window a black-painted personnel car pulled to a stop outside. The hatches popped up. Four men, a stout woman, and a lath-thin youth stepped down. A moment later Nolan heard the front door open. A short, heavily-built man with bristly reddish hair strolled into the front hall, his retinue close behind him.

"Well, a fortunate find," a suety voice said. "The structure seems sound enough. We'll establish my administrative HQ here, I think. And you can make ready personal quarters for me as well; much as I'd prefer to share issue accommodations with out people, I'll need to remain close to affairs."

"I think there's ample room for all the staff here, Director Fraswell," another voice said, "if we make do with a room apiece—"

"Don't be afraid to share a little hardship with the men, Chester." The man called Fraswell cut off his subordinate's remark curtly. "I'll remind you—" He broke off abruptly as he caught sight of Nolan and Annette.

"Who's this?" the plump man barked. He had a mottled complexion and a wide, unsmiling mouth. He turned to the man beside him. "What's this fellow doing here, Chester?"

"Here, who're you?" A lean, bony man with a crooked face spoke sharply, coming forward from behind his chief.

"My name is Nolan—"

"Get his crew number." A third man spoke up.

"Here, fellow, what's your number?" the crooked-faced man said quickly.

"Who's the woman?" the plump man barked. "I made it clear there was to be no fraternization!"

"Get the woman's number," Chester said sharply.

"All right, crew and unit numbers," the man in the rear rank said, coming forward. "Let's see your wrists, both of you."

Nolan stepped in front of Annette. "We don't have numbers," he said. "We're not in your party. We live here. My name is Nolan—"

"Eh?" The plump man interjected in elaborate puzzlement. "*Live here?*"

"Live *here?*" his aid echoed.

"That's right. That's my dock you tied up to. This is my house. I—"

"Oh, yes." The plump man nodded, making a show of recalling a

trivial datum. "You'd be the fellow, what's-his-name, ah, Nolan. Yes. I was told you'd established some sort of squatter's claim here."

"My claim is on file at Toehold, ten copies, notarized and fees paid. So I'd appreciate it if you'd load your property back aboard your boat and take another look at your charts. I don't know where you were headed, but I'm afraid this spot's taken."

The plump man's face went expressionless. He looked past Nolan's left ear.

"I've requisitioned this site for the resettlement of a quota of economically disadvantaged persons," he said solemnly. "We constitute the advance party, to make ready the facilities for the relocatees who're to follow. I trust we'll have your full cooperation in this good work."

"The facilities, as you call them, happen to be private property—"

"You'd prate of selfish interests with the welfare of hundreds at stake?" Fraswell barked.

Nolan looked at him. "Why here?" he asked levelly. "There are thousands of unoccupied islands available—"

"This one seems most easily adaptable for our purposes," Fraswell said flatly. "I estimate a thousand persons can be accommodated here quite nicely—"

"It's no different than any other island in the chain."

Fraswell looked surprised. "Nonsense. The cleared land along the shore is ideal for erection of the initial camp site; and I note various food plants are available to supplement issue rations."

A man in a clerical collar came into the room, rubbing his hands. "A stroke of luck, Director Fraswell," he cried. "I've found a supply of nonissue foodstuffs, including a well-stocked freezer—" He broke off as he saw Nolan and Annette.

"Yes, yes, Padre," Fraswell said. "I'll conduct an inventory and see to an equitable distribution of items found."

"Found—or stolen?" Nolan said.

"Whaaat?"

"Why can't these deserving cases of yours produce their own supplies? The land's fertile enough—"

The cleric stared. "Our people are not criminals, condemned to hard labor," he said indignantly. "They're merely disadvantaged. They have the same right to Nature's bounty as yourself—if not more!"

"Aren't you missing the distinction between Nature's bounty and the product of human effort? There's an ample supply of Nature on the next

island. You have plenty of labor available. If you take virgin land, in a year you can harvest your own crop.”

“You expect me to subject these unfortunate people to unnecessary hardships, merely out of your personal selfishness?” Fraswell snorted.

“I cleared land; they can start off the same way I did—”

“My instructions are to establish my group at a certain standard; the more quickly that standard is reached—”

“The better you’ll look back at HQ, eh?”

A woman had followed the priest into the room. She was thick-necked, red-faced, with grimly frizzed gray hair, dressed in drab-colored clothing and stout shoes. She looked indignantly at Nolan.

“The land and what’s on it belongs to everyone,” she snapped. “The idea, one man trying to hog it all! I guess you’d just sit here in luxury and let women and children starve!”

“I’d let them clear their own land and plant their own crops,” Nolan said gently. “And build their own headquarters. This happens to be my family’s house. I built it—and the power plant, and the sewage system—”

“Wonder where he got the money for all that,” the woman wondered aloud. “No honest man has that kind of cash.”

“Now, Milly,” Fraswell said indulgently.

“I saved eighty credits per month for twenty-seven years, Madam,” Nolan said. “From a very modest salary.”

“So that makes you better than other folk, eh?” She pursued the point. “Can’t live in barracks like everybody else—”

“Now, Mil trade,” Fraswell said mildly, and turned back to Nolan.

“Mr, ah, Nolan, inasmuch as I’ll be requiring information from you as to various matters, you may as well be assigned a cot here at HQ. I’m sure that now you’ve considered it you’ll agree that the welfare of the community comes first, though modest personal sacrifices may be required of the individual, eh?”

“What about my wife?”

Fraswell looked grave. “I’ve ordered that there’ll be no sexual fraternization for the present—”

“How do *we* know she’s your wife?” Miltrude demanded.

Annette gasped and moved closer to Nolan; the crooked-faced man caught at her arm. Nolan stepped forward and knocked it away.

“Oh, violence, eh?” Fraswell nodded as if in satisfaction. “Call Glotz in.” Chester hurried away. Annette clutched Nolan’s hand.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Fraswell knows how far he can go.” He looked



meaningfully at the plump man. "This isn't an accident, is it?" he said. "I suppose you've had your eye on our island for some time; you were just waiting until we had it far enough along to make it worth stealing."

The big man from the boat came into the room, looking around. He saw Nolan.

"Hey, you—"

Fraswell held up a hand.

"Now, Nolan—there'll be no more outbursts, I trust. Now, as I say, you'll be assigned quarters here at HQ provided you can control yourself."

A lanky, teen-age lad with an unfortunate complexion sauntered in through the open door. He had a small, nearly ripe tomato in his hand, from which he had just taken a bite, another fruit in his hand.

"Look what I found, Pop," he said.

"Not now, Leston," Fraswell barked. He glared until the lad shrugged and departed. Then he looked alertly at Nolan.

"Tomatoes, eh?" he said thoughtfully. "I'd understood they couldn't be grown here on Kaka Nine."

"Just one experimental plant," Nolan said grimly. "Leston seems to have terminated the experiment."

Fraswell grunted. "Well, have I your word, Nolan?"

"I don't think you'd like the word I'm thinking of, Mr. Fraswell," Nolan said.

"Pah!" the Director snorted. "Very well, then." He eyed Nolan severely. "Don't say I didn't give you every consideration! Glotz—Chester—take them away and lock them up somewhere until they see reason."

### III

In the dark of the tool shed where he had been confined, Nolan massaged his bruised knuckles and listened to the soft sigh of the wind, the lonely call of the native nightbirds—and to a stealthy, persistent rasping, barely audible, coming from beyond the locked door across the small room.

The sound ceased with a soft clank of metal. The knob turned; the door swung inward. Through the opening, a youthful face appeared.

"Tim! Nice work!" Nolan breathed.

"Hi, Dad!" The boy slipped through, closed the door. Nolan held out

his wrists, linked by braided steel a quarter inch in diameter. Timmy clamped the bolt cutter on the cable, snipped through the strands.

“My ankle is cuffed to the cot,” Nolan whispered.

Timmy found the cable, cut it deftly. A moment later, Nolan and his son were outside. All was silence, though there were still a few lights in the upper rooms of the house, and down by the dock side.

“Your mother?” Nolan said as they moved off.

“They’ve got her in the last tent in line—down by the pond. Dad, you know what they did? They used a net and took every fish out of the pond! All our panfish and bass fingerlings! They cooked ‘em up and ate ‘em.”

“They can be replaced—in time.”

“They sure smelled good,” Tim admitted.

“You had anything to eat?”

“Sure. I raided the kitchen while that fat man with the funny hps was trying to figure out how to work the tricordeo. All he could get was the ref patterns. He was pretty mad.”

They passed behind the ranked tents. A light burned in one.

“That’s where the honchos stay,” Tim said.

“No sentries?” Nolan asked.

“Nope. They talked about it and decided they didn’t need any.”

They were behind the last tent in line.

“About here,” Tim said, indicating a spot six paces from the corner. “I saw Mom just before they opaqued it.”

Nolan asked. Til take the knife,” he said. “You move back and be ready to run for it if there’s an alarm.”

“Heck, Dad—”

“So you can try again, if they catch me.”

“Oh. OK.”

Nolan worked the knife point through the tough material. Air hissed out. He ripped upward. From inside the tent there was a sharp exclamation, followed by a muffled thud. He thrust the cut flap aside and plunged through.

Annette met him.

“I knew you’d come,” she whispered, and kissed him swiftly. “I had to hit her over the head.” She nodded toward a bulky figure slumped at her feet.

“Timmy’s outside,” Nolan whispered as he passed her through the breach in the fabric wall.

Already the taut plastic had begun to sag.

“Patching goo,” the boy said, and handed Nolan a roll of wide tape. Quickly they sealed the opening.

“Where to first?” Tim asked.

“The house,” Nolan said.

The back door was locked; Nolan keyed it open. Inside, he went silently to the den, selected two small handguns and a lightweight power rifle. In the kitchen, Annette had assembled a small heap of concentrates not yet looted from the stores. Tim came in from the tackle room with packs.

Back outside, Nolan posted his wife and son near the path leading to the hills and set off toward the power house. Inside, he made certain adjustments; he locked the door behind him as he left. Moving on to the pump house, he closed two large valves, opened others. Last, he engaged the massive power lock on the equipment shed.

“That’s about it,” he said as he rejoined the others. “Let’s go.”

“If they hadn’t showed up,” Tim said as they set off up the steep path, “I guess we never would have taken that camping trip we’re always talking about.”

## IV

The cave was a large and airy one, with a narrow entrance well-concealed from below by a rocky ridge and a freshwater spring that trickled at the rate of one gallon per hour into a stone basin. It was a cave the Nolan family knew well; they had once lived in it for two months, until the first rooms of the house had been completed.

It was the work of an hour to sweep out the accumulated wind-blown rubbish, set up the inflatable cots, arrange the collapsible cooking equipment around the stone fireplace. By then the sun was coming up.

Nolan looked down across the stunted mountain growth toward the house far below. The binoculars showed a cluster of men around the pump house.

“They must have emptied the reserve tank already,” he said.

“They’ll just blow the door off the pump house, Reed,” Annette said. “Won’t they?”

“Maybe—if they have the right explosives. But they’ll still have to know which valves to open.”

“I feel pretty mean—cutting off their water supply.”

“There’s always the pond and buckets. They won’t suffer—except for a few blisters.”

Nolan and Tim spent most of the morning busy on the slopes. The Tusker herds were gathering in the high meadows now; using binoculars, Nolan estimated their numbers at over ten thousand. They returned to the cave with a specimen bag filled with fossils, low grade gem-stones, and some new varieties of fungus to add to Tim’s slide collection. Annette greeted them with hot soup and sandwiches.

Late in the afternoon they watched a party of men spread out and scour the underbrush near the house. After an hour or two the search petered out.

“IH bet old Fatty’s plenty mad by now,” Tim said cheerfully. I’ll bet he still hasn’t figured out the tricordeo.”

The Nolans set out a board and played three-handed chidge until dinner time. Annette served recon chicken-and-chips. She and Reed had cold dehi-beer, Tim hot cocoa. Just after dusk, all the lights went off in the house and on the grounds below.

“I suppose we’ll hear from Director Fraswell pretty early in the morning,” Nolan said as they composed themselves for sleep.

## V

Half an hour before dawn there was a soft *beep!* from the small black box beside Nolan’s bed.

“Visitors,” he said, checking the indicator lights that told him which of the sensors he and Tim had planted the previous day had been activated. “On the east trail. They didn’t waste any time.” He rose and donned the clean clothes Annette had run through the precipitator, picked up the power rifle.

“Dad, can I come?”

“Negative. You stay here with your mother.”

“Reed—are you sure—”

“I’m not that bad a shot,” he said, and grinned at her. “I’ll be back for coffee.”

It took Nolan ten minutes to reach the vantage point he had selected the previous day. He settled himself in a comfortable prone position, adjusted the sling, and sighted through the scope-sight. Three men toiled upward on the trail. Nolan took aim at the rock wall ten feet above them

and squeezed off a burst. Dust spurted. When he lowered his sights, the men were gone. He picked them up a quarter of a mile back downtrail, running for home.

Twice more that day the spotters Nolan had planted on the slopes signaled intruders; twice more a single warning shot sufficed to discourage them.

Late in the afternoon, a bucket brigade formed across the lawn far below, hauling water to the house. The men working on the power house door gave up at twilight. A crew of men set about chopping wood to heap on the lawn for a bonfire.

“Reed—the baby peach trees, and the pecans, and the limes—” Annette mourned.

“I know,” Nolan said tersely. They watched the fire for an hour before turning in.

## VI

It was mid-morning when the signaler beeped again. This time it was a party of three men—one of them the man called Winston whom Nolan had last seen with Fraswell—carrying a white towel attached to a section of sapling—pecan, Nolan thought. They waited for a quarter of an hour at the spot marked by a small crater in the rock wall from Nolan’s shot of the previous day. Then they advanced cautiously.

On a rocky ledge a hundred yards below Nolan’s position, they halted. A shout rang faintly.

“Nolan! We wish to talk to you!”

He remained silent.

“Director Fraswell has authorized me to offer you leniency if you give yourself up now,” Winston shouted.

Nolan waited.

“You’re to come down at once,” Winston resumed. “No criminal charges will be pressed, provided you cooperate fully henceforth.”

Another minute passed in silence.

“Nolan, give yourself up at once!” the angry voice shouted. “Otherwise . . .”

A single shot rang out above Nolan. Instantly the men below turned and ran. Nolan looked up toward the cave. Annette, her back to him, stepped from behind the rocky barrier that concealed the entrance, a

pistol in her hand. She turned and waved. Nolan climbed back up to her side.

“On the west trail,” she said indignantly. “The idea-while they were parleying with you!”

“Never mind,” Nolan said mildly. “They’re just exploring their environment.”

“I’m worried, Reed. How long can this go on?”

“We have food for a month or so. After that, maybe Tim and I will have to raid the larder again.”

Annette looked worried but said nothing further on the subject.

## VII

For five days, while Nolan watched the unirrigated fields slowly fade and wilt, there were no further overtures from below. Then, in mid-morning of the sixth day a party of four set out from the house, advanced slowly up the east trail. One of the men was Fraswell, Nolan saw. A man in the rear carried what appeared to be a placard. When they paused for their first rest, the man turned the sign to face the heights, but Nolan was unable to make out the lettering at the distance.

“Watch the beepers,” he told Annette and Tim. “I don’t think that’s the game this time, but they may have planted someone on another trail last night after dark.” He descended to his lookout station below. Director Fraswell’s red face was clearly visible at half a mile, even on low mag. Nolan was able to read the placard now:

### NOLAN—WE MUST TALK

“Fraswell,” Nolan called. “What is it you want?”

The plump man scanned the cliff above for a glimpse of Nolan.

“Show yourself!” he called. “I can’t carry on a discussion with a disembodied voice!”

“Don’t let me keep you.”

“Nolan, in my capacity as a Field Director of the ELPUI I call on you to descend at once and cease this harassment!”

“My family and I are just taking a long deferred vacation, Mr. Fraswell.”

“You shot at my people!”

"If I had, I'd have hit them. I hold a Double Distinguished Marksman's rating. You can check that if you like.

"Look here, Nolan—you're deliberately withholding information essential to the success of this mission!"

"I think you're a little confused, Mr. Fraswell. I'm in no way connected with your mission. I paid my own way here—"

"I'm not concerned with that! It's your duty to serve the people—"

"Mr. Fraswell, I suggest you pack up your people and your equipment and move on to another piece of real estate, and I'll give you all the technical assistance I can in getting started."

"Would you attempt to bargain with the welfare of a thousand men, women, and children?"

"Not quite. I estimate you have about fifty men in your advance party."

"The relocatees will arrive in less than a fortnight! Unless you give up this dog-in-the-manger attitude at the expense of these poor, helpless souls, I won't be responsible for the outcome!"

"Wrong again, Mr. Fraswell. It's your entire responsibility. I'm just curious as to what you plan to do after you've eaten all the seed corn and cleaned out my emergency reserves. Move on and loot somebody else? What happens when you run out of people to loot, Fraswell?"

"I'm not in the business of making predictions, Nolan! I'm concerned for the success of the present operation!"

"I suppose by the time you run out of goodies you'll be retired, eh? Meanwhile, if you get tired of hauling water and eating issue rations you can always leave, Mr. Fraswell. Tell your headquarters it didn't work; perhaps next time they'll supply you with some equipment of your own."

"The power is off! There's no water! My men can't start the vehicles! The crops are dying! I call on you to come down here and undo your sabotage!"

"The only sabotage I've seen is what your men have done to my lawns and orchards. We won't count the fishpond."

There was a two minute silence during which the men below conferred.

"Look here, Nolan," Fraswell called, sounding reluctantly conciliatory. "I'll concede that, from a purely materialistic standpoint, it might be said you have some right to compensation. Very well. Though it means taking bread from the mouths of the innocent, I'll undertake to guarantee payment of the usual credit per acre—for the arable portions of the tract,

of course. After survey.”

“I paid a credit and a half an acre for the unimproved land, over five years ago—and I paid for all of it—mountains, desert—the whole island. I’m afraid your offer doesn’t tempt me.”

“You—you exploiter! You think you can victimize the ordinary man, but you’ll see! They’ll rise in their righteous wrath and destroy you, Nolan!”

“If they’d rise in their wrath and tackle that next island, they could have a quarter section cleared and ready for summer planting.”

“You’d condemn these good people to inhuman hardship—for the sake of mere personal avarice! You’d deny them bread! You’d—”

“I know these good people, Mr. Fraswell. I tried to hire some of them when I was breaking ground here. They laughed. They’re the untrainables, the unemployables. They’ve had a free ride all their lives. Now they’re overflowing the trough. So you’re trying to dump them on me to maintain. Well, I decline the honor, Mr. Fraswell. It looks as if they’re going to have to go to work if they want to eat. By the way, what’s *your* salary per annum?”

Fraswell made choking noises.

“One last thing, Fraswell,” Nolan called. “My gardenia hedges; tell your men to leave them alone; you don’t need firewood that badly, and the few steps it would save in coming and going up into the foothills isn’t worth destroying them.”

“Gardenias, eh? Mean a lot to you, do they? I’m afraid I’ll have to use my own judgment regarding fuel sources, Nolan!” The Director spun on his heel and walked away. One of his attendants turned to shake a fist upward before disappearing down the trail.

That afternoon, Nolan saw a crew hard at work, leveling the hedges.

The following day, Tim hurried into the cave calling excitedly that the Tusker herds had started to move down from the heights.

## VIII

“I don’t like it,” Annette said as Nolan prepared to leave the cave. “You don’t know what that terrible man is likely to do if he gets his hands on you.”

“I have to give them fair warning,” Nolan said. “I’ll be all right. Fraswell’s not going to let anything happen that might look awkward on



his record.”

“How come, Dad?” Tim said. “Why not let the Tuskers surprise ‘em? Maybe they’ll scare ‘em right off the island!”

“Someone could get hurt; they might panic and get trampled. And those horns are sharp.”

“Sure, but—you could get hurt, too, Dad, if you try to get in their way! They’re pretty hard to stop once they’re running!”

“I’ll be careful. Don’t worry about me.”

Nolan set off by the most direct route available: a near-vertical ravine, water-cut, too narrow and precipitate for a Tusker, but just possible for an active man. In twenty minutes he arrived at the valley floor, winded and dusty, with scratched and bleeding hands. As he emerged from the tangle of underbrush at the cliff base, three men jumped him.

## IX

The house stank. Director Fraswell, somewhat leaner than when Nolan had last seen him, badly shaved, wearing rumpled, sweat-marked clothing, glared triumphantly across the former dining room table, now occupying the center of the living room and covered with papers and empty ration boxes.

“So you finally came to your senses, eh?” He paused to scratch under his left arm. “I suppose you’ll expect to hold me to the bargain I proposed. Well, think again! You rejected my offer when I made it. Now suffer the consequences!” He shook his finger in Nolan’s face.

Nolan’s hp was split. His jaw was swollen painfully. His head ached.

“I didn’t come here to bargain,” he said. “I came to warn you—”

“You—warn *me*?” Fraswell jumped to his feet. “Listen to me, you arrogant little popinjay! I’ll do the warning! I want the power plant in full operation in fifteen minutes from now! I want water flowing ten minutes after that! I want all facilities unlocked and the keys turned over to me before you leave this room!” He scratched furiously at his ribs.

“That would be quite a trick,” Nolan said. “Even if I had the keys.”

Fraswell’s mouth opened and shut. “Search him!”

“We did; he’s got nothing on him.”

“Nothing on him, *sir!*” Fraswell barked, and whirled on Nolan. “Where have you hidden them? Speak up, man! I’m at the end of my patience!”

“Never mind the keys,” Nolan said. “That’s not what I came here to talk about—”

“You’ll talk about it nonetheless!” Fraswell was almost screaming.

“Here, what’s the trouble?” a female voice shrilled. Miltrude, looking the worse for ten days without a bath, stood in the doorway, hands on broad hips. “Well—looky who’s here!” she said as she saw Nolan. Behind her, Leston peered over her shoulder. “Finally caught him, did you, Alvin?”

“Yes—I caught him. But he’s stubborn! But he’ll crack! I assure you of that!”

“What about the fancy woman he was keeping?” Miltrude queried grimly. “Turn her over to me; I’ll see she makes him cooperate.”

“Get out!” Fraswell roared.

“Here, you Alvin!” his spouse snapped. “Mind your tone!”

Fraswell swept an empty concentrate flask from the table and hurled it viciously; it struck the wall beside Miltrude; she screeched and fled, almost knocking her son down in passing.

“Make him talk!” Fraswell yelled. “Get those keys; do whatever you have to do to him, but I want results—now!”

One of the men holding Nolan gave his arm a painful wrench.

“Not here—outside!” Fraswell sank back in his chair, panting. “Of course, you’re not to do him any permanent injury,” he muttered, looking into the corner of the room as they hustled Nolan away.

## X

Two men held Nolan’s arms while a third doubled his fist and drove it into his midriff. He jackknifed forward, gagging.

“Not in the stomach, you fool,” someone said. “He has to be able to talk.”

Someone grabbed his hair and forced his head back; an open-handed slap made his head ring.

“Listen, you rich scum,” a wild-eyed, bushy-headed man with gaps between his teeth hissed in Nolan’s face. “You can’t hold out on us—”

Nolan’s knee, coming up fast, caught the man solidly; he uttered a curdled scream and went down. Nolan lunged, freed an arm and landed a roundhouse swing on someone’s neck. For a moment he was free, facing two men, who hesitated, breathing hard.

"In a matter of minutes there's going to be a stampede, right across this spot," he said blurrily. "It's a wild herd—big fellows, over a ton apiece. You'll have to warn your men."

"Get him," a man snapped, and leaped for Nolan. They were still struggling to pin his legs when a heavy crashing sounded from behind the house. A man screamed—a shocking yell that froze Nolan's attackers in mid-stroke. He rolled free and came to his feet as a man sprinted into view from around the corner of the house, pale face rigid with terror, legs pumping. A heavy thudding sounded behind him. A big male tusker charged across the wheel-rutted turf, the remains of a wrecked rose trellis draped around his mighty shoulders. The man dived aside as the beast galloped on into the cover of what remained of the woodlot, whence sounded a diminishing crashing of timber.

For a moment, the three men stood rigid, listening to a sound as of thunder in the mountains, then, as one, they whirled and ran. Nolan hurried around to the front of the house.

Fraswell was on the front terrace, his head cocked, a blank expression on his big features, the boy Leston beside him. The Director shied when he saw Nolan, then charged down the steps, ran for the corner of the house—and skidded to a halt as a tusker thundered past.

"Good God!" Fraswell backed, spun, started for the porch. Nolan blocked his way.

"Run for the boat," he shouted.

"This is your work! You're trying to kill us all!" Fraswell shouted.

"Dad," Leston started as two men sprinted into view around the side of the house. One carried a rifle.

"Get him!" Fraswell yelled, pointing. "He's a fanatic! It's his doing!"

"Don't be a fool, Fraswell," Nolan snapped. "If you're in danger, so am I—"

"A fanatic! He intends to pull me down with him! Get him!" Fraswell jumped at Nolan; the other two men closed in. Wild fists pummeled Nolan; clutching hands caught his arms, dragged him down. A boot caught in the side. He grabbed the ankle, brought the man down on top of him. The other man was dancing sideways, gun at the ready.

"Kill the bloodsucker," the one Nolan had felled shouted as he scrambled up. "Here—gimme that!" He seized the gun from the other's grip, aimed it at Nolan's head. It was tall, thin Leston who jumped forward, knocked the gun down as it fired. A gout of lawn exploded beyond Nolan.

“Pa—you can’t—” the boy started; Fraswell whirled on him, struck him an open-handed blow that sent him sprawling.

“A traitor in my own house! You’re no son of mine!” The drumming of the approaching herd was a continuous surf-roar now. The man with the gun threw it down and ran for the dock. As more tuskers swung into view, Fraswell turned too, and ran for it, followed by his two men. Nolan struggled to his feet, noted the animals’ course, then set off at a dead run toward a stand of native thorn on a low rise near the path of the charging herd, snatching up a broken branch from the uprooted gardenia hedge as he went. The lead animals were less than fifty feet behind him when he stopped and turned, waving the branch and shouting. The approaching tuskers shied from the hateful scent, crowding their fellows to the right of the thorn patch—onto a course dead for the dock.

Nolan dropped down on the grass, catching his breath as the herd thundered past. Through the dust he could see the group gathered down on the pier and on the dock of the boat.

A man on the pier—Fraswell, Nolan thought—was shouting and pointing toward the house. Someone on the boat seemed to yell a reply. It appeared there was a difference of opinion among the leadership and the rank-and-file of the HPU.

“Time for one more little nudge,” Nolan muttered, getting to his feet. A few elderly cows, stragglers, were galloping past the grove. Nolan searched hastily, wrenched off a stalk of leatherplant, quickly stripped it. A thick, pungent odor came from the ripe pulp. He went forward to intercept a cow, waving the aromatic plant, turned and ran as the cow swung toward him. He could hear the big animal’s hooves thudding behind him. He yelled; down below, the men crowding the pier looked up to see Nolan sprinting toward them, the tusker cantering in his wake.

“Help!” he shouted. “Help!”

The men turned and ran for the gangway. Fraswell caught at a man’s arm; the man struck at him and fled. The plump figures of Miltrude and the Director held their ground for a moment; then they turned and bolted onto the boat.

As they turned to look back, the sound of the ship’s engines started up. The gangplank slid inboard when Nolan was fifty feet from the pier. He tossed the branch aside as the cow braked to a halt beside him, nudging him to capture the succulent prize. Nolan gave a piercing scream and fell, leaving the cow to stare after the hastily departing vessel, munching peacefully.

# XI

A tall, lean youth came around the side of the house to meet Nolan as he came up.

“Uh . . . I . . . “ he said.

“Leston—how did you get left behind?” Nolan asked in dismay.

“On purpose,” the boy blurted.

“I don’t think your father will be back,” Nolan said.

Leston nodded. “I want to stay,” he said. “I’d like a job, Mr. Nolan.”

“Do you know anything about farming, Leston?” Nolan asked dubiously.

“No, sir.” The boy swallowed. “But I’m willing to learn.”

Nolan looked at him for a moment. He put out his hand and smiled.

“I can’t ask any more than that,” he said.

He turned and looked across the ruined lawn, past the butchered hedges and the mutilated groves toward the languishing fields.

“Come on, let’s get started,” he said. “The plague’s over, and we’ve got a lot of work ahead before harvest time.”

The End