

"Damn it!"

The words exploded softly from the slender man who knelt in the snow. "Another dead one," he said bitterly.

With a single gesture—half help-less, half compassionate—he reached down and closed the star-ing eyes of the dead Yeep.

Olie Struan finished pulling the tissue sample and got to his feet, still looking at the woolly Yeep. A small drift of snow had piled up on the windward side of the body, and was beginning to blow over the top of it, skittering in eddies along the slick ice.

After several minutes, Olie lifted his head and stared out across the glare-ice of Botany Bay. His Vi-king-blue eyes moved steadily over the bleak landscape, following the curve of the old shoreline.

Even though he knew where it was, the land was so desolate as to be hardly distinguishable—for prac-tical purposes—from the iced-over bay. Green technicians at Botany Bay had to go out with an experi-enced hand to avoid losing their bearings when they got out of sight of the station. Even with a homing scanner—compasses didn't work on Flannigan—a new man might, and often did, stubbornly insist he was going the right direction when the scanner told him the opposite.

"Sure is a funny place," Olie said to himself.

He ran his eyes over the ice, looking carefully at the large, bushy puffdocks, most of which drooped down tiredly onto the ice. The puffdocks, a large, lichenous algae, were dying off. They would turn a slicky, nacreous white and lay down into the snow and ice. The Yeep, with their narrow-range, starch-oriented metabolism, depended almost entirely on the puffdocks for a food supply. Their bodies couldn't draw proper nour-ishment from anything more complicated—not enough to stay alive—unless they stayed awake around the clock and ate constantly, which they would not do.

Now, the Yeep were still dying off, in spite of everything Olie Struan and the Terrans at the Bot-any Bay station could do. With the apparent onset of a shift pattern in the life forms of Flannigan, it had not been set out in the program to merely make a short-term cure of the ailment that was killing off the puffdocks. The project had been programmed to mutate the Yeep by broadening their metabolic functions so their food-chain re-quirements could expand. That had been simple enough, but now, mi-nor genetic drifts had apparently diminished the Yeep's ability to cope with the extremes of climate on Flannigan.

They were dying off faster than ever.

The Botany Bay project was be-ginning to look like a write-off. Or, so it seemed at this moment to Olie, who was tired and discouraged.

He looked carefully from one fallen puffdock to another, knowing he would see more dead Yeep.

Sure enough, there was another telltale drift of snow, which prob-ably concealed another dead Yeep. The pattern was depressingly con-sistent. Frozen feet, followed by the freezing of ears and other ex-tremities. Then, gangrene. Finally, death.

The Yeep were an extraordi-narily stupid species.

Olie Struan took a last look at the dead Yeep lying at his feet. The drifting snow had almost buried it now. One shiny, black horn stuck up in clear view, like a crooked grave marker, glistening wetly in contrast to the white snow and ice that was all around.

The wind tore at his thoughts and seemed to throw back mocking parodies of his words whenever he spoke aloud to himself.

He felt a heavy sense of failure.

He started for the place where he expected to find the next dead Yeep. He moved at a rapid sliding shuffle—a pace that let him main-tain some speed over the slick ice without danger of slipping and fall-ing.

"Slick ice," he said to himself. The ice on Flannigan was extremely slippery. *Probably some variant species of leptothrix*, Olie thought idly as he covered the dis-tance between him and the next dead

Yeep. Someday, maybe I'll have time to break it down and see. We already know that the water on Flannigan is full of an adipose bacillus. Harmless enough—doesn't interfere with our tapping local water supplies—but, when the water freezes, it leaves a residue in the ice made up of the oily parts of the bacillus. Creates very slippery, almost greasy ice. Slick ice.

Following a route that took him in a wide loop out over Botany Bay, Olie worked his way across the surface of Flannigan, finding more and more dead Yeep from which he took tissue samples, until his course brought him back in sight of Botany Bay station.

He quickened his pace as much as he could without risking a fall on the slick ice. He was anxious to do his lab analyses on the tissue samples he had taken—anxious to confirm his own suspicions—anxious to tromp into Elsa's office and tell her that he had been right and she had been wrong.

The anachronism of Botany Bay station always made him smile. Three large structure pods surrounded by inflatable sheds made up the station. It always looked ludicrously out of place to Olie whenever he came on it suddenly. On the barren surface of Flannigan, it reminded him of nothing so much as a plum sticking out of an enormous albino pudding.

The structures themselves were incredibly sophisticated, holding as they did a complete biostation. They would have taken years to build from scratch on the surface. Instead they had appeared almost overnight—already complete.

All of the Terran research stations were carried the same way. They were closed-cycle units, inserted piggyback into the hull of a starship. When the destination planet or space station was raised, the proper number of the proper units were simply detached from the ship and de-graved down to the surface, complete with their own power supplies and food-chain sources.

Needless to say, the abrupt appearance of a research station had a profound effect on any intelligent native life which happened to dwell on a place like Flannigan.

The establishment of Botany Bay station had done the same for the primitive natives of Flannigan, who called themselves Gratchii and were organized into simple, nomadic tribes. It had been quite easy to convince the Gratchii that the Terrans were beings with whom it would be wise to cooperate.

In the shirt-sleeve environment of the station's main pod, Rudolf Altborg clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair.

As the project's biochemist, he was obliged to chart trends, ride herd on the work of biomedical technicians like Olie Struan, and condense information into reports—such as the one he was dictating into the message chip at this moment.

"Conclusion-wise," he said into the pickup, "we have effectively diluted the metabolic spectrum of the Yeep in such a way that this species, *Ovis Flanax*, will easily be able to operate on a more diversified diet. The almost exclusive dependence by the local indigenous population on the Yeep should be relieved by the successful conclusion of the project. However, while it is not within my area to draw economic conclusions, it appears at this juncture that the fact of the natives' dependence on the Yeep, or on any single animal species, for—" Altborg ticked them off on his fingers—"food supply, fiber from the animal's wool, and monetary units essential to their commercial trade among themselves, offers an indication that an evaluation would be in order toward the possible end of assigning an econ team to widen the systems of merchandise and exchange used by the Gratchii. Not only could the progress of civilization on Flannigan thus be accelerated, but such crises as the one currently being dealt with on successful levels by this project might easily be prevented from recurrence in the future.

"Bio-section expects to shortly complete tests on the mutated strain of Yeep developed here, and we are confident of a successful conclusion of our assignment. Using adaptations of advanced techniques, we have . . ."

Olie Struan slammed the door. Altborg slowly spun his chair to face Olie, who was still shivering from the outside cold.

"They're still dying," Olie said flatly.

Altborg pursed his lips. "Why?"

"Same as I said." Olie stared at Altborg with unblinking blue eyes.

"Are you sure?" Altborg asked.

"No. But I've taken thirty-one tissue samples. I'm sure I'm right, but I'll have to go down to my lab and spin down the samples."

"So, quit guessing and spin 'em."

"Thought you'd like to know, before you get off another report to Elsa, conning her about how well we're doing. I'll be able to prove I'm right."

Altborg was silent for a moment. "Until you prove that you're right—"

"And prove you're wrong," Olie cut in.

"Until you prove you're right," Altborg repeated evenly, "you're still wrong. So, get to proving. Then, we'll re-evaluate—if we have, in point of fact, anything that needs re-evaluating."

"Look!" snapped Olie. "They're still dying. The extremities freeze, they get gangrene, and they die. That doesn't take a genius to see. Hell! Even the Gratchii can see that much. And they're not even hot-shot biochemists. The question is, why? Why are the Yeep in the improved strain, dying off from frozen feet, when the native strain never did?"

"That," Altborg said grumpily, "is what I asked you to find out." "I'm finding it out!" Struan's temper was rising. "I know what it is. All I'm asking you to do is pursue it along an independent mutation. By the time I've proved I'm right, we'll have failed. The Gratchii will have sorted it out in their simple little minds that the Yeep are dying because of us."

"Ridiculous!"

"Sure, it is. The Yeep were dying when we came. We told the Gratchii we'd save them. Now, the new strain keeps dying off."

"That's not it, damn it!" Altborg brought the flat of his hand down sharply on the top of the console and sprang to his feet. "It's a minor genetic drift. You don't have to introduce a new strain to get rid of a drift!"

"This time you do." Struan's blue eyes were wide now. "If the Gratchii start figuring that they are losing their Yeep because of 'evil gods who come from the sky,' our goose is cooked on Flannigan. It's hard enough to keep them from stealing our breeding stock because the Yeep population has shrunk so badly. But, at least, we have their grudging cooperation. If they start casting us as the villains of the piece, we've got two choices. Either bring in troops to protect the station, or pack up and go home." "God damn it!" barked Altborg. He abruptly turned his back on Olie. "All I ask you to do is find the answer to a simple drift, and you start beating me over the head with geopolitics."

"I'm finding it," Olie growled. "But, I also know what it is. For two weeks now, I've been begging you to consider it, but no. 'Elsa insists that we cover the bases,' you say. That's great. I have no objection to that. But while we're covering the bases, I could be cutting across the infield and have the answer waiting when the rest of us get to home plate."

"You think we're going to blow this project, don't you?"

"Yes," Olie replied. "Yes, I do."

"Because you've got a pet theory, and can't be bothered following project policy with it."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Look here, Altborg. You're not the only guy around here with his tail in a crack. As a biochemist, you're far enough up the ladder that you can stand a project failure once in a while without too much strain on your career. But if Botany Bay project goes down the pipe, I'm the guy that will have to take the responsibility. I'm the biomed-gen tech—the organic mechanic. If we fail, I won't be called on the carpet. That's true. But everyone will say that we failed because Olie Struan couldn't handle a simple mutation in a simple animal with a simple mind. That leaves me pretty well swinging as far as my reputation in my specialty goes."

"Hogwash!" snapped Altborg. "Not in my book. If that were true, I could just live with it. But it's not true. The problem with the Yeep is peripheral circulatory deficiency."

"You don't know that yet."

"Not on paper," Struan said. "But that's what it is, just the same. There's more to it than freezing feet,

too. Our new strain of Yeep is also stupider than the old strain. And nearsighted. We're going the wrong direction. We've got to de-velop a new strain in order to cover our bets."

"This all sounds very familiar," Altborg said wearily. "I think I've heard it before, somewhere. You prove your theory, and I'll be the first one to approve a new strain of Yeep. But without something to hang our hat on, Elsa is never go-ing to buy it."

"Not as long as you keep send-ing up sugar-coated reports to her—no."

"Well." Altborg smiled his nas-tiest smile. "Next time you're in the sack with her, maybe you could plead your case. And while you're at it, you can explain what a son of a bitch I am."

They stood across the console from each other for a full minute and glared.

"All right." Olie broke the si-lence. "This is getting us nowhere, and we're both losing our tem-pers."

"I expect we are," Altborg re-marked dryly.

Olie turned and started for the door. "I'll spin these down, first. I'll let you know." He left before Alt-borg could say anything else.

Between Altborg's office and the lab, Olie's temper began to subside, and he sifted through the reasons for his friction with Altborg. There was, he thought, certainly no rea-son to bring personal relationships into the picture. The fact that Elsa Spitzen was the engineer in charge of the Botany Bay project had no bearing on her personal relation-ship with Olie. In this kind of a closed environment where Terrans had to work together, but also had to live together in some kind of community harmony, on-duty titles couldn't be allowed to have any-thing to do with off-duty friend-ships. Altborg, Olie thought, appar-ently was upset that Elsa had made such an arrangement—an arrange-ment that omitted the person be-tween them in the chain of com-mand. Altborg. It was silly for Altborg to be irritated by that, Olie thought. But, it was getting plainer all the time that he was. He never missed a chance to get a dig in about it, and the friction was get-ting to a point that it endangered the project itself.

Olie sighed as he entered his lab. Maybe, if this hump with the ge-netic drift in the Yeep could be gotten over, things would smooth out. After all, Altborg was getting some heavy pressure from upstairs, and it was only natural for him to get rid of it by passing it down to the next man in line. *Unfortunately*, thought Olie, *the next man in line happens to be me.*

Altborg, in his own office, was winding up his report. "And, so, while there are some minor genetic drifts that present some operational difficulties in the new strain of Yeep, we expect to have made ad-justments for them before the next generation is born. These adjust-ments, followed by a testing period, should conclude our successful adaptive mutations of the Yeep."

He rubbed his eyes and leaned back in the chair for a moment. Then he punched an alert circuit and removed the message chip from the pickup.

He sat, staring at the console, and absently tapping the message chip against the palm of his hand.

The records specialist who shortly came into his office was a willowy redhead. "Yes, Dr. Altborg?"

He looked up. "Hi, sweetie. Say, who was the genius that programmed this project so that all the records specialists were female?"

She gave a sophisticated little shrug.

"Here, Jill," Altborg said. "File this and kick a copy upstairs."

As she bent to take the chip from his hand, he expertly pinched her, just hard enough to elicit a slight squeal.

The security alarm buzzed with a rasp that was unmistakable. Red lights flashed in all compartments of the station, and the monitor's voice came booming over the auto-matic gain speakers.

"Alert! Alert! Perimeter breach near number-ten shed! All person-nel on duty to the area of number-ten shed! Gratchii have broken into perimeter. Security personnel—se-cure station pods. Alert! Alert!"

Olie Struan quickly switched off his bio-analyzer and sprang toward the door of his lab. Good thing, he thought, that he had not yet started spinning down his series of sam-ples. Otherwise, he would have had to stick with the machine.

At this moment, he was the most anxious man in Botany Bay station to answer the security alarm, but not because of number-ten shed.

As soon as he cleared the station pod, he sprinted toward number-twelve shed.

The Gratchii—the hairy, bow-legged humanoid inhabitants of Flannigan—had finally figured out how to ground a portion of the stun-field barrier that had been put around Botany Bay station. They had simply built a ramp of hard-packed snow that let them walk over the barrier, which was set on straight-line force fields. Once the outside ramp was complete, they stood on top of it and feverishly poured more snow pack over its crest into the compound. By work-ing rapidly, they built a bridge across the stun-fence, though the force field continued to operate in the tunnel it had melted through the packed snow ramp. Perhaps a hundred of the Gratchii, quite ac-customed to using the harsh winter climate of Flannigan to their ad-vantage, had thrown up the bridge before security could detect its con-struction, and they were swarming over it at the rear of the station area, running at the peculiar, bobbling trot which let them move rapidly over the slick ice and snow fields.

The Terrans spread out from the three tall pods of the station to protect the inflatable sheds which housed the breeding stock of Yeep and the experimental flocks of both the new and old strains.

Olie Struan sprinted along with a group from his pod until he got close to the threatened sheds. Then he veered away and made for shed twelve.

Once inside the shed, Olie slammed the hatch and leaned against the bulkhead, sucking in great gasps of air until he began to get his wind.

The air in the shed was cold, but not nearly as icy as that outside. The shed interior was sheltered from the wind, and the body heat of the animals kept it to a more tolerable temperature than outside.

Olie drew the c-w pistol he had snatched up when he left his lab. He thought it was charged, but he couldn't really remember, so he stripped out the power and checked it while he got his breath.

A quick visual inspection of the shed showed that it was operating and intact. The sheds themselves were longish, semicylindrical affairs with double walls of vyathane film. Between the walls, a pressure of one and a half atmospheres kept the structure rigid, but allowed it to ripple enough so the stormy winds of Flannigan didn't damage it. On the outside, tie-downs anchored to dead-men buried in the frozen ground helped hold down the otherwise lightweight structures. On the inside, a system of web baffling helped the leeward side of the structure hold its shape in a wind-storm by giving the skin walls something to tug against.

The inflatable sheds came down with the station pods, packed in ca-nisters, and were erected by pulling a ring lanyard which activated a gas cell. The canister itself con-tained a small compressor and a set of sensors. When it was patched into the power supply of the sta-tion, it continued to operate as a regulator that maintained proper pressure between the vyathane walls and flashed an alarm if the pressure dropped below an opti-mum level or if the skin of the walls was breached.

Shed twelve was a back-up shed, used to house short-run control groups of Yeep. Normally, no one ever needed to enter it, except the organic mechanic who was doing the mutation runs on the Yeep.

That person was Olie Struan.

Olie made his way to the rear of the shed, where a web fence, run-ning across from one wall to the other, partitioned off the control group of Yeep about which he had been so concerned.

They didn't look like the old strain of Yeep, nor did they look a great deal like the new strain—the new strain which was failing, as far as Olie could see, just as miserably as had the old Yeep that were de-pendent on the puffdocks. The old Yeep had stubby ears, a pair of curved, black horns, were covered with a thick, gray wool, and had four stubby legs which terminated in four-toed, manlike feet. The new Yeep had essentially the same ap-pearance, but were decorated with large, floppy, cocker-spaniel ears, long, fluffy tails, and even larger anthropoid feet.

The Yeep in Olie's secret flock were somewhere in between, but with some minor exceptions—ex-ceptions which Olie believed would make them a viable species, even in the changing ecology of Flanni-gan. They had stand-up, more effi-cient ears, much like a mule deer's, and broad, flattened noses. Their longer legs terminated in a foot with two wide, spatulate toes, ar-ranged opposably, and covered with a thick, horny sheath. At the posterior cleft of the foot was a stubby,

articulable phalanx, equipped with a thick toenail. Their relationship with the other Yeep was evidenced by two small, vestigial toes, on either side of the foot, located above each half of the hoof. The whole foot was a good deal like that of a camel in appearance, but it was better engineered, and all the phalanges were subject to voluntary control by the Yeep.

Hooves.

Hooves didn't freeze. And, with the opposable-toe arrangement, Olie's secret Yeep could grip things, albeit in a very rudimentary manner, a feature that would assist them in keeping their footing on slick ice.

Also, Olie liked to think that these Yeep had kinder eyes than their cousins—eyes that seemed to him to hold at least a spark of intelligence.

He had gone ahead and developed this strain on his own, deliberately operating outside procedural requirements of the project and without authorization. If he was found out before he actually got authorization to develop this mutation, it could cost him his post. But, he had reasoned, if the new Yeep—the ones that were failing to operate and dying of frozen feet—turned out to be a complete failure and there was nothing else in the works to back up the project in a way that could justify it both to the Gratchii and the Terran government, then he was in trouble, anyway.

He was the organic mechanic at Botany Bay, and, when an aid project of this type backfired—as it occasionally did—it was usually the organic mechanic who had to take it on the chin. The organic mechanic was in the uncomfortable position of being the guy who couldn't cover himself by passing the buck.

Olie had suspected the problem, and as far as he could see, had anticipated the answer as soon as he discovered the new strain of Yeep beginning to die off. He had started his own program, at first as a re-search control, but he had never gotten a chance to even try and sell it. Elsa Spitzen was the engineer in charge of the Botany Bay project, and she was six feet of raving Teutonic precision. She had loudly insisted that "guesswork" had no place in the scientific method; that project policy would be followed to the letter; that a solid body of supporting data would be assembled first; that it would be evaluated; that curves would be established; that then and only then would any new strains be developed, if and only if it was clearly indicated as a necessity for the success of the project.

If Elsa found out that Olie had gone against her orders, she would have no hesitation about cutting him off right at the ground. Elsa wouldn't let her own personal affection for Olie soften her response to such a situation. She wasn't built that way. Six feet tall, blond and blue-eyed, solidly built yet slender at a hundred and fifty-five pounds. That was Elsa. She was always feminine, even when she was working in the sheds, wearing boots and a baggy one-piece. There was never any question that she was a woman, but she was also an ecological engineer—one of the best—and she knew she was one of the best.

She ran Botany Bay station like the quarterdeck of an Eighteenth Century man-of-war.

No. Olie had no self-delusions about what would happen to him if Elsa got wind that he had deliberately gone against her orders.

Olie moved to the wall of the shed and looked out through a glass window. Outside, the shouting was drawing closer, as the Gratchii warmed to their task of stealing as many Yeep as they could cart off.

Maybe the Gratchii were hungry. It was anyone's guess why they had broken into the compound at Botany Bay, but that could be the reason. After all, they had oriented their own food chain and trade development to a system that depended much too heavily on the Yeep. They used them for meat. They used their wool to make the rough, homespun woolen clothes that protected them from the harsh climate of Flannigan. And they used Yeep as a medium of exchange. Their entire commerce used Yeep as money. A thing was worth this or that many Yeep. If you wanted to buy, you had to buy with Yeep, and if you didn't have any Yeep, you had to sell something to get them, or venture out into the frozen countryside and catch some. If you wanted to sell, you had to take payment in Yeep.

It was, of course, entirely possible that the Gratchii had mounted this raid on Botany Bay station simply because they couldn't resist the temptation of all that "money" being stashed away by the Terrans.

As Olie looked out on the melee in the compound, he had no trouble distinguishing between the

Terrans and the Gratchii. The average Gratchii was a good six inches shorter than the average Terran. The natives of Flannigan had chubby, moon faces, with beards and long, wild hair. Their deep chests gave them a stocky look, which was given a ridiculous appearance by their bowed legs.

Somewhere in their chain of evolution, Olie mused, their legs had become bowed in order to allow them to move over slick ice without falling down a great deal, as was evidenced by the peculiar, bobbing gait they used when running. A Terran could not run on slick ice. He had to move with a rapid, sliding shuffle and keep his feet in contact with the surface of the ice. Otherwise he would lose his footing every few steps. The Gratchii, however, could trot along at a pretty respectable speed.

They were running every which way, now, out in the compound.

Rather than take the obvious method of gaining entry to the sheds, some of them had avoided the doorway hatches and tried to hack their way in through the walls.

The sheds, when robbed of the air pressure between the vyathane skin double walls, had, of course, collapsed, but not fast enough to keep the Gratchii out. They had poured into the sheds through the holes cut with their knives, unaware that the whole structure was in the process of sagging to the ground like a flaccid tent with poles suddenly turned to sponge rubber.

The collapsed sheds rippled in the wind, and were filled with lumps that represented Gratchii, Terrans, and Yeep. All were thrashing madly, and screaming unintelligible curses of confusion, if the Yeep could be said to be capable of cursing.

The effect was much like two busted marble bags full of jumping beans. Hysterical Gratchii were writhing under the vyathane film, slashing madly with the large skinning knives they all carried. Some of them were, largely by chance, chopping holes in the collapsed sheds and escaping into the open air, even more disheveled than usual, and reeling, glassy-eyed, away from their recent astonishment at being attacked by a building.

The Terrans knew more about what needed to be done when a shed comes down on one. Beams of light from c-w weapons stabbed out through the vyathane. Terran technicians, bellowing their customary, ritual profanities, had whipped out their sidearms, stopped the power down to minimum level, and systematically sliced their way out from under. They were coming out now, tousled and enraged, but still mindful of what needed to be done. The Gratchii and the Yeep— and a few Terrans who had lost their c-w weapons in the scuffle—had to be gotten out of the collapsed sheds before they used up the little air trapped under the vyathane and smothered.

The Yeep were reacting like the lovable idiots they were. They were hopping up and down in one spot and howling, with the earsplitting shriek that had inspired the Terrans to call them Yeep in the first place.

Fist fights had broken out in scuffling clumps around the two collapsed sheds. It was plain that the Gratchii had no lethal intentions—they were smart enough to know the Terrans had them completely outgunned. They didn't want to hurt anyone. They just wanted to steal some Yeep from the station. The Terrans didn't want to hurt the Gratchii—that would be bad public relations—but, they didn't want the experimental flocks of Yeep carted away, either.

A Gratchii would snatch up a groggy, confused Yeep, and start hot-footing it for the snow ramp over the stun-fence. A Terran would tackle him, or knock him down, or simply seize the Yeep and dash for the nearest functional shed, where other Terrans were dumping bewildered Yeep through the hatchways and securing them from the greedy grasps of the Gratchii.

Once burned, the Gratchii showed no further interest in getting into the other sheds by cutting a hole in the walls. They were concentrating on the Yeep which were loose in the compound, and more were being turned loose every minute by groups of Terrans who were feverishly shredding up the collapsed sheds and disentangling those—both Yeep and Gratchii—still trapped under the vyathane. Once in a while, as a knot of Yeep were sprung from confinement, a Terran technician would break cover with them, red-faced from respiration reduction, and roaring obscene maledictions on everyone and

ev-erything within earshot. His aggravation was usually alleviated by the deliverance of a good, swift kick in the rump to the, nearest Yeep, or, in some cases, the summary deck-ing of a convenient Gratchii.

Little clusters of Yeep stood about, knotted together, with their heads touching, like a huddle of football players, jumping stiff-legged and shrieking piteously.

The Terrans were trying to gather up the loose Yeep as fast as they could. The Gratchii were try-ing to steal them just as fast. Once in a while, a Terran technician would grab hold of a Yeep at the same time as a Gratchii grabbed hold of the other end of the same animal. The two of them would tug back and forth, stretching every part of the Yeep's anatomy, while the Yeep howled bloody murder with its tongue hanging out and a glazed look of astonishment in its eyes. The Terran usually won the Yeep, but the Gratchii were deter-mined little fellows, and they would hang doggedly onto the prize as some burly Terran tech-nician carted it toward a shed, dragging the Gratchii along behind.

The noise of the battle filtered through to the inside of shed twelve, where Olie was sticking close to his secret flock of improved-design Yeep. He could hear the shouting confusion outside, and the meaty pop of fists striking flesh. Through his glassane window, he saw the Gratchii begin to thin out as most of the Yeep were secured by scurrying Terrans.

Once, a bow-legged Gratchii trotted laboriously past, just outside the window, lugging a Yeep under each arm. Pausing for breath, he looked up at the window and saw Olie staring at him. He dropped the Yeep and scampered off through the snow. The Yeep licked their noses and sat down dis-gustedly, only to be scooped up by another Gratchii who came sprint-ing along, heading for the snow ramp and the safety that lay be-yond it.

The second Gratchii wore exactly the expression of a Terran who has just spotted a bundle of money ly-ing in the street. He paused for a moment, looked up and down, then grabbed the two dazed Yeep—one under each arm—smiled broadly, and, grunting under the weight, la-bored off toward the perimeter of Botany Bay station.

When Olie was satisfied that the station was secure—satisfied that no more larcenous Gratchii were lin-gering inside the perimeter—he turned back to his Yeep.

They stood, some with their heads cocked to one side, and regarded him aristocratically.

"Well," he said softly, "you're still safe—so far—my chickens."

That seemed to satisfy the Yeep, and they moved along the web fence to their feeding trough and began to munch quietly. Olie stared at them for a few more min-utes, looking at the control tag on the pen without really seeing it. "E.M.," it read, short for Experimental Mutation; followed by the digital readout that would identify data on this group in the comput-ers—if Olie could just engineer a way to reveal his Yeep to Elsa without getting laced up one side and down the other by her temper.

"Yeep. E.M. 57-50-88." Letters and numbers, burn-stenciled on a plain white sign that was riveted to the web fence. To Olie, that "Yeep. E.M. 57-50-88," was the critical data on which would hinge the suc-cess or failure of the Botany Bay project—as well as the success or failure of a certain organic me-chanic who had gotten himself a long way out on a very shaky limb.

Olie puffed out his cheeks and emptied his lungs. He was just as tired as if he had been out there, running around with his colleagues, belting Gratchii and lugging Yeep.

Outside the shed, he holstered his c-w pistol and dogged the hatchway shut against the wind. He rubbed his face with both hands and looked up at the overcast sky. Clouds were rolling in off Botany Bay, and the wind had gotten higher during the hour that had passed since the security alarms had first sounded.

A storm was shaping up. Olie noted the fact mentally, reflecting, as he trudged back toward the sta-tion pods, that it would be no inconvenience to him, since he had plenty of work to do in his lab: first spinning down the analyses on the tissue samples he had collected; then, trying to pound some sense into Altborg's head so he could get an opportunity to try to pound some sense into Elsa's head.

He latched his door behind him and leaned against it briefly. It wasn't the work that was wearing him down. He enjoyed his work, felt it was important, and never tired of it. When he carefully manipulated

very tiny organic parts and pieces which controlled the whole organism of a creature, even though he knew what he was going to get, he was always faintly surprised and pleased that it worked.

No, Olie decided, it wasn't the work that was making him tired. It was the pressure from Altborg, the inability—or refusal—to listen to what Olie was trying to get across to him. Olie's painstakingly orderly methods, together with years of experience, had given him an insight and intuition which told him he already knew the answer—told him that his lab findings would simply verify what he had guessed at the beginning.

He unbuckled the belt and hung his pistol on a hook by the door, then moved across to the bio-analyzer console and punched up the power source.

An hour later, he was still hovered over the screen. When the analyzer had spun down and broken up the tissue sample a series of readout models would come up on the screen—cells, chains, nuclei, molecules. Olie's finger hovered over the print key, methodically punching it for a hard copy of each readout. He had a healthy pile of paperwork—detailed tissue diagrams on all the dead Yeep he had found that morning—when Altborg entered the lab.

Olie glanced up from the bio-analyzer. "Hi," he said, and turned back to the screen.

Altborg smiled crookedly. "Fifty-seven; fifty; eighty-eight," he said.

Olie switched off his machine and swung his chair around to face Altborg, who was leaning on a lab bench. "I beg your pardon?" Olie asked calmly.

"Fifty-seven; fifty; eighty-eight," Altborg repeated. "Mean anything to you?"

"Sounds like a digmudent to me."

"Say!" Altborg feigned surprise. "That could be it. Digital mutation identification. It's arranged the same way. I don't know, though. Our operational strain is only fifty-seven; fifty; seventy-five. How could there be an eighty-eight strain? It's not logged in the computer."

Olie laid his hand on the pile of printouts, as though they needed his protection. "I don't really have time to play cat-and-mouse with you, Altborg. What's on your mind?"

"O.K. You have loused up the detail. You have said the hell with policy orders and program definition, and put together a mutation strain on your own hook. That's what's on my mind."

"What makes you think so?" Olie asked evenly.

"Been there," Altborg replied. "To shed twelve. All tucked away in the back pen," he added by way of verification.

Olie stiffened. He started to reach for the commo key, but Altborg waved him off. "Don't worry. They're all right—for now. I didn't hurt them. But, we will be getting rid of them pretty quick."

Olie looked at him questioningly. "Get rid of them? What in blazes do you mean, get rid of them? The eighty-eight strain is the answer."

"They're not in the program," Altborg said smoothly.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Put them in the program! That won't kill us, will it?"

"According to my paperwork and reports," Altborg replied, "the seventy-five strain is operational, is getting the job done, and functions well within program curves."

"What? They're dying off! And you know it!"

"Not on my books. My relative program evaluations say we'll be out of this hole in less than a month."

"God damn it, Altborg!" Olie smacked the pile of printout diagrams with the flat of his hand.

"The dope is right here. It's like I said, and I can cut samples from now till doomsday and still get the same answers. The tissue freezing and gangrene is a product of peripheral circulatory insufficiency. They don't get enough blood into their feet and ears to keep them from freezing. The old Yeep had smaller, tougher feet, and tiny ears. Further, the seventy-five strain is stupider than the old Yeep, the circulatory disorder also affects their brains and eyes. Cerebral circulatory insufficiency, and retinopathy. That's another reason for their feet freezing. They're too damned dumb to know anything's wrong with them until they drop dead."

"Hm-m-m." Altborg got to his feet and began to pace up and down the lab. "Well, that's very nice, but I'm not in a position where I can back up, now."

"The seventy-five strain is *not* operational! If we pick up and leave *them* to replace the old Yeep, the project will be a big, fat zero. The seventy-five strain can't function as well as the original strain. Yeep will be *extinct* before we've gotten back to base. Look, Altborg, you can't just kiss off the Gratchii that way. They're cold, hungry, and broke right now—and, there are few Yeep left. This afternoon proves that point. The raid—"

"Stroke of luck, that." Altborg rubbed his chin.

"What?"

"The raid, Olie. That's how I found out about your illegal Yeep. I got to wondering just what there might be out in shed twelve that would send you streaking for it the way you did—when the Gratchii were hitting shed number ten and shed number nine."

"So, you waited—"

"Right. I waited until you left and then took a look."

Olie smiled cynically. "Some-thing told me I should lock it up."

Altborg quit pacing. "At least, you haven't lost your sense of humor. No, locking the shed would only have gotten someone to wondering about it long before this. Come on, Olie . . . hooves, for God's sake. Where'd you get that brilliant idea?"

"Humph. Hooves won't freeze."

"They won't work, either," Altborg said flatly.

"Hah! You seem pretty sure about that."

"I am. Trouble with you is, you're so busy tinkering over your micros, latching and unlatching DNA chains, synthesizing new quasiviruses, that you don't pay attention. Look around you, damn it! The answer is always in the ecology."

"Sure," Olie said, "And this ecology is getting colder and meaner. The hooves—"

Altborg slammed his hand down on the lab bench. "Look at the other species for a moment. Pay attention. If hooves made operational feet on Flannigan, there would be at least a few species here that had them. There aren't. And, you don't have any idea why they don't exist, because you're locked in so damned tight on your own narrow specialty. Ask me. Ask Elsa. The larger system picture is our job."

"So, all right." Olie was fighting to hang onto his half-Nordic, half-Scots temper. "I'm asking, professor. What about it?"

"It's the slick ice. Animals with hooves can't get a grip on it. Natural selection knocked hooves out of evolution here long ago. You stick your 'new and improved' Yeep out there on that greasy ice, and they'll spend so much time falling on their prat and getting up again that they'll never get a *chance* to eat anything."

"If you had bothered to look *just* a little more closely," Olie said evenly, "you *might* have noticed that the hoofed phalanges are both articulable and opposable. Grip and traction are—"

"Agh!" Altborg snorted. He turned abruptly and resumed his pacing up and down. "We were dropped down on this hellhole to breed a strain of Yeep with a broader food-chain capability. We've done just that."

"But," Olie protested, getting to his feet and picking up the sheaf of printout paper, "they're *dying*. The seventy-five strain is—"

"Is *what*?" thundered Altborg, interrupting again. "Is dying of *what*? I say it's systemic, not genetic. I say we can make a spot correction on it and get out of here."

Olie threw down the printouts. "Maybe it is a disease, but if it is, it's inherited. I've got the same thing in two generations, now. There's a third generation just coming out of the chute, and I can see the same thing starting up in them." Olie ticked them off on his fingers. "Peripheral circulatory insufficiency. Retinopathy. Cerebral circulatory insufficiency. The seventy-five strain will be extinct in two generations, once our control flocks are turned loose. Don't you care anything about what happens to them—to the species? And what about the poor, miserable natives of this planet? Don't you care what will happen to them, once the Yeep are *all* dead?"

"No!"

Olie Struan and Rudolf Altborg stood, staring each other down, their eyes fairly crackling hostility

across the lab bench.

When Altborg spoke again, his voice was low and even. "I care about my career. I care more about it than I do about you, or the Yeep, or the Gratchii, or this whole crummy icebox of a planet. I started out as a biomedgen tech—organic mechanic—like you. And I worked, and skulled, and learned, and beat my brains out until I worked up to biochemist. I'm still working and beating my brains out to get up to ecological engineer. I didn't get this far by kicking over the program every time I got to feeling sorry for myself, or got to feeling sorry for some tribe of smelly natives. Get me? You don't make it in this business by going outside the program. Right now, I *certainly* don't need you—or anyone like you—lousing up the detail."

"Sure," Olie said sarcastically. "Maybe you can draw a slot on your next project as ecological en-gineer in charge."

"Maybe I can," Altborg said. He hesitated for a second. "So?"

"Nothing. By that time the Yeep will be extinct and the Gratchii will be starving to death. Pretty ex-pensive, isn't it? I mean—for two pay jumps and a bigger office?"

Altborg sat down wearily on the stool by the lab bench. "Listen, Olie. Get it through your head, will you? We have completed our aid program oh Flannigan. We have engineered a new strain of Yeep that can live on most anything, short of animal protein. We have produced a stabilized metabolism in the seventy-five strain that does not depend on the puffdocks for a food supply. That was the program for this project. We have accom-plished that. They'll adapt to the feet-freezing that you're so all-fired worried about—and, I think they'll adapt before they all die off."

"I don't think so."

Altborg snorted. "I *know* you don't think so! That's why you've been doing your damnedest to wreck my section. Quit it!"

"All right," Olie said soothingly. "All right. Hear me out, then. Now—the cat's out of the bag; or, the Yeep's out of the shed, so to speak. Give me a chance to sell you on it. If what I say makes any sense to you at all, we can—maybe—quietly turn my eighty-eight strain loose in the snow and forget they ever existed."

"Oh for—"

"Hold on. What have we got to lose? They're not logged into the records. If you think I'm on to something, all I ask is that you don't murder my eighty-eights—"

"Euthanasia isn't—"

"It is to me," Olie insisted.

"Oh, for—" Altborg began, again.

"Come on, now." Olie's voice began to show strain. "Are you so closed up you can't listen?"

"You think I *owe* you a hear-ing?"

Olie hesitated. "In a way ,yes."

"All right. All right." Altborg threw both hands over his head, then let them drop. "I'm only the man in charge. Why should my judgment amount to anything? Go ahead. Tell me about it."

Olie licked his lips as he gath-ered his thoughts. Then, he sat down in the control chair at the bio-analyzer. "It's true; the seventy-five strain has mutated perfectly well—within the program. As you say, they can live on almost any-thing, short of animal protein. You say they have a systemic disorder that will adjust out. I say the circulatory disorders are the result of a minor genetic drift—the small, annoying float-gene that we can never predict, but which crops up in the mutated strain once in a while. Normally, this isn't any real problem. Normally, it has nothing to do with our alterations of the basic metabolism of a given crea-ture to solve a given problem."

Altborg's voice was impatient. "Look, Olie. I don't really need lecture on organic chem-engineer-ing."

"O.K., O.K. Just pay attention."

Altborg got to his feet and re-sumed pacing, hands behind his back. He nodded toward Olie, in-dicating that he was ready to hear him out.

"We use endocrine therapy to al-ter the animal's metabolism in samples of the species. Once our clinical evaluation satisfies us that the alteration is functional, we can synthesize a quasivirus to do the

same thing as the drug matrix. We inject that quasivirus into a new group—control group of animals. The nucleus of the virus detaches in the bloodstream, tacks itself onto the DNA molecules in the tissues, and our alteration becomes a trait that will be genetically transmitted. If the transmission holds up throughout the control group, we have a mutation, but there are always some drifts—side-effect mutations—

"Come on," Altborg said wasp-ishly. "I was *producing* organic programs and shoving them into the works long before you ever jerked a tissue sample."

"I've no doubt of it," Olie replied quickly. "It's always come off before. Our systems have worked every time—but, *because* the minor genetic drifts never superimposed themselves on the object of the mutation. This one *does*. That's why I'm carefully going over this ground—"

Altborg stopped in front of Olie, his hands still clasped behind his back. "I *know* what you're talking about. It's very basic stuff; but how does it form any decent argument that the seventy-five strain is a bust, while the eighty-eight—" Altborg checked himself. "While your illegal strain—developed outside the program—will be such a galloping success?"

"It gets back to the same old thing. Peripheral circulatory insufficiencies. Poor collateral circulation—in this case affecting the extremities, eyes and brain. In the seventy-five strain, there simply isn't enough capillary formation in the tissue masses. In itself, that's within tolerance levels, but only in a general way. This climate brings it to critical importance in the areas of the Yeep's body that I've mentioned. You see it as systemic, as something that can be solved through pathology. That's because you're thinking in terms of biochemistry. I'm looking at it as a cell mechanic—and, I can see that it will have to be built out of the seventy-five strain."

"Well, you're out of luck!" snorted Altborg. "It's too late for that. The seventy-five strain is in operation, and passed by the system evaluation—"

"Of course it's too late," Olie said. "I'm only the organic mechanic, but I can see that we'd have to work up an entire new strain to get rid of the problem with the vascular system. In the eighty-eight strain, I simply knocked out the parts of the machine—the animal—where poor collateral circulation was causing trouble in this climate."

"Hm-m-m," mused Altborg. "I still say the hooves won't work—not on slick ice. The whole thing sounds flaky. It's too easy."

"Maybe so," Olie said. He sensed that Altborg was beginning to soften, but that his enormous ego prevented him from actually voicing any specific agreement.

"Look, Altborg. There's nothing to lose, really. Just turn the eighty-eight control flock loose. See how they do. If they look like they'll make it, leave them loose."

"Sure," Altborg sniffed. "What will the follow-up team log them as when *they* check up on the Botany Bay project, later on?"

"They'll log them as a selection variation, and you know it. I haven't been on too many follow-up teams, but I've pulled samples for enough of them to know they'll stretch a point pretty far to make observed results fit the system evaluation on a project." Olie laughed a short, hard laugh. "Those guys are like you. They like their paper-work to go together nice and smooth."

"Hmmp!" Altborg sniffed, again. "Who doesn't? And, what if your 'eighty-eight' strain is a flat failure? What if I *am* right—and I am very apt to *be* right, you know?"

"Well," Olie said, "you can relieve me from the project and ship me home."

"Hah! I can do that right *now*!"

"Yes, but if you'll give the eighty-eight strain a fair shake—and give the Gratchii a fair shake thereby—and my Yeep do fail, I'll sit still for getting fired." He measured his words carefully. "I'll shut up and take it. You'll have a free hand with Elsa—uh—off-duty-wise."

Altborg's eyes narrowed. "I'll have to think it over."

"Fair enough."

"Let me have your hard data on the eighty-eights. I'll run it through the sides program—see how it stands in comparative analysis."

Olie began shuffling together his pile of printouts, and stacked some more sheafs of data on top of it. Then he paused. "How about copies? They do just as well?"

Altborg shrugged and turned his back. "Sure. Copies are fine."

Outside the pods of Botany Bay station, the early front of the rising storm was building itself on the prevailing winds that carried it in upon the land from far out over the cold sea—miles away from the shore where constant wind and wa-ter motion did not allow the sea to ice over as it had in Botany Bay it-self.

The wind had risen during the afternoon, from its usual low whistle to a persistent whine. It drove small maelstroms of powdery snow across the slick ice and me-thodically piled up the heavy clouds in the eastern sky, as some mythical god-child might stack snowballs in preparation for a bursting good sham-battle that it was plotting with friends.

The vyathane skins of the sheds, reined by the tie-downs outside and the web baffling inside, rippled steadily under the rising wind, rustling softly as the web baffles stretched and tugged, making the entire structures creak and sigh. The Yeep shuffled nervously in their pens and knotted together in little clumps which shifted constantly as their instincts told them of the coming storm.

Rudolf Altborg hunched over the console in his darkened office, his face lit from below by the lights of the feeder complex. He was putting Olie's data into an analysis pro-gram of Botany Bay station's main computer. He muttered to himself as he worked. "If he hadn't caught on and insisted on giving me copies, I could have shoved the data into a non-retrieval and dumped his eighty-eight strain." He sighed. "Now I've got to go ahead with it, but I might as well give him a square analysis. He may be onto something that will be useful on some other project . . ."

The commo key on Altborg's desk console lit up.

He ignored it and continued feeding the job into the computer's sides program.

The key buzzed, softly at first, then more loudly as the reception cycle was manually overridden. Only one commo outlet in the station was equipped to do that: talk to you if you *didn't* answer the call.

"Rudolf," said Elsa Spitzen's voice from the desk console. "Will you get up here to my office as soon as you can?"

"I can't come right now, sweets," Altborg said, without turning. "I'm feeding a job into the computer. I can't break off till it's all in."

"O.K.," Elsa replied, after a brief silence. "Will it bother you if we talk while you're doing it?"

"Nope. Not a bit. What's on your mind?"

In her own office, Elsa switched her commo key to broad range, and turned her chair away from her desk console so she could look out the large window behind her desk.

"I just had the Alapah of the lo-cal Gratchii tribe in here. The translation was a bit strange, but it was an interesting conversation."

Altborg stopped what he was doing and looked intently at the pickup that was broadcasting Elsa's voice. *Now what?* he thought to himself.

In her office, Elsa had not turned on the lights, even though the af-ternoon light was beginning to go—even faster, now, with the weather beginning to kick up in earnest.

She had changed her clothes, was no longer wearing the rather severe one-piece she favored during busi-ness-as-usual hours when her job was to let no one make a mistake about her being the ecological en-gineer of the project—female or not. Now, she was wearing a light-weight, loose-fitting one-piece of soft silken net that accentuated the full curves of her body. Sitting be-hind her desk console, silhouetted against the fading light that came through the window, she put her feet up, kicked off her deck slip-pers and began to take her hair down. As she talked to Altborg over the commo, the pale blond mantle began dropping about her shoulders—full, wavy hair that seemed to glisten as the dying light from the overcast sky of Flannigan shone through it.

"Are you interested, Rudolf?" she said into the commo.

"Sure," Altborg replied in his own office. "What did your friend the Alapah have to say? Did you find out anything about this afternoon's snatch expedition?"

"Not much we didn't already know. Except for this one crazy thing."

"What's that?"

"He said—as nearly as the trans-lator could tell—that the seventy-five strain of Yeep are dying off as fast as the base strain."

Altborg hesitated. "Must be an error somewhere with the translator. The base strain are still starv-ing out, but my evaluations—"

"That's what disturbs me, Ru-dolf. You may have overlooked some points, somewhere. It's not like you. Have you had any data on the seventy-fives' freezing their feet and dropping dead?"

Altborg continued feeding data into the sides program. He couldn't stop, now that he had started, until all of Olie's material had been put into the job. "Oh," he replied ab-sently, "we've had a little trouble along those lines, but it looks sys-temic to me—a float gene at the worst. We're working it out."

In her own office, Elsa opened a compartment in her console and re-moved a hairbrush. She didn't look where she was reaching, because she knew precisely where the brush was placed in the compartment. She began brushing out her full, Norse-blond hair as she talked to Altborg. "I haven't pulled any data, yet, Rudolf. It seemed only right to talk with the section chiefs, first. Do you think this might be an idiopathic disorder—something to do with the emotional tension on the part of the Yeep at being held in the control sheds?"

"Hm-m-m. Possible," Altborg re-plied. "We've some data on cyanosis of the extremities in affected Yeep—"

"Vascular constriction?" she cut in. "Could it, then, *not* be a genetic drift?" There was a hopeful tone to her voice. "If it's only systemic, we can treat it with an induced auto-immunity system."

"We're taking RNA inventories now," Altborg said, as he punched up a retrieval system that would give him that information, "toward a system setup."

"Get together a workup on this idiopathic thing. It could be some-thing on the order of—say—Ray-naud's Disease."

Altborg wrote it down. "Been checking that out, but I haven't found too much on it. Fairly re-cently identified, isn't it?"

"First described in the Nine-teenth Century." There was a sud-den, sharp chill in Elsa's voice. "Oh."

"Let's get some real results, Ru-dolf. Your reports look rosy and your section runs smoothly, but your paperwork is a little too good to be true. I want this mutation wrapped up so it works right. We're coming down to the end of our funding. At least for this project. If I ask for an extension to straighten out some screwup, I know what the answer will be."

"Yes?"

"They'll cancel the programming on Flannigan and let the Gratchii float on their own—sink or swim. I don't know about you, but I don't propose to have it on my record that I was in charge of a project that was scrubbed for failure."

"Uh, I'll get right on it." Altborg cursed under his breath, silently. This was just the thing he had been trying to avoid. "I'll start pulling evaluations and putting them through the sides program. My techs will be pulling tissue samples as soon as we finish talking. Don't worry. I'll find the fly in the oint-ment."

"You do that, Rudolf. I've got to get an update on this weather situ-ation—it looks bad. I'll get back to you." She paused. "Anything else?"

"I've got it."

"O.K." The com-mo key light winked out as Elsa broke the cir-cuit.

Altborg leaned back in his chair, put his hands on top of his head, and exhaled noisily. He lifted his right foot and gently shoved for-ward the switch that would start sides analysis of Olie's data on the illegal eighty-eight strain.

As the computer sucked in the information that had been stored in the feeder complex and gained up on the comparison cycles, Altborg whistled tunelessly—as he had a habit of doing when the pressure was building—and made up a lim-erick to take his mind off his trou-bles.

"An ecologist fair named Spit-zen,
To make certain that everything fits in,
Says 'Rudolf, clean up the pro-gram,
Even if you don't give a damn,

Or whether you're coming to your wits' end."

Altborg smiled. "Hey diddle, diddle; right down the middle. Who's on the griddle?"

"Wow. That gal is too much," said the meteorologist.

"Hm-m-m?" his partner grunted, without looking up from his monitors.

"She's calling for a new weather plot every fifteen to twenty minutes."

"So—she wants to keep informed. She's the boss, isn't she?"

"No way to make a mistake about it. She just had Altborg on the pipe, and laced him up one side and down the other—as much as she ever does on the commo, at least."

The monitor section of Botany Bay station did more than plot and record the weather. It resembled the bridge of a starship—though it was not nearly so large or complex. Data came into it from a dozen different kinds of sensors and systems. Security personnel kept their attention to visual readouts of sensing devices on the station perimeter and in the control sheds. Records specialists were constantly feeding information from chips into retrieval storage and recording all internal commo between compartments and sections. The two weathermen at their console were only a small part of the constant activity in the monitor section.

"How did he take it?" asked the second meteorologist.

"There's only one way with her, and that's to take it, and smile, and say 'Thank you,' when she's finished."

"I suppose." The second meteorologist straightened from his screens and with the heel of his hand rapped a key that would send a recap of the current weather status into the crossover for storage in the main computer's memory. "The trouble with Altborg is he's got the hots for Elsa. Wrecks his objectivity. His judgment isn't working at all well."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"Jill told me."

"Leave it to a records specialist to be up on the gossip."

"Besides that, she's nice to look at."

The first meteorologist chuckled. "Count your blessings that you're involved with Jill. If you had hooked up with Elsa, you sure wouldn't have any time for section gossip."

The other smiled. "Yeah. I don't know if I could handle her at all."

"That's what's eating Struan, probably. Damn, has he been in a mood, lately. Beats me why he ever picked on Elsa to begin with."

"I think it was the other way around," the second man said. "Yeah?"

"Sure. Elsa's satisfied with Struan as an object of her affection—she knows she can handle him—knows he won't give her any trouble."

"That's one of the things that's got Altborg chewing up the rug. I think, anyway. Elsa is apparently perfectly satisfied with Struan, but she won't give Altborg a tumble. Like you said—it's hard on his ego—wrecks his objectivity."

"Logical."

"What Altborg can't see is that Elsa wouldn't be likely to care for any liaison with him; if for no other reason than the fact that she's pretty heavy on the ego, herself. Oops. Here she comes, again."

The commo key lit up and buzzed simultaneously.

"Yes, Elsa," said the first meteorologist.

"What's the weather doing?" Elsa asked.

The first meteorologist quickly scanned the screens and riffled through the hard copies of the re-cap printouts. "Still stiffening. The kph is up 7.6. Barometer still dropping, steadily. Current rate of storm: force gamma-zero. The activity center is fifty clicks out, coming in on bearing two-zero-five at twelve clicks per; up two full clicks from last recap."

"What's your plot on full break?"

"Hm-m-m. Trend sides indicate we'll get it about 2300, but it will be slacked off enough for us to get out of the pods by 0600."

In her office, Elsa smiled slightly. "In other words," she said into the comms pickup, "we better nail our shoes to the deck, or we'll blow away."

"Affirmative," the meteorologist replied. "This looks like the mean-est stroke of weather we've seen yet on Flannigan."

"O.K.," she said. "I'll get back to you."

At the exit portal of the main pod, Olie took his bug off the board, wrote on it where he was going and his expected time of return, and handed the plastic chip across to the security man on duty, who punched the information into his console. The active inrush data in this local console continued to sort itself until each entry was manually cleared. If a technician was gone over his estimated time, the console would flash the information up on a screen, alerting the duty security to the possibility that the man might be in some trouble. The only other job which that duty security had was to make certain that no local natives or animal life gained entry to the pod. The night security duty was a good place to catch up on your reading.

The security man had his reader propped on his knees and jacked into the library channel. "Hit the sign-out sheet, too," he said to Olie. "We're on a weather alert." "Sure thing," Olie replied. "What are you reading?" he asked as he carefully printed the information on the clipboard.

"Spec-fiction," the other man answered. "'Slavers of Space.' Weird stuff. Don't catch cold," he said as he activated the portal.

Olie gasped as the wind hit him full in the face. He had to lean steeply into the fierce gale to keep his feet, and still nearly fell several times before he got to shed number twelve.

The wind nearly tore the hatch-way from his hands as he opened it. It slammed back against the frame, but the noise was lost on the howling wind, which was beginning to drive snow before it now, as it swept in off Botany Bay. The piling clouds were no longer visible in the darkness—only the scream of the wind and the sleet, biting into the surface of Flannigan. But that was enough to tell anyone that even heavier weather was already on the way.

Olie had to throw all his weight on the hatch to pull it shut behind him. There was a low click as the electric hinges engaged, telling the security monitors that the hatch was now closed.

The Yeep were all up and twittering among themselves, awakened by the blast of wind from the open hatch. Olie hurried to the rear pen and his eighty-eights.

They clustered near the fence when they saw him, and made inquiring little noises at him. Olie was the only human they knew.

"Take it easy, chickens," Olie said, as he spread feed into their trough. "Take it easy. Just a little bad weather."

The eighty-eights were plainly jumpy at the noise of the wind and the creaking of the shed, but Olie's voice seemed to reassure them, as did his regular habit of feeding them himself. These Yeep didn't know their existence was a secret. They only knew that this man came to feed them twice each day, and they sensed his special feeling for them.

Olie fed the other Yeep that were housed inside the shed, then returned to the pen where his eighty-eights were now feeding quietly.

"Altborg wants to kill you all," he said to them.

One tiny Yeep, only a few weeks old, was bobbing around the cluster of his elders, trying vainly to shoulder his way up to the trough. The more he struggled, the less effect he had. The older Yeep munched their feed contentedly and ignored him. As his vexation grew, he began to squeal furiously—his attempt to duplicate the shrieking sound made by adult Yeep.

"So," Olie said, "you think the squeaky wheel always gets the grease, do you? Well, kid, the older you grow, the more you'll learn. Tain't necessarily so. Altborg is boxing me in, slowly but surely, just like your folks, here—and, God knows, I've been howling my head off. What has it got me? Nothing but trouble. I *know* I'm right—but Altborg *knows* he's right, too. We can't both be right, can we, kid?"

The baby Yeep was beginning to wear himself out now. He stopped squealing and retired to the far side of the pen, where he licked his nose disgustedly and sat down, panting for breath.

"Rather than let Altborg exterminate all of you, maybe I'd be better off to do the job myself and try to forget about it. I don't know why I'm so upset about you guys, any-way. No one else seems to give a damn. If I killed you all off, there wouldn't be any evidence—no real evidence—that you ever existed. My career would be clean, and I'd be out of trouble."

The baby Yeep got to his spindly legs and looked straight at Olie, with his head cocked to one side. Olie cocked his own head and looked back. "You think I'm nuts, don't you, kid? Maybe I am." Suddenly, Olie smacked his fist into his hand. "But, damn it, I'm *right*. Ev-erything I know tells me I'm right." Olie thought for a moment, sorting over all the desperate alternatives that were open to him now, since he had managed to work himself into this very tight spot. None of them made real sense to him, except one. He knew he couldn't bear to kill off the eighty-eights himself, and he didn't think he could take knowing that Altborg would have it done.

"Phooey," Olie said to himself. "Altborg isn't going to buy my bargain. He isn't going to let me turn you loose to see if you can make it."

The baby Yeep at the rear of the pen sniffed the ground, and pawed at it, flexing both halves of his right front hoof.

"You know it, too, don't you kid. If Altborg won't give you a chance, maybe I'll just sneak out there—as soon as the storm lets up—and turn you all loose myself."

The baby Yeep took a deep breath, gathering himself on his skinny legs, and galloped headlong toward the cluster of Yeep at the feeding trough. The momentum of his charge carried him well into the flock. Squealing triumphantly, he squirmed and wriggled his way up to the trough, almost falling head-first into it. He looked up smugly at Olie, as if to say, "See? That's how it's done," and then he began to eat.

Olie looked down at the trough for a moment. Not only was this youngster tougher than the others, he assuredly was smarter. Olie blinked his blue eyes a few times, then straightened to his full height, and turned toward the hatchway.

Back in the main pod, Olie signed in and hung his bug back on the personnel board. "How's the book?" he asked the security man.

The duty security shrugged. "I don't know why I read the stuff." "How's that?"

"Oh, the guy had everything going good; then, all of a sudden, he decided it was long enough and ended it. I was just getting wound up, and he said 'Surprise!' and wrapped it all up on me in three pages. I don't know why I read the stuff."

Olie strode purposefully down the passage, thinking to himself what would be the best way to handle this thing. *Get to your own lab, he decided, and call Elsa from there. No point in just busting in on her. She'll be furious enough when she has the whole story, anyway. Altborg isn't going to give you any satisfaction. On the other hand, he does deserve the courtesy of asking what he got from the sides evaluation of the eighty-eights. That will have to be done first. Going straight to Elsa, now, after having made a deal—however shaky—with Altborg, would just be going off half-cocked.*

He didn't knock.

Altborg looked up from the con-sole, where he had been sitting, pondering the whichness of the why. "Yes?" he said.

My *turn*, thought Olie. "What'd you find out from the computer about the eighty-eights?"

"Haven't got it back out, yet," Altborg lied. "The job is sitting on standby."

"What for?"

"The machine is busy running data updates and recapping this weather development."

"Very likely," Olie replied. "I've just been out in it. It's rotten."

"Not a fit night out for man or Yeep, eh?"

"Something like that." Olie's gaze moved about the room, stopping abruptly at a pile of printouts next to the feeder complex. He moved closer to Altborg and the console. "I've made up my mind, Altborg."

"About what?" Altborg asked pleasantly.

"About my eighty-eights. I've been out there in the shed with them. They can make it. I know they

can make it."

"Hang on a minute," Altborg soothed. "Let's see what the comparative analysis says."

"Nope. I'm going to Elsa."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to Elsa, and I'm going to lay it on the line."

"Don't be a sap, Olie."

"I told you. My mind is made up."

"Hah! Question is, what's it made up of?"

"Skip the word games, Altborg. If you've got the sides program printout, say so. If you don't, I'll go without it."

Altborg got to his feet. "You won't go—with it or without it. Look, I'm trying to keep both of us from being boiled in oil. If anybody goes to Elsa, I'll go . . ." He smiled crookedly. "Unless, of course, you have a purely social call in mind."

Olie bristled. "I'm tired of that noise, too. So forget it. Don't worry. I won't implicate you. I'll take the whole load myself. I developed the eighty-eights—not you. If anybody gets roasted, I'll take the whole roasting alone. No one has to know that you were even aware of the eighty-eights."

"That may sound all right to you," Altborg said quickly. "But, it will sure make me look like a prize sap, and you know it."

"Oh?" Olie was beginning to lose his temper. Something, he thought for an instant, rubbed him the wrong way about Altborg. It had, he decided, always rubbed him the wrong way. He was getting mad now, and he was enjoying it, as he had never enjoyed getting mad before.

"Oh?" he repeated. "How's that?"

"Some section chief I'll look like—when everyone knows that a plain organic mechanic pulled the wool over my eyes—developed a strain of Yeep outside the program without my ever knowing it."

"Well," Olie shrugged, "that's the way it is. Too bad."

"Wait a minute," said Altborg smoothly.

Olie edged around toward the console. When he was close enough, he reached out and snatched up the printout, glancing at it briefly. "Looks like your job came out of the computer while you were asleep, or something."

He moved toward the door.

"Put that down!" snapped Altborg, who was already moving around from behind the console toward Olie.

"Too late, Rudolf. Too late." Olie realized with a smile that this was the first time he had ever called Altborg by his first name. He didn't know what the change was—he was too busy—but he knew it felt good.

Even as Altborg swung his fist, Olie—like the frustrated baby Yeep—was charging forward. His momentum carried them both to the deck. The pile of printouts Olie had been clutching tumbled in a heap by the doorway. They rolled behind the console, thrashing madly, each trying to get on top and land a punch. Altborg tangled in the console chair as Olie scrambled to his feet, but as he came up after him, Altborg brought a fist with him from the deck. It didn't land squarely. Olie had seen it and was already moving to one side, but the blow glanced off his jaw, and sent him backwards over the console, headfirst.

Altborg started to climb after him. Olie came up from the deck, eyes glassy, but he was clutching a heavy dilon waste canister in his right hand. As Altborg launched himself from the work surface of the console, Olie brought the canister around in an arc and bounced it off his skull with a clang. Altborg's forward momentum slacked for a second, then he sagged to the deck. He gathered his legs under him, starting to pull himself to his feet.

No point in being halfway about it, thought Olie. He brought the canister down on top of Altborg's head, then dropped it, steadied himself against the console to keep from falling, and looked down at the still form lying on the deck.

As was his methodical custom, Olie knelt beside Altborg, checked his pulse and respiration, skinned

back an eyelid, and then smiled. "Well, he's not dead . . . But, he's going to have one hell of a knot on his head when he comes around."

That felt good, too.

Olie stayed on one knee until he caught his wind. Only one thought kept him from lying down, himself. He wanted, at that moment, to just lie down and go to sleep, and never get up again. But, regardless of what happened now, he had to put the whole thing before Elsa.

Wearily he gathered up the printouts he had dropped and headed for his own lab, straight-ening out the computer evaluation as he half ran, half staggered down the passage.

In his lab, he gathered the originals of his hard copy runs on the Yeep, including his eighty-eights, and stuffed the whole works into a case. While he worked, he rapped the commo key with his knuckles and punched out the call for Elsa's office.

No answer.

He put in a second call, to her quarters.

"Yes?" she answered.

Olie smiled. "Elsa? Are you de-cent?"

"Olie? Is that you? You sound awful."

"I am," Olie panted. "Are you decent?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'll be right there." He broke the circuit and headed for the door.

For a patient forty minutes, Elsa listened while Olie briefed her on his findings about the seventy-five strain of Yeep, piling up data sheets and tissue printouts of sample bio-analyses as he went. And, while he laid out the entire story on the eighty-eight strain, why he had developed them, why he believed so strongly in them, and his reasons for believing Altborg had been dealing to him off the bottom of the deck.

Finally, he had gone over all of it, and stood waiting for her reaction, not having any idea what form it would take.

She stared at the wall for several minutes, then turned to him. "Very concise report, no more chance for preparation than you had."

"Like I said," Olie replied, "I didn't know what the sides evaluation was. I never had time to read it over until I laid it on your table, here."

"Even so," she said, "It does support your guesses. Guesses have no place in scientific work. I thought you knew that."

"Yes, Elsa. I know it. Believe me, I know it. But, I knew I was right."

Her eyes narrowed. "What if you had been wrong?"

"But, I wasn't—"

"You *might* have been. You know damn well you might have been."

"I know. But, I couldn't get any-thing from Altborg—and he was greasing up his reports with all kinds of optimistic information that was only a skip and a hop from being downright false."

"Agreed. That was something you should have brought to me at the time, instead of going off half-cocked—outside the program. I can't go along with that kind of rule-breaking, Olie—regardless of my personal feelings for you. The only way any of us can be scientists is to be scientists and technicians when we're supposed to be scientists and technicians. The fact that we're men and women," she paused, "and we sometimes have personal, emotional relationships, is something we have to put away. We have to lock it up somewhere before we go into the lab or into the field. That's what Rudolf *didn't* do. It got him in a mess, didn't it?" "That's what I'm saying. Yes. He got so pushed out of shape about you not giving him a tumble, he fell down on the job."

"And so did you, Olie. Don't look at me that way. You know damn well you did. You got so wrapped up in the Gratchii and the Yeep with your emotions, that you couldn't see them with your science. You, much as I hate to say it, blew it. You went outside the program, didn't you? Because you couldn't stay within the very necessary discipline of scientific procedures offered by that

program—disciplines that are set down to keep us objective."

She waited for him to answer. "Yes," he admitted. "Yes, I did." "You defied production requirements. You chucked procedures into the can. You deliberately flouted my authority—disregarded my orders. You broke every rule in the book."

Olie stared at her. *Not here, too*, he thought. *She's saying the same things Alborg said. I thought—I thought she would be, somehow ...*

Finally, he spoke. "I thought ... I mean, that's the kind of thing Alborg was giving me. You—"

"You thought I'd let you get away with it, just because I happen to like you a hell of a lot? Just because I might be in love with you?"

"Well?" he said irritably. "Aren't you?"

"I don't know," she replied evenly. "And neither do you. We've talked about that, before. Summer romance, and all that. We won't really know—either of us—until we get this project wrapped up, get off Flannigan, and spend some time back in civilization. I think I do love you, but I can't let that have anything to do with this business with the Yeep."

"Damn it! Charity is not what I'm after!"

She put her hand on his arm. "Oh, Olie!" She paused, searching for the words. "You're such a fool, sometimes. Don't you see? If I let this go past, just because I think I love you, I won't be any better than Rudolf—a knothed of a sci-entist who can't tell the difference between his emotions and his work. That can't be the basis for this—it just can't."

Olie rubbed his eyes. "You're right. You're right. I'm sorry I barked at you. I didn't expect you to just pat me on the head and kiss me. I guess I got mad because I was hoping you would, even though I knew you wouldn't."

"The point is, Olie, as I said, that you broke every rule in the book. You even broke the rules when you punched Rudolf. Personally, I'm glad you did. I wish I had seen it. I think he probably had it coming. But, as the ecological engineer in charge, I have to look at it from a further perspective."

"I agree with all that," he said. "But—after all is said and done . . . And, by the way, I'm willing to take whatever you dish out—whatever you think is right. After all is said and done, what about my Yeep? I agree that I let my own objectivity get away from me. I can see that, now—now that it's too late. It may prove to be a pretty expensive lesson, but I can see it, now."

She smiled. "I didn't think you had it in you—to believe so strongly that you were right that you would kick over the program and take the bit in your teeth that way. Good for you, Olie. I don't know if you know it or not, or even if I should tell you, but that's how I made my reputation. I got stubborn about a program once, on Kallenberg's Planet. I juggled data. I fed phoney information into the computer. The works."

Olie blinked. "You—"

"That's right." Elsa chuckled throatily. "Me. 'The iron fist in the velvet glove,' I believe they call me around here. Yes. I did the same thing. I was right, though, so my bosses didn't roast me alive. I was right, but for all the right reasons, I was wrong. I just got lucky. It taught me a hell of a lesson, believe me."

"What about my Yeep?" Olie asked, again.

"Good question. I don't want to see the Gratchii fall on hard times, either. Not because their Yeep are dying off, and not because our sev-enty-five strain is a flat failure. I think you're right about the eighty-eight strain." She arched an eye-brow. "The eighty-eight strain that you developed *without* authorization."

"Don't rub it in."

"You need to have it rubbed in, Olie. If you learn the same lesson from this as I did on Kallenberg's Planet, the whole mess will be worthwhile."

"And the Yeep?" he persisted.

Elsa sighed. "I'm going to give them a whirl. See how they do. Not because of you, personally," she added quickly. "Make no mistake about that. I think you may have the answer. I'm not going to kiss off

your work just because you let a lot of other things run away with your responsibilities as a technician—as a scientist. Science is science, discoveries are discoveries, even if they're made by a homicidal maniac who is researching for a novel way to poison someone. I know the differences about that, too, though I didn't learn them the same way as I learned the lesson about scientific discipline. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Except for one thing."

"Which is?"

"Altborg. He'll try to kill the eighty-eights, once he knows I've given you this information."

"No, he won't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"The pods are sealed. Have been for nearly an hour, since you were in his office. If you hadn't been punching each other silly, you would have heard the alert. The weather is up to the point where we can't safely go out until the storm has passed."

"Oh."

"So, your Yeep are safe till morning—provided they don't blow away tonight." Elsa reached for the commo key and punched through to security.

"Yes, Elsa."

"Dr. Altborg is restricted to the main pod."

"For how long?"

"Until after I go out in the morning."

"What reason are we to give, if he inquires?"

"My orders!" she snapped. "Good enough?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Elsa broke the circuit, and punched out a shutoff code to the effect that she would take no more calls until 0630.

Then, she turned to Olie. "Now, then. Let's get a good night's sleep; then, we'll see what your Yeep can do."

The pale sunlight of Flannigan broke through a soggy, overcast cloud-cover and sparkled on the clean, new snow and fresh slick ice deposited by the storm.

Only two sheds were still standing. The inflatable control sheds had been engineered for some stiff weather, but the massive storm which had swept across Botany Bay station during the night was far past the margins that had been built into these systems. Several sheds had gone down as their webs and guying had given way, allowing the gale winds to stretch the vyathane skins beyond their limits of elasticity. One shed was completely blown away—ripped loose from its moorings and carried off by the fierce wind and sleet. Two sheds had been reduced to shredded tatters, still guyed down, but only torn fragments of vyathane, flapping in the morning breeze.

Shed number eleven and shed number twelve.

The perimeter of the station was littered with dead Yeep. As the sheds had started to give way, they had panicked—like the lovable idiots they were—and scattered. Some had been smothered in the sheds that went down. Others had died at the stun-fence. Still others had piled themselves together in clumps to keep warm, and smothered the ones on the bottom of the pile.

Olie was weary and defeated as he and Elsa walked the shed area, surveying the damage.

They stopped alongside one of the dead eighty-eights.

"Maybe it's better this way," said Olie ruefully. "Maybe they wouldn't have made it, after all."

"We'll find out," Elsa said. "I think you had the answer. I thought you had it last night, and I still think it—storm or no storm."

Olie shook his head dejectedly. "I guess—I sort of made pets out of my eighty-eights. That's why it's hard to take—seeing them spread out, dead, all over the place."

"Nonsense," said Elsa briskly. "We've got your data. We'll program up a new group of eighty-eights—inside the system, and see what we get. Don't go off half-cocked again, Olie. It won't be

hard to get a body-count on the eighty-eights. Maybe some of them made it."

Elsa's commo beeped.

She flipped the key. "Yes?"

"Altborg, here, sweets. Come up to the top of the main pod, will you? Bring Olie along. I want to show you something."

Altborg was sporting a large shaved spot on his head and a spray-web dressing, which covered the contusion left by his skull's sudden collision with the waste canister.

"Did you drag us up here to see the sunlight glint on that knot on your head?" Elsa asked. Her tone was half-joking, half-irritated.

"Not a bit. Hardly felt it." He eyed Olie. "No hard feelings, old man." He reached out and stroked the large bruise on Olie's jaw. "Looks like I gave as good as I got."

"All right, Altborg. Get to it. What's on your mind?" Olie instinctively drew away from Altborg's touch.

"Take a peek in the scope." He motioned for both of them to come closer to the optical system.

Far below them, out on the fresh slick ice, there was a milling clump of eighty-eights.

Olie's face brightened. "They made it! Some of them made it!"

"Well," Altborg said, offhand-edly. "Like I said, they're falling down a lot. But, take a closer look."

It was true. Most of the eighty-eights were wobbling around on the slick ice, their gait growing more and more unsteady. When they finally lost their footing, one end of them would go down with a splat, slamming either their heads or their rumps onto the slick ice.

They would remain in that grotesque posture for several seconds, then gradually pull themselves up on all four legs once more, only to have the other end flop out from under them.

A few, notably the younger ones, were sailing along without any apparent difficulty. With their inborn habit of locking their knees and jumping up and down in one spot when they were excited, it was a simple step for them to lock their legs into a stiff position, draw the two articulable halves of their hooves close together and skim along on the slick ice, as though they were wearing ice skates. When they wanted to slow down, they simply spread each half of the hoof and dug in the little finger at the rear of the foot, setting up braking friction on the ice.

Olie laughed aloud.

"Lo and behold—serendipity," Altborg said.

"One thing that's wrong, though," Elsa mused.

"What's that?" Olie asked suddenly.

"Look at the speed they're making," she answered. "They're sailing along much faster than the Gratchii can run. Now the Gratchii won't be able to catch them."

"Maybe," Olie remarked, "we could teach the Gratchii how to ski."