

It was past planet-noon when the hoverscooter lofted from the green hollow, where the scoutcraft nested and moved buoyantly across the landscape, maintaining a twelve-inch air cushion between the boots of its two passengers and the black soil of this world. In their heavy shieldsuits and clearplastic head-bubbles, the two men for once achieved a near-uniformity of detail and proportion. It was not a uniformity that would bear close inspection.

Render guided the hoverscooter around a giant stalk that resembled a towering broccoli. Bright blooms spilled violently from the top of its head. At ground level, vines fought for space. Mingled with clusters of dull green leaves were others of such high metallic gloss that they mirrored sunlight in painful flashes. Springing through the vinyl carpet were waist-high plants with large, heavily-bearded leaves. Intermingled were many species that would have looked at home on Earth in any uncultivated field.

Yute Vantz took no bucolic pleasure from the tangle of leaf, stalk and vine. He was too aware of his people in orbit above, anxious to learn if they could claim this world or if they must pass deeper into the void to establish their place.

Yute glanced at Render. Like any spacebound Normal, Render had come aboard at Earthport already shieldsuited, and he had never shed or changed the suit over the months of the journey. Nor had he ever removed the headbubble. The air he breathed was scrupulously filtered before entering his tank. Technology had extended itself fully to protect his chaste genetic material from the warping rays and mutagenic gases that lay beyond Earth's solar system.

Technology had extended itself less enthusiastically in the direction of comfort. Yute squirmed inside the suit he had pulled on ten minutes ago. Render's terseness, his barely leashed anger—Yute had assumed these spoke his distaste for the genetic aberrants he ferried. But now that Yute tasted shield-suiting, he wondered if Render's spleen didn't stem at least partially from simple physical discomfort.

They moved across the land. A sporadic stand of corn appeared, perverted from its original form after two centuries of radiation from an alien sun. Some stalks were willowy, others massively thick. Some bore red-veined leaves that ended in dark thorns. Others exploded with vivid purple blossoms.

"Looks like the edge of the cultivated area," Yute observed. "Obviously."

The scooter swung easily through the disordered corn, then elevated to top a heavy clump of vines. Yute, turning, caught sight of a protrusion from the dull-leafed mass. "Wait—back there."

Render swung his head, then swung the scooter. He settled it beside the clump.

Tearing at twining stems, they uncovered a farm wagon. The bed, made of native material, was crumbling. But the wheels were heavy plastic, intact. "Part of the original shipment," Render decided, studying the digits inside the plastic rim.

Yute stood, cast his eyes over the field. They were nearing New Salem now, nearing the answers they had come for. This planet lay nearer Earth than any other inhabitable planet. Yute's people wanted this world. Yute wanted it for them. But there had been a settlement of humans here before. It had not survived.

Yute's head whipped as he caught distant movement. Before he could alert Render, the barely glimpsed shape disappeared. Yute frowned, trying to reconstruct the brief image.

It had looked very much like a dog.

He turned back to Render. The other man was already reboarding the scooter. Shrugging, Yute took his own seat.

A few minutes later they stood on the perimeter of New Salem. Constructed, like the farm wagon, half of native materials, half of Earth durables, the community was a vine-choked mausoleum now. It was ninety years since its death had been discovered by recon ship. The ship had not landed to investigate further.

"Tell you anything?" Render challenged.

"It will," Yute said, moving forward.

The vines that buried the dead village tangled at their feet, tripping them and hiding what they had

come to inspect—the remains of the previous human inhabitants of this world. They dug, Render grimly, Yute with purpose.

It was late afternoon before they rested. Then they sat on a plastic slab before a half-collapsed structure. Behind them, within the structure, were the skeletons of a dozen humans. Before them, in the brief stretch of excavated street, were the skeletons of two dozen more.

Sighing, Yute stood to shed his shieldsuit and headbubble. The need to protect himself against possible infection was clearly past. "They all died of violence," he mused, flexing his spider-long limbs, stretching his abbreviated torso. His head was heavy and malformed. "Every one of them. Crushed skulls, shattered ribcages, smashed spines—the inhabitants of New Salem had killed each other with pitchfork, club, ax and gun. Their weapons remained to tell the story.

Render grunted.

"And they weren't fighting over food." They had discovered extensive stocks of preserved food nearby. Yute's mind labored to comprehend the carnage. This community, after all, had been founded by pacifists, people who had left Earth in a body, all major races of man represented, to protest the violence rampant there. They had come here to found a community that would stand monument to peace and brotherhood.

The monument, obviously, had toppled.

"And we don't know any more than we did before we pulled back the vines," Yute said.

Render's dark eyes fired. "We know there was a fantastic mutation rate here. You saw that yourself."

Yute frowned. Marked skeletal changes had been apparent in many of the remains, pointing to a similarly high percentage of mutations that could not be detected now, with muscle and flesh disintegrated.

"There's going to be a high mutation rate on any world we settle," Yute pointed out. "Would that keep you on Earth if you were an Abby?"

Render's brows contracted. "I see no point in discussing that."

Yute shrugged. "Maybe we should get back to the scout. Tomorrow we can return with tools."

Render faced him. "Vantz, with the proven mutation rate here, it would be more to the point to return to the ship and head for the next inhabitable planet out."

"Oh? What's the proven mutation rate on that one?"

"It hasn't been formally assessed."

Yute shook his head. "Unless you can guarantee a lower rate—no. Not until we prove this place uninhabitable." He studied the Normal's face. "There isn't one of my people who doesn't dream that his line will breed back to normal in a matter of generations and return to Earth. We want to be close enough to make that practical."

Render's face tightened. "That's nonsense. Your genes are riddled with lethals and sublethals. When you reproduce, you'll be lucky to salvage one liveborn out of three. And that third isn't going to be normal, just more fit than the other two to survive to adulthood."

"That's more offspring than the Abbies who remain Earthside will salvage."

Render's eyes darkened. "You blame us for putting a stop to the breeding? How long could the human race retain its identity if you people were allowed to keep disseminating your kind into the population?"

Yute frowned, refusing to anger. Two hundred and forty years ago, his ancestor had carried the flag of humanity to new worlds—and had returned to Earth with the mark of space upon his genes. Now his descendants and the descendants of all others like him had been renounced by the human race, their right to continue reproducing precluded by law.

"What would you do, Render? Choose a deadend life on Earth? Or come out here where you could hope to leave a heritage?"

Render's reply was a bone-whitening of his features. Without word, he rose and stalked away.

Yute stared after him, perplexed. He knew well the odd side of Normals, their fears, their confusions, their hatreds when faced with the Aberrant. But Render's reaction held a different quality, a bitter anger

Yute found it difficult to assay.

Shrugging, Yute settled back to the slab. The village of New Salem lay deathly still at his feet. Tomorrow they would return with tools. But he knew already what they would find under the remaining tangle of vine.

More of the same. Death by violence.

He rubbed his forehead. He had seen all the material on New Salem. He had read the proclamation of purpose drawn up by the original settlers. He had glanced over the inventory of materials, supplies, stocks and seeds shipped with them.

He had browsed through the journal of Timmer Janssen, published Earthside on the tenth anniversary of the founding of New Salem. It was a self-consciously poetic account of the first years of this community. It was a self-righteous document too, dwelling long on the contrast between the bucolic harmony here and the strife and competition that prevailed on Earth.

At first, passing recon ships reported on the colony with fair regularity. Then came a thirty year hiatus.

The last ship to find New Salem alive was captained by Janro LaFarge. Yute had read ship's log passages pertaining to LaFarge's visit. The captain was able to spend just three hours on-planet, but his account glowed with the hospitality of the Salemites, with their health, beauty and prosperity, with the rustic charms of their setting—even with the intelligence and friendliness of the purebred Collies they raised. He left the world proud both of the human race and of his own people, whom he found markedly predominant in the community.

Yute sat for an hour on the slab, trying to resurrect phantoms. They remained stubbornly inert.

Finally he returned to the scooter. Render waited at the controls, stiff and silent. Yute boarded, and Render pulled the scooter into the air.

The scoutcraft, despite its size, had been designed to provide complete privacy for its occupants. Yute and Render took their evening meal separately. Afterward, Yute lay on his bunk, eyes closed.

The questions in his mind would not be lulled. Soon Yute was outside the craft, carrylamp in hand.

He stood for a while in shadow, senses alert. Then he flicked on his lamp. Mirror-bright leaves caught his light and shafted it back at him. As he stepped from the hollow and passed under a towering broccoli tree, strong fragrance seared his nostrils and eyes.

Other night-bloomers were more gentle. Their perfume was pervasive, evocative. Vines rustled with evening gossip. Overhead, stars hung blue-white and brilliant. Yute walked under them. On Earth, the lights and vapors of civilization muffled the night sky. Human bustle made each man small. But Yute stepped across this world, under his regal canopy of galaxies, with elation, master of time, master of place.

Reaching a second hollow, he sat and extinguished his light. Then he listened. There were animals on this world, he knew, several distinct species of them. Small animals, shy animals. They carried their eyes on waving stalks. Timmer Janssen had described them in his journal.

The eyes he found peering at him from the shadow of a broccoli tree did not wave on stalks. They hung steady and red thigh-high from the ground. They were spaced like the eyes of a large dog.

There were three pairs of them.

Five minutes passed. Slowly Yute brought the carrylamp from his side and held it between his knees. He flicked it on.

The eyes were gone in a flurry. Yute fanned his light, trying to catch the fleeing animals in the beam.

Without success.

He doused the light again and thought. If there were dogs, survivors of New Salem, they were wild dogs now. And he was not armed.

Except with a carrylamp. It would do—for tonight.

He reached the edge of New Salem as the first golden moon rose in the south. He sent the beam of his lamp down vine-choked lanes. But he felt no desire to walk death alley tonight. Instead he turned back toward the scoutcraft.

He found Render standing in the dark. "Enjoying the night?"

"What do you think?"

His tone startled Yute. Then, studying Render's posture, he understood the bitterness. Render didn't stand with the breeze of evening on his cheek, with the caress of night in his hair. Render stood in a stagnant shieldsuit, his view of the stars filtered through clearplas.

Render wasn't here at all. Render was still shut into a stale closet on Earth. Only the unfeeling skin of his suit was exposed to the sensuous ceremonies of an alien night.

"There's something out there," Render said darkly.

"Eyes?"

"Yes. In pairs."

"How many pairs?"

"First one, then several more. They pulled back when they heard you coming."

"I saw them earlier. I think they may be dogs."

Render's interest was engaged: "Collies? The ones LaFarge mentioned?"

"Possibly—many times removed." And probably grotesqueries by LaFarge's standards by now. LaFarge's family had bred Collies for show. "Maybe we'll sight them tomorrow."

Render's interest dulled. "Maybe." The word held bitterness beyond the content of the conversation.

The next day they returned to New Salem with tools and implements.

By late afternoon they knew just as much as they had known twenty-four hours before. The settlers had killed each other with very conventional weapons and very brutal methods. There were nearly three hundred skeletons to tell that tale.

But why had the tale been spun? General madness? Civil war?

Yute brooded, leaning on the handle of a shovel. They had all the wrong answers. They knew how, but they didn't know why. Could he call his people down here with the why obscure?

Render's face was grim. "It's clear what happened. It would have come to the same thing on Earth if we hadn't taken measures."

"Oh?"

"By loose estimate, a full fifty percent of the population was Abby. They were threatening to take over and the Normals fought it. All the way."

Yute's eyebrows rose. "I understand the community operated on democratic principles. One individual—one vote."

"That's the point," Render countered coldly. "A few more years of uncontrolled breeding and the Aberrants would have outnumbered the Normals—and seized control."

Yute sighed, exasperated. Was it beyond Render's understanding that the star-damaged cherished no desire to dominate human society? That they merely wanted to function within it, like anyone else?

"LaFarge didn't mention rivalry of that nature here," he pointed out.

"LaFarge didn't mention the mutant problem at all. He only spent three hours on-world. Obviously the mutants were kept out of sight."

Yute frowned. "Kept—?" But Render was right. LaFarge hadn't mentioned the presence of Abbies. Instead he had dwelled glowingly on the health and beauty of the New Salemites who had entertained him.

"I don't see the point of pursuing this further," Render said, recognizing Yute's uncertainty. "I'm making a formal recommendation that your party continue on to the next planet. I will record that recommendation in the ship's log as soon as I get back to the scoutcraft."

Yute studied the Normal's face. Slowly he shook his head. "I refuse to say yes or no to this place yet. I still need time."

"To dig more skeletons?"

"To think more thoughts."

"Think them then." Render gathered his tools and lofted the scooter back toward the scoutcraft, leaving Yute afoot.

Yute walked down the half-cleared streets of New Salem. He found his seat of the day before. Sat. Thought. There had to be some way to clarify the events that had led to the death of New Salem.

Gradually he became aware of scrutiny. He raised his head.

A single dog stood fifty yards away, a Collie. Its generous chestnut and white coat gleamed. Its nose was long and typey. It stood with ears pricked, head erect, meeting his gaze.

He stared, aware that his jaw sagged. When he had fully digested the startling sight, he buckled his jaw back up into place. Slowly he extended his hand.

The dog did not approach.

He clucked. Chirped. Coaxed softly.

The dog lowered its head warily. Carefully Yute stood.

The dog ran.

Yute stared after it. How had a Collie managed to survive here? No, not how had it survived—there was small game, after all. There had been poultry, sheep and rabbits in addition to the native species. Instead, how had a Collie managed to retain the integrity of its breed? After ninety years or more?

If the New Salemites had kept nothing *but* purebred Collies, perhaps . . .

And if the dogs had been far more resistant to mutation than their masters . . .

But the original settlers had brought many breeds. He knew that. They had shipped working dogs of all descriptions including crossbreeds and mongrels.

He returned to the scoutcraft thoughtfully. That night he remained in his cabin. When he slept, vivid images floated up to trouble him. Healthy, handsome settlers romped before him, magnificent dogs at their heels. But the settlers' faces were blurred.

He woke with LaFarge's closing comment in mind. Janro LaFarge had left this planet proud both of the human race and of his own people, whom he had found markedly predominant in the population of New Salem.

And who had LaFarge's people been?

Yute was at the commset by dawn. He touched the controls.

"*Agnelles* bridge," a wispy voice informed him.

Sweet Molly, dark-eyed maid whose perspiration left fine crystal of sugar on her skin. "This is Yute. I need information. You'll have to flash back to Earth for it."

Her voice woke. "I will—right away."

"Good. I want to know two things: the nationality and racial background of Captain Janro LaFarge and the national and racial breakdown of the original New Salem settling party, if you can get it."

"I'll call you when I have the information. We're all waiting to hear what you've found."

"Keep waiting," he told her. "I won't keep the news to myself when I decide."

It was mid-morning when he had the answers. "Captain LaFarge was Black American, classified as indigo-dark. The original settling party was 76 percent North American by nationality, 12 percent West European Combine, 9 percent Continental Asian Alliance, 3 percent Eastern European Republic. The racial breakdown of the Americans was—"

"No United Africans?" Yute interrupted.

"None listed."

"OK, go ahead with the North American breakdown."

She did: "67 percent Caucasoid American, 12 percent Latin American, 10 percent Oriental American, 6 percent Black American, 3 percent—"

"That's what I wanted. Thanks."

He settled back in the padded seat of the cockpit, his forehead creasing. LaFarge had found his own people predominant in the colony of New Salem. Presumably he had referred to his own racial strain—after one hundred settlement years, national backgrounds should have receded into relative unimportance. Yet the party that left Earth had been heavily Caucasoid. There had been no United Africans aboard, only a handful of Black Americans.

Blacks and Collies. Unless the laws of genetics had changed radically under this sun, something was amiss.

He did not share his thoughts or his rising excitement with Render. Render was talking departure again.

Yute was not listening. "Coming to New Salem with me today?" "I see no point to it."

Yute nodded. "Go out after dark last night?"

"Very briefly."

"See any dogs?"

"I saw eyes. I have no idea what type of animal they belonged to." Yute nodded again. If his plans went right, he would return bearing a dog. Before he left, he loaded the hoverscooter with several items. He loaded his belt with a stunner.

As he neared New Salem, he broke open the box of meatbits and began scattering them. He described a sparse circle of tidbits around the village and then made a heavier path to its center. There he parked the scooter and sat down to wait, stunner in hand.

While he waited, he thought. He thought of dogs he had known.

Soon they found his trail and followed it to him. They appeared cautiously nosing their way, and Yute felt victory like a searing joy.

One was the regal Collie of the previous day. Another was the tall, lank mongrel his brother had once adopted, briefly. His mother had been disenchanted with the animal's habits. A third was a silver standard poodle. And the fourth—Nip. Pet of his childhood, stocky little mutt with accidentally bobbed tail and spotted ears. Yute restrained himself from reaching for his old friend. Nip—dead many years now.

He raised the stunner casually. With his left hand, he tossed a final generous shower of meatbits.

The dogs responded warily.

And Yute squeezed the trigger. Three dogs fled. The fourth fell, little Nip.

Unconscious, Nip changed. Radically. Lying in the street inert, he became larger. His body altered. His chest became heavy, deep, his spine abnormally short and humped. His tail vanished.

Yute went to him and lifted his head. Jowly bags of flesh sagged almost a foot from his jaw. His nose was blunted flat against his skull. And his fur was patchy, exposing expanses of bare flesh.

Little Nip was like no dog ever seen on Earth. Yute lifted the lax body to the scooter and tied it with cord.

By the time they reached the scoutcraft, the animal's eyes were open, and he was little Nip again. He writhed against the cords. Quickly, Yute dismounted and ran his hands over the animal's head and body.

The contours conformed to the appearance. The nose was sharp, the spine straight, the jowly bags nonexistent, the fur smooth. The transformation was complete.

Yute stood, controlling his elation. The question rode now on what Render, encased in shieldsuiting and clearplas, saw in the animal.

Render was unimpressed. "A mongrel left over from the colony. So what?"

Yute's eyes kindled. Little Nip had passed the test. He was a common mutt to a Normal—even a Normal hermetically sealed—as well as to an Aberrant. "So I want my people down, Render. We're claiming this world."

Render's eyes flashed back to the struggling dog. "Did you find something else in New Salem?"

"I found a decision. We're staying."

Render's face was stony. "Vantz, I have formally recommended that your party continue on to the next inhabitable planet. That recommendation is on record with Earth Authority."

"Good. You're covered. Now I want my people."

Render didn't accept the ultimatum with grace. "All right. It's your decision, Vantz. And your responsibility. I'm messaging Earth Authority to that effect before I call a single individual down."

When Render returned to the scoutcraft, Yute bent to release the dog. He watched it disappear across the fields—his fields, his own now.

LaFarge, Black American of a family that bred Collies, had come to this world and found Blacks and Collies. A hundred years later, Yute Vantz, Aberrant, had come. There had been no humans to greet him, only dogs. The first of those had found in his mind fresh images of LaFarge's Collies.

And had become a Collie. How, Yute didn't know. Not yet. Perhaps simply by the projection of images to appropriate portions of Yute's nervous system. Perhaps by actual, physical transformation. The fact that the change was perceptible to the hands as well as to the eyes pointed to the latter theory.

In either case, LaFarge's log notes told him that the human inhabitants of New Salem had become capable, over generations, of similar transformations. Caucasoid, malformed by mutation, they had made themselves- black and beautiful for LaFarge's eyes. The radiations of this sun had written a new footnote to the history of human genetics.

Somewhere in that footnote lay the answer to New Salem's violent death. Rate and degree of mutation are seldom uniform. Some individuals are affected, others not. And the ability to project or, assume a deceptive physical appearance is no minor dissimilarity. Fears have been inflamed by smaller differences. Wars have been fought, brothers killed.

Brothers could be killed again. But Yute's people would be forewarned of the changes that might occur. Yute's people would be watching for them.

Yute's people would be waiting.

Pensively Yute maneuvered the hoverscooter back into its bay.

Render answered from the cockpit. "I have messaged Earth Authority to make my position perfectly clear. Now, as a matter of self-protection, I intend to wait for confirmation of their receipt of my message before I allow any further step to be taken."

Yute sighed, exasperated. "What are you festering about, Render? You're off-loading your problems in a matter of hours. Then you're out of it."

Render's eyes blazed. "*Abby!*" he whispered hoarsely.

Yute stared at him, suddenly comprehending. "Look, why don't you zip off that suit and turn yourself free, Render? You didn't join Space Service because you wanted to see the galaxy from a mobile coffin."

Render's lips stretched into a tight line.

"You could start smoothing the way for yourself by making some substitutions in your vocabulary. For mutation read evolution."

"For mutation I read corruption."

Yute shrugged. The drive that had taken Man off Earth, past the Moon and the Solar System, still operated in Render. But it was strangulated by fear of what the universe could do to his vulnerable germ plasm. Now it poisoned him as it putrefied inside his sealed shieldsuit.

"The human race wasn't handed down on stone tablets," Yute suggested. "It evolved."

Render didn't answer. He turned and slammed into the privacy of his cabin.

It was dusk when Yute's people came down from the *Agnelles*. They came by scores, the strange, the beautiful, the grotesque—the rejected. They came with packs on their backs and scars in their hearts. They had been born to Earth. But Earth had denied them acceptance, had finally even proscribed their right to reproduce their kind.

When the crates and containers had been off-loaded, Render's scoutcraft rose up from the green hollow. The setting sun caught it and turned it to a dart of fire.

Yute's heart surged fiercely. "We'll be back, Render. And when we come, we can meet you anywhere."

On Earth or on any other planet. True, it would be generations before this sun had worked its magic on their genes. But when it had, for those of them who were favored, the image they cast would be of their own choosing. Human face, human hand—or something entirely different.

"Just stay in your tree," Yute said softly when Render's fiery missile had been swallowed up. "Someday we'll come with a sack of bananas."