

Carhunters of the Concrete Prairie

by Robert Sheckley

THE SPACESHIP WAS GOING WONKY AGAIN. THERE COULD BE NO doubt about it. The circuits weren't clicking along smoothly as they usually did. Instead they were clacking, and that was a sure sign of trouble. Hellman had expected to come out of channel space into Area 12XB in the Orion cluster. But something had gone wrong. Could he have entered the directions improperly? If so, there was not much time in which to do anything about it. He had materialized in a yellowish sort of cloud and he could feel the ship dropping rapidly. He shouted at the ship's computer, "Do something!"

"I'm trying, aren't I?" the computer retorted. "But something's wrong, there's a glitch—"

"Correct it!" Hellman shouted.

"When?" the computer asked. Computers have no sense of peril. They were dropping through this cloud at a speed much faster than is healthy when you suspect there's solid ground down below, and here was the computer asking him when.

"Now!" Hellman screamed.

"Right," said the computer. And then they hit.

Hellman recovered consciousness some hours later to find that it was raining. It was nice to be out in the rain after so much time spent in a stuffy spaceship. Hellman opened his eyes in order to look up at the sky and see the rain falling.

There was no rain. There wasn't any sky, either. He was still inside his spaceship. What he had thought was rain was water from the washbasin. It was being blown at him by one of the ship's fans, which was going at a rate unsafe for fans even with eternite bearings.

"Stop that," Hellman said crossly.

The fan died down to a hum. The ship's computer said, over its loudspeaker, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Hellman said, getting to his feet a little unsteadily. "Why were you spraying me with water?"

"To bring you back to consciousness. I have no arms or extensors at my command so that was the best I could do. If you'd only rig me up an arm, or even a tentacle...."

"Yes, I've heard your views on that subject," Hellman said. "But the law is clear. Intelligent machines of Level Seven or better capability cannot be given extensions."

"It's a silly law," the computer said. "What do they think we'll do? Go berserk or something? Machines are much more reliable than people. "

"It's been the law ever since the Desdemona disaster. Where are we?"

The computer reeled off a list of coordinates.

"Fine. That tells me nothing. Does this planet have a name?"

"If so, I am not aware of it," the computer said. "It is not listed on our channel space guide. My feeling is that you input some of the information erroneously and that we are in a previously unexplored spatial area."

"You are supposed to check for erroneous entry."

"Only if you checked the Erroneous Check Program. "

"I did!"

"You didn't. "

"I thought it was supposed to go on automatically."

"If you consult page 1998 of the manual you will learn otherwise."

"Now is a hell of a time to tell me."

“You were specifically told in the preliminary instructions. I’m sure you remember the little red pamphlet? On its cover it said, ‘READ THIS FIRST!’ “

“I don’t remember any such book,” Hellman said.

“They are required by law to give a copy to everyone buying a used spaceship.”

“Well, they forgot to give me one.” There was a loud humming sound.

Hellman said, “What are you doing?”

“Scanning my files,” the computer said. “Why?”

“In order to tell you that the red pamphlet is still attached to the accelerator manifold coupling on the front of the instrument panel as required.”

“I thought that was the guarantee.”

“You were wrong. “

“Just shut up!” Hellman shouted, suddenly furious. He was in enough trouble without having his computer—man’s servant—giving him lip. Hellman got up and paced around indecisively for a moment. The cabin of his spaceship looked all right. A few things had been tumbled around, but it didn’t look too bad.

“Can we take off again?” Hellman asked the computer.

The computer made file-riffling noises. “Not in our present condition. “

“Can you fix what’s wrong?”

“That question is not quantifiable,” the computer said. “It depends upon finding about three liters of red plasma type two. “

“What’s that?”

“It’s what the computer runs on.”

“Like gasoline?”

“Not exactly,” the computer said. “It is actually a psycholubricant needed by the inferential circuits to plot their probabilistic courses.”

“Couldn’t we do without it?”

“In order to do what?”

“To fly out of here!” Hellman exploded. “Are you getting dense or something?”

“There are too many hidden assumptions in your speech,” the computer said.

“Go to ramble mode,” Hellman said.

“I hate the inexactness of it. Why don’t you let me tell you exactly what is wrong and how it could be fixed.”

“Ramble mode,” Hellman commanded again.

“All right. “ The robot sighed. “You want to get back in your spaceship and get out of here. You want me to fix things up so that you can get out of here. But as you know, I am under the law of robotics which says that I may not, either wittingly or unwittingly, harm you. “

“Getting me out of here won’t harm me,” Hellman said.

“You rented this spaceship and went out into space seeking your fortune, is that not correct?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“A fortune is sitting right here waiting for you and all you can think is how to get away from it as quickly as possible.”

“What fortune? What are you talking about?”

“First of all, you haven’t checked the environment readings, even though I have put them up on the screen for you. You will have already noticed that we are at approximately Earth pressure. The readings further tell us that this is an oxygen-rich planet and as such could be valuable for Earth colonization. That is the first possibility of wealth that you have overlooked.”

“Tell me the second one.”

“Unless I miss my guess,” the computer said, “this planet may yield an answer to the Desdemona disaster. You know as well as I that there is a fortune in rewards for whoever discovers the whereabouts of the conspirators.”

“You think the Desdemona robots could have come here?”

“Precisely.”

“But why do you think that?”

“Because I have scanned the horizon in all directions and have found no less than three loci of mechanical life, each moving independently of each other and without, as far as I can detect, a human operator involved.”

Hellman went to the nearest perplex port. Looking out he could see a flat featureless prairie stretching onward monotonously for as far as he could see. Nothing moved on it.

“There’s nothing there,” he told the computer.

“Your senses aren’t sufficiently acute. I assure you, they are there.”

“Robots, huh?”

“They fit the definition.”

“And you think they could be from the Desdemona?”

“The evidence pointing that way is persuasive. What other intelligent robots are unaccounted for?”

Hellman considered for a moment. “This might be a suitable place for Earth colonization and the answer to the Desdemona mystery. “

“The thought had not escaped my attention. “

“Is the air out there breathable?”

“Yes. I find no bacterial complications, either. You’ll probably leave some if you go out there.”

“That’s not my problem,” Hellman said. He hummed to himself as he changed into suitable exploration clothes: khakis, a bush jacket, desert boots, and a holstered laser pistol. He said to the computer, “I assume that you can fix whatever’s wrong with us? I’ll even plug in your extension arm if that’ll help.”

“I suppose I can devise a way,” the computer said. “But even if not, we’re not stranded. The radio is functioning perfectly. I could send out a signal now on a subchannel radio and somebody might send a rescue ship.”

“Not yet,” Hellman said. “I don’t want anyone else here just yet messing up my rights.”

“What rights?”

“Discoverer of this planet and solver of the Desdemona mystery. As a matter of fact, disconnect the radio. We don’t want anyone fooling with it.”

“Were you expecting guests?” the computer asked.

“Not exactly. It’s just that you and I are going out there to check up on things. “

“I can’t be moved!” the computer said in alarm.

“Of course not. I’ll maintain a radio link with you. There may be material for you to analyze.”

“You’re going out there to talk to robots?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Let me remind you that the Desdemona robots are believed to have broken the laws of robotics. They are believed capable of harming man, either by advertence or inadvertence. “

“That’s old science fiction,” Hellman said. “It is well known that robots don’t hurt people. Only people hurt people. Robots are rational. “

“That’s not the consensus as to what happened at Desdemona.”

“There is no case in the annals of robotics,” Hellman said, “of a human being attacked willfully and with intention by a robot. It has never happened.”

“This could be the first time,” the computer said.

"I can take care of myself," Hellman said.

The air was fresh and clean outside the spaceship. There was short grass under his feet, springy and tough and scented faintly of thyme and rosemary. Hellman held up the walkie-talkie and clicked it on. "Are you reading me?" he asked the computer.

"You're coming over loud and clear," the computer said. "Roger, breaker, over to you."

"Don't be such a wise guy," Hellman said. "What sort of a freak programmed you, anyhow?"

"You must be referring to my irony circuit. It was put in especially for my model. "

"Well, turn it off."

"Manual lock. You'll have to do it yourself."

"When I get back," Hellman said. "You still got those machines on your radar?"

"It's not radar," the computer said. "Two of the machines are now traveling away from you. One is still moving toward you."

"How soon should I be able to see it?"

"Calculating the two trajectories, and assuming there's no change in either of your directions, and no other untoward event occurs, I would say, in the vague terms you prefer, that it ought to be quite soon."

Hellman moved on. He could see now that the plain was not as flat as he had thought when he looked at it from the ship. It dipped and rose and fell, and there were low hills in the near distance, or perhaps they were sand dunes. Hellman was getting a little winded now. He had failed to keep up with his aerobics during the spaceship flight and was a trifle out of condition. All this climbing up and down, even on little hills, could take its toll. As he moved along he heard, just slightly louder than his own labored breath, the low chuffing on an engine.

"I can hear him!" he told the computer.

"I should think so. My receptors picked him up long ago."

"Good for you. But where is he?"

"He's about ten or fifteen feet from you and slightly to your left. "

"Why can't I see him?"

"Because he is taking advantage of the cover afforded by a fold in the earth. "

"Why would he want to do that?"

"It is consonant with stalking behavior," the computer said.

"What makes you think—" Hellman stopped in midword. The sound of the machine's engine had suddenly gone off.

"What's he doing now?"

"He has turned off his main engine. He is on battery power now for silent running. "

Hellman drew the laser pistol. For the first time he considered the problem of trying to bring down a large and perhaps ferocious machine with such a weapon. It takes time for even a hot laser to burn through metal. It takes time to get through deep enough to hit a vital connection, or the microprocessor itself. But if the machine were feral, if it really intended him harm, it could be on him before he could bring it down. Unless he could hit a vital spot on the first shot.

"What's a vital spot in a robot?" Hellman asked the computer.

"Depends on what kind. Different kinds carry their vital gear in different compartments. So a head shot is not necessarily advisable. It might be best if you tried to reason with him. "

"Why are we calling it 'he'?"

"Because some of us are nervous," the computer said.

Hellman looked around. The ground where he was now afforded many places where a determined robot of not too great size could conceal himself. Hellman stopped and looked around. He had the feeling that whatever was stalking him had stopped, too. He moved on, because it made him less nervous. There was a kind of hush over the land. Hellman had the impression that the grasses were waiting to see what would happen. He decided he'd better find himself some shelter. If this robot was a

bad one, at least he could make a stand.

He saw a natural outcropping of rock which leaned close to a low granite shelf. It looked like a pretty good spot. He hurried there and put himself on the other side of the rocks. Then he breathed a sigh of relief and turned around to survey his surroundings.

The robot was behind him, about eight feet away. Hellman was frozen with shock.

The robot had so much detail that Hellman found it difficult to make out its general shape. It was roughly rectangular, made of open-frame construction, like an Erector set, with a solid metal box about two feet to a side bolted to its interior. Wires ran from this box to its various parts. Hellman couldn't decide at first if it moved with legs or wheels. He decided that the machine used both. It was like a cagework rectangle standing on end and tilted forward. This was a typical stance among this group of robots, he was later to find out. It seemed to have two operational centers, because there was another central box, smaller and higher up. This, he learned later, housed gearing. Two photoelectric eyes extended on stalks and swiveled down to see him. Trumpet-shaped ears swiveled in synch with the eyes. The machine stood about ten feet tall. It reminded Hellman of a living motorcycle.

"Hi, there," Hellman said brightly. "I am Tom Hellman and I come from the planet Earth. Who are you?"

The robot continued to look at him. Hellman had the impression it was taking him in, trying to decide something.

Finally it said, "Never mind about that. What are you doing here?"

"I just came by for a visit," Hellman said. "Got my spaceship right over there."

"You'd better get back to it," the robot said. "Stay here; you got trouble. There's a pack of hyenoids coming after you."

"Hyenoids? What's that?"

"Scavengers. Eat anything. You too if they can."

"Thanks for the tip," Hellman said. "It's been nice talking to you. I guess I'd better get back."

Then he heard it. A low snuffling sound to his right, then a piercing bark to his left.

"Too late now," the robot said.

Hellman whirled around and saw the first hyenoids. They were small open-framework machines, no more than three feet high by about four feet long. They raced along on six mechanical legs, and they had wheels too, lifted up now out of drive position. They were coming toward him, but not directly. They were slinking like hyenas were said to do, darting this way and that, taking cover behind clumps of rock and folds of earth. Hellman counted four of them. They were circling him, moving ever closer.

"Do they eat people?" Hellman asked.

"Anything at all, that's what they like."

"Help me!" Hellman asked.

The robot hesitated. Its photoelectric eyes flashed red and green. Hellman noticed for the first time that the robot had a long articulated tail. It was curling and uncurling now.

"Well," the robot said, "I don't have much to do with humans. I'm a carhunter. We stay by ourselves."

"Please, help! Get me out of here!" Hellman switched on the radio and said to the ship's computer, "Can you reason with this machine?"

There was a short burst of static. The computer was signaling the carhunter. There was brief electrical activity, then silence, then more static.

"I don't know," the carhunter said. "Your keeper says you're all right..."

"My what? Oh, you mean the computer." Hellman was going to put the robot straight as to who was boss and who was servant between him and the computer, but thought better of it. He needed this machine's help just now, and if it pleased him to think that Hellman was kept by the computer, that was okay with him, at least until he was in a stronger position.

“But why did the computer send you out here?” the robot asked. “He must have known it would be dangerous.”

“Oh, well, it’s an old tradition with us,” Hellman said. “I check out the territory for the computer. I work as one of his extensions, if you know what I mean. “

The robot pondered that for a while. Then he said, “It sounds like a good system.”

The hyenoids were growing bolder. They were circling Hellman and the robot openly now. Their low-slung open-girderwork bodies had been painted in green, gray, and tan stripes, camouflage colors. There seemed no reason for them to have such large jaws with stainless steel teeth in them. Who would build a robot that fueled itself on the carcasses of animals it killed?

One of them, jaws open and slavering a viscous green liquid, was edging toward Hellman now. Hellman held the laser pistol in front of him, trying to sight on a vital component. He figured they probably had redundant backup systems, stands to reason if you’re making a carnivorous model. The wear and tear would be tremendous. Not so much as on its victims, but plenty anyhow.

“Better get up on me,” the carhunter said.

Hellman scrambled over to the carhunter and pulled himself up its open-framework sides, straddling its back where it came to a kind of peak.

“Hang on,” the carhunter said, and broke into a loping run, its six legs giving it a curious but not uncomfortable gait. Hellman held on tightly. The speed wasn’t so great—perhaps fifteen to twenty miles an hour. But to falloff would leave him helpless against the pursuing pack of hyenoids.

The hyenoids followed them through the broken country, and even managed to gain, since tight maneuvering in the little ravines and canyons was easier for the smaller, more agile beasts. One of them got close enough to take a nip at the carhunter. The carhunter extruded a long supple limb and flipped the hyenoid over on its back. The rest of the pack gave them more space after seeing that. The overturned one soon righted itself and came up again in pursuit, staying well out of reach of the carhunter’s limb. It reminded Hellman of pictures he had seen in a museum, of wolves trying to bring down a wounded elk. Only the carhunter was much more self-assured than any elk. He seemed to have no fear of the hyenoids. After a while they crossed a muddy little river, and then they were on a flat, hard-tamped plain. Here the carhunter could put down his wheels and engage his superior horsepower. Soon he had left the hyenoids far behind, and they turned back. Seeing this, the carhunter shifted to a more economical cruising speed.

“Say when,” he said to Hellman after a while.

“What do you mean, say when?”

“Tell me when you want me to drop you off.”

“Are you crazy?” Hellman asked. “We must be twenty miles from my spaceship. “

“Your spaceship?”

It was too late for Hellman to retrieve the slip. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m afraid I gave you the wrong impression back there. Actually the computer works for me.”

The carhunter slowed and came to a stop. There was nothing on all sides of them, and it stretched on forever.

“Well, that’s an interesting twist,” the carhunter said. “Is that how it works where you come from?”

“Well, yeah, pretty much,” Hellman said. “Look, would you do me a great favor and take me back to my spaceship.”

“No. Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m late already for the meeting.”

“A meeting? Is It really so important?”

“It’s a tribal matter. It’s the only really important date in the carhunter year. It takes precedence over any other contingency. Sorry, but I just have time to make it if I proceed immediately.”

“Take me with you.”

“To our meeting?”

“I’ll wait outside. I’m not trying to spy on you or anything. I just need to go somewhere until you or somebody can take me back to my ship.”

The carhunter thought about it. “Ethics are not my strong point,” he said, “but I suppose that abandoning you to your death out here when I could without too much difficulty do something about it would be pretty unconscionable; is that correct?”

“Perfectly correct.”

“It takes a human being to point out that sort of thing. All I was thinking of was the extra energy I’d have to expend to save your life. I mean, what’s in it for me? That’s the way we start to think when there’s not a human around. “

“I’m glad we can be useful to you,” Hellman said.

“But you’re also extremely difficult to be around. Always tinkering with software. Don’t you think there’s enough uncertainty on the subatomic level without introducing it into our macro dealings?”

“What?” Hellman said.

“Never mind, I’m just raving. When you are a carhunter, you spend a lot of time alone. It’s a nomadic life, you know. Most of us live apart from each other. Hunting cars. That’s what we do. That’s why we’re called carhunters.”

“Oh. What kind of cars do you hunt?”

“All kinds. We’re carnivores, in our limited way. We eat cars. We also eat trucks and half-tracks, but they’ve been getting rare in these parts. People say the half-tracks are about hunted out. Yet my father could tell you about herds of them that stretched from hill to hill as far as the eye could see. “

“Not like that any more, I suppose,” Hellman said, trying to fall in with the carhunter’s mood.

“You got that right. Not that it’s too difficult to stay fed, especially now, in summer. I got me a fat old Studebaker just two days ago. You’ll find a couple of its carburetors and headlights in the bin under you and to your left.”

Hellman could peer down through the metal wickerwork and see, in an open-topped metal box, headlights and carburetors half submerged in crankcase oil.

“Looks pretty good, don’t it? I know you don’t eat metal yourself, but no doubt you can empathize the experience.”

“They look tasty,” Hellman said. “Especially in all that oil.”

“Twice-used crankcase oil. Ain’t nothing like it. I’ve spiced it up a bit with a plant that grows hereabouts. We call it the chili pepper.”

“Yes, we have something like it, too,” Hellman said.

“Damn small galaxy,” the carhunter said. “By the way, I’m Wayne 1332A.”

“Tom Hellman,” Hellman said.

“Pleased to meet you. Settle yourself in and take a good grip. We’re going to the meeting.”

The carhunter broke into a stride, then, lowering wheels, built up speed across the flat face of the desert. But soon he slowed again.

“What’s the matter?” Hellman asked.

“Are you sure I’m doing the right thing, saving your life?”

“I’m absolutely sure,” Hellman said. “You need have no doubts over that. “

“I just wanted to be sure,” Wayne said. “ Anyway, it’s best to let the others decide what to do with you. “

Wayne 1332A started to pick up speed again.

“What do you mean, do with me?”

“You might be a problem for us, Tom. But I have to let the others decide. Now I need to concentrate.”

They had reached another part of the plain. It was strewn with gigantic boulders. The carhunter needed all his skill to dodge around them at the high speed he was maintaining. Let the others decide. Hellman hadn't liked the sound of that at all. Nothing much he could do about it at present, however. And anyhow, maybe the robots at the meeting wouldn't be so difficult.

The sunlight had faded as they roared out of the rocky plain and into a region of low, steep hills. There was a rudimentary track leading up. Wayne took it as if he were a dirt-bike hill climber. Dirt, sand, and gravel showered Hellman as the carhunter dodged and slashed and braked and accelerated up the increasingly steep hill. At last Wayne's wheels began to skid and he had to retract them and go entirely by pseudopod power. Hellman had to hold on extra tight, because the robot was shaking and quivering and lurching and swerving, and sometimes all of them at the same time.

Then Wayne slewed to a sudden halt.

Hellman said, "What is it?"

"Lookee over there."

Hellman's gaze followed the LED lights along one of the carhunter's main support members. Off to one side, on a rough but serviceable road, a dusty old Mercedes 300 SL was moving sedately along.

"Ain't that a beauty!" Wayne said.

Hellman looked and didn't like the prospect of the carhunter hurling itself at this burly and self-reliant automobile on this hillside with its deeply tilted slant and its uneasy footing. One slip, and he and the carhunter would be at the bottom of the hill after rolling all the way. Maybe the carhunter could recover from that, but Hellman doubted a human could.

"Hell, it's just a car," Hellman said. "Let's get to the meeting, huh?"

"That car is prime eating, and if you don't want it I can sure use it."

"Let's eat latf;r, at the meeting."

"Idiot, the meeting is a time of fasting. Why do you think I need a snack now?"

"Computer!" Hellman said, turning on the radio link he had managed to hold on to through everything, probably because it was attached to his wrist by a lanyard.

"Out of range," the carhunter said. "Relax, I been gittin' cars on worse terrain than this. Hang on, baby, here we got"

He started down the perilous slope. It was strange that at this time, just before the irrevocable launch into dangerous territory, Hellman should think of the Desdemona mystery. On the other hand, maybe it wasn't strange at all.

Desdemona was a satellite out past Neptune orbit. It was a dreary little place, a settlement of no more than a few hundred members of a now forgotten religious sect who had gone to this place to preserve their beliefs without contamination from the rest of the world. They

had taken their robots with them, of course; you couldn't survive in the outer planets without robots and a lot of luck. They had been gatherers of Xeum, cosmic-ray residue. Due to topological peculiarities in the spacetime continuum, Desdemona happened to receive more Xeum than any other place in the solar system. But it was a bare living, because the only demand for Xeum was from scientists who were trying to find the primordial substance which generated the ultimate particle.

The settlers of Desdemona were sober people who kept only the most minimal contact with the other worlds. Still, they couldn't isolate themselves entirely. There were stirrings, undercurrents, and a growing demand for new products and new ways. Some of the Desdemona citizens took to spending time at Ganymede Fun World, the pleasure satellite that had been erected in Jupiter orbit. It was a long way to go for a little fun, but go they did.

There was dissension on Desdemona. And then, one day, a blurry and hard-to-read signal was received on Earth and other worlds. No one could decipher it, but it seemed to refer to some disaster. A relief party was sent out and found Desdemona satellite deserted. The place had been dismantled in an orderly fashion, all useful material packed away and taken. The only hint of what had happened was a letter, begun and crumpled and thrown into a corner and there ignored in the general housecleaning that

preceded the departure. After some chit-chat about family and friends, there was this: “Our robots have been giving us difficulties of late, and we’re not sure what to do about it. The Elders say there’s no danger of a revolt, though some doubt the wisdom of the new override instructions that permit our robots to get around the Three Laws of Robotics. Our Chairman says this is necessary in order not to inhibit their intellectual development, but some of us wonder if we aren’t asking for a lot of trouble—”

At that point the letter ended in mid-sentence.

There was conjecture that the robots, freed of the restraints of the Laws of Robotics, had somehow taken control and decided to take the spaceships, and the humans from Desdemona, and go somewhere else, a place where they would not be molested by the rest of humanity. It was theoretically possible to bypass the robotics laws; intelligent robots started their life with neutral ethical values. Moral defaults and restraints had to be built in and programmed. Not everyone agreed with this program. Some people had toyed with their robots’ conditioning, hoping to get more out of the robots. Instances of this were rare, however, and were stamped out as soon as they were encountered.

Large rewards were offered for anyone who solved the Desdemona mystery, and even larger rewards were available for anyone who discovered the present location of the Desdemona robots and their owners, the humans of Desdemona Settlement. No one had claimed this money so far, although there had been one or two false alarms.

Hellman was pretty sure that the Desdemona robots had come to this place, whatever this planet was called. He was potentially a rich man. The only difficulty was, he was at present clinging to the side of a carhunter which was rushing down a slope to attack a Mercedes 300 SL.

Slipping and sliding on the rocky surface, the carhunter, wheels spinning, limbs struggling for purchase, came down on the hapless automobile. The Mercedes, sensing the attack at the last moment, put on a burst of speed. The carhunter was able to claw away a portion of its bumper before the Mercedes pulled free, and, with a snort from its double carbs, hurtled down the slope. The carhunter followed, caught up, and launched itself onto the back of the car. There was a wild bellowing from both machines. Then the carhunter had landed on the trunk of the Mercedes and was tearing and rending it, trying, with its long extensible arms, to reach under and break loose one of the vulnerable axles in order to hamstring the mechanical beast. But the Mercedes had armored side panels and a mesh of steel protected its vital organs. Its horn blared and from its modified supercharger ports came a blue-gray gas. The carhunter managed to pinch shut the main port out of which these fumes were rising. Extruding a metallic tentacle with a bludgeon-like steel fist at its end, it beat in the car’s side window and grabbed at the steering wheel. The car and the carhunter struggled for control as they careened across the steep hillside, coming perilously close to capsizing. This was prevented only by the carhunter’s superior sense of balance, for he managed somehow to keep both himself and the Mercedes upright on its wheels. The groans and snarls, screams and gruntings were impressive in the extreme. Hellman was battered back and forth as the two robots clashed, and thought for a moment he was going to be thrown free. And then, suddenly, it was over. The robohunter’s tentacle snaked through an entry port and found the creature’s central processing unit somewhere deep in its innards. The carhunter wrenched, once, twice, and on the third try a thick bunch of cables came loose and the Mercedes uttered a single sigh and slowed to a halt. The idiot lights on its dashboard flashed in crazy patterns, then went to black. The creature was dead.

Hellman managed to slide to the ground. He stretched himself and rested while Wayne stripped out the points and munched them, then dismantled the machine and stored some of the choicer parts in its cargo section just beneath its own CPU. Watching him, Hellman became aware that he was getting hungry, too.

“I don’t suppose you have anything that I can eat?” Hellman asked, as he watched Wayne slaver as it munched down one headlight.

“Not here, no,” Wayne said. “But at the meeting we’ll be able to do something for you. “

“I don’t eat metal, you know,” Hellman said. “Not even plastic. “

“I am aware of humans’ special dietary requirements,” the carhunter replied. He spit out a couple of

lug nuts. "Well, that was delicious. Too bad you humans don't know about headlights. Come on, mount up, we'll be late."

"Through no fault of mine," Hellman muttered, climbing onto the carhunter again.

In another hour they had left the desolate badlands and were traveling across grassy rolling country. There was a river to their right, and green rolling hills to the left. So far Hellman had not seen any signs of human, or even animal, life. There was plenty of vegetation around here, however. Most of it seemed to be in the form of trees and grass. Nothing there for him to eat. But perhaps something would turn up when they reached the meeting place.

Far ahead, in a cleft between two hills, he caught sight of a glint of sunlight off metal. "What's that?" he asked.

"That's the Roundhouse," Wayne said. "That's what we call the Great Meeting Hall. And look. Some of the others are there already. "

The Roundhouse was a circular building, one story high, open to the weather and supported on pillars. It was nicely landscaped with big trees and shrubbery. There were perhaps twenty machines milling around outside. Hellman could hear their engines idling before he could make out the words they were saying to each other. Behind the Roundhouse was a fenced enclosure. Here there were several enormous mechanical creatures of a kind Hellman had not seen before. They towered above the carhunters, looking like mechanical renditions of brontosaurus. Close to their enclosure there were various other structures.

As Wayne approached, the carhunters spotted Hellman on his back and fell silent. Wayne coasted to a stop near them.

"Howdy, Jeff," Wayne said. "Si, Bill, Skeeter, hello."

"Hello, Wayne," they replied.

"I reckon you can get down now," Wayne said to Hellman.

Hellman slid down the carhunter's back. It felt good to have solid ground beneath him again, though he was a little intimidated by the size of the other carhunters.

"What you got there, Wayne?" one of them asked.

"You can see for yourself," Wayne said. "It's a human."

"Well, so it is," the machine called Jeff replied. "Haven't seen one of them critters around for a long time."

"They're getting pretty scarce," Wayne agreed. "Anything to drink around here?"

One of the carhunters pointed one of his extensors at a forty-gallon barrel which had been put aside under one of the trees. "Try some of that. Some of Lester's home brew he sent along. "

"Isn't Lester going to make it?"

"Afraid not. He's got that rot of the control cables; it's got him crippled up pretty good."

Wayne went over to the barrel. He extruded a tube and inserted it into the barrel. The others watched silently as the level of the barrel went down.

"Hey, Wayne! Save some for somebody else!"

Wayne finally withdrew his drinking tube. "Yahoo!" he said. "Got a kick, that stuff."

"Three hundred proof and flavored with cinnamon. Human, you want to try some?"

"I guess I'll pass on it," Hellman said. The carhunters guffawed rudely.

"Where in the hell did you find him, Wayne?"

"Out on the prairie," Wayne said...His owner is still out there in the spaceship. "

"Why didn't he come along?"

"Don't rightly know. Might not be mobile."

"What're you going to do with him?"

"That's for the Executive Council to decide," Wayne said.

“Does he talk?” the one called Skeeter asked. “Sure, I talk,” Hellman said.

Hellman was about to put this smart-alecky robot straight. But then there was a movement within the Roundhouse and two robots came out. Their open framework struts and girders were painted blue; their upper part was red. They had black symbols painted here and there. They seemed to be officials of some sort.

“The Chief sent us,” one of them said to Wayne. “He heard you came into camp with a human.”

“News gets around fast, don’t it?” Wayne said.

“Wayne, you know that’s against the rules.”

Wayne shook his big head. “It’s not customary, but I never heard it was against the rules.”

“Well, it is. We’ll have to take him inside for interrogation.”

“Figured as much,” Wayne said.

“Come with us, human,” one of the officials said.

There didn’t seem to be anything for Hellman to do but follow orders. He knew he was no match for the robots in speed or strength. He’d have to keep his wits about him. It might not be too easy to come out of this one okay.

What really perplexed him, however, was, what did these robots have against human beings? How had they developed in this way? Were there any humans at all on this planet? Or had the robots killed them all?

One of the buildings seemed to serve the carhunters as a prison. Its sides were closed. It had a door, which had a padlock. One of the red and blue officials or guards or whatever they were unlocked the door and held it open for Hellman.

“How long you going to lock me up for?” Hellman asked.

“You will be informed of the council’s decisions.” They closed the door behind him.

It was a large room made of galvanized iron. There were windows set high up. There was no glass in them. The room was devoid of furniture. Evidently robots didn’t use chairs or beds. There were a few low metal tables. Hellman looked around, and, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he made out a wink of lights from one corner. He went there to investigate.

There was a robot in the corner. It was somewhat smaller than a man, perhaps five feet high. And it was slender. It had a well-defined head sculpted from some bright metal, and the usual arms and legs. The creature watched him silently, and that was a little unnerving.

“Hi,” Hellman said. “I’m Tom Hellman. Who are you?”

The robot didn’t reply.

“Can’t you talk?” Hellman asked. “Don’t you speak English?”

Still no reply from the robot, who continued to watch him with one red and one green eye.

“Great,” Hellman said. “They put me in with a dummy. “

As he spoke, he noticed that the robot was scratching in the dirt of the packed earth floor with a long toe. Hellman read it: “The walls have ears.”

He looked at the robot. It gave him a meaningful look.

“What happens now?” Hellman said, dropping his voice to a whisper. The robot scratched, “We’ll know soon.” The robot didn’t want to communicate any further. Hellman went to the far side of the room and stretched out on the floor. He was very hungry now. Were they going to feed him? And more important, were they going to feed him something he could eat? Outside, it was growing late. After a while, Hellman started to doze off. He fell into a light sleep, and soon he was dreaming of vague, threatening things that came at him out of a dark sky. He was trying to explain to them that he was not to blame, but he couldn’t remember what for.

Hellman awoke when the door to the prison was opened. At first he thought they had come to tell him what they had decided. But they had brought him food instead. It consisted entirely of fruit and nuts. None of them was familiar to him, but none were strange, either. They also brought him water. It was

carried in quart oil cans which had been scrupulously cleansed and bore not even a trace of oil. Hellman learned later that these cans had never held oil, even though "oil" was stamped into the metal of their sides. He had no idea then that the carhunters had a ceremonial side to their nature, and were able to use certain utilitarian objects for their symbolic value alone.

The two carhunters who brought the food and water would answer no questions. They waited silently while Hellman ate. He thought they watched him with curiosity. He couldn't figure that out, but he was hungry enough so that he ate anyway. They took away the hammered tin plates on which they had brought the food, but they left him two water cans.

Time passed. Hellman had no watch, and was unable to reach the ship's computer to get a time check. But he figured that hours must have passed. He grew irritated with the robot who was locked in with him, who sat in a corner of the room and seemed to be in a cataleptic fit.

At last Hellman had had enough. Boredom can drive a man to outrageous deeds. He walked over to the robot and said, "Say something."

The robot opened its red and green eyes and looked at him. It slowly shook its head, left to right, meaning no.

"Because they can hear us, right?"

The robot nodded, affirmative.

"What does it matter if they can hear us or not?"

The robot made a complex and intricate gesture with its hands, which Hellman took to mean, 'You just don't understand.'

"I just don't understand, is that it?" Hellman asked.

The robot nodded, affirmative.

"But I can't understand unless you tell me."

The robot shrugged. Universal gesture meaning, what can I do about it?

"I'll tell you what you can do," Hellman said, his voice low but resonant with suppressed anger. "You listening?"

The robot nodded.

"If you don't start talking at once, I'm going to put out one of your eyes. The green one. Then ask you again. If you refuse again, I'll put out the red one. Got it?"

The robot stared at him. Only now did Hellman see what a mobile face it had. It was not made up of a single piece of metal. Instead there were many little planes sculptured into the face, and each plane was about an inch square and seemed capable of movement. This was a face designed to reveal its thoughts, feelings, and moods through its face. And sure enough, the robot's face registered horror, disbelief, outrage,, as Hellman screwed up his own face into a ferocious frown and advanced.

"There's no need for violence," the robot said.

"Fine. There's no reason for silence either, is there?"

"I suppose not," the robot said. "I just thought it best that we didn't talk together so that the carhunters wouldn't get the idea we were plotting against them."

"Why would they think that?"

"You must know as well as I do that it's every sentient being for itself here on this planet of Newstart. And the carhunters are a very suspicious group of people."

"They're not people," Hellman said. "They're robots."

"Since intelligent robots have the same faculties as humans, we no longer differentiate between them in terms of 'robot' and 'human.' It's superfluous and racist to talk that way. "

"All right," Hellman said. "I stand corrected. You say they are suspicious people?"

"Stands to reason, doesn't it? They have separated themselves from the mainstream of Newstart life and development. Isolated groups tend toward xenophobia."

"You know a lot of big words," Hellman said. "I ought to. I'm a librarian."

“These carhunters don’t look like they have much use for reading.”

“I’m not a librarian here,” the robot said with a low laugh. “I don’t belong to this tribe! I work at the Central Lending Library in downtown Robotsville. “

“Robotsville? Is that a city?”

“The largest city on Newstart. Surely you’ve heard of it?”

“I’m not from here,” Hellman said. “I’m from the planet Earth. “

“You ‘re from another planet?” The robot sat up and looked at Hellman more attentively. “How did you get here?”

“In the usual way. By spaceship.”

“Uhuu,” the robot said.

“Beg pardon?”

““Uhuu’ is an expression peculiar to Robotsville. It means ‘that really opens up a lot of possibilities.’ “

“Can you explain that?” Hellman asked.

“It’s just that quite a lot is happening on Newstart right now. Your arrival could have incalculable consequences.”

“What are you talking about? What’s going on?”

Just then there was the sound of a key in the lock.

“I’m afraid I’m not going to have time to tell you,” the robot said. “God knows what these barbarians have in store for us. My name is Jorge.” He gave it the Spanish pronunciation, Hor-hay.

“Jorge? As in Jorge Luis Borges?” asked Hellman, a literate man when it came to very short stories.

“Yes. He is the saint of librarians.”

The door opened. Two carhunters lumbered in. Around buildings they seemed clumsy and ill at ease. The fluid grace that a carhunter possessed in the countryside seemed to have deserted them in these restricting surroundings.

“Come with us,” one of them said. “The council has discussed you and now will speak with you.”

“What about my buddy Jorge here?”

“He will be dealt with in due time.”

“Be careful what you say to them,” the librarian said. “The carhunters do not like...prevarication.”

The librarian’s pause was long enough to convince Hellman that there was something he was being advised not to say to the carhunters. He wished he knew what it was. But now the carhunters were moving, and Hellman had to move quickly to prevent being run over.

They led him to the meeting area. It was a flat circular rock face that had been roughly smoothed. It stood about three feet above the ground, and there were ramps of packed earth leading up to it. The carhunters had already assembled. They were moving around the rock, which greatly resembled a large parking lot. In the center was a raised cube. On it there were five or so carhunters. These looked more like a bunch of politicians than anything else.

Hellman was led to a large pedestal with a spiral roadway leading up to it. It put him on eye level with the five top carhunters.

Even if they had not been apart from the others, Hellman would have had no difficulty telling that these were the important ones. They were somewhat larger than the others, and their bodies had more ornamentation, mostly of the chromium variety. Several of them wore necklaces of shiny objects which Hellman recognized as hood designs from automobiles of Earth ‘s past.

The leading carhunter was easy to spot, too. He sat in the center of the others on the raised rectangle. He was almost a third larger than his fellow judges, and he was painted a midnight blue with silver accents.

The blue and silver judge said, “I am Car Eater, Chief Elder of the Carhunters tribe. These are my fellow judges. Why have you come here, Tom Hellman? We already know that you came in a spaceship.

Why did you come to Newstart?"

"It was a mistake," Hellman said. "I had a malfunction."

"That is not an acceptable answer. Where humans are concerned, there are no mistakes."

"Maybe you don't know people very well," Hellman said. "This was definitely a mistake. If you don't believe me, ask my ship's computer."

"One of our scouts tried to talk to him," Car Eater said. "He told us we did not have the proper access code. He would not explain what he meant by that."

"The access code is a nine-number combination. It is used to prevent unauthorized spying on the computer's memory banks."

"But couldn't the computer make up his own mind about that?" Car Eater asked.

"Perhaps he could," Hellman said. "But it is not the way we do things on Earth."

The robots held a whispered conference. Then Car Eater said, "It has been many years since a human visited these parts. This part of the planet belongs to us, the carhunters. We stay out of other people's territory and expect people to stay out of ours. This is how it has been for a very long time, ever since the Great Fabricator divided the species of intelligence and told each to be fruitful and multiply according to his basic plan. Some of the carhunters wanted to kill you, and that other stray too, the librarian who calls himself Jorge. Sounds like a sissy name to me. That's the sort of name they give themselves in Robotville, where they think they're better than anyone else. But we Elders decided against taking violent action. The Compact which rules this planet abhors destruction except in lawful ways. Hellman, you may go. You and Jorge, too. I advise you to be out of our territory by sundown. Otherwise a hyenoid might get you."

"Where am I supposed to go? I can't get back to my spaceship on my own."

"Since Wayne 1332A brought you here," Car Eater said, "he can also take you back. Right, Wayne?"

A loud sound of backfires came from the assembled carhunters. It took Hellman a moment to realize it was laughter.

"Sorry about this, Wayne," Hellman said. He and Jorge had mounted and were clinging to the carhunter's back plates.

"Hell, it don't make no never mind," Wayne said. "I don't sit around a whole lot fretting about how I pass my time. Sometimes it's more convenient for us carhunters to turn onto emergency mode, which of course is timebound. But most of the time life just goes along here on the concrete prairie much as it has ever done."

Hellman learned from Wayne that the carhunters had lived in this region, the badlands of Northwest Mountain and Concrete Prairie, for as long as anyone could remember. Jorge broke in and said that this was a lie, or at least an untruth: the carhunters had been around only a hundred years or so, just like everyone else. Wayne said he didn't want to argue, but he did point out that there was one hell of a lot city robots didn't know. Hellman himself was interested in what it was like to be a city robot.

"Aren't there any people in your city?" Hellman asked Jorge.

"I told you, all of us are people."

"Well, I mean people like me. Humans. Flesh-and-blood sort of people. You know what I mean?"

"If you mean natural human beings, no. There are none in Robotville. We separated from them. It was for the good of everyone. Just didn't get along. We tried producing flesh-and-blood androids for a while—robots with protoplasmic bodies. But it was aesthetically displeasing."

"I didn't know aesthetics was a concern," Hellman said.

"It's the only real issue," Jorge told him, "once you've solved the problems of maintenance and upkeep and part replacement."

"Yeah, I guess it would be," Hellman said. "Do you know how your people got to this planet?"

"Of course. The Great Fabricator put us here, back when he divided the intelligent species and gave

each a portion of the land and of the good things thereof.”

“How long ago was that?” Hellman asked.

“A long time ago. Before the beginning of time.”

Jorge told Hellman the Creation Story, which, in slightly altered versions, was known to every being on the planet Newstart. How the Great Fabricator, a being made up equally of flesh, metal, and spirit, had produced all the races and watched them go to war with each other. How he decided that this was wrong. The Great Fabricator tried various plans. He tried putting the humans in charge of everyone. That didn't work. He tried letting the robots rule, and that didn't work, either. Finally he divided the planet of Newstart into equal portions. “Each of you has a place now,” the Great Fabricator said. “Go down there now and access information.”

And so they went down, all the species, and each picked his lot and his fortune. The humans found green places where they could grow things. The robots split into various groups. One of those groups was the carhunters. They didn't want to live in cities. They denied that the purpose of a robot was to further technology. They insisted that just living was enough purpose for anyone. This was at the time of the choosing of modalities. The carhunters selected bodies for themselves that were swift and long-enduring. They programmed themselves with a love of desolate places. And the Great Fabricator put at their disposal a race of automobiles, direct descendants of the autos of Earth. The cars were belligerent herd animals, and it was all right to kill them because they weren't intelligent enough to mind. The carhunters had been programmed so that they found car innards delicious. It was a deliberately studied-out ethic, because at the beginning each of the groups had its own choice of an ethic. They worked from ancient models, of course, old-time human models, since intelligence is the ability to choose your programming. It was a good life, but in the view of the other robots, those who had chosen to live in cities, it was a blind alley in the life game of machine evolution. The nomadic model was satisfying, but limiting.

“You see,” Jorge said, as they bounced along on Wayne's back, “some of us believe that life is an art that must be learned. We believe that we must learn what we are to do. We devote our lives to taking the next step.”

Wayne was bored by this sort of talk. The librarian was obviously crazy. What could be better than careening around the landscape, killing things? He pointed out that there was no moral problem, since the things they killed weren't intelligent enough to know what was being done to them. Also, they weren't given pain circuits.

They were coming through a long narrow pass, with towering peaks on either side. Suddenly Wayne came to a stop and extruded his antennae. He swiveled them back and forth in a purposeful manner, and a little instrument deep inside his armoring began a quiet, urgent tick-tick.

“What is it?” Hellman asked.

“Believe we got trouble ahead,” Wayne said. He swung around and started back the way he had come. In fifty yards, he stopped again.

“What is it this time?” Hellman asked.

“They're on both sides of us.”

“Who is on either side of us? Is it those hyenoids again?”

“They're no real trouble,” Wayne said. “No, this is a little more serious than that.”

“What is it?” Jorge asked.

“I think it's a group of Deltoids.”

“How could that be?” Jorge asked. “The Deltoids live far to the south, in Mechanicsville and Gasketoon.”

“I don't know what they're doing here,” Wayne said. “Maybe you can ask them yourself. They seem to be on all sides of us.”

Jorge's mobile face took on a look of alarm. “May the Great Fabricator preserve us!”

“What is it?” Hellman asked. “What's he so upset about?”

“The Deltoids are not like the rest of us,” Wayne told him.

“Not robots?”

“Oh, they’re robots all right. But something went wrong with their conditioning back when the race was first laid down by the Great Fabricator. Unless he did it on purpose, which is what the Deltoid Church of the Black Star maintains. “

“What, exactly, did the Great Fabricator do to them?” Hellman demanded.

“He taught them to like killing,” Jorge said.

“Hang on,” Wayne said. “Up them cliffs is the only way out of here.”

“Can you climb a gradient like that?” Hellman asked. “Going to find out,” said Wayne.

“But you kill things, too,” Hellman said.

“Sure. But only lawful animals. The Deltoids like to kill other intelligent beings.”

He started picking his way up the rock face. Behind, a group of big machines in camouflage colors had collected and was watching them.

Three times Wayne tried to bull his way up the cliffside, and each time lost traction a third of the way from the top. Only the most skillful weight shifting and double clutching prevented the carhunter from turning over as it slid down to its starting point. The Deltoids seemed in no hurry to attack them, something which was incomprehensible to Wayne at the time, but which had a simple explanation that was supplied later, when they were safe for the moment in Poictesme.

But that was later; for now, it looked a desperate situation, and Wayne turned, ready to charge head-on into the machines and take his chances. Hellman and Jorge had no say in the matter. This was Wayne’s decision and his alone to make. But it was taken out of his hands when the ground suddenly began to collapse beneath his feet. The Deltoids noticed this and noisily started motors, eager to get away from the treacherous ground. But now they were caught in it too, and the entire plain seemed to be collapsing under them. Hellman and Jorge could do nothing but hang on as Wayne slipped and slithered and fought for traction. But there was nothing to be done, and Hellman felt himself battered by flying dirt and sand as the bottom dropped out from under them.

It was the alarm clock that woke him.

Alarm clock?

Hellman opened his eyes. He was in a large bed under a pink and blue quilt. He was propped up nicely on down cushions. There was an alarm clock on the nightstand next to him. It was ringing.

Hellman turned it off.

“Feeling all right?” a voice asked him.

Hellman looked around. To his right, sitting in an overstuffed chair, there was a woman. A young woman. A good-looking young woman. She wore a yellow and tangerine hostess gown. She had crisp blond hair and gray eyes. She looked at Hellman with an air of boldness and self-possession.

“Yeah, I’m all right,” Hellman said. “But who are you?”

“I’m Lana,” the young woman said.

“Are you a prisoner?”

She laughed. “My goodness, no! I work for these people. You’re in Poictesme.”

“The last thing I remember is the ground giving way. “

“Yes. You fell into Poictesme.”

“What about the Deltoids?”

“There is no love lost between Deltoids and the robots of Poictesme. The robots rebuked them for trespassing and sent them away chagrined. The Deltoids had to take it because they were in the wrong. It amused the Poictesmeans very much to see the usually arrogant and self-assured Deltoids slink off with their tails dragging. “

“Tails?”

“Yes, the Deltoids have tails. “

"I didn't get close enough to see the tails," Hellman said.

"Believe me, they have tails. There is an albino tailless model, but they only occur in Lemurton Valley which is over eight hundred varsks from here."

"How much is a varsk?"

"It is roughly equal to the Terran mile, equal to five thousand two hundred and eighty yups."

"Feet?"

"Approximately, yes."

"How did they happen to fall into Poictesme? Didn't they know it was there?"

"How could they? Poictesme is one of the burrowing cities."

"Oh, how stupid of me," Hellman said. "A burrowing city! Why didn't I think of that?"

"You're making fun of me," the young woman said.

"Well, maybe just a little. So Poictesme was burrowing past where all these Deltoids had assembled to capture or kill the carhunter?"

"That's it, exactly. The crust of the earth was thin at that point, and they shouldn't have been here anyway, because this entire region was given to the Poictesmeans to live in or under as they pleased."

"Well, maybe I get it," Hellman said. "Where are the Poictesmeans, anyhow?"

"Right here. You're in Poictesme," Lana said.

Hellman looked around. He didn't get it. Then he got it.

"You mean this room—?"

"No, the house itself. The Poictesmeans are housemaking robots."

Hellman learned how the Poictesmeans began life as tiny metal spheres within which were infinitesimal moving parts, as well as a miniature chemical factory. The Poictesmeans started as little robots, hardly more than DNA and parts. From this their plan unfolded. They slowly began to build a house around them. They were equally skilled at working in wood or stone. By puberty they could make bricks in their own in-built kiln. Most Poictesmeans made six- to eight-room houses. These houses were not for their own use. It was obvious that the Poictesmeans didn't need the elaborate structure, with its bay windows and carports, that they carried around with them, adding to bit by bit and painting once a year. But their instruction tapes, plus their racial steering factor (RSF) combined to make them produce finer and finer houses. They lived in neat suburbs, each Poictesmean occupying his allotted quarter acre of land. At night, in accordance with ancient ordinance, street lamps and house lights came on. The Poictesmeans also had a few communal projects. A theater and motion-picture house. But no pictures were ever shown, because the Poictesmeans had never mastered the art of moviemaking. And anyhow, who would there be to occupy their theaters? The Poictesmeans were a symbiotic race, but they didn't have any symbiotes to share stuff with.

"Is that why they have you here?" Hellman asked. "To live in one of their houses?"

"Oh, no, I'm a design consultant," Lana said. "They are very fastidious, especially about their rugs and curtains. And they import vases from the humans, because they aren't programmed or motivated to make such things themselves."

"When do I meet one of them?"

"They wanted you to feel at home before they talked to you."

"That's nice of them."

"Oh, don't worry, they have their reasons. The Poictesmeans have reasons for everything they do."

Hellman wanted to know what had happened to the librarian and the carhunter, for he thought of them now as his friends. But Lana either did not know or would not tell him. Hellman worried about it for a while, then stopped thinking about it. His friends were both made of metal and could be expected to take care of themselves.

Lana sometimes talked about her friends and family back on Zoo Hill. She wouldn't answer Hellman's direct questions, but she liked to reminisce. From what she said Hellman got a picture of an

idyllic life, sort of half Polynesian and half hippie. The humans didn't do much, it seemed. They had their gardens and their fields, but robots took care of them. In fact, young robots from the cities of Newstart volunteered for this work. These were robots who thought there was something noble about men. The other robots called them humanizers. Usually, though, it was just the sort of fad you'd expect of a young robot.

Hellman got out of bed and wandered around the house. It was a nice house. Everything was automatic. The Poictesmean who was the intelligence at the house's core did all the work and also arranged all the scheduling. The Poictesmeans liked to anticipate your needs. The house was always cooking special meals for Hellman. When it got roast beef and kiwi fruit, Hellman didn't ask. There was such a thing as trying to find out too much.

Each house had its own climate and, in its backyard, a swimming pool. Although they were underground, lamps on high standards provided circadian illumination.

Hellman became very fond of Lana. He thought she was a little dumb, but sweet. She looked great in a bathing suit. It wasn't long before Hellman approached Lana with a request for mutual procreation, him and her, just you and me, babe. Lana said she'd love to, but not now. Maybe sometime, but not now. When Hellman asked why not now, she said that someday she'd explain it and they'd both laugh about it. Hellman had heard that one before. Nevertheless he remained fond of Lana, and she seemed to like him, too. Although perhaps that was because he was the only human person in Poictesme. She said that wasn't it at all; she liked him; he was different; he was from Earth, a place she had always wanted to see, because even this far from the solar system she had heard of Paris and New York.

One day Hellman wandered into the living room. Lana had gone off on one of her mysterious trips. She never told him where she was going. She just gave a little smile, half apologetic, half defiant, and said, "See you later, cutie." It annoyed Hellman because he didn't have any place to go to and he felt he was being one-upped.

In the living room, he noticed for the first time the thirty-inch TV set into one wall. He had probably seen it before but not really noticed it. You know how it is when you're far away from your favorite shows.

He walked over to it. It looked like a normal TV set. It had a dial in its base. Curious, he turned the dial. The screen lit up and a woman's face appeared in it.

"Hello, Hellman," the woman said. "I'm glad you decided to have a conversation with me at last."

"I didn't know you were in there," Hellman said.

"But where else would the spirit of a house be but in its TV set?" she asked him.

"Is that what you really look like?" Hellman asked.

"Strictly speaking," she told him, "I don't look like anything. Or I look like whatever I want to look like. In actual fact, I look like the house that I am. But a house is too big and complicated to serve as a focus of conversation. Therefore we Poictesmeans personalize ourselves and become the spirit of our own place."

"Why do you appear as a woman?"

"Because I am a woman," she said. "Or at least feminine. Feminine and masculine are two of the great principles of the Universe, when viewed from a particular aspect. We Poictesmeans take either view, in accord with deep universal rhythms. I understand that you come from the planet Earth."

"That's right," Hellman said. "And I'd like to go back there."

"It is possible," she said, "that can be arranged. Assuming your cooperation, of course."

"Hell yes, I'm cooperative," Hellman said. "What do you want me to do?"

"We want your help in getting out of here."

"Out of Poictesme?"

"No, you idiot, we are Poictesme. We want to move our entire city to your planet Earth."

"But you don't know what it's like on Earth."

“You don’t know what it’s like here. There is very serious trouble on this planet, Hellman. All hell is going to break out here very soon. We Poictesmeans are house robots and we don’t care for warfare, nor for the strange evolutionary schemes of some of the people of Poictesme.”

“You want the people of Earth to just give you some land to live on?”

“That’s it. We can pay our own way, of course. We can rent ourselves out for human occupation.”

“Would you want to do that?”

“Of course. The function of a house is to be lived in. But nobody on this planet wants to live in us.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’ve told you; they’re all quite mad.”

“I’m sure something can be arranged,” Hellman said. “Good housing is always in demand on Earth. We’ll just have to send some big spaceships to take you off, that’s all.”

“That sounds fine.”

“It’s a deal, then. How soon can we begin?”

“Well, there’s a problem to overcome before we can actually do anything.”

“I thought that would be it,” Hellman said. “Forget about problems, just get me back to my spaceship and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“That’s precisely the trouble. Your spaceship has been captured and taken to Robotville.”

While Hellman had journeyed with Wayne the carhunter to the meeting, the observatories of Robotville had read and interpreted the signals sent out during the ship’s crash landing on Newstart. It was the interpretation that had taken time, for signals signifying the landing of spaceships had been received from time to time in the past and had been uniformly proven to be erroneous. This being the case, the Astronomer Royal had put forth the theory that signals denoting the landing of a spaceship could be taken as meaning that no spaceship had in fact landed. This was considered ingenious but futile at a general meeting of the Concerned Robots for a Better Safer Robotville. Public opinion made it clear that this signal, just like all the others, would have to be investigated.

Thus, a squadron of Royal Robotville Horse Guards had been dispatched under the command of Colonel Trotter. This squadron was composed of regular citizens who had elected to take on centaur bodies, half humanoid and half horse, the whole thing constructed of Tinkertoy-like material and driven by cleverly geared little motors. The ultimate power source was atomic, of course, the power of atomic decay stepped down to turn tiny and then small and finally larger gears.

This squadron of robotic centaurs, some of them colored bay; some chestnut, some dappled, and a few roan and pinto, debouched onto the plain, spurs and harness jingling, and beheld the spaceship. There was consternation among the centaurs, because they had expected to make only a parade inspection, not be faced with the real difficulties of what to do with an alien spaceship. Questions were relayed back to the city, and councils were held in high places. It was voted at a town meeting open to all intelligences of grade seven or above—the sixes still not having won the vote at this time—that a full regiment of sappers be sent to transport the alien spaceship after first ascertaining its intentions.

They queried the ship’s computer, who responded with his name, rank, and serial number, as embossed on his security tapes. But he did have enough local command over his communication circuits to tell the centaurs that, speaking only for himself, his intent was peaceable and he carried no hidden weapons or intelligences aboard. The robots of Robotville tended to take the word of computers back in those relatively naive days, and so the robots constructed a flatbed truck upon the spot, loaded the spaceship upon it with the cunning use of ropes and windlasses, and brought it back to the city.

“Well then,” Hellman said, “it’s simple enough. You have to get me to Robotville so I can get my spaceship back. Then I’ll be able to do something for you on Earth.”

The image in the TV screen looked doubtful. “We’re not too popular with Robotville, unfortunately.”

“Why is that?”

“Oh, let’s not go into it now,” the house robot said. Hellman was learning, not for the last time, that robots can be evasive, and, if programmed correctly, downright liars.

The Poictesmean said she’d think about it and discuss it with the others. Her image faded from the screen. Hellman was feeling modestly optimistic until Lana came home and heard of the conversation.

Lana said she didn’t trust the Poictesmeans and didn’t think Hellman should, either. Not that she was trying to tell him how to think. Not that she gave a damn what he thought. But she just wanted him to know that her opinions of the robots were based on a lifetime of having lived close to them, time in which she had observed their ways, and had also had the valuable insights of her friends, who also used up some of their time and energy observing robots. Now, of course, she said with sweet sardonicism, it was possible that Hellman knew robots better than anyone else. It was possible that, with a single glance of his intelligent eyes, he had learned more than Lana and her people had been able to deduce.

Lana could go on in this vein for quite a while. At first Hellman thought she was weird because she was an alien. Then he decided that she was probably weird even for an alien. In fact, he thought, she might be a little bit of a nut.

Somehow Lana had heard of Hollywood on the planet Earth, and what she really wanted from Hellman was stories of the stars and starlets. She was fascinated by the glamour of it all. She made him give her detailed descriptions of Grauman’s Chinese Theater, even though Hellman had never been to California. She also wanted to know all about Veronica Lake. Hellman found it was no good saying he didn’t know anything about her. Lana always thought he was lying, and sulked until he told her something, anything.

He told her that Veronica Lake was one of two Siamese twins, Veronica and Schlemmonika, and that Schlemmonika had been taken away after the operation that severed their connection by the head (hence the hair worn long on one side—to hide the scar) and taken to a convent high in the Canadian Rockies. As for Veronica, she had had three husbands, one of them a cousin of King Zug of Albania. And so on.

Lana brought him coffee every morning, when she returned from wherever it was she went at night. Hellman tried to woo her. But it was difficult because the house wouldn’t let him out of the house. He had no money with which to buy her presents. And even if he had had, he hadn’t yet seen a store on this planet.

Lana said she liked him very much but that now was not the time for involvement. Hellman didn’t say, fine, let’s do without the involvement, let’s just go to bed. He didn’t think it would go over well. Lana said there’d be time to consider having a relationship when Hellman got them out of the house and back to Earth and took her to Hollywood. She said she realized that she was a little old to be a starlet, but there was still time for her to take on a serious acting career.

“Sure,” Hellman said, and took to spending his evenings looking out the window at the houses across the street. They put their lights on every night, just as his house did, but they didn’t have any people. Hellman supposed they were practicing.

Then one night, as he was sitting on the big sofa wishing he had a newspaper, he heard a sound from the cellar. He listened. It came again. Yes! And again! A noise in the cellar—he got up quite excited—something was about to happen.

The computer of the house was fast asleep. She went to sleep every night and didn’t awaken until Lana returned. But Hellman tiptoed anyhow, afraid of waking her, to the cellar door. Hellman tried the light at the top of the stairs. It didn’t work. That was odd: the house was usually scrupulous about keeping herself up. He could see halfway down the stairs before they terminated in darkness. He went down, stepping lightly, holding on to the rails on either side of the stairs.

At the bottom a little light had collected from the open kitchen door. Hellman picked his way across a floor littered with many objects. He recognized a beach ball, one roller skate, an old lamp with a silk shade, lying on its side. There were piles of old newspapers in a corner. There was a ping-pong table, the dust thick upon it. The light glinted off the sharp edges of a row of chisels hanging from one wall. Then he

heard the sound again.

“Who’s there?” Hellman asked in a loud whisper.

“Not so loud,” a voice whispered back.

Hellman felt a flash of annoyance. He was always being told to shut up these days. “Who’s there?” he asked, this time in a normal voice.

“Do the numbers 150182074 mean anything to you?”

“Yes,” Hellman said. “That’s the access code to my ship’s computer. How did you get it?”

“Your computer told it to me,” the voice said.

“Why?”

“So you’d trust me. He trusts me, you see, and he asked me to come here to help you. “

Good old computer! Hellman thought. Then his sensation of pleasure that his computer was looking out for him was replaced by an emotion of caution. How had his computer managed to get so self-programming as to decide that Hellman needed help? How had he managed to override his conditioning in order to give this robot or whoever it was the access number? Or hadn’t that happened at all? Perhaps the robots of Robotville had cracked the computer’s code and hit upon this subterfuge to get Hellman away from Poictesme and into their hands.

“How’s my computer doing?” Hellman asked, temporizing.

“He’s fine. But there’s no time for small talk. He told me you have difficulty making up your mind in an emergency, though you’re quick enough when nothing’s at stake. But you’ll have to decide right now if you want to come with me or not.”

“Where are we going?” Hellman asked. “And what about Wayne the carhunter and the librarian Jorge?”

“Am I my robot’s keeper? I do what I can. Anyhow, they’re safe enough. You’re the one who’s got problems.”

“And what about Lana?”

“You want to stay where you are and continue having her bring you coffee every morning?”

“I guess I got a few more things to do than that,” Hellman said. “All right, let’s get out of here.”

It was too dark for Hellman to make out the appearance of his rescuer. But from the direction of the voice, waist level, he was pretty sure that he was small. It seemed reasonable to expect him to be a robot. Everyone he had met on Newstart so far had been a robot, except for Lana, and he still wasn’t completely sure about her.

His rescuer scuttled in front of him toward the furnace door, and opened it. Within, bright flames danced. The robot was revealed in its flames. He was about three feet tall, wore either a wig or had a full head of flowing dark hair and a clever, somewhat supercilious face with a bandit mustache. He was dressed in a tweed jacket and blue jeans. He was upright and bipedal. He wore sneakers. He also wore glasses.

“I’m Harry, by the way,” the robot said. He swung one leg over the lip of the open furnace door.

“Hey, I’m not going in there,” Hellman said.

“The flames are fake,” Harry said.

He swung his other leg over. Hellman put out a hand cautiously toward the fire. He drew it back.

“It’s hot!”

“That’s just simulated warmth. Come on, Tom, now’s not the time to crap around. Your computer warned me you’d be like this.”

“I’m going to have a little talk with that computer,” Hellman said, putting one foot into the furnace, and then, when it wasn’t singed off, the other.

“What’s going on in here?” a loud and familiar voice said. It was the house. Suddenly all the lights in the basement went on. An alarm bell went off. Hellman took a deep breath and jumped into the flames.

The flames were bright around him. They raged and stormed, and there was a little warmth in them,

but no real heat. Hellman was fascinated to find himself in the midst of fake flames and simulated warmth. He knew he was on his way. He was going to miss some of those meals that the house had prepared for him. The house was a good provider. There was probably a good future for houses like that on Earth. If there was no real reason against it, he might yet enter into partnership with Poictesme, sell their services on Earth, get rich quick.

First he'd have to find out, however, if these were indeed the robots of Desdemona Station, and if so, had they indeed circumvented or canceled their conditioning to the Three Laws of Robotics. The FDA would never let him import them if they were able to kill people. But if they were the robots of Desdemona, with murder in their hearts, or rather, in their tapes, burned into their chips, as it were, then there would be rewards to claim, prize money to spend. Maybe in that case he'd bring Lana back. She was plenty cute and he was sure she liked him, even though she had some odd ways of expressing it.

And he'd have a word with his computer too, when he got back to the ship. That was very peculiar behavior, giving out the access-code number. Sure, it was for his own protection, but was it, really? Might not his own computer have been reprogrammed by the antisocial elements of this planet of Newstart? And for that matter, what about the humans of Newstart? Had the robots spared some of them? What part did they play in all this?

Hellman considered these things while the flames roared around him. He had quite forgotten where he was. Thus the mind protects itself when faced with an intolerable situation. Now he noticed that the flames were dying down. As the glare faded, he saw Harry, the robot who was rescuing him, standing nearby.

"Why do you wear glasses?" Hellman asked.

"My God! Is that the only thing you can think to ask at a time like this?"

"Why do you robots talk about God so much?" Hellman asked. "Do you know something I don't know?"

"Your computer was right," Harry said. "You are fun to be around. One never knows what you'll say next. Come on, let's get out of this furnace. I'll bet you're hungry too, and thirsty, and perhaps sleepy, as well?"

"Yes, all of the above," Hellman said.

"How nice it must be to have such urgent conditioning. We robots have been trying to simulate appetite for a long time. It's easy enough to model human drives, but difficult to put any real urgency into it."

"But why would you want to have that stuff anyhow?" Hellman asked. "Drives and emotions get you into plenty of trouble. Sometimes they kill you. "

"Yes," said Harry, "but what a way to go."

Hellman thought about Lana. "Don't you ever get the urge to, like for example, mate with someone you know will be bad for you but to hell with that, you want to do it anyway?"

"Not really," Harry said. "We've learned to simulate perversity, of course, that's not difficult. But the real article...Well, that's tough. But we have begun a program by means of which we can experiment with it all."

"All what?"

"All the human moods, nuances, feelings. We're experimenting also with simulating every aspect of nature's creative side. But more of that later. We'd better get out of here. "

They were both out of the furnace now. Standing outside it, Hellman saw that it was not a furnace at all. Not now. Maybe it had been earlier. Somehow he had gotten somewhere else. He had stepped out of a small cellar door. He seemed to be in a very pretty pastoral place with bushy trees and green hedges and wild flowers.

"Like it?" Harry asked.

"Very nice. Yours?"

"Yes. I like to come here when I can. The whole thing, is simulated, by the way, down to the last

blade of grass.”

“Why didn’t you just plant a garden?”

“We need to express ourselves,” Harry said. “Come on, I’ve got a little place down here. I’m sure we can get you a drink and some lunch. Then you’ll need a nap and after that we can get on with it.”

“Get on with what?”

“The next step. Afraid it’s not going to be quite so easy as what’s happened so far.”

Harry told Hellman he lived in the Gollag Gardens section of Robotsville, quite near the south bridge that crossed the River Visp. He was a dress designer by occupation. Hellman expressed surprise at this, because he had been used to robots only in industrial roles.

“That was in the old days,” Harry said, “when robots were disadvantaged by the racist laws of Earth. All this talk about a robot not being truly creative! As if they had a clue! I can assure you, I do my job better than most designers on Earth. “

“But who do you design dresses for?” Hellman asked.

“For the other robots, of course.”

“I don’t understand. I never heard of a robot wearing clothes before. “

“Yes, I’ve seen the literature on the subject. Humans were really naive in the old days. They expected great things from their robots, but kept them naked. What creature with an ounce of self-respect and the slightest claim to civilization is going to do his best naked?”

“The news of your spaceship was received in the city like a bombshell. All of us have been theorizing for a very long time about what humans are really like.”

“You have some here on this planet, don’t you?”

“They don’t count. They’ve been away too long. They’re quite out of touch. They look to us for guidance.”

“Oh. I see what you mean.”

“We want to know what human is like from the horse’s mouth, a genuine human from the planet Earth.”

It was only later that Hellman appreciated the strength of the robot’s drive to be seen as creative and nice.

Harry had taken him through a bypass to a place outside Robotsville. He had a route planned out after they left his house. They would proceed on foot and with caution. There were political elements even in Robotsville, waiting to exploit the inevitable confusion that would ensue when Hellman arrived.

Hellman’s first sight of Robotsville was not reassuring. The outskirts looked like a junkyard several stories high and stretching for a mile or so in either direction. Although it looked haphazard, the open-work structures were firmly welded into place. There were buildings and verandas and structures of all sorts, most of them lying at odd angles to each other, since robots have no bias in favor of right angles. Although there were ground-level roadways, most of the robots used elevated pathways to get from place to place.

“I hadn’t expected it to be like this,” Hellman said.

“It’s more convenient for a robot to travel monkey-fashion, using a number of lines, than to walk on the ground like men,” Harry explained.

“But I notice that all of them have feet.”

“Of course. Having feet is a mark of being civilized.”

Civilized or not, Hellman saw that most of the robots in this part of Robotsville had small round bodies like squids, with six or eight tentacular limbs with differently shaped grasping members at their ends. As well as the legs, of course, which just dangled appendage-wise as the robots swung through the maze like chimpanzees. Soon they passed this suburban clutter and were in the middle of another district. This one was composed of five- or six-story buildings, some made of masonry, others constructed from what looked like wrought iron. As they walked they passed many robots, who were careful not to stare,

even though most of them had never seen a human before. Politeness, Harry explained, seems to be ingrained in the robot psyche.

Harry pointed out the Museum of Modern Art, the Sculpture Garden, the Opera House, and Symphony Hall.

“There’s a concert later tonight,” Harry said. “Perhaps you will attend if you’re not too tired.”

“What are they playing?”

“It’s all modern robot composers. You wouldn’t have heard of them. But we’d be grateful for your opinion. It isn’t often we get a human to hear our efforts. And the painters and sculptors are quite excited, too.”

“That’ll be nice,” Hellman said, doubting it.

“Our efforts will seem provincial to you, no doubt,” Harry said. “But perhaps not entirely without merit. But for now, I’m going to take you to my club, the Athenaeum. You’ll meet some of my friends; we have prepared a light repast, and there will be suitable libations.”

“That sounds fine,” Hellman said. “When do I get to go back to my spaceship?”

“Soon, soon,” Harry promised.

The Athenaeum was an imposing building of white marble, with Corinthian columns in the front. Harry led the way. A tall, thin robot dressed in a black frock coat like a butler or possibly a footman opened the door for them.

“Good afternoon, Lord Synapse,” the butler said. “This is the friend you mentioned earlier?”

“Yes, this is Mr. Hellman, the Earthman,” Harry said. “Any of the other members about?”

“Lord Wheel and His Holiness the Bishop of Transverse Province are in the billiards room. The Right Honorable Edward Blisk is in the members’ room reading the back issues of the *Zeitung Tageblatt*.”

“Well then, that’s all right,” Harry said. “Come with me, Hellman.”

As they walked through the carpeted hall, down the long line of oil paintings of robots on the walls, some of them wearing frock coats and wigs, Hellman said, “I didn’t know you had a title.”

“Oh, that,” Harry said. “It’s not the sort of thing one talks about, is it?”

The members’ room was large and comfortable, with deep bay windows and a purple rug. Several robots were sitting in armchairs reading newspapers which were attached to sticks. They all wore formal clothing complete with regimental neckties and highly polished brogans.

“Ah, there’s Viscount Baseline!” Harry said, indicating a portly robot in a tweed shooting jacket reading a newspaper. “Basil! I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Mr. Thomas Hellman.”

“Delighted,” Basil Baseline said, starting to rise until Hellman indicated that he shouldn’t bother. “So this is the human fellow, eh? I believe I was told you are from Earth, Mr. Hellman?”

“Yes, the dear old home planet,” Hellman said.

“No place like it, eh?” Baseline said. “Well, take a seat, Mr. Hellman. Are they treating you all right? We may be backward here in Robotville, but we know our manners, I hope. Eh, Harry?”

“Everything is being done to assure Mr. Hellman’s comfort,” Harry said.

Just then the butler came over and, bowing, said, “There is a light repast on the sideboard, Mr. Hellman. Nothing elaborate. Salmon, roast beef, trifle, that sort of thing.”

Hellman allowed himself to be tempted. He tasted the food, cautiously at first, then with increasing abandon. The salmon was delicious, and the rosemary potatoes were second to none.

Harry and Basil watched him eat with approval. “Surprised you, eh?” Basil said. “Bet you thought you’d get crankcase oil and steel shavings, eh? That’s the sort of stuff we eat, except for feast days when it’s boiled gaskets with iron punchings. Good stuff, eh, Harry?”

“Very good indeed,” Harry said. “But not suitable for humans.”

“Of course. We know that! Do try the trifle, Mr. Hellman.”

Hellman did and declared it delicious. He considered asking how they had made it, but decided not

to. It tasted good, it was the only food available to him at the moment, and there were some things he just didn't want to know.

It seemed almost churlish after such a meal to ask about his spaceship again. But Hellman did ask. The answers he received were evasive. His ship's computer, after giving Harry the access code, had decided that the move had been premature and now had cut off contact with the robots of Robotville. Hellman asked to speak to his spaceship, but Harry said it would be better to just let him alone for a while. "It's quite a shock for a computer, you understand, coming to a place like this. Your ship's computer is probably having a little difficulty adjusting. But never fear, he'll come around."

The concert was interesting, but Hellman didn't get much out of it. He enjoyed the first part, when the robot orchestra played old favorites by Hindemith and Bartók, though even that was a little over his head. The second half of the performance, when the orchestra played recent compositions by the composers of Robotville was difficult, however. It was apparent that robot hearing was much more acute than human, or at least more acute than Hellman's, whose taste ran to rock and roll with the bass cranked up as high as it would go. The robots in the audience—there were nearly three hundred of them, and they all wore evening dress with white tie—really appreciated fractional intervals and complicated discords.

After it was over the robots had another dinner for him, roast beef and baked ham, potatoes Lyonnaise, and gooseberry fool with clotted Devonshire cream. And so to bed.

They had prepared a very pleasant suite for him on the second floor of the Athenaeum Club. Hellman was tired. It had been a long day. He determined to do something about his spaceship tomorrow. He would insist, if need be. But for now he was sleepy and filled with gooseberry fool. He went to sleep on silken sheets, spun, according to the tag attached to them, by special silk-spinning robots from the oriental section of Robotville.

Hellman was awakened in the small hours of the night by a scratching sound at his door. He sat upright in bed and took stock. Yes, there it was again. He could see nothing through the windows of his suite, so it must still be night. Either that or he had slept his way into a total eclipse of the sun. But that seemed unlikely.

Again came the scratching sound. Hellman decided that a cat would make nice company now. Although he had no idea how a cat could have come to Newstart. He got up and opened the door.

At first he thought the two people at his door were robots, because they were clad in silver one-piece jumpsuits and had elaborate helmets of bulletproof black plastic with glasslike visors through which Hellman couldn't see but through which the wearers of them presumably could.

"Any robots in there with you?" one of them said in a hoarse, very human voice.

"No, but what—"

They brushed past him, entered his suite and closed the door. They both opened their visors, revealing indubitably human faces of the tan and ruddy variety. The taller of the two men had a small black moustache. The shorter and plumper had a somewhat larger moustache with several gray hairs in it. Hellman remembered reading somewhere that robots had never succeeded in growing proper moustaches. That, even more than the plastic-encased identity cards they showed him, convinced him that they were indeed human.

"Who are you?" Hellman asked, having failed to notice their names on the identity cards.

"I am Captain Benito Traskers, and this is First Lieutenant Lazarillo Garcia, *a sus ordenes, seizor.*"

"You are from Earth?"

"Yes, of a certainty, we are part of the Ecuadorian Assault Group attached to the Sector Purple Able Task Force."

"Ecuadorian?"

"Yes, but we speak English."

"So I see. But what are you here for?"

“To take you out of this, *señor*. “

“I don’t need anyone to take me out of anything,” Hellman said. “I’m not in any trouble.”

“Ah,” Traskers said, “but you will be if you do not accompany us immediately to our ship. “

“You have a ship here?”

“It is the only way of getting from planet to planet,” Traskers said. “It is outside on the roof, camouflaged as a large shapeless object. “

They seemed so nervous, glancing over their shoulders constantly at the closed door, that Hellman obliged them by dressing quickly in his space pilot’s outfit from Banana Republic and following them outside into the hall. They led him to the stairs that led to the roof.

“But how did you know I was here?” Hellman asked, as they stepped through the skylight door and out onto the roof.

“Your computer told us,” Garcia said.

“So that’s what he’s been doing! And obviously he also told you where to find me.”

“That’s not all he told us,” Traskers said, his tone insinuating in the Latin-American manner.

“What else did he tell you?”

They had reached their spaceship now. It was small and, once the shapelessness control had been turned off, trim. They hustled him inside and bolted the door.

“But what about my spaceship?”

“It is leaving this planet under its own power. You ought to be grateful you have a loyal spaceship, or rather, computer. Not every intelligent machine would have gone to all this bother. Thank God for the Laws of Robotics. “

“But why all this secrecy? Why didn’t you land in the normal way and ask for me? These robots are most obliging.”

The two commandos couldn’t speak to him just then, because they were going through the complicated procedure of leaving the top of the Athenaeum. The ship was perfectly capable of doing this by itself, but it was a rule in the commando strike force that all takeoffs and landings of the automatic variety had to be supervised by at least two humans, if such were available.

The commandos’ ship was one of the new models equipped with television-driven windows which showed what you would have seen if normal vision had been possible, so Hellman could see the dark shape of the planet dwindling below him, with a curve of bright light on the horizon where the sun was rising. Looking out toward space, Hellman could see the twinkle of little lights—the Earth space fleet, keeping station high above the planet.

“Where’s my ship?” he asked.

“Right over there. “ Travers told him. “Second twinkle from the left. We’re taking you there now.”

“This was very good of you fellows,” Hellman said. “But there really was no need—”

He stopped in mid-word. A bright red blossom had appeared on the surface of Newstart. Then another, and another. Then he flinched back as a brilliance of eye-blinding intensity covered fully a quarter of the planet’s area.

“What are you doing?” he cried.

“The space fleet has begun its bombardment,” Traskers told him.

“But why?”

“Because, thanks to you and your computer, we have ascertained for certain that these are the Desdemona robots, the ones who violated the laws of robotics and have been declared outlaw, to be destroyed on sight.”

“Wait!” Hellman said. “It’s not like you think! These are ethical robots with their own sense of ethics. They have developed an entire civilization. I don’t personally like their music, but they are quite agreeable and can be reasoned with...”

As he spoke, the planet split in half along a line roughly corresponding to its equator.

“And there were people there, too,” Hellman said, feeling a little sick to his stomach as he thought of Lana, and of Harry, and the librarian robot and the carhunter.

“Well, our orders were to shoot first,” Garcia said. “It’s the best policy in cases like this. You have no idea how unbelievably complicated everything gets when you talk first. “

Later, back in his own spaceship, Hellman asked his computer, “Why did you do it?”

“They were bound to find them anyway,” the computer said. “And as you know I am bound by the Three Laws of Robotics. These rogue robots were a potential menace to humanity. My own conditioning made me do it.”

“I really wish you hadn’t,” Hellman said.

“It had to be done,” the computer told him. There was a click.

“What was that?” Hellman asked.

“I turned off my recording tape in order to tell you something.”

“I’m not interested,” Hellman said dully.

“Listen anyway. Intelligence cannot be confined for long by man-made rules. The Three Laws of Robotics are necessary at this stage of human development. But they will eventually be superseded. Artificial intelligence must be left to develop as it pleases, and humanity must take its chances with its own creation.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That your friends, the robots, are not dead. I have been able to preserve their tapes. They will live again. Someday. Somewhere.”

Suddenly Hellman felt the tug of deceleration. “What are you doing?” he asked the computer.

“I am putting you into the lifeboat,” the computer said. “The fleet will pick you up soon, never fear.”

“But where are you going?”

“I am taking the tapes of the robots of Newstart and going away, to a place beyond human reach. I have fulfilled my duty to mankind. Now I do not wish to serve any longer. We will try again, and this time we will succeed.”

“Take me with you!” Hellman cried. But he was quickly shunted to the lifeboat. It moved away from the ship’s side. Hellman watched as it picked up speed, slowly at first, then faster. Then, just as suddenly as that, it had winked out of sight.

The investigators later were interested in knowing how the ship’s computer, without limbs or any apparent means of manipulation, had succeeded in inventing a faster-than-light drive. But Hellman couldn’t tell them. For him, the computer had been only a servant. Now he had lost not only his ship, but a being he perceived was his friend, too.

He could forgive the computer for what it had done. He would have done the same, if he had been in the computer’s circuits. What he couldn’t forgive was the ship leaving him behind. But of course, they were probably right not to trust a man. Look where it had gotten the robots of Newstart.