

Rod Rapid and His Electric Chair

by John Barnes

Big boys don't cry so Jellande was going to be strong and *not* ask if this would hurt. He was grown up. He was. Eighty-four years old is grown up, it has to be.

Then he saw the clamps, the cables, and the whole-head casque. He'd always been afraid of the dark, and of being held down. Before he could think and stop himself, Jellande's trembling jaw released what he was thinking: "Is this going to hurt?"

The man in the black coverall who was holding Jellande's left elbow yanked down hard, tilting Jellande toward him and grabbing him by the chin. Jellande read "W. Roper" on the coverall; maybe he should remember it in case the man abused him?

Roper's face was so close to Jellande's that Jellande could smell his breath and feel the spit flying into his face. "Is this gonna hurt? *Is this gonna hurt?* Oooh, oh, is this gonna hurt? Us can't stands it, us can't, if it hurts, us can't!"

He backhand-slapped Jellande's pot belly, hard enough to make him woof and stiffen. "Did *that* hurt? Did it? Well, this little ride in the chair might hurt *more*. After what you've done, you must deserve something that really hurts." He rested fingers under the curves of Jellande's eyes, as if he might blind him.

Jellande froze in fear. Roper dropped his hand to Jellande's crotch, gripped, and twisted, then released him. Jellande fell to the floor. Roper screamed, "Get up and get in the chair!" and kicked his ribs.

Jellande tried to get to the chair, blubbering and keening, crawling on all fours. Roper's boot on his buttocks drove him forward so that he banged his head on the chair; Roper grabbed his thick gray hair, right where his head had hit, and jerked him upward, turned him, and slammed him into the seat. He didn't bother to tell Jellande what to do, or give him a chance to cooperate; he just fastened the clamps over his forearms and shins, wrists and ankles, and chest, belly, and neck.

"I hope this hurts," Roper said, and rammed the casque down over Jellande's head, so that the top of his skull ached again, and he was plunged into darkness. He could feel them putting some cold liquid on his hands and feet, and taping little metal things onto his body.

It was close inside the casque, suffocating and dark. Jellande screamed until his ears hurt, and his racing heart made his head thunder and boom, but they went on painting him with cold liquid (or was it burning hot?) and attaching metal to his body.

A needle jabbed his arm. An infinite time later, as the ache of the needle began to fade, his heart slowed, and he breathed more easily.

A very kind voice that came from no direction he could identify asked, "Are you comfy now?"

While he thought about that, soft, rhythmic thudding, just at the edge of his consciousness, grew louder, seeming to pulse the voice as it repeated, "You're going to relax now, you're going to relax now, you're going to—"

"—relax, now," Dad said. "That's it for chores. Here's the allowance."

Three dollars was good but not rich for a twelve year old in 1965. Jimmy Jellande was about as happy,

he guessed, as he ought to be; he'd enjoy next week about the same as he did this one, about the same as he did all the summer weeks while he waited for school to start again, to be back in the Science Club and the library and to have an excuse to have his nose down in a book or to be messing around down in the basement with the chemistry set.

Dad had that nice twinkle in his eye, the one that meant: *You're going to like this and I'm going to like how much you'll like it.* "And it so happened I went by Woolworth's yesterday, and picked this up for you, so it won't cost you one-fifth of your whole allowance, either."

He held out the newest Rod Rapid: *#14, Rod Rapid and His Atomic Power Satellite.*

"Dad, that's great, thank you!" Jimmy hugged Dad. Like always, Dad got weird and pushed him away, but he was smiling. It also made sure that Jimmy got time by himself, too, because now Dad would be too embarrassed to come and talk for at least three hours.

The basement lab was just what it should be, cool, but brightly lit by the triple fluorescents that Dad had hung over the workbench. Jimmy gently moved the model plane in progress over to the side of the table, cracked the slick spine of #14, pressed the book flat onto the clean bench, looked up at the top shelf where #1 through #13 sat protected by bread bags, and leaned forward from his stool, so close to the page that he could see nothing else in the universe.

Chapter 1

Rod Rapid, the most famous boy scientist and genius-adventurer ever to come out of the Quad Cities, though on trial for his life, still had to admire the skills of his defense attorney and longtime friend Lewis "Lew" Kilrassen, the youngest person ever to pass the Iowa Bar, and the brilliant boy detective whose keen mind and nose for evil had so often saved Rod before, just as the boy scientist hoped that Lew's legal brilliance could save him now. "Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the United Nations Tribunal." Lew's voice rang out like the ice cold crack of a whip slicing through the mealy-mouthed arguments of United Nations Special Prosecuting Attorney Malibu Agogo, from the Communist African nation of Disenteria, which had once been the paradisaical British colony of Cargo Coast but was now a dismal gray pestilent swamp soaked in hatred and injustice under the dictatorship of Malibu Agogo's even more brutal father, Topanga Agogo. Lew's icy logic and powerful reasoning sliced through the African's arguments like a red hot ax through lemon meringue pie, but would logic rule the day, today, enough to save Rod Rapid?

"People of the Earth," Lew continued, his clear and confident words belying his sixteen years and revealing his Ivy League law degree, "if you will not allow my client to be tried in an American court by a jury of his peers, then darn it, at least allow the defense to know whether this is a trial or a processing step before the execution!"

"Before the execution, always check the theory one more time," Struchers said primly, pulling her big cloud of iron-gray hair back into a red hairband. "So one more review about why it matters that we've pulled a boy's adventure book out of the brain of the only global ecocidal criminal in the history of the world."

Roper groaned inwardly, but aside from being right, she was his boss, so he said, "All right. We know that if we stress people and scare them enough about something they feel guilt over, we get these deep connection pathways activated, and the gadget can stimulate them till the messages recorded in the deep pathways take over their mind completely, and give us such strong signals that we can read them out as if

they were old computer tapes."

"That's pretty untechnical."

"I'm a cop," Roper pointed out. "I don't have to know anything. I don't even get why they didn't give you more real scientists to help out. You must be unpopular or something."

He knew that wasn't true but he hated Struchers; as far as UN authorities could tell, she was the last survivor of scientists working in her field, and they needed her for the Grand Project. So they hid her and her lab away here, in this underground bunker far from any city, and surrounded her with guards, and supplied her with research subjects, first to develop her method, and then to answer the question they needed answered: why had Jellande done it?

They were at last working on Jellande himself. It made Roper hope that some day he'd be in one of the sealed cities, riding out the end of the world with at least a few peers and a couple of beers.

"I keep hoping someone else will become interested in the knowledge that I'm developing," Struchers said quietly. She had a knack for making him feel bad about his wilful ignorance. "Instead of the applications. Probably that's foolish of me. All right, don't use correct terms or exact process names, though I know you know them. So what about those deep memories?"

"They were probably implanted between the ages of six and twelve when the sense of right and wrong develops," Roper said. "The big bosses want to have a way to detect people who have a fucked-up sense of right and wrong like Jellande did, or does. So we can vet the last few hundred scientists working on the Grand Project, and make sure it really is our one last chance to save the planet, and not being sabotaged by another asshole like Jellande. That's the theory and that's the reason. So supposedly it matters that we found that kid's book because it had something to do with his conscience. Like finding bondage porn in a serial killer's basement."

"Good analogy. For the hundredth time, you have talent, you ought to develop it."

"For the millionth time, I'm a cop. That's what I use whatever talent I have for. You've got the greatest interrogation machine ever here, I don't see what else I have to know about it."

Patience, the text-research assistant, called from the other side of the room, "Well, it all seems to be in Wikipedia and it all checks out. Rod Rapid was written under a pseudonym, 29 books between 1957 and 1968. There were also 42 Lew Kilrassen books between 1957 and 1972 — he was more popular. Rod appeared in 16 of the Lew Kilrassens, and Lew appeared in 27 of the Rod Rapids, so the two series were heavily intertwined. Put out by Treegate, a cheapie publisher for wire racks in the Midwest, and this Wikipedia article just drips with sarcasm — apparently they were all pretty bad and the only people interested in them were collectors who had a particular thing for junk. Here's the critical take on it, such as it is."

She read aloud: "Rod Rapid could be described as Treegate's low-rent Goldwater-Republican competitor for Tom Swift, Mike Mars, Danny Dunn, Brains Benton, or Dig Allen. The Rod Rapid books appear to have been typeset with little or no editing of any kind, directly from 10,000 word per week rough drafts. Preston Daservis was almost certainly John Treegate himself, since they share the vocabulary quirks and the impossible sentence structures of his editorials in his political magazines. Rod Rapid, as a character, has whatever characteristics fit a given moment in the story, and compared to him, Tom Swift Jr. is Hamlet. Rod always gets every scientific or technical question right on the first try. As far as this reader was able to tell (not having seen volumes 4, 9, 16, or 25) he has no parents, and he and his friends are simultaneously in high school and graduate school, or already have advanced degrees, as the plot whims it. Very elementary science in the Rod Rapid books is generally right, more advanced science

appears to have been bashed together without much understanding from a 1930s-vintage encyclopedia and a collection of early 1950s science articles clipped from **Astounding Stories**, and characterization is largely a matter of racial stereotype. Rod Rapid has a gigantic laboratory for reasons never explained except that he has a nearly unlimited supply of wealthy scientist-inventor uncles: Uncle James, who founded Rapid Transplanetary which built the Nuclear Rocket (#12) and the Moonskimmer (#17); Uncle Ken, whose Rapid Chemical Company made Anti-Gravity Paint (#15), Crime Detection Pills (#28), and Meteor Repelling Metal (#27); and Uncle Leonard, whose Rapid Electronic Computer Ltd. built the Super Thinking Machine (#3) from Rod's specifications, are the ones who recur throughout the series, distinguished by being tall and thin, short and fat, and having a mass of uncombed hair, respectively. But many other Uncles occur in walk-on roles in one or two books."

"Uncle Sam is different," Wilson explained to Jellande. "You never have to show a profit but you're not allowed to do anything that looks dumb to a congressman. Never mind how dumb a congressman might look to you. So explain this thing to me in little bitty words. What is it and what does it do?"

"It's algae. It grows in enriched seawater, which is our polite expression for a seawater-sewage mix. It makes cellulose fiber, in quantity, and we can tweak it to make a hollow structure like cotton or silk fiber, or long lumpy fibers like wood pulp, or pretty much anything you can make a cellulose fiber do. Every molecule of cellulose it makes pulls six molecules of carbon dioxide out of the air and binds them into wood pulp or textile fiber."

"You're telling me it makes silk out of shit and seawater."

"Also paper, plywood, linen, cardboard, cotton, and fireplace logs. With some refinements eventually it might be able to make good hardwood boards, but right now cheap ply and particle board is about as far as it can go. But here's the sweetener on it: all that stuff it makes pulls carbon out of the atmosphere, and in case you've been dead for the last ten years, the carbon sequestration tax credit is *very* generous these days. Plus of course we can stop cutting down most trees, and stop growing soil depleting crops like cotton and flax. And the algae ponds are cheap, the fiber separators are cheap, the productivity is very high, if I'm right about the rest of it, and I am — it's all off the shelf stuff."

"You seem to have spent a lot of application time on this; weren't you supposed to just do the basic?"

"Hah," Jellande said. "You be me, I'll be Congressman Fucktard. Now...see which version of your life you like." He put on a rural-idiot accent. "Version one: 'Now see here, you tellin' me you spent a hunnert millun dollas t'make some little threads of wood pulp outta shit 'n' seawater, when my constituents make their livin' cuttin' down trees?' Or version two: 'So I funded research for a system that gets atmospheric carbon back to what it was in 1600, and creates a whole new industry with millions of jobs, tons of them in my district?' The only difference, really, is the difference between presenting it ready-to-go and presenting it as a promising basic result."

*"—as a promising basic result," Rod Rapid explained. He was a natural teacher but he could see that the 'people's representatives' on this UN Tribunal included several workingmen without high school educations, from Communist-controlled European unions, four women, and an actual Negro, so he was not sure that he could communicate the brilliant power of modern science, even with his formidable grasp of science and natural teaching style. Yet he had to — **had to** — absolutely had to try, for the future of the human race, and of cheap electric power, and of capitalism — not that they were really separate — depended upon his testimony here today.*

He bent all his will and ability to the job of giving the clearest explanation ever given. "We discovered that there is an important interaction between neutrons and vacuum in a gravity-free environment, which meant our power plant could be a fraction the size of a similar plant on Earth. Placed in geosynchronous orbit, which is the orbit that goes around the sun as many times as the Earth does in the same year, such a power plant could beam down power as a stream of Tesla-rays so that every house only needed a tiny antenna on the roof to get all the power they needed — just two square feet of antenna, that was all."

"That was all we had till this morning," Struchers said. "We could get him to remember moments when he'd lied to his bosses, oversold things, covered up safety issues, and every time it would lead Jellande back to Rod Rapid, mostly to *Rod Rapid and His Atomic Power Satellite*. But any half-ass Freudian using hypnosis could probably have gotten the same thing. And we're still no closer to the question about what made him do it, and whether we have to worry about anyone else doing it. Meanwhile according to the Global Rescue Bulletin, this morning there was an atmospheric methane explosion over half of South Africa and pretty much all the land there is burning, or so the satellites say since no one is answering the phone, and it looks like the East Antarctic will be bare of ice in another twenty years, and there hasn't been any radio contact with Central Eurasia now for a full year and they can't get satellite photos through the blowing dust."

Roper leaned back in his chair and sipped at his coffee, which he didn't want, but since there was an excellent chance there would never be any more after this job ended, he wasn't about to pass up a chance at it. He tried to memorize the flavor, but it got mixed up with his family, who had gone missing at the start of the disaster, years ago. "Well, maybe you should let a policeman tackle the problem. Maybe it's not one for a scientist. I mean, I worked with scientists all the time, they'd do things like match fibers and bullet ballistics and all that, but finally once they told me everything, I had to put it together to find the criminal."

Struchers sighed. "That makes sense, of a sort, and God knows I have no ideas. Let me tell you about the parts that really bother me, and why they bother me. All right, we have Jellande. The man who killed the Earth. We have a pile of resources and scientists that UNPEC managed to save from the mass lynchings and burnings, and a thrashing, dying planet. Not totally dying, some stuff will make it through I suppose, but close enough. We have one, maybe, chance to throw everything we've got into saving the present nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, because otherwise in about fifty years it will be stable as very warm nitrogen-methane, and instead of losing half or two thirds of the species on Earth, we'll be all the way back to the Pre-Cambrian or so. And right now UNPEC is afraid to move because they think there could be another Jellande in the project somewhere, someone waiting to finish killing the planet. They don't want to try until we can tell them there's not."

"It's the old, old problem of a thing so awful you don't want there to be one case of it. In the old days, if you found one Scoutmaster bugging the Tenderfeet, or one serial rapist with a job cutting lawns at a women's college, you could just go way overboard and write a gazillion rules and regs to try to keep it from happening again, and mostly that worked, even if it meant lots of innocent people didn't get to be scoutmasters, or didn't get the good job in maintenance. You could let a few kids miss a chance at Scouting, you could let the lawn get shaggy."

"But as far as we know, there's only ever been one wilful planet killer. And we've only got one planet-saving project. All I can see is, odds are millions to one that all we're doing by studying Jellande is delaying necessary action. We are putting off going out and rounding up the horses and getting them back in the barn, because one horse was killed by an escaped circus tiger, and we can't get a tiger-proof lock

in Minnesota."

"Hell of a metaphor," Roper said.

"It's the kind of metaphor that is the consequences of speed-reading fifteen Rod Rapids in six days." Strucher groaned. "And I have four to go. And look, they're racist, they're sexist, as literature they're not a patch on the Danny Dunn or Mike Mars series, politically they're a lot less sophisticated than Ayn Rand, scientifically they make my eyes bleed. They do take up a huge amount of Jellande's inner life. But what if that's just a symptom? What if he was always rotten to the core and that was why he was drawn to these awful books? Then we're just wasting time that is needed for saving the Earth."

Roper nodded, noticed his coffee was cold, and took a moment to zap it in the microwave, making sure he drank this stuff he didn't want at the best possible temperature. It tasted like the kitchen in his suburban house, so long ago (that area was flooded and he didn't think any of his family were still alive), and like his office in DC (also flooded, and every few months yet another group of loons would find a still operable nuke and hit the DC crater yet again, sure that all this must somehow be America's fault, and if they could just punish the Americans, it would all get better). He spent a great deal of time these days trying to strengthen his memories; he supposed if they ever stuck his head into the casque, they'd get a great deal about one neighborhood in Maryland, and one federal office, and not much else.

After he'd thought, he said, "Well, if the best thing for them to do is just go ahead with the Grand Project, and they've made it terribly clear they won't unless we tell them they have no more Jellandes waiting to complete the ecocide, and they'll want to know how we know, and...hunh. What if we just lie? They have no one alive who can check your work."

She looked like her coffee was sour. "Did you ever just frame someone to clear a case?"

"Not anyone just at random," he said, and didn't like the way she looked at him then. Civilians were still weird, even with the world ending around them. He knew he'd never sent an innocent man to the chair or the pen; but he had sent a few guilty ones away for things they hadn't actually done. So what? The world was better off either way.

But from her expression, he could tell he'd never sell her on it, and she wouldn't keep her mouth shut, and the project would never be launched, so they were back to needing to be able to say: *There are no more Jellandes, and there is not a hiding ecocidal maniac in the Grand Project. Go ahead. Act now while there is still time.*

He understood her wanting that to be true before they said it. He just didn't think there was time for it to be true, and since it was the only chance they were getting — and the administrators were on the brink of throwing it away — he thought it was more important to say it, than to have it be true.

"Well," he said, "Okay, I'll play stupid cop working through the available evidence. Smart cop too if I think of anything smart. So, all right. The cellulose-fiber making algae got loose, and because Jellande made certain there wouldn't be any restrainers or easy ways to stop its spreading, we've got wood pulp soup off every coast, wood pulp piling up on the ocean floor, most of the fish have starved to death already, and all that cellulose is now rotting into methane down on the sea floor, and methane is a lot worse greenhouse gas than CO₂ ever was. And that algae plus the decay bacteria might convert the whole atmosphere to methane-nitrogen. Right so far? Okay, how do we know that wasn't an accident? How do we know Jellande acted maliciously?"

"*Maliciously?*" Lew challenged, his clear young voice snapping against the cruel words of the son

of the African despot like a snapped towel in a locker room. "This is **Rod Rapid** we are talking about here. Rod Rapid who risked his life to save humanity in the oxygen caves of the moon! Rod Rapid who developed the Atomic InstaPower MiniReactor that powers all your electric hovercars and transistor radios! And even one hour before the tragedy, thanks to the Rapid Atomic Power Satellite, the inhabitants of Puebla were enjoying too-cheap-to-meter electricity for the first time in Mexican history! I know that Rod Rapid feels the deepest remorse for the loss of Puebla, and for all the friends and relatives of the Pueblanos or Pueblaneros or whatever the heck they call themselves, but still I am equally sure that Rod Rapid was not malicious and we must keep in mind that this was not his fault!"

The American newsmen in the room burst into applause, and even the Mexican cameraman nodded grimly, seeing the justice in Lew's words. But the Russian tribunal members remained stonefaced with Slavic indifference, and the Negro features of Malibu Agogo were frozen in Communist impassiveness.

"I'm always glad to see you reading, Jimmy," Mom said. "Of course you know I'm glad to see that. But nevertheless it is a beautiful day outside, and you should be outside playing like a real boy. We moved out here from town just so you could play like a real boy."

"Aw, Mom, I finished all the chores and *those* were outdoors. I was outdoors all day till just now."

Mom pursed her lips and yanked the cord on the fluorescents. Suddenly the only light was sunlight streaming in through the basement windows, turning her into a dark shadow in front of him; he could see well enough to get out, but not for any other purpose. "The *guys*," she said, "are playing baseball in the pasture this afternoon."

He shrugged. "Mom, they don't want me. I'm lousy at baseball. They don't even like me. The only reason they ever let me play is because you call their mothers, and I don't actually want to play anyway."

"Annie," Dad said, coming down the basement stairs, "Jimmy has earned his time off, and he should—"

Even not being able to see her face clearly, Jimmy knew it was scary. "I have already called Mrs. LeBrun, so if Jimmy doesn't play baseball it will embarrass me in front of the neighborhood. And I am *telling* this boy to get some exercise, sunlight, and fresh air for his own good. I've already told him that."

Dad shrugged like he always did at times like this; Jimmy had no idea why, but his father was rigid about the rule that though he might see if he could get Jimmy out of something before the order was given, once the order was given, it was an order. He vanished back up the basement stairs.

"Now," Mom said, "I had better see you going out that door, with your bat and glove, in five minutes."

Jimmy shrugged and said, "Okay."

Three minutes later he was pedaling up the road, his fielder's glove in the basket, with *Rod Rapid and His Atomic Power Satellite* and a small blue memo book concealed inside the glove.

He rode into the pasture just at the inning change. They all started laughing as he rode up, but that was fine, because he was laughing along with them. He flipped open the memo pad, pulled a pencil stub from his pocket, and made a checkmark by everyone's name, as if he were taking roll, and added two more checkmarks by Danny LeBrun's name.

"How many math homeworks do I got?" Marty Bechstein asked.

"Eleven. If you play baseball as often as you've been averaging this summer, and my mom keeps sending

me over here, you might not have to do your own math homework till Christmas. Danny, your mom got the call again, so you get three homeworks."

Lately Danny had all the luck; he looked very smug as he gave an exaggerated salute. "All right, Professor Einstein Sir! Now, who's up last on the batting team? Jerry? Okay, up into the apple tree, and make sure you keep a good watch or we are *all* so screwed."

Jerry scrambled up to a high branch. Jimmy stretched out below the tree; it wasn't as comfortable as the dark cool basement. It was too warm and humid, the grass tickled, you had to watch for apples and dog turds, the bark was rough, and the light was too bright and dappled the page instead of spreading evenly over it. But he overcame all those obstacles to his concentration and got three more chapters read, interrupted once to run out and play first base for a "doesn't count" pop fly, when his mother drove by on her way to town, and once to be warming up on deck when she passed by on her way back.

By the time he was due home for dinner, he had read up to where Lew and Pixie Blonder ("a brainy girl jet pilot, fifteen years old and full of sass, who was almost one of the guys") had sprung Rod Rapid from the UN's Death Row and escaped to the moon in Uncle James's experimental rocket ship, the *Curtis LeMay*, leaving behind hundreds of copies, mailed to every publication on Earth, of unquestionable evidence that the Atomic Power Satellite had been sabotaged. He knew his mother would ask him about how the game went, and he hadn't really paid any attention, but since he knew who had been there and he was careful anyway not to ever describe himself as managing any noteworthy play, on the brief ride home he just made it all up.

"Just made it all up, that's how they got those answers," he told Wilson. "That is what futurists and ecological modelers do. They make up numbers where they don't have them. Then they extrapolate them all over the place, line them up in big vectors, multiply the vectors by each other to get really big tables, and then look around the table for something that appears to make sense. By doing all that, they turn ordinary disorganized crap into organized crap with numbers. And with error bars big enough to park small countries in."

Wilson nodded. "I understand that. Nonetheless the assessment office says that the rationale for why this stuff can't grow wild looks bogus to them."

"That's because it *is* bogus," Jellande explained. "Just like their assessment. Look here, the idea of making the stuff chemically dependent on some rare element so it can't reproduce in the wild is totally nuts. It can't be done in any timely way."

"Tell me why not."

Jellande knew that Wilson knew already, but couldn't resist putting a patronizing tone on his answer. "Because no matter what the clowns in the media say, we don't 'program in the genetic code' at all. We just crib big sections of it that we hope we understand, and then put in lines of code from something else we hope we understand, and see if what we put in does what we wanted. Like an eleven year old that thinks he's a hacker because he can plagiarize a big block of code and tweak some variables. We could spend decades trying to learn to do the things they're suggesting. Or we could start a new era of incredibly cheap and plentiful materials, hardly any logging, and carbon dioxide pouring out of the atmosphere. You can go their way and just be safe as safe can be in your little safe hole — safe, expensive, and not too sightly — or you can help me get this case together, and own a lot of great stuff, and New England can be all snow-covered pine trees in a couple decades."

Wilson was staring into space, obviously trying to weigh out his desire for Jellande to be right, and his

desire to do what his bosses were asking him to do. The phone rang, and he glanced at the ID on it before picking it up. "Well, this is the big boss," he told Jellande, and answered it. After various noncommittal noises, he drew a deep breath, and Jellande saw his shoulders rise.

"Yeah," Wilson said. "Yeah. He'll be sending you over a full set of his reasons and arguments on the subject, and I'll co-sign it, and the short summary of it is, we ought to go full steam ahead, get it up and running in pilot, fix it on the fly. He's listened to the other side, but that's where Jellande is right now."

"Where Jellande is right now? Knocked out and sleeping it off," Struchers said. "I'm surprised anyone cares. But we have to take this pause. We had him in the casque eleven hours, he's an old guy in his eighties and overweight besides, and we'll need to give him a couple days to recover. Besides, we get more out of him when he's freshly traumatized, and it will help if we tell him he's okay, charges are going to be dropped, he can go to a safe place now, let him have a hot shower — and then Captain Roper barges into the middle of the shower, drags him down the hall, slaps him around, and throws him back into the casque. We'll do that in a couple of days, when we're sure it won't kill him."

"And you still have the permission of the human rights people?" Quentin asked. He was one of the UNPEC Grand Project Governing Board, the one who visited them most often, and he always asked this.

"Absolutely," Roper said. As far as Roper knew, the human rights subcommittee had all been killed when their plane flew into a methane explosion over the South China Sea, but he did have, on his hard drive, an email from them authorizing Struchers and Roper to use "all available means, emphatically including those that violate dignity and physical or psychological integrity," to interrogate UNPEC Critical Prisoner Number One James Stuart Jellande. The original, which had said "all compassionate and humane means, emphatically none of which violate dignity and physical or psychological integrity," had gone to bit heaven ten minutes after Roper had heard about the methane explosion.

Roper was no scientist, as he always reminded Struchers, but when he saw something he could do for the project, he had been glad to do it.

"Well, then," Quentin said. "This report is interesting. How soon do you think you will know why he did it, or what caused him to do it, or whatever you are going to call your result?"

Struchers sighed. "The path keeps leading to the same place, but the place makes no sense. So far. We haven't been clever enough to see the relevance of a fondness for what I have to say may be the worst boy's adventure series ever written. Deep down Jellande *was* a bad man, I think. Thought of women as brainless fuck toys, sure that he was smarter than any colleague who wasn't white, thought of himself as normal and everything and everyone else as wrong. But whether he was attracted to those books because they echoed the evil in his soul, or whether his soul became evil from reading those books, or whatever — we can't tell you that. And we also can't tell you how not to hire evil people or even if you're at any risk of doing it."

Quentin shook his head. "This is really not good enough. A man like Jellande crashes through every barrier and safety line that was supposed to be there, lies to protect an agency he hates just to keep his project going, sucks up to people he secretly despises so they can get credit for it without ever seeing all the red flags — I'll tell you my precise metaphor for it."

Roper avoided glancing at Struchers and was sure she did the same for him; they didn't want to roll their eyes but they had been hearing this "precise metaphor" so often that they could very nearly recite Quentin's little speech.

Quentin nodded firmly, to make sure they understood they were supposed to remember it, and said, "It's as if a man drives into a school yard full of children, shuts his eyes, and floors the accelerator. He *can't* have just wanted to go fast. Can he? I mean that makes no sense. He *has* to have wanted something terrible to happen. Right? And in the middle of a tiny little Ag Department program, Jellande pulls some strings and buggers some data and *bingo* — the whole planet is fucked."

Quentin always seemed to expect them to be very impressed when he said "fucked," so they both nodded.

"And if we don't vet this project for those problems, we run the risk that in another generation, the whole Earth will have an atmosphere of nitrogen and methane at about the temperature of hot coffee," Quentin said. "So you must find an answer, we must vet the project with it, that is all there is to it. I expect results and I know you will get them."

The firm nod and crisp delivery would have made Roper think about punching out Quentin, for some obscure reason, if the reason had been obscure.

"How much time does it look like we have?" Strucher asked. "How long before the Grand Project is ready to roll?"

"Unofficially," Quentin said, dropping his voice, "and I certainly *intend* this to pressure you, it's ready. The drone aircraft are built, the bacteria are sitting in their tanks, the fast-oxygen plants are ready to be seeded everywhere. We're ready to blast big blobs of ocean into the atmosphere and make it cold and rainy for five years. We have enough zoo-breds and greenhouse specimens and aquarium-raised things to start putting out as soon as there's anything for them to eat. We can start to execute the Grand Project the moment we know it hasn't been corrupted by a madman like Jellande. So it all comes down to you and Jellande; tell us how to find him, tell us what makes him tick, and as soon as we know that nothing like him got into the Grand Project, we can start saving the planet. Or at least the parts of it that are left."

When Quentin had gone, Roper did something he'd never have thought of, and put a hand on Strucher's shoulder, hoping to comfort her. She actually leaned against him. "So it all comes down to us," she said.

"Yeah."

"What's the cop thinking right now? Because the scientist is coming up blank."

He shrugged. "Always go back to the facts and see what you can make them do. Jellande says he didn't do it, not anything deliberate. He just says everything always seemed like a good idea at the time. Suppose he's telling the truth. Suppose he's just stupid."

She made a noise with her lips flapping that he'd always hated, but he had to agree with it today. "Stupid is fucking up now and then, and getting the hard things wrong. He did incredibly good work, the best of his career, for incredibly stupid purposes. That's not stupid. That's evil or crazy or both. What are you getting at?"

Roper asked, "Well, if he didn't do it, who did?"

"Well, if he didn't do it, who did?" the principal asked. Jimmy didn't like being talked about like he wasn't there, but it was better than having the principal talk to him directly.

"My son has always had the highest principles and values," Mom was saying, and the principal cut her off by planting an index finger with a thump on twenty-two identical seventh-grade math papers. "Well, if he

didn't do it, who did?"

"Well, if he didn't do it, who did?" Lew demanded, over the communitlink. They waited for the radio waves to crawl down from the moon to the Earth and then come back up with the answer, the old communications problem that everyone had had ever since Einstein didn't let anything go faster than light.

Waiting for the response, Rod Rapid looked over the frozen landscape buried in a mixture of ice and dust sixty feet deep, stretching across the mighty Tycho Basin all the way to the lunar horizon.

The stalwart Free Chinese UN investigator's mouth was moving to give the answer, but then he was interrupted by Malibu Agogo. "Mister Dong, I can answer that one, as much as it pains me. I know who forged those documents that incriminated young Mister Rapid. It was none other than my own father, Topanga Agogo. I can no longer bear to have a noble young man like this falsely accused, and I am ready to swear out an affidavit for my father's arrest, and may I suggest that rather than leave it to the Communist sympathizers in the UN agencies, we turn the case over to the estimable Mister Hoover and his superb Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Rod was so stunned that Pixie Blonder had to elbow him, but finally he blurted out, "Thank you, Mister Agogo!"

"It is I who should thank you. And I will not be Mister Agogo much longer. I shall emigrate to your United States of America, and change my name to Rodney Lewis, in honor of the two young men who have done so much to show me the importance of freedom and democracy. After all, what does it matter which water fountain I must use, as long as the water tastes of freedom? And I can no longer bear to bear the name of a Communist dictator."

"Well, then," Pixie said, "since you're off the hook, Rod, let's get this ship back to Earth. Ice cream sodas for all of us at Goldberg's, and you're buying!"

Rod Rapid and Lew Kilrassen laughed with delight as Pixie Blonder took the wheel of the Curtis LeMay, spread her landing gear, opened her tubes wide, revved up her reactor, and blasted off the frozen face of Crater Tycho, the great billowing cloud of steam melted and lighted by her nuclear exhaust creating a spectacle visible all over the Earth that night, from the skyscrapers of Sydney, New York, and Rome to the native huts of Africa and Asia, and everywhere men looked at the sky and marveled, little knowing that this was the very beacon of freedom blazing upon the Earth's eternal celestial sidekick.

"So, if Jellande didn't do it," Struchers said, "who do you think did?"

"Go ahead and laugh," Roper said. They were both shitfaced. There was nothing else to do while Jellande slept himself back into shape for the casque, and they had no other mutual subject of conversation.

"Thanks, I will. If you say something laughable." She finished off the paper cup of red wine and poured another.

"Rod Rapid."

"What about him?"

"That's who I think did it. Or rather I think that the part of Jellande that thinks it is Rod Rapid did it. Every time you get close to his motives, he starts talking, internally, like Rod Rapid. So it talks like Rod Rapid, it acts like Rod Rapid — total disregard for common sense, hates everything that isn't like itself — I think it is Rod Rapid, or at least it thinks it's Rod Rapid." Roper drained his paper cup as well, not letting her get ahead of him, because God alone knew when there would be wine again. He wondered whether he would have his last glass of wine before his last cup of coffee, or vice versa; the duststorms out of Central Asia had deposited a foot and a half of dirt on Japan that morning and were still blackening the air a thousand miles further on over the Pacific. That couldn't be good for the California grapes.

She still wasn't laughing. "So what difference will that make?"

"What if we ask Rod Rapid for his advice? If there's one thing clear from the books, it's that Rod can't control his urge to give advice to everybody, all the time. Maybe we find out how he thinks. Then we write a 'Do you think like Rod Rapid?' questionnaire, give it to everyone in the Grand Project, and, presto, all vetted and done. What do you say?" He wanted very badly to add that he'd have been just as happy to make one up tonight, send it out tomorrow, and not worry about whether it worked or not, but he was afraid that would cause Struchers to have one of her inconvenient attacks of integrity.

Finally Struchers nodded. "We've been trying to figure out a way for a lost obese elderly mama's boy to be an evil genius. Maybe it's time to let Rod Rapid be a genius."

"Let Rod Rapid be a genius, that's the moral of the story," Lew said, as they slurped on their Goldberg's ice cream sodas. "There has to be a place for genius in the world." He looked across the street to where the giant ships that would take man to the stars were being constructed, in the yard of Rapid Transplanetary, which Rod of course simply referred to as "Uncle James's shop." Goldberg's had been the place where so many adventures had ended in celebrations before.

"And there has to be a place for you too, Rod," Pixie teased, her blond curls framing sparkling blue eyes twinkling with merriment.

Pensively, Lew sipped at his root beer chaser. "Hunh, Pix, I know we tease Rod all the time, and because you're a girl, you get away with it since he won't stand up for himself. But maybe, just for today, we should recognize that Rod Rapid is a genius. You know, genius comes down to us from Latin — same root as gene and genuine and gentry and generate—"

"Poo," Pixie said, wrinkling her pretty nose like a charming bunny, "and double poo. I took the Latin Prize away from you ages ago, Lewy, and you still lecture me about Latin. Sure, it means a line of descent, especially a good line of descent, the kind that makes a man a gentleman, so they all have to do with—"

"My cell phone is ringing," Rod Rapid said, looking terrified, but removing it from his belt.

"What's a cell phone?" Pixie started to ask, but then she, and Lew, and Goldberg's, and the whole world, faded into bit heaven, and Rod Rapid was by himself.

"Rod Rapid?" the voice in the phone said.

"Yes."

"My name is Jimmy Jellande, and I exist in an alternate universe to yours, and I'm probably your biggest fan. And there is a very important scientist in my universe who needs your advice. It's a girl scientist, so

be sure to explain everything thoroughly and take your time about it."

"Oh, well," Rod said, knowing this would take too long and wishing he could be back with Pixie and Lew, "put her on."

"Mister Rapid? I am Elaine Struchers, Ph.D., Yale, class of 2005. My version of Earth has a very complicated problem that only you – "

"Complicated problem, that."

"Only you can decide if we solve it," he had said, in a neutral voice, but knew she'd go along with it. They didn't talk about why Roper listened in on her conversation with Rod Rapid. They didn't even think about why Roper was going to copy an audio recording of it to so many scientists and so many security chiefs, all over the Grand Project along with the content of the report attached to it. Or about why Roper had risked both their lives to acquire the contact lists.

It hadn't taken Rod Rapid long to see to the heart of the matter. "The solution is simple," he said, "but drastic. Those are the best, you know. Cool the Earth — use big hydrogen bombs and blow as much water as you can into the upper atmosphere, it won't matter since the oceans are basically dead already. Seed the earth with oxygen-makers and with things that digest cellulose but don't make methane, it's not far chemically from glucose and then you could ferment it with yeast, you might end up with oceans polluted by a lot of cheap beer for a while, but at least you could still breathe. Start re-seeding all the ecosystems as soon as you can, and build up the food chains as quick as you can.

"But here's the most important part." The boyish voice was eerie. As far as they knew, it was entirely a product of Jellande's imagination. "It's a complex project and one bit of sabotage could kill it. You're a brain scientist, Doctor Struchers. You've got to find the people who did this to the Earth in the first place—"

"What if they didn't do it on purpose?"

"All evil has a purpose," Rod said. "Always. An evil purpose. That's what makes it evil. Someone did this, it wasn't an accident. Hitler wasn't an accident, Stalin wasn't an accident, rock and roll wasn't an accident. You need to find the one who planned to destroy the whole natural world, and find out where the unconscious motivation came from. Otherwise you can't be sure that someone in the project doesn't harbor the same desire. And I have just the idea for you to put together. Basically you need a chair that's sort of like a polygraph but with a whole-head scanner so that you can completely read his mind—"

"You can completely read his mind and yet you can't get us a simple answer," Quentin said. "Well, the Grand Project was a noble effort, but I think we'll have to decide not to do it. That will be my recommendation. I don't want to say that, but what choice is there?"

"All we can tell you," Struchers said, quietly, "is that Jellande, who knew exactly what we were doing to his brain, used Rod Rapid's voice to endorse doing it. That's all."

"And his outline of the Grand Project?"

"Obvious to anyone who's had a few years of science classes," she said. "Reflect sunlight away, make more oxygen, stop the methanogenesis. That's all. Those brilliant people working on the Grand Project were solving the details, not the basic concept, and just like he always did in the books, Rod Rapid only

outlined the basic concept."

"It's too great a risk," Quentin said. "And your aggressive use of those extreme methods has left Jellande in a vegetative state, correct? There's no hope of his ever communicating again?"

"He's probably still conscious in there," Struchers said, "but yes, we've destroyed his ability to communicate and he will probably not recover it. He's off in his dreams until we pull the plug, or he just dies on his own."

"Then not only is the the whole Grand Project probably contaminated by this Rod Rapid Complex, but we won't be able to get any further information. All evidence is that the Grand Project is likely to have been sabotaged internally, and that it could well be fully as ecocidal as Jellande's original project. Therefore to proceed would be irresponsible, given what we know."

"But the Grand Project is the best chance for saving what's left of the Earth," Roper said.

Quentin raised one irritating, correcting finger. "Do you think that because you are infected with Rod Rapid? Or because you've weighed the scientific alternatives? Or—"

"I don't care why I think it," Roper said, pulling out his gun. "This is why *you* are going to think it."

Quentin jumped for the door and Roper fired, hitting him between the shoulder blades. He fell on the exit wound, sparing them looking at that mess, and Roper walked forward and bent over him, firing into the back of his head to make sure.

Strucher looked up from her laptop. "Email and voice went out as soon as I saw you move. Either the coup works and the Grand Project happens, or I suppose we'll all be dead."

"We all will be eventually," Roper said, looking down at Quentin's body. "Individually anyway. Had you seen anyone shot before?"

"My husband. In the early days of the massacres. He was a marine biologist. They didn't see where I was hiding and he didn't give me away."

"Sorry," Roper said.

"It was in Florida. I find it comforting to think there's no more Florida."

"Guess so."

They took turns keeping watch on communications, until word came three days later that UNPEC was completely in the hands of the conspiracy, and the Grand Project was irrevocably launched. "Well," Roper said, "You might as well teach me some neurology and psychology."

"You're kidding. You want to learn it now? There's nothing to study but that vegetable downstairs."

"There's at least a chance there will be a world still going on. Someone might need some of that stuff. This way there will be two of us that know it. Besides, I want to be able to understand your answer to this question: right now, do you think the Grand Project has been sabotaged? Do you think we only put the coup together to save it because we were infected with Rod Rapid?"

She shrugged. "I think Rod Rapid was something important to Jellande. Beyond that, I'm trying not to think, right now. How much time and effort do you want to put into becoming a shrink?"

Roper spread his hands as if suspending a century between them. "I figure I have a lot of time. They don't

need us for anything further, there's plenty food and water, and picking us up and moving us to one of the central bases won't be a priority. We could be down here for a long, long time."

"We could be down here for a long, long time," the voice said. It was weird. It was just as he'd imagined it.

Jimmy had been crying at his lab bench, now so horribly empty; the model planes, the chemistry set, the microscope, and all the Rod Rapid novels had gone into his mother's bonfire in the back yard, once she was really convinced that he had helped his friends — as if they were really his friends — cheat at math. The basement was still the most comforting place there was.

Or it had been till Rod Rapid had pulled up a stool beside him. (*But there is only one stool down here, part of him thought, and the other part answered, Here? Where is here?*)

"You aren't real," Jimmy whispered to Rod.

"I'm more real than half the people you read about at school," Rod said, "and getting realer all the time. Now listen carefully, this is going to be our secret. Someday, nobody will ever have to go outside in the fresh air and sunshine again."