



THE SOUL-EMPTY ONES

Walter M. Miller, Jr.

Miller, to my mind, is a writer of exceptional power. He is the author of what may be my all-time favorite story, "Vengeance for Nikolai," and the novel A Canticle for Leibowitz. When-ever / see his name on fiction, I know it will stir me. The present entry is not his best, for reasons explained in the introduction to this volume, but I remember it across three decades as a good, solid adventure. What distinguishes man from animal, apart from intelligence? Is it his soul? If so, what is the status of an android—that is, a creature crafted in the laboratory—who is made in the complete image of man, feelings and all? Fast action plus a good thematic question—this, to me, is the essence of conventional science fiction.

—PA

Miller had a sensational career beginning in 1951, published stunning novellas and short stories in the magazines ("The Darfstellar," Astounding 1/55, won a Hugo), topped it off with the 1959 A Canticle for Leibowitz, considered by many to be the single finest science-fiction novel ever published (it is in everyone's top ten), and then utterly ceased to publish. No one knows why. A mysterious, emblematic figure of science fiction's most ambitious (and emblematic) decade, Miller lives in a southern state in virtual isolation from the genre to which he gave so much; there are vague rumors of a novel in progress. "The Soul-Empty Ones," a characteristic story and apparently Miller's only unreprinted shorter work, appeared in Astounding in 1952, incited praise from fames Blish (collected in his volume of criticism, The Issue At Hand), and has not been read by other than collectors and specialists in the last quarter of a century. Until now.

They heard the mournful bleat of his ramshorn in the night, warning them that he was friend, asking the sentries not to unleash the avalanches upon the mountain trail where he rode. They returned to their stools and huddled about the lamplight, waiting—two warriors and a woman. The woman was watching the window; and to-ward the valley, bright bonfires yellowed the darkness.

"He should never have gone," the girl said tonelessly.

The warriors, father and son, made no answer. They were valley men, from the sea, and guests in the house of Daner. The younger one looked at his sire and shook his head slowly. The father clenched his jaw stubbornly. "I could not let you go to blaspheme," he growled defensively. "The invaders are the sons of men. If Daner wishes to attack them, he is our host, and we cannot prevent it. But we shall not violate that which is written of the invaders. They have come to save us."

"Even if they kill us, and take our meat?" muttered the blond youth.

"Even so. We are their servants, for the sons of men created our fathers out of the flesh of beasts, and gave them the appearance of men." The old one's eyes glowed with the passionate light of conviction.

The young one inclined his head gravely and submissively, for such was the way of the valley people toward their parents.

The girl spoke coldly. "At first, I thought you were cowardly, old man. Now I think your whole tribe is cowardly."

Without a change of expression, the gray-haired one lifted his arms into the lamplight. His battles were written upon them in a crisscross of white knife scars. He lowered them silently without speaking.

"It's in the mind that you are cowardly," said the girl. "We of the Natani fight our enemies. If our enemies be gods, then we shall fight gods."

"Men are not gods," said the young one, whose name was Falon.

His father slapped him sharply across the back of the neck. "That is sacrilege," he warned. "When you speak of the invaders. They are men and gods."

The girl watched them with contempt. "Among the Natani, when a man loses his manhood by age, he goes into the forest with his war knife and does not return. And if he neglects to go will-

ingly, his sons escort him and see that he uses the knife. When a man is so old that his mind is dull, it is better for him to die."

The old warrior glowered at his hostess, but remained polite. "Your people have strange ways," he said acidly.

Suddenly a man came in out of the blackness and stood swaying in the doorway. He clutched his dogskin jacket against his bleeding chest as a sponge. He was panting softly. The three occupants of the small stone hut came slowly to their feet, and the woman said one word:



"Daher!"

The man mopped his forehead and staggered a step forward. He kicked the door closed with his heel. His skin had gone bloodless gray, and his eyes wandered wildly about the room for a moment. Then he sagged to his knees. Falon came to his aid, but Daner shook him off.

"They're really the sons of men," he gasped.

"Did you doubt it?" asked the old valley man.

Daner nodded. His mouth leaked a trickle of red, and he spat irritably. "I saw their skyboats. I fought with a guard. They are the sons of men . . . but they . . . are no longer men." He sank to a sitting position and leaned back against the door, staring at the woman. "Ea-Daner," he breathed softly.

"Come care for your man, you wench!" growled the old one. "Can't you see he's dying?"

The girl stood back a few feet, watching her husband with sadness and longing, but not with pity. He was staring at her with deep black eyes, abnormally brightened by pain. His breath was a wet hiss. Both of them ignored their valley guests.

"Sing me 'The Song of the Empty of Soul,' Ea, my wife, " he choked, then began struggling to his feet. Falon, who knew a little of the Natani ways, helped him pull erect.

Daner pawed at the door, opened it, and stood looking out into the night for a moment. A dark line of trees hovered to the west. Daner drew his war knife and stood listening to the yapping of the wild dogs in the forest. "Sing, woman."

She sang. In a low, rich voice, she began the chant of the Soul-Empty Ones. The chant was weary, slowly repeating its five monotonous notes, speaking of men who had gone away, and of their Soul-Empty servants they had left behind.

Dauer stepped from the doorsill, and became a wavering shadow, receding slowly toward the trees.

The song said that if a man be truly the son of men, the wild dogs would not devour him in the time of death. But if he be Empty of Soul, if he be only the mocking image of Man, then the wild dogs would feed—for his flesh was of the beast, and his ancestor's seed had been warped by Man to grow in human shape.

The two valley warriors stood clumsily; their ways were not of the Natani mountain folk. Their etiquette forbade them interfere in their host's action. Dauer had disappeared into the shadows. Ea-Daner, his wife, sang softly into the night, but her face was rivered with moisture from her eyes, large dark eyes, full of anger and sadness.

The song choked off. From the distance came a savage man-snarl. It was answered by a yelp; then a chorus of wild-dog barks and growls raged in the forest, drowning the cries of the man. The girl stopped singing and closed the door. She returned to her stool and gazed out toward the bonfires. Her face was empty, and she was no longer crying.

Father and son exchanged glances. Nothing could be done. They sat together, across the room from the girl.

After a long time, the elder spoke. "Among our people, it is customary for a widow to return to her father's house. You have no father. Will you join my house as a daughter?"

She shook her head. "My people would call me an outcast. And your people would remember that I am a Natani."

"What will you do?" asked Falon.

"We have a custom," she replied vaguely.

Falon growled disgustedly. "I have fought your tribe. I have fought many tribes. They all have different ways, but are of the same flesh. Custom! Bah! One way is as good as another, and noway-at-all is the best. I have given myself to the devil, because the devil is the only god in whom all the tribes believe. But he never answers my prayers, and I think I'll spit on his name."

He was rewarded by another slap from his father. "You are the devil's indeed!" raged the old man.

Falon accepted it calmly, and shrugged toward the girl. "What will you do, Ea-Daner?"

She gazed at him through dull grief. "I will follow the way. I will mourn for seven days. Then I will take a war knife and go to kill one of my husband's enemies. When it is done, I will follow his path to the forest. It is the way of the Natani widow."

Falon stared at her in disbelief. His shaggy blond eyebrows gloomed into a frown. "No!" he growled. "I am ashamed that the ways of my father's house have made me sit here like a woman while Daner went to fight against the sons of men! Daner said nothing. He respected our ways. He has opened his home to us. I shan't let his woman be ripped apart by the wild dogs!"

"Quiet!" shouted his father. "You are a guest! If our hosts are barbarians, then you must tolerate them!"

The girl caught her breath angrily, then subsided. "Your father is right, Falon," she said coldly. "I don't admire the way you grovel before him, but he is right."

Falon squirmed and worked his jaw in anger. He was angry with both of them. His father had been a good man and a strong warrior; but Falon wondered if the way of obedience was any holier than the other ways. The Natani had no high regard for it. Ea-Daner had no father, because the old man had gone away with his war knife when he became a burden on the tribe. But Falon had always obeyed, not out of respect for the law, but out of admiration for the man. He sighed and shrugged.

"Very well, then, Ea-Daner, you shall observe your custom. And I will go with you to the places of the invader."

"You will not fight with the sons of men!" his father grumbled sullenly. "You will not speak of it again."

Falon's eyes flared heatedly. "You would let a woman go to be killed and perhaps devoured by the invaders?"

"She is a Natani. And it is the right of the sons of men to do as they will with her, or with us. I even dislike hiding



from them. They created our fathers, and they made them so that their children would also be in the image of man—in spite of the glow-curse that lived in the ground and made the sons of animals unlike their fathers."

"Nevertheless, I—"

"You will not speak of it again!"

Falon stared at the angry oldster, whose steely eyes barked commands at him. Falon shivered. Respect for the aged was engrained in the fibers of his being. But Daner's death was fresh in his mind. And he was no longer in the valleys of his people, where the invaders had landed their skyboats. Was the way of the tribe more important than the life of the tribe? If one believed in the gods—then, yes.

Taking a deep breath, Falon stood up. He glanced down at the old man. The steel-blue eyes were biting into his face. Falon turned his back on them and walked slowly across the room. He sat beside the girl and faced his father calmly. It was open rebellion.

"I am no longer a man of the valley," he said quietly. "Nor am I to be a Natani," he added for the benefit of the girl. "I shall have no ways but the ways of embracing the friend and killing the enemy."

"Then it is my duty to kill my son," said the scarred warrior. He came to his feet and drew his war knife calmly.

Falon sat frozen in horror, remembering how the old man had wept when the invaders took Falon's mother to their food pens. The old one advanced, crouching slightly, waiting briefly for his son to draw. But Falon remained motionless.

"You may have an instant in which to draw," purred the oldster. "Then I shall kill you unarmed."

Falon did nothing. His father lunged with a snarl, and the knife's steel sang a hissing arc. Its point dug into the stool where the youth had been sitting. Falon stood crouched across the room, still weaponless. The girl watched with a slight frown.

"So, you choose to flee, but not fight," the father growled.

Falon said nothing. His chest rose and fell slowly, and his eyes flickered over the old one's tough and wiry body, watching for muscular hints of another lunge. But the warrior was crafty. He relaxed suddenly, and straightened. Reflexively, Falon mirrored the sudden unwinding of tension. The elder was upon him like a cat, twining his legs about Falon's, and encircling his throat with a brawny arm.

Falon caught the knife-thrust with his forearm, then managed to catch his father's wrist. Locked together, they crashed to the floor. Falon felt hot hate panting in his face. His only desire was to free himself and flee, even to the forest.

They struggled in silence. With a strength born of the faith that a man must be stronger than his sons, the elder pressed the knife deeper toward Falon's throat. With a weakness born of despair, Falon found himself unable to hold it away. Their embrace was slippery with wetness from the wound in his forearm. And the arm was failing.

"I . . . offer you . . . as a holy . . . sacrifice," panted the oldster, as the knife began scratching skin.

"Father . . . don't—" Then he saw Ea-Daner standing over the old man's shoulder. She was lifting a war club. He closed his eyes.

The sharp crack frightened and sickened him. The knife clattered away from his throat, and his father's body went limp.

Slowly, he extricated himself from the tangle, and surveyed the oldster's head. The scalp was split, and the gray hair sogging with slow blood.

"You killed him!" he accused.

The girl snorted. "He's not dead. I didn't hit him hard. Feel his skull. It's not broken. And he's breathing."

Falon satisfied himself that she spoke the truth. Then he climbed to his feet, grumbling unhappily. He looked down at the old man and deeply regretted his rebelliousness. The father's love of the law was greater than his love for a son. But there was no undoing it now. The elder was committed to kill him, even if he retracted. He turned to the girl.

"I must go before he comes to his senses," he murmured sadly. "You'll tend his head wound?"

She was thoughtful for a moment, then a speculative gleam came into her eyes. "I understood you meant to help me avenge my husband?"

Falon frowned. "I now regret it."

"Do the valley folk treat their own word with contempt?"

Falon shrugged guiltily. "I'm no longer of the valley. But I'll keep my word, if you wish." He turned away and moved to the window to watch the bonfires. "I owe you a life," he murmured. "Perhaps Daner would have returned alive, if I had accompanied him. I turned against my father too late."

"No, Soul-Falon, I knew when Daner left that he meant to fight until he was no longer able—then drag himself back for the forests. If you had gone too, it would have been the same. I no longer weep, because I *knew*."

Falon was staring at her peculiarly. "You called me Soul-Falon," he said wonderingly; for it was a title given only to those who had won high respect, and it suggested the impossible—that the Soul-Empty One was really a man. Was she mocking him? "Why do you call me that?" he asked suspiciously.

The girl's slender body inclined in a slight bow. "You ex-changed your honor for a new god. What greater thing can a man offer than honor among his people?"

He frowned for a moment, then realized she meant it. Did the Natani hold anything above honor? "I have no new gods," he growled. "When I find the right god, I shall serve him. But until then, I serve myself—and those



who please me."

The old man's breathing became a low moan. He was beginning to come awake. Falon moved toward the door.

"When he awakes, he may be so angry that he forgets he's your guest," warned the young warrior. "You'd better come with me."

She hesitated. "The law of mourning states that a widow must remain—"

"Shall I call you Soul-Ea?"

She suffered an uncomfortable moment, then shrugged, and slipped a war knife in her belt thong. Her sandals padded softly after him as he moved out into the darkness and untethered the horses. The steeds' legs were still wrapped in heavy leather strips to protect them against the slashing fangs of the wild dogs.

"Leave Daner's horse for your father," said the girl with unsentimental practicality. "The mare's tired, and she'll be slow if he tries to follow us."

They swung into the small rawhide saddles and trotted across the clearing. Dim moonlight from a thin silver crescent illuminated their way. Two trails led from the hut that overlooked the cliff. Falon knew that one of them wound along the clifftops to a low place, then turned back beneath the cliff and found its way eventually to the valley. The other penetrated deeper into the mountains. He had given his word, and he let the girl choose the path.

She took the valley road. Falon sighed and spurred after her. It was sure death, to approach the invader's camp. They had the old god-weapons, which would greet all hostile attacks from the Soul-Empty Ones. And if the Empties came in peace, the sons of men would have another occupant for their stock pens. He shivered slightly. According to the old writings, men had been kindly toward their artificial creatures. They created them so that the glow-curse that once lived in the earth would not cause their children to be born as freaks. And they had left Earth to the Empties, promising that they would come again, when the glow-curse passed away.

He remembered Daner's words. And Dauer was right, for Falon had also caught glimpses of the invaders before he fled the valley. They were no longer men, although they looked as if they had once been human. They were covered with a thick coat of curly brown hair, but their bodies were spindly and weak, as if they had been a long time in a place where there was no need for walking. Their eyes were huge, with great black pupils; and they blinked irritably in the bright sunlight. Their mouths were small and delicate, but set with four sharp teeth in front, and the jaws were strong—for ripping dainty mouthfuls of flesh.

They had landed in the valley more than a month earlier—while a red star was the morning star. Perhaps it was an omen, he thought—and perhaps they had *been* to the red star, for the old writings said that they had gone to a star to await the curse's lifting. But in the valley, they were building a city. And Falon knew that more of them were yet to come—for the city was large, while the invaders were few.

"Do you think, Ea-Daner," he asked as they rode, "that the invaders really own the world? That they have a right to the land—and to us?"

She considered it briefly, then snorted over her shoulder. "They owned it once, Falon. My grandfather believed that they cursed it themselves with the glow-curse, and that it drove them away. How do they still own it? But that is not a worry for me. If they were gods of the gods, I should still seek the blood that will pay for Daner's."

He noticed that the grief in her voice had changed to a cool and deadly anger. And he wondered. Did the alchemy of Natani custom so quickly change grief into rage?

"How long were you Daner's woman?" he asked.

"Only a few months," she replied. "He stole me from my father in the spring."

Falon reflected briefly that the Natani marriage customs were different than those of the valley peoples, who formally purchased a wife from her parents. The Natani pretended to be more forceful, but the "wife stealing" could be anything from a simple elopement, agreeable even to the parents, to a real kidnaping, involving a reluctant bride. He decided not to press the question.

"Among my people," he said, "I would ask you to be my wife—so that you would not be disgraced by returning to your father's house." He hesitated, watching the girl's trim back swaying in the half-light of the moon. "How would you answer me?"

She shook her head, making her dark hair dance. "Doesn't a valley widow mourn?"

"To mourn is to pity oneself. The dead feel nothing. The mourner does not pity the dead. He pities himself for having lost the living."

She glanced back at him over her shoulder. "You speak as if you believe these things. I thought you were renouncing your people?"

"There is some wisdom, and some foolishness, in every people's way. But you haven't answered my question."

She shrugged. "We are not among your people, Falon." Then her voice softened, "I watched you fight the old one. You are quick and strong, and your mind is good. You would be a good man. Dauer was a gloomy one. He treated me well, except when I tried to run away at first. But he never laughed. Do you ever laugh, Falon?"

Embarrassed, he said nothing.

"But this is pointless," she said, "for I am a daughter of my people."

"Do you still intend," he asked nervously, "to follow your husband to the wild dogs?"

She nodded silently, then, after a thoughtful moment, asked, "Do you believe it's foolishness—to try to kill some of



the invader?"

Falon weighed it carefully. His defiance of his own law might weaken her resolve, if he persisted in trying to convince her against the suicidal attempts. But he spoke sadly.

"We are the Soul-Empty Ones. There are many of us in the world. If one invader could be killed for every dozen they kill of us, we would win. No, Ea, I don't think it's foolishness to fight for lives. But I think it's foolishness to fight for tribes, or to give your-self to the wild dogs."

She reined her horse around a bend in the trail, then halted to stare out at the distant bonfires. "I'll tell you why we do that, Falon. There's a legend among my people that the wild dogs were once the pets of Man, of Soul-Man, I mean. And it is said that the dogs scent the soul, and will not devour true Soul-Flesh. And the legend is also a prophecy. It says that someday, children will be born to the Natani who are Soul-Children—and that the wild dogs

will again know their masters, and come to lick their hands. The Natani drag themselves to the forest when they die, in the hope that the dogs will not molest them. Then they will know that the prophecy has come, and the dead will go to the Place of Watching, as the Soul-Men who made us did go."

She spurred her horse gently and moved on. But Falon was still staring at the bonfires. Why did the invader keep them burning nightly? Of what were they afraid in the darkness?

"I wonder if the dogs could scent the souls of the sons of men—of the invaders," he mused aloud.

"Certainly!" she said flatly.

Falon wondered about the source of her certainty—from legend or from fact. But he felt that he had questioned her enough. They rode for several miles in silence, moving slowly along the down-going trail. The forests to their flanks were as usual, wailing with the cries of the dog packs.

Falon reined up suddenly. He hissed at Ea-Daner to halt, then rode up beside her. The dim shadow of her face questioned him. "Listen! Up ahead!"

They paused in immobility, trying to sort out the sounds—the dog packs, a nightbird's cry, the horses' wet breathing, and

"Dogs," murmured Ea-Daner. "Feeding on a carcass in the pathway. Their growls—" Suddenly she stiffened and made a small sound of terror in her throat. "Do you suppose it could be—"

"No, no!" he assured her quickly. "A wounded man couldn't come this far on foot. And you heard—"

She was sobbing again. "Follow me," grunted Falon, and trotted on ahead. He found the sharp dog-spikes in his saddlebag and fitted them onto the toes of his sandals. They were six inches of gleaming steel, and sharpened to needlelike points. He called to the girl to do the same. The dogs usually weighed the odds carefully before they attacked a horseman. But if interrupted at meal-time, they were apt to be irritable. He unwound a short coil of rawhide to use as a whip.

He passed a turn in the trail. A dozen of the gaunt, white animals were snarling in a cluster about something that lay on the ground. Their dim writhing shadows made a ghostly spectacle as Falon spurred his mount to a gallop, and howled a shrill cry to startle them.

"Hi-yeee! Yee yee!"

Massive canine heads lifted in the wind. Then the pack burst apart. These were not the dogs left by Man, but only their changed descendants. They scurried toward the shadows, then formed a loose ring that closed about the horsemen as they burst into the midst. A dog leaped for Falon's thigh, then fell back yelping as the toe-spike stabbed his throat. The horse reared as another leaped at his neck, and the hoofs beat at the savage hound.

"Try to ride them down!" Falon shouted to the girl. "Ride in a tight circle!"

Ea-Daner began galloping her stallion at a ten-foot radius from the bleeding figure on the ground. She was shrieking unfeminine curses at the brutes as she lashed out with her whip and her spike. Falon reined to a halt within the circle and dismounted. He was inviting a torn throat if a dog dared to slip past Ea. But he knelt beside the body, and started to lift it in his arms. Then he paused.

At first, he thought that the creature was an invader. It was scrawny and small-boned, but its body was not covered with the black fur. Neither was it a Soul-Empty One—for in designing the Empties, Man had seen no reason to give them separate toes. But Falon paused to long.

"Dog! Look out!" screamed the girl.

Falon reflexively hunched his chin against his chest and guarded his abdomen with his arms as he drew his war knife. A hurtling body knocked him off balance, and long fangs tore savagely at his face. He howled with fear and rage as he fell on his back. The dog was straddling him, and roaring fiercely as he mauled Falon's face and tried to get at his throat.

Falon locked his legs about the beast's belly, arched his body, and stretched away. The great forepaws tore at his chest as he rolled onto his side and began stabbing blindly at the massive head, aiming for a point just below the ear, and trying to avoid the snapping jaws. As the knife bit home, the fangs sank in his arm—then relaxed slightly. With his other hand, Falon forced the weakening jaws apart, pressed the knife deeper, and crunched it through thin bone to the base of the brain. The animal fell aside.

Panting, he climbed to his feet and seized the animal by the hind legs. The girl was still riding her shrieking circuit, too fast for the dogs to attack. Falon swung the dead carcass about him, then heaved it toward the pack. Two others leaped upon it. The rest



paused in their snarling pursuit of the horse. They trotted toward their limp comrade. Falon mounted his stallion quickly. "Draw up beside me here!" he shouted to the girl.

She obeyed, and they stood flank to flank with the man-thing on the ground between them. The pack swarmed about the dead one. "Look, they're dragging it away!" said Ea.

"They see they can have a feast without a fight," Falon muttered.

A few seconds later, the pack had dragged the carcass back into the forest, leaving the horsemen in peace. Ea glanced down at the man-thing.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. But I think it's still alive." Dismounting, he knelt again beside the frail body, and felt for a heartbeat. It was faintly perceptible, but blood leaked from a thousand gashes. A moan came from its throat. Falon saw that it was hopelessly mutilated.

"What are you?" he asked gently.

The man-thing's eyes were open. They wandered toward the crescent moon, then found Falon's hulking shadow.

"You . . . you look— Are you a man?" the thing murmured in a tongue that Falon had studied for tribal ritual.

"He speaks the ancient holy language," Falon gasped. Then he answered in kind. "Are you an invader?"

Dim comprehension came into the eyes. "You . . . are an . . . android."

Falon shook his head. "I am a Soul-Empty One."

The eyes wandered toward the moon again. "I . . . escaped them. I was looking for . . . your camps. The dogs—" His speech trailed off and the eyes grew dull.

Falon felt for the heartbeat, then shook his head. Gently, he lifted the body, and tied it securely behind his saddle. "Whoever he is, we'll bury him, after the sun rises." He noticed that Ea made no comment about the relative merits of tribal death-customs, de-spite the fact that she must feel repugnance toward burial.

Falon felt his face as they rode away. It dripped steadily from the numerous gashes, and his left cheek felt like soggy lace.

"We'll stop at the creek just ahead," said the girl. "I'll clean you up."

The dog-sounds had faded behind them. They dismounted, and tied their horses in the brush. Falon stretched out on a flat rock while Ea removed her homespun blouse and soaked it in the creek. She cleaned his wounds carefully and tenderly, while he tried to recover his breath and fight off the nausea of shock.

"Rest awhile," she murmured, "and sleep if you can. You've lost much blood. It's nearly dawn, and the dogs will soon go to their thickets."

Falon allowed himself the vanity of only one protest before he agreed to relax for a time. He felt something less than half alive. Ea stretched her blouse across a bush to dry, then came to sit beside him, with her back to the moon so that her face was in blackness.

"Keep your hands away from your wounds," she warned. "They'll bleed again."

He grinned weakly. "I'll have some nice scars," he said. "The valley women think a man is handsome if he has enough war scars. I think my popularity will increase. Do you like warriors with mauled faces, Ea?"

"The white scars are becoming, but not the red, not the fresh ones," she replied calmly.

"Mine will be red and ugly," he sighed, "but the valley women like them."

The girl said nothing, but shifted uneasily. He gazed at the moon's gleam on her soft shoulders.

"Will you still give yourself to the wild dogs if we return from the valley?"

She shivered and shook her head. "The Natani have scattered. A scattered people perhaps begins to lose its gods. And you've shown me a bad example, Soul-Falon. I have no longing for the dogs. But if the Natani found me alive—after Daner's death—they would kill me."

"Did you love him greatly?"

"I was beginning to love him—yes. He stole me without my consent, but he was kind—and a good warrior."

"Since you're breaking your custom, will you marry again?"

She was thoughtful for a moment. "Soul-Falon, if your cow died, would you cease to drink milk—because of bereavement?"

He chuckled. "I don't know. I don't have a cow. Do you compare Daher to a cow?"

"The Natani *love* animals," she said in a defensive tone.

"I am no longer a valley man and you are no longer a Natani. Do you still insist we go down against the invaders—alone?" "Yes! Blood must buy blood, and Daner is dead."

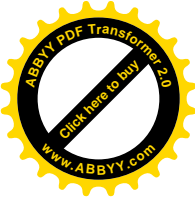
"I was only thinking—perhaps it would be better to pause and plan. The most we can hope to do alone is ambush a guard or two before they kill us. It is foolish to talk of life when we approach death so blindly. I don't mind dying, if we can kill some invaders. But perhaps we can live, if we stop to think."

"We have today to think," she murmured, glancing toward the eastern sky. "We'll have to wait for nightfall again—before we go out into the open places of the valley."

"I am wondering," Falon said sleepily, "about the man-thing we took from the dogs. He said he escaped. Did he escape from the sons of men? If so, they might send guards to search for him."

She glanced nervously toward the trail.

"No, Ea—they wouldn't come at night. Not those puny bodies. They have god-weapons, but darkness spoils their



value. But when the sun rises, we must proceed with caution."

She nodded, then yawned. "Do you think it's safe to sleep a little now? The sky is getting lighter, and the dogs are silent."

He breathed wearily. "Sleep, Ea. We may not sleep again."

She stretched out on her side, with her back toward him. "Soul-Falon?"

"Hm-m-m?"

"What did the man-thing mean—`android'?"

"Who knows? Go to sleep—Soul-Ea."

"It is a foolish title—'Soul,' " she said drowsily.

A feverish sun burned Falon to dazed wakefulness. His face was stiff as stretched rawhide, and the pain clogged his senses. He sat up weakly, and glanced at Ea. She was still asleep, her dark head cushioned on her arms; and her shapely back was glistening with moisture. Falon had hinted that he was interested in her—but only out of politeness—for it was valley etiquette to treat a new widow as if she were a maiden newly come of age, and to court her with cautious flirtation. And a valley man always hoped that if he died, his wife would remarry quickly—lest others say, "Who but the dead one would want her?"

But as Falon glanced at the dozing Ea in the morning sunlight, her bronzed and healthy loveliness struck him. The dark hail spread breeze-tossed across the rock, and it gleamed in the sun.

She would make me a good wife indeed, thought Falon. But then he thought of the Natani ways that were bred into her soul—the little ways that she would regard as proper, despite her larger rebellion—and he felt helpless. He knew almost nothing about Natani ritual for stealing brides. But it was certainly not simply a matter of tossing a girl over one's shoulder and riding away. And if he courted her by valley custom, she might respond with disgust or mockery. He shrugged and decided that it was hopeless. They had small chance of surviving their fool's errand.

He thought of capture—and shuddered. Ea, being herded into the invaders' food pens—it was not a pleasant thought. There must be no capture.

A gust of wind brought a faint purring sound to his ears. He listened for a moment, stiffening anxiously. Then he stood up. It was one of the invaders' small skycarts. He had seen them hovering about the valley—with great rotary blades spinning above them. They could hang motionless in the air, or speed ahead like a frightened bird.

The brush obscured his view, and he could not see the skycart, but it seemed to be coming closer. He hurried to untether the horses; then he led them under a scrubby tree and tied them to the trunk. Ea was rubbing her eyes and sitting up when he returned to the rock.

"Is my blouse dry, Soul-Falon?"

He fetched it for her, then caught her arm and led her under the tree with the horses. She heard the purr of the skycart, and her eyes swept the morning sky.

"Put your blouse on," he grumbled.

"Am I ugly, Soul-Falon?" she asked in a hurt tone, but obeyed him.

He faced her angrily. "Woman! You cause me to think of breaking my word. You cause me to think of forgetting the invader, and of stealing you away to the mountains. I wish that you were ugly indeed. But you trouble me with your carelessness."

"I am sorry," she said coldly, "but your dogskin jacket was no good for bathing wounds."

He noticed the dark stains on the blouse, and turned away in shame. He knew too little of Natani women, and he realized he was being foolish.

The skycart was still out of sight, but the horses were becoming restless at the sound. As Falon patted his stallion's flanks, he

glanced at the body of the man-thing—still tied across the steed's back. His mouth tightened grimly. The creature had evidently been desperate to have braved the forest alone, unarmed, and afoot. Desperate or ignorant. Had he escaped from the invader, and was the skycart perhaps searching for him? It was moving very slowly indeed—as he had seen them move when searching the hills for the villages of the Empties.

An idea struck him suddenly. He turned to the girl. "You know these paths. Is there a clearing near here—large enough for the skycart to sit upon?"

Ea nodded. "A hundred paces from here, the creekbed widens, and floods have washed the bedrock clean. Duck beneath the brush and you can see it."

"Is it the *only* clearing?"

She nodded again. "Why do you ask? Are you afraid the cart will land in it?"

Falon said nothing, but hastily untied the body from his horse. He carried it quickly to the flat rock where they had slept, and he placed the man-thing gently upon it—where he would be in full view from the sky. The skycart crept into distant view as Falon hurried back into the brush. Ea was watching him with an anxious and bewildered stare.

"They'll see him!" she gasped.

"I hope they do! Hurry! Let's go to the clearing!"

He caught her arm, and they began racing along the shallow creekbed, their sandals splashing in the narrow trickle of shallow water. For a few seconds they ducked beneath overhanging brush, but soon the brush receded, and the bed



broadened out into a flat expanse of dry rock, broken only by the wear marks of high waters. Then they were in the open, running along the brushline.

"In here!" he barked, and plunged over a root-tangled embankment and into a dense thicket. She followed, and they crouched quietly in the thick foliage, as the purr of the skycart became a nearby drone.

"What are we going to do?" Ea asked tensely.

"Wait, and hope. Perhaps you'll get your knife wet."

Falon peered up through the leaves, and saw the skycart briefly as it moved past. But the sound of its engine took on a new note, and soon he knew that it was hovering over the rock where the body lay. Ea made a small sound of fright in her throat.

After a moment, the skycart moved over the clearing and hung growling fifty feet above them. As it began to settle, Falon saw a fur-coated face peering out from its cabin. He hissed at Ea to re-main silent.

The skycart dropped slowly into the clearing, rolled a short distance, and stopped, a pebble's toss from the hidden tribesmen. Its occupants remained inside for a moment, peering about the perimeter of brush. Then a hatch opened, and one of the feeble creatures climbed painfully out. There were three of them, and Falon shuddered as he saw the evil snouts of their flamethrowers.

One of them remained to guard the ship, while the others began moving slowly up the creekbed, their weapons at the ready, and their eyes searching the brush with suspicion. They spoke in low voices, but Falon noticed that they did not use the ancient sacred tongue of Man. He frowned in puzzlement. The valley folk who had been close enough to hear their speech swore that they used the holy language.

"Now?" whispered the girl.

Falon shook his head. "Wait until they find the horses," he hissed in her ear.

The spider-legged creatures moved feebly, as if they were carrying heavy weights; and they were a long time covering the distance to the flat rock. The guard was sitting in the hatchway with his flame gun across his lap. His huge eyes blinked painfully in the harsh morning sunlight as he watched the thickets about the clearing. But he soon became incautious, and directed his stare in the direction his companions had gone.

Falon heard a whinny from the horses, then a shrill shout from the invaders. The guard stood up. Startled, he moved a few steps up the creekbed, absorbed in the shouts of his companions. Falon drew his war knife, and weighed the distance carefully. A miss would mean death. Ea saw what he meant to do, and she slipped her own knife to him.

Falon stood up, his shoulders bursting through the foliage. He aimed calmly, riveting his attention on an accurate throw, and ignoring the fact that the guard had seen him and was lifting his weapon to fire. The knife left Falon's hand as casually as if he had been tossing it at a bit of fur tacked to a door.

The flame gun belched, but the blast washed across the creek- i bed, and splashed upward to set the brush afire. The guard screamed and toppled. The intense reflected heat singed Falon's

hair, and made his stiff face shriek with pain. He burst from the flaming brush, tugging the girl after him.

The guard was sitting on the rocks and bending over his abdomen. The gun had clattered to the ground. The creature had tugged the knife from his belly, and he clutched it foolishly as he shrieked gibberish at it. The others had heard him and were hurrying back from the horses.

Falon seized the gun and kicked the guard in the head. The creature crumpled with a crushed skull. *The gods die easily*, he thought, as he raced along the brushline, keeping out of view.

He fumbled with the gun, trying to discover its firing principle. He touched a stud, then howled as a jet of flame flared the brush on his left. He retreated from the flames, then aimed at the growth that overhung the narrowing creek toward the horses. A stream of incendiary set an inferno among the branches, sealing off the invaders from their ship.

"Into the skycart!" he barked at Ea.

She sprinted toward it, then stopped at the hatch, peering inside. "How will you make the god-machine fly?" she asked.

He came to stare over her shoulder, then cursed softly. Evidently the skycart had no mind of its own, for the cabin was full of things to push and things to pull. The complexity bewildered him. He stood thoughtfully staring at them.

"They'll creep around the fire in a few moments," warned Ea.

Falon pushed her into the ship, then turned to shout toward the spreading blaze. "We have your skycart! If we destroy it, you will be left to the wild dogs!"

"The wild dogs won't attack the sons of men!" Ea hissed.

He glanced at her coolly. If she were right, they were lost. But no sound came from beyond the fire. But the invaders had had time to move around it through the brush, while the man and the girl presented perfect targets in the center of the clearing.

"Fire your god-weapons," Falon jeered. "And destroy your skycart." He spoke the ancient holy tongue, but now he wondered if the invaders could really understand it.

They seemed to be holding a conference somewhere in the brush. Suddenly Falon heard the horses neighing shrilly above the crackling of the fire. There came a sound of trampling in the dry tangles, then a scream. A flame gun belched, and the horses shrieked briefly.



"One of them was trampled," Falon gasped. "Man's pets no longer know his odor."
He listened for more sounds from the horses, but none came. "They've killed our mounts," he growled, then shouted again.

"Don't the pets know their masters? Hurry back, you gods, or perhaps the skycart will also forget."

A shrill and frightened voice answered him. "You can't escape, android! You can't fly the copter."

"And neither can you, if we destroy it!"

There was a short silence, then: "What do you want, android?" "You will come into the clearing unarmed."

The invader responded with a defiant curse. Falon turned the flame gun diagonally upward and fired a hissing streak to the lee-ward. It arced high, then spat into the brush two hundred paces from the clearing. Flames burst upward. He set seven similar fires at even intervals about them.

"Soon they will burn together in a ring," he shouted. "Then they will burn inward and drive you to us. You have four choices: flee to the forest; or wait for the fire to drive you to us; or destroy your ship by killing us; or surrender now. If you surrender, we'll let you live. If you choose otherwise, you die."

"And you also, android!"

Falon said nothing. He stayed in the hatchway, keeping an eye on the brush for signs of movement. The fires were spreading rap- idly. After a few minutes, the clearing would become a roasting oven.

"Don't fire, android!" called the invader at last.

"Then stand up! Hold your weapon above your head."

The creature appeared fifty paces up the slope and moved slowly toward them. Falon kept his flame gun ready.

"Where's the other?" he called.

"Your beasts crushed him with their hoofs."

Falon covered him silently until he tore his way into the clearing. "Take his weapon, Ea," he murmured. The girl obeyed, but her hand twitched longingly toward her knife as she approached. The creature's eyes widened and he backed away from her.

"Let him live, Ea!"

She snatched the invader's weapon, spat at him contemptuously, then marched back to the ship. Her face was white with hate, and she was trembling.

"Sit in the skycart," he told her, then barked at the captive. "You'll fly us away, before the fire sweeps in."

The prisoner obeyed silently. They climbed into the aircraft as the clearing became choked with stoke and hot ashes. The engine coughed to life, and the ship arose quickly from the clearing. The girl murmured with frightened awe as the ground receded beneath them. Falon was uneasy, but he kept his eyes and his gun on the back of the pilot's furry neck. The creature chuckled with gloating triumph.

"Shoot the flame rifle, android," he hissed. "And we shall all burn together."

Falon frowned uncomfortably for a moment. "Quiet!" he barked. "Do you think we prefer your food pens to quick and easy death? If you do not obey, then we shall all die as you suggest."

The pilot glanced back mockingly, but said nothing.

"You tempt me to kill you," Falon hissed. "Why do you gloat?"

"The fires you set, android. The forests are dry. Many of your people will be driven down into the valleys. It is a strategy we in- tended to use—as soon as our city had grown enough to accommodate the large numbers of prisoners we will take. But you have made it necessary to destroy, rather than capture."

Ea glanced back at the fires. "He speaks truth," she whispered to Falon, who already felt a gnawing despair.

"Bah, hairy one! How will you kill thousands? There are only a few of you! Your god-weapons aren't omnipotent. Numbers will crush you."

The pilot laughed scornfully. "Will your tribesmen attack their gods? They are afraid, android. You two are only rebels. The tribes will flee, not fight. And even if some of them fought, we have the advantage. We could retreat to our ships while enemies broke their knives on the hull."

The ship was rising high over the forest, higher than any mountain Falon had ever climbed. He stared out across the valley to-ward the seacoast where the fishing boats of his people lay idle by their docks. The owners were in captivity or in flight. The city of the invaders was taking form—a great rectangle, thousands of paces from end to end. A dozen metallic gleams were scattered about the area—the skyboats in which the invader had descended from the heavens.

He noticed the food pens. There were two of them—high stockades, overlooked by watchtowers with armed guards. He could see the enclosures' occupants as antlike figures in the distance. Neither pen seemed crowded. He frowned suddenly, wondering if the man-thing had been confined to one of the pens. The creature had been neither invader nor Empty. Falon felt a vague suspicion. He glanced at the pilot again.

"The dead one told us many things before he died," he said cautiously.

The creature stiffened, then shot him a suspicious glance. "The escaped android? What could *he* have told you?"

"*Android?*" Falon's hunch was coming clearer. "Do you call *yourself* an android?" he jeered.

"Of course not! I am a man! 'Android' is our word for 'Soul-Empty One.'"

"Then the dead one is not of your race, eh?"

"You have eyes, don't you?"

"But neither is he of our race!" Falon snapped. "For we have no toes. He is a soul-man!"



The pilot was trembling slightly. "If the dead one told you this, then we shall all die—lest you escape and speak of this to others!" He wrenched at the controls, and the ship darted valleyward toward the city. "Fire, android! Fire, and destroy us! Or be taken to the food pens!"

"Kill him!" snarled Ea. "Perhaps we can fly the ship. Kill him with your knife, Soul-Falon!"

The pilot, hearing this, shut off the engines. The ship began hurtling earthward, and Falon clutched at his seat to keep balance.

"Fly to your city!" he shouted above the rush of air. "We will submit!"

Ea growled at him contemptuously, drew her knife, and lunged toward the pilot. Falon wrestled with her, trying to wrench the knife from her grasp. "I know what I'm doing," he hissed in her ear.

Still she fought, cursing him for a coward, and trying to get to the pilot. Falon howled as her teeth sank into his arm, then he clubbed his fist against her head. She moaned and sagged limply.

"Start the engine!" he shouted. "We'll submit."

"Give me your weapons, then," growled the pilot.

Falon surrendered them quickly. The ship's engine coughed to life as they fell into the smoke of the forest fire. The blazes were

licking up at them as the rotors milled at the air and bore them up once more.

"Death is not to your liking, eh, android?" sneered the invader. "You'll find our food pens are very comfortable."

Falon said nothing for a time as he stared remorsefully at the unconscious girl. Then he spoke calmly to the pilot.

"Of course, there were others with us when we found the dead one. They will spread the word that you are not the sons of men." "You lie!" gasped the pilot.

"Very well," murmured Falon. "Wait and see for yourselves. The news will spread, and then our tribes will fight instead of flee."

The pilot considered this anxiously for a moment. Then he snorted. "I shall take you to Kepol. *He* will decide whether or not you speak the truth."

Falon smiled inwardly and glanced back at the fires beneath them. They were creeping faster now, and soon the blaze would be sweeping down the gentle slopes to drive the inhabitants of the forest into the valley. Thousands of Natani and valley warriors would swarm out onto the flatlands. Most would not attack, but only try to flee from the creatures whom they thought were demigods.

Falon watched the invaders' installations as the ship drew nearer. Workmen were swarming busily about the growing city. First he noticed that the workmen were hairless. Then he saw that they were not Empties, but the scrawny soul-men. Furry figures stood guard over them as they worked. He saw that the soul-men were being used as slaves.

Soon they were hovering over the city, and, glancing down, he noticed that the occupants of one pen were soul-men, while the other was for Empties. Evidently the soul-men were considered too valuable as workers to use as food. The two pens were at opposite ends of the city, as if the invaders didn't care to have the two groups contacting one another. Falon wondered if the *captive* Empties knew that their overlords weren't soul-men, as they had once believed.

The girl came half awake as they landed. She immediately tore into Falon with teeth and nails. Guards were congregating about the ship as the pilot climbed out. He held off the furious Ea while a dozen three-fingered hands tugged at them, and dragged them from the plane. The pilot spoke to the guards in a language Falon could not understand.

Suddenly the butt of a weapon crashed against his head, and he felt himself go weak. He was dimly aware of being tossed on a cart and rolled away. Then the sunlight faded into gloom, and he knew he was inside a building. Bright self-lights exploded in his skull with each jog of the cart, and his senses were clogged with pain.

At last the jouncing ceased, and he lay quietly for a time, listening to the chatter of the invaders' voices. They spoke in the strange tongue, but one voice seemed to dominate the others.

A torrent of icy water brought him to full consciousness. He sat up on the cart and found himself in a small but resplendent throne room. A small wizened creature occupied a raised dais. Over his head hung a great golden globe with two smaller globes revolving slowly about it. The walls were giant landscape murals, depicting a gaunt red earth the likes of which Falon had never seen.

"On your feet before Lord Kepol, android!" growled a guard, prodding him with a small weapon.

Falon came weakly erect, but a sharp blow behind his knees sent him sprawling. The creature called Kepol cackled.

"This one is too muscular to eat," he said to the guards. "Place him in restraints so that he can have no exercise, and force-feed him. His liver will grow large and tender."

A guard bowed. "It shall be done, Lordship. Do you wish to hear him speak?"

The king-creature croaked impatiently. "This pilot is a fool. If a few of the androids believe we are not men, what harm can be done? Most of them would not believe such rumors. They have no concept of our world. But let him speak."

"Speak, android!" A booted foot pushed at Falon's ribs. "I've got nothing to say."

The boot crashed against his mouth, and a brief flash of blackness struck him again. He spat a broken tooth.

"Speak!"

"Very well. What the pilot says is true. Others know that you are not men. They will come soon to kill all of you."

The boot drew back again angrily, but hesitated. For the king-creature was cackling with senile laughter. The guards



joined in politely.

"When will they come, android?" jeered the king.

"The forest fires will cause them to come at once. They will sweep over your city and drive you into the sea."

"With knives—against machine guns and flamethrowers?" The king glanced at a guard. "This one bores me. Flog him, then bring me the girl. That will be more amusing."

Falon felt loops of wire being slipped over his wrists. Then he was jerked erect, suspended from the ceiling so that his toes scarcely touched the floor.

"Shall we do nothing about the forest fires, Your Lordship?" a guard asked.

The king sighed. "Oh . . . I suppose it would be wise to send a platoon to meet the savages when they emerge. Our fattening pens need replenishing. And we can see if there is any truth in what the captive says. I doubt that they suspect us, but if they do, there is small harm done."

Falon smiled to himself as the first lash cut across his back. He had accomplished the first step in his mission. A platoon was being sent.

The whip master was an expert. He began at the shoulders and worked stroke by stroke toward the waist, pausing occasionally to rub his fingers roughly over the wounds. Falon wailed and tried to faint, but the torture was calculated to leave him conscious. From his dais, the king-creature was chortling with dreamy sensuality as he watched.

"Take him to the man pen," ordered the king when they were finished. "And keep him away from other androids. He knows things that could prove troublesome."

As Falon was led away, he saw Ea just outside the throne room. She was bound and naked to the waist. Her eyes hated him silently. He shuddered and looked away. For she was the sacrifice which he had no right to make.

The man pen was nearly deserted, for the soul-men were busy with the building of the city. Falon was led across a sandy court-yard and into a small cell, where he was chained to a cot. A guard pressed a hypodermic into his arm.

"This will make you eat, android," he said with a leer, "and grow weak and fat."

Falon set his jaw and said nothing. The guard went away, leaving him alone in his cell.

An old man came to stare through the bars. His eyes were widewith the dull glow of fatalistic acceptance. He was thin and brown, his hands gnarled by the wear of slave work. He saw Falon's toe-less feet and frowned. "Android!" he murmured in soft puzzlement. "Why did they put you in here?"

Falon's throat worked with emotion. Here was a descendant of his creators. Man—who had gone away as a conqueror and re-turned as a slave. Nervously Falon met the calm blue-eyed gaze for a moment. But his childhood training was too strong. Here was Man! Quietly he slipped to his knees and bowed his head. The man breathed slow surprise.

"Why do you kneel, android? I am but a slave, such as your-self. We are brothers."

Falon shivered. "You are of the immortal ones!"

"Immortal?" The man shrugged. "We have forgotten our ancient legends." He chuckled. "Have your people kept them alive for us?"

Falon nodded humbly. "We have kept for you what we were told to keep, soul-man. We have waited many centuries."

The man stared toward one of the watchtowers. "If only we had trusted you! If only we had told you where the weapons were hid-den. But some of the ancients said that if we gave you too much knowledge, you would 'destroy us when we tried to return. Now you have nothing with which to defend yourselves against our new masters."

Falon lifted his head slightly. "Weapons, you say? God-weapons?"

"Yes, they're hidden in vaults beneath the ancient cities. We sent a man to tell you where to find them. But he probably failed in his mission. Do you know anything of him? Come, man! Get off your knees!"

Self-consciously, Falon sat on the edge of his cot. "We found this man dead in the trail—last night." He paused and lowered his eyes. It had been easy to lie to the invaders, but it would be harder lying to the gods. He steeled himself for a rebuke. "The emissary failed to tell us of the god-weapons, but he told us that the invaders were not men. The tribes now know this fact. In a few hours, they will attack. Will you help us, soul-man?"

The man gasped and wrinkled his face in disbelief. "*Attack!* With only knives and spears? Android, this is insanity!" Falon nodded. "But notice how smoke is dimming the sun,

soul-man. The forest fires are driving the people forth. They have no choice but to attack."

"It's suicide!"

Falon nodded. "But it is to save you that they do it. And to save the earth for both of us. Will you help?"

The man leaned thoughtfully against the bars. "Our people are slaves. They have learned to obey their masters. It is hard to say, android. They would rally to a hopeful cause—but this seems a hopeless one."

"So it seems. I have planted a seed in the mind of the one known as Kepol. He also thinks it is hopeless, but when he sees a certain thing, the seed may bloom into panic. He underestimates us now. If later he comes to overestimate us, we may have a chance."

"What do you propose to do?"

Falon was loath to take the initiative and tell a soul-man what to do. It seemed somehow improper to him. "Tell me," he asked cautiously, "can you fly the skyboats in which the invaders brought you?"



The man chuckled grimly. "Why not? It was our civilization that built them. The invaders were but savages on Mars, before we came to teach them our ways. They learned from us, then enslaved us. Yes, we can fly the rockets. But why do you ask?"

"I am uncertain as yet. Tell me another thing. How did the one man escape?"

The man frowned, then shook his head. "This, I shall not tell you. We were months in preparing his escape. And the way is still open. Others might follow him. I cannot trust you yet, android,"

Falon made no protest. "You've told me what I want to know—that others can escape. Can many go at once?"

The man was thoughtful for a moment. "It would take a little time—to evacuate the entire man pen. But the others are already outside, working on the city."

"They will be brought back soon," Falon said dogmatically. "Wait and see."

The man smiled faintly. "You're sure of yourself, android. You tempt me to trust you."

"It would be best."

"Very well. The escape route is only a tunnel from beneath your cot to the center of the city." The man glanced around at the towers, then tossed Falon a key. "This will unlock your door. We filed it from a spoon. Let your unlocking of it be a signal. I'll speak to the others if they return, as you say."

Man and android eyed each other for a moment through the bars.

"Can you get word to the ones who are working on the city?" Falon asked.

The man nodded. "That is possible. What would you have them know?"

"Tell them to watch the forests. Tell them to set up a cry that the tribes are coming to save us."

"You think this will frighten our captors, android?"

"No, they will laugh. But when the time comes, the thought will be in their minds—and perhaps we can change it to fear."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose it can do no harm. We'll keep you informed about the fire's progress. If the wind doesn't change, it should burn quickly toward the valley."

The man departed, and Falon lay back upon the cot to think of Ea in the throne room. He had no doubt of her fate. When the king was finished with her, she would be assigned to the android pen for fattening. He had given her over into the sensual hands of the invader, and he resolved to atone for it by sheer recklessness when the time came for action. If the gods watched, then perhaps his own blood would pay for whatever she was suffering.

But another thought occupied his mind. The soul-man had called him "brother"—and the memory of the word lingered. It blended with the death-chant which Ea had sung for Daher when he went to die in the manner of his tribe—"The Song of the Soul-Empty Ones." "Brother," the man had said. Did one call an animal "brother"? Yet the man knew he was an android.

Several old men moved about in the stockade. Apparently their duties were to "keep house" for the younger laborers. Falon wondered about the women. None were visible. Perhaps they had been left upon the invaders' world. Or perhaps the invaders had other plans for women.

Soon he heard the sound of distant shouting from the direction of the city, but could make no sense of it. Apparently, however, the workmen were setting up a cry that rescue was imminent. If only they would come to believe it themselves!

The hypodermic injection was taking effect. He felt a ravenous hunger that made his stomach tighten into a knot of pain. A horrifying thought struck him suddenly, and he shouted to the men in the yard at the stockade. One of them approached him slowly.

"Tell me, soul-man," Falon breathed. "What sort of food do the invaders bring you? Is there any—meat?"

The man stiffened and turned away. "Once they brought us meat, android. Three men ate of it. We saw that the three met with ... uh, fatal accidents. Since then, the Mars-Lords have brought us only fish and greens."

He moved away, his back rigid with insult. Falon tried to call an apology after him, but could find no words.

The sunlight was growing gloomy with the smoke of the forest fires, but the wind had died. Falon prayed that it would not reverse itself and come out of the east.

He examined his chains and found the sleeve which fastened them to the cot was loose. The soul-men had evidently pried it slightly open. Then he found that the bolts which fastened the cot legs to the concrete floor had been worked free, then returned to their places. They could be extracted with a slight tug, the plate unscrewed, and the sleeve slipped off the leg. But he left them in place, lest a guard come. Beneath the cot was a dusty sheet of steel which evidently covered the tunnel's mouth.

When a guard brought food, Falon devoured it before the creature left his cell and begged for more.

"You will be fat indeed, android," chuckled the Martian.

Toward sunset, a clamor in the courtyard told him that the soul-men were being returned to the stockade. The light had grown forge-red, and the air was acrid with faint-smoke smell. The man, who was called Penult, came again to Falon's cell.

"The smoke obscures our vision, android," he said. "The Mars-Lords have sent a patrol to police the edge of the hills, but we can longer see them." He frowned. "The lords seem worried about something. They scuttle about chattering among them-selves, and they listen secretly to their radios."

"Radios?"



"The voices with which they speak to the patrol. I think they are preparing to send others. Helicopters are taking off, but the smoke must choke their visibility. What can be happening?"

"The tribes are attacking, of course," lied Falon. He noticed that the wind had arisen again. It was sweeping the smoke along in the downdrafts from the foothills.

"What are your plans, android?" asked Penult. Several others had gathered behind him, but he hissed them away lest they attract the suspicion of the watchtowers.

"Wait until the invaders become desperate and send too many on their patrols. Then we shall rise up against the ones that re-main."

"Be we have no weapons."

"We have surprise. We have fear. We have your tunnel. And we must have lightning swiftness. If you can gain access to their skyboats, can you destroy them or fly them?"

Penult shook his head doubtfully. "We will discuss it among ourselves. I will see what the others wish to do." He moved away.

Dusk fell. Lights flickered on from the watchtowers, bathing the stockade in smoky brilliance. The courtyard was thronging with soul-men who wandered freely about their common barracks. Beyond the wall of the man pen, the evening was filled with angry and anxious sounds as the Mars-Lords readied more patrols for battle.

Falon knew that if they remained about the city, they would be safe. But the first patrol had undoubtedly been engulfed in the tide of wild dogs that swept from the forests. Their weapons would be ineffective in the blanket of smoke that settled about them. And the gaunt dog packs would be crazed by fear of the fire. Thousands of the brutes had rolled out across the plain, and the small patrol had been taken by surprise. The horsemen would come last. They would wait until the dogs had gone before they fled the fires. Perhaps they would arrive in time to see the dogs devouring the bodies of their gods. Perhaps then they would attack.

Penult stopped at Falon's cell. "We have managed to contact the android pen," he said. "In a few moments they will start a riot within their stockade, to distract the watchtower guards. Be ready to unlock the door."

"Good, Soul-Penult! Pick us a dozen good men to rush the towers when we come from the tunnel. Let them go first, and I will be with them."

Penult shrugged. "It is as good a way to die as any."

Falon tugged the bolts from the floor, and slipped the chain's sleeve from the leg of his cot. The manacles were still fastened to his ankles and wrists, but he decided that they might make good weapons.

One of the searchlights winked away from the courtyard. Falon watched its hazy beam stab toward the opposite end of the city. Then he heard dim sounds of distant shouting. The riot had begun. Other lights followed the first, leaving the man pen illuminated only by the floods about the walls.

Quickly he slipped from his cot and moved to the door. A soul-man sidled in front of his cell to block the view from the towers while Falon twisted the key in the lock. Then he pushed the cot aside. A man came to help him move the steel plate. They pushed it away noiselessly, and the tunnel's mouth yawned beneath them. The cell was filling with men while the guard's eyes were distracted toward the android pen.

"We are all here, android," a voice whispered.

Falon glanced doubtfully toward the courtyard. The men were thronging near the cell, kicking up dust to obscure the tower's vision. Evidently they had not seen; for Falon was certain that the invaders would not hesitate to blister the entire group with their flamethrowers if they suspected escape. Already there were sounds of explosions from the other end of the city. Perhaps they were massacring the inhabitants of the other pen. He thought grimly of Ea.

A man had lowered himself into the tunnel. Falon followed him quickly, to be swallowed by damp and cramped blackness. They proceeded on their hands and knees.

Falon called back over his shoulder. "Tell the others to wait for us to emerge before they enter."

"They're setting the barracks and the stockade walls on fire, android," hissed the man behind him. "It will provide another distraction."

It was a long crawl from the stockade to the center of the city. He thought grimly of the possibility that the tunnel would be discovered by guards coming to quench the barracks fire. The small party might emerge into the very arms of the waiting Mars-Lords.

The tunnel was not made for comfort, and Falon's chains hindered his progress. He became entangled frequently, and bruised his kneecaps as he tripped over them. There was no room to turn around. If guards met them at the exit there could be no retreat.

The lead man stopped suddenly. "We're here!" he hissed. "Help me hoist the slab of rock, android."

Falon lay upon his back and pressed his feet against the ceiling. It moved upward. A slit of dim light appeared. The soul-man peered outside, then fell back with a whimper of fright.

"A guard!" he gasped. "Not a dozen feet away! He's watching the man pen."

Falon cursed softly and lowered the lid of the exit. "Did he see the stone move?" he asked.

"NO! But he seemed to hear it."

Suddenly there was a dull thumping sound from overhead. The guard was stomping on the stone slab, listening to its hollowness.



With an angry growl, Falon tensed his legs, then heaved. The stone opened upward, carrying the guard off balance. He fell with the slab across his leg, and his shriek was but another sound in the general melee as Falon burst upon him and kicked his weapon aside. The Martian, still shrieking, fumbled at something in his belt. Falon kicked him to death before he brought it into play.

The dozen soul-men climbed out into the gloom and raced for the black shadows of a half-completed masonry wall in the heart of the growing city. One of them seized the small weapon in the guard's belt, while Falon caught up the flamethrower.

The city was lighted only by the dim smoky aura of searchlights aimed at the man pens. The riot had diminished in the android pen, but an occasional burst of sharp explosions belched toward it from one of the watchtowers. Falon's people were sacrificing them-selves to draw attention away from the soul-men.

"Split in two groups!" Falon hissed. "Tackle the two nearest towers."

They separated and diverged, following the shadows of the walls. Leadership was impossible, for the operation was too hastily planned. Falon trusted in the hope that each man's mind had been long occupied with thoughts of escape, and that each knew the weakest spots in the invaders' defenses.

A few of the searchlights were stabbing out toward the west, where sounds of the dog packs were becoming faintly perceptible. Somewhere out upon the plains, the invaders' patrols were tiny island-fortresses in the infiltrating wave of dogs and horsemen. They could easily form into tight groups and defend themselves against the hordes with their explosives and flamethrowers, but they would be unable to stem the tide of flesh whose only real de-sire was to escape the fires. But some of the Natani might be attacking, when they saw that the dogs did not regard the Mars-Lords as their masters.

* * *

At the corner of the city, Falon's group found itself within stone's throw of a tower. They crouched in the darkness for a moment, watching the lights sweep westward. For now that the futile android riot was put down, the guards saw no threat save the unreal one on the plains. The threat's grimness was increased by the shroud of smoke that hid it and gave it mystery in the Martian eyes.

The man who had seized the belt weapon nudged Falon and whispered, "I'll stay here and cover your dash, android."

Falon nodded and glanced around quickly. They would be within the floodlights' glow, once they bounded across the wall-scurrying targets for all the towers. Suddenly he gasped. A man was running up the ladder of the tower to which the other group had gone. A searchlight caught him in its pencil. Then a blast of machine-gun fire plucked him off and sent him pitching earth-ward.

"Hurry!" Falon barked, and leaped across the wall.

They sprinted single file toward the base of the tower. A light winked down to splash them with brilliance. The man fired from the shadows behind them, and the light winked out. Dust sprayed up about Falon's feet as the guards shot from overhead. A streak of flame lanced downward, and two of the men screamed as it burst upward in a small inferno. The covering fire brought a guard hurtling from the tower. Falon leaped over his body and began scaling the steel ladder toward the cage.

A roar of voices came from the man pens. The barracks were blazing while a handful of guards played hoses over the walls.

Falon climbed steadily, expecting at an moment to feel a searing burst of flame spray over him. But the guards above him were firing blindly toward the shadows whence came the covering fire. And the other towers were playing their lights about their own skirts, watching for similar attacks.

A slug ricocheted off the hatchway as he burst through it into the cage. Another tore through his thigh as he whipped the chain in a great arc, lashing it about the legs of one of the guards. He jerked the creature off his feet, then dived at the other, who was trying to bring a machine gun into play. The android's attack swept him off balance, and Falon heaved him bodily from the tower.

Another man burst through the hatch and disposed of the guard who was being dragged about by Falon's chain.

Falon threw himself to the floor as a burst of bullets sprayed the open space above the waist-high steel walls of the cage. The nearest tower had opened fire upon them. Falon leaped for the permanently mounted flamethrower and sent a white-hot jet arcing toward the other cage. It fell short. He tried another burst, arcing it higher. It splashed home and the incendiary made a small furnace of the other tower, from which the guards hastily descended. The other towers were beyond flame-gun range, but they sprayed Falon's newly won outpost with machine-gun fire.

"Lie flat!" shouted the man. "The armor will turn back the bullets."

Falon flung himself headlong while the rain of small-arms fire pelted the steel walls. He ripped a sleeve from his rawhide jacket and made a tourniquet for his flesh wound. "Where are the other four?" he gasped.

"Dead," shouted his companion above the din.

A crashing roar came from the direction of the man pen. The barrage suddenly ceased. Falon chanced a glance over the low rim of the cage. One wall of the flaming stockade had collapsed, and men were pouring through the broken gap to overwhelm the fire-men. The towers were turning their weapons upon the torrent of escapees. Falon's companion manned the machine gun and turned it on the invaders. "We'll draw their fire!" he called.

The second group had taken their objective, and another tower had fallen into the rebels' hands. Men poured through the stockade gap while the towers exchanged fire among themselves.

"They're trying to make it to the ships!" the gunner called. Then he fell back with half his face torn away.



Falon crawled to the gun and tried to operate it, but being unfamiliar with the god-weapons, he was only exposing himself to death. He dropped it in favor of the flamethrower, lay beside the hatch, and shot down at the occasional unfortunate Martian that scurried within his range.

Several of the towers were silent now, including the other captive one. Falon slipped through the hatch and climbed down the steel ladder. His descent went unnoticed as the battle raged about the city and among the ships. He noticed that fire was spurting from several rockets, but they were still in the hands of the invader; for the man pen's escapees were still fighting for possession of the nearest ship.

Falon sprinted for the city's wall as a pair of wild dogs attacked him from the shadows. He fried them with a blast from the flame gun, then hurdled the wall and climbed atop a heap of masonry. Most of the lights were out now, and the darkness was illuminated only by the flaming stockade. The wild-dog packs were trotting in from the west, mingling in the battle to attack man, android, and Martian alike.

One of the ships blasted off into the night, but Falon felt certain that it was not commanded by men. It was the throne ship, in which the king resided. Another followed it; but the second seemed to be piloted by the escapees.

The battle had become chaos. Falon stumbled through the masonry, stepping over an occasional body, and looking for a fight. But most of the Martians had taken up positions about the ships. He noticed that few of them were among the dead, who were mostly men and androids. But the rebels could afford to lose more than the Martians.

A few horsemen were joining the fray as the battle on the plains moved eastward. They rode into the tides of flesh that rolled about the ships. Falon saw a rider spit a Martian on his dog-spike and lift him to the saddle. The Martian shot him, then fell back to be tram-pled by the horse.

The two ships were returning. Falon flung himself down behind a wall as the throne ship shrieked past, splashing a wide swath of blinding brightness down the length of the city. The second ship, which had been in hot pursuit, nosed upward and spiraled off over the ocean to make a wide circle in the opposite direction. Falon, sensing a sky battle, ducked quickly out of the city's walls, caught the bridle of a runaway horse, and swung into the saddle.

The throne ship was coming back for another run, while the other was streaking back from the south. Falon realized vaguely what the man-pilot meant to do. He glanced toward the ground battle. It had subsided, and the warriors were scurrying for cover. Shrieks of "Collision!" and "Explosion!" arose from the mobs.

Hardly knowing what to expect, Falon decided quickly to follow their example. He reined the mare to a standstill, then swung out of the saddle and clung to her flank, hiding himself from the approaching ships. He saw them come together as he ducked his head behind the mare's neck.

The ground beneath him became bathed in pale violet. Then a dazzling and unearthly brilliance made him close his eyes. For several seconds there was no sound, save the snarls of the dog packs. Then the force of a thousand avalanches struck him. He fell beneath the mare, still guarding his face behind her neck. The breath went out of him in a surge of blackness. He struggled for a moment, then lay quietly in ever-deepening night.

Daylight awakened him, gloomy gray dawnlight. The mare had tried to stagger to her feet, but had fallen again a few feet away. The valley was silent, save for the whisper of ocean breakers in the distance. He sat up weakly and knew that some of his ribs were broken. He looked around.

The plain was littered with bodies of dogs, men, and Martians. A spiral of smoke arose lazily from the wreckage. Then he saw figures moving about in the ruins. He managed a feeble shout, and two of them approached him. One was man, the other android. He knew neither of them, but the man seemed to recognize him as the prisoner who had occupied the cell in the man pen. Falon lowered his head and moaned with pain. The man knelt beside him.

"We've been looking for you, android," he murmured.

Falon glanced at the destruction again, and murmured guiltily. The man chuckled, and helped him to his feet. "We've got a chance now," he said. "We can go to the ancient cities for the hid-den weapons before the Martians can send a fleet. Mars won't even find out about it for a while. The ships were all damaged in that blast."

"Were many killed?"

"Half of us perhaps. You androids are lucky. Our ancestors gave you a resistance against radiation burns—so you wouldn't mutate from the residual radioactivity left by the last war."

Falon failed to understand. "Not so lucky," he muttered. "*Our* dead do not go to the Place of Watching."

The man eyed him peculiarly, then laughed gently. Falon

flushed slightly; for the laughter had seemed to call him a child. "Come, android," the man said. "People are waiting for you." "Who?"

"A surly old codger who says he's your father, and a girl who says she's your woman."

Falon moved a few steps between them, then sagged heavily. "He's unconscious," said the android, "or dead."

They lifted him gently in their arms. "Hell!" grunted the human. "Did you ever see a dead man *grin*?"