

Blood's A Rover

By Chad Oliver

It's a very hard thing indeed for a man to define what he means by "good"—and hard, sometimes, to see good in the misery, disorganization and squalor that results

Illustrated by van Dongen.

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[Notes](#)

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
Breath's a ware that will not keep.
Up, lad: when the journey's over
There'll be time enough to sleep.
A. E. Housman.

I.

Night sifted through the city like flakes of soft black snow drifting down from the stars. It whispered along the tree-lined canyons between the clean shafts of white buildings and pressed darkly against windows filled with warm light. Conan Lang watched the illumination in his office increase subtly in adjusting to the growing darkness outside and then looked again at the directive he held in his hand.

It still read the same way.

"Another day, another world," he said aloud. And then, paraphrasing: "The worlds are too much with us—"

Conan Lang fired up his pipe and puffed carefully on it to get it going properly. Then he concentrated on blowing neat cloudy smoke rings that wobbled across the room and impaled themselves on the nose of the three-dimensional portrait of the President. It wasn't that he had anything against President Austin, he assured himself. It was simply that Austin represented that nebulous being, Authority, and at the moment it happened that Authority was singularly unwelcome in the office of Conan Lang.

He looked back at the directive. The wording was friendly and informal-enough, but the meaning was clear:

Headquarters, Gal. Administration.
Office of Admiral Nelson White,
Commander, Process Planning Division.
15 April, 2701. Confidential.

One Agent Conan Lang
Applied Process Corps
G.A. Department Seven

Conan: We got another directive from the Buzzard yesterday. Seems that the powers that be have decided that a change in Sirius Ten is in order—a shift from Four to Five. You're it. Make a prelim check and report to me at your convenience. Cheer up—maybe you'll get another bag of medals out of

it.

Nelson.

Conan Lang left the directive on his desk and got to his feet. He walked over to the window and looked out at the lights sprinkled over the city. There weren't many. Most people were long ago home in the country, sitting around the living room, playing with the kids. He puffed slowly on his pipe.

Another bag of medals. Nelson wasn't kidding anybody—wasn't even trying to, really. He knew how Conan felt because he felt the same way. They all did, sooner or later. It was fascinating at first, even fun, this tampering with the lives of other people. But the novelty wore off in a hurry—shriveled like flesh in acid under a million eyes of hate, a million talks with your soul at three in the morning, a million shattered lives. Sure, it was necessary. You could always tell yourself that; that was the charm, the magic word that was supposed to make everything fine and dandy. Necessary—but for *you*, not for them. Or perhaps for them too, in the long run.

Conan Lang returned to his desk and flipped on the intercom. "I want out," he said. "The Administration Library, Division of Extraterrestrial Anthropology. I'd like to speak to Bailey if he's there."

He had to wait thirty seconds.

"Bailey here," the intercom said.

"This is Lang. What've you got on Sirius Ten?"

"Just like that, huh? Hang on a second."

There was a short silence. Conan Lang smoked his pipe slowly and smiled as he visualized Bailey punching enough buttons to control a space fleet.

"Let's see," Bailey's voice came through the speaker. "We've got a good bit. There's McAllister's 'Kinship Systems of Sirius Ten'; Jenkins'—that's B. J. Jenkins, the one who worked with Holden—'Sirius Ten Social Organization'; Barthelm's 'Economic Life of Sirius Ten'; Robert Patterson's 'Basic Personality Types of the Sirius Group'; 'Preliminary and Supplementary Ethnological Surveys of the Galactic Advance Fleet'—the works."

Conan Lang sighed. "O.K.," he said. "Shoot them out to my place, will you?"

"Check—be there before you are. One thing more, Cone."

"Yes?"

"Been reading a splendid eight-volume historical novel of the Twentieth Century. Hot stuff, I'll tell you. You want me to send it along in case you run out of reading material?"

"Very funny. See you around."

"So long."

Conan Lang switched off the intercom and destroyed the directive. He lapped out his pipe in the waster and left the office, locking the door behind him. The empty hallway was sterile and impersonal. It seemed dead at night, somehow, and it was difficult to believe that living, breathing human beings walked through it all day long. It was like a tunnel to nowhere. He had the odd feeling that there was nothing around it at all, just space and less than space—no building, no air, no city. Just a white antiseptic tunnel to nowhere.

He shook off the feeling and caught the lift to the roof. The cool night air was crisp and clean and there was a whisper of a breeze out of the north. A half moon hung in the night, framed by stars. He looked up at it and wondered how Johnny was getting along up there, and whether perhaps Johnny was even then looking down on Earth.

Conan Lang climbed into his bullet and set the controls. The little ship rose vertically on her copter blades for two thousand feet, hovered a moment over the silent city, and then flashed off on her jets into the west.

Conan Lang sat back in his cushioned seat, looking at the stars, trying not to think, letting the ship carry him home.

Conan Lang relaxed in his armchair, his eyes closed, an icy bourbon and soda in his hand. The books he had requested—neat, white, uniform microfilm blowups from the Administration Library—were stacked neatly on the floor by his side, waiting. Waiting, he thought, sipping his drink. They were always waiting. No matter how much a man knew, there was always more—waiting.

The room closed in around him. He could feel it—warm, friendly, personal. It was a good room. It was a room filled with life, his life and Kit's. It was almost as if he could see the room better with his eyes closed, for then he saw the past as well as the present. There was the silver and black tapestry on the wall, given to him by old Maharani so long ago, on a world so far away that the very light given off by its sun when he was there had yet to reach the Earth as the twinkle of a star in the night sky. There were his books, there were Kit's paintings, there was the smudge—the current one—on the carpet where Rob had tracked dirt into the house before supper.

He opened his eyes and looked at his wife.

"I must be getting old, Kit," he said. "Right at the moment, it all looks pretty pointless."

Kit raised her eyebrows and said nothing.

"We tear around over the galaxy like a bunch of kids playing Spacemen and Pirates," he said, downing his drink. "Push here, pull there, shove here, reverse there. It's like some kind of half-wit game where one side doesn't even know it's playing, or on which side of the field. Sometimes—"

"Want another drink?" Kit asked softly.

"Yes. Kit—"

"I know," she said, touching his shoulder with her hand. "Go ahead and talk; you'll feel better. We go through this every time there's a new one, remember? I know you don't really mean things the way you say them, and I know why you say them that way anyhow." She kissed him lightly on the forehead and her lips were cool and patient. "I understand."

Conan Lang watched her leave the room with his empty glass. "Yes," he whispered to himself. "Yes, I guess you do."

It *was* necessary, of course. Terribly, urgently necessary. But it got to you sometimes. All those people out there, living their lives, laughing and crying, raising children. It hurt you to think about them. And it wasn't necessary for them, not for him, not for Kit. Or was it? You couldn't tell; there was always a chance. But if only they could just forget it all, just live, there was so much to enjoy—

Kit handed him a fresh bourbon and soda, icy and with just a trace of lemon in it the way he liked it, and then curled up again on the couch, smiling at him.

“I’m sorry, angel,” he said. “You must get pretty sick of hearing the same sad song over and over again.”

“Not when you sing it, Cone.”

“It’s just that sometimes I chuck my mind out the nearest window and wonder why—“

There was a thump and a bang from the rear of the house. Conan Lang tasted his drink. That meant Rob was home. He listened, waiting. There was the hollow crack—that was the bat going into the corner. There was the heavy thud—that was the fielder’s glove.

“That’s why,” Kit said.

Conan Lang nodded and picked up the first book off the floor.

Three days later, Conan Lang went up the white steps, presented his credentials, and walked into the Buzzard’s Cage. The place made him nervous. Irritated with himself, he paused deliberately and lit his pipe before going on. The Cage seemed cold, inhuman. And the Buzzard—

He shouldn’t feel that way, he told himself, again offering his identification before entering the lift to the Nest. Intellectually, he understood cybernetics; there was nothing supernatural about it. The Cage was just a machine, for all its powers, even if the Buzzard did sometimes seem more—or perhaps less—than a man. Still, the place gave him the creeps. A vast thinking machine, filling a huge building, a brain beside which his own was as nothing. Of course, men had built it. Men made guns, too, but the knowledge was scant comfort when you looked into a metallic muzzle and someone pulled the trigger.

“Lang,” he said to himself, “you’re headed for the giggle ward.”

He smiled then, knowing it wasn’t so. Imagination was a prime requisite for his job, and he just had more than his share. It got in the way sometimes, but it was a part of him and that was that.

Conan Lang waded through a battery of attendants and security personnel and finally reached the Nest. He opened the door and stepped into the small, dark room. There, behind the desk where he always was, perched the Buzzard.

“Hello, Dr. Gottlieb,” said Conan Lang.

The man behind the desk eyed him silently. His name was Fritz Gottlieb, but he had been tagged the Buzzard long ago. No one used the name to his face, and it was impossible to tell whether or not the name amused him. He spoke but seldom, and his appearance, even after you got used to it, was startling. Fritz Gottlieb was squat and completely bald. He always dressed in black and his heavy eyebrows were like horizontal splashes of ink against the whiteness of his face. The Buzzard analogy, thought Conan Lang, was more than understandable; it was inevitable. The man sat high in his tower, in his Nest of controls, brooding over a machine that perhaps he alone fully understood. Alone. He always seemed alone, no matter how many people surrounded him. His was a life apart, a life whose vital force pulsed in the shifting lights of the tubes of a great machine.

“Dr. Lang,” he acknowledged, unmoving, his voice sibilant, almost a hiss.

Conan Lang puffed on his pipe and dropped into the chair across from Gottlieb. He had dealt with the Buzzard before and most of the shock had worn off. You could get used to anything, he supposed. Man was a very adaptable animal.

“The smoke doesn’t bother you, I hope?”

Gottlieb did not comment. He simply stared at him, his dark eyes unblinking. Like looking at a piece of meat, thought Conan Lang.

“Well,” he said, trying again, “I guess you know what I’m here for.”

“You waste words,” Fritz Gottlieb hissed.

“I hadn’t realized they were in short supply,” Lang replied, smiling. The Buzzard was irritating, but he could see the justice in the man’s remark. It *was* curious the number of useless things that were said all the time—useless, at any rate, from a purely communicative point of view. It would have been sheerly incredible for Gottlieb—who after all had been checking his results in the computer—*not* to have known the nature of his mission.

“O.K.,” said Lang, “what’s the verdict?”

Fritz Gottlieb fingered a square card in his surprisingly long-fingered hands, seeming to hover over it like a bird of prey.

“It checks out,” he said sibilantly, his voice low and hard to hear. “Your plan will achieve the desired transfer in Sirius Ten, and the transfer integrates positively with the Plan.”

“Anything else? Anything I should know?”

“We should all know many more things than we do, Dr. Lang.”

“Um-m-m. But that was all the machine said with respect to my proposed plan of operations?”

“That was all.”

Conan Lang sat back, watching Gottlieb. A strange man. But he commanded respect.

“I’d like to get hold of that baby sometime,” he said easily. “I’ve got a question or two of my own.”

“Sometimes it is best not to know the answers to one’s questions, Dr. Lang.”

“No. But I’d like to have a shot at it all the same. Don’t tell the security boys I said that; they’d string me up by the toes.”

“Perhaps one day, Dr. Lang. When you are old like me.”

Conan Lang stood up, cupping his pipe in his hand. “I guess that’s all,” he said.

“Yes,” said Fritz Gottlieb.

“See you around.”

No answer. Cold shadows seemed to fill the room.

Conan Lang turned and left the way he had come. Behind him, drilling into his back, he could feel the eyes of Fritz Gottlieb following him, cold and deep like the frozen waters of an arctic sea.

The ship stood on Earth but she was not of Earth. She was poised, a mighty lance of silver, a creature of the deeps. She waited, impatient, while Conan Lang slowly walked across the vast duralloy tarmac of Space One, Admiral White at his side. The sun was bright in a clean blue sky. It touched the ship with lambent flame and warmed Conan Lang’s shoulders under his uniform. A slight puff of breeze rustled across the spaceport, pushing along a stray scrap of white paper ahead of it.

“Here we go again,” said Conan Lang.

“That’s what you get for being good,” the admiral said with a smile. “You get good enough and you’ll get my job—which ought to be a grim enough prospect even for you. If you’re smart, you’ll botch this job six ways from Sunday and then we’ll have to give you a rest.”

“Yeah—play a little joke, strictly for laughs, and give ’em an atom bomb or two to stick on the ends of their hatchets. Or take ’em back to the caves. There are plenty of delicious possibilities.”

The two men walked on, toward the silver ship.

“Everything’s set, I suppose?” asked Conan Lang.

“Yep. Your staff is already on board and the stuff is loaded.”

“Any further instructions?”

“No—you know your business or you wouldn’t be going. Just try to make it as quick as you can, Cone. They’re getting warm over on Research on that integration-acceleration principle for correlating data—it’s going to be big and I’ll want you around when it breaks.”

Conan Lang grinned. “What happens if I just up and disappear one day, Nels? Does the galaxy moan and lie down and quit?”

“Search me,” said Admiral Nelson White. “But don’t take any more risks than you absolutely have to. Don’t get the idea that you’re indispensable, either. It’s just that it’s tiresome to break in new men.”

“I’ll try to stay alive if you’re positive that’s what you want.”

They approached the ship. Kit and Rob were waiting. The admiral touched his cap and moved on, leaving Conan Lang alone with his family. Kit was lovely—she always was, Conan Lang thought. He couldn’t imagine a life without her.

“Bye, darlin’,” he whispered, taking her in his arms: “One of these days I’m coming back and I’m never going to leave you again.”

“This is till then,” Kit said softly and kissed him for keeps.

Much later, Conan Lang released her and shook hands with his son.

“So long, old-timer,” he said.

“Hurry back, Dad,” Rob said, trying not to cry.

Conan Lang turned and joined Admiral White at the star cruiser. He did not look back.

“Good luck, Cone,” the admiral said, patting him on the back. “I’ll keep the medals warm and a light in the cabin window.”

“O.K., Nels,” said Conan Lang.

He swung aboard the great ship and stepped into the lift. There was a muted hum of machinery as the car whispered up through the pneumatic tube, up into the hollowness of the ship. Already it seemed to Conan Lang that he had left Earth far behind him. The endless-loneliness of the star trails rode up with him in the humming lift.

The ship rested, quiescent, on Earth. Ahead of her, calling to her, the stars flamed coldly in an infinite sea of night.

II.

Conan Lang walked down the long white corridor to the afterhold, his footsteps muffled and almost inaudible in the murmur of the atomics. It *would* be a long white corridor, he thought to himself. Wherever man went, there went the long white corridors—offices, hospitals, command posts. It was almost as if he had spent half a lifetime walking through long white corridors, and now here was yet another one—cold and antiseptic, hanging in space eight light-years from Earth.

“Halt.”

“Lang here,” he told the Fleetman. “Kindly point that thing the other way.”

“Identification, please.”

Lang sighed and handed it over. The man should know him by now; after all, the ship was on his mission, and he was hardly a subversive character. Still, orders were orders—a principle that covered a multitude of sins. And they couldn’t afford to take chances, not *any* chances.

“All right, sir,” the Fleetman said, returning the identification. “Sorry to bother you.”

“Forget it,” said Conan Lang. “Keep your eye peeled for space pirates.”

The guard smiled. “Who’d want to steal space, sir?” he asked. “It’s free and I reckon there’s enough to go around.”

“Your inning,” acknowledged Conan Lang, moving into the afterhold. The kid was already there.

“Hello, sir,” said Andrew Irvin.

“Hi, Andy—and cut the ‘sir,’ what do you say? You make me feel like I should be extinct or embalmed or something.”

The kid smiled almost shyly. Conan Lang had half expected to find him there in the hold; Andy was always poking around, asking questions, trying to learn. His quick brown eyes and alert carriage reminded Conan of a young hunting dog, frisking through the brush, perpetually on the verge of flushing the grandfather of all jack rabbits.

“It doesn’t seem possible, does it?” asked the kid.

Conan Lang raised his eyebrows.

“All this, I mean,” Andy Irvin said, gesturing at the neat brown sacks stacked row upon row in the brightly lighted hold. “To think that a couple of sacks of that stuff can remold a planet, change the lives of millions of people—”

“It’s not just the sacks, Andy. It took man a good many hundreds of thousands of years to learn what to *do* with those sacks.”

“Yes, sir,” the kid said, hanging on every word.

“No ‘sir,’ remember? I’m not giving you a lecture, and you don’t have to look attentive. I’m sure that elementary anthropology isn’t *too* dumfounding to a guy who took honors at the Academy.”

“Well—”

“Never mind.” Conan Lang eyed him speculatively. The kid reminded him, almost too much, of someone else—a kid named Conan Lang who had started out on a great adventure himself too many years ago. “I... um-m-m... guess you know you’re going to work with me on Ten.”

Andy looked like Conan had just handed him a harem on a silver platter. “No, sir,” he said. “I didn’t know. Thank you, sir.”

“The name is Conan.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hellfire,” said Conan Lang. How did you go about telling a kid that you were happy to have someone around with stars in his eyes again? Without sounding like a fool? The answer was simple—you didn’t.

“I can’t wait,” Andy said. “To really *do* something at last—it’s a great feeling. I hope I’ll do O.K.”

“It won’t be long now, Andy. Twenty-four hours from now you and I go to work. The buggy ride is about over.”

The two men fell silent then, looking at the neat brown rows of sacks, feeling the star ship tremble slightly under them with the thunder of her great atomics.

It was night on Sirius Ten—a hot, humid night with a single moon hanging like frozen fire in the darkness. A small patrol craft from the cruiser floated motionless in the night sky, her batteries pouring down a protective screen around the newly-cleared field. Conan Lang wiped the sweat from his forehead and washed his hands off in the clean river water that gurgled through the trench at his feet.

“That about does it, Andy,” he said wearily. “Toss ’em a Four signal.”

Andy Irvin turned the rheostat on his small control board to Four and flipped the switch. They waited, listening to the faint murmur of the night breeze off the river. There was no change, nothing that they could see, but they could almost feel the intense radiation pounding into the field from the patrol ship, seeping into the ground, accelerating by thousands of times the growth factor in the seeds.

“That’s got it,” said Conan Lang. “Give ’em release.”

Andy shot the patrol craft the release signal and shut off his control board. The little ship seemed to hover uncertainly. There was a humming sound and a spot of intense white light in the sky. That was all. The ship was gone and they were alone.

“It’s been a long night, kid,” yawned Conan Lang. “We’d better get some sack time—we’re liable to need it before morning.”

“You go ahead,” Andy Irvin said. “I’m not sleepy; the sunrise here ought to be something.”

“Yeah,” said Conan Lang. “The sunrise ought to be something.”

He walked across the field and entered a structure that closely resembled a native hut in appearance but was actually quite, quite different. Too tired even to undress, he piled into bed with his clothes on and rested quietly in the darkness.

The strange, haunting, familiar-with-a-difference sounds of an alien world whispered around the hut on the soft, moist breeze from the sluggish river. Far away, an animal screamed hoarsely in the clogging brush. Conan Lang kept his eyes closed and tried not to think, but his mind ignored him. It went right on

working, asking questions, demanding answers, bringing up into the light many memories that were good and some that were better forgotten.

“Kit,” he said, very softly.

Tired as he was, he knew there would be no sleep for him that night.

The sunrise was a glory. The blue-white inferno of Sirius hung in the treetops across the field and then climbed into the morning sky, her white dwarf companion a smaller sun by her side. The low cumulus clouds were edged with flame—fiery red, pale blue, cool green. The fresh morning winds washed the field with air and already the young plants were out of the ground, thirsty for the sun. The chuckling water in the trenches sparkled in the light.

With the morning, the natives came.

“They’re all around us,” Conan Lang said quietly.

“I can’t see them,” whispered Andy Irvin, looking at the brush.

“They’re there.”

“Do you... expect trouble, sir?”

“Not yet, assuming we’ve got this deal figured right. They’re more afraid of us than we are of them.”

“What if we *don’t* have it figured right?”

Conan Lang smiled. “Three guesses,” he said.

The kid managed a wry grin. He was taking it well, Lang thought. He remembered how he’d felt the first time. It didn’t really hit you until that first day, and then it upped and kicked you in the teeth. Quite suddenly, it was all a very different proposition from the manuals and the viewers and the classrooms of the Academy. *Just you, all alone*, the alien breeze sighed in your ear. *You’re all alone in the middle of nowhere*, the wind whispered through the trees. *Our eyes are watching you, our world is pressing you back, waiting. What do you know of us really? What good is your knowledge now?*

“What next?” Andy asked.

“Just tend the field, kid. And try to act like a ghost. You’re an ancestor of those people watching us from the brush, remember. If we’ve got this figured wrong—if those survey reports were haywire somewhere, or if someone’s been through here who didn’t belong—you should have a little warning at least. They don’t use blowguns or anything—just spears, and they’d prefer a hatchet. If there’s trouble, you hightail it back to the hut *at once* and man the projector. That’s all.”

“I’m not so sure I care to be an ancestor,” Andy Irvin muttered, picking up his hoe. “Not yet, anyhow.” He moved off along a water trench, checking on the plants.

Conan Lang picked up his own hoe and set to work. He could feel the natives watching him, wondering, whispering to themselves. But he was careful not to look around him. He kept his head down and dug at the plants with his hoe, clearing the water channels. The plants were growing with astonishing rapidity, thanks to the dose of radiation. They should be mature in a week. And then—

The sun blazed down on his treated skin and the sweat rolled off his body in tiny rivulets. The field was strangely silent around him; there was only the gurgle of the water and the soft sigh of the humid breeze. His hoe chopped and slushed at the mud and his back was tired from bending over so long. It

was too still, unnaturally still.

Behind that brush, back in the trees—a thousand eyes.

He did not look around. Step by step, he moved down the trench, under the hellish sun, working with his hoe.

The fire-burned days and the still, hushed nights alternated rapidly. On the morning of the third day, Andy Irvin found what they had been waiting for.

In the far corner of the field, placed on a rude wood platform about four feet high, there were three objects. There was a five-foot-square bark mat, neatly woven. There was a small animal that closely resembled a terrestrial pig, face down, its throat neatly slashed. And there was a child. It was a female baby, evidently not over a week old. It had been strangled to death.

“It’s... different... when you see it for yourself,” Andy said quietly, visibly shaken.

“You’ll get used to it,” said Conan Lang, his voice purposely flat and matter-of-fact. “Get the pig and the mat—and stop looking like a prohibitionist who just found a jug of joy water in the freezer. This is old stuff to ancestors.”

“Old stuff,” repeated Andy without conviction.

They carried the contents of the platform back to their hut and Conan Lang wrapped the body of the child in a cloth.

“We’ll bury her tonight after dark,” he said. “The pig we eat. It won’t do any harm to sit on the mat where they can see us while we’re eating it, either.”

“Well,” Andy muttered. “Glad to see you’re not going to eat the baby, too.”

“You never can tell,” smiled Conan Lang. “We anthropologists are all crazy, or hadn’t you heard?”

“I’ve heard,” agreed Andy Irvin, getting his nerves under control again. “Where’s the hot sauce?”

Conan Lang stepped back outside and picked up his hoe. The blazing double sun had already produced shimmering heat waves that danced like live things in the still air over the green field. The kid was going to be all right. He’d known it all along, of course—but you could never be *sure* of a man until you worked with him under field conditions. And a misfit, an unstable personality, was anything but a joke on an alien planet where unknowable forces hung in the balance.

“Let’s see if I’ve got this thing figured straight,” Andy said, puffing away on one of Conan’s pipes. “The natives are afraid of us, and still they feel that they must make us an offering because we, as their supposed ancestors, control their lives. So they pick a system of dumb barter rather than sending out the usual contact man to ferret out kinship connections.”

“You’re O.K. so far,” Conan Lang said. “I guess you’ve studied about the dumb barter systems used on Earth in the old days; it was used whenever trade took place between groups of markedly unequal strength, such as the African pygmies and trading vessels from the west. There’s a fear factor involved.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Forget the ‘sir.’ I didn’t mean to lecture. I think I’ll start calling you Junior.”

“Sorry. The bark mat is a unit in a reciprocal trade system and the pig is a sacred animal—I get that part of it. But the baby—that’s terrible, Conan. After all, we caused that death in a way—”

“Afraid not,” Conan Lang corrected him. “These people practice infanticide; it’s part of their religion. If the preliminary reports were correct—and they’ve checked out so far—they kill all the female children born on the last three days of alternate months. There’s an economic reason, too—not enough food to go around, and that’s a pretty effective method of birth control. The baby would have been killed regardless—we had nothing to do with it.”

“Still—”

“I know. But maybe she was the lucky one after all.”

“I don’t quite follow you there.”

“Skip it—you’ll find out soon enough.”

“What are you going to leave them tonight?”

“Not sure yet,” Conan Lang said. “We’ll have to integrate with their value system, of course. We brought some mats, and I guess a good steel knife won’t hurt things any. We’ll worry about that later. Come on, farmer—back to work.”

Andy Irvin picked up his hoe and followed Conan Lang into the field. The clear water bubbled softly as it flowed through the trenches. The growing plants sent their roots thirstily into the ground and the fresh green shoots stretched up like tentacles into the humid air of Sirius Ten.

That night, under the great yellow moon that swam far away and lonesome among the stars, they placed exchange gifts of their own on the platform. Next morning, the invisible traders had replaced them with four mats and another dead pig.

“No babies, anyhow,” Andy Irvin said, puffing industriously on one of Conan’s pipes. They had decided that cigarettes, as an unfamiliar cultural trait to the natives, were out. Now, with Andy taking with unholy enthusiasm to pipe smoking, Conan Lang was threatened with a shortage of tobacco. He watched the smoke from the kid’s pipe with something less than ecstasy.

“We can have smoked ham,” he observed.

“It was your idea,” Andy grinned.

“Call me ‘sir.’ ”

Andy laughed, relaxed now, and picked up the pig. Conan gathered up the somewhat cumbersome mats and followed him back into the hut. The hot, close sun was already burning his shoulders. The plants were green and healthy looking, and the air was a trifle fresher in the growing field.

“Now what?” Andy asked, standing outside the hut and letting the faint breeze cool him off as best it could.

“I figure we’re about ready for an overt contact,” Conan Lang said. “Everything has checked out beautifully so far, and the natives don’t seem to be suspicious or hostile. We might as well get the ball rolling.”

“The green branch, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

They still did not get a glimpse of the natives throughout the steaming day, and that night they placed a single mat on the platform. On top of the mat they put a slim branch of green leaves, twisted around back

on itself and tied loosely to form a circle. The green branch was by no means a universal symbol of peace, but, in this particular form, it chanced to be so on Sirius Ten. Conan Lang smiled a little. Man had found many curious things among the stars, and most of them were of just this unsensational but very useful sort.

By dawn, the mat and the circle branch were gone and the natives had left them nothing in return.

“Today’s the day,” Conan Lang said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “They’ll either give us the works or accept our offer. Nothing to do now but wait.”

They picked up their hoes and went back into the field. Waiting can be the most difficult of all things, and the long, hot morning passed without incident. The two men ate their lunch in silence, thankful for the odorless injection that kept the swarming insects away from them. Late in the afternoon, when the long blue shadows of evening were already touching the green plants and the clean, flowing water, the natives came.

There were five of them and they appeared to be unarmed. One man walked slightly in advance of the others, a circular branch of green leaves in his hand. Conan Lang waited for them, with Andy standing by at his side. It was moments like this, he thought, that made you suddenly realize that you were all alone and a long, long way from friends. The natives came on steadily. Conan felt a surge of admiration for the young man who led them. From his point of view, he was walking into a situation filled with the terror of the supernatural, which was a very real part of his life. His steps did not falter. He would, Conan supposed, be the eldest son of the most powerful chief.

The natives stopped when they were three paces away. Their leader extended the circular green branch. “We would serve you, fathers from the mountains,” the native said in his own tongue.

Conan Lang stepped forward and received the branch. “We are brothers,” he replied in the same language, “and we would be your friends.”

The native smiled, his teeth very white. “I am Ren,” he said. “I am your brother.”

Conan Lang kept his face expressionless, but deep within him a dark regret and sadness coursed like ice through his veins.

It had begun again.

III.

For many days, Conan Lang listened to the Oripesh natives preparing for the feast. Their small village, only a quarter of a mile from the field, was alive with excitement. The women prepared great piles of the staple rice-fruit and broiled river fish in great green leaves on hot coals. The men chanted and danced interminably, cleansing the village by ritual for the coming visitation, while the children, forgotten for once, played on the banks of the river. On the appointed day, Conan Lang walked into the village with Andy Irvin at his side.

It was a crude village, necessarily so because of its transient nature. But it was not dirty. The natives watched the two men with awe, but they did not seem unfriendly. The supernatural was for them always just on the other side of the hill, hidden in the night, and now it was among them, in the open. That was all. And what, after all, thought Conan Lang, could have seemed more supernatural to them than a silver ship that dropped out of the stars? What was supernatural depended on one’s point of view—and on how much one happened to know about what was *natural*.

The box he carried was heavy, and it took both arms to handle it. He watched Andy puffing at his side and smiled.

“Stick with it, kid,” he said, walking steadily through the watching natives. “You may earn your pay yet.”

Andy muttered something under his breath and blinked to get the sweat out of his eyes.

When they reached the clearing in the center of the village, they stopped and put their boxes down. Ren, the eldest son of the chief Ra Renne, approached them at once and offered them a drink from a large wooden bowl. Conan drank and passed the container on to Andy, who grinned broadly and took a long swallow of the warm fluid. It was sweet, although not too sweet, and it burned pleasantly on the way down. It was, Conan decided instantly, a great improvement over some native fermented horrors he had been subjected to in times past.

The natives gathered around them in a great circle. There must have been nearly five hundred of them—far more than the small village could accommodate for any length of time.

“We’re celebrities,” Conan Lang whispered out of the side of his mouth as he waited to be presented ceremonially to the chiefs.

“You want my autograph?” hissed Andy, his face just a trifle flushed from the drink he had taken. “I make a real fine X.”

The feast followed a pattern familiar to Conan Lang. They were presented ceremonially to the tribe, having identified themselves as ancestors of four generations ago, thus making themselves kin to virtually all the tribe with their complicated lineage system, and also making refutation impossible since no one remembered that far back. They were seated with the chiefs, and ate the ritual feast rapidly. The food was good, and Conan Lang was interested in getting a good taste of the ricefruit plant, which was the basic food staple of the Oripesh.

After the eating came the drinking, and after the drinking the dancing. The Oripesh were not a musical people, and they had no drums. The men and the women danced apart from each other, each one doing an individual dance—which he owned, just as the men from Earth owned material property—to his own rhythm pattern. Conan Lang and Andy Irvin contented themselves with watching, not trusting themselves to improvise an authentic dance. They were aware that their conduct was at variance with the somewhat impulsive conduct usually attributed to ancestors in native folklore, but that was a chance they had to take. Conan was very conscious of one old chief who watched him closely with narrowed eyes.

Conan ignored him, enjoying the dancers. The Oripesh seemed to be a happy people, although short on material wealth. Conan Lang almost envied them as they danced—envied them for their simple, lives and envied them their ability to enjoy it, an ability that civilized man had left by the wayside in his climb up the ladder. Climb—or descent? Conan Lang sometimes wondered.

Ren came over, his color high with the excitement of the dance. Great fires were burning now, and Conan noticed with surprise that it was night.

“That is Loe,” he said, pointing. “My *am-ren*, my, bride-to-be.” His voice was filled with pride.

Conan Lang followed his gesture and saw the girl. Her name was a native word roughly translatable as *fawn*, and she was well named. Loe was a slim, very shy girl of really striking beauty. She danced with diffidence, looking into Ren’s eyes. The two were obviously, almost painfully, in love—love being a part of the culture of the Oripesh. It was difficult to realize, sometimes, even after years of personal experience, that there were whole worlds of basically humanoid peoples where the very concept of

romantic love did not exist. Coaan Lang smiled. Loe was, if anything, a trifle *too* beautiful for his taste. Dancing there; with the yellow moon in her hair, moving gracefully with the leaping shadows from the crackling fires, she was ethereal, a fantasy, like a painting of a woman from another, unattainable century.

“We would give gifts to the chiefs,” Conan Lang said finally. “Your Loe—she is very beautiful.”

Ren smiled, quickly grateful, and summoned the chiefs. Conan Lang rose to greet them, signaling to Andy to break open the boxes. The chiefs watched intently. Conan Lang did not speak. He waited until Andy had opened both boxes and then pointed to them.

“They are yours, my brothers,” he said.

The natives pressed forward. A chief picked the first object out of the box and stared at it in disbelief. The shadows flickered eerily and the night wind sighed through the village. He held the object up to the light and there was a gasp of astonishment.

The object was a ricefruit—a rice-fruit the likes of which had never before been seen on Sirius Ten. It was round, fully a foot in diameter, and of a lush, ripe consistency. It made the potato-sized ricefruits of the Oripesh seem puny by comparison.

It was then that Conan Lang exploded his bombshell.

“We have come back to show you, our brothers, how to grow the great ricefruit,” he said. “You can grow them over and over again, *in the same field*. You will never have to move your village again.”

The natives stared at him in wonder, moving back a little in fear.

“It cannot be done,” a chief whispered. “The ricefruit devours the land—every year we must move or perish.”

“That is over now,” Conan Lang said. “We have come to show you the way.”

The dancing had stopped. The natives waited, nervous, suddenly uncertain. The yellow moon watched through the trees. As though someone had flipped a switch, sound disappeared. There was silence. The great ricefruit was magic. They looked at the two men as though, seeing them for the first time. This was not the way of the past, not the way of the ancestors. This was something completely *new* and they found themselves lost, without precedent for action. Ren alone smiled at them, and even he had fear in his eyes.

Conan Lang waited tensely. He must make no move; this was the crisis point. Andy stood at his side, very still, hardly breathing.

A native walked solemnly into the silence, carrying a young pig under his arm. Conan Lang watched him narrowly. The man was obviously a shaman, a witch doctor, and his trembling body and too-bright eyes were all too clear an indication of why he had been chosen for his role in the society.

With a swiftness of motion that was numbing, the shaman slit the pig’s throat with a stone knife. At once he cut the body open. The blood stained his body with crimson. His long, thin hands poked into the entrails. He looked up, his eyes wild.

“They are not ancestors,” he screamed, his voice high like an hysterical woman’s. “They have come to do us evil!”

The very air was taut with tension.

“No,” Conan Lang said loudly, keeping his voice clear and confident. “The *barath-tui*, the shaman, has been bewitched by sorcerers! Take care that you do not offend your ancestors!”

Conan Lang stood very still, fighting to keep the alarm off his face. He and Andy were helpless here, and he knew it. They were without weapons of any sort—the native loin cloth being a poor place to conceal firearms. There was nothing they could do—they had miscalculated, moved too swiftly, and now they were paying the price.

“We are your brothers,” he said into the ominous silence. “We are your fathers and your father’s fathers. There are others who watch.”

The flames leaped and danced in the stillness. An old man stepped forward. It was the chief that Conan had noticed watching him before.

“You say you are our brothers who have taken the long journey,” the old chief said. “That is good. We would see you walk through the fire.”

The wind sighed in the trees. Without a moment’s hesitation, Conan Lang turned and walked swiftly toward the flames that crackled and hissed in the great stone fire pits.

There was nothing else in all the world except the flickering tongues of orange flame that licked nearer and nearer to his face. He saw the red, pulsing coals waiting beneath the twisted black branches in the fire and he closed his eyes. The heat singed his eyebrows and he could feel his hair shrivel and start to burn.

Conan Lang kept moving, and moved fast. He twisted a rigid clamp on his mind and refused to feel pain.

He wrenched his mind out of his body, thinking as he had been trained to think, until it was as if his mind floated a thing apart, free in the air, looking down upon the body of Conan Lang walking through hell.

He knew that one of the attributes of the Oripesh ancestor gods was that they could walk through flame without injury—a fairly common myth pattern. He had known it before he left Earth. He should have been prepared, he knew that. But man was not perfect, which would have been a dangerous flaw had it not been his most valuable characteristic.

He saw that his legs were black and blistered and he smelled the suffocating smell of-burning flesh. The smoke was in his head, in his lungs, everywhere, choking him. Some of the pain was coming through—

He was out. He felt Andy’s hands beating out the rivulets of flame that clung to his body and he forced the clean, pure air of night into his sick lungs. The pain, the pain—

“Stick with it, Cone,” Andy whispered in his ear. “Stick with it.”

Conan Lang managed to open his eyes and stared blankly into a hot-red haze. The haze cleared and he was faintly surprised to find that he could still see. The natives were awestruck with fear—they had angered their gods and death was in the air. Conan Lang knew that the shaman who had denounced him would quite probably be dead of fear before the night was over—if he did not die before then of some less subtle malady. He had endangered the tribe without reason, and he would pay with his life.

Conan Lang kept his face expressionless. Inside, he was on fire. Water, he had to have water, cold water—

Ren came to him, his eyes filled with pain. “I am sorry, my brother,” he whispered. “For my people, I am sorry.”

“It is all right, Ren,” Conan Lang heard his voice say steadily. “I am, of course, unharmed.”

Conan Lang touched Andy’s arm and moved across to the chiefs. He felt Andy standing behind him, ready to catch him, just in case. He could feel nothing in his feet—quite suddenly, he was convinced that he was standing on the charred stumps of his legs and he fought to keep from looking down to make sure he still had feet.

“You have doubted your brothers who have come far to help their people,” he said quietly, looking directly into the eyes of the old chief who had sent him into the flames. “We are disappointed in our people—there are sorcerers at work among you, and they must be destroyed. We leave you now. If you anger your brothers again, the Oripesh shall cease to be.”

He did not wait for an answer but turned and started away from the clearing, back through the village. Andy was at his side. Conan Lang set his teeth and moved at a steady pace. He must have no help until they were beyond the village; the natives must not suspect—

He walked on. The great yellow moon was high in the night sky, and there was the face of Loe with stars in her hair. The moon shuddered and burst into flame and he heard himself laughing. He bit his lips until the blood came and kept going, into the darkness, into nothing. The pain clawed at his body.

They were through the village. Something snapped in Conan Lang—the steel clamp that had carried him through a nightmare parted with a clean *ping*. There was emptiness, space. Conan Lang collapsed. He felt Andy’s arm-around him, holding him up.

“You’ll have to carry me, kid,” he whispered. “I can’t walk at all.”

Andy Irvin picked him up in his arms and set out through the night.

“It should have been me,” he said in bitter self-reproach. “It should have been me.”

Conan Lang closed his eyes and, at last, nothing mattered any more, and there was only darkness.

A week later, Conan Lang stood in the dawn of Sirius Ten, watching the great double sun lift above the horizon and chase the shadows from the green field that they had carved out of the wilderness. He was still a very sick man, but Andy had pulled him through as best he could and now the star cruiser was coming in to pick him up and leave a replacement with the kid.

The fresh leaves of the ricefruit plants were shoulder high and the water in the irrigation trenches chuckled cleanly, waiting for the full fury of the sun. The tenuous, almost hesitant breeze crawled through the still air.

Conan Lang watched the green plants silently. The words of the dead *baratk-tui*, the shaman, echoed in his brain. *They are not ancestors*, the man had screamed. *They have come to do us evil!*

They have come to do us evil...

How could he have known—with only a pig and a stone knife? A crazy shaman working the discredited magic of divination—and he had been *right*. Coincidence? Yes, of course. There was no other way to look at it, no other *sane* way. Conan Lang smiled weakly. He remembered reading about

the Snake Dance of the Hopi, long ago back on Earth. The Snake Dance had been a rain-making ceremonial, and invariably when the very early anthropologists had attended the dance they had got drenched on the way home. It was only coincidence and good timing, of course, but it was difficult to tell yourself that when the rain began to pour.

“Here she comes,” said Andy Irvin.

There was a splitting whistle and then a soft hum as a small patrol ship settled down toward the field on her anti-gravs. She hung there in the dawn like a little silver fish seen through the glassite walls of a great aquarium, and Conan Lang could sense what he could not see—the massive bulk of the sleek star cruiser waiting out in space.

The patrol ship came down out of the sky and hovered a few feet off the ground. A man swung down out of the outlift and waved. Conan Lang recognized him as Julio Medina, who had been lifted out of another sector of Sirius Ten to come in and replace him with Andy. The ricefruit was green and fresh in the field and it hurt Conan to leave his job unfinished. There wasn't a great deal to do now until the check, of course, and Julio was a very competent and experienced man, but there was still so much that could go wrong, so much that you could never anticipate—

And he didn't want anything to happen to the kid.

“So long, Cone,” Andy said, his voice very quiet. “And—thanks. I won't forget what you did.”

Conan Lang leaned on Andy's arm and moved toward the ship. “I'll be back, Andy,” he said, trying to keep the weight off his feet. “Hold the fort—I know it'll be in good hands.”

Conan Lang shook hands with Julio and then Julio and Andy helped him into the outlift. He had time for a brief wave and a final glimpse of the green field under the fiery sun, and then he was inside the patrol ship. They had somehow rigged up a bunk for him in the cramped quarters, and he collapsed into it gratefully.

“Home, James,” he whispered, trying not to think about what would happen if they could not save his legs.

Conan Lang closed his eyes and lay very still, feeling the ship pulse and surge as it carried him out into the dark sea from which he had come.

IV.

The doctors saved his legs, but years were to pass before Conan Lang again set foot upon Earth. Space was vast and star cruisers comparatively few. In addition, star ships were fabulously expensive to operate—it was out of the question for a ship on a mission to make the long run from Sirius to Sol for the sake of one man. Conan Lang became the prize patient of the ship medics and he stayed with the star cruiser as it operated in the Sirius area.

A star cruiser on operations was never dull and there were books to read and reports to write. Conan Lang curbed his impatience and made the best of the situation. The local treatments applied by Andy had been effective enough so that the ship medics were able to regenerate his burned tissue, and it was only a question of time before he would be strong again.

The star cruiser worked efficiently and effectively in support of Administration units in the Sirius area, sliding through the blackness of space like some leviathan of the deep, and Conan Lang rested and made

himself as useful as he could. He often went up into the control room and stood watching the visiplat that looked out upon the great emptiness of space. Some where, on a far shore of that mighty sea, was a tiny planet called Earth. There, the air was cool and fresh under the pines and the beauty of the world, once you got away from it and could see it in perspective, was fantastic. There were Rob and Kit, friendship and tears and laughter.

There was home.

While his body healed, Conan Lang lived on the star cruiser. There was plenty of time to think. Even for a race with a life span of almost two hundred years, the days and the weeks and the months can seem interminable. He asked himself all the old questions, examined all the old answers. Here he was, on a star ship light-years from home, his body burned, waiting to go back to Sirius Ten to change the life of a planet. What thin shreds of chance, what strange webs of history, had put him there? When you added up the life of Conan Lang, of all the Conan Langs, what did you get? Where was Earth going, that pebble that hurled its puny challenge at the infinite?

Sometimes, it was all hard to believe.

It had all started, he supposed, with cybernetics. Of course, cybernetics itself was but the logical outgrowth of a long cultural and technological trend. For centuries, man's ally, the machine, had helped him physically in his adjustment to his environment. What more natural than that it should one day help him mentally as well? There was really nothing sinister about thinking machines, except to a certain breed of perpetually gloomy poets who were unable to realize that values were never destroyed but were simply molded into new patterns in the evolution of culture. No, thinking machines were fine and comforting—for a while.

But with the dawn of space travel, man's comfortable, complacent progress toward a vague somewhere was suddenly knocked into a cocked hat. Man's horizons exploded to the rims of the universe with the perfection of the star drive—he was no longer living *on* a world but *in* an inhabited universe. His bickerings and absurdities and wars were seen as the petty things they were—and man in a few tremendous years emerged at last from adolescence.

Science gave to men a life span of nearly two hundred active years and gave him the key to forever. But there was a catch, a fearful catch. Man, who had had all he could do to survive the conflicts of local groups of his own species, was suddenly faced with the staggering prospect of living in an inhabited *universe*. He had known, of course, about the millions and millions of stars, about the infinity of planets, about the distant galaxies that swam like island universes through the dark seas of space. But he had known about them as figures on a page, as photographs, as dots of unwinking light in a telescope. They had been curiosities, a stimulus to the imagination. Now they were vital parts of his life, factors to be reckoned with in the struggle for existence. In the universe were incredible numbers of integers to be equated in the problem of survival—and *the mind of man could not even learn them all, much less form intelligent conclusions about future actions.*

And so, inevitably, man turned again to the machine. But this time there was a difference. The machine was the only instrument capable of handling the data—and man in a million years could not even check its most elementary conclusions. Man fed in the facts, the machine reached the conclusions, and man acted upon them—not through choice, but simply because he had no other guide he could trust.

Men operated the machines—but the machines operated men.

The science of cybernetics expanded by leaps and bounds. Men made machines to develop new machines. The great mechanical brains grew so complex that only a few men could even pretend to

understand them. Looking at them, it was virtually impossible to believe that they had been born in the minds of men.

The machines did not interfere in the everyday routine of living—man would never submit to that, and in problems which he could understand he was still the best judge of his own happiness. It was in the larger problems, the problems of man's destiny in the universe in which he found himself, that the great brains were beyond value. For the machines could integrate trends, patterns, and complexes of the known worlds and go on from there to extrapolate into the unknown. The machines could, in very general terms, predict the outcome of any given set of circumstances. They could, in a very real sense, see into the future. They could see where Earth was headed. And Earth was headed for disaster.

The machines were infallible. They dealt not with short-term probabilities, but with long-range certainties. And they stated flatly that, given the equation of the known universe, Earth would be destroyed in a matter of centuries. There was only one thing to do—man must change the equation.

It was difficult for man, so recently Earthbound, to really *think* and *act* in terms of an inhabited universe. But the machines showed conclusively that in as yet inaccessible galaxies life had evolved that was physically and mentally hostile to that of Earth. A collision of the two life-forms would come about within a thousand years, and a life-and-death struggle was inevitable. The facts were all too plain—Earth would lose and the human race would be exterminated.

Unless the equation could be changed.

It was a question of preparing the galaxy for combat. The struggle would be a long one, and factors of reserves, replacements, different cultural approaches to common problems, planets in varying stages of development, would be important. It was like a cosmic chess game, with worlds aligning themselves on a monstrous board. In battles of galactic dimensions, the outcome would be determined by centuries of preparation before contact was even made; it was not a romantic question of heroic spaceships and iron-jawed men of action, but rather one of the cultural, psychological, technological, and individual patterns which each side could bring to bear—patterns which were the outgrowths of millennia of slow evolution and development.

Earth was ready, or would be by the time contact came. But the rest of the galaxy—or at any rate as much of it as they had managed to explore—was not, and would not be. The human race was found somewhere on most of the star systems within the galaxy, but not one of them was as far advanced as were the men from Earth. That was why Earth had never been contacted from space—indeed, it was the only possible explanation, at least in retrospect. And the other galaxies, with their totally alien and forever nonunderstandable principles, were not interested in undeveloped cultures.

The problem thus became one of accelerating the cultural evolution of Earth's sister planets by means of diffusion, in order to build them up into an effective totality to combat the coming challenge. And it had to be done in such a manner that the natives of the planets were completely unaware that they were not the masters of their own destiny, since such a concept produced cultural stagnation and introduced corrupting elements into the planetary configurations. It had often been argued that Earth herself was in such a position, being controlled by the machines, but such was not the case—their choice had been a rational one, and they could abandon the machines at any time at their own risk.

Or so, at any rate, argued the thinkers of Earth.

The long months lengthened into years and, inactive though he was, Conan Lang spent his time well. It was good to have a chance to relax and think things through; it was good for the soul to stop midway in

life and take stock. Almost, it was possible to make sense out of things, and the frantic rush to nowhere lost some of its shrieking senselessness.

Conan Lang smiled without humor. That was all very well for him, but what about the natives whose lives they were uprooting? Of course, they were human beings, too, and stood to lose as much as anyone in the long run—but they did not understand the problem, *could* not understand it. The plain truth was that they were being used—used for their own benefit as well as that of others, but used none the less.

It was true that primitive life was no bed of roses—it was not as if, Conan Lang assured himself, the men from Earth were slithering, serpentlike, into an idyllic Garden of Eden. All they were doing was to accelerate the normal rate of change for a given planet. But this caused far-reaching changes in the culture as it existed—it threw some people to the dogs and elevated others to commanding positions. This was perhaps no more than was done by life itself, and possibly with better reason, but you couldn't tell yourself that when you had to face the eyes of a man who had gone from ruler to slave because of what you had done.

The real difficulty was that you couldn't *see* the threat. It was there all right—a menace besides which all the conflicts of the human race were as nothing. But it had always been difficult for men to work before the last possible moment, to prepare rather than just sit back and hope for the best. That man was working now as he had never worked before, in the face of an unseen threat from out of the stars, even to save his own existence, was a monument to his hard-won maturity. It would have been so easy, so pleasant, just to take it easy and enjoy a safe and comfortable life—and beyond question it would have meant the end of the human race.

Of one thing, Conan Lang was sure—whenever man stopped trying, stopped working and dreaming and reaching for impossible heights, whenever he settled back in complacency, on that day he shrunk to atrophied insignificance.

Sirius Ten had been a relatively easy project because of the planet-wide nature of its culture. Sirius Ten had only one huge land mass, and one great sea. The natives all shared basically the same life pattern, built around the cultivation of dry ricefruit, and the teams of the Applied Process Corps were faced with only one major problem rather than hundreds of them as was more often the case. It was true that certain peoples who lived on the shores of the sea, together with one island group, had a variant culture based on fishing, but these were insignificant numerically and could for practical purposes be ignored.

The dry ricefruit was grown by a cutting and burning method, under which a field gave a good yield only once before the land was exhausted and the people had to move on. Under these conditions, individual ownership of land never developed, and there were no inequalities of wealth to speak of. The joint families worked different fields every year, and since there was no market for a surplus there was no effort made to cultivate more land than was really needed.

The Oripesh natives of Sirius Ten had a well-developed cult of ancestor worship, thinking of their dead as always watching over them and guiding their steps. Since whatever the ancestors did automatically had the sanction of tradition behind it, it was through them that the Corps had decided to work—it being simply a question of palming off Corps Agents as ancestors come back from their dwelling place in the mountains to help their people. With careful preparations and experienced men, this had not proved overly difficult—but there were always miscalculations, accidents. Men were not like chemicals, and they did not always react as they were supposed to react. There was always an individual variable to be considered. That was why if a Corps Agent lived long enough to retire you knew both that he knew his stuff and that he had had more than his share of plain old-fashioned luck.

Sirius Ten had to be shifted from Stage Four to Stage Five. This was a staggering change in economics, social structure, and technology—one that had taken men on Earth many centuries to accomplish. The men of the Applied Process Corps had to do it in a matter of a few years. And so they set out, armed with a variety of ricefruit that grew well in marshy land and a sound knowledge of irrigation.

With such a lever they could move a world.

It was three years to the day when Conan Lang returned to Sirius Ten. The patrol ship came in on her anti-gravs and he waited eagerly for the outlift shaft to open. His heart was pounding in his chest and his lips were dry—it was almost like coming home again.

He swung his newly-strong body into the outlift and came out of it in the green field he had planted so long ago. He took a deep breath of the familiar humid air and grinned broadly at the hot, burning sun over his head. It *was* good to be back—back at a place like so many other places he had known, places that were as close to a home as any he could ever have without Kit. The breeze whispered softly through the green ricefruit and he waved at Julio who came running across the field to meet him. These were, he knew, his kind of people—and he had missed Andy all these years.

“Hey there, Julio!” he laughed, shaking Medina’s hand. “How goes it?”

“Pretty good, Conan,” Julio said quietly. “Pretty good.”

“The kid—how’s the kid?”

“Andy is dead,” said Julio Medina.

Conan Lang stood stock-still while an iron fist smacked into his stomach with cold, monotonous precision. Andy dead. It could not be, *could not be*. There had been no word, nothing. He clenched his fists. It couldn’t be true.

But it was. He knew that with ice cold certainty.

“It just happened the other day, Conan,” Julio said. “He was a fine boy.”

Conan Lang couldn’t speak. *The whole planet*, his mind tortured him. *The whole stinking planet isn’t worth Andy’s life*.

“It was an accident,” Julio said, his voice carefully matter-of-fact. “Warfare has sprung up between the rival villages like we figured. Andy was out after information and he got between them—he was hit by mistake with a spear. He never had a chance, but he managed to walk away and get back here before he died. The Oripesh don’t suspect that he wasn’t a god and could die just like anyone else. He saved the rest of us by coming back here—that’s something.”

“Yeah,” Conan Lang said bitterly, “that’s something.”

“I buried him here in the field,” Julio Medina went on. “I thought he’d like that. He... said good-by to you, Conan.”

It had been a long time since Conan Lang had had tears in his eyes. He turned without a word and walked away, across the green field and into the hut where he could be alone.

V.

From that time on, by unspoken mutual consent, the two men never again mentioned the kid's name. They gave him the best possible write-up in their reports, and that was all that they could ever do for Andy Irvin.

"I think we've about done it here, Conan," Julio told him. "I'd like to have you make your own check and see if you come up with the same stuff I did. There's a lull in the raiding right now—the natives are worried because that spear hit an ancestor by mistake and they're pretty well occupied with rituals designed to make us feel better about the whole thing. You shouldn't have any trouble, and that ought to about wind things up."

Conan Lang nodded. "It'll be good to get home again, eh Julio?"

"Yes, you know that—and for you it should be for keeps."

Conan Lang raised his eyebrows.

"It's no secret that you're due to be kicked upstairs," Julio said. "I rather think this is your last field job."

"Well, it's a nice theory anyhow."

"You remember all us old men out here in the stars, the slave labor of the Process Corps. Bring us all home, Conan, and we'll sit around in the shade and drink cold wine and fish and tell lies to each other."

"Consider it done," said Conan Lang. "And I'll give you all some more medals."

"I've got medals."

"Can't have too many medals, Julio. They're good for what ails you."

"They're not good for what ails *me*" said Julio Medina.

Conan Lang smiled and fired up his pipe. *The kid*, his mind whispered. *The kid liked that pipe*. He thrust the thought from his mind. A man had to take death in his stride out here, he told himself. Even when it was a kid who reminded you of yourself a million years ago—

A million years ago.

"I'll start in tomorrow," Conan Lang said, puffing on his pipe. "Do you know Ren, Julio?"

"The chief's son? Yes."

"How did he come out?"

"Not well, Conan. He lost his woman, Loe, to one of the men we made wealthy; he has not been the same since."

"We're great people, Julio."

"Yes."

Conan Lang was silent then and the two men stood together in the warm evening air, watching the great double sun float slowly down below the horizon as the long black shadows came marching up from

the far edge of the world.

Next morning, Conan Lang was off with the dawn on his final check. He pretty well knew what he would find—Julio Medina was an experienced hand and his information was reliable. But it was always a shock when you saw it for yourself. You never got used to it. To think that such a tiny, seemingly insignificant thing could change a planet beyond recognition. A rice-fruit—

It was already hot when he passed the native fields. Their ricefruit plants were tall and healthy, and their irrigation channels well constructed. He shook his head and walked on to the native village.

Where the open, crude, friendly village had stood there was a great log wall. In front of the wall was a series of deep and ugly-looking moats. Behind the wall, he could see the tops of sturdy wooden buildings, a far cry from the huts of only a few short years ago. Conan Lang made no attempt at concealment but walked openly up to the moats and crossed them on a log bridge. He stopped outside the closed gate.

“You will remember me who walked through the flames,” he said loudly in the Oripesh tongue. “You will open the gate for your brother as he would visit you.”

For a moment nothing happened, and then the gate swung open. Conan Lang entered the village.

The native guard eyed him with suspicion, but he kept his distance. Conan Lang noticed that he had a bow by the log wall. There was nothing like constant warfare for the production of new weapons, he reflected. Civilization was bringing its blessings to the Oripesh with leaps and bounds.

Conan Lang walked through the village unmolested, taking rapid mental notes. He saw storehouses for ricefruit and observed slaves being marched off to work in the fields. The houses in the village were strong and comfortable, but there was a tense air in the village, a feeling of strain. Conan Lang approached a native and stopped him.

“Brother,” he said, “I would see your chiefs. Where are they?”

The native looked at him warily. “The Oripesh have no chiefs,” he said. “Our king is in council.”

Conan Lang nodded, a sick feeling inside him. “It is well,” he said. “Ren—I would see him.”

The native jerked his thumb contemptuously toward the back of the village. “He is there,” he said. “Outside.”

Conan Lang moved through the village, watching, missing nothing. He went all the way through and came out through the back wall. There, the old-style native huts baked in squalor under the blazing sun. There was no log wall around them, although they were inside the moat system. A pig rooted around for garbage between the huts.

“Slums,” Conan Lang said to himself.

He walked among the huts, ignoring the fearful, suspicious eyes of the natives. He found Ren preparing to go out into the fields. The chief’s son was thin. He looked tired and his eyes were dull. He saw Conan and said nothing.

“Hello, Ren,” said Conan Lang.

The native just looked at him.

Conan Lang tried to think of something to say. He knew what had happened—the chiefs and their sons had been so busy with ritual work for the tribe that they had lagged behind in the cultivation of the

new ricefruit. They had stuck to the old ways too long and their people had passed them by.

“I can help you, my brother,” Conan Lang said softly. “It is not too late.”

Ren said nothing.

“I will help you with a field of your own,” said Conan Lang. “Will you let me help you?”

The native looked at him and there was naked hate in his eyes. “You said you were my friend,” he said. Without another word, he turned and left. He did not look back.

Conan Lang wiped the sweat from his forehead and went on with his work. The sensitive part of his mind retreated back in to a dark, insulated corner and he let his training take over. He moved along, asking questions, watching, taking mental notes.

A little thing, he thought.

A new kind of plant.

A week later, Conan Lang had completed his check. He sat by the evening cook fire with Julio, smoking his pipe, watching the shadows in the field.

“Well, we did a good job,” he said. “It’s awful.”

“It would have come without us,” Julio reminded him. “It does no good to brood about it. It is tough, sometimes, but it is a small price to pay for survival.”

“Yes,” said Conan Lang. “Sure.”

“Your results check out with mine?”

“Mostly. It’s the same old story, Julio.”

Conan Lang puffed slowly on his pipe, reconstructing what had happened. The new ricefruit had made it valuable for a family to hang on to one piece of land that could be used over and over again. But only a limited amount of the land could be used, because of natural factors like the presence or absence of available water. The families that had not taken the plunge right away were virtually excluded, and the society was divided into the landed and the landless. The landless gradually had to move further and further from the main village to find land upon which to grow the older type of ricefruit—sometimes their fields were so far away that they could not make the round trip in a single day. And they could not get too far away and start over, because of the tribal warfare that had broken out between villages now that valuable stores of ricefruit were there for the taking. The old joint family co-operation broke down, and slaves became economically feasible.

Now that the village need not be periodically moved, it too became valuable and so was strongly fortified for defense. One old chief, grown powerful with fields of the staple ricefruit, set himself up as a king and the other chiefs went to work in his fields.

Of course, Sirius Ten was still in transition. While the old patterns were being destroyed, new ones, less obvious to the untrained eye, were taking their place. Disintegration and reintegration marched hand in hand, but it would be tough on the natives for a while. Process Corps techniques had speeded up the action almost beyond belief, but from here on in the Oripesh were on their own. They would go on and on in their individual development—although no two peoples ever went through exactly the same stages at the same time, it was possible to predict a general planet-wide trend. The Oripesh would one day learn to write, since they already had a crude pictographic system for ritual use. When the contact finally

came from the hostile stars in the future, what histories would they have written? Who would they remember, what would they forget? Would there be any twisted legend or myth left that recalled the long-ago time when the gods had come out of the mountains to change the lives of their people?

That was the way to look at it. Conan Lang tapped out his pipe on a rock. Just look at it like a problem, a textbook example. Forget about the people, the individuals you could not help, the lives you had made and the lives you had destroyed. Turn off that part of your mind and think in terms of the long-range good.

Or try to.

“We’re all through here, Julio,” Conan Lang said. “We can head for home now.”

“Yes,” said Julio Medina. “It has been a long time.”

The two men sat silently in the darkness, each thinking his own thoughts, watching the yellow moon sail through silver stars.

After the patrol ship had been signaled, there was nothing to do but wait until their pickup could be coordinated with the time schedules of the other Corps men and the operational schedule of the star cruiser. Conan Lang busied himself with his reports while Julio sprawled in the shade and devised intricate and impossible card games with a battered deck that was old enough to be in itself of anthropological interest.

Conan Lang was playing a game, too. He played it with his mind and he was a somewhat unwilling participant. His mind had played the game before and he was tired of it, but there was nothing he could do about it. There wasn’t any button that would turn his mind off, and while it was on it played games.

It was engaged in putting two and two together.

This was not in itself uncommon, although it was not as widespread as some people fondly imagined it to be. But Conan Lang played the game where others did not see even one, much less a set of twos with a relationship between them. There is nothing so hard to see as what is termed obvious after the fact. Conan Lang’s mind had played with the obvious all his life; it would not let well enough alone. He didn’t like it, there were times when he would have preferred to junk it all and go fishing without a thought in his head, but he was stuck with it. When his mind wanted to play the game, it played and that was that.

While he waited for the patrol ship, his mind was playing with a set of factors. There was the history of Earth, taken as a vast overall sequence. There were thinking machines, atomic power, and the field techniques of the Process Corps. There was the fact that Earth had no record of ever having been contacted by another world—they had always done the contacting themselves. There was the new principle that Admiral White had spoken to him about, the integration-acceleration factor for correlating data. There was the incredible, explosive energy of man that had hurled him light-years into space. There was his defiant heart that could tackle the prodigious job of reshaping a galaxy when the chips were down.

Conan Lang put two and two together, and he did not get four. He got five.

He didn’t know the answers yet, but he knew enough to formulate the right questions. From past experience, he knew that that was the toughest part of the game. Incorrect answers were usually the products of off-center questions. Once you had the right question, the rest was a matter of time.

The patrol ship came for them finally, and Conan Lang and Julio Medina walked across the soil of Sirius Ten for the last time. They crossed the field where the green plants grew, and neither tried to say

what was in his heart. Three had come and only two could leave. Andy Irvin had lived and worked and dreamed only to fall on an alien planet light-years away from Earth that could have been his. He was part of the price that was exacted for survival—and he was also a kid with stars in his eyes who had gotten a rotten, senseless break.

After the patrol ship had gone, the green leaves of the ricefruit plants stretched hungrily up toward the flaming sun. The clean water chuckled along the irrigation trenches, feeding the roots in the field. Softly, as though sad with all the memories it carried, the lonesome breeze whispered through the empty hut that had housed the men from Earth.

VI.

Through the trackless depths of interstellar space the star cruiser rode on the power from her atomics. The hum that filled the ship was a good sound, and she seemed to quiver with pride and impatience. It did make a difference which way you were going in space, and the ship was going home.

Conan Lang paced through the long white corridors and walked around the afterhold where the brown sacks of ricefruit had been. He read in the library and joked with the medics who had salvaged his burned body. And always ahead of him, swimming in the great emptiness of space, were the faces of Kit and of his son, waiting for him, calling him home again.

Rob must have grown a lot, he thought. Soon, he wouldn't be a boy any longer—he would be a man, taking his place in the world. Conan remembered his son's voice from a thousand quiet talks in the cool air of evening, his quick, eager eyes—

Like Andy's.

“Dad, when I grow up can I be like you? Can I be an Agent and ride on the ships to other worlds and have a uniform and everything?”

What could you tell your son now that you had lived so long and were supposed to know so much? That life in the Process Corps filled a man with things that were perhaps better unknown? That the star trails were cold and lonely? That there were easier, more comfortable lives? All that was true; all the men who rode the ships knew it. But they knew, too, that for them this was the only life worth living.

The time passed slowly. Conan Lang was impatient to see his family again, anxious to get home. But his mind gave him no rest. There were things he had to know, things he *would* know before he went home to stay.

Conan Lang had the right questions now. He had the right questions, and he knew where the answers were hidden.

Fritz Gottlieb.

The star cruiser had hardly touched Earth again at Space One before Conan Lang was outside on the duralloy tarmac. Since the movements of the star ships were at all times top secret matters, there was no one at the port to greet him and for once Conan was glad to have a few extra hours to himself. Admiral White wouldn't expect him to check in until tomorrow anyway, and before he saw Kit he wanted to get things straight once and for all.

The friendly sun of Earth warmed him gently as he hurried across the tarmac and the air felt cool and fresh. He helped himself to an official bullet, rose into the blue sky, and jetted eastward over the city. His

brain was seething and he felt cold sweat in the palms of his hands. What was it that Gottleib had said to him on that long-ago day?

“Sometimes it is best not to know the answers to one’s questions, Dr. Lang.”

Well, he was going to know the answers anyhow. All of them. He landed the bullet in the space adjoining the cybernetics building and hurried inside, flashing his identification as he went. He stopped at a switchboard and showed his priority credentials.

“Call the Nest, please,” he told the operator. “Tell Dr. Gottleib that Conan Lang is down here and would like to see him.”

The operator nodded and spoke into the intercom. There was a moment’s delay, and then he took his earphones off and smiled at Conan Lang.

“Go right on up, Dr. Lang,” the operator said. “Dr. Gottleib is expecting you.”

Conan Lang controlled his astonishment and went up the lift and down the long white corridors. *Expecting* him? But that was impossible. No one even knew the star cruiser was coming back, much less that he was coming here to the Nest. Impossible—

All around him in the great building he felt the gigantic mechanical brain with its millions of circuits and flashing tubes. The brain crowded him, pressed him down until he felt tiny and insignificant. It hummed and buzzed through the great shielded walls.

Laughing at him.

Conan Lang pushed past the attendants and security men and opened the door of the Nest. He moved into the small, dark room and paused to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the dim light. The room was silent. Gradually, the shadow behind the desk took form and he found himself looking into the arctic eyes of Fritz Gottleib.

“Dr. Lang,” he hissed softly. “Welcome to the Buzzard’s Nest.”

The man had not changed; he was timeless, eternal. He was still dressed in black and it might have been minutes ago instead of years when Conan Lang had last seen him. His black eyebrows slashed across his white face and his long-fingered hands were bent slightly like claws upon his desk.

“How did you know I was coming here?” Now that he was face to face with Gottleib, Conan Lang felt suddenly uncertain, unsure of himself.

“I know many things, Dr. Lang,” Fritz Gottleib said sibilantly. “Had I cared to, I could have told you ten years ago the exact date, within a day or so, upon which we would have this meeting. I could even have told you what you would say when you came through the door, and what you are going to say five minutes from now.”

Conan Lang just stared at him, feeling like an absurd little child who had presumed to wrestle a gorilla. His mind recoiled from the strange man before him and he knew at last that he knew nothing.

“I do not waste words, Dr. Lang,” Gottleib said, his eyes cold and un-moving in his head. “You will remember that when we last met you said you wanted to ask some questions of the machine. Do you remember what I said, Dr. Lang?”

Conan Lang thought-back across the years. “*Perhaps one day, Dr. Lang,*” Gottleib had said. “*When you are old like me.*”

“Yes,” said Conan Lang. “Yes, I remember.”

“You were not ready then,” Dr. Gottlieb said, his white face ghostly in the dim light. “You could not even have framed the right questions, at least not all of them.”

Conan Lang was silent. How much *did* Gottlieb know? Was there anything he *didn't* know?

“You are old enough now,” said Fritz Gottlieb.

He turned a switch and the surface of his desk glowed with dull red light. His face, reflected in the flamelike glow, was unearthly. His cold eyes looked out of hell. He rose to his feet, seeming to loom larger than life, filling the room. Moving without a sound, he left the room and the door clicked shut behind him.

Conan Lang was alone in the red room. His heart hammered in his throat and his lips were dry. He clenched his fists and swallowed hard. Alone—

Alone with the great machine.

Conan Lang steadied himself. Purposefully, he made himself go through the prosaic, regular motions of lighting up his pipe. The tobacco was healthily full-bodied and fragrant and it helped to relax him. He smoked slowly, taking his time.

The red glow from the desk filled the room with the color of unreality. Crimson shadows seemed to crouch in the corners with an impossible life of their own. But was anything impossible, here? Conan Lang felt the pulse of the great machine around him and wondered.

Trying to shake off a persistent feeling of dreamlike unreality, Conan Lang moved around and sat down behind Gottlieb's desk. The red panel was a maze of switches which were used to integrate it with technical panels in other sections of the building. In the center of the panel was a keyboard on an open circuit to the machine and set into the desk was a clear square like a very fine telescreen. Conan Lang noticed that there was nothing on Gottlieb's desk that was not directly connected with the machine—no curios, no pictures, no paperweights, not a single one of the many odds and ends most men picked up for their desks during a long lifetime. The whole room was frightening in its very impersonality, as though every human emotion had been beaten but of it long ago and the room had been insulated against its return.

The machines never slept and the circuits were open. Conan Lang had only to ask and any question that could be answered would be answered. The red glow in the room reminded him of the fire and he shuddered a little in spite of himself. Had that really been over three years ago? How much had he learned in those three years when he had seen the Oripesh change before his eyes and had had time for once to really think his life through? How much did he still have to learn?

Conan Lang took a long pull on his pipe and set the desk panel for manual type questioning and visual screen reception. He hesitated a moment, almost afraid of the machine at his disposal. He didn't *want* to know, he suddenly realized. It wasn't like that. It was rather that he *had* to know.

Framing his words carefully, Conan Lang typed out the question that had been haunting him for years:

IS THE EARTH ITSELF THE SUBJECT OF PROCESS MANIPULATION?

He waited nervously, sure of the answer, but fearful of it nevertheless. There was a faint, all but inaudible hum from the machine and Conan Lang could almost feel the circuits closing in the great walls around him. The air was filled with tension. There was a brief click and one word etched itself blackly on

the clear screen:

YES.

Conan Lang leaned forward, sure of himself now, and typed out another question.

HOW LONG HAS THE EARTH BEEN MANIPULATED AND HAS THIS CONTROL BEEN FOR GOOD OR EVIL?

The machine hummed and answered at once.

THE EARTH HAS BEEN GUIDED SINCE EARTH YEAR NINETEEN HUNDRED A.D. THE SECOND PART OF YOUR QUESTION IS MEANINGLESS.

Conan Lang hesitated, staggered in spite of himself by the information he was getting. Then he typed rapidly:

WITH REFERENCE TO GOOD, EQUATE SURVIVAL OF THE HUMAN RACE

The screen clouded, cleared, and the words formed.

THE CONTROL HAS BEEN FOR GOOD.

Conan Lang's breathing was shallow now. He typed tensely:

HAS THIS CONTROL COME FROM WITHIN THIS GALAXY? IF SO, WHERE? IS THERE USUALLY AN AGENT OTHER THAN EARTH'S IN CHARGE OF THIS MACHINE?

The hum of the machine filled the blood-red room and the screen framed the answers.

THE CONTROL HAS COME FROM WITHIN THE GALAXY. THE SOURCE IS A WORLD KNOWN AS RERMA, CIRCLING A STAR ON THE EDGE OF THE GALAXY WHICH IS UNKNOWN TO EARTH. THE MAN KNOWN AS GOTTLEIB IS A RERMAN AGENT.

Conan Lang's pipe had been forgotten and gone out. He put it down and licked his dry lips. So far so good. But the one prime, all-important question had not yet been asked. He asked it.

IF THE PLAN IS FOLLOWED, WHAT WILL BE THE FINAL OUTCOME WITH RESPECT TO RERMA AND THE EARTH?

The machine hummed again in the red glow and the answer came swiftly, with a glorious, mute tragedy untold between its naked lines:

RERMA WILL BE DESTROYED. THE EARTH WILL SURVIVE IF THE PLAN IS CAREFULLY FOLLOWED.

Conan Lang felt tears in his eyes and he was unashamed. With time forgotten now, he leaned forward, asking questions, reading replies, as the terrible, wonderful story unfolded.

Far out on the edge of the galaxy, the ancient planet of Rerma circled her yellow sun. Life had evolved early on Rerma—had evolved early and developed fast. While the other humanoid peoples of the galaxy were living in caves, the Rerma were building a great civilization. When Earth forged its first metal sword, the Rerma split the atom.

Rerma was a world of science—true science. Science had eliminated war and turned the planet into a paradise. Literature and the arts flourished hand in hand with scientific progress, and scientists worked

surrounded by cool gardens in which graceful fountains splashed and chuckled in the sun. Every man was free to develop himself as an individual and no man bent his head to any other man.

The Rerma were the human race in full flower.

But the Rerma were few, and they were not a warlike people. It was not that they would not fight in an emergency, but simply that they could not possibly win an extended encounter. Their minds didn't work that way. The Rerma had evolved to a point where they were too specialized, too well adjusted to their environment.

And their environment changed.

It was only a question of time until the Rerma asked the right questions of their thinking machines and came up with the knowledge that their world, situated on the edge of the galaxy, was directly in the path of a coming cultural collision between two star systems. The Rerma fed in the data over and over again, and each time the great machines came up with the same answer.

Rerma would be destroyed.

It was too late for the equation to be changed with respect to Rerma—she had gone too far and was unfortunately located. But for the rest of the human race, scattered on the far-flung worlds that marched along the star trails, there was a chance. There was time for the equation to be changed for them—if only someone could be found to change it! For the Rerma had the knowledge, but they had neither the manpower nor the driving, defiant spirit to do the job themselves. They were capable of making heroic decisions and sticking by them, but the task of remolding a star system was not for them. That was a job for a young race, a proud and unconquerable race. That was a job for the men of Earth.

The ships of the Rerma found Earth in the earth year 1900. They knew that in order for their plan to succeed the Rerma must stand and fight on that distant day when galaxies collided, for their power was not negligible despite their lack of know-how for a long-range combat. They must stand and fight and be destroyed—the plan, the equation, was that finely balanced. Earth was the only other planet they found that was sufficiently advanced to work with, and it was imperative that Earth should not know that she was being manipulated. She must not suspect that her plans were not her own, for a young race with its pride wounded is a dubious ally and an ineffective fighting mechanism.

The Rerma set to work—willing even to die for a future they had already lived. The scientists of Rerma came secretly to Earth, and behind them, light-years away, their crystal fountains still sparkled sadly in the sun.

Rerma would be destroyed—but humanity would not die.

Conan Lang sat alone in the red room, talking to a machine. It was all clear enough, even obvious, once you knew the facts. Either there were no advanced races in the galaxy, which would account for Earth having no record of any contact—or else the Earth *had* been contacted secretly, been manipulated by the very techniques that she herself was later to use on undeveloped worlds.

He looked back on history. Such profound and important changes as the Neolithic food revolution and the steam engine had been produced by Earth alone, making her the most advanced planet in the galaxy except for the Rerma. Earth had a tradition of technological skill behind her, and she was young and pliable. The Rerma came—and the so-called world wars had followed. Why? Not to avenge the honor of insulted royalty, not because of fanatics, not because of conflicting creeds—but in a very real sense to save the world. The world wars had been fought to produce atomic power.

After 1900, the development of Earth had snowballed in a fantastic manner. The atom was liberated and man flashed upward to other planets of the solar system. Just as Conan Lang himself had worked through the ancestor gods of the Oripesh to bring about sweeping changes on Sirius Ten, the Rerma had worked through one of the gods of the Earthmen—the machine.

Cybernetics.

Man swept out to the stars, and the great thinking machines inevitably confronted them with the menace from beyond that drew nearer with each passing year. Young and proud, the men of Earth accepted the most astounding challenge ever hurled—they set out to reshape a galaxy to give their children and their children's children a chance for life.

And always, behind the scenes, beneath the headlines, were the ancient Rerma. They subtly directed and hinted and helped. With a selflessness unmatched in the universe, these representatives of a human race that had matured too far prepared Earth for galactic leadership—and themselves for death on the edge of the galaxy. They had unified Earth and pushed and prodded her along the road to survival.

When the Rerma could have fled and purchased extra time for themselves, they chose instead—these peace-loving people—to fight for another chance for man.

Conan Lang looked up, startled, to find the black figure of Fritz Gottlieb standing by his side. He looked old, very old, in the blood-red light and Conan Lang looked at him with new understanding. Gottlieb's impatience with others and the vast, empty loneliness in those strange eyes—all that was meaningful now. What a life that man had led on Earth, Conan Lang thought with wonder. Alone, wanting friendship and understanding—and having always to discourage close personal contacts, having always to fight his lonely battle alone in a sterile little room, knowing that the very men he had dedicated his life to help laughed behind his back and compared him to a bird of prey.

"I've been a fool, sir," Conan Lang said, getting to his feet. "We've all been fools."

Fritz Gottlieb sat down again behind his desk and turned the machine off. The red glow vanished and they were left in the semidarkness.

"Not fools, Dr. Lang," he said. "It was necessary for you to feel as you did. The feelings of one old man—what are they worth in this game we are playing? We must set our sights high, Dr. Lang."

Conan Lang waited in the shadows, thinking, watching the man who sat across from him as though seeing him for the first time. His mind was still groping, trying to assimilate all he had learned. It was a lot to swallow in a few short hours, even when you were prepared for it beforehand by guesswork and conjecture. There were still questions, of course, many questions. He knew that he still had much to learn.

"Why me?" Conan Lang asked finally. "Why have I been told all this? Am I the only one who knows?"

Fritz Gottlieb shook his head, his face ghost-white in the darkened room. "There are others who know," he said sibilantly. "Your superior officer, Nelson White, has known for years of course. You were told because you have been selected to take over his command when he retires. If you are willing, you will work very closely with him here on Earth for the next five years, and then you will be in charge."

"Will I... leave Earth again?"

"Not for a long time, Dr. Lang. The integration-acceleration principle will keep you busy—we are in effect lifting Earth another stage and the results will be far-reaching. But you will be home, Dr.

Lang—home with your family and your people.

“That is all, Dr. Lang,” Gottlieb hissed.

Conan Lang hesitated. “I’ll do my level best,” he said finally. “Good-by, sir... I’ll see you again.”

Conan Lang put out his hand to the man he had called the Buzzard and Gottlieb shook it with a firm, powerful grip.

“Good-by, Conan,” Fritz Gottlieb said softly.

Conan Lang turned and walked from the dark room, leaving the man from Rerma sitting alone in the shadows of the Nest.

The little bullet rose vertically on her copter blades through the evening sky, hovered a moment in the cool air under the frosty stars, and then flashed off on her jets into the west. Conan Lang set the controls and leaned back in the seat, at peace with himself at last. There *was* meaning to it all, there was a purpose—and Andy and all the others like him on the far trails had not sacrificed their lives for nothing.

Conan Lang breathed the clean air of Earth and smiled happily. Ahead of him, waiting for him, were Kit and Rob and he would never have to leave them again. He opened the lateral ports and let the wind hurl itself at his face.

The End.

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