

THE BIOLOGICAL REVOLT

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The world now enters a new cycle, that of the antibiotics and wonder medicines. Good as these scientific remedies are, scientists already warn us that the human body is beginning to manufacture new bacteria, new microbes, which, in turn, create unknown virulent diseases. Man now eats more chemicals than ever before. Our daily bread is loaded with chemicals; the fowl, beef, and particularly pork we eat are all loaded with antibiotics.

In his eagerness to make money, man stops at nothing. When will the human body revolt and break out in new, loathsome diseases? This is a serious problem for today's health scientists. The problem is world wide.

1

'The dark lines of a man's head and shoulders cut across the brightness. The silhouette hung in the frame and then bent forward to look into the room.

The figure turned so he would not block the shine. He looked upon that part of the bed lit by the moon and upon a woman who slept.

“Barbara,” he whispered.

“Barbara!” His voice trembled with loneliness.

The woman jumped from bed, scooped up a gown and slid it on. As she tied the strings across her bosom, she wheeled upon the man outside. Her voice was shrill. “Go away, Bill! Go away!”

The recent presence of another man was obvious -a shirt and a necktie hung on the door knob. The piney odor of pipe tobacco remained in the air.

“Barbara, I’m sick. Very sick. I need you.”

She stepped backwards from him, slowly. “There’s nothing I can do for you. If you were dying, I couldn’t even hold your hand.”

“It’s not true, Barbara.” His voice was lower and more controlled, and his eyes were red and hot. “You could at least take one shot of anti-asp. You could talk with me without being affected.”

“No, the anti-asp shot is just a trick of yours. If you loved me, husband dear, you’d not ask me to take one shot for you. You know how terrible the asp is! Do you want me to suffer, too?”

“Barbara! If you knew how lonely I am.”

Trembling, she said, “Besides, how could you want me now?” She glanced at the door where the man, Travers, had left.

He gripped the sill tighter, as if the house were whirling and he didn’t want to fall off.

For the first time, she stepped toward him. She yelled, “Do you think you are the only one who’s lonely?”

“No, no—I understand. But remember, Barbara, we said, ‘for better or worse, till death do us part.’”

She screamed, “Get out, Bill. I wish you were dead! You are dead, to me! Get out before I kill you ... Or myself!” She turned and ran through the door.

2

The man walked alone.

His passage from the house through narrow woods was marked by solitude and terror. Mosquitoes, thirsty, swooped toward him. Closer, they suddenly angled off and flew away. They wanted none of his stench. A frog, sitting apart from the path flopped away panicked through the weeds. A coon, clinging to a branch and complacently watching the man, suddenly sniffed. It scuttled up the tree and clung to the bending tip. This man, Bill Ogate, was the Asp.

The terror he breathed and sweated with every second was his curse. Victim of man’s revenge and ingenuity, he was doomed for eight years to imbue with the asp all who came close. His free will had been

violated, but the horrified world could not help him. Their sympathy and aid came from a distance; nobody could hold his hand or call him brother.

The Asp was impregnated with that giant protein molecule called the asp. It was forcibly injected into his bloodstream where it spread to every part of his body. Utilizing the electromagnetic field of the body cells, the asp attached itself to each cell so that the host must "share" its field with the uninvited guest. Many of Ogtate's cells inhospitably refused, and the commensals secured a foothold only on about an eighth of the total.

Bill Ogtate's weight increased with the swarm of semivirus. The demand for more energy aroused his appetite. His metabolism accelerated, and his body, to control the increased energy-output, released it in heat and sweat as in exercise. The internal body temperature thus remained normal and constant.

Ogtate's skin was the primary transmitter of the "bite," as this emanation came to be called. Asps radiated continuously from him, although the rate varied according to reproduction. When asps attached to a certain organ built up to a certain bulk, the host was unable to endure any more accretion. They threw the switch, so to say, cut off some power, and weak-ened the link between the negative and positive poles of host and guest. Though some asps always clung, others were kicked off and thus emitted from the Asp. They left his body via breath, skin, and other means of voiding. They floated through the air to be breathed or otherwise absorbed by whatever living thing hap-pened to be near.

Ogtate himself was immune to the reaction his presence induced in others. Though burdened by the giant molecules, his sympathetic nervous system and adrenal glands, which were particularly affected in others, were quite indifferent to the asps. They were injected into his blood along with an antibody. The antibody depended upon the closed field of the adren-als for reactivation. Although it could not, unfor-tunately, kill the asps, it kept them from stimulating the adrenals. It did not, however, deaden these organs to other vital stimuli.

Ogtate breathed and sweated as a man must. The invisible miasma put out long fingers through the air and plunged then into the lungs and skin of any living creature that came near. In a short time the fingers felt the blood. They wrapped themselves around the medulla, the inner portion of the adrenals, and they squeezed.

The effects were immediate. Adrenalin poured out, activating the sympathetic nervous system, at-tached closely to the glands. The person thus "bitten" felt at once the hardbeating heart, the shallow and jerky breaths, cold sweat and rising body tempera-ture, shaking of body and paling of skin, standing-up of hair, halting of digestion, loosening of muscles, dilation of pupils.

Above all he felt suspension of reason.

Added together, the symptoms characterized one dominant emotion.

Fear.

There was but one thought body and mind had: Get away fast.

Actually, there was no chance for permanent damage to those who were affected, as long as they went away before their systems were overstimulated. The asps attacked only briefly before being excreted. To get a hard grip upon the cells, they had to be suspended in a nourishing fluid and injected into the blood. The nutrient gave them strength to hook into the host's electromagnetic field.

Although the Asp's bite was at times strong, at others weak, according to the rhythm of their reproduction, he always radiated enough that he could never be approached by unvaccinated people.

If he were a rabbit, he could safely have hopped through a den of hungry lions.

But he was a man who would have welcomed even the company of a lion.

3

The visor in the front room of the Ogtate house bonged. Barbara walked into the front room and pressed a button. The screen sprang from blankness into full life color. Seemingly, a man stood before her.

"Mrs. Ogtate, I am General Yewliss of the Terran Psychological Corps." The tones, like the man, were sturdy and dark. Once you heard them, you didn't forget.

She nodded and said, "I've seen you on the news, General."

He wasted no time, but like the big red-black bull he so much resembled, charged at the point. "Mrs. Ogtate, I'm going to ask you if you will forgive me for interfering with your free will. Believe me, it was absolutely necessary for the good of Earth."

"What did you do?"

"Mrs. Ogtate, for some time we've had a detector alarm buried near your house. We call it a 'rattle-snake.' When the person whose presence it is set to detect comes near, it sends out a signal. Its receiver is this." He tapped a little box on his wrist. "I've been wearing this day and night. Ten minutes ago I was awakened by its alarm. That meant much to me. It meant that your husband, undoubtedly the most important man on Earth, was at your house."

He paused, then added, "And it implied much more."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. Bill Ogtate finally broke under the pressure of loneliness and ostracism. He knows that you, the person he loves more than any other, will not share his exile, yet he's desperate enough to make a hopeless plea."

Paling, she said, "Have you been spying?"

His broad swarthy face split showing white teeth, and his large hand passed over his closely-cropped black poll with underlying red glints. "Hardly. Even the military don't do that nowadays, Madame. But the Psych Corps has many resources. One is the Computer of Probabilities, the so-called 'giant brain' at New Delphi. Given all available data, it estimated he should break down about this time. Especially if he were sick. And that he should come to you."

Scornfully, she said, "Do you need a machine to tell you that?"

The General smiled slightly and said, "Your rebuke is accepted. To tell the truth, I figured it out independently, too, but one must have the backing of authority, you know."

He became brisk. "Would you mind telling me, Madame, if our surmises were correct? He did make an appeal, didn't he?"

The General's eyes went over her shoulder. She didn't turn around, for she knew by the oriental aroma of cigarette smoke that Toni Travers had come into the room.

"Yes, you were right," she said. Her eyes looked straight into his: her back straightened and her shoulders squared.

He said, "Please don't get angry, Mrs. Ogtate. I make no moral judgments. One lives as one must."

"I'm not interested in what you think. What else do you want?"

He glanced at her trembling lower lip and said, "Would you care to sign a waiver over our violation of your free will? Remember, we are trying to influence your husband to give Earth the Belos."

"I know that. Don't you think the Government has approached me enough on that subject. And," she suddenly shouted, "my answer to them is still 'no'!"

"I'm well aware of that," Yewliss replied, "That's why I didn't renew the plea. If you'd answer my question, Mrs. Ogtate, we could end this. The hour is late. I'm sure you're anxious to get back to ... bed." He paused, and she wondered if he shot an amused glance at Travers from under his lowered lids. Then he continued, "And I have to work fast. Earth's existence is in the balance."

His words did not affect her, for he said them so prosaically. However, she was tired of the subject "Send the papers. I'll sign them, provided I have your promise you won't bother me again."

He spoke quickly. "You have it. Papers won't be needed. The recording of our conversation is sufficient. Thank you, and goodnight, Mrs. Ogtate."

Travers came from behind and put his arms around her waist. Smoke blew around her face. "You need sleep. I think I'll make coffee for myself."

She turned in his arms and put her head on his chest. "He saw you."

"So what? Do people pay much attention to such things any more?"

"You don't understand. If I would go to Bill and say I'd live with him, I'm sure he would turn the Belos over to Earth. The war would be over. But I can't. They can't make me do it. I am so lonely. If it weren't for you, I don't know what I'd do."

"Move away with me. Get a divorce."

She raised her head. Tears sparkled. "I will, Tom, Tomorrow."

4

Gathering his thoughts on this strangest of all stories, Yewliss went to his desk. He pressed a button; his orderly came in.

"Everything's ready?"

“Yes, sir.”

“What about the woman who’s going with me?”

“The Conmprob look a long time selecting her, sir. Seems it had a lengthy priority request to fulfill first. And your specifications were extraordinary, sir.”

“I didn’t say they had to be met to the iota. I just wanted the nearest thing. This is too big for picayunish perfection.”

“We’ve met them anyway, sir. The woman was doing medical research on Eros. We finally located her. She should be here any moment. Eros is at its closest to Earth now.”

The Generalunwrapped a cigar. Suddenly, he stopped, rigid. “Wait a minute!” he roared. “You said Eros? Doing medical research for the Army?”

“Yes, sir.”

Yewliss breathed deeply and said, “You know her name?”

“Yes, sir. Here’s the information. Major Killison. She’s even got the same first name as his wife, Bar-bara. She fits tour requirements to a ‘F.’”

Yewliss looked as if might throw the cigar in the orderly’s face. He scow led and said, “That’s all for the time being, Brown. Notify me when she gets in. Have her report at once.”

The noncom was puzzled, but glad to escape from the office. The Old Fox wasn’t living up to his name. He was more like a big black bull seeing red.

When the door closed, Yewliss stuck the cigar between his thick lips, lit up and drew in and puffed out smoke through his nostrils like a virgin-eating dragon. “Barbara Killison, by the gods! Won’t that make them hold their sides and laugh!”

When the cigar had become a stub of ashes, the orderly knocked out the door and announced Major Killison. Yewliss, trying to control the rage in his voice said, “Come in!” He rose and faced the door.

The woman was longlegged and narrowwaisted and deepbreasted. She had thick wavy red hair. She bore a more than superficial resemblance to Mrs. Ogtate. She saluted.

Yewliss returned it and then said, “Drop the formality, Barbara.” He went up to her and took her shoulders, broad for a woman’s, in his big, dark hands and looked her in the eyes, level with his. “Barbara, I’m sorry you had to come all this way for nothing. Yet, I’m glad for myself. I haven’t seen you in three months.” He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head.

“What’s time matter?” He squeezed his eyes. “You’ve met somebody else? Who? Colonel Singh?”

“Don’t be so damned silly-jealous,” she said in a slow fluid voice. “Do you expect me to kiss you and then get your blessing to go away and throw myself at Ogtate?”

He laughed. “So that’s it? Barbara, if I weren’t in such a hurry, I’d take you out for a drink. We could

have a good laugh over this. No, Barbara, I didn't know you were the one chosen. I sent the specifications to the Comprob two days ago. Some civilian had priority over me. When it finally started on my problem, it took all day to find what I wanted. Then the military attaches sent a message to you. I didn't have time to find whom it'd found, because I've been working on Project Aspnight and day. See? Still mad?"

"May I smoke? Yes. Well, dear, there's something you forgot." She relished the smoke a second and then let it float, genie-like, front her lovely mouth. "You forget, I was told what I am volunteering for. I came into this of my own free will."

"Were you informed you might have to marry Ogtate?"

"I was."

The temptation struggled on his tongue to say some stupid cliché like "But how could you?" Fighting it, he walked around his desk and sat down and put tight fists on the plastic top. "Let me get this straight. You no longer love me?"

"I never did, remember? I did say I'd marry you. I admired you more than any man in the world. I think I could respond to you with every response that marriage demands. Perhaps we could become the much-talked-about ideal of psychologists and priests: one flesh. But I never loved you."

He murmured, "That's right. I forgot. I equated your promise to marry me with a confession of love."

"That's not like you," she said. "The Old Fox never forgets, they say."

"The Old Fox has been outfoxed by the one who can do it best," Yewliss replied. "Himself." He unclenched his hands, spread them out on the desk and looked down at them. "So I've brought you here only to turn you over to the Asp? And I must do my best to see he takes you?" He struck the desk top. "I don't have to do it! Barbara, I reject you for this mission!"

She walked across the room and sat down in a chair, which remolded itself about her long curves. Many a man would obviously have liked to trade places with it. "Yew, I know you can't reject time. I sent a message to New Delphi. The Comprobators told me the girl next in line was more than fifteen points off classification. I'm the only one who has a chance for success with Ogtate. And that chance is only 60-40. Moreover," and she leaned forward so suddenly that the reluctant chair remade a popping sound. "you can't order me not to. The mission interferes with my personal rights. I'll ask the Comprob for a review of your order, and it'll verify my stand."

He groaned, "Oh, for the good old days, when a general's word couldn't be countermanded by an unconscious electronic gadget! Very well, Barbara. I wouldn't try to force you. You're an adult, and you've free will, modified, of course, by circumstances." He rose and reached for his cap. "I still can't understand why you volunteered. I hoped I meant more to you."

She rose, too, and smoothed the top of her cap, which had been folded in her belt. "What's the most important problem of Earth today?"

"You know it's Ogtate. He must be wheedled into giving us the Belos. Otherwise, we lose the war and, quite possibly, become exterminated. The Belos is so important that the Government may pass a special case law to force Ogtate to tell. But he can't be forced. Drugs or even torture—though that, of course, is out of the question—would only scramble the equations in his mind. There's no way of breaking that

post-hypnotic block.”

“Then why are you so surprised that I volunteered?”

“I’m not, Barbara. It’s just that one part of me, the man that loves you, can’t accept it. The soldier understands.”

She put her hand on his arm. “I’m really sorry,” she said in her deep and soft voice. “But I’m just idealistic enough to hold Earth’s welfare above mine.”

He withdrew a little. “Don’t feel sorry for me. This affair isn’t over. You’re not Ogtate’s yet. Tell me, if you don’t have to become asparted yourself, will you still marry me?”

“Dear Yew! I thought your pride would be so hurt that you would have no more to do with me.”

“It is hurt. But I love you. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“If I don’t have to be asparted, I’ll marry you.”

He clapped his hat on and said, “Good! Major Killison, will you come outside with me? The copter’s ready.”

“Yes, sir.” She smiled a little.

5

Outside, they walked upon the broad field, two forms threading between shiny pools of glass blasts made by rockets. They wandered beneath an enormous Mississippi moon. Killison gazed at the many buildings and towering silver needles and said, “All this was built because of one man?”

He nodded and said, “That’s how important he is. The military know it, but we can’t heat it into the heads of our citizens. Most think the war is ninety million miles off. It is, now, but any day the noses of Priami ships may materialize out of the air.”

They stepped into the copier and strapped themselves in. Yewliss checked the instruments, and then lifted up the ship.

“According to my men, Ogtate flew back to his island where he’ll be licking his wounds, and there we’ll help him. Or, rather you will.”

She placed her hand upon her doctor’s kit as if to make sure it hadn’t dissolved. “How do you know he’s sick.”

“His wife told me. Besides, the Comprob submitted he’d be most likely to break when he was sick.”

“I don’t think it’s malaria,” she said. “I understand there is still some along the Amazon and the Congo. But there hasn’t been a case on this continent for forty years. His fever may be psychosomatic.”

“Possibly from an allergy,” he said.

She glanced at him, wondering why he’d said that. “One of the reasons I volunteered, although by no

means the strongest, was to study the asps. I don't agree with my colleagues who maintain that the effect can't be wiped out."

"You'll get nowhere. We offered to place him in a lab where Earth's best brains would study him. He refused. He said they might work twenty years before they found anything. By then, the asps would have worn themselves out. Besides, they can discover as much using test animals as they could with him. He doesn't want to spend all that time behind glass win-dows, like an ape in a zoo."

"Or a snake in a pit," she added.

"In one way, I don't blame him. But he hasn't been at all co-operative. The main reason he wouldn't allow himself to be placed under observation is that he's afraid we'll pry the Belos out of him."

She leaned back and gazed from the window. "The night is beautiful," she said. "The moon is giving herself to every lover in sight. I've never seen a nightscape like this."

Then, as if her senses had been talking for her while she was thinking about something else, she said, "The major who met me at the transmitter briefed me. Perhaps you know more than he, a weak-ness of Ogtate's that you, as a psych, might have no-ticed."

"Tell me what you know. I'll fill in anything you've missed." As he looked at her, he fought against his consuming desire to place his arm around her shoulders. She was Diana, bright and full at tines, shadowed and crescented at others, far off yet just beyond tiptoe reach, a blend of majesty and of pas-sion. If she were to become Ogtate's, could Yewliss find her equal? Realist that he was, he knew there were women just as beautiful and intelligent and strong; spirited. Many would gladly be his mate; many could satisfy him in every way and would make him love them. But they were not Barbara, the only one he wanted.

Closing her eyes, she talked. "The story as I know it began about three years ago. The Priami warned us to stay off Mars. Dr. Erkells, a physicist, and his assistant, Ogtate, were working on a device they thought would make interplanetary war impos-sible, or at least, extremely difficult."

She opened her eyes and said, "Yew,am I boring you? You know all this, of course. It is so fantastic, so fairy-like. We step into booths, sit down, and, in what seems to us the next second, we're halfway around the Earth, or on Callisto or Ceres. And Erkells was going to wave his black sorcerer's wand and put an end to that. Of course, it was for a good cause, but how many bad deeds are done for good reasons? He even would have stopped EPB-travel between Earth cities, for the Belos would have distorted the waves so much that we'd be quite scrambled by the time we arrived at our destination.

"Nobody thinks about that. If Ogtate tells us the secret, we defeat the Martians. But we also go back, for a while at least, to flight on the wings of matter. Our magical energy-chariots are grounded. Yet few realize this; they're all so blase and talk about weekends in Paris or Luna Port as if they were hot-dog stands down the street. So do I, but now and then I wake up and catch my breath and say, 'Dabs, can this be? Is this you, in this age? Why, Babs, Louis XIV or Pharaoh Cheops would give all they had to be the commonest citizen of Earth. And wouldn't Shelley or Poe or Dunsany or Li Po have signed in blood to step through the magical gate of Space and Time annihi-lated? How can we look around and not run scream-ing down the street with joy? Babs, this is you, now!' "

He patted her hand. "I like you, Barbara. You're one of the few people I know who aren't walking corpses. You're alive. Your eyes aren't world-shot. Others live horizontally; you, if you can see what I mean, live perpendicularly."

She closed her eyes and put her head back. “So,” she resumed, indifferently, “when the war began, Erkells and Ogtate were working hard on the theory of their weapon. They succeeded in thinking out the equations. It was a marvelous invention, and, if given to both sides, would make interplanetary war im-possible. Before Erkells could begin work on the prac-tical part, however, the human element entered-though, perhaps, it had never been absent.

“Erkells fell out of love with his wife. She knew it. She knew the young woman he intended to marry after the divorce. So, because she didn’t want to lose him, she looked for something to prevent his going to the other woman. She found help in an assistant of her husband’s, a man who was on the point of losing his job because his love-life interfered with his work. In this case, although Erkells didn’t know it, the assistant’s trouble sprang from Erkells’ wife. She, thinking she could trust him because he was fond of her, asked him to help her. He gave her an illegal drug. It was a post -hypnotic affecting thalamocortical integration. Once it was fed to the scientist, he’d not be able to resist his wife’s suggestion that he abandon his bride-to-be and continue happily married to her.

“Sounds Dark-Ageish, doesn’t it? So it is. Technologically, we’re in the Golden Age, but people change slowly. They take a long time to come out of the Brass.

“Unfortunately, the assistant, by means of the drug, implanted the suggestion that the physicist de-stroy himself by fire! Suggestion is not easily effected, and it has little chance of success unless there is a similar, strong neurosis or psychosis already buried in the subject. This was Erkells’ case, as the assistant knew. His victim, however, fought his growing insanity. He went to a therapist, and in time the doctor would have discovered the cause of his aberration. Not long afterwards, though, Erkells’ copter crashed while he was flying to the therapist’s office. He died of radiation-sickness from the broken fuel-tank.

“Before he died, he did something he had sworn he would never do. He gave the secret of the Belos to his scientific colleague, Ogtate. The master himself had done all of the concluding work on the equations. When he surrendered his knowledge, however, he made the young man swear he wouldn’t give the weapon to Earth, unless she was in danger of annihila-tion. Erkells was a pacifist. He believed the whole conflict was based on misunderstanding and that it could peaceably be resolved. As both factions had potentially democratic political systems, they should be able to avert a cataclysmic war.

“Erkells figured that if the Earth had a monopoly upon the Belos, it would easily win, for the Priami would not be able to penetrate our power fields. Conquest would therefore be so easy for us that we might become an arrogant, empire-building race. We would lose all the ideals and freedom we have gained in the last two hundred years. Moreover, he thought the Priami were no different from Terrans.”

“He had never seen one of those monsters!” in-terrupted the General. “Nor one of our Callistan stations they’ve bombed.”

“No, that’s certain. Anyway, the assistant and Mrs. Erkells were sent to a therapeutic institution. Ogtate was left with the burden of decision. If he didn’t divulge the Belos until Earth was in danger, he might be too late, for it took time and organization to set up the equipment for the field. But if he told scientists the secret, he might launch the moral downfall of his people.”

“Idiot!” said Yewliss. “How can he linger in mist and moonshine with the threat of bombs?”

“I intend to find out,” she said, and squirmed to find a more comfortable position. He watched the shifting of curves, the upthrust of breasts, the rotation of hips below the slim waist, as she settled back with a sigh. He closed his eyes and gripped the wheel.

“About this time,” she continued, “Ogtate joined the Militant Pacifists Party. Inasmuch as everyone knew he alone kept the Belos’ secret, he rose quickly to a high position in the MP’s. He led these in their demand to sue for peace at once even if we had to forswear all claims to any part of our system. He thought the Priami—a reasonable race, according to him would be so impressed with our generosity they would come to terms. But his opponents insisted our contacts with the Priami were enough to prove that we were dealing with devils.

“Despite this, Ogtate presented to the Council a law that would halt the war. His opponents claimed that, if the law were passed, we would be slaughtered, unless he would hand over the Belos.

“The night before the law was to be considered, Ogtate was seized by a band of masked men. They asparted him! People were horrified. They decided to vote the Council out of office at once, for they suspected that the men who’d done the outrageous deed were of the same party. That very night, however, the Priami helium-bombed Callisto. So the government stayed in power, and the MP’s dissolved from lack of adequate membership. The government did everything they could to make up to Ogtate. Too late. He lost his wife and children; his friends deserted him; he was forced to live alone.”

“Here we are,” said Yewliss.

The copter crossed the moonspotted Mississippi and settled down upon a heart-shaped bit of earth: Lemons’ Island. Artificially built, it had once been a pleasure resort. Ogtate had requested it and got it. The craft landed in a clearing before a large, white house built in pseudo-prebellum style. Although there were lights inside, no one appeared at the doors or windows.

When the wheels touched, Yewliss took a hypo from a kit and injected the contents into Killison’s left arm. “It’s 0100,” he said. “You have ten hours before the effect wears off. After that, take no more, or you’ll be sensitized. Second shots have been tried on lab animals; they always die.”

“You forget I’m an M.D.,” she said, sharply. She took her kit and began to climb out.

He pulled her back. “No kiss?”

“If I fail in this mission, we’ll have enough time for that then. Meanwhile, silly as this may sound, I’d feel unfaithful to Ogtate if I kissed you.”

“Just a meeting of the lips?” He wasn’t sure whether she was kidding him.

“I put all of myself into a kiss. Nothing’s, held back.”

“The asp has affected you already,” he said trying to carry it off with a laugh. Even to himself, he sounded dismal. “Remember,” he called after her, “to contact me at once if anything comes up.”

She waved goodnight and walked off. A moment later, his copter whirred away.

General Yewliss set the automatic controls after leveling out his copter and turned to the visor. Idly, he twisted the dial until a New York program jumped upon the screen. It was one of the many discussion panels filling the air, and this, like most of its competitors, was discussing the Asp and the Belos. Although the panelers were scientists and intellectuals, they had nothing new to offer. Yewliss listened

with half an ear and then cut them off.

Everybody knew that when Terrans went to Mars, they found underground colonies of the so-called Priami. This race had come to the solar system from a star's planet system that long ago flared into a nova. Knowing their fate, the Priami had escaped by means of a unique form of interstellar travel. Years before they themselves emigrated, they launched a ship driven by ion beams and containing automatic energy-matter wave receivers and converters. Then the beings were passed from matter into alpha energy-waves and were beamed to the solar system, which they knew had planets.

After fifty years of near-lightspeed travel, the ship entered the sun's gravitomagnetic field, which elec-tron-triggered the machinery. The wave-charts, not as yet deteriorated by the rather short trip, fed into the converter. The coded pulses were then metamorphosed again into matter: spaceships and crews.

It was during the mid-1940's, that Terrans themselves succeeded in their first experiments with energy-into-matter conversion. They didn't know, as they celebrated feeble success in creating several atoms from energy and adding them to some carbon molecules, that the Priami not only anticipated them by quite a few hundred years but used the classic development to survive as a race.

The newcomers, noting the large population, industries, and quarrelsomeness of the Terrans, ignored Earth and burrowed into arid Mars. They freed oxy-gen from the rusty rocks and contented themselves with sending occasional space ships to report on their neighbors' progress.

By the time man's rockets reached Mars, the Priami were beginning to build on the surface, whose sterile soil was being converted to fertility. In several more centuries they would make of the red globe a smaller, but green Earth.

Only one thing could destroy them-man. Strangely, the Martians didn't fear man's bombs or diseases or rapacity. They dreaded a factor which man himself would never have considered a weapon. Man was a liar!

The Priami could not lie, or rather, if they did, it was by a super-effort of will. But then they went into psychosomatic decline and death, often suicide. Prolonged and intimate contact with man would lead to race extinction.

Nonlying was a culturally-conditioned characteristic. Many Priami, realizing they would inevitably have to face man in numbers, tried to change their culture. They were determined to teach themselves to lie and to listen to lies. However, the flexibles met opposition. The change was delayed so bitterly that it would be centuries before Mars as a whole would be a planet of prevaricators. Meanwhile, the Priami issued ultimatums to keep off Terrans. When man, un-able to take their life-and-death problem seriously, persisted, the Priami attacked Earthmen in self-defense. The first interplanetary war had begun.

Independently, Terra evolved its energy-matter converters and transmitters. During the mid-twentieth century scientists photographed individual atoms with electron microscopes. Out of these were born elec-tronic scanners that could "blueprint" the most complicated matter. Combining these with the converters, the scientists could disintegrate a rocketship, atom by atom, and beam them in pulses, to be reassembled at a distance.

By Yewliss' time, they proved that electrons consisted of points of convergence in lines of force or energy waves. They formed positive and negative convergence points from energy to build atoms, and so on up the scale of size to complete man.

Humankind was justly proud of this achievement, but soon found that the EPB-converters could only be set up on Earth, Luna, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter's moons and some of the asteroids. The Priami had stations and colonies on every other body worth occupying. They warned that if man transgressed, a converter ship would drop close to Earth and would materialize a whole fleet of war-vessels.

Earth could do the same to Mars, but retribution would follow.

There was a stalemate. Yet, a move could be made, and Terra could make it. She knew of a new weapon that could nullify enemy Energy-Pulse-Blue-print Realizers, while her own dropped unmarked upon Mars. It was called the Belos, the Greek word for weapon. The principle of the Belos was known quite well. The application was not.

According to theory, a series of tremendous generators from North Magnetic Pole to South Magnetic Pole, geared thus to the Earth's electro-magnetic field, would produce a shell of energy around the globe. This shell corresponds, for various scientific reasons, with the ionosphere, and would work on a principle first deduced in the 1940's by two British astronomers. This was the idea that the universe was expanding and being kept from entropy because hydrogen atoms were continuously forming in space. Later, scientists found that it was, instead, electrons that formed de nova. These, along with some short-lived subatomic particles came into being when gravitomagnetic lines of force converged.

Founded on this discovery, the Belos shell consisted of shifting electro-magnetic stresses, statically bound to cross enough energy waves so particles would be "created". Thus, if a Priami materializer-rocket penetrated the Earth's atmosphere with the intention of converting a huge fleet in the air, before the Terrans could do anything about it, the attack would be thwarted. The Belos would generate "endostatic", mixing the matter with foreign particles, then adding or subtracting electrons from the new configurations, making accurate materialization impossible. If the converter-ship stayed far out of the Belos, it might as well not leave its home port, for Earth radar would pick up the distant Martians, and send interceptors. To be effective, the invaders should come into being at close range, but as long as the third planet had the Belos, they could do it. Only one man knew how to put the Belos into operation. He would not tell. His name was Bill Ogtate.

7

Bill Ogtate was sitting at a little table, contemplating a queen, when he heard a copter cutting the air outside. "You'd better take off," he said to Smith, his opponent.

Smith withdrew a three-fingered hand from a king. "Take off? That means fly? Remove? Unveil? Imitate?"

"Fly. Flee. Run. Dismiss yourself."

"Dismiss Smith? Ah, go away! But who would visit you?"

"Well, you have," said Ogtate. He smacked his lips as if his mouth tasted bitter.

Smith stood up. There was a strong light behind him. The pulsing of his green-blue bloodstreams and the slow squeezing of his intestines showed dimly, as in a fog. You could never accuse Smith of being thick-skinned.

Smith talked from behind a two-foot-long, elephantine trunk and a fleshy, walrus mustache. From time

to time little spearheaded teeth showed in his mouth. There were two rows that moved sidewise in opposite directions. Here was the original living meatgrinder. "Do you have any cigarettes on you?" he asked, his voice amplified by the large throat-sac hang-ing from his neck. "If your visitor is female, I may be in the ship for quite a while. I haven't any smokes down there."

"I'm sorry I taught you to enjoy tobacco," said Ogtate as he tossed a package.

The Martian caught it in his trunk and walked to the corner. There he lifted the rug, opened a trap-door, and climbed through it. Ogtate replaced the rug and walked to the front of the house.

When he saw the woman, he clung to the sides of the door. "Lord," he said, "I thought at first you were Barbara."

"I am Barbara," she answered. She had a beautiful smile. "I'm Major Barbara Killison. I'm a doctor. I understand you're sick."

"So that's the way the wind blows, is it?" he snarled. "How dumb do they think I am? Sure, I was sick and will be again. But I'm not so far out of my head that I don't know when I'm being played for a fall guy."

"May I come in?" she asked coolly. She marched straight at him. He had to let her in or else block her body. At the last moment, he stepped aside and watched her put her bag on a table, open it and take out a stethoscope. "Would you mind unbuttoning your shirt?"

"That, too? Sure, I'll take off everything. That's what they put you up to, isn't it?"

"I may have to give you a complete examination." He laughed loudly. "Come on, Killison. Let's not be coy. I know that Old Fox Yewliss is bent on forcing the Belos from me. I know how his mind works. He submits a list of facts, or supposed facts, about my life to the Comprob. 'What says the Coruprob?' he asks. And it answers that if he wants the secret, send some one who can seduce it front me. A Delilah to clip the long-haired Samson. Get a girl who looks like his wife. He'll like that; he's very much in love with her. Have her be a doctor. If all else fails, she can bat her lashes over her big blue eyes and say she'll make the sacrifice. She'll allow herself to be raped and share his lonely life. Together, two against the world, they'll walk hand in hand into the setting sun and make beautiful music together. There's only one catch in the whole plan. I won't follow it."

"I wish I knew everything, too," she replied calmly.

He held out his arm, fist clenched, blue vein ready for the needle. "Go ahead, I have been sick. You just now caught me in one of my healthier moods."

"There's hope for you. You're certainly not apathetic. Angry people are on the road to recovery."

"Time is the only thing that will cure my anger. I have eight years to live in this mobile prison. If I decide to stick it out, that is . . ."

She shot a look from under lowered lids to see if he were bidding for sympathy. Catching it, he sneered. She wondered if he thought the glance was one of coquetry. Flushing despite herself, she took the blood sample and then walked to the table where she set up her rack of tubes and several tiny machines.

"If you want to, you may use my lab," he said. "It's very large, set up at Government expense." "May

I?" she asked.

"Go ahead. It's the last door to the left at the end of the hall."

Glad that he wasn't going with her, she said, "Thank you," and walked down the long, deserted corridor. A feeling came to her that he was watching. She sensed his eyes roving her hips. She tried to modify their sway, for she knew very well that her walk aroused men. She couldn't help it; she was born with the talent. Nevertheless, for some reason, she now felt self-conscious. His eyes were feverish, skimming the goose-pimples on her skin.

When she entered the lab, she stopped short and gasped. It was a mess: broken glass and torn books and stinking liquids littered the floor. Even a shatterproof window bore spiderweb streaks where he'd struck it. Dried blood stained one corner of it.

The damage didn't matter. She went to the lab for privacy. A flick of the toggle on the wristbox and a syllable reached Yewliss at once.

"Yew, what have you been feeding this man?"

"What?"

"Somebody's tampered with his food. It's no wonder he suffers recurrent fevers. I found enough pyretigen in his blood to send an elephant to bed."

"All right," came his deep voice, somewhat tinny through the receiver. "I could pretend innocence. I won't. The Comprob estimated that a fever would bring him even closer to the breaking point. His mother nursed him through three attacks of a fever while he was vacationing as a child in India. So I gave him an artificial temperature. It won't hurt him."

"Yew, if this gets out, you'll be disgraced!"

"I know it. Babs, don't be mad. I don't like to be dramatic-" he paused when she laughed-"but the fate of humanity depends on Ogtate. I'd do anything -even give up you, much as I love you-to get the Belos. Time is short; our scientists are working furiously to duplicate the Belos principle, but without success so far. No, Babs. What I'm doing-how many men you know would dare it? Remember, this is for you, too."

She shook. "That may be true, but I don't want anyone to violate another's free will like that. Not even for the world. Or for me."

His voice was anger-stippled. "Sure, I know it violates everything you were taught. But I'm a congenital sceptic. The stuff they injected me with never 'took'.

If I have a goal, I reach it. That's the motto of my world, Callisto. A damn good thing for Earth, too. Do you realize that a large percentage of top officers of the military come from outlying satellites? They're the only ones who aren't afraid to command others ... Never mind. No time for that. Has anything interesting happened? Do you like Ogtate?"

She cried, "I don't think I like either of you!" and she flicked off the toggle.

Bill Ogtate watched Barbara walking down the hall. A new, different fever ran through him. When he thought of her, the pit of his belly flamed. Breath-ing hard, he walked into the library, locked the door, and flicked on the wall-viso. The screen showed the pilot-room of a spaceship buried in mud beneath the floating-dock on the west side of Lemon's Island. Smith had reached it through an underground, un-derwater passage constructed for the use of the ec-centric who had ordered the island built.

Smith, or, if you preferred, Ixtrungszb, stared at him with solid green-blue eyes. His trunk lifted, and the sidewise-grinding rows of teeth showed through his mustache. He stuck a cigar in his mouth and blew smoke-rings through the trunk, a feat the human much admired. "Bill, what's the matter?"

The man's voice trembled. "I think you're going to get your answer within the next few hours," he said.

The Priami removed his cigar. "Ah, the female is the catalyst."

"Yes. I'm going to decide, one way or the other. She'll have to leave by this morning or else stay for eight years."

Smith blew surprise through his trunk. "I, of course, am unable to judge her beauty, since I have quite different standards. I see she's affected you very much."

"It's far from being that simple. I'm weary of life. She has appeared at the psychological moment."

Smith expelled more smoke through his waving proboscis and said. "Well, Bill, I'll stick to my prom-ise. If you decide to give the Belos to Earth and not to us, I'll not kill you or kidnap you. I'll just take back the message. But I hope for the sake of uni-versal peace that your answer is favorable."

Gloomily, the man said, "I do too, Smitty," and turned the visor off. He knew the Martian didn't lie. He had put him under the eegie while questioning him.

As he left the library, he met Killison coming down the hall. She said nothing about the wreckage in the lab, but set her kit back on the table. He mo-tioned toward the lab and said, "I won't weep and orate about how lonely and bitter I am. You see the external effects of my state. Language can't communi-cate the internal. You know, Barbara, I should hate you? I've hated my wife for a long time because she deserted me. My loneliness and my sickness drove me back to her tonight to make a plea that I knew in my heart was hopeless. I couldn't help it. I didn't want to go to her. Something picked me up by the nape of my neck and carried me there. I should hate you because you remind me of her. I don't. I'm free to reject or accept you for what you are, not for what you seem to be." He came closer as he spoke. When he finished, he put his arms around her and kissed her.

Barbara did not resist, for she wanted to find out how she would like it. Much depended on this, although she was aware that first kisses are often unsatisfactory and that it takes time to realize each other's techniques, quirks, and foibles. He had a nice mouth. Slow at first, even tender, he gradually took fire and suddenly pressed so hard he mashed her mouth. She managed to make him release her.

"A long time," he said, shaking. "A long time."

"I liked it, but I think you should exercise some control. I won't be forced. I can take care of myself."

"Right now you could," he said. "However, if you had studied my psych index, you'd know I'm incapable of violence."

“Your index says so, but there’s a part of you that might be quite violent!”

He laughed. “Barbara, I won’t waste any words. Will you have me from now on? You know, of course, what that implies.”

“How do you know you want to be alone with me for eight years?” she replied. “We would have to stay together, you know, even if we came to hate each other. There would be no one else to go to.”

He removed his hands to light a cigarette. When it glowed, he did not touch her again. He seemed to sense she did not, at that particular moment, care for it. Perceiving his delicacy, she warmed inside.

“Look, Barbara, you have been on some outlying asteroid, right? You haven’t followed my life too closely. You would be surprised to learn the number of women who offered to share life with me. I carefully checked the psych index of everyone. I was thorough because I haven’t much else to do. And I re-jected them, lonely as I was.”

He smiled at her widening eyes and said, “Sit down. Care for a drink? Brandy and a water chaser? Good! How did I know? It’s easy. Yewliss, as you have gathered by now, isn’t the only one with access to the Comprob. The Government allows me about anything I want, you know.

“But before I tell you things about yourself you think only you know, I want to make a confession. After I kissed you, I said, ‘A long time.’ You thought that tonight was the first time I’d held a woman in my arms for two years, didn’t you? Well, it wasn’t.” He sipped from his glass, tasted the liquor on his tongue, and then swallowed.

“For a long time the Government has been shipping me women. They take the anti-asp shot, stay overnight, and leave. I’ve had a hundred. They all had high-sounding motives. They wanted to get the secret from me for the good of mankind, in the inter-ests of peace, but they didn’t fool me for a minute. All they were after was the glory, the rewards that would be heaped upon them by the worried populace. “That was until six months ago. Suddenly, I became enraged, disgusted. Those nights left me feeling nothing. Nothing. Or, rather, a deep uneasiness. Maybe that is a moral reaction, who knows? Whatever the definition, it was a definite emptiness. Sex wasn’t enough. I had some of Earth’s most beautiful and passionate women, and they left me unfulfilled. They just weren’t . . .”

He looked down at his drink as if he didn’t want to face her. “About that time I came to know a Mar-tian. He was one who shared my outstanding feature, the ability to create fear. Not by any evil in him. Just by his presence. We became friends, despite certain difficulties of communication, and soon knew each other as well as might be expected. He is quite a master of the mind. He has a new slant on the psyche, perhaps because he cannot think like a human and so is more objective. I can confide in him as I never could in . . . human therapists . . . because I don’t feel ashamed. He seems so non-personal, although in fact he is quite friendly and has many admirable qualities. So, while we play chess, he rids me of demons that have been riding me. The fact that I went to my wife showed me I wasn’t free of her yet. But that act broke the last puppet-string. I’m through with her!”

“You seem a little confused,” she said. She was thinking that Yewliss should check on the visor-rec-ords to find out who was playing long-distance chess with him. He might pry useful information from him. She continued, “Did you forget your wife because you think now you’ve found a satisfactory substitute?”

“Barbara, I’ve not known you long. But I’m sure there’s no one like you, and I’m sure you’re the real thing.” He looked up from his glass. His eyes searched hers. “Barbara, all those women? Will they make

any difference in your decision?"

"No. I'm not-as they say in historical novels-pure."

"Yewliss?"

"Yes,and several others."

"What about me?"

"Too short an acquaintance. I know your index, but a man on paper and one in the flesh are two dif-ferent things. Tell me how you know about me?"

"How do I know you?Easy. After rejecting hun-dreds of offers, I asked the Comprob to find the wom-an I would best like. She had to be one who'd be capable of loving me, too. You fit both roles."

"And Yewliss was also asking for a woman whose specifications happened to fit me?"

"Yes. He sent for you before I was disentangled from my wife. I put off contacting you."

"So you insulted me because you were still angry at your wife? You transferred your rage from one Barbara to another?"

"Partly.I was contemptuous, too, because the Old Fox thought he was dealing with a stupid young cock." He took another drink,then said, "Would you mind taking my temperature? I feel hot again. Comes on me suddenly."

She raised her eyebrows and reached for the thermodial. "When did you last eat?"

She was troubled. The amount of pyretigen she detected in his blood should not have been there. It should long ago have oxidized. Possibly, Yewliss had also part some fever-inducer in his liquor, but she doubted that. An excess would be serious. TheGeneral , whatever his philosophy of ends and means, did not want to kill Ogtate. The dial rose to 100 and stopped.

He took it from his mouth and said, "It always comes up fast and stays at about 100.8 for an hour. Then it quickly goes back to normal."

"When did you first notice this fever?"

"Three days ago.Right after lunch."

"Why didn't you call a doctor?"

"I felt fine between attacks, and, to be frank, I didn't care whether I lived or died." He touched the back of her hand. "I do now."

She ignored his last remark and said, "Let me think a moment." She lighted a cigarette and gazed at him. He looked bad. His eyes were hot and red, and fatigue subtly crumpled his body-fullness. The possible reactions to the pyretigen were complicated and frightening. And there were the asps, too. A visor-screen wit had called them Anti-Social Perfume, and the initials, with their association of the venomous snake, had stuck. Bill Ogtate was the Asp. If you came near him, you were 'bitten'.

Ogtate's identity as a true Asp would last at least eight years. During the final eight months, the semivirus, for a reason not yet determined, would literally 'kick off.' Perhaps the body becomes tired of feeding the parasite and starves them of electro-magnetic power by building a powerline around them. No one knew. The asps were created in laboratory animals and would never have been applied to human beings, had not a man with a desire to control and revenge perverted it to this end.

"Any conclusions, Doc?" croaked Bill.

"Not yet. You'd better reach over for a drink. Water, I mean."

The problem was whether or not the pyretigen, also a semivirus, acted in conjunction with the asps to produce the temperature again. As far as she knew, the combination had never been put in a living body.

Another question. What prevented the complete oxidization of the fever-maker? Pyretigen would naturally combine with oxygen after a change in chemical structure.

"How long did you say the fever lasts?" she asked.

"About an hour. It goes away fast, but three hours later it returns fast."

There was something about that rhythm that should have strummed a resonant chord in her mind. She tried vainly to strike it.

"You'd better lie down," she said, rising to help him to the divan.

He shook his head. "Nothing doing. I do not need a nurse."

Accepting his stubbornness, knowing what was behind it, she silently took his temperature and pulse again. Then she drew out another sample of blood. A minute's work showed her that the amount of pyretigen had not diminished: it had increased!

He said, "All this talk, and you still haven't answered me. Will you marry me?"

Barbara kept her back to him. "I think I could. But I'm not in love with you."

"Could you be in the future?"

"What is love?"

"If you can endure eight years of living with me, without wanting to kill me or to be indifferent to me, you'll be in love. After all, we don't have to stay here. We can travel anywhere, be assured of privacy, entirely at Government expense. Eight years would fly."

"How could we travel without creating a fuss? Anyway, that does not matter. I've a question. If I promise to marry you, will you give Earth the Belos?"

"Are you trading yourself for the Belos?"

"You're sick. Otherwise, I'd knock you down for that."

“Try it. You’re not as tough as you think you are, Barbara.”

“Look at the man. Already he’s quarreling.”

“That was childish. I shouldn’t have said it. The point is, I want you, Barbara. But I must feel you’re not just a woman provided by the Government.”

“My point is this. Will you give Earth the Belos? Madly in love with you or not, I still have my duty, to induce you to give up the secret.”

“Induce? Seduce!”

“Anyway you call it. The Belos or me.”

He stood, shakily, and turned his head back and forth. “I don’t know. Maybe the fever’s getting me. I wouldn’t do this in my right mind.” Gripping the table’s edge, he said, “Barbara, promise me that, soldier’s duty or not, you won’t reveal what I’m going to show you.”

Puzzled, she said, “I promise, provided it’s not dangerous to Earth’s welfare.”

This isn’t.”

He went into the library, closed the door, and in a few minutes returned to slump into the chair. The moment he did so, she, forgetting his behavior, jumped from her chair, saying loudly, “I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

“I’ll have the place sprayed.” he croaked, smiling feebly.

She came over and kissed his fever-parched mouth. “If you can joke while feeling like this, you might make a good husband.”

She picked up her bag and went into the lab. Not all the bottles were smashed. Her clue was the fact that pyretigen raised a fever by conserving excess heat in the body resulting from increased cell metabolism. Its action was doublefold. It oxidized sugar, breaking it down into carbon dioxide and water. Though the burning of glucose was a normal function in the body, pyretigen accelerated it. At the same time, it excited that part of the sympathetic nervous system which controlled the capillaries of the skin, thereby contracting them and lessening time blood-flow through them. The result was that excess heat was not radiated at the body’s surface.

The fever-inducer, normally burned up in the blood, maintained itself in Ogtate’s blood. Killison, recalling the asps’ maintenance of their numbers, reasoned that they were the underlying cause for the steady level of pyretigen. Somehow, they “locked” onto the fever-stimulants and, as fast as the substance burned, produced more.

The rhythm of reproduction of the asps was followed by the pyretigen. Killison wanted to know if the pyretigen had a similar enough molecular structure, positively charged, to fasten itself onto the negative tag-ends of the asp.

Books were scattered on the floor. She searched among them and was thrilled to find the one she sought. Some pages were torn out, but among the ones left she found her information. The semivirus pyretigen did have an asp-like molecular structure.

A calculated dose of a recently developed anti-virus in his bloodstream might close down the little double factories. The serum, though it started in the vascular system, could diffuse through other tissues. It was itself as dangerous as the foes it was designed to fight. But a sample of blood would show exactly the proportions needed. The numbered hosts would tramp up and down the highways and alleys of the body, and wherever they met the enemy, they would attack. They couldn't refuse to fight, for their negative charge drew them irresistibly to their brother virus. Civil war would rage. Antivirus would meet the pyretigen, would close with it, would explode. Touching one would discharge the field of both. Literally burned, they would then disintegrate.

Ogtate's body would be a funeral pyre. It would become warm, but the ultimate effect would be cool.

As a matter of course, the discharged pyretigens would become unlocked from the asps. There would be no more fabrications by fabrications. And Barbara Killison would see to it that Bill ate no more tampered-with food.

She searched in the huge lab and found what she wanted. Her hopes were high, for there was almost every kind of substance needed. Ogtate had by no means destroyed all of the containers. Having located a tube, she returned to the big room at the end of the hall.

"Bill!" she called. "We'll fix you . . ." Rigid, she stopped short and gasped.

9

Ogtate said, "I'm sorry, Barbara. Smitty just walked in. I was telling him to wait in the library until I prepared you. I'm really sorry."

Smitty removed his cigar with the prehensile end of his trunk and said, "Believe me, Madame, if I hadn't known you were here, and I'd walked around the corner into you, I'd have been just as startled and horrified."

She recovered a little and said, "Thank you."

"Bill," Barbara said, "I'm going to pour a bunch of little thunderstorms in you. This stuff wasn't designed for the particular kind of work it's being called to do, but it should handle your trouble."

He didn't watch the needle but looked at the Priami. "Sit down, Smitty. I'm going to give you my decision now."

Smith trumpeted an undecipherable emotion. Barbara jumped and pushed the needle in hard. Bill said, "Ouch!"

"That's what I meant," said Smith. Smoking, he sat back, seemingly at ease with the world. Bill could see the abnormal pulsing of veins and, perhaps, the heart hammering under the unorthodox ribcage. The latter, he thought, must be his imagination.

"There are four things I can do," intoned Ogtate. "One, keep the Belos to myself. Two, give it to Earth. Three, extend it to Mars. Four, allow both factions to possess it. If I do the first, I go crazy from indecision. More important, I'll spend eight years without the one woman I know I can learn to love. If you want the truth, I'm afraid to face those years without her. If I do the second, I will, I'm sure, start Earth on a downward spiral of conquest and arrogance. Earth people are not the stuff of warriors just

now, but un-til two hundred years ago they were, and they can be again. And Smitty risked his life to sneak here and convince me the Priami aren't the all-black carnivorous monsters they're painted to be. As is evident, you can see through him. He has nothing to hide."

Ogtate sat up a little straighter. Killison asked him if he felt better, and he replied that he did.

"If I give it to the Priami alone, then the war-mongers there will do to us as we'd do to them. Although I am bitter, I don't, contrary to report, hate man as a whole. I loathe some individuals and am indifferent to others. But wiping out a world because of what a small, vicious gang did to me, isn't in my character at all." He smiled apologetically at the woman. "In fact I held the Belos over Earth's head because I knew that once I gave it away, I'd no longer be valuable. Yewliss was kind enough to point that out to me during a visor-interview, and Smitty here confirmed it. I rejected that idea, because it made me look so terribly selfish. But Barbara's appearance tonight, as Smitty said, was a catalyst. The truth of my unconscious possessiveness hit me.

"If I do the fourth, give the Belos to both planets . . . As for the traitor-stigma I'll gain, the Government can make no official actions because of the law of free will. By giving the Belos to the Priami, I'm not personally hurting anybody. Earth ships don't have to penetrate the Priami field. If they want to, let them do it safely, by arranging peace. There'll be social ostracism, yes. What a laugh! And eight years hence, I'm sure, events will prove me right. Chances are, I'll be in the limelight again, this time as a social lion-instead of a skunk. No matter. I don't care about their adulation.

"As for the accusation that I'll be setting up another status quo, I plead guilty. The two foes will stagnate because they'll be afraid to use interplanetary travel. They'll slide back to their former conditions of dinky one-globe states. That is, unless they achieve peace. They'll have to, because population and prosperity depend on trade between worlds. Cut off EPB transmitters and you have chaos."

Smith rose, trumpeted again and dropped his cigar. The light behind him gleamed dully through him and showed a blackish pump working accelerando in the grille of his chest. "I have your word?"

Ogtate straightened some more. He looked proud. This was his greatest moment. He was the unofficial emperor of the solar system; he was dispensing the fate of many billions. "The papers are on the table by your chair. They were within handreach for the last six months. I just couldn't make up my mind to tell you what they were."

As if he would at all costs keep his dignity, Smith turned slowly. When he picked up the thick packet, he almost dropped it. His proboscis blew a suspicious note. "Bill," he said.

He stopped, interrupted by a hysterical, tiny gonging from the woman's wristbox. She flicked the toggle and said, "Major Killison talking."

"Barbara!" tinned Yewliss' voice. "Drop everything and come on home. Good news! Lord, but it's good news! For all of us. For Earth and for you and for me."

"What is it?"

"The Belos field has been discovered independently by our scientists. We don't need to toady to Ogtate any more. You can forget about your sacrifice and come home to me."

Bill jumped up and screamed, "What?" and he swayed.

Barbara seemed stunned, too. Yewliss demanded several times that she answer.

“All right, Yew. I’ll contact you later.”

“Later, nothing!” exploded the wristbox. “I’m flying now to get you.”

“You stay right there until I tell you to come. There are some problems yet to solve.”

“Babs, you don’t have to go through with that silly act. Lord, now I think back on it, I don’t see how I could have let you go ahead.”

“But you did, Yew,” she replied, tonelessly. “You know me well enough to realize I mean what I say. Don’t come until I call you.”

“Major Killison, this is General Yewliss speak-ing!”

“Man Yewliss, this is woman Killison talking. So long.” She snapped the little lever.

Ogtate said, “I don’t know what to say, Barbara.”

Smith stepped forward and seized the man’s left hand in his webbed fingers. His trunk caressed Bill’s forehead with a gesture of affection. It hinted, also, of sadness and farewell.

The woman, watching him, was aware of an ir-relevant thought. She had wondered in the back of her mind why he wasn’t affected by the bite. Now the answer came from the dark of forgotten facts. His metabolism was based on a fluorine-carbon chain. The drifting semiviruses couldn’t attach themselves to his poisonous proteins.

The Priami seemed to know Ogtate was in no mood for lengthy ceremonies. He said, “I thank you for all you’ve clone. I respect you, Bill, and I know you respect me. I hope to see you again, and I wish you good fortune with your female. Whether that means getting or losing her, I can’t say. But I wish you fortune.”

Bill said in a tight voice, “Sorry you must go, Smitty. But your people will want to hear your news.”

Smitty trumpeted. “I wouldn’t be surprised if, when I arrived, I found my people, too, had dis-covered the Belos. And I will be ignored, the igno-minious hero who was too late.”

He faced Barbara. “I hope to visit you some day, Major. Openly.”

She murmured a suitable reply.

He walked away, swinging long thin arms, then stopped and said, hesitantly, “Bill, would you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

The Priami picked up a box of cigars. “I’d like to take these home. It’ll be hard getting a good smoke on Mars.”

Ogtate burst out laughing and sat down. "Go ahead, Smitty. Take a dozen boxes, all I have. Compliments of the Earth Government!"

"The opening wedges in the door of peace." He was gone.

10

Barbara put the thermodial in his mouth and felt his pulse. When she looked at the gauge, she said, "Almost normal. How do you feel?"

"Rotten. But not from the fever. I feel like the world's biggest fool."

"At least you're not a nonentity."

"I'm that, too."

For want of anything better to say, thinking she must take his mind off his sudden plunge into humiliation, she commented, "Well, you'll have no more fever, anyway."

When he wanted to know what she meant, she decided nobody would be hurt by the information. The maneuvering was over.

He cursed. "Yewliss, again! I could sue him for interference of free will!"

"You won't. Your index shows you dislike legal procedures."

He poured two double shots of brandy and gave her one. "Well, here's to the Old Fox and you. May you bear him manycubs."

"Your index also shows you often leap to conclusions."

The dark liquor sloshed over the tiny glass. "If you go back to Yewliss," he said, "I'll have nothing." "Turn on the visor," she said.

They watched the wild celebrations of the crowds that had quickly gathered all over the world. Bill flicked the screen off.

"Poor devils, they remind me of us. They work on one problem, and halfway through the solution of the first, a second one forms."

"Life is like that," she said. Her hand touched his for the first time since he kissed her, and she didn't take it back.

"True," he said, "but I don't feel like philosophis-ing. Barbara, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. That's funny, too, because I'm usually quick at deciding."

"Then you're not just going to walk out on me?"

She shook her head. "No. This is no longer a military mission. It's entirely personal. Actually, it was personal from the beginning."

“What do you mean?”

“You won’t hate me? Promise?”

“Why should I? I mean, why should I hate you?”

“Bill, one of the reasons I came to you the main one, in fact-is that I felt guilty about you. I’ve had that feeling for a long time. I told myself it was ridiculous that what happened to you wasn’t my fault.”

“Barbara, get to the point!”

“Very well. I came here because . . . I was re-sponsible for your being inoculated with the Asp. You see, I was one of those who created it. I couldn’t help that it was used as a political weapon. When we wade it, it was for experiments with laboratory animals. None of us had the slightest idea that someone would steal the virus and inject you with it.”

He shut his eyes for a second. Opening them, he said, “I know. But it was a shock. I’ve cursed the asp inventors so many times, even when I knew they weren’t guilty. And now to have you ...”

“You can see why I came?”

He nodded, and then, as if inspired, his face grew twisted, unrecognizable and frightening. He rose, took her hand and led her to the broad staircase that curved like a ram’s horn to the second floor.

She said, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“We might as well find out if we really like each other.”

She jerked her hand from his.

“Is that what you mean by really liking? Do you still think I’m just one of those women provided by the Government for your pleasure?”

He sensed he had lost her. “Forgive me, Barbara. No, it’s just that we have to act in some fashion.”

“But that’s not my idea of using your brain to solve a problem. Or using your heart, either.”

They sat down again. Hesitantly, he picked up her hand. When she did not refuse it, he put his arm around her and kissed her.

“But will you ever decide? You’re sure you’re not trying to let me down easy?”

“After I just confessed my guilt? Quit asking foolish questions, will you?”

She closed her eyes and leaned back. He, like an automaton obeying preset stimuli, leaned over and kissed her. This time, though he had expected she would, she did not protest. She shifted a little and did not turn her head away.

At last she whispered, “Oh, if you must, Bill. If you think that’s the only way. But, I think it’s ...”

Despite what she said, she held him as tightly as he held her. Her nails dug into his arms as if she were loneliness and fear trying to clutch love and courage. He pondered: what, besides his flesh, did he have to give to her? He pondered only briefly.

11

It was a bright day when Ogtate awoke. General Yewliss arrived. At the moment that Ogtate first saw him, he was not intent upon them. His fierce black eyes were fixed upon his wristwatch.

Ogtate sat up to dress. Neither man spoke.

By the time Bill was clothed, Barbara came in.

Yewliss did not explode. He spoke gently, "All right, Barbara. I was worried about what might happen, so I took an anti-asp myself and flew here. I am not too surprised by what I find. I understand you might feel sorry for Ogtate. I do myself, a little."

"Don't just stand there, Yewliss, breathing like a foundered bull," Barbara said. "Events have put a different perspective on this." Her voice regained its normal fluid assurance. "I take it, Yew, all is forgiven and forgotten?" She held out her hand to Yewliss.

Then she turned. "Bill, I may be a fool, but I don't regret what happened before. And since I've decided we'll be a long time together ..."

Bill wasn't looking at her. He was staring over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. She twisted her head. It was a few seconds before she realized the significance of the hands on the face.

Yewliss knew when he came, but he had said nothing. Now he rumbled, "Babs, your ten hours were up fifty minutes ago."

She turned away, shrugging. "Should I be fright-ened?" She went to the table on which rested her tube-rack and bag.

As if inspired by press of daring resolve, she stopped, tube in hand, and stared, red mouth gaping in hopeful wonder. "Could it be? Why not? They never tried that particular combination before. It won't be the first time an accident has shown what experiment never would." She whirled and leaped at Ogtate and seized his shirt.

"Bill, it's wonderful! And it was an accident! But I did it! I did it!"

The men were bewildered.

"Bill, don't you see? I poured that anti-pyretigen into you. It not only discharged its enemies, it did more. It must have released the asps, too! When the interlocking antis and gees burned, they reversed the positive charge of the asp cells. And the weakened asps drifted off and were excreted while you slept. They couldn't reattach themselves after they'd regained their normal charge, probably because the electrophoretic display accelerated the normal time for your soma's disposal of the asps. Eight years' work in ten hours! Oh, I don't know exactly. We can find out in the labs, later. Now, you're free, Bill. Free! Nobody will ever run away from you!"

Yewliss and Ogtate looked at her and then at each other. Their eyes said that she was very beautiful.

Yewliss roared with resigned laughter. They waited until he'd quit laughing. Then Barbara said, "All's not well yet. The war isn't won. We discovered the Belos; the Priami may do so independently."

Ogtate shot her a grateful look for keeping confidence of his concession to the Priami.

"You're right," the General said. "We're at a standstill. The only way we'll find out if they own it, too, will be to send a ship through. If they have it, the ship goes up in a blaze of energy."

"Then what?" asked Ogtate, staring at the woman as if he were seeing a new creature.

"Then static. The end of interplanetary travel. Babs, you'll get new orders that'll keep you on Earth. I promise that."

"I'd hoped so," she replied. "Bill, what about you? This development puts us on a new plane. Before, I knew where we stood. Now, I'm confused."

Ogtate frowned. Then tidily, as a good husband should, he replied: "I'll have to arrange for moving certain things from this island."