

Ultimate Life

by ALBERT de PINA and HENRY HASSE

People tend to think of things in the terms of the familiar. When a layman speaks of "life on other worlds" he actually means something recognizably human. But the facts indicate that intelligence in one form or another may be found everywhere. The humble ant has a complex social structure, including extreme specialization of types for certain functions; it tends its "milk-producing cattle" and even organizes and conducts real wars. Yet no beginning has been made by man at communicating with the ants. Our chances of recognizing intelligent life on another world, particularly in alien guise, is remote. Our chances of communicating with them are fainter still. An intergalactic alien, then, might be forgiven if he needed a lot of convincing before he was certain that man fulfilled his own definition of intelligence.

BOLIVAR rested the nozzle and hose connected to the insecticide cylinder on the bright, blue-green grass. He raised his head and gazed at the sky as he wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of the synthetic silk shirt he wore; it was an all-purpose material, easy to produce and marvelously long-wearing.

A short distance away, Gus stopped too, and the acrid, blinding fumes of the chemical swirled about them as it was dispersed by a slight breeze which gently swayed the stand of chestnut-like trees in the background.

"So we've sterilized this section," Gus grinned, as he spat with accuracy at an inch-long varihued worm which had been laboriously crawling toward him. The strong tobacco juice stopped the insect in its track; it writhed, curled and lay still.

"It'll stay lousy for a week." Bolivar stooped down and began to coil nozzle and hose, then carried it back to the portable cylinder.

From the clump of trees, the sound of a gong reverberated through the vast stillness. After the overcrowded cacaphony of Earth, this virgin world, with its immense desolate expanses and primeval silence, was something they had not become accustomed to.

But this planet had its compensations. No one could suffer from claustrophobia here; the silence would eventually be conquered by the beneficial insects and harmless birds which the government of Terra had provided.

In any event, although they were in a sense outcasts, no criminal stigma had been attached to the order for their relocation.

The surging billions of Terra had achieved a delicate balance where excesses—even emotional ones—could not be tolerated. It was too dangerous to allow uncontrollable psychological factors to alter established patterns.

The two thousand families which had finally been relocated on the deserted planet had been carefully screened for precisely those factors which in the dim past had been considered virtues, but which in the highly sophisticated and regimented Terran social order, were considered dangerous survivals from another age.

In short, although the word was never used, they were classified as Class A. atavisms.

When Bolivar arrived at the plastic prefabricated dwelling which was his home, Stella had supper on the table. He kissed her warmly, tenderly, for the wonder and ecstasy of their honeymoon still lingered, touching even the loneliness of this new world with the miracle of its happiness.

It was a simple, frugal meal of Terran vegetables and proteiates which had the taste and texture of flesh. They had to be frugal. The newly planted crops and grains had yet to germinate and be harvested; the dairy and food animals must be preserved until their multiplication would reach the point where their consumption was feasible.

And the spaceship which had brought them, along with all the imperatives for colonization had gone, its dwindling fire becoming a shooting star in the heavens and finally disappearing in the endless void. It left behind a world of loneliness, but not before it had given these strong, resourceful Terrans the incentive of creating a new world. The crew of the spaceship might have spared itself the twinges of conscience they had felt on leaving the colonists behind.

They didn't quite understand, on viewing the desolate expanse of the new planet, that its very primitive grandeur had not only provided the colonists with a creative challenge—a new incentive—but with something more which belonged in all truth to another age.

Bolivar sat down at the table and smiled whimsically at the way Stella had managed to find blue flowers in the forests to decorate the table.

He gazed at her and for a moment it seemed to him as if he were viewing the future, when their plastic home would be alive with children. The long afternoons would resound the lowing of cattle. There would

be birds nesting in the trees, endlessly bickering, or soaring in streams of song. And the fields, golden with ripening grain, would sweep in shining waves to the very shores of the one placid ocean.

He remembered his last year on Earth. The stifling monotony of his days as a minor agricultural engineer. Stifled by the sameness which condemned him with millions of others to a changeless security which allowed for no promotion just as it regarded as unthinkable any retrogression. The miniscule alcove which served as his home; the rigidly rationed food, clothing, and necessities—and the crowds, always the inescapable tidal wave of humanity which suffocated every moment of his life.

"Dreaming of Earth?" Stella inquired gently, and there was a nostalgic expression in her eyes.

He shook his head and smiled. "No, my dear. I was dreaming of what our new world will be like. Think of it, we can literally build a world to our heart's desire. We'll be not only existing, like on Earth, but living and growing!"

THEY BEGAN to eat, wrapped in the silence of the lengthening shadows, as the pale yellow sun sank into the calm blue waters. "I'll be glad when you've finished sterilizing," Stella spoke. "We might have a garden of our own. It's a wonderful feeling to see growing things. On Earth, all I ever saw from the windows of the hospital where I worked were the rearing buildings, and the gray-black pavements." She laughed happily. "I've never even seen a garden. May I have one now?" Bolivar smiled tenderly. Flowers, fragile things all beauty and color. On Earth only eating things could be grown. But here, a whole planet awaited a new rebirth—the song of birds; the travail of the harvests; and for the first time the sound of laughter. "Won't be long now, this whole sector will be cleared of those stubborn pests. The more we try to sterilize, the deeper they burrow into the ground. It's uncanny the way they put up subsurface defenses. One would think they had human intelligence!" "Is it so critical?" Stella inquired innocently. Bolivar shrugged. "It is, if we're to be sure of having crops. They're like politicians ... undermining everything. This world's like a door to life, Stella. We can't risk having it closed on us."

The Genserians

IT HAD been eons since their lives had been ruled by self-interest, passions, or sentiment.

They were a race so old that all the changes of passion, heartbreak, and adventure had been wrung from their souls.

Only loneliness remained.

Among the thousands—millions, even of stars, theirs had given birth to a planet that bore life. And that life was their race. The irony was that except for them, their galaxy was sterile. So they thought!

Alone, in their own eternity of space, they had gradually passed through all the stages of savagery, barbarism, wars, and finally the beginnings of true civilization. But all of that had been immeasurable ages ago, until even the memory of past wars had ceased to be a legend, and the legends themselves had grown dim and ceased to exist.

Throughout millenia, conflict among themselves had become impossible, and violence an impossible psychological aberration. Even science had ceased to be an adventure.

At first, as the virus of their galactic boredom became more and more intense, their starships roamed the limitless reaches of their galaxy, searching, always searching for some form of life that might offer the kinship of intelligence. But it was the irony of their destiny that among the thousands of stars and their planetary systems, the only forms of life they had found were either so brutish and bestial, or so utterly alien, that not even their extraordinary science could hasten their evolution toward intelligence.

The Genserians were fated, it seemed, to an eternity of killing time instead of employing it creatively as the very substance of life lived to its fullest.

More and more their life had become devoid of wonder. Steeped in melancholy and lacking incentive, it had become a grey transition between birth and extinction. Little by little their literature, their magnificent arts—even their music—began to sink into the background and to disappear along with innumerable variations of pleasure they had long since invented.

They could not even pass on to a younger race the treasury of inventions and discoveries which enriched their world. Thus they were denied that final meaning which lies in parenthood—galactic parenthood was their lot.

And then, in one of those scout trips to the limits of their galaxy—more to commune with the eternal melancholy silence of space than anything else—they had discovered the planet Rima. It had suited their mood, for it was desolate like their minds—barren of intelligent life like their galaxy. And yet, like a nostalgic reminder of their ancient dreams, it was verdant and aglow with the golden wash of a beneficent sun.

Varona had commanded the scout ship. The crew, which was not a crew—for any of its members could have filled any position on the ship except one—had kept up the illusion of its being a flight of exploration. They were all aware, of course, that it would be as sterile as previous ones. So that when they landed, it was more to break the monotony of space flight, than to try to confirm any possible hope.

For a moment, as they first breathed the clean fragrant air, and trod fastidiously on the lush grass, something of the very primitiveness of the uninhabited planet seemed to touch them. They even speculated what it would be like to begin all over again in this new world, and build it anew. And then they saw the futility of such an idea. They had become too utterly removed from the realities of pioneering.

They stood silent, their ten-foot-tall incredibly thin and fragile bodies slightly translucent, scarcely casting a shadow on the blue-green turf. There were no signs of life. And then, Varona had kicked over a large clod of soil, revealing the small mouth of a subsurface chamber.

There was life! But to their chagrin, so inconceivably non-Genserian that they did not even betray their thought-processes. Whatever the fundamental structure of their minds was, there seemed to be no way of contacting them. But it was intelligent life, there could be no question about that!

To the Genserians, it became an enormous incentive. Here was a challenge, and a promise, and a confirmation of their hopes.

These subsurface dwellers of a primitive planet, whose soft white bodies were not more than an inch long, became all of a sudden the center of attention of Genserian culture. Scientists theorized and even argued for the first time in thousands of orbitemps* concerning the aliens' social structure; for they had one! (*An orbitemp (pl. orbitemps, or orbitempi) is the time measure it takes for a given planet to make one revolution around its sun.)

They had vastly more than that, in the complex yet rigid matriarchy which ruled their dark world. It was

discovered that they had evolved a complicated, yet utterly functional type of architecture; their social classes, which included the workers, warriors, and matriarchs, were born of identical eggs hatched in an identical way, but organically modified by miracles of diet.

One Genserian scientist had earned the highest honor, and what was more, the gratitude of his world, by discovering that these aliens not only were capable of flight, but once an orbitemp performed a dramatic ritual of mating and death in midflight! Another discovered their telepathic means of communication, and that they had a system of husbandry and even suffered parasites to find shelter in their cities—and that they had pets.

This last finding brought the aliens a little closer to the Genserians, for they themselves sheltered and protected huge quadruped pets, hairy, long-toothed, and fierce but completely loyal and devoted animals of a very low order of intelligence, which they called *savjers*.

But centuries of investigation, experiments, and efforts to bridge the abyss that separated them from the subsurface inhabitants of Rima, had been unavailing.

The tiny Rimans remained as alien as ever. And thus, another great hope had finally dwindled and died. So reluctant were the Genserians to give up even this forlorn hope, that it was decided to wait five centorbitemps before visiting them again, in the hope that evolution might make them more accessible.

FOR hundreds of orbitemps, the problem presented by the Rimans had kept alive speculative science and had given a new impetus to exploration, in the hope of finding other worlds with intelligent life. And now, the date of the return to Rima had come.

There was a touch of excitement in the rarified atmosphere of the Genserian minds. They were all scientists. All of them were convinced that this trip would bring no greater results than the previous ones. And yet, some stubborn hope that refused to die, brought back to life the forgotten and faint memory of ancient emotions.

They clustered around Varona in the control room, as he powered the screen to full magnification, and into the field of their vision a solitary planet floated slowly, touching with shadow the golden glare of the alien sun. They had seen it happen a hundred thousand times, and yet it always stirred them a little.

The patrol ship flashed over the planet's pole, then swung in a parabolic arc toward the southern hemisphere. Varona brought the ship in silently, and landed it within two hundred yards of where originally he had made the epochal discovery.

Soon they had all left the ship, and let their huge *savjers* run and romp and chase imaginary shadows in the warm invigorating sun; attenuated as their physical reactions were, they could not but feel the indescribable sensation of this burgeoning and fertile soil, with its young jungles and unsullied virginity. They breathed deeply of the fresh dew-laden air, and watched whimsically for a moment as Perra, Varona's pet female *savjer*, snarled at her mate and romped away into a field of golden grain.

Strange, Varona thought inwardly, *I never noticed a field of grain before. Could it have evolved from primitive grasses in a mere five centorbitemps?* And then it occurred to him how long he had lived, and that in another couple of hundred years or so rejuvenation therapy would not work any longer.

Suddenly he hoped with an intensity that startled him, that they might be able to contact these alien intelligences, that he might take with him into oblivion the memory of success.

But he had no more time for idle speculation. At the far end of the field Perra's casual barking had suddenly become an ominous growl; then there was a series of snarls, and a voice tinged with fear.

The tremendous outpouring of emotional energy struck them telepathically like a blast. They had never experienced signals of that kind! They hurried toward the point of disturbance.

They found Perra in mortal combat with a strange biped, slightly less than two-thirds their size. The creature, whatever it was, had a curling mat of black fur on its head, beneath which two luminous grey eyes were wide with fear and rage. They thrashed violently among the golden grain. As the Genserians stood transfixed, buffeted by the maelstrom of primitive emotions, they were even more astonished to see a smaller and slither replica of the creature, with yellow fur on its head, come flying from among the trees and join the death struggle.

They saw the larger of the two creatures raise one of its powerful appendages on which something metallic gleamed, and plunge it into Perra's body.

Perra slid to the ground with a howl of pain.

They stood facing each other across the crimson-stained grasses of an alien world. They stared at each other in the silence of absolute astonishment.

None of the Genserians had ever witnessed a kill. They were too numb and startled to feel horror; they could only gaze at these savage creatures, and blank their minds against the barrage of psychic vibrations.

Varona recovered first. He had been trying to send powerful telepathic thought-patterns to the creatures. But they seemed utterly incapable of receiving them.

He wondered with a sense of futility if the strange and alien planet could only produce such unGenserian types of intelligence that it was useless even to try to contact them. The first life-form had proven a complete failure. These, although a travesty of their own physical appearance, seemed even lower in the intelligence scale than the wormlike matriarchs who lived beneath the surface crust. They were dangerous, too! He suddenly realized.

Wordlessly he aimed a tiny conical rod, first at the larger creature, then at what was evidently its female. They toppled over without a sound, as the charge painlessly neutralized them.

It took the entire crew of seventeen scientists to carry the two heavy creatures, one at a time, to their ship. Once there, they held a conference.

Some of the scientists were for taking them back to their own world. Varona himself was dubious. He felt they were violating their captives' rights.

". . . Besides, what good would it do? We must study them in their own milieu—against the background of the environment which produced them!" Varona observed placidly.

"But did Rima produce them?" Garaban, the psycho-synthesist wanted to know. "In a mere five hundred years? Granted, their intelligence seems to be of a very low order. It has to be, for this creature to engage in mortal combat with anything as fierce and elemental as Perra!"

"Then too," Moldav, the para-psychic, observed thoughtfully, "I noticed right after the battle that the female was having a violent neuro-emotive upheaval. These are low order, highly unstable primitive intelligences—in fact, the original matriarchal race had a vaster, more stable type of coordinates. Witness their highly evolved social complex; their advanced architecture and underground agriculture. And most important, I think," he ended, "they *are* sufficiently evolved as to be incapable of attack."

"They *were*," Vestal interposed. "While you conferred I have been exploring in order to establish the incidence of these creatures. There seem to be no others in this sector. But, the startling fact is, that the original matriarchs have been destroyed by some sort of lethal gases, artificially introduced into their subsurface cities!"

The disclosure caused as near a sensation as the nature of the Genseriens permitted. They gazed at one another in something akin to horror.

What were these newer creatures? They seemed to have a genius for destruction. These low-order, non-telepathic bipeds seemed to be the embodiment of explosive violence. Varona felt a long forgotten thrill of anticipation. Here was not only a problem as to origin and identity, but something far greater. All this energy, all this incredible emotional power, could not possibly be the complement of a mere brutish, bestial biped. He struggled to recapture some of the ancient, atrophied passions which his race must have felt in eons past. He failed. With a sigh, he turned gently to Garaban. "Do you suppose that by some miracle these creatures possess a share of the insight that might lift them eventually above the level of, let us say, our pet savjers?" He patted the enormous fanged head of Porro, who had lain his muzzle on

Varona's knee. Porro lifted his great eyes and gazed mournfully and adoringly at his master, and gave a gusty sigh. He missed Perra, his mate, and the young female they had given him taxed his patience.

One of the younger scientists brought a large platter of food and placed it before him. The shaggy head sniffed the succulent proteinates disdainfully, and turned to gaze at its master. Mara, his young new mate, came rushing in and started to take a bite from the platter. Instantly, Porro turned with a gargantuan snarl, bearing his sharp white fangs, and crouched for the attack. Mara hesitated briefly, drew back, and with a low growl retreated. Porro stood over the platter of food and glared at her.

Varona wearily gestured towards Porro. "They never change, you see! After endless millennia and countless generations, we have failed to raise them an iota on the road to evolution!"

Moldav nodded gently. "Sometimes I think," he said, "that we're trying to find something which does not exist. We're chasing phantoms—it's a deep subconscious wish fulfillment, which in some way is tied up with our fear of racial extinction."

Garaban smiled. "We have lived so long, we have all become rulers—but we have no one to pass the power to. I would be the last one to dash your hopes. But my theory is that these creatures are rebel parasites who have turned against their hosts, the matriarchs, and emerged from the subsurface cities. Obviously, they could not have been evolved in five hundred years. More obviously still, they could not have come from space!"

VARONA rose, and went into the interior of their ship. He stood before two hastily converted staterooms. Originally they had been doorless. Now they were barred with thin strips of alloy. The two strange creatures had been placed one in each stateroom. They were awake now.

Varona had hardly been there a moment before the larger of the two specimens took the vessel containing water, which had been placed inside the stateroom, and hurled it out, missing Verona by inches but nevertheless drenching him.

He stood there utterly astonished. While the creature uttered a rapid succession of discordant sounds, and shook the alloy strips with almost supernatural strength.

In the other stateroom, the yellow-furred female buried her face in her hands and emitted curious muffled cries as her shoulders shook convulsively.

After a while, the neuro-tempest subsided. But the male continued to glare at him with an awful fixity of purpose. It was then Varona noticed the creature had in his hand the noncorrosive alloy math-temporal rule he had lost, five centuries before.

He smiled. He wondered with faint amusement if such an occasion had ever occurred before. It was as if Porro, his pet savjer, were to take up in his paws a slide-rule.

As he stood observing the amazing creatures, Garaban and Moldav joined him.

Little by little, the rage of the male seemed to subside. He was emitting strange sounds now, and to their infinitely subtler minds it seemed as if there were a terrible desperate urgency in the deep voice.

"Do you suppose these creatures have a language of sorts?" Varona wondered aloud.

"Of course. Rudimentary, no doubt, but so has Porro here." He patted the bristling savjer who had followed the scientists silently. "No matter how low the order of intelligence, all life beyond a certain stage

has means of communication—it may be vocal, as in this instance, or telepathic, as in the case of the matriarchs. Perhaps both, as in our case." He shook his head with vast disappointment.

"I would give my last remaining two hundred orbitemps," Varona said with conviction, "if I could only find the merest evidence of that spark which is the key to creative evolution in even this creature!"

"What do you imagine he sees of interest in that math-rule?" Garaban inquired half in earnest, half in amusement. "What an adventure to be able to penetrate his mind for even a few seconds!"

They fell silent. The two aliens were quiet now, as if from the depth of their vast despair they gazed at their captors, beyond fear and beyond words.

And out of the silence Moldav, the para-psychic, spoke. His voice rose, tinged with the faintest excitement. He had always been the most original.

"I think," he said uncertainly, "that perhaps we are defeating our purposes by trying to solve this problem from our own exalted point of view. We have become so far removed from the basic values of life that we no longer seem able to understand, not only the problems, but even to recognize the signposts! Observe. See how the family is desperate to be reunited with her mate. Does it not mean something to you, this powerful attachment, even under the stress of an artificial environment?"

They turned to gaze at him in astonishment. If they understood correctly what Moldav was trying to hint, these were low-intelligence beings—precursors of what might he one day, a culture comparable to theirs. This they had gathered from his mind.

Garaban, the psycho-synthesist, permitted himself a slightly sardonic smile. "Even Porro has an attachment of sorts for his females," he observed mildly. "The most bestial lower form will fight to the death to protect its young. These, my dear Moldav, are mere instinctive reactions. I am surprised that one of your brilliance and originality should entertain such mistaken deductions from primitive behavior!"

Varona raised his hand. As the eldest, he permitted himself certain prerogatives, and his whimsical mind had suddenly conceived a simple test which would once and for all settle all theories and speculations.

"My dear Moldav, we have lost so much, so very much, that even the thrill of scientific and intellectual speculations has vanished. It was the last remaining type of adventure we had—we no longer have that. Since we seem to have become so emotionally rarified, that in comparison with these," he gestured toward Bolivar and Stella, "we are but a shadow of life; I wonder you would endow these creatures with the only remaining reason for existence that we possess. Surely, only after having tasted the bitterness of defeat, endless humiliations, unimaginable despair, were we able to rise to our present stature and understand the length and breadth and depth and height of the noblest, the only supreme emotion left to us. And that you should hint these creatures can even begin to be capable of it . . ."

Varona had the unprecedented and pleasurable feeling of being speechless for the first time in his life.

But Moldav held his ground. It was a challenge. If only for this, the Genseriens' flight into space had been a success. "I can prove it," he said quietly.

"It will be cruel," Varona thought aloud, having read Moldav's mind.

"It will not harm them, however," Garaban interposed quickly, catching their trend of thought.

"How long shall we time the experiment?" Moldav inquired, as he eyed the alien creatures.

Varona gazed at them speculatively. "I should say that sixty divisions of time would be about right. If

there is any danger during the experiment, we can always stop. Given their anthropological make-up, they should be susceptible to our rejuvenation process in case of physical damage."

And suddenly, despite the obvious absurdity, all three of them hoped with all their beings that the experiment would be a success.

TO BOLIVAR and Stella, the whole thing had been a tremendous shock. Bolivar had tried the three or four languages he knew on their captors, without success.

The very uncertainty, their complete ignorance of the fate in store for them, added to their fear and horror of the unknown.

He tried to reassure the hysterical Stella, repeating over and over, "Nothing's going to happen, my dear. They're just curious!" But he himself didn't believe it in his heart.

"But who are they? What are they trying to do to us?" Stella sobbed. She felt her senses reeling. The sight of the tall, attenuated beings whose large eyes regarded her so intently, paralyzed her reason.

Bolivar tried to explain, "They're from out in space somewhere, darling—probably millions of years ahead of us in development. And they're testing us. They don't quite know what we are, just as we wonder about them. But there's no danger!" He reassured her trying to put conviction in his voice. Stella sobbed.

That night Moldav who was on watch, came and stood silently before the two barred state-rooms. He seemed to be concentrating as he regarded Bolivar and then Stella by turns.

Bolivar took the math-rule and moved it back and forth; he could not hope to understand its strange mathematical symbolism, but he tried desperately to show Moldav that he understood its purpose. The Gensarian remained impassive and aloof.

In desperation, Bolivar concentrated on their new home on Rima, on Gus and his family living a few miles away; on Earth and its surging throngs, and mammoth cities—he concentrated until his head ached and his eyes burned.

For an instant Moldav's eyes glowed, then he smiled and left as silently as he had come.

The next day, the food ration stopped.

Stella and Bolivar didn't know what to think. They had never brought courage to life or to love—on Terra, it was not necessary. Their rigid, paternalistic culture frowned on greatness. The slightest deviation—even daring or great love, not to speak of abnegation—were considered proper subjects for psychiatric study.

They had no weapons left but themselves; no resources but the vast heritage of their race, now dormant and stifled by the cowardly soporific of an artificial way of life.

But *they* were the unwanted. They did not quite conform to Terra's sterile ideal. Were they not atavistic? For that they had been *relocated*—a polite euphemism for exile. And now, in their hour of need, it was their very failure which came to their aid!

The days lengthened into a week, and still no food was forthcoming. Stella and Bolivar had passed through the agony of hunger and into the grey chiaroscuro of semicomatose. Daily they grew weaker. They

had dreamed of feasts and banquets as they tossed restlessly and cried out in the night. But now, even the mocking specter of hunger had gone, leaving their minds preternaturally clear.

They knew that some fiendish test was under way. And they no longer hoped that their captors possessed any decency. At times they lapsed into delirium, losing their sense of reality as the subconscious overflow gave them relief from tortured nerves and endless fear. Phantoms and nightmares invaded their minds with distorted dreams and memories of Earth and Rima, only to awaken to the reality of starvation—made more stark and terrible by the increasing clarity of their minds.

The Test

IT SEEMED to Bolivar as if here in the glaucous depths of Rima's placid ocean there was silence and peace. He felt cool and relaxed in the luxury of an all-pervading lassitude. Only a faint memory of a "she" with yellow hair gnawed subtly at his mind; it was a vague remembrance that had to do with waving fields of grain like a golden sea. And the "she" was part of him—but he didn't quite know how. And then he was stooping over the freshly furrowed earth, to pick up a strange metallic instrument with odd symbols, which he could not understand out of its frame of reference. It looked like a super-slide-rule.

He floated in that placid sea, shielded by the warm darkness, weightless—in an ecstasy of non-feeling, scarcely breathing. Suddenly, he was flooded with light, and he felt himself rising, rising upwards until he broke surface and awoke to a universe of pain. His eyes were blurred, and delirium returned to dance a macabre saraband without meaning in his brain.

As if from a long distance he saw the fading outlines of his captors; their figures seemed to waver, recede and grow dim. He could hear strange voices pitched low, but the sounds had no significance. He felt a vague irritation at the figures and the lights and the sounds; he longed for the warm security of his placid sea. And without knowing it, he whimpered.

"We have gone too far!" Varona protested. During the weeks of the experiment, he had begun to feel the stirrings of emotions he had not known he was capable of. It made him uncomfortable. "We have no right to violate the concepts of our ethics."

"But you concurred in the experiment," Garaban softly reminded him. He, too, seemed haggard.

But it was Moldav who was not quite himself. He made a gesture with his hand . . . it trembled.

"I would have stopped it long ago," he said pensively, and purposely left his mind open for contact. "But I seemed to contact mental vibrations from the male. Strange! Something in the form of images he was trying to project. I decided then to go on with the experiment."

The other Genserian scientists gazed at him in mild astonishment, probing at Moldav's mind.

"But that would presuppose a high order of intelligence!" Garaban exclaimed with a measure of intensity such as he had rarely shown. "It would mean our search is at an end!"

Moldav nodded. "I am not quite sure," he said slowly. "If I am right, the final test will reveal it."

"I still think it's unfair," Varona shook his head incredulously. "Oh, they're biped, and therefore startlingly Genseroid, all right. Some of the indices conform to our highest expectations, such as cranial development and especially . . ." He broke off uncertainly and frowned at Moldav. "The tailless, hairy,

stoop-walking caricatures of Rigel-VI had similar characteristics, remember? There we drew a blank."

Moldav remembered. It had been one of their greatest disappointments. The strain he was under was beginning to give his fragile features an elfin look.

At that moment, one of the younger scientists came bearing aloft a steaming platter of food. Silently he placed it before the two staterooms, far enough back as to be clearly visible by both captives.

Slowly the passageway became filled with the rest of the crew. There was no sound except their shallow breathing, as the succulent odor of the food permeated the air.

And then Varona did a strange thing, he placed a hand on Moldav's shoulder, and his thoughts had a tinge of compassion.

"Don't be affected by the failure of this experiment," he said softly. "After all, remember that the instinct of self-preservation is supreme among all the creatures we have ever known. *In all recorded history, we've never encountered abnegation—except among ourselves!*" He touched an activating key to the lock on each barred door, and silently they slid back in their grooves.

The overpowering odor of food awoke her. Stella stirred and opened her eyes; so weak she could scarcely move, she stared at the white metal ceiling of her cell. Wave upon wave of maddening odor assaulted her. She trembled with the intensity of her desire as her mind cleared.

She turned her head slowly towards the source of the heady fragrance, and saw the platter of food. For an instant, her mind clouded, and she knew only a ravening urge to devour it. She glanced up and saw the tall figures of the aliens as they watched her, and her lips drew back tight over her teeth. Then sanity returned. Her mind had never been so clear. It was as if her famished and wasted body had released its hold upon her mental faculties, and there were no barriers to her understanding.

Intuitively she knew. *This was the test!* She gazed at the Genserians with a world of scorn mirrored in her eyes. And then she remembered Bolivar. He mustn't touch it, she thought inwardly. He mustn't! Slowly, she began to crawl to the open door to warn him; twice her strength failed her and she had to rest under the scrutiny of those alien eyes. She again began the slow, painful crawl toward the platter. Over and over she repeated in a scarcely audible voice the anguished refrain, as she called his name.

BOLIVAR, too, had been aroused by the tantalizing odor. He crouched in a corner of his cell and eyed the open door and the food platter, trying to think. But the power of coherent thought had left him now. He only knew that there, a long distance away, there was food. A ravening, an insane desire consumed him as he started to inch his way towards the platter. It seemed to be an eternity away from him, and he whimpered and growled by turns. The blurred figures of his captors he ignored—they had no meaning. There was only one reality—the food.

Then he heard a rustling sound and the sobbing insistence of a voice. He stopped. Dimly he remembered a "she." Would she try to rob him of his food? With a tremendous effort he gathered his ebbing strength and tried to go faster, unaware of the hoarse sound issuing from his throat. He got to the door. He eyed the platter which was now almost within his reach, and a wave of nausea shook him in its grip.

When Bolivar opened his eyes, he saw her. She was near the platter too, but not as near as he. His lips drew back in a savage snarl, and his eyes glowed with a towering rage. "Trying to steal my food," he thought. He gave a low growl and pounced on the food, his emaciated hands trembling over the prize.

"Don't Bolivar! Don't . . . eat it! Oh, my darling!" It was a heart-rending cry that issued from Stella's throat, and with it went the last of her strength. She fell and lay gasping between sobs.

Bolivar heard it. It came to him dim and far-away. He gazed at her inert form, as all the tenderness in that cry began to dispel the crimson fog from his mind. He hesitated and looked at the food.

"Bolivar . . ." Her voice was so faint it could scarcely be heard.

He gazed at Stella lying, so white, so pitifully thin, and trembling, and sobbing, he called her name, he dragged himself to her side. Tenderly he raised her head, then cradled her in his arms. He took a morsel of food from the platter and placed it in her mouth; several times he fed her, waiting for her to swallow each time, as he smoothed her hair and caressed her. Not until she could no longer eat, did he begin to eat.

Varona gazed at Moldav in the absolute silence of the passageway, and each saw the other's eyes were wet.

"We're not alone, at last!" Varona exclaimed in an altered voice. "These are our inheritors!" And for the first time in many centorbitemps, the tears coursed down his ancient cheeks as he wept unashamed.