

LOWER THAN ANGELS

Much lower.

Algis Budrys

THIS WAS almost the end: Fred Imbry, standing tiredly at the jungle's edge, released the anchoring field. Streaming rain immediately began coming down on the parked sub-ship on the beach. The circle of sand formerly included in the field now began to splotch, and the sea dashed a wave against the landing jacks. The frothing water ran up the beach and curled around Imbry's ankles. In a moment, the sand was as wet as though nothing had ever held that bit of seashore free.

The wind was still at storm force. Under the boiling gray sky, the craft shivered from half-buried landing jacks to needlenosed prow. Soggy fronds plastered themselves against the hull with sharp, liquid, slaps.

Imbry trudged across the sand, slopping through the water, wiping rain out of his face. He opened the sub-ship's airlock hatch, and stopped, turning for one look back into the jungle.

His exhausted eyes were sunk deep into his face. He peered woodenly into the jungle's surging undergrowth. But there was no sign of anyone's having followed him; they'd let him go. Turning back, he hoisted himself aboard the ship and shut the hatch behind him. He opened the inside hatch and went through, leaving wet, sandy footprints across the deck.

He lay down in his piloting couch and began methodically checking off the board. When it showed green all around, he energized his starting engines, waited a bit, and moved his power switch to *Atmospheric*.

The earsplitting shriek of the jet throats beat back the crash of the sea and the keening of the wind. The jungle trees jerked away from the explosion of billowing air, and even the sea recoiled. The ship danced, off the ground, and the landing jacks thumped up into their recesses. The sand poured out a shroud of towering steam.

The throttles advanced, and Imbry ascended into Heaven on a pillar of fire.

CHAPTER I

Almost at the beginning, a week earlier, Fred Imbry had been sitting in the *Sainte Marie's* briefing room for the first time in his life, having been aboard the mother ship a little less than two weeks. He sat there staring up at Lindenhoff, whose reputation had long ago made him one of Imbry's heroes, and hated the carefully schooled way the Assignment Officer could create the impression of a judgment and capacity he didn't have.

Around Imbry, the other contact crewmen were listening carefully, taking notes on their thigh pads as Lindenhoff's pointer rapped the schematic diagram of the solar system they'd just moved into. Part of Imbry's hatred was directed at them, too. Incompetents and cowards though most of them were, they still knew Lindenhoff for what he was. They'd all served under him for a long time. They'd all been exposed to his dramatics. They joked about them.

But now they were sitting and listening for all the world as if Lindenhoff was what he pretended to be--the fearless, resourceful leader in command of the vast, idealistic enterprise that was embodied in the *Sainte Marie*. But then, the mother ship, too, and the corporation that owned her, were just as rotten at the core.

Lindenhoff was a bear of a man. He was dressed in irongray coveralls; squat, thick, powerful-looking, he moved back and forth on the raised platform under the schematic. With the harsh overhead lighting, his close-cropped skull looked almost bald; naked and strong, a turret set on the short, seamed pillar of his neck. A thick white scar began over his right eye, crushed down through the thick jut of his brow ridge, the mashed arch of his blunt nose, and ended on the staved-in cheekbone under his left eye. Except for the scar, his face was burned brown and leathery, and even his lips were only a different shade of brown. The bright gold color of his eyebrows and the yellow straw of his lashes came close to glowing in contrast.

His voice was pitched deep. He talked in short, rumbled sentences. His thick arm jerked sharply each time he moved the pointer.

"Coogan, you're going into IV. You've studied the aerial surveys. No animal life. No vegetation. All naked rock where it isn't water. Take Petrick with you and do a mineralogical survey. You've got a week. If you hit anything promising, I'll extend your schedule. Don't go drawing any weapons. No more'n it takes to keep you happy, anyhow. Jusek's going to need 'em on VII."

Imbry's mouth twitched in disgust. The lighting. The platform on which Lindenhoff was shambling back and forth, never stumbling even when he stepped back without looking behind him. The dimensions of that platform must be clearly imprinted in his mind. Every step was planned, every gesture practiced. The sunburn, laid down by a battery of lamps. The careful tailoring of the coveralls to make that ursine body look taller.

Coogan and Petrick. The coward and the secret drunkard. Petrick had deft a partner to die on a plague world. Coogan had shot his way out of a screaming herd of reptiles on his third contact mission--and had never gone completely unarmed, anywhere, in the ten years since.

The rest of them were no better. Ogin had certified a planet worthless. A year later, a small scavenger company had found a fortune in wolfram not six miles away from his old campsite. Lindenhoff hadn't seen fit to fire him. Kenton, the foulminded pathological liar. Maguire, who hated everything that walked or flew or crept, who ripped without pity at every world he contacted, and whose round face, with its boyish smile, was always broadcast along with a blushing modest interview whenever the *Sainte Marie's* latest job of opening up a new solar system was covered by the news programs.

Most of those programs, Imbry'd found out in the short time he'd been aboard, were bought and paid for by the *Sainte Marie* Development Corporation's public relations branch.

His thin hands curled up into tight knots.

The mother ships and the men who worked out of them were the legends of this generation--with the *Sainte Marie* foremost among them. Constantly working outward, putting system after system inside the known universe, they were the bright hungry wave of mankind reaching out to gather in the stars. The men were the towering figures marching into the wilderness--the men who die unprotestingly in the thousand traps laid by the

unknown darkness beyond the Edge; the men who beat their way through the jungles of the night, leaving broad roads behind them for civilization to follow.

He had come aboard this ship like a man fulfilling a dream--and found Coogan sitting in the crew lounge.

"Imbry, huh? Pull up a chair. My name's Coogan." He was whipcord lean; a wiry, broadmouthed man with a tough, easy grin and live brown eyes. "TSN man?"

Imbry'd shaken his hand before he sat down. It felt a little unreal, actually meeting a man he'd heard so much about, and having him act as friendly as this.

"That's right," Imbry said, trying to sound as casual as he could under the circumstances. Except for Lindenhoff and possibly Maguire, Coogan was the man he most admired. "My enlistment finally ran out last week. I was a rescue specialist."

Coogan nodded. "We get some good boys that way." He grinned and chuckled. "So Old Smiley slipped you a trial contract and here you are, huh?"

"Old Smiley?"

"Personnel manager. Glad hand, looks sincere, got distinguished white hair."

"Oh. Mr. Redstone."

Coogan grinned. "Sure. Mr. Redstone. Well--think you'll like it here?"

Imbry nodded. "It looks like it," he said carefully. He realized he had to keep his enthusiasm ruthlessly under control, or else appear to be completely callow and juvenile. Even before he'd known what he'd do after he got out, he'd been counting the days until his TSN enlistment expired. Having the Corporation offer him a contract on the day of his discharge had been a tremendous unexpected bonus. If he'd been sixteen instead of twenty-six, he would have said it was the greatest thing that could have happened to him. Being twenty-six, he said, "I figure it's a good deal."

Coogan winked at him. "You're not just kiddin' friend. We're on our way out to a system that looks pretty promising. Old Sainte Marie's in a position to declare another dividend if it pays off." He rubbed this thumb and forefinger together. "And how I do enjoy those dividends! Do a good job, lad. Do a bang-up job. Baby needs new shoes."

"I don't follow you."

"Hell, Buddy, I got half of my pay sunk into company stock. So do the rest of these guys. Couple years more, and I can get off this goddam barge and find me a steady woman, settle down, and just cash checks every quarter for the rest of my life. And laugh like a sonavabitch every time I heard about you birds goin' out to earn me some more."

Imbry hadn't known what to make of it, at first. He'd mumbled an answer of some kind. But, listening to the other men talking--Petrick, with the alcohol puffing out on his breath; Kenton, making grandiose plans; Maguire, sneering coldly; Jusek, singlemindedly sharpening his bush knife--he'd gradually realized Coogan wasn't an exception in this crew of depraved, vicious fakes. Listening to them talk about the Corporation itself, he'd realized, too, that the "pioneers of civilization" line was something reserved for the bought- and paid-for write-ups

only. He wasn't dewy-eyed. He didn't expect the Corporation to be in business for its health. But neither had he expected it to be totally cynical and grasping, completely indifferent to whether anyone ever settled the areas it skimmed of their first fruits.

He learned, in a shatteringly short time, just what the contact crew men thought of each other, of the Corporation, and of humanity. They carped at, gossiped about, and despised each other. They took the Corporation's stock as part of their pay, and exploited all the more ruthlessly for it. They jockeyed for favored assignments, brought back as "souvenirs" anything valuable and sufficiently portable on the worlds they visited, and cordially hated the crews of all the rival mother ships. They weren't pioneers--they were looters, squabbling among themselves for the biggest share, and they made Imbry's stomach turn.

They were even worse than most of the TSN officers and men he'd known.

"Imbry."

He looked up. Lindenhoff was standing, arms akimbo, under the schematic at the head of the briefing room.

"Yes?" Imbry answered tightly.

"You take II. It's a rainforest world. Humanoid inhabited."

"I've studied the surveys."

Lindenhoff's heavy mouth twitched. "I hope so. You're going alone. There's nothing the natives can do to you that you won't be able to handle. Conversely, there's nothing much of any value on the planet. You'll contact the natives and try to get them started on some kind of civilization. You'll explain what the Terran Union is, and the advantages of trade. They ought to be able to grow some luxury agricultural products. See how they'd respond toward developing a technology. If Coogan turns up with some industrial ores on IV, they'd make a good market, in time. That's about the general idea. Nobody expects you to accomplish much--just push 'em in the right direction. Take two weeks. All straight?"

"Yes." Imbry felt his jaws tightening. Something for nothing again. First the Corporation developed a market, then it sold it the ores it found on a neighboring world.

No, he wasn't angry about having been given an assignment that couldn't go wrong and that wouldn't matter much if it did. He was quite happy about it, because he intended to do as little for the Corporation as he could.

"All right, that's about it, boys," Lindenhoff finished up. He stepped off the platform and the lights above the schematic went out. "You might as well draw your equipment and get started. The quicker it all gets done, the quicker we'll get paid."

Coogan slapped him on the back as they walked out on the flight deck. "Remember what I said," he chuckled. "if there's any ambition in the gooks at all, shove it hard. Me, I'm going to be looking mighty hard for something to sell 'em."

"Yeah, sure!" Imbry snapped.

Coogan looked at him wide-eyed. "What's eating you, boy?"

Imbry took a deep breath. "You're eating me, Coogan. You and the rest of the set-up." He stopped and glared tensely at Coogan. "I signed a contract. I'll do what I'm obligated to. But I'm getting off this ship when I come back, and if I ever hear about you birds again, I'll spit on the sidewalk when I do."

Coogan reddened. He took a step forward, then caught himself and dropped his hands. He shook his head. "Imbry, I've been watching you go sour for the last week. All right, that's the breaks. Old Smiley made a mistake. It's not the first time--and you could have fooled me, too, at first. What's your gripe?"

"What d'you think it is? How about Lindenhoff's giving you Petrick for a partner?"

Coogan shook his head again, perplexed. "I don't follow you. He's a geologist, isn't he?"

Imbry stared at him in astonishment. "You don't follow me?" Coogan was the one who'd told him about Petrick's drinking. He remembered the patronizing lift to Coogan's lips as he looked across the lounge at the white-faced, muddye-eyed man walking unsteadily through the room.

"Let's move along," Lindenhoff said from behind them.

Imbry half-turned. He looked down at the Assignment Officer in surprise. He hadn't heard the man coming. Neither had Coogan. Coogan nodded quickly.

"Just going, Lindy." Throwing another teamed glance at Imbry, he trotted across the deck toward his sub-ship, where Petrick was standing and waiting.

"Go on, son," Lindenhoff said. "You're holding up the show."

Imbry felt the knotted tension straining at his throat. He snatched up his pack.

"All right," he said harshly. He strode over to his ship, skirting out of the way of the little trucks that were humming back and forth around the ships, carrying supplies and maintenance crewmen. The flight deck echoed back to the clangs of slammed access hatches, the crash of a dropped wrench, and the soft whir of truck motors. Maintenance men were running back and forth, completing final checks, and armorers struggled with the heavy belts of ammunition being loaded into the guns on Jusek's ship. In the harsh glare of work lights, Imbry climbed up through his hatch, slammed it shut, and got up into his control compartment.

The ship was a slightly converted model of the standard TSN carrier scout.

He fingered the controls distastefully. Grimacing, he jacked in his communication leads and contacted the tower for a check. Then he set up his flight plan in the ballistic computer, interlocked his AutoNav, and sat back, waiting.

Lindenhoff and his fearsome scar. Souvenir of danger on a frontier world? Badge of courage? Symbol of intrepidity?

Actually, he'd gotten it when a piece of scaffolding fell on him during a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, well before he ever came aboard the *Sainte Marie*.

The flight deck cleared. Imbry set his ship's circulators. The flight deck alarm blasted into

life.

The deck canopy slid aside, and the flight deck's air billowed out into space. Imbry energized his main drive.

"Imbry clear for launch."

"Check, Imbry. Launch in ten."

He counted down, braced back against his couch. The catapult rammed him up off the deck, and he fired his engines. He rose high above the *Sainte Marie*, hovering, and then the ship nosed down and he trailed a wake of fire across the spangled night, in toward the foreign sun.

CHAPTER II

Almost from pole to pole, World II was the deep, lush color of rainforest vegetation. Only at the higher latitudes was it interspersed with the surging brown-green of prairie grass and bush country, tapering into something like a temperate ecology at the very "top" and "bottom" of the planet. Where there was no land, there was the deeper, bluer, green of the sea. And on the sea, again, the green of islands.

Imbry balanced his ship on end, drifting slowly down. He wanted a good look and a long look.

His training in the TSN had fitted him admirably for this job. Admirably enough so that he depended more on his own observation than he did on the aerial survey results, which had been fed raw into a computer and emerged as a digested judgment on the planet's ecology and population, and the probable state and nature of its culture. The TSN applied this judgment from a military standpoint. The Corporation applied it to contact work. Imbry's experience had never known it to go far wrong. But he distrusted things mechanical, and so he hung in the sky for an hour or more, checking off promising-looking sites as they passed under him--and giving his bitterness and disillusion time to evaporate.

Down there was a race that had never heard of any people but itself; a race to which large portions of even its own planet must be unknown and enigmatic. A fairly happy race, probably. And if the Corporation found no significance in that, Imbry did. He was going to be their first touch with the incredible vastness in which they floated, and whatever he could do to smooth the shock and make their future easier, he meant to do, to the best of his ability. And if the Corporation had no feelings, he did. If there was no idealism aboard the *Sainte Marie*, there was some in him.

Finally, he picked an area on the eastern shore of the principal continent, and drifted down toward it, slipping in over the swelling expanse of an island-speckled ocean. Following the curve of a chain of atolls extending almost completely across the sea, he lost altitude steadily, finding it possible, now, with some of the tension draining out of him, to enjoy the almost effortless drift through the quiet sky, and the quick responsiveness of his ship. It wasn't quite as he'd dreamed it, but it was good. The mother ship was far away, and here on this world he was alone, coming down just above the tops of the breakers, now, settling gently on a broad and gleaming beach.

The anchoring field switched on, and bored down until it found bedrock. The sand around the ship pressed down in a shallow depression. Imbry turned away from the beach and began to walk into the jungle, his detectors and pressor fields tingling out to all sides of him. He walked slowly in the direction of a village, wearing his suit with its built-in equipment, with his helmet slung back between his shoulder blades.

The jungle was typical rainforest. There were trees which met the climatic conditions, and therefore much resembled ordinary palms. The same was true of the thick undergrowth, and, from the sound of them, of the avian fauna. The chatter in the trees was not quite as harsh as the Terrestrial version, nor as shrill. From the little he'd seen, that seemed typical--a slightly more leisurely, slightly gentler world than the Pacific belt of Earth. He walked slowly, as much from quiet enjoyment as from caution. Overhead, the sky was a warm blue, with soft clouds hanging over the atolls at the horizon. The jungle ran with bright color and deep, cool green. Imbry's face lost its drawn-up tension, and his walk became relaxed.

He found a trail in a very short time, and began following it, trusting to his detectors and not looking around except in simple curiosity. And quite soon after that, his detector field pinged, and the pressor pushed back against the right side of his chest. He turned it down, stopped, and looked in that direction. The field was set for sentient life only, and he knew he was about to meet his first native. He switched on his linguistic computer and waited.

The native, when he stepped out on the trail, was almost humanoid enough to pass for a Terrestrial. His ears were set a bit differently, and his musculature was not quite the same. It was also impossible to estimate his age, for none of the usual Terrestrial clues were applicable. But those were the only differences Imbry could see. His skin was dark enough so there was no mistaking him for a Caucasian--if you applied human standards--but a great deal of that might be simple suntan. His hair was light brown, grew out of his scalp in an ordinary fashion, and had been cut. He was wearing a short, skirt-like garment, with a perfectly ordinary navel showing above it in a flat stomach. The pattern of his wraparound was of the blocky type to which woven cloth is limited, and it was bright, in imitation of the forms and colors available in the jungle.

He looked at Imbry silently, out of intelligent black eyes, with a tentative smile on his mouth. He was carrying nothing in his open hands, and he seemed neither upset nor timid.

Imbry had to wait until he spoke first. The computer had to have something to work with. Meanwhile, he smiled back. His TSN training had prepared him for situations exactly like this. In exercises, he'd duplicated this situation a dozen times, usually with ET's much more fearsome and much less human. So he merely smiled back, and there was no tension or misgiving in the atmosphere at all. There was only an odd, childlike shyness which, once broken, could only lead to an invitation to come over to the other fellow's house.

The native's smile broadened, and he raised one hand in greeting, breaking into soft, liquid speech that seemed to run on and on without stopping, for many syllables at a time.

The native finished, and Imbry had to wait for his translator to make up its mind. Finally, it whispered in his ear.

"This is necessarily a rough computation. The communication is probably: 'Hello. Are you a god?' (That's an approximation. He means something between 'ancestor' and 'deity'.) 'I'm very glad to meet you.'"

Imbry shook his head at the native, hoping this culture didn't take that to mean "yes." "No,"

he said to the computer, "I'm an explorer. And I'm glad to meet you." He continued to smile.

The computer hummed softly. "Explorer, is inapplicable as yet," it told Imbry. It didn't have the vocabulary built up.

The native was looking curiously at the little box of the computer sitting on Imbry's shoulder. His jungle-trained ears were sharp, and he could obviously hear at least the sibilants as it whispered. His curiosity was friendly and intelligent; he seemed intrigued.

"All right, try: 'I'm like you. Hello'" Imbry told the computer.

The translator spoke to the native. He looked at Imbry in gentle unbelief, and answered.

This time, it was easier. The translator sank its teeth into this new material, and after a much shorter lag, with out qualification, gave Imbry the native's communication, in its usual colloquial English, somewhat flavored:

"Obviously, you're not like me very much. But, we'll straighten that out later. Will you stay in my village for a while?"

Imbry nodded, to register the significance of the gesture. "I'd be glad to. My name's Imbry. What's yours?"

"Good. I'm Tylus. Will you walk with me? And who's the little ancestor on your shoulder?"

Imbry walked forward, and the native waited until they were a few feet apart and then began leading the way down the trail.

"That's not an ancestor," Imbry tried to explain. "It's a machine that changes your speech into mine and mine into yours." But the translator broke down completely at that. The best it could offer to do was to tell Tylus that it was a lever that talked. And "your speech" and "my speech" were concepts Tylus simply did not have.

In all conscience, Imbry had to cancel that, so he contented himself with saying it was not an ancestor. Tylus immediately asked which of Imbry's respected ancestors it would be if it *were* an ancestor, and it was obvious that the native regarded Imbry as being, in many respects, a charming liar. But it was also plain that charming liars were accorded due respect in Tylus's culture, so the two were fairly well acquainted by the time they reached the outskirts of the village, and there was no longer any lag in translation at all.

The village was built to suit the environment. The roofs and walls of the light, one-room houses were made of woven frond mats tied down to a boxy frame. Every house had a porch for socializing with passersby, and a cookfire out front. Most of the houses faced in on a circular village square, with a big, communal cooking pit for special events, and the entire village was set in under the trees just a little away from the shoreline. There were several canoes on the sand above high water, and at some time this culture had developed the outrigger.

There was a large amount of shouting back and forth going on among the villagers, and a good-sized crowd had collected at the point where the trail opened out into the village clearing. But Tylus urged Imbry forward, passing proudly through the crowd, and Imbry went with him, feeling somewhat awkward about it, but not wanting to leave Tylus marching on alone. The villagers moved aside to let him through, smiling, some of them grinning at

Tylus's straight back and proudly carried head, none of them, obviously, wanting to deprive their compatriot of his moment.

Tylus stopped when he and Imbry reached the big central cooking pit, turned around, and struck a pose with one arm around Imbry's shoulders.

"Hey! Look! I've brought a big visitor!" Tylus shouted, grinning with pleasure.

The villagers let out a whoop of feigned surprise, laughing and shouting congratulations to Tylus, and cordial welcomes to Imbry.

"He says he's not a god!" Tylus climaxed, giving Imbry a broad, sidelong look of grinning appreciation for his ability to be ridiculous. "He came out of a big *Ihoni* egg on the beach, and he's got a father-ghost who sits on his shoulder in a little black pot and gives him advice!"

"Oh, that's ingenious!" someone in the crowd commented in admiration.

"Look how fair he is!" one of the women exclaimed.

"Look how much handsomer than us he is!"

"Look how richly he's dressed! Look at the jewels shining in his silver belt!"

Imbry's translator raced to give him representative crowd comments, and he grinned back at the crowd. His rescue training had always presupposed grim, hostile or at best noncommittal ET's that would have to be persuaded into helping him locate the crashed personnel of the stricken ship. Now, the first time he'd put it to actual use, he found reality giving theory a bland smile, and he sighed and relaxed completely. Once he'd disabused this village of its godnotions in connection with him, he'd be able to not only work but be friendly with these people. Not that they weren't already cordial.

He looked around at the crowd, both to observe it and to give everybody a look at his smile.

The crowd was composed, in nearly equal parts, of men and women very much like Tylus, with no significant variation except for age and sex characteristics that ranged from the appreciable to the only anthropologically interesting. In lesser part, there were children, most of them a little timid, some of them awestruck, all of them naked.

An older man, wearing a necklace of carved wood in addition to his wraparound, came forward through the crowd. Imbry had to guess at his age, but he thought he had it fairly accurately. The native had white hair, for one thing, and a slight thickness to his waist. For another, he was rather obviously the village head man, and that indicated age, and the experience it brought with it.

The head man raised his arm in greeting, and Imbry replied.

"I am Iano. Will you stay with us in our village?"

Imbry nodded. "My name's Imbry. I'd like to stay here for a while."

Iano broke into a smile. "Fine! We're all very glad to meet you. I hope your journey can be interrupted for a long time." He smiled. "Well, if you say you're not a god, who do you say

you are?" There was a ripple of chuckling through the crowd.

"I'm a man," Imbry answered. The translator had meanwhile worked out the proper wording for what he wanted to say next. "I'm an explorer from another country." The local word, of course, was not quite "explorer"--it was "traveler-from-other-places-for-the-enjoyment-of-it-and-to-see-what-I-can-find."

Iano chuckled. Then gravely, he asked: "Do you always travel in an *lhoni* egg, Imbry-who-says-he-is-Imbry?"

Imbry chuckled back in appreciation of Iano's shrewdness. He was enjoying this, even if it was becoming more and more difficult to approach the truth.

"That's no *lhoni* egg," he deprecated with a broad gesture to match. "That's only my..." And here the translator had to give up and render the word as "canoe."

Iano nodded with a gravity so grave it was obviously no gravity at all. Tylus, standing to one side, gave Imbry a look of total admiration at this effort which overmatched all his others.

"Ah. Your canoe. And how does one balance a canoe shaped like an *lhoni* egg?"

Imbry realized what the translator had had to do. He'd been afraid of as much. He searched for the best answer, and the best answer seemed to be to tell the truth and stick to it. These people were intelligent. If he presented them with a consistent story, and backed it up with as much proof as he could muster, they'd eventually see that nothing so scrupulously self-consistent could possibly be anything but the truth.

"Well," he said slowly, wondering what the effect would be at first, "it's a canoe that doesn't sail on water. It sails in the sky."

There was a chorus of admiration through the crowd. As much of it seemed to be meant for Iano as for Imbry. They appeared to think Imbry had made a damaging admission in this contest.

Iano smiled. "Is your country in the sky?"

Imbry struggled for some way of making it understandable. "Yes and no," he said carefully. "It's necessary to travel through the sky to get to my country, but when you get there you're in a place that's very much like here, in some ways."

Iano smiled again. "Well, of course. How else would you be happy if there weren't places like this to live, in the sky?"

He turned toward the other villagers. "He *said* he wasn't a god," he declared quietly, his eyes twinkling.

There was a burst of chuckling, and now all the admiring glances were for Iano.

The head man turned back to Imbry. "Will you stay in my house for a while? We will produce a feast later in the day." The head man turned back to Imbry. "Will you stay in my house for a while? We will produce a feast later in the day."

Imbry nodded gravely. "I'd be honored." The villagers were smiling at him gently as they

drifted away, and Imbry got the feeling that they were being polite and telling him that his discomfiture didn't really matter.

"Don't be sad," Tylus whispered. "Iano's a remarkably shrewd man. He could make anybody admit the truth. I'm quite sure that when he dies, he'll be some kind of god himself."

Then he waved a hand in temporary farewell and moved away, leaving Imbry alone with the gravely smiling Iano.

CHAPTER III

Imbry sat on the porch with Iano. Both of them looked out over the village square, sitting side by side. It seemed to be the expected posture for conversation between a god and someone who was himself a likely candidate for a similar position, and it certainly made for ease of quiet contemplation before each new sentence was brought out into words.

Imbry was still wearing his suit. Iano had politely suggested that he might be warm in it, but Imbry had explained.

"It cools me. That's only one of the things it does. For one thing, if I took it off I wouldn't be able to talk to you. In my country we have different words."

Iano had thought about it for a moment. Then he said: "Your wraparound must have powerful ancestors living in it." He thought a moment more. "Am I right in supposing that this is a new attribute you're trying out, and it hasn't grown up enough to go about without advice?"

Imbry'd been glad of several minutes in which to think. Then he'd tried to explain.

"No," he said, "the suit (perforce, the word was 'wraparound- for-the-whole-body') "was made--was built--by other men in my country. It was built to protect me, and to make me able to travel anywhere without being in any danger." But that was only just as much as repeating Iano's theory back to him in different form, and he realized it after Iano's polite silence had extended too long to be anything but an answer in itself.

He tried to explain the concept "machine."

"I'll teach you a new word for a new thing," he said.

Iano nodded attentively.

Imbry switched off the translator, making sure Iano saw the motion and understood the result. Then he repeated "machine" several times, and, once Iano had accustomed himself to Imbry's new voice, which up to now he'd only heard as an indistinct background murmur to the translator's speaker, the head man picked it up quickly.

"Mahschin," he said at last, and Imbry switched his translator back on. "Go on, Imbry."

"A machine is a number of levers, working together. It is built by perfectly ordinary artisans--not gods, Iano, but men like yourself and myself--who have a good deal of knowledge and skill. With one lever, you can raise a tree trunk. With many levers, shaped into paddles, men can push the tree trunk through the water, after they have shaped it into a

canoe.

"So a machine is like the many levers that move the canoe. But usually it doesn't need men to push it. It goes on by itself, because it--"

Here he had to stop for a minute. These people had no concept of storing energy and then releasing it to provide motive power. Iano waited, patient and polite.

"It has a little bit of fire in it," Imbry was forced to say lamely. "Fire can be put in a box--in something like two pots fastened tightly on top of each other--so that it can't get out. But it wants to get out--it pushes against the inside of the two pots--so if you make a hole in the pots and put a lever in the way, the fire rushing out pushes the lever."

He looked at Iano, but couldn't make out whether he was being believed or not. Half the time, he had no idea what kind of almost-but-sadly-not-quite concepts the translator might be substituting for the things he was saying.

"A machine can be built to do almost anything that would otherwise require a lot of men. For instance, I could have brought another man with me who was skilled at learning words that weren't his. Then I wouldn't need the little black pot, which is a machine that learns words that aren't the same as mine. But the machine does it faster, and in some ways, better."

He stopped, hoping Iano had understood at least part of it.

After a time, Iano nodded gravely. "That's very ingenious. It saves your ancestors the inconvenience of coming with you and fatiguing themselves. I had no idea such a thing could be done. But of course, in your country there are different kinds of fires than we have here."

Which was a perfectly sound description, Imbry had to admit, granting Iano's viewpoint.

So now they'd been sitting quietly for a number of minutes, and Imbry had begun to realize that he might have to work for a long time before he extricated himself from this embarrassment. Finally he said, "Well, if you think I'm a god, what kind of a god do you think I am?"

Iano answered slowly. "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know. You might be an ancestor. Or you might be only a man who has made friends with a lot of his ancestors." Imbry felt a flash of hope, but Iano went on: "Which, of course, would make you a god. Or--" He paused, and Imbry, taking a sideward look, caught Iano looking at him cautiously. "Or you might be no ancestor and no man-god. You might be one of the very-real-gods. You might be the cloud god, or the jungle god, taking the attribute of a man. Or...you might be *the* god. You might be the-father-of-all-*Ihoni*."

Imbry took a deep breath. "Would you describe the *Ihoni* to me, please," he said.

"Certainly." Iano's voice and manner were still cautious. "The *Ihoni* are animals which live in the sea or on the beaches, as they choose. They leave their eggs on the beaches, but they rear their young in the sea. They are fishers, and they are very wise. Many of them are ancestors." He said it with unusual respect and reverence.

Imbry sat quietly again. The god who was the-father-of-all-the-*Ihoni* would not only be the father of many ancestors, who were themselves minor gods, he would also control the sea, everything pertaining to the sea, the beaches, probably all the islands, and the fates of those

whose lives were tied to the sea, who were themselves fishers, like the villagers. Imbry wondered how much geography the villagers knew. They might consider that the land was always surrounded by ocean--that, as a matter of fact, the universe consisted of ocean encircling a relatively small bit of land.

If Iano thought that was who Imbry might be, then he might very well be thinking that he was in the presence of the greatest god there was. A typical god, of course--there wasn't a god in the world who didn't enjoy a joke, a feast, and a good untruth-for-the- fun-of-everybody at least as much as anybody else--but still, though you might not expect too much of the household fares and penates, when it came to Jupiter himself...

Imbry couldn't let that go on. Almost anything might happen. He might leave a religion behind him that, in a few generations of distortion, might twist itself--and the entire culture--into something monstrous. He might leave the way open for the next Corporation man to practice a brand of exploitation that would be near to unimaginable.

Imbry remembered what the *conquistadores* had done in Central and South America, and his hackles rose.

"No!" he exploded violently, and Iano recoiled a little, startled. "No, I'm not a god. Not any kind. I'm a man--a different kind of man, maybe, but just a man. The fact that I have a few machines doesn't prove anything. The fact that I know more about some things than you do doesn't prove anything. I come from a country where the people can keep records, so nothing's lost when a man who has some wisdom dies. I've been taught out of those records, and I'm helped by machines built by other men who study other records. But do you think my people are any better than yours? You think the men I have to work with are good, or brave, or kind? No more than you. Less. We kill each other, we take away from other people what isn't ours, we lie--we tell untruths-for-unfair- advantage--we leave bad where we found good--we're just men, we're not anything like gods, and we never will be!"

Iano had recovered his composure quickly. He nodded.

"No doubt," he said. "No doubt, to one god other gods are much like other men are to a man. Possibly even gods have gods. But that is not for us to say. We are men here, not in the country of the gods. There is the jungle, the sky, and the sea. And those who know more places than that must be our gods." He looked at Imbry with quick sympathy. "It's sad to know that even a god must be troubled."

CHAPTER IV

The odds were low that any of the food served at the feast could hurt him. Aside from the fact that the ecology was closely parallel to Earth's, Imbry's system was flooded with Antinfect from the precautionary shot he'd gotten aboard the mother ship. But he couldn't afford to take the chance of getting sick. It might help destroy the legend gathered around him, but it would also leave him helpless. He had too much to do in too short a time to risk that. So he politely faked touching his tongue to each of the dishes as it was passed to him, and settled for a supper of rations out of his suit, grimacing as he heard someone whisper behind him that the god had brought his own god-food with him because the food of men could not nourish him in this attribute.

No matter what he did, he couldn't shake the faith of the villagers. It was obvious at a glance

that he was a god; therefore, ipso facto, everything he did was god-like.

He sat beside Iano and his wives, watching the fire roar in the communal pit and listening to the pounding beat of the musicians, but, even though the villagers were laughing happily and enjoying themselves immensely, he could not recapture the mood of easy relaxation he had borrowed from them and their world this afternoon. The *Sainte Marie* pressed too close to him. When he left here, he'd never be able to come back--and a ravaged world would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Hey! Imbry! Look what I've got to show you!"

He looked up, and there was Tylus, coming toward him hand-in-hand with a quietly beautiful girl, and holding a baby just into the toddling stage. The child was being half-led, half-dragged, and seemed to be enjoying it.

Imbry smiled broadly. There was no getting away from it. Tylus enjoyed life so hugely that nobody near him could quite escape the infection.

"This is my woman, Pia," Tylus said with a proud grin, and the girl smiled shyly. "And this one hasn't got his name yet." He reached down and slapped the baby playfully, and the boy grinned from ear to ear.

Everyone around the fire chuckled. Imbry grinned despite himself, and nodded gravely to Tylus. "I'm glad to meet them." He smiled at Pia. "She must have been blind to pick you when she could have had so much better." The girl blushed, and everyone burst into laughter, while Tylus postured in proud glee. Imbry nodded toward the boy. "If he didn't look so much like his father, I'd say he was a fine one."

There was fresh laughter, and Imbry joined in it because he almost desperately needed to; but after it trailed away and Tylus and his family were gone back into their hut, after the fire died and the feast was over, when Imbry lay on the mat in Iano's house and the wind clashed the tree fronds while the surf washed against the beach--then Imbry lay tightly awake.

Given time--given a year or two--he might be able to break down the villagers' idea about him. But he doubted it. Iano was right. Even if he threw away his suit and left himself with no more equipment than any of the villagers possessed, he knew too much. Earth and the Terran Union were his heritage, and that was enough to make a god of any man among these people. If he so much as introduced the wheel into this culture, he was doing something none of these people had conceived of in all their history.

And he had nothing like a year. In two weeks' time, even using eidetic techniques, he could barely build up enough of a vocabulary in their language to do without his translator for simpler conversations. And, again, it wouldn't make a particle of difference whether he spoke their language or not. Words would never convince them.

But he had to get through to them somehow.

The cold fact was that during a half day's talk, he hadn't gotten anyone in the village to take literally even the slightest thing he said. He was a god. Gods speak in allegories, or gods proclaim laws. Gods do not speak man-to-man. And if they do, rest assured it is part of some divine plan, designed to meet inscrutable ends by subtle means.

What was it Lindenhoff had told him?

"You'll contact the natives and try to get them started on some kind of civilization. You'll explain what the Terran Union is, and the advantages of trade. See how they'd respond toward developing a technology."

It couldn't be done. Not by a god who might, at worst, be only a demi-god, who might at best even be *the* god, and who could not, under any circumstances, possibly be considered on a par with the other travelers-for-pleasure who occasionally turned up from over the sea but who were manifestly only other men.

He wasn't supposed to be a stern god, or an omnipotent god, or a being above the flesh. That kind of deity took a monotheist to appreciate him. He was simply supposed to be a god of these people--vain and happily boastful at times, a liar at times, a glutton at times, a drunkard at times, timid at times, adventurous at times, a hero at times, and heir to other sins of the flesh at other times, but always powerful, always above the people in wisdom of his own kind, always a god: always a mute with a whispering ancestor on his shoulder.

But if he left them now, they'd be lost. Someone else would come down, and be a god. Kenton, or Ogin, or Maguire the killer. And when the new god realized the situation, he'd stop trying to make these people into at least some kind of rudimentary market. They wouldn't even have that value to turn them into an interest to be protected. Lindenhoff would think of something else to do with them, for the Corporation's good. Turn them into a labor force for the mines Coogan would be opening up on IV, perhaps. Or else enslave them here. Have the god nudge them into becoming farmers for the luxury market, or introduce a technology whether they understood it or not.

That might work. If the god and his fellow gods found stones for them to dig and smelt into metal, and showed them how to make machines, they might do it.

To please the god by following his advice. Not because they understood or wanted machines--or needed them--but to fulfill the god's inscrutable plan. They'd sicken with the bewilderment in their hearts, and lose their smiles in the smelter's heat. The canoes would rot on the beaches, and the fishing spears would break. The houses would crumble on the ocean's edge until the sea reached up and swept the village clean, and the *Ihoni* eggs would hatch out in the warming sun. The village would be gone, and its people slaving far away, lonesome for their ancestors.

He had to do it. Somehow, within these two weeks, he had to give them a chance of some kind.

It would be his last chance, too. Twenty-six years of life, and all of it blunted. He was failing here, with the taste of the Corporation bitter in his mouth. He'd found nothing in the TSN but brutal officers and cynical men waiting for a war to start somewhere, so the promotions and bonuses would come, and meanwhile making the best they could out of what police actions and minor skirmishes there were with weak alien races. Before that, school, and a thousand time-markers and campus wheels for everyone who thought that some day, if he was good enough, he'd have something to contribute to Mankind.

The god had to prove to be human after all. And the human could talk to these other men, as just another man, and then perhaps they might advance of themselves to the point where they could begin a civilization that was part of them, and part of some plan of theirs, instead of some god's. And someday these people, too, would land their metal canoes on some foreign beach under a foreign sun.

He had to destroy himself. He had to tear down his own facade.

Just before he fell into his fitful sleep, he made his decision. At the first opportunity to be of help in some way they would consider more than manlike, he'd fail. The legend would crumble, and he could be a man.

He fell asleep, tense and perspiring, and the stars hung over the world, with the mother ship among them.

CHAPTER V

The chance came. He couldn't take it.

Two days had gone by, and nothing had happened to change the situation. He spent two empty days talking to Iano and as many other villagers as he could, and the only knowledge they gained was an insight into the ways of gods, who proved, after all, to be very much like men, on their own grander scale. One or two were plainly saddened by his obvious concern over something they, being unfortunately only men, could not quite grasp. Iano caught something of his mood, and was upset by it until his face fell into a puzzled, concerned look that was strange to it. But it only left him and Imbry further apart. There was no bridge between them.

On the third day, the sea was flat and oily, and the air lay dankly still across the village. The tree fronds hung down limply, and the clouds thickened gradually during the night, so that Imbry woke up to the first sunless day he'd seen. He got up as quietly as he could, and left Iano's house, walking slowly across the compound toward the sea. He stood on the beach, looking out across the glassy swells, thinking back to the first hour in which he'd hung above that ocean and slowly come down with the anticipation burning out the disgust in him.

He threw a shell as far out into the water as he could, and watched it skip once, skip twice, teeter in the air, and knife into the water without a splash. Iano turned around and walked slowly back into the village, where one or two women were beginning to light their cookfires.

He greeted them listlessly, and they answered gravely, their easy smiles dying. He wandered over toward Tylus's house. And heard Pia crying.

"Hello!"

Tylus came out of the house, and for the first time Imbry saw him looking strained, his lips white at the corners. "Hello, Imbry," he said in a tired voice.

"What's wrong, Tylus?"

Tylus shrugged. "The baby's going to die." Imbry stared up at him. "Why?"

"He cut his foot yesterday morning. I put a poultice on it. It didn't help. His foot's red today, and it hurts him to touch it. It happens."

"Oh, no, it doesn't. Not any more. Let me look at him." Imbry came up the short ladder to Tylus's porch. "It can't be anything I can't handle."

He knew the villagers' attitude toward death. Culturally, death was the natural result of growing old, of being born weak, and, sometimes, of having a child. Sometimes, too, a healthy person could suddenly get a pain in the belly, lie in agony for a day, and then die. Culturally, it usually made the victim an ancestor, and grief for more than a short time was something the villagers were too full of living to indulge in. But sometimes it was harder to take; in this tropical climate, a moderately bad cut could infect like wildfire, and then someone died who didn't seem to have been ready for it.

Tylus's eyes lit up for a moment. Then they became gravely steady.

"You don't have to, if you don't want to, Imbry. Suppose some other god wants him? Suppose his ancestors object to your stepping in? And--and besides--" Tylus dropped his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe you're not a god."

Imbry couldn't stop to argue. "I'd like to look at him anyway. No matter what might happen."

The hopelessness drained out of Tylus's face. He touched Imbry's arm. "Come into my house," he said, repeating the social formula gratefully. "Pia! Imbry's here to make the baby well!"

Imbry strode into the house, pulling his medkit out of his suit. Pia turned away from the baby's mat, raising her drawn face. Then she jumped up and went to stand next to Tylus, clenching his hand.

The baby was moving his arms feverishly, and his cheeks were flushed. But he'd learned, through the night, not to move the bandaged foot.

Imbry cut the scrap of cloth away with his bandage shears, wincing at the puffy, white-lipped gash. He snapped the pencil light out of its clip and took a good look into the wound.

It was dirty as sin, packed with some kind of herb mixture that was hopelessly embedded in the tissues. Cleaning it thoroughly was out of the question. Cursing softly, he did the best he could, not daring to try the anesthetic syrette in the kit. He had no idea of what even a human child's dosage might be.

He had to leave a lot of the poultice in the wound. Working as fast as he could, he spilled an envelope of antibiotics over the gash, slapped on a fresh bandage, and then stood up. Antipyretics were out. The boy'd have to have his fever. There was one gamble he had to take, but he was damned if he'd take any more. He held up the ampule of Antinfect.

"Universal Antitoxin" was etched into the glass. Well, it had better be.

He broke the seal and stabbed the tip of his hyposprayer through the diaphragm. He retracted carefully. It was a three cc ampule. About half of it ought to do. He watched the dial on the sprayer with fierce concentration, inching the knob around until it read "1.5," and yanking the tip out.

Muttering a prayer, he fired the Antinfect into the boy's leg. Then he sighed, re-packed his kit, and turned around.

"If I haven't killed him, he'll be all right." He gestured down at the bandage. "There's going to be a lot of stuff coming out of that wound. Let it come. Don't touch the bandage. I'll take

another look at it in a few hours. Meanwhile, let me know if he looks like he's getting worse." He smiled harshly. "And let me know if he's getting better, too."

Pia was looking at him with an awestruck expression on her face. Tylus's glance clung to the medkit and then traveled up to Imbry's eyes.

"You are a god," he said in a whisper. "You are more than a god. You are the god of all other gods."

"I know," Imbry growled. "For good and all now, even if the boy dies. I'm a god now no matter what I do." He strode out of the house and out across the village square, walking in short, vicious strides along the beach until he was out of sight of the village. He stood for a long time, looking out across the gray sea. And then, with a crooked twist to his lips and a beaten hopelessness in his eyes, he walked back into the village because there was nothing else he could do.

Lord knew where the hurricane had been born. Somewhere down the chain of islands--or past them--the mass of air had begun to whirl. Born out of the ocean, it spun over the water for hundreds of miles, marching toward the coast.

The surf below the village sprang into life. It lashed along the strand in frothing, growling columns, and the *lhoni* eggs washed out of their nests and rolled far down the slope of the beach before the waves picked them up again and crushed them against the stones and shells.

The trees tore the edges of their fronds against each other, and the broken ends flew away on the wind. The birds in the jungle began to huddle tightly into themselves.

"Your canoe," Iano said to Imbry as they stood in front of the head man's house.

Imbry shook his head. "It'll stand."

He watched the families taking their few essential belongings out of their houses and storing them inside the overturned canoes that had been brought high inland early in the afternoon.

"What about this storm? Is it liable to be bad?"

Iano shook his head noncommittally. "There're two or three bad ones every season."

Imbry grunted and looked out over the village square. Even if the storm mashed the houses flat, they'd be up again two days afterward. The sea and the jungle gave food, and the fronded trees gave shelter. He saw no reason why these people wanted gods in the first place.

He saw a commotion at the door of Tylus's house. Tylus and Pia stood in the doorway. Pia was holding the baby.

"Look! Hey! Look!" Tylus shouted. The other villagers turned, surprised.

"Hey! Come look at my baby! Come look at the boy Imbry made well!" But Tylus himself didn't follow his own advice. As the other villagers came running, forgetting the possessions piled beside the canoes, he broke through them and ran across the square to Imbry and Iano.

"He's fine! He stopped crying! His leg isn't hot any more, and we can touch it without hurting him!" Tylus shouted, looking up at Imbry.

Imbry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He smiled with an agonized twist of his mouth. "I thought I told you not to touch that foot."

"But he's *fine*, Imbry! He's even laughing!" Tylus was gesturing joyfully. "Imbry--"

"Yes?"

"Imbry, I want a gift."

"A gift?"

"Yes. I want you to give him your name. When his naming day comes, I want him to call himself The Beloved of Imbry."

My God, Imbry thought, I've done it! I've saddled them with the legend of myself. He looked down at Tylus. "Are you sure?" he asked, feeling the words come out of his tight throat.

"I would like it very much," Tylus answered with sudden quietness.

And there was nothing Imbry could say but, "All right. When his naming day comes, if you still want to."

Tylus nodded. Then, obviously, he realized he'd run out of things to say and do. With Imbry the ancestor, or Imbry the man-with-many-powerful-ancestors; with Imbry the demi-god, he could have found something else to talk about. But this was Imbry, the god of all gods, and that was different.

"Well...I have to be with Pia. Thank you." He threw Imbry one more grateful smile, and trotted back across the square, to where the other villagers were clustered around Pia, talking excitedly and often looking with shy smiles in Imbry's direction.

It was growing rapidly darker. Night was coming, and the hurricane was trudging westward with it. Imbry looked at Iano, with his wraparound plastered against his body by the force of the wind and his face in the darkness under the overhanging porch roof.

"What'll you do when the storm comes?" Imbry asked.

Iano gestured indefinitely. "Nothing, if it's a little one. If it's bad, we'll get close to the trees, on the side away from the wind."

"Do you think it looks like it'll get bad?"

Iano gestured in the same way. "Who knows?" he said, looking at Imbry.

Imbry looked at him steadily. "I'm only a man. I can't make it better or worse. I can't tell you what it's going to be. I'm only a man, no matter what Tylus and Pia think."

Iano gestured again. "There are men. I know that much because I am a man. There may be other men, who are our ancestors and our gods, who in their turn have gods. And those

gods may have greater gods. But I am a man, and I know what I see and what I am. Later, after I die and am an ancestor, I may know other men like myself, and call them men. But these people who are not yet ancestors--" He swept his arm in a gesture that encircled the village. "--these people will call me a god, if I choose to visit them.

"To Tylus and Pia--and to many others--you are the god of all gods. To myself...I don't know. Perhaps I am too near to being an ancestor not to think there may be other gods above you. But," he finished, "they are not my gods. They are yours. And to me you are more than a man."

The hurricane came with the night, and the sea was coldly phosphorescent as it battered at the shore. The wind screamed invisibly at the trees. The village square was scoured clean of sand and stones, and the houses were groaning.

The villagers sat on the ground, resting their backs against the thrashing trees.

Imbry couldn't accustom himself to the constant sway. He stood motionless beside the tree that sheltered Iano, using his pressors to brace himself. He knew the villagers were looking at him through the darkness, taking it as one more proof of what he was, but that made no difference any longer. He faced into the storm, feeling the cold sting of the wind.

Lindenhoff would be overjoyed. And Maguire would grin coldly. Coogan would count his money, and Petrick would drink a solitary toast to the helpless suckers he could make do anything he wanted.

And Imbry? He let the cold spray dash against his face and didn't bother to wipe it off. Imbry was ready to quit.

The universe was made the way it was, and there was no changing it, whether to suit his ideas of what men should be or not. The legendary heroes of the human race--the brave, the brilliant, selfless men who broke the constant trail for the rest of Mankind to follow--must have been a very different breed from what the stories said they were.

A house crashed over on the far side of the village, and crunched apart. He heard a woman moan in brief fear, but then her man must have quieted her, for there was no further sound from any of the dim figures huddled against the trees around him.

The storm rose higher. For a half hour, Imbry listened to the houses tearing down, and felt the spray in his face thicken until it was like rain. The phosphorescent wall of surf crept higher on the beach, until he could see it plainly; a tumbling, ghostly mass in among the trees nearest the beach. The wind became a solid wall, and he turned up the intensity on his pressors. He had no way of knowing whether the villagers were making any sound or not.

He felt a tug at his leg, and bent down, turning off his pressors. Iano was looking up at him, his face distorted by the wind, his hair standing away from one side of his head. Imbry closed one arm around the tree.

"What?" Imbry bellowed into the translator, and the translator tried to bellow into Iano's ear.

"It...very...very bad...very... rain...no rain..."

The translator struggled to get the message through to Imbry, but the wind tore it to tatters.

"Yes, it's bad," Imbry shouted. "What was that about rain?"

"Imbry... when ... rain...."

Clearly and distinctly, he heard a woman scream. There was a second's death for the wind. And then the rain and the sea came in among the trees together.

White, furious water tore at his legs and pushed around his waist. He gagged on salt. Coughing and choking, he tried to see what was happening to the villagers.

But he was cut off in a furious, pounding, sluicing mass of water pouring out of the sky at last, blind and isolated as he tried to find air to breathe. He felt it washing into his suit, filling its legs, weighing his feet down. He closed his helmet in a panic, spilling its water down over his head, and as he snapped it tight another wave raced through the trees to break far inland, and he lost his footing.

He tumbled over and over in the churning water, fumbling for his pressor controls. Finally he got to them, and snapped erect, with the field on full. The water broke against his faceplate, flew away, and he was left standing in a bubble of emptiness that exactly outlined the field. Sea water walled in from the ground to the height of his face, and the rain flooded it from above.

Blind inside his bubble, he waited for the morning.

He awoke to a dim light filtering through to him, and he looked up to see layer after layer of debris piled atop his bubble. It was still raining, but the solid cloudburst was over. There was still water on the ground, but it was only a few inches deep. He collapsed his field, and the pulped sticks and chips of wood fell in a shower on him. He threw back his helmet and looked around.

The water had carried him into the jungle at the extreme edge of the clearing where the village had stood, and from where he was he could see out to the heaving ocean.

The trees were splintered and bent. They lay across the clearing, pinning down a few slight bits of wreckage. But almost all traces of the village were gone. Where the canoes with their household possessions had lain in an anchored row, there was nothing left.

Only a small knot of villagers stood in the clearing. Imbry tried to count them; tried to compare them to the size of the crowd that had welcomed him into the village, and stopped. He came slowly forward, and the villagers shrank back. Iano stepped out to meet him, and, slowly, Tylus.

"Iano, I'm sorry," Imbry said in a dull voice, looking around the ravaged clearing again. If he'd had any idea the hurricane could possibly be that bad, he would have called the mother ship for help. Lindenhoff would have fired into the storm and disrupted it, to save his potential slaves.

"Why did this happen, Imbry?" Iano demanded. "Why was this done to us?"

Imbry shook his head. "I don't know. A storm--Nobody can blame anything."

Iano clenched his fists.

"I did not ask during the whole day beforehand, though I knew what would happen. I did not even ask in the beginning of the storm. But when I knew the rain must come; when the sea growled and the wind stopped, *then*, at last, I asked you to make the storm die. Imbry, you did nothing. You made yourself safe, and you did nothing. *Why was this done?*"

Iano's torso quivered with bunched muscles. His eyes blazed. "If you were who we believed you to be, if you made Tylus's boy well, why did you do this? *Why did you send the storm?*"

It was the final irony: apparently, if Iano had accepted Imbry as a man, he would have told him in advance how bad the storm was likely to be....

Imbry shook his head. "I'm not a god, Iano," he repeated dully. He looked at Tylus, who was standing pale and bitter-eyed behind Iano.

"Are they safe, Tylus?"

Tylus looked silently over Imbry's shoulder, and Imbry turned his head to follow his glance. He saw the paler shape crushed around the trunks of a tree, one arm still gripping the boy.

"I must make a canoe," Tylus said in a dead voice. "I'll go on a long journey-to-leave-the-sadness-behind. I'll go where there aren't any gods like you."

"Tylus!"

But Iano clutched Imbry's arm, and he had to turn back toward the head man.

"We'll all have to go. We can't ever stay here again." The grip tightened on Imbry's arm, and the suit automatically pressed it off. Iano jerked his arm away.

"The storm came because of you. It came to teach us something. We have learned it." Iano stepped back. "You're not a great god. You tricked us. You're a bad ancestor--you're sick--you have the touch of death in your hand."

"I never said I was a god." Imbry's voice was unsteady. "I told you I was only a man."

Tylus looked at him out of his dead eyes. "How can you possibly be a man like us? If you're not a god, then you're a demon."

Imbry's face twisted. "You wouldn't listen to me. It's not my fault you expected something I couldn't deliver. Is it my fault you couldn't let me be what I am?"

"We know what you are," Tylus said.

There wasn't anything Imbry could tell him. He slowly turned away from the two natives and began the long walk back to the sub-ship.

He finished checking the board and energized his starting motors. He waited for a minute, and threw in his atmospheric drive.

The rumble of jet throats shook through the hull, and throbbed in the control compartment. The ship broke free, and he retracted the landing jacks.

The throttles advanced, and Imbry fled into the stars.

He sat motionless for several minutes. The memory of Tylus's lifeless voice etched itself into the set of his jaw and the backs of his eyes. It seemed impossible that it wouldn't be there forever.

There was another thing to do. He clicked on his communicator.

"This is Imbry. Get me Lindenhoff."

"Check, Imbry. Stand by."

He lay in the piloting couch, waiting, and when the image of Lindenhoff's face built up on the screen, he couldn't quite meet its eyes.

"Yeah, Imbry?"

He forced himself to look directly into the screen. "I'm on my way in, Lindenhoff. I ran into a problem. I'm dictating a full report for the files, but I wanted to tell you first--and I think I've got the answer."

Lindenhoff grinned slowly. "Okay, Fred."

Lindenhoff was waiting for him as he berthed the subship aboard the *Sainte Marie*. Imbry climbed out and looked quietly at the man.

Lindenhoff chuckled. "You look exactly like one of our real veterans," he said. "A hot bath and a good meal'll take care of that." He chuckled again. "It will, too--it takes more than once around the track before this business starts getting you."

"So you figure I'll be staying on," Imbry said, feeling tired and older than he ever had in his life. "How do you know I didn't make a real mess of it, down there?"

Lindenhoff chuckled. "You made it back in one piece, didn't you? That's the criterion, Fred. I hate to say so, but it is. No mess can possibly be irretrievable if it doesn't kill the man who made it. Besides--you don't know enough to tell whether you made any mistakes or not."

Imbry grunted, thinking Lindenhoff couldn't possibly know how much of an idiot he felt like, and how much he had on his conscience.

"Well, let's get to this report of yours," Lindenhoff said.

Imbry nodded slowly. They walked off the *Sainte Marie's* flight decks into the labyrinth of steel decks below.

CHAPTER VI

It was three seasons after the storm, and Tylus was still on his journey. One day he came to a new island and ran his canoe up on the beach. Perhaps here he wouldn't find Pia and the nameless boy waiting for him in the palm groves.

He walked up the sand, and triggered the alarm without knowing it.

Aboard the mother ship, Imbry heard it go off and switched the tight-beam scanner on. The intercom speaker over his head broke into a crackle.

"Fred? You got that one?"

"Uh-huh, Lindy. Right here."

"Which set-up is it?"

"88 on the B grid. It's that atoll right in the middle of the prevailing wind belt."

"I've got to hand it to you, Fred. Those little traps of yours are working like a charm."

Imbry ran his hand over his face. He knew what was going to happen to that innocent native, whoever he was. He'd come out of it a man, ready to take on the job of helping his people climb upward, with a lot of his old ideas stripped away.

Imbry's mouth jerked sideways, in the habitual gesture that was etching a deep groove in the skin of his face.

But he wouldn't be happy while he was learning. It was good for him--but there was no way for him to know that until he'd learned.

"How many this time?" Lindenhoff asked. "Coogan tells me they could use a lot of new recruits in a hurry, in that city they're building up north."

"Just one canoe," Imbry said, looking at the image on the scanner. "Small one, at that. Afraid it's only one man, Lindy." He moved the picture a little. "Yeah. Just one." He focused the controls.

"It's him! Tylus! We've got Tylus!"

There was a short pause on the other end of the intercom circuit. Then Lindenhoff said: "Okay, okay. You've finally got your pet one. Now, don't muff things in the rush." He chuckled softly and switched off.

Imbry bent closer to the scanner, though there was no real necessity for it. From here on, the process was automatic, and as inevitable as an avalanche.

Imbry watched the protoplasmic robots on the island come hesitantly through the underbrush toward the beach.

On the island, Tylus stopped. There was a crackle in the shrubbery, and a small, diffident figure stepped out. Its expression was watchful, but friendly. It looked rather much like a man, except for its small size and the shade of its skin. Its eyes were intelligent. It looked trustful.

"Hello," Tylus said. "I'm Tylus."

The little native came forward. Others followed it, some more timid than the first, some smiling cordially. They kept casting glances at the magic tree-pod which could carry a man

over the sea.

"Hello," the little native answered in a soft, liquid voice. "Are you an ancestor ghost or a god ghost?"

And Tylus began learning about Imbry.

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