

Hybrid

1

Deep in the soil of the planet, rootlets tougher than steel wire probed among glassy sand grains, through packed veins of clay and layers of flimsy slate, sensing and discarding inert elements, seeking out and absorbing calcium, iron, sulphur, nitrogen.

Deeper still, a secondary system of roots clutched the massive face of the bedrock; sensitive tendrils monitored the minute trembling in the planetary crust, the rhythmic tidal pressures, the seasonal weight of ice, the footfalls of the wild creatures that hunted in the mile-wide shadow of the giant Yanda tree.

On the surface far above, the immense trunk, massive as a cliff, its vast girth anchored by mighty buttresses, reared up nine hundred yards above the prominence, spreading huge limbs in the white sunlight.

The tree was only remotely aware of the movement of air over the polished surfaces of innumerable leaves, the tingling exchange of molecules of water, carbon dioxide, oxygen. Automatically it reacted to the faint pressures of the wind, tensing slender twigs to hold each leaf at a constant angle to the radiation that struck down through the foliage complex.

The long days wore on. Air flowed in intricate patterns; radiation waxed and waned with the flow of vapor masses in the substratosphere; nutrient molecules moved along capillaries; the rocks groaned gently in the dark under the shaded slopes. In the invulnerability of its titanic mass, the tree dozed in a state of generalized low-level consciousness.

The sun moved westward. Its light, filtered through an increasing depth of atmosphere, was an ominous yellow now. Sinewy twigs rotated, following the source of energy. Somnolently, the tree retracted tender buds against the increasing cold, adjusted its rate of heat and moisture loss, its receptivity to radiation. As it slept, it dreamed of the long past, the years of free-wandering in the faunal stage, before the instinct to root and grow had driven it here. It remembered the grove of its youth, the patriarchal tree, the spore-brothers. . . .

It was dark now. The wind was rising. A powerful gust pressed against the ponderous obstacle of the tree; great thews of major branches creaked, resisting; chilled leaves curled tight against the smooth bark.

Deep underground, fibers hugged rock, transmitting data which were correlated with impressions from distant leaf surfaces, indicating that a major storm was brewing: There were ominous vibrations from the depth; relative humidity was rising, air pressure falling—

A pattern formed, signalling danger. The tree stirred; a tremor ran through the mighty branch system, shattering fragile frost crystals that had begun to form on shaded surfaces. Alertness stirred in the heart-brain, dissipating the euphoric dream-pattern. Reluctantly, long-dormant faculties came into play. The tree awoke.

Instantly, it assessed the situation. The storm was moving in off the sea—a major typhoon. It was too late for effective measures. Ignoring the pain of unaccustomed activity, the tree sent out new shock roots—cables three inches in diameter, strong as stranded steel—to grip the upreared rock slabs a hundred yards north of the taproot.

There was nothing more the tree could do. Impassively, it awaited the onslaught of the storm.

2

"That's a storm down there," Malpry said.

"Don't worry, we'll miss it." Gault fingered controls, eyes on dial faces.

"Pull up and make a new approach," Malpry said. "You and the Creep."

"Me and the Creep are getting tired of listening to you bitch, Mal."

"When we land, Malpry, I'll meet you outside," Pantelle put in. "I told you I don't like the name 'Creep.' "

"What, again?" Gault said. "You all healed up from the last time?"

"Not quite; I don't seem to heal very well in space."

"Permission denied, Pantelle," Gault said. "He's too big for you. Mal, leave him alone."

"I'll leave him alone," Malpry muttered. "I ought to dig a hole and leave him in it. . . ."

"Save your energy for down there," Gault said. "If we don't make a strike on this one, we've had it."

"Captain, may I go along on the field reconnaissance?" Pantelle asked. "My training in biology—"

"You better stay with the ship, Pantelle. And don't tinker. Just wait for us. We haven't got the strength to carry you back."

"That was an accident last time, Captain—"

"And the time before. Skip it, Pantelle. You mean well, but you've got two left feet and ten thumbs."

"I've been working on improving my coordination, Captain. I've been reading—"

The ship buffeted sharply as guidance vanes bit into atmosphere; Pantelle yelped.

"Oh-oh," he called. "I'm afraid I've opened up that left elbow again."

"Don't bleed on me, you clumsy slob," Malpry said.

"Quiet!" Gault said between his teeth. "I'm busy."

Pantelle fumbled a handkerchief in place over the cut. He would have to practice those relaxing exercises he had read about. And he would definitely start in weightlifting soon, and watching his diet. And he would be very careful this time and land at least one good one on Malpry, just as soon as they landed.

3

Even before the first outward signs of damage appeared, the tree knew that it had lost the battle against the typhoon. In the lull, as the eye of the storm passed over, it assessed the damage. There was no response from the northeast quadrant of the sensory network where rootlets had been torn from the rockface; the taproot itself seated now against pulverized stone. While the almost indestructible fiber of the Yanda tree had held firm, the granite had failed. The tree was doomed by its own mass.

Now, mercilessly, the storm struck again, thundering out of the southwest to assault the tree with blind ferocity. Shock cables snapped like gossamer, great slabs of rock groaned and parted, with detonations lost in the howl of the wind. In the trunk, pressures built, agonizingly.

Four hundred yards south of the taproot, a crack opened in the sodden slope, gaping wider. Wind-driven water poured in, softening the soil, loosening the grip of a million tiny rootlets. Now the major roots shifted, slipping. . . .

Far above, the majestic crown of the Yanda tree yielded imperceptibly to the irresistible torrent of air. The giant north buttress, forced against the underlying stone, shrieked as tortured cells collapsed, then burst with a shattering roar audible even above the storm. A great arc of earth to the south, uplifted by exposed roots, opened a gaping cavern.

Now the storm moved on, thundered down the slope trailing its retinue of tattered debris and driving rain. A last vengeful gust whipped branches in a final frenzy; then the victor was gone.

And on the devastated promontory, the stupendous mass of the ancient tree leaned with the resistless inertia of colliding moons to the accompaniment of a cannonade of parting sinews, falling with dreamlike grace.

And in the heart-brain of the tree, consciousness faded in the unendurable pain of destruction.

* * *

Pantelle climbed down from the open port, leaned against the ship to catch his breath. He was feeling weaker than he expected. Tough luck, being on short rations; this would set him back on getting started on his weightlifting program. And he didn't feel ready to take on Malpry yet. But just as soon as he had some fresh food and fresh air—

"These are safe to eat," Gault called, wiping the analyzer needle on his pants leg and thrusting it back into his hip pocket. He tossed two large red fruits to Pantelle.

"When you get through eating, Pantelle, you better get some water and swab down the inside. Malpry and I'll take a look around."

The two moved off. Pantelle sat on the springy grass and bit into the apple-sized sphere. The waxy texture, he thought, was reminiscent of avocado; the skin was tough and aromatic; possibly a natural cellulose acetate. There seemed to be no seeds. That being the case, the thing was not properly a fruit at all. It would be interesting to study the flora of this planet. As soon as he reached home, he would have to enroll in a course in E.T. botany. Possibly he would go to Heidelberg or Uppsala, attend live lectures by eminent scholars. He would have a cosy little apartment—two rooms would do—in the old part of town, and in the evening he would have friends in for discussions over a bottle of wine—

However, this wasn't getting the job done. There was a glint of water across the slope. Pantelle finished his fruit, gathered his buckets, and set out.

4

"Why do we want to wear ourselves out?" Malpry said.

"We need the exercise," Gault told him. "It'll be four months before we get another chance."

"What are we, tourists, we got to see the sights?" Malpry stopped, leaned against a boulder, panting. He stared upward at the crater and the pattern of uptilted roots and beyond at the forestlike spread of the branches of the fallen tree.

"Makes our sequoias look like dandelions," Gault said. "It must have been the storm, the one we dodged coming in."

"So what?"

"A thing that big—it kind of does something to you."

"Any money in it?" Malpry sneered.

Gault looked at him sourly. "Yeah, you got a point there. Let's go."

"I don't like leaving the Creep back there with the ship."

Gault looked at Malpry. "Why don't you lay off the kid?"

"I don't like loonies."

"Don't kid me, Malpry. Pantelle is highly intelligent—in his own way. Maybe that's what you can't forgive."

"He gives me the creeps."

"He's a nice-looking kid; he means well—"

"Yeah," Malpry said. "Maybe he means well—but it's not enough . . ."

From the delirium of concussion, consciousness returned slowly to the tree.

Random signals penetrated the background clatter of shadowy impulses from maimed sensors—

"Air pressure zero; falling . . . air pressure 112, rising . . . air pressure negative . . .

"Major tremor radiating from— Major tremor radiating from—

"Temperature 171 degrees, temperature -40 degrees, temperature 26 degrees. . . .

"Intense radiation in the blue only . . . red only . . . ultraviolet . . .

"Relative humidity infinite . . . wind from north-northeast, velocity infinite . . . wind rising vertically, velocity infinite . . . wind from east, west . . ."

Decisively, the tree blanked off the yammering nerve-trunks, narrowing its attention to the immediate status-concept. A brief assessment sufficed to reveal the extent of its ruin.

There was no reason, it saw, to seek extended personal survival. However, certain immediate measures were necessary to gain time for emergency spore propagation. At once, the tree-mind triggered the survival syndrome. Capillaries spasmed, forcing vital juices to the brain. Synaptic helices dilated, heightening neural conductivity. Cautiously, awareness was extended to the system of major neural fibers, then to individual filaments and interweaving capillaries.

Here was the turbulence of air molecules colliding with ruptured tissues; there, the wave pattern of light impinging on exposed surfaces. Microscopic filaments contracted, cutting off fluid loss through the massive wounds.

Now the tree-mind fine-tuned its concentration, scanning the infinitely patterned cell matrix. Here, amid confusion, there was order in the incessant restless movement of particles, the flow of fluids, the convoluted intricacy of the alpha-spiral. Delicately, the tree-mind readjusted the function-mosaic, in preparation for spore generation.

Malpry stopped, shaded his eyes. A tall, thin figure stood in the shade of the uptilted root mass on the ridge.

"Looks like we headed back at the right time," Malpry said.

"Damn," Gault said. He hurried forward. Pantelle came to meet him.

"I told you to stay with the ship, Pantelle!"

"I finished my job, Captain. You didn't say—"

"OK, OK. Is anything wrong?"

"No sir, but I've just remembered something—"

"Later, Pantelle. Let's get back to the ship. We've got work to do."

"Captain, do you know what this is?" Pantelle gestured toward the gigantic fallen tree.

"Sure; it's a tree." He turned to Malpry. "Let's—"

"Yes, but what kind?"

"Beats me. I'm no botanist."

"Captain, this is a rare species. In fact, it's supposed to be extinct. Have you ever heard of the Yanda?"

"No. Yes—" Gault looked at Pantelle. "Is that what this is?"

"I'm sure of it. Captain, this is a very valuable find—"

"You mean it's worth money?" Malpry was looking at Gault.

"I don't know. What's the story, Pantelle?"

"An intelligent race, with an early animal phase; later, they root, become fixed, functioning as a plant. Nature's way of achieving the active competition necessary for natural selection, then the advantage of conscious selection of a rooting site."

"How do we make money on it?"

Pantelle looked up at the looming wall of the fallen trunk, curving away among the jumble of shattered branches, a hundred feet, two hundred, more, in diameter. The bark was smooth, almost black. The leaves, a foot in diameter, were glossy, varicolored.

"This great tree—" Pantelle began, emotionally.

Malpry stooped, picked up a fragment from a burst root.

"This great club," he said, "to knock your lousy brains out with—"

"Shut up, Mal," Gault put in.

"It lived, roamed the planet perhaps ten thousand years ago, in the young faunal stage," Pantelle told them. "Then instinct drove it here, to fulfill the cycle of nature. Picture this ancient champion, looking for the first time out across the valley, saying his last farewells as the metamorphosis begins."

"Nuts," Malpry said.

"His was the fate of all males of his kind who lived too long, to stand forever on some height of land, to remember through unending ages the brief glory of youth, himself his own heroic monument."

"Where do you get all that crud?" Malpry said.

"Here was the place," Pantelle said. "Here all his journeys ended."

"OK, Pantelle," Gault continued. "Very moving. You said something about this thing being valuable."

"Captain, this tree is still alive, for a while at least. Even after the heart is dead, the appearance of life will persevere. A mantle of new shoots will

leaf out to shroud the cadaver, tiny atavistic plantlets without connection to the brain, parasitic to the corpse, identical to the ancestral stock from which the giants sprang, symbolizing the extinction of a hundred million years of evolution."

"Get to the point."

"We can take cuttings from the heart of the tree. I have a book—it gives the details of the anatomy—we can keep the tissues alive. Back in civilization, we can regenerate the tree—brain and all. It will take time—"

"Suppose we sell the cuttings."

"Yes, any university would pay well—"

"How long will it take?"

"Not long. We can cut in carefully with narrow-aperture blasters—"

"OK. Get your books, Pantelle. We'll give it a try."

Apparently, the Yanda mind observed, a very long time had elapsed since spore propagation had last been stimulated by the proximity of a host-creature. Withdrawn into introverted dreams, the tree had taken no conscious notice as the whispering contact with the spore-brothers faded and the host-creatures dwindled away. Now, eidetically, the stored impressions sprang into clarity. It was apparent that no female would pass this way again. The Yanda kind was gone. The fever of instinct that had motivated the elaboration of the mechanisms of emergency propagation had burned itself out futilely. The new pattern of stalked oculi gazed unfocused at an empty vista of gnarled jungle growth; the myriad filaments of the transfer nexus coiled quiescent, the ranked grasping members that would have brought a host-creature near drooped unused, the dran-sacs brimmed needlessly; no further action was indicated. Now death would come in due course.

Somewhere a drumming began, a gross tremor sensed through the dead mass. It ceased, began again, went on and on. It was of no importance, but a faint curiosity led the tree to extend a sensory filament, tap the abandoned nerve-trunk—

Agony!

Convulsively, the tree-mind recoiled, severing the contact. An impression of smouldering destruction, impossible thermal activity. . . .

Disoriented, the tree-mind considered the implications of the searing pain. A freak of damaged sense organs? A phantom impulse from destroyed nerves?

No. The impact had been traumatic, but the data were there. The tree-mind reexamined each synaptic vibration, reconstructing the experience. In a moment, the meaning was clear: a fire was cutting deep into the body of the tree.

Working hastily, the tree assembled a barrier of incombustible molecules in

the path of the fire, waited. The heat reached the barrier, hesitated—and the barrier flashed into incandescence.

A thicker wall was necessary.

The tree applied all of its waning vitality to the task. The shield grew, matched the pace of the fire, curved out to intercept—

And wavered, halted. The energy demand was too great. Starved muscular conduits cramped. Blackness closed over the disintegrating consciousness. Time passed.

Sluggishly, clarity returned. Now the fire would advance unchecked. Soon it would bypass the aborted defenses, advance to consume the heart-brain itself. There was no other countermeasure remaining. It was unfortunate, since propagation had not been consummated, but unavoidable. Calmly the tree awaited its destruction by fire.

* * *

Pantelle put the blaster down, sat on the grass and wiped tarry soot from his face.

"What killed 'em off?" Malpry asked suddenly.

Pantelle looked at him.

"Spoilers," he said.

"What's that?"

"They killed them to get the dran. They covered up by pretending the Yanda were a menace, but it was the dran they were after."

"Don't you ever talk plain?"

"Malpry, did I ever tell you I don't like you?"

Malpry spat, "What's with this dran?"

"The Yanda have a very strange reproductive cycle. In an emergency, the spores released by the male tree can be implanted in almost any warmblooded creature and carried in the body for an indefinite length of time. When the host animal mates, the dormant spores come into play. The offspring appears perfectly normal; in fact, the spores step in and correct any defects in the individual, repair injuries, fight disease, and so on; and the life-span is extended; but eventually, the creature goes through the metamorphosis; roots, and becomes a regular male Yanda tree—instead of dying of old age."

"You talk too much. What's this dran?"

"The tree releases an hypnotic gas to attract host animals. In concentrated form, it's a potent narcotic. That's dran. They killed the trees to get it. The excuse was that the Yanda could make humans give birth to monsters. That was nonsense. But they sold the dran in the black market for fabulous

amounts."

"How do you get the dran?"

Pantelle looked at Malpry. "Why do you want to know?"

Malpry looked at the book which lay on the grass.

"It's in that, ain't it?"

"Never mind that. Gault's orders were to help me get the heart-cuttings."

"He didn't know about the dran."

"Taking the dran will kill the specimen. You can't—"

Malpry stepped toward the book. Pantelle jumped toward him, swung a haymaker, missed. Malpry knocked him spinning.

"Don't touch me, Creep," he spat, and wiped his fist on his pants leg.

Pantelle lay stunned. Malpry thumbed the book, found what he wanted. After ten minutes, he dropped the book, picked up the blaster, and moved off.

* * *

Malpry cursed the heat, wiping at his face. A many-legged insect scuttled away before him. Underfoot, something furtive rustled. One good thing: no animals in this damned woods bigger than a mouse. A hell of a place. He'd have to watch his step; it wouldn't do to get lost in here. . . .

The velvety wall of the half-buried trunk loomed, as dense growth gave way suddenly to a clear stretch. Malpry stopped, breathing hard. He got out his sodden handkerchief, staring up at the black wall. A ring of dead-white stalks sprouted from the dead tree. Nearby were other growths, like snarls of wiry black seaweed, and ropy-looking things, dangling—

Malpry backed away, snarling. Some crawling disease, some kind of filthy fungus— But—

Malpry stopped. Maybe this was what he was looking for. Sure, this was what those pictures in the book showed. This was where the dran was. But he didn't know it would look like some creeping—

"Stop, Malpry!" Pantelle's voice spoke sharply, near at hand.

Malpry whirled.

"Don't be so . . . stupid . . ." Pantelle was gasping for breath. There was a purpling bruise on his jaw. "Let me rest . . . Talk to you . . ."

"Die, you gutter-scraping. Have a nice long rest. But don't muck with me." Malpry turned his back on Pantelle, unlimbered the blaster.

Pantelle grabbed up a broken limb, slammed it across Malpry's head. The rotten wood snapped. Malpry staggered, recovered. He turned, his face

livid; a trickle of blood ran down.

"All right, Creep," he grated. Pantelle came to him, swung a whistling right, his arm bent awkwardly. Malpry lunged, and Pantelle's elbow caught him across the jaw. His eyes went glassy, he sagged, fell to his hands and knees. Pantelle laughed aloud.

Malpry shook his head, breathing hoarsely, got to his feet. Pantelle took aim and hit him solidly on the jaw. The blow seemed to clear Malpry's head. He slapped a second punch aside, knocked Pantelle full-length with a backhanded blow. He dragged Pantelle to his feet, swung a hard left and right. Pantelle bounced, lay still. Malpry stood over him, rubbing his jaw.

He stirred Pantelle with his foot. Maybe the Creep was dead. Laying his creeping hands on Malpry. Gault wouldn't like it, but the Creep had started it. Sneaked up and hit him from behind. He had the mark to prove it. Anyway, the news about the dran would cheer Gault up. Better go get Gault up here. Then they could cut the dran out and get away from this creeping planet. Let the Creep bleed.

Malpry turned back toward the ship, leaving Pantelle huddled beside the fallen tree.

* * *

The Yanda craned external oculi to study the fallen creature, which had now apparently entered a dormant phase. A red exudation oozed from orifices at the upper end, and from what appeared to be breaks in the epidermis. It was a strange creature, bearing some superficial resemblance to the familiar host-creatures. Its antics, and those of the other, were curious indeed. Perhaps they were male and female, and the encounter had been a mating. Possibly this hibernation was a normal process, preparatory to rooting. If only it were not so alien, it might serve as a carrier. . . .

The surface of the fallen creature heaved, a limb twitched. Apparently it was on the verge of reviving. Soon, it would scurry away, and be seen no more. It would be wise to make a quick examination; if the creature should prove suitable as a host . . .

Quickly the tree elaborated a complex of tiny filaments, touched the still figure tentatively, then penetrated the surprisingly soft surface layer, seeking out nerve fibers. A trickle of impressions flowed in, indecipherable. The tree put forth a major sensory tendril, divided and subdivided it into fibers only a few atoms in diameter, fanned them out through the unconscious man, tracing the spinal column, entering the brain—

Here was a wonder of complexity, an unbelievable profusion of connections. This was a center capable of the highest intellectual functions—unheard of in a host creature. Curious, the tree-mind probed deeper, attuning itself, scanning through a kaleidoscope of impressions, buried memories, gaudy symbolisms.

Never had the Yanda-mind encountered the hyper-intellectual processes of emotion. It pressed on, deeper into the phantasmagoria of dreams—

Color, laughter, and clash-of-arms. Banners rippling in the sun, chords of a remote music, and night-blooming flowers. Abstractions of incredible beauty mingled with vivid conceptualizations of glory. Fascinated, the tree-mind explored Pantelle's secret romantic dreams of fulfillment—

And abruptly, encountered the alien mind.

There was a moment of utter stillness as the two minds assessed each other.

"You are dying," the alien mind spoke.

"Yes. And you are trapped in a sickly host-creature. Why did you not select a stronger host?"

"I . . . originated here. I . . . we . . . are one."

"Why do you not strengthen this host?"

"How?"

The Yanda-mind paused. "You occupy only a corner of the brain. You do not use your powers?"

"I am a segment . . ." The alien mind paused, confused. "I am conceptualized by the monitor-mind as the subconscious."

"What is the monitor-mind?"

"It is the totality of the personality. It is above the conscious, directing. . . ."

"This is a brain of great power, yet great masses of cells are unused. Why are major trunks aborted as they are?"

"I do not know."

There was no more information to be gained here. This was an alien brain indeed, housing independent, even antagonistic minds.

The Yanda-mind broke contact, tuned.

There was a blast of mind-force, overwhelming. The Yanda-mind reeled, groped for orientation as the impact from within its own mental terrain shook its ego-gestalt.

YOU ARE NOT ONE OF MY MINDS, it realized.

"You are the monitor-mind?" gasped the Yanda.

YES. WHAT ARE YOU?

The Yanda-mind projected its self-concept.

STRANGE, VERY STRANGE. YOU HAVE USEFUL SKILLS, I PERCEIVE. TEACH THEM TO ME.

The Yanda-mind squirmed under the torrent of thought impulses.

"Reduce your volume," it pled. "You will destroy me."

I WILL TRY. TEACH ME THAT TRICK OF MANIPULATING MOLECULES.

The Yanda cringed under the booming of the alien mind. What an instrument! A fantastic anomaly, a mind such as this linked to this fragile host-creature—and unable even to use its powers. But it would be a matter of the greatest simplicity to make the necessary corrections, rebuild and toughen the host, eliminate the defects—

TEACH ME, YANDA-MIND!

"Alien, I die soon," the Yanda gasped. "But I will teach you. There is, however, a condition. . . ."

The two minds conferred, and reached agreement. At once, the Yanda mind initiated sweeping rearrangements at the submolecular level.

First, cell regeneration, stitching up the open lesions on arm and head. Antibodies were modified in vast numbers, flushed through the system. Parasites died.

"Maintain this process," the tree-mind directed.

Now, the muscular layers; surely they were inadequate. The very structure of the cells was flimsy. The Yanda devised the necessary improvements, tapped the hulk of its cast-off body for materials, reinforced the musculature. Now for the skeletal members. . . .

The tree visualized the articulation of the ambulatory mechanism, considered for a moment the substitution of a more practical tentacular concept—

There was little time. Better to retain the stony bodies, merely strengthen them, using metallo-vegetable fibers. The air sacs, too. And the heart. They would have lasted no time at all as they were.

"Observe, alien, thus, and thus . . ."

I SEE. IT IS A CLEVER TRICK.

The Yanda worked over the body of Pantelle, adjusting, correcting, reinforcing, discarding a useless appendix or tonsil here, adding a reserve air storage unit there. A vestigial eye deep in the brain was refurbished for sensitivity at the radio frequencies, linked with controls. The spine was deftly fused at the base; additional mesenteries were added for intestinal support. Following the basic pattern laid down in the genes, the tree-mind rebuilt the body.

When the process was finished, and the alien mind absorbed the techniques demonstrated, the Yanda-mind paused and announced:

"It is finished."

I AM READY TO REESTABLISH THE CONSCIOUS MIND IN OVERT CONTROL.

"Remember your promise."

I WILL REMEMBER.

The Yanda-mind began its withdrawal. Troublesome instinct was served. Now it could rest until the end.

WAIT. I'VE GOT A BETTER IDEA, YANDA. . . .

* * *

"Two weeks down and fourteen to go," Gault said. "Why don't you break down and tell me what happened back there?"

"How's Malpry?" Pantelle asked.

"He's all right. Broken bones do knit, and you only broke a few."

"The book was wrong about the Yanda spores," Pantelle said. "They don't have the power in themselves to reconstruct the host-creature—"

"The what?"

"The infected animal; the health and life-span of the host is improved. But the improvement is made by the tree, at the time of propagation, to insure a good chance for the spores."

"You mean you—"

"We made a deal. The Yanda gave me this—" Pantelle pressed a thumb against the steel bulkhead. The metal yielded.

"—and a few other tricks. In return, I'm host to the Yanda spores."

Gault moved away from Pantelle.

"Doesn't that bother you? Parasites—"

"It's an equitable deal. The spores are microscopic, and completely dormant until the proper conditions develop."

"Yeah, but you said yourself this vegetable brain has worked on your mind."

"It merely erased all the scars of traumatic experience, corrected deficiencies, taught me how to use what I have."

"How about teaching me?"

"Sorry, Gault." Pantelle shook his head "Impossible."

Gault considered Pantelle's remarks.

"What about these 'proper conditions' for the spores?" he asked suddenly.

"You wake up and find yourself sprouting some morning?"

"Well," Pantelle coughed. "That's where my part of the deal comes in. A host-creature transmits the spores through the normal mating process. The offspring gets good health and a long life before the metamorphosis. That's

not so bad—to live a hundred years, and then pick a spot to root and grow and watch the seasons turn. . . ."

Gault considered. "A man does get tired," he said. "I know a spot, where you can look for miles out across the Pacific. . . ."

"So I've promised to be very active," Pantelle said. "It will take a lot of my time, but I intend to discharge my obligation to the fullest."

Did you hear that, Yanda? Pantelle asked silently.

"I did," came the reply from the unused corner he had assigned to the Yanda ego-pattern. "Our next thousand years should be very interesting."