

# Rat Race

Frank Herbert, 1955

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In the nine years it took Welby Lewis to become chief of criminal investigation for Sheriff John Czernak, he came to look on police work as something like solving jigsaw puzzles. It was a routine of putting pieces together into a recognizable picture. He was not prepared to have his cynical police-peopled world transformed into a situation out of H. G. Wells or Charles Fort.

When Lewis said "alien" he meant non-American, not extraterrestrial. Oh, he knew a BEM was a bug-eyed monster; he read some science fiction. But that was just the point -- such situations were *fiction*, not to be encountered in police routine. And certainly unexpected at a mortuary. The Johnson-Tule Mortuary, to be exact.

Lewis checked in at his desk in the sheriff's office at five minutes to eight of a Tuesday morning. He was a man of low forehead, thin pinched-in Welsh face, black hair. His eyes were like two pieces of roving green jade glinting beneath bushy brows.

The office, a room of high ceilings and stained plaster walls was in a first floor corner of the County Building at Banbury. Beneath one tall window of the room was a cast-iron radiator. Beside the window hung a calendar picture of a girl wearing only a string of pearls.

There were two desks facing each other across an aisle which led from the hall door to the radiator. The desk on the left belonged to Joe Welch, the night man. Lewis occupied the one on the right, a cigarette-scarred vintage piece which had stood in this room more than thirty years.

Lewis stopped at die front of his desk, leafed through the papers in the *Incoming* basket, looked up as Sheriff Czernak entered. The sheriff, a fat man with wide Slavic features and a complexion like bread crust, grunted as he eased himself into the chair under the calendar. He pushed a brown felt hat to the back of his head, exposing a bald dome.

Lewis said, "Hi, John. How's the wife?" He dropped the papers back into the basket

"Her sciatica's better this week," said the sheriff. "I came in to tell you to skip that burglary report in the basket. A city prowler picked up two punks with the stuff early this morning. We're sending 'em over to juvenile court"

"They'll never learn," said Lewis.

"Got one little chore for you," said the sheriff. "Otherwise everything's quiet. Maybe we'll get a chance to catch up on our paper work." He hoisted himself out of the chair. "Doc Bellarmine did the autopsy on that Cerino woman, but he left a bottle of stomach washings at the Johnson-Tule Mortuary. Could you pick up the bottle and run it out to the county hospital?"

"Sure," said Lewis. "But I'll bet her death was natural causes. She was a known alcoholic. All those bottles in her shack."

"Prob'ly," said the sheriff. He stopped in front of Lewis' desk, glanced up at the calendar art. "Some dish."

Lewis grinned. "When I find a gal like that I'm going to get married," he said.

"You do that," said the sheriff. He ambled out of the office.

It was almost 8:30 when Lewis cruised past the mortuary in his county car and failed to find a parking place in the block. At the next corner, Cove Street, he turned right and went up the alley, parking on the concrete apron to the mortuary garage.

A southwest wind which had been threatening storm all night kicked up a damp gust as he stepped from the car. Lewis glanced up at the gray sky, but left his raincoat over the back of the seat. He went down the narrow walk beside the garage, found the back door of the mortuary ajar. Inside was a hallway and a row of three metal tanks, the tall kind welders use for oxygen and acetylene gas. Lewis glanced at them, wondered what a mortuary did with that type of equipment, shrugged the question aside. At the other end of the hall the door opened into a carpeted foyer which smelled of musky flowers. A door at the left bore a brass plate labeled OFFICE. Lewis crossed the foyer, entered the room.

Behind a glass-topped desk in the corner sat a tall blond individual type with clear Nordic features. An oak frame on the wall behind him held a colored photograph of Mount Lassen labeled PEACE on an embossed nameplate. An official burial form -- partly filled in -- was on the desk in front of the man. The left corner of the desk held a brass cup in which sat a metal ball. The ball emitted a hissing noise as Lewis approached and he breathed in the heavy floral scent of the foyer.

The man behind the desk got to his feet, put a pen across the burial form. Lewis recognized him -- Johnson, half owner of the mortuary.

"May I help you?" asked the mortician. Lewis explained his errand.

Johnson brought a small bottle from a desk drawer, passed it across to Lewis, then looked at the deputy with a puzzled frown. "How'd you get in?" asked the mortician. "I didn't hear the front door chimes."

The deputy shoved the bottle into a side pocket of his coat. "I parked in the alley and came in the back way," he said. "The street out front is full of Odd Fellows cars."

"Odd Fellows?" Johnson came around the desk.

"Paper said they were having some kind of rummage sale today," said Lewis. He ducked his head to look under the shade on the front window. "I guess those are Odd Fellows cars. That's the hall across the street."

An ornamental shrub on the mortuary front lawn bent before the wind and a spattering of rain drummed against the window. Lewis straightened. "Left my raincoat in the car," he said. "I'll just duck out the way I came."

Johnson moved to his office door. "Two of our attendants are due back now on a call," he said. "They -- "

"I've seen a stiff before," said Lewis. He stepped past Johnson, headed for the door to the rear hall.

Johnson's hand caught the deputy's shoulder. "I must insist you go out the front," said the mortician.

Lewis stopped, his mind setting up a battery of questions. "It's raining out," he said. "I'll get all wet."

"I'm sorry," said Johnson.

Another man might have shrugged and complied with Johnson's request, but

Welby Lewis was the son of the late Proctor Lewis, who had been three times president of the Banbury County Sherlock Holmes Round Table. Welby had cut his teeth on *logical deduction* and the logic of this situation escaped him. He reviewed his memory of the hallway. Empty except for those tanks near the back door.

"What do you keep in those metal tanks?" he asked.

The mortician's hand tightened on his shoulder and Lewis felt himself turned toward the front door. "Just embalming fluid," said Johnson. "That's the way it's delivered."

"Oh." Lewis looked up at Johnson's tightly drawn features, pulled away from the restraining hand and went out the front door. Rain was driving down and he ran around the side of the mortuary to his car, jumping in, slammed the door and sat down to wait. At 9:28 A.M. by his wrist watch an assistant mortician came out, opened the garage doors. Lewis leaned across the front seat, rolled down his right window.

"You'll have to move your car," said the assistant. "We're going out on a call."

"When are the other fellows coming back?" asked Lewis.

The mortician stopped halfway inside the garage. "What other fellows?" he asked.

"The ones who went out on that call this morning."

"Must be some other mortuary," said the assistant. "This is our first call today."

Thanks," said Lewis. He rolled up his window, started the car and drove to the county hospital. The battery of unanswered questions churned in his mind. Foremost was -- *Why did Johnson lie to keep me from going out the back way?*

At the hospital he delivered the bottle to the pathology lab, found a pay booth and called the Banbury Mortuary. An attendant answered and Lewis said, "I want to settle a bet. Could you tell me how embalming fluid is delivered to mortuaries?"

"We buy it by the case in concentrated form," said the mortician. "Twenty-four glass bottles to the case, sixteen ounces to the bottle. It contains red or orange dye to give a lifelike appearance. Our particular brand smells somewhat like strawberry soda. There is nothing offensive about it. We guarantee that the lifelike -- "

"I just wanted to know how it came," said Lewis. "You're sure it's never delivered in metal tanks?"

"Good heavens, no!" said the man. "It'd corrode them!"

"Thanks," said Lewis and hung up softly. In his mind was the Holmesian observation: *If a man lies about an apparently inconsequential thing, then that thing is not inconsequential.*

He stepped out of the booth and bumped into Dr. Bellarmine, the autopsy surgeon. The doctor was a tall, knobby character with gray hair, sun-lamp tan and blue eyes as cutting as two scalpels.

"Oh, there you are, Lewis," he said. "They told me you were down this way. We found enough alcohol in that Cerino woman to kill three people. We'll check the stomach washings, too, but I doubt they'll add anything."

"Cerino woman?" asked Lewis.

"The old alcoholic you found in that shack by the roundhouse," said Bellarmine. "You losing your memory?"

"Oh ... oh, certainly," said Lewis. "I was just thinking of something else. Thanks, Doc." He brushed past the surgeon. "Gotta go now," he muttered.

Back at his office Lewis sat on a corner of his desk, pulled the telephone to him and dialed the Johnson-Tule Mortuary. An unfamiliar masculine voice answered. Lewis said, "Do you do cremations at your mortuary?"

"Not at our mortuary," said the masculine voice, "but we have an arrangement with Rose Lawn Memorial Crematorium. Would you care to stop by and discuss your problem?"

"Not right now, thank you," said Lewis, and replaced the phone on its hook. He checked off another question in his mind -- the possibility that the tanks held gas for a crematorium. *What the devil's in those tanks?* he asked himself. "Somebody die?" The voice came from the doorway, breaking into Lewis' reverie. The deputy turned, saw Sheriff Czernak.

"No," said Lewis. "I've just got a puzzle." He went around the desk to his chair, sat down.

"Doc Bellarmine say anything about the Cerino dame?" asked the sheriff. He came into the room, eased himself into the chair beneath the calendar art.

"Alcoholism," said Lewis. "Like I said." He leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk and stared at a stained spot on the ceiling.

"What's niggling you?" asked the sheriff. "You look like a guy trying to solve a conundrum."

"I am," said Lewis and told him about the incident at the mortuary.

Czernak took off his hat, scratched his bald head. "It don't sound like much to me, Welby. In all probability there's a very simple explanation."

"I don't think so," said Lewis.

"Why not?"

Lewis shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't think so. Something about that mortuary doesn't ring true."

"What you think's in them tanks?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know," said Lewis.

The sheriff seated his hat firmly on his head. "Anybody else I'd tell 'em forget it," he said. "But you -- I dunno. I seen you pull too many rabbits out of the hat. Sometimes I think you're a freak an' see inside people."

"I am a freak," said Lewis. He dropped his feet to the floor, pulled a sketch pad to him and began doodling.

"Yeah, I can see you got six heads," said the sheriff.

"No, really," said Lewis. "My heart's on the right side of my chest."

"I hadn't noticed," said the sheriff. "But now, you point it out to me -- "

"Freak," said Lewis. "That's what I felt looking at that mortician. Like he was some kind of a creepy freak."

He pushed the scratch pad away from him. It bore a square broken into tiny segments by zigzag lines. Like a jigsaw puzzle.

"Was he a freak?"

Lewis shook his head. "Not that I could see."

Czernak pushed himself out of his chair. "Tell you what," he said. "It's quiet today. Why'ncha nose around a little?"

"Who can I have to help me?" asked Lewis.

"Barney Keeler'll be back in about a half hour," said Czernak. "He's deliverin' a subpoena for Judge Gordon."

"O.K.," said Lewis. "When he gets back tell him to go over to the Odd Fellows Hall and go in the back way without attracting too much attention. I want him to go up to that tower room and keep watch on the front of the mortuary, note down everybody who enters or leaves and watch for those tanks. If the tanks go out, he's to tail the carrier and find out where they go."

"What're you gonna do?" asked the sheriff.

"Find a place where I can keep my eye on the back entrance. I'll call in when I get set." Lewis hooked a thumb toward the desk across from his. "When Joe Welch comes on, send him over to spell me."

"Right," said Czernak. "I still think maybe you're coon-doggin' it up an empty tree."

"Maybe I am," said Lewis. "But something shady about a mortuary gives my imagination the jumps. I keep thinking of how easy it could be for a mortician to get rid of an inconvenient corpse."

"Stuff it in one of them tanks, maybe?" asked the sheriff.

"No. They weren't big enough." Lewis shook his head. "I just don't like the idea of the guy lying to me."

It was shortly after 10:30 A.M. when Lewis found what he needed -- a doctor's office in the rear of a building across the alley and two doors up from the mortuary garage. The doctor had three examining rooms on the third floor, the rear room looking down on the mortuary back yard. Lewis swore the doctor and his nurse to secrecy, set himself up in the back room with a pair of field glasses.

At noon he sent the nurse out for a hamburger and glass of milk for his lunch, had her watch the mortuary yard while he called his office and told the day radio operator where he was.

The doctor came into the back room at five o'clock, gave Lewis an extra set of keys for the office, asked him to be certain the door was locked when he left. Again Lewis warned the doctor against saying anything about the watch on the mortuary, stared the man down when it appeared he was about to ask questions. The doctor turned, left the room. Presently, a door closed solidly. The office was silent.

At about 7:30 it became too dark to distinguish clearly anything that might happen in the mortuary back yard. Lewis considered moving to a position in the alley, but two floodlights above the yard suddenly flashed on and the amber glow of a night light came from the window in the back door.

Joe Welch pounded on the door of the doctor's office at 8:20. Lewis admitted him, hurried back to the window with Welch following. The other deputy was a tall, nervous chain-smoker with a perpetual squint, a voice like a bassoon. He moved to a position beside Lewis at the window, said, "What's doing? Sheriff John said something about some acetylene tanks."

"It may be nothing at all," said Lewis. "But I've a feeling we're onto something

big." In a few short sentences he explained about his encounter with the mortician that ' morning.

"Don't sound exciting to me," said Welch. "What you expecting to find in those tanks?"

"I wish I knew," said Lewis.

Welch went into the corner of the darkened room, lighted a cigarette, returned. "Why don't you just ask this Johnson?"

"That's the point," said Lewis. "I did ask him and he lied to me. That's why I'm suspicious. I've been hoping they'd take those tanks out and we could trail them to Wherever they go. Get our answer that way."

"Why're you so sure it's the tanks he didn't want you to see?" asked Welch.

"That was a funny hallway," said Lewis. "Door at each end, none along the sides. Only things in it were those tanks."

"Well, those tanks might already be gone," said Welch. "You didn't get on this end until about 10:30 you said and Keeler wasn't on the front until about eleven. They could've been taken out then if they're so all-fired important."

"I've had the same thought," said Lewis. "But I don't think they have. I'm going out to grab a bite to eat now, then I'm going down in the alley for a closer look."

"You won't get very close with all them lights on the yard," said Welch.

Lewis pointed to the garage. "If you look close you can see a space along the other side; in the shadow there. The light's on in the back hall. Ill try to get close enough for a look through the window hi that rear door. They're tall tanks. I should be able to see them."

"And if they've been moved some place else in the building?" asked Welch.

"Then I'll have to go in and brace Johnson for a showdown," said Lewis. "Maybe I should've done that in the first place, but this is a screwy situation. I just don't like a mystery in a mortuary."

"Sounds like the title of a detective story," said Welch. " 'Mystery In a Mortuary.' "

Welch sniffed. "There's already death inside there," he said. "This could be something mighty unpleasant."

Welch lighted a new cigarette from the coal of the one he had been smoking, stubbed out the discard in a dish Lewis had been using for an ash tray. "You may be right," said Welch. "The only thing impresses me about this shebang, Welby, is like Sheriff John said -- I've seen you pull too many rabbits out of the hat."

"That's what he told you?" asked Lewis.

"Yeah, but he thinks maybe you're gonna pull a blank this tune." Welch stared down at the mortuary. "If you go inside, do you want me to round up a few of my men and smother the place if you don't come out by some set time?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary," said Lewis. "Don't take any action unless you see something suspicious."

Welch nodded his head. "O.K.," he said. He looked at the glowing tip of his cigarette, glanced down at the yard they were watching. "Mortuaries give me the creeps anyway," he said.

Lewis bolted a hot beef sandwich at a cafe two blocks from the mortuary, returned

along a back street. It was cold and wet in the alley. A perverse wind kept tangling the skirts of his raincoat. He hugged the shadows near the mortuary garage, found the row of boards which had been nailed across the area he was going to use. Lewis clambered over the boards, dropped to soft earth which was out of the wind but under a steady dripping from unguttered eaves. He moved quietly to the end of the shadow area and, as he had expected, could see inside the window on the rear door of the mortuary. The tanks were not visible. Lewis cursed under his breath, shrugged, stepped out of the shadows and crossed the lighted back yard. The door was locked, but he could see through the window that the hallway was empty. He went around to the front door, rang the night bell

A man in a rumpled black suit which looked as though he had slept in it answered the door. Lewis brushed past him into the warm flower smell of the foyer. "Is Johnson here?" he asked.

"Mr. Johnson is asleep," said the man. "May I be of service?"

"Ask Mr. Johnson to come down, please," said Lewis. "This is official business." He showed his badge.

"Of course," said the man. "If you'll go into the office there and have a seat, I'll tell Mr. Johnson you're here. He sleeps in the quarters upstairs."

"Thanks," said Lewis. He went into the office, looked at the colored photograph of Mount Lassen until the night attendant had disappeared up the stairs at the other end of the foyer. Then Lewis came out of the office, went to the doorway leading into the hall. The door was locked. He tried forcing it, but it wouldn't budge. He moved to the hinge side, found a thin crack which gave a view of the other end of the hall. What he saw made him draw in a quick breath. The three metal tanks were right where he had expected them to be. He went back to the office, found a directory and looked up the number of the doctor's office where Welch was waiting, dialed the number. After a long wait Welch's voice came on the line, tones guarded. "Yes?"

"This is Welby," said Lewis. "Anything come in the back?"

"No," said Welch. "You all right?"

"I'm beginning to wonder," said Lewis. "Keep your eyes peeled." He hung up, turned to find Johnson's tall figure filling the office doorway.

"Mr. Lewis," said Johnson. "Is something wrong?" He came into the office.

"I want to have a look at those metal tanks," said Lewis.

Johnson stopped. "What metal tanks?"

"The ones in your back hall," said Lewis.

"Oh, the embalming fluid," said Johnson. "What's the interest in embalming fluid?"

"Let's just have a look at it," said Lewis.

"Do you have a warrant?" asked Johnson.

Lewis' chin jerked up and he stared at the man. "I wouldn't have a bit of trouble getting one," he said.

"On what grounds?"

"I could think of something that'd stick," said Lewis.

"Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

Johnson shrugged. "As you wish." He led the way out of the office, unlocked the

hall door, preceded Lewis down the hallway to the three tanks.

"I thought embalming fluid came in sixteen-ounce glass bottles," said Lewis.

"This is something new," said Johnson. "These tanks have glass inner liners. The fluid is kept under pressure." He turned a valve and an acrid spray emerged from a fitting at the top.

Lewis took a shot in the dark, said, "That doesn't smell like embalming fluid."

Johnson said, "It's a new type. We add the masking perfumes later."

"You just get these filled?" asked Lewis.

"No, these were delivered last week," said Johnson. "We've left them here because we don't have a better place to store them." He smiled at Lewis, but the eyes remained cold, watchful. "Why this interest?"

"Call it professional curiosity," said Lewis. He went to the rear door, unlatched it and locked the latch in the open position, stepped outside, closed the door. He could see the tanks plainly through the window. He came back into the hallway.

*He's still lying to me,* thought Lewis. *But it's all so very plausible.* He said, "I'm going to give your place a thorough search."

"But why?" protested Johnson.

"For no good reason at all," said Lewis. "If you want, I'll go out and get a warrant." He started to brush past Johnson, was stopped by a strong hand on his shoulder, something hard pressing into his side. He looked down, saw a flat automatic menacing him.

"I regret this," said Johnson. "Believe me, I do."

"You're going to regret it more," said Lewis. "I have your place watched front and back and the office knows where I am."

For the first time he saw a look of indecision on Johnson's face. "You're lying," said the mortician.

"Come here," said Lewis. He stepped to the back door, looked up to the black window where Welch stood. The glow of the deputy's cigarette was plainly visible, an orange wash against the blackness. Johnson saw it "Now let's go check the front," said Lewis.

"No need," said Johnson. "I thought you were playing a lone hand." He paused. "You came in the back yard again and had a look in the window, didn't you?"

"What do you think?" asked Lewis.

"I should've anticipated that," said Johnson. "Perhaps I was too anxious to have things appear just as they were. You startled me coming in here at night like this."

"You saw me come in the front?" asked Lewis.

"Let us say that I was aware you were downstairs before the attendant told me," said Johnson. He gestured with his gun. "Let's go back to the office."

Lewis led the way down the hall. At the foyer door he glanced back.

"Turn around!" barked Johnson.

But the one glance had been enough. The tanks were gone. "What was that humming sound?" asked Lewis. "Just keep moving," said Johnson. In the front office, the mortician motioned Lewis to a chair. "What were you looking for?" asked



Johnson. He slid into the chair behind his desk, rested his gun hand on the desk top.

"I found what I was looking for," said Lewis. "And that is?"

"Evidence to confirm my belief that this place should be taken apart brick by brick."

Johnson smiled, hooked the telephone to him with his left hand, took off the receiver and rested it on the desk. "What's your office number?" Lewis told him.

Johnson dialed, picked up the phone, said, "Hello, this is Lewis."

Lewis came half out of the chair. His own voice was issuing from Johnson's mouth. The gun in the mortician's hand waved him back to the chair.

"You got the dope on what I'm doing?" asked Johnson. He waited. "No. Nothing important. I'm just looking." Again he paused. "I'll tell you if I find anything," he said. He replaced the phone in its cradle.

"Well?" said Lewis.

Johnson's lips thinned. "This is incredible," he said. "A mere human -- " He broke off, stared at Lewis, said, "My mistake was in telling you a plausible lie after that door was left open. I should have -- " He shrugged.

"You couldn't hope to fool us forever," said Lewis.

"I suppose not," said Johnson, "but reasoning tells me that there is still a chance." The gun suddenly came up, its muzzle pointing at Lewis. "It's a chance I have to take," said the mortician. The gun belched flame and Lewis was slammed back in his chair. Through a dimming haze, he saw Johnson put the gun to his own head, pull the trigger, slump across the desk. Then the haze around Lewis thickened, became the black nothing of unconsciousness.

From a somewhere he could not identify Lewis became aware of himself. He was running through a black cave, chased by a monster with blazing eyes and arms like an octopus. The monster kept shouting, "A mere human! A mere human! A mere human!" with a voice that echoed as though projected into a rain barrel. Then, above the voice of the monster, Lewis heard water dripping in a quick even cadence. At the same time he saw the mouth of the cave, a round bright area. The bright area grew larger, larger, became the white wall of a hospital room and a window with sunshine outside. Lewis turned his head, saw a metal tank like the ones in the mortuary.

A voice said, "That brought him around."

Vertigo swept over Lewis and for a moment he fought it. A white clad figure swam into his field of vision, resolved itself into a county hospital intern whom Lewis recognized. The intern held a black oxygen mask.

The sound of the dripping water was louder now and then he realized that it was a wrist watch. He turned toward the sound, saw Sheriff Czernak straighten from a position close to his head. Czernak's Slavic face broke into a grin. "Boy, you gave us a scare," he said.

Lewis swallowed, found his voice. "What -- "

"You know, you are lucky you're a freak," said Czernak. "Your heart being on the right side's the only thing saved you. That and the fact that Joe heard the shots."

The intern came around beside the sheriff. "The bullet nicked an edge of your lung and took a little piece out of a rib at the back," said the intern. "You must've been born lucky."

"Johnson?" said Lewis.

"Deader'n a mackerel," said Czernak. "You feel strong enough to tell us what happened? Joe's story don't make sense. What's with these tanks of embalming fluid?"

Lewis thought about his encounter with the mortician. Nothing about it made sense. He said, "Embalming fluid comes in sixteen-ounce bottles."

"We got those three tanks from the hallway," said

Czernak, "but I don't know what we're doing with them."

"From the hall?" Lewis remembered his last look at the empty hall before Johnson had ordered him to turn around. He tried to push himself up, felt pain knife through his chest. The intern pushed him gently back to the pillow. "Here now, none of that," he said. "You just stay flat on your back."

"What was in the tanks?" whispered Lewis.

"The lab here says it's embalming fluid," said the sheriff, "What's so special about it?"

Lewis remembered the acrid odor of the spray Johnson had released from the tank valve. "Does the lab still have some of that fluid?" he asked. "I'd like to smell it."

"I'll get it," said the intern. "Don't let him sit up. It could start a hemorrhage." He went out the door.

"Where were the tanks when you found them?" asked

Lewis.

"Down by the back door," said Czernak. "Where you said they were. Why?"

"I don't really know yet," said Lewis. "But I've something I wish you'd do. Take a -- "

The door opened and the intern entered, a test tube in his hand. "This is the stuff," he said. He passed the tube under Lewis' nose. It gave off a musklike sweet aroma. It was not what he had smelled at the tanks. *That explains why the tanks disappeared, he thought. Somebody switched them. But what was in the others?* He looked up at the intern, said, "Thanks."

"You were sayin' something," said the sheriff.

"Yes," said Lewis. "Take a crew over to that mortuary, John, and rip out the wall behind where you found those tanks and take up the floor under that spot."

"What're we supposed to find?" asked Czernak.

"Damned if I know," said Lewis, "but it sure should be interesting. Those tanks kept disappearing and reappearing every time I turned my back. I want to know why."

"Look, Welby, we've got to have something solid to go on," said the sheriff. "People are running around that mortuary like crazy, saying it's bad for business an' what all."

"I'd say this was good for business," said Lewis, a brief smile forming on his lips. His face sobered. "Don't you think it's enough that somebody tried to kill one of your men and then committed suicide?"

The sheriff scratched his head. "I guess so, Welby. You sure you can't give me

anything more'n just your hunch?"

"You know as much about this as I do," said Lewis. "By the way, where's Johnson's body?"

"They're fixin' it up for burial," said Czernak. "Welby, I really should have more'n just your say so. The D.A. will scream if I get too heavy handed."

"You're still the sheriff," said Lewis.

"Well, can't you even tell me why Johnson killed himself?"

"Say he was mentally unbalanced," said Lewis. "And John, here's something else. Get Doc Bellarmine to do the autopsy on Johnson and tell him to go over that body with a magnifying glass."

"Why?"

"It was something he said about mere humans," said Lewis.

"Askin' me to stick my neck out like this," said Czernak.

"Will you do it?" asked Lewis.

"Sure I'll do it!" exploded Czernak. "But I don't like it!" He jammed his hat onto his head, strode out of the room.

The intern turned to follow.

Lewis said, "What time is it?"

The intern stopped, glanced at his wrist watch. "Almost five." He looked at Lewis. "We've had you under sedatives since you came out of the operating room."

"Five A.M. or five P.M.?" asked Lewis.

"Five P.M.," said the intern.

"Was I a tough job?" asked Lewis.

"It was a clean wound," said the intern. "You take it easy now. It's almost chow time. I'll see that you're served in the first round and then I'll have the nurse bring you a sedative. You need your rest."

"How long am I going to be chained to this bed?" asked Lewis.

"We'll discuss that later," said the intern. "You really shouldn't be talking." He turned away, went out the door.

Lewis turned his head away, saw that someone had left a stack of magazines on his bed stand. The top magazine had slipped down, exposing the cover. It was done in garish colors -- a bug-eyed monster chasing a scantily clad female. Lewis was reminded of his nightmare. *A mere human ... A mere human ... A mere human.* The words kept turning over hi his mind. *What was it about Johnson that brought up the idea of a freak?* he wondered.

A student nurse brought in his tray, cranked up his bed and helped him eat. Presently, a nurse came in with a hypo, shot him in the arm. He drifted off to sleep with the mind full of questions still unanswered.

"He's awake now," said a female voice. Lewis heard a door open, looked up to see Czernak followed by Joe Welch. It was daylight outside, raining. The two men wore damp raincoats which they took off and draped over chairs.

Lewis smiled at Welch. "Thanks for having good ears, Joe," he said.

Welch grinned. "I opened the window when I saw you come out the back door," he said. "I thought maybe you was going to holler something up to me. Then when you went right back inside, I thought that was funny; so I left the window partly open or I'd never've heard a thing."

Czernak pulled a chair up beside Lewis' bed, sat down. Welch took a chair at the foot.

Lewis turned his head toward the sheriff. "Is the D. A. screaming yet?"

"No," said Czernak. "He got caught out in that rainstorm the other day and he's home with the flu. Besides, I'm still sheriff of this county." He patted the bed. "How you feeling, boy?"

"I'm afraid I'm gonna live," said Lewis.

"You better," said Welch. "We got a new relief radio gal who saw your picture in the files an' says she wants to meet you. She's a wow."

"Tell her to wait for me," said Lewis. He looked at the sheriff. "What'd you find?"

"I don't get it, Welby," said Czernak. "Right behind where them tanks was there was this brick wall covered with plaster. We took away the plaster and there's all these wires, see."

"What kind of wires?"

"That's just it, Keeler's old man is a jeweler and Keeler says this wire is silver. It's kind of a screen like, crisscrossed every which way."

"What were they hooked up to?"

"To nothing we could find," said Czernak. He looked at Welch. "Ain't that right?"

"Nothing there but this wire," said Welch.

"What did you do with it?" asked Lewis.

"Nothing," said Czernak. "We just left it like it was and took pictures."

"Anything under the floor?"

Czernak's face brightened. "Boy, we sure hit the jackpot there!" He bent his head and peered closely at Lewis. "How'd you know we'd find something under there?"

"I just knew those tanks kept appearing out of nowhere," said Lewis. "What was under there?"

Czernak straightened. "Well, a whole section of the hall floor was an elevator and down below there was this big room. It stretched from under the hall to clear under the embalming room and there was a section of the embalming room floor where a bunch of tiles come up in one piece and there was a trapdoor and a stairway. Hell! It was just like one of them horror movies!"

"What was down there?"

"A buncha machinery," said Czernak.

"What kind?"

"I dunno." Czernak shook his head, glanced at Welch.

"Craziest stuff I ever saw," said Welch. He shrugged.

"Doc Bellarmine came down and had a look at it after the autopsy last night," said Czernak. "He said he'd be in to see you this morning."

"Did he say anything about the autopsy?" asked Lewis.

"Not to me," said Czernak.

Welch hitched his chair closer to the foot of the bed, rested an arm on the rail. "He told me it was something about the autopsy made him come down to have a look at the mortuary," he said. "He didn't say what it was, though."

"What about the mortuary staff?" asked Lewis. "Did they say anything about the secret room?"

"They swear they never even knew it was there," said Czernak. "We took 'em all into custody anyway, all except Tule and his wife."

"Tule?"

"Yeah, the other partner. His wife was a licensed mortician, too. Ain't been seen since the night you were shot. The staff says that Johnson, Tule and the wife was always locking doors around the building for no good reason at all."

"What did this machinery look like?"

"Part of it was just an elevator for that section of floor. The other stuff was hooked up to a bunch of pipes coming down from the embalming table upstairs. There was this big -- " Czernak stopped as the door opened.

Dr. Bellarmine's cynical face peered into the room. His eyes swept over the occupants, he entered, closed the door behind him. "The patient's feeling better, I see," he said. "For a while there I thought this would be a job for me in my official capacity."

"This guy'll outlive all of us," said Welch.

"He probably will at that," said the doctor. He glanced down at Lewis "Feel like a little conversation?"

"Just a minute, Doc," said Lewis. He turned to Czernak. "John, I have one more favor," he said. "Could you get one of those tanks of embalming fluid to a welding shop and have it cut open with a burner. I want to know how it's made inside."

"No you don't," said Czernak. "I'm not leavin' here without some kind of an explanation."

"And I don't have an explanation," said Lewis. "All the pieces aren't together yet. I'm tied to this bed when I should be out working on this thing. I've ten thousand questions I want answered and no way of answering them."

"Don't excite yourself," said Bellarmine.

"Yeah, Welby, take it easy," said Czernak. "It's just that I'm about ready to pop with frustration. Nothing makes sense here. This guy tries to kill you for no apparent reason and then commits suicide. It seems to be because you wanted to look inside them tanks, but they're just embalming fluid. I don't get it."

"Would you have those tanks cut open for me?" asked Lewis.

"O.K., O.K." Czernak hoisted himself to his feet. Welch also arose. "Come on, Joe," said the sheriff. "We're nothin' but a couple of leg men for Sherlock here. Let's take them -- "

"John, I'm sorry," said Lewis. "It's just that I can't -- "

"I know you can't do it yourself now," said Czernak. "That's why I'm doing it. You're the best man I got, Welby; so I'm countin' on you to put this together. Me, I

gave up when I saw that machinery." He left the room, muttering, followed by Welch, who stopped at the door, winked at Lewis.

Bellarmino waited until the door closed, sat down on the foot of the bed. "How'd you get onto them?" he asked.

Lewis ignored the question. "What'd you find in that autopsy?" he asked.

The surgeon frowned. "I thought you were nuts when the sheriff told me what you wanted," he said. "Any fool could see Johnson died of a gunshot wound in the head. But I guessed you had a reason; so I did my cutting carefully and it was a lucky thing I did."

"Why?"

"Well, this is the kind of case an autopsy surgeon sloughs off sometimes. Visible wound. Obvious cause. I could've missed it. The guy looked to be normal."

"Missed what?"

"His heart for one thing. It had an extra layer of muscles in the cardiac sheath. I experimented with them and near dropped my knife. They work like that automatic sealing device they put in airplane fuel tanks. Puncture the heart and this muscle layer seals the hole until the heart's healed."

"Damn!" said Lewis.

"This guy was like that all over," said Bellarmino. "For a long time doctors have looked at the human body with the wish they could redesign certain things to better specifications. Johnson looked like our wish had come true. Fewer vertebrae with better articulation. Pigment veins into the pupil of the eye which could only be some kind of filter to -- "

"That's it!" Lewis slapped the bed with the palm of his hand. "There was something freakish about him and I couldn't focus on it. The pupils of his eyes changed color. I can remember seeing it and -- "

"You didn't see anything," said Bellarmino. "His pelvic floor was broader and distributed the weight more evenly to the legs. The feet had larger bones and more central distribution of weight over the arch. There was an interlaced membranous support for the viscera. His circulatory system had sphincter valves at strategic points to control bleeding. This Johnson may have looked human on the outside, but inside he was superhuman."

"What about that machinery in the mortuary basement?" asked Lewis.

Bellarmino stood up, began to pace the floor, back and forth at the foot of the bed. Presently, he stopped, put his hands on the rail, stared at Lewis. "I spent half the night examining that layout," he said. "It was one of the most beautifully designed and executed rigs I've ever seen. Its major purpose was to take cadaver blood and fractionate the protein."

"You mean like for making plasma and stuff like that?" asked Lewis.

"Well, something like that," said Bellarmino. "I didn't think you could use the blood of a corpse for that," said Lewis.

"We didn't either," said the surgeon. "The Russians have been working on it, however. Our experience has been that it breaks down too quickly. We've tried -- "

"You mean this was a Communist setup?"

Bellarmino shook his head. "No such luck. This rig wasn't just foreign to the U.S.A.

It was foreign to Earth. There's one centrifugal pump in there that spins free in an air blast. I shudder every time I think of the force it must generate. We don't have an alloy that'll come anywhere near standing up to those strains. And the Russians don't have it, either."

"How can you be sure?"

"For one thing, there are several research projects that are awaiting this type of rig and the Russians have no more results on those projects than we have."

"Then something was produced from cadaver blood and was stored in those tanks," said Lewis.

Bellarmino nodded. "I checked. A fitting on the tanks matched one on the machinery."

Lewis pushed himself upright, ignoring the pain in his chest "Then this means an extraterrestrial in -- " The pain in his chest became too much and he sagged back to the pillow.

Dr. Bellarmine was suddenly at his side. "You fool!" he barked. "You were told to take it easy." He pushed the emergency button at the head of the bed, began working on the bandages.

"What's matter?" whispered Lewis.

"Hemorrhage," said Bellarmine. "Where's that fool nurse? Why doesn't she answer the bell?" He stripped away a length of adhesive.

The door opened and a nurse entered, stopped as she saw the scene.

"Emergency tray," said Bellarmine. "Get Dr. Edwards here to assist! Bring plasma!"

Lewis heard a drum begin to pound inside his head -- louder, louder, louder. Then it began to fade and there was nothing.

He awoke to a rustling sound and footsteps. Then he recognized it. The sound of a nurse's starched uniform as she moved about the room. He opened his eyes and saw by the shadows outside that it was afternoon.

"So you're awake," said the nurse.

Lewis turned his head toward the sound. "You're new," he said. "I don't recognize you."

"Special," she said. "Now you just take it easy and don't try to move." She pushed the call button.

It seemed that almost immediately Dr. Bellarmine was in the room bending over Lewis. The surgeon felt Lewis' wrist, took a deep breath. "You went into shock," he said. "You have to remain quiet. Don't try to move around."

His voice low and husky, Lewis said, "Could I ask some questions?"

"Yes, but only for a few minutes. You have to avoid any kind of exertion."

"What'd the sheriff find out about the tanks?"

Bellarmino grimaced. "They couldn't open them. Can't cut the metal."

"That confirms it," said Lewis. "Think there are any other rigs like that?"

"There have to be," said Bellarmine. He sat down on a chaff at the head of the bed. "I've had another look at that basement layout and took a machinist with me.

He agrees. Everything about it cries out mass production. Mostly cast fittings with a minimum of machining. Simple, efficient construction."

"Why? What good's the blood from human cadavers?"

"I've been asking myself that same question," said Bellarmine. "Maybe for a nutrient solution for culture growths. Maybe for the antibodies."

"Would they be any good?"

"That depends on how soon the blood was extracted. The time element varies with temperature, body condition, a whole barrel full of things."

"But why?"

The surgeon ran a hand through his gray hair. "I don't like my answer to that question," he said. "I keep thinking of how we fractionate the blood of guinea pigs, how we recover vaccine from chick embryos, how we use all of our test animals."

Lewis' eyes fell on the dresser across his room. Someone had taken the books from his night stand and put them on the dresser. He could still see the bug-eyed monster cover.

"From what I know of science fiction," said Lewis, "that silver grid in the hall must be some kind of matter transmitter for sending the tanks to wherever they're used. I wonder why they didn't put it downstairs with the machinery."

"Maybe it had to be above ground," said Bellarmine.

"You figure it the same way I do."

"You're a hard-headed guy, Doc," said Lewis. "How come you go for this bug-eyed monster theory?"

"It was the combination," said Bellarmine. "That silver grid, the design of the machinery and its purpose, the strange metals, the differences in Johnson. It all spells A-L-I-E-N, alien. But I could say the same holds for you, Lewis. What put you wise?"

"Johnson. He called me a *mere human*. I got to wondering how alien a guy could be to separate himself from the human race."

"It checks," said Bellarmine.

"But why guinea pigs?" asked Lewis.

The surgeon frowned, looked at the floor, back at Lewis. "That rig had a secondary stage," he said. "It could have only one function -- passing live virus under some kind of bombardment -- X-ray or beta ray or whatever -- and depositing the mutated strain in a little spray container about as big as your fist. I know from my own research experience that some mutated virus can be deadly."

"Germ warfare," whispered Lewis. "You sure it isn't the Russians?"

"I'm sure. This was a perfect infecting center. Complete. Banbury would've been decimated by now if that's what it was."

"Maybe they weren't ready."

"Germ warfare is ready when one infecting center is set up. No. This rig was for producing slight alterations in common germs or I miss my guess. This little spray container went into a ... "

"Rack on Johnson's desk," said Lewis.



"Yeah," said Bellarmine.

"I saw it," said Lewis. "I thought it was one of those deodorant things." He picked a piece of lint off the covers. "So they're infecting us with mutated virus."

"It scares me," said Bellarmine.

Lewis squinted his eyes, looked up at the surgeon. "Doc, what would you do if you found out that one of your white rats was not only intelligent but had found out what you were doing to it?"

"Well -- " Bellarmine looked out the window at the gathering dusk. "I'm no monster, Lewis. I'd probably turn it loose. No -- " He scratched his chin. "No, maybe I wouldn't at that. But I wouldn't infect it anymore. I think I'd put it through some tests to find out just how smart it was. The rat would no longer be a simple test animal. Its usefulness would be in the psychological field, to tell me things about myself."

"That's about the way I had it figured," said Lewis, "How much longer am I going to be in this bed?"

"Why?"

"I've figured a way for the guinea pigs to tell the researchers the jig's up."

"How? We don't even know their language. We've only seen one specimen and that one's dead. We can't be sure they'd react the same way we would."

"Yes they would," said Lewis.

"How can you say that? They must already know we're sentient."

"So's a rat sentient -- to a degree," said Lewis. "It's all in the way you look at it. Sure. Compared to us, they're vegetables. That's the way it'd be with -- "

"We don't have the right to take risks with the rest of humanity," protested Bellarmine. "Man, one of them tried to kill you!"

"But everything points to that one being defective," said Lewis. "He made too many mistakes. That's the only reason we got wise to him."

"They might dump us into the incinerator as no longer useful," said Bellarmine. "They -- "

Lewis said, "They'd have to be pretty much pure scientists. Johnson was a field man, a lab technician, a worker. The pure scientists would follow our human pattern. I'm sure of it. To be a pure scientist you have to be able to control yourself. That means you'd understand other persons' -- other beings' -- problems. No, Doc. Your first answer was the best one. You'd put your rats to psychological tests."

Bellarmino stared at his hands. "What's your idea?"

"Take a white rat in one of those little lab cages. Infect it with some common germ, leave the infecting hypo in the cage, put the whole works -- rat and all -- in front of that silver grid. Distort -- "

"That's a crazy idea," said Bellarmine. "How could you tell a hypothetical something to look at your message when you don't even know the hypothetical language -- how to contact them in the first place."

"Distort the field of that grid by touching the wires with a piece of metal," said Lewis. "Tie the metal to the end of a pole for safety."

"I've never heard a crazier idea," said Bellarmine.

"Get the white rat, the cage and the hypo and I'll do it myself," said Lewis.

Bellarmino got to his feet, moved toward the door. "You're not doing anything for a couple of weeks," he said. "You're a sick man and I've been talking to you too long already." He opened the door, left the room.

Lewis stared at the ceiling. A shudder passed over his body. *Mutated virus!*

The door opened and an orderly and nurse entered. "You get a little tube feeding of hot gelatin," said the nurse. She helped him eat it, then, over his protests, gave him a sedative.

"Doctor's orders," said the nurse.

Through a descending fog, Lewis murmured, "Which doctor?"

"Dr. Bellarmino," she said.

The fog came lower, darkened. He drifted into a nightmare peopled by thousands of Johnsons, all of them running around with large metal tanks asking, "Are you human?" and collecting blood.

Sheriff Czernak was beside the bed when Lewis awoke. Lewis could see out the window that dawn was breaking. He turned toward the sheriff. "Mornin', John," he whispered. His tongue felt thick and dry.

" 'Bout time you woke up," said Czernak. "I've been waiting here a coupla hours. Something fishy going on."

"Wind my bed up, will you?" asked Lewis. "What's happening?"

Czernak arose, moved to the foot of the bed and turned the crank.

"The big thing is that Doc Bellarmino has disappeared," he said. "We traced him from the lab here to the mortuary. Then he just goes *pffft!*"

Lewis' eyes widened. "Was there a white rat cage?"

"There you go again!" barked Czernak. "You tell me you don't know anything about this, but you sure know all the questions." He bent over Lewis. "Sure there was a rat cage! You better tell me how you knew it!"

"First tell *me* what happened," said Lewis.

Czernak straightened, frowning. "All right, Welby, but when I get through telling, then you better tell." He wet his lips with his tongue. "I'm told the Doc came in here and talked to you last night. Then he went down to the lab and got one of them white rats with its cage. Then he went over to the mortuary. He had the cage and rat with him. Our night guard let him in. After a while, when the Doc didn't come out, the guard got worried and went inside. There in the back hall is the Doc's black bag. And over where this silver wire stuff was he finds -- "

"Was?" Lewis barked the word.

"Yeah," said Czernak wearily. "That's the other thing. Sometime last night somebody ripped out all them wires and didn't leave a single trace."

"What else did the guard find?"

Czernak ran a hand under his collar, stared at the opposite wall.

"Well?"

"Welby, look, I--"

"What happened?"

"Well, the night guard -- it was Rasmussen -- called me and I went right down. Rasmussen didn't touch a thing. There was the Doc's bag, a long wood pole with a tire iron attached to it and the rat cage. The rat was gone."

"Was there anything in the cage?"

Czernak suddenly leaned forward, blurted, "Look, Welby, about the cage. There's something screwy about it. When I first got there I swear it wasn't there. Rasmussen doesn't remember it either. My first idea when I got there was that the Doc'd gone out the back way, but our seal was still on the door. It hadn't been opened. While I was thinkin' that one over -- I was standing about in the middle of the hall -- I heard this noise like a cork being pulled out of a bottle. I turned around and there was this little cage on the floor. Out of nowhere."

"And it was empty?"

"Except for some pieces of glass that I'm told belonged to a hypo."

"Broken?"

"Smashed to pieces."

"Was the cage door open?"

Czernak tipped his head to one side, looked at the far wall. "No, I don't believe it was."

"And exactly where was this cage?" Lewis' eyes burned into the sheriff's.

"Like I said, Welby. Right in front of where the wires was."

"And the wires were gone?"

"Well -- " Again the sheriff looked uncomfortable. "For just a second there when I turned around after hearing that noise -- for just a second there I thought I saw 'em."

Lewis took a deep breath.

Czernak said, "Now come on and give, will you? Where's the Doc. You must have some idea, the way you been askin' questions."

"He's taking his entrance exams," said Lewis. "And we'd all better pray that he passes."