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Renegades of Time by Raymond F. Jones

I

Joe Simmons was lying on his back in a puddle of rainwater. His vision of the sky was limited by tiers of foliage that ranged up and beyond any tree height he had ever known. Beyond his feet a monstrous, twisted palm tree seemed to rise forever. Its sharp sword fronds mingled with branches of adjacent trees that bore leaves of red and silver. These spread in massive sheets to the sky, and occasionally, when their load of rainwater was more than they could bear, they twisted gently and dumped gallons of water with an enormous splash from their hundred-foot heights.

He raised on his elbows and turned his head to try to bring some familiar object within his vision. There was nothing. The rain itself had a sharp sting that felt as if it were on the edge of ice, but the air and the trees were tropical.

A moment ago he had been on Huntington's Hill, outside the little college town of Midland. Bill Bradley was there. It was snowing. Bill was screaming, "Get back! Get off the Hill! You'll kill us both, you fool!"

And now he was here.

There was no accounting for the change in the landscape, and he didn't try. He remained still and repeated his own name over and over again. "I am Joe Simmons. I spent two years of jungle hell in the Army. Now I live in Midland and go to Midland College. I'm trying to see a crazy guy named Bill

Bradley to get some papers for tomorrow's class in Kinematics of Machines."

He touched the water of the puddle in which he lay. It was wet, but colder than rainwater ought to be in this jungle. He inventoried his fingers and his arms and legs. He felt the wet coat and shirt and pants he wore. They were the clothes he had put on that morning.

He shut his eyes and tried to relax. He was obviously experiencing some sort of temporary mental condition, which would soon pass. He must have fallen and struck his head, causing some kind of regression. That seemed to make sense. The jungle surroundings were like those he had seen many times in the Army. Trees. Water. Mud. Humidity.

Not quite.

The differences were enough to tell him this scene was stirred up by a damaged mind. In a moment, however, he would be all right, he told himself.

It had been only a short time ago, not more than a couple of hours at the most, when he and Bill had their collision on the campus of the College. It had been snowing after an ice storm. Everybody was creeping along, half blind. Joe had been running scornful of the hazards. It would have been all right if Bill Bradley hadn't crept blindly into an intersection of the walks.

They collided. Their briefcases broke open and spilled books and papers for a dozen feet over the snowbanks and walks. For twenty minutes they scrabbled in fury to retrieve their belongings. Papers that weren't their own they thrust at one another in anger. Finally, with everything gathered up, they retreated into the snowstorm in opposite directions without a glance at the other.

The spilled contents included Joe's final paper for his Kinematics of Machines class which would determine his grade and which was due tomorrow. He dried the soaked papers over the floor vent of the heater in his room and recognized with a sickness in his belly that four of the most critical sheets were

missing. And a half dozen of Bill Bradley's papers were still mixed with his.

It would be impossible to duplicate the mathematical work on the missing sheets that night, and there was no other copy of the work. He had an impulse to rip the offending papers belonging to Bill Bradley. But he needed them for ransom of his own sheets.

He didn't know how to locate Bill Bradley. The sheets themselves gave no clue. What he read on them made no sense. There were references to weird names such as Choral, Venata, Susselein, and Tamarina. It looked as if Bill Bradley had been writing fantasy stuff for an English assignment.

Joe remembered, however, seeing some reference to Bill Bradley in connection with an obscure science fraternity, one of those where the members speak only to each other. He located the president, who told Joe that Bill lived with his aunt and uncle at the old Huntington place nearly ten miles out of town. And he had no phone.

There was no solution except to crank up the ancient Chevy Joe had bought from one of the original Forty Thieves when he got out of the Army and make his way out to the old Huntington place.

There, the uncle told Joe that Bill was up on top of the little rise known as Huntington's Hill. Alone in the snowstorm on the Hill, Bill was bareheaded and in shirtsleeves. The whole top of the Hill seemed faintly illuminated by a ghostly, silvery column of light. And Joe had the impression that, somehow, it wasn't snowing where Bill was.

Bill Bradley stood perfectly motionless, his feet spread apart and his face upturned to the sky with expectancy. Then he saw Joe Simmons. An expression of mixed rage and horror exploded on his face. He flung an arm in Joe's direction. "Get back! Get back, you fool!" Then he looked up once more and gestured frantically to the cloud-covered sky. "Normalize time! Normalize—! Interference—interference—!"

Joe stopped, watching the frantic gestures and hearing the

words of Bill Bradley. Joe was now in an area entirely free of snow. When he looked up at the sky overhead he could see flakes that seemed to vanish as they came near the Hill. He felt himself bathed in a column of warm, silvery light.

But the desperation in Bill's voice convinced Joe there was danger. He hesitated, then backed a dozen steps. Near the edge of the snow-free circle he turned and started to run.

It was like hitting a brick wall. There was nothing there but the edge of the column of light, yet he was hurled back and thrown to the ground. He was conscious of a moan of despair from where he had last seen Bill Bradley. He twisted to look in that direction.

That was when he saw the giant twisted palm and felt the stinging cold raindrops of the alien jungle. A place—a world—he had never seen before.

He heard the voice then. He afterwards thought it like the voice of angels. But it was uttering a stream of vituperation that would have had to be an angel swearing.

He opened his eyes again to this unlikelihood and stirred in the shallow puddle. Twenty feet away a girl stood watching and reviling him in that golden voice.

He didn't catch all she said. She seemed to be using a dozen languages, most of them unknown to him. But he caught, "idiot—fool—stumbling jackass*, —empty-headed clod—" and references to ancestry that are common in any language. That was his introduction to Tamarina. He didn't know then who she was, of course. She was simply a bedraggled spitfire standing in the rain, her presence in that setting as mysterious to him as his own.

She was dressed in clothing that had a touch of the unknown, yet it was not too different from that seen on the streets and in the classrooms of Midland. Her tiny brown skirt looked like fine leather, but was probably some plastic. Calf-length boots were quite suitable for the sludge she waded through to approach Joe Simmons. Her soaked blouse could have been of any place or

fashion.

Her blonde hair was long and fine and was normally filled with golden light, Joe was sure. Now it was wet and straggly, and the girl looked much like a drenched kitten Joe had once pulled out of the creek when he was a kid.

He couldn't help smiling. He didn't know who the girl was or where the two of them were, or what had brought him there. But he felt sure it was no illusion now, and it was a delight to hear the girl swear in the seventeen different languages she seemed all mixed up in.

Joe grabbed a branch projecting over the puddle and jerked to his feet. Still woozy, he managed to stay upright. He discarded the soaked car coat he wore. The soggy mass was wholly unnecessary in the warm rain.

"Take it easy," he said to the girl. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I don't like some of the names you're calling me. It might help us both if you told me what you know about where we are."

Her expression was one of contempt. "English language. From Bill Bradley's block. He said there was interference. I suppose you are it. For making a mess of things your performance is a beautiful, roaring success."

Joe took a step toward her, feeling less wobbly now. "If there's anything I did to deliver us here it was purely accidental. Now tell me who you are, and what you know about this place—and, most important, what you know about getting us out of here."

Joe touched her arm above the elbow, intending to be firm and show her who was boss in this place and to shut off the storm of abuse she was still throwing at him. His muscles weren't exactly feeble after his stint of Army service, but the girl shook free of his grip with judo ease. He stood back, awed by the strength he had felt in her.

"Don't touch me again!" she warned. "As for where we are, I know nothing more about it than you do. But your bungling

stupidity is responsible for us being here."

He let the accusation drop. "Are you a friend of Bill Bradley?" Joe asked.

The girl frowned, as if the word was outside her vocabulary. "Friend? Bill Bradley? Yes—friend—I suppose you could say so. You may say I am a friend of Bill Bradley."

There seemed to be a gap in their mental processes, as if she were not only unfamiliar with the English language, but that her basic concepts were enormously different.

Like "friend." Joe was certain she didn't understand the word at all.

"Tell me your name," he said.

"You may call me Tamarina."

His memory jogged. He felt a chill shock of recognition. Tamarina. That was one of the weird names he had read in Bill's papers. He tried to remember another.

"Who is Susselein?" he demanded abruptly.

The girl reacted with a tensing of her body. "Who told you about Susselein? Not Bill—"

He shrugged and felt a sense of minor triumph— for no good reason. But he had at least thrown her off balance.

"I'm Joe Simmons," he said. "Joe, to my friends."

The girl seemed willing to forget his mention of the other name, as if it were something forbidden. She looked puzzled now. "Am I one of your friends?"

Joe couldn't help laughing, and this seemed to anger her. He quickly sobered. "Yes," he said. "Let us say you are my friend."

And suddenly he thought, 'We'll be much more than friends. This is no illusion. This is reality that will shape all future

reality.'

"We may never leave here," Tamarina said. "We may spend all the rest of our lives here. She walked a little way from Joe and glanced up through the branches of the enormous trees of the rain forest and shook her head with an attitude of resignation. "But we will try to get away."

Joe still felt mentally numb from shock of his sudden plunge into these strange surroundings and his lack of understanding of where he was. "How did we get here?" he demanded.

"You created—or, rather, became—an interference in the temporal channel. But you wouldn't understand any of that. Ask your friend, Bill Bradley —if you ever see him again," she added bitterly. She started walking away. After a moment Joe slogged through the swampy underfooting after her.

"You're right," Joe said when he caught up with her. "I don't understand any of this. How about trying to answer *this* question: Where are we?"

She laughed now for the first time. "That's easy! In your language you say: 'Your guess is as good as mine.' Your guess is as good as mine. I don't know where we are. Not the foggiest, the faintest notion."

Joe stopped. The rain pelted the leaves of the dense growth on all sides with a flat, spattering sound. Somewhere, at an enormous distance, there was the sound of the cry of some great animal.

Tamarina had continued walking, and now she turned back with an expression of irritation at Joe's stupidity in not following her. He looked at her across the distance between them. The rain slapping on the leaves, the strange forest growth about them, the wet golden-haired girl who didn't know what the word "friend" meant—then he asked the question he had been afraid to ask.

"Is this somewhere on Earth?"

"That's one thing I am sure of. We are certainly not on your

Earth."

"The Solar System?"

"Do any of your planets resemble this?"

He let it go. "Then where?" he said.

"I told you I don't know! A light year—a thousand light years—an infinity of light years' from Earth. Who can tell? What does it matter? More important is: When?"

"When?" he asked stupidly.

"*When*, yes. How much temporal displacement is there between your intrusion and our arrival here?"

"I don't understand," Joe said weakly. "Wasn't it a matter of seconds between the time I fell on the Hill and my appearance here?" He felt of his face uncertainly. His beard—or lack of it—was the same. He hadn't arrived suddenly with a Rip Van Winkle appearance.

"No, you don't understand. You don't understand anything. Try to understand this: We are lost. Completely and totally lost. I doubt that anyone has our coordinates. Our only hope is beacon scanning. Perhaps they can find us that way. And you are responsible. You—Joe Simmons—you put us into this predicament. You are the one wholly responsible for our being utterly lost in time and in space. Can you understand that?"

She turned and marched furiously through the rain forest. Joe stood with her words echoing in his skull —which seemed at the moment empty of everything else.

Lost.

Not only in space, but in time.

She was right: He understood none of it.

The girl had disappeared into the depths of the forest while Joe pondered her words. He smashed through the dense foliage

in the direction she had gone. The gloom of the wet growth became thicker and darker as he penetrated. It seemed impossible that Tamarina had come this way. He had lived for six months in the jungles and he was sure there was no way through here without a machete.

He decided to turn back, and at that moment Tamarina's contemptuous voice came from his left. "What are you doing? I thought you were with me. Come this way."

When he turned to look in the direction from which her voice came he saw a narrow opening between air roots as thick as sewer pipes. He couldn't see Tamarina yet, but he crawled through the space and glimpsed her form dimly ahead. She moved on rapidly as if challenging him to keep up with her.

After an hour or more, they emerged into a clearing. Clear, that is, except for waist-high grass that was thick leaved and dense.

And wet. It swished and clung like strips of wet •

sheeting as they waded through. Beyond it, a mile or two away, was the ocean. An ocean that wasn't blue or green, like the waters Joe Simmons knew. It was a muddy brown, like the clay of jungle deltas. And the whitecaps and the breakers on the rocky beach were not white at all. They were almost blood red.

Tamarina moved ahead once more. Joe could scarcely see her above the tall grass, except for the moving swath she made through it. Finally, she waited for him, contemptuous amusement in her eyes as he caught up with her once more.

"Where are we going?" he demanded. "What's the use of wallowing through this stuff? I had enough of that in the Army. We ought to go back to the edge of the forest and set up a shelter to wait out this rain."

She glanced at the dense sky. "Worlds such as this are common. I suspect we would die of old age, waiting for the rain to stop."

Her words smashed him again with the unreality of their situation. "Worlds like this? You talk as if you visit different worlds every week! Who are you?"

"There is not time to explain to you." Her voice now was not quite so irritable. She seemed almost anxious to make up for some of her earlier wrath. Joe sensed that their experience was not unfamiliar to her. She was not frightened and not dismayed. She had a goal in mind.

"I need a flat area," she said, "free of growth and as large as possible. I think the beach by the water may be suitable. Let us hurry, please."

She resumed her urgent march through the high, clinging grass before Joe could ask why there was need of the beach. It was more than the mile or two he had originally guessed. The light was deceptive, and it was more like five miles before they broke out of the grass, exhausted from fighting it.

Tamarina dropped to the cold sand of the brownish sea, her body heaving with the efforts of the long exertion. After a long time, when she had regained her breath, she stirred and rose "to her elbows. She regarded Joe, who sat with his back against a nearby rock, watching her. She smiled in a way he would never forget, a smile that relaxed the barrier she kept about herself.

"Joe Simmons—I think I would like to be your friend," she said.

II

She carried a belt at her waist, which Joe had paid little attention to. The belt bore little packets, closed by snap fasteners. Tamarina opened one of these and removed eight crimson, glowing cubes. The moment they were free of the container they seemed to burst into radiant fire so intense Joe could no longer look at them.

Tamarina shielded her eyes and walked up the beach. She paused and laid one of the cubes carefully on the sand, then

moved as if pacing an exact distance and deposited another one. She continued until she had arranged all eight in a square pattern as large as the beach permitted, about a hundred yards on each side.

She returned to Joe. "A beacon," she said. "They will be scanning for us and should detect the emission of this pattern as they sweep through. We must hope that we are not beyond their range."

Joe regarded the glowing cubes lying on the sand. It seemed as if their light was increasing in intensity by the minute. He could glance at them only for a moment, even at the distance to which Tamarina had moved them. There was now a square column of crimson glow rising from the beach to the gray ceiling of clouds.

He didn't ask her who "they" were.

Tamarina moved toward a crag rising out of the sand. She sat with her back against the rock, slumped in utter exhaustion. The setting of the cubes seemed to have been her mission. With it completed, she was drained of the immense energy that had driven her through the jungle and the grass faster than Joe Simmons could go.

Her eyes swept slowly over the ugly seascape as if seeking a sign of some distant shore, or perhaps a vessel that would take them away, Joe thought. Nothing appeared to break the sweep of brown, dismal sea. Overhead, the sky was fast darkening, and the rain was turning colder. A chill wind was rising off the sea. Tamarina had rejected the idea of building a shelter earlier, and now it was too late to try. It would soon be completely dark, except for the eerie crimson glow of the cubes. They would have to spend the night in the open with no shelter but the lee of the rocks sticking out of the beach.

Joe walked over and sat beside her. He tried to see her features more closely, but the light was gone, and she was scarcely more than a shadow against the rock.

None of this is actually happening, he thought. He had been

injured by the fall, and his brain had stirred up with wild fantasy of its own accord.

"We don't know how long the nights are," said Tamarina out of the dimness. "They may be shorter or many times longer than the night you are accustomed to."

"Whatever it is," Joe said, "we must hunt food as soon as it is light again. We were crazy not to spend the daylight hours doing that. There must be some kind of small animal life and plant growth that is edible. Maybe even fish in that dirty sea."

"I'm sorry. I forgot," Tamarina said. She fumbled at another of the packets at her waist. Then her fingers hunted for Joe's hand in the darkness. She pressed a small capsule into his hand.

"Break it slowly between your teeth. Let it drain down your throat."

He felt the half-inch long capsule and tried to see it in the dimness. "This is a steak dinner?" he said. "We've gone a long way toward dehydrating food, but not this far. And it takes water to make it a meal."

"It's not food," said Tamarina. "It's a drug that removes the sense of hunger and thirst for a time about equal to one of your days. The body suffers the lack of nourishment, but you are insensible to it. No more than seven of the capsules may be used. But our beacon should be found within a day—if it is to be found at all."

Joe crunched the capsule and felt a warm drop of syrup spread over his mouth and throat. He swallowed hard to get the -stuff down. It stuck to the tissues and diffused over his tongue and throat, and then he could feel it in his stomach.

And suddenly he was as satisfied as if he had eaten the steak dinner he had mentioned. He felt as if he needed to loosen his belt and back away from the table. Only when he touched his belly it felt as hollow as ever.

"That's great stuff. Too bad it isn't for real."

"It's dangerous. But it's an easy death, I am told —if there is to be death."

Joe shuddered involuntarily. All the Army experience he had known seemed no good here. Tamarina knew they were lost, but she knew *how* they were lost. That made the difference. Joe started to ask her once again to explain their situation, but she stirred.

"I must sleep," she said. "Do what you will, but remain near. The beacon will alarm us when it is detected."

He was too astonished to question how or where she would sleep. He sensed her moving away from the rock. She went a little distance and smoothed the sand, hollowing it to fit her body. Then she lay down. But she had done something else, too. From another of the packets she removed a pair of objects. She placed one just beyond her feet. The other, above her head. In a moment a soft blue haze enveloped her, like a giant easter egg, settling over her. Then the hazy light slowly disappeared.

And so did Tamarina.

How long he sat there watching the spot where she had last been, Joe had no way of knowing. He knew it was useless to go over and put his hand on the spot, but he did. He felt the cold, moist sand, the depression she had scooped out to lie in.

He returned to his seat by the rock, feeling his way in the darkness. Reality had fled. He was in- a black, wet womb where time had stopped and identity had disappeared. The only sensation was the incessant rain and the wash of the dismal sea on the near shore.

He needed sleep. He slumped against the side of the rock, sitting on the sand, the ram water puddling against him as it flowed down the slope of the beach. He had slept in worse conditions in jungles. Still, he fought against closing his eyes. Charley wasn't hiding in the grass beyond the beach, it was true, but when he was *there* he at least had a rough idea where he was.

Here—

He knew he had dozed, but it couldn't have been for long. The bluish haze was rising over the spot where he had last seen—or dreamed he had seen—the girl called Tamarina. And in a moment she was there again, in the depression in the sand. She was resting on one elbow, watching him.

"I couldn't leave you out there," she said. "Come here."

He approached slowly.

"Make a place in the sand as I did," Tamarina commanded. "Closer. The shell is very small. It is designed for only one person, but two can occupy it in an emergency."

He did as she instructed, not understanding what he was doing. He reclined beside her.

"Closer," she ordered. "The shell will cut off your leg if you are not inside the boundary."

He moved closer until they were touching. Tamarina examined the outline of the area they occupied and then touched the object near her head. The black, rainy night vanished. Joe and the girl were enclosed in a softly luminous shell, faintly golden on the inside. A gentle warmth radiated from it and began to dry his clothes and penetrate the chill of his body. The air was refreshed as if it seeped through the shell, but nothing of the night of rain and cold came through.

Joe became suddenly aware of the exquisite femininity of Tamarina, almost literally lying in his arms. But intimacy was farthest from her mind.

"Sleep," she said. "You will need all the physical resources you can gather."

He turned partially on his side, reclining on one arm. He rested his back against the curve of the shell, which was a warm and solid support. Tamarina watched him regarding her. She seemed more relaxed now.

"In a minute," he said. "You've told me your name is Tamarina, and that's all I know about you. Won't you tell me something more?"

"What?"

"What kind of a world is your home? What do your people do? What is the purpose of this travel in time and space which I have been caught up in?"

He thought for a moment she was going to refuse to talk of these things. Then her eyes grew softer as she stared upward at some infinity beyond the limits of the shell.

"I suppose I don't really have a world that is my home," she said finally. There was a moment's bitterness mixed with sadness in her voice, Joe thought. "Few of my people do. Not many of us are even born on the world our race comes from. I don't know where I was born—and I'm glad I don't. That way there's never a looking back to some beginning place. There's only a looking ahead. I like it that way."

"Your parents must know what world you were born on."

The girl laughed as if he had said something ridiculous. "Bill explained how your relationships are on Earth. They are nothing like that among my people. Marriage relationships can be as temporary or as permanent as people care to make them. My parents made it quite temporary.

"I saw my father only once, when I was a little girl, but I remember even now what a handsome and a powerful man he was. He was a hunter. He spent all his time on worlds of primitive development and hunted great animals like your own ancient dinosaurs and tyrannosaurs."

"That was his whole life—hunting?"

Tamarina nodded. "He loved it. He served as a guide for others at times, but mostly he liked to go alone, armed with only some primitive weapon like an explosive pellet gun such as you have on Earth. He could bring down a brontosaurus with one of

your elephant guns."

Her eyes shone brightly, and she smiled as she spoke of this man, her father, whom she had seen only once. Joe thought he understood her skill and bravado in the jungle.

"Why didn't he ever come to see you again?"

"Why should he? He was a hunter. That was his life. There was no place for me in it." Her head rocked gently back and forth in emphasis. "He was such a great hunter, such a great man. I still hear them tell stories about him in distant galaxies. And I can hunt, too, now. I could go on a hunt with him if he ever came back now."

"Maybe he will." i "No. I think he must be dead. He hasn't been heard of for a long time."

"I'm sorry," said Joe. "What of your mother?"

Tamarina's expression changed. "She was entirely different. Jungle worlds and dangerous hunts terrified her. Great cities and civilized worlds were her life. She was a great beauty, and nothing delighted her more than to make an appearance in the society of some world where she instantly outshone all the other beauties. She would remain long enough to stir up excitement and mystery and turmoil—and then leave, only to repeat it all on some other world."

"Were you with her more than with your father?"

"Very little. She took me to a world that overflowed with little girls. She thought it was a place where I could best be trained. It was a world where ninety percent of the population was female.

"She left me when I was about ten, in terms of your years, and gave me a set of the beacon cubes, instructing me how to use them and to do it on my sixteenth birthday. I did, and that is when I learned who my people really were."

"But I never saw my mother again."

"And your people," said Joe, "who are they?"

Tama'ina remained staring for a long time, her eyes focussed far beyond the limits of the enclosure. At last she looked at Joe, examining his features as if seeing him for the first time. "I must sleep," she said. "You, too. It may be dawn very quickly."

She closed her eyes, but Joe continued watching her. Her golden hair was almost dry. Her face was as relaxed as a child's. But there was a strength and a sense of experience in her features that gave the impression there was nothing in the universe she had not looked upon and understood.

She had much of her mother's beauty, Joe thought. And she must have much of her father's wild daring and fierce love of adventure. The two had produced a character that was willful and strong, demanding and unforgiving. But the strength had a brittleness, he sensed. He hoped Tamarina never experienced anything that could shatter it.

Envious of her mother and longing for her father, she must be searching the universe for a haunting something she could not name.

He still did not know who her people were or why or how they traveled among the worlds as they did, but he understood something about one small, beautiful, tough but fragile member of that race.

III

He was wakened by thick rain splattering his face. It poured into his eyes and nostrils, and he sat up, half drowned.

The shell was gone, and muddy daylight swabbed the landscape. Nearby, Tamarina squatted and was shaking his shoulder roughly. "Get up, Joe Simmons! Get up quickly—it's time to go"

He stared at her.

"They've found us, and you can go back to your world now. Hurry!"

Joe stood up. Tamarina grasped his hand and drew him at a run toward the square column of crimson light. Now, in the midst of the red beam, a white cylinder of light poured down. Tamarina cried, "Keep going. Don't stop. Get into the center of the white beam and wait. It will take only a moment, and you will be back where you started."

Joe drew back. "What about you? Aren't you coming, too?"

"There's no time to explain or argue." She jerked him toward the pillar of light. "I will go next— to my own time and place. Hurry!"

"But when will I see you again?"

"Never! Go now, Joe Simmons, or we'll both be lost!"

She shoved him through the wall of light with such force that he was almost thrown to the ground. He kept moving to retain his balance.

And entered the column of white light.

Instinctively, he knew it was impossible to go back. But he tried. He battered himself against the wall of light, and it was just as it had been on Hunt-ington's Hill when he first saw Bill Bradley there. A barrier, as tangible as a brick wall, held from passing through to Tamarina again.

It was like a circular prison, twenty feet in diameter. He looked up. Infinity seemed to be above. No clouds. Just brilliant emptiness. And the barren, brilliant walls of light. A sudden fierce claustrophobia drove him against the walls, battering his fists against them.

From somewhere—a million miles away—a golden voice cried a warning. "The center, Joe Simmons! Get to the center of the column!"

They were the last words he heard from Tamarina. Blindly sensing he must obey her, he crawled to the center of the space that imprisoned him.

Then slowly the lights vanished. The white column and the red square.

And he was lying on his back on Huntington's Hill, and it was snowing on his face.

The temperature must have been below twenty. It was night, and the snowfall was so thick he could see no more than a step or two in front of him.

Coatless, in an agony of sudden cold, he got to his feet and stood on the hilltop, his face upturned to the sky. The snowflakes fell on his face and stung his eyelids. His hands went out in front of him in a kind of mute appeal to the heavens as he stumbled and caught himself as he took a step, twisting about to search the blank, impenetrable sky.

"Tamarina—Tamarina—" His lips felt frozen as he whispered her name.

Freezing with cold and infinite loss he crushed his hands to the sides of his head and staggered and slid his way down the trail to the farmhouse.

The light of the dim bulb in the kitchen was barely visible. Joe stumbled to the kitchen door and beat on it with his fist. After his normal wait of an eternity Bill's uncle opened the door.

"Bill—!" Joe gasped. "Let me talk to Bill Bradley. I've got to talk to Bill—!"

The old man frowned nervously. "I told you he was up on the Hill. Didn't you find him? But I think you'd better see him tomorrow. He don't like to be disturbed when he's on the Hill. It's just as well you didn't find him." He stared suddenly at Joe in bewildered distaste. "You lost your coat," he said flatly. "What happened to your coat? You'd better come in and get warm before you go back."

"No—no, I'll be all right. I'll see Bill in the morning. I've got to get on back to town—" Joe backed from the door.

The cold seemed so intense that he thought he wouldn't make it to the car. The keys were still in his pants pocket, but it seemed like some kind of miracle that they should be. His hands shook so badly he could hardly start the car. It finally shuddered into action, and he got it moving down the driveway, and then he had to get out and clean the snow off the windshield before he could go on.

There was, of course, no heater in the wreck—not one that would work, anyway. He did have a blanket instead of a seat cover on the worn front seat, and he wrapped that around him. In an agony of cold he drove back to town.

It was two in the morning when he reached his room. He ripped off his clothes and stood in the shower to melt the cold. He let the warm water run over him and refused to think about what he had seen and where he might have been that night.

He sank into bed at last, but there was no sleep. His mind remained alive with vivid pictures that he could not smother.

Tamarina—standing in the rain scolding him furiously.

Tamarina—plunging through the jungle with skill that would have brought admiration from her great hunter father.

Tamarina—lying quietly in the confines of the protective shell, rehearsing the memories of lost parents.

Tamarina—thrusting him into the column of light, her voice and image fading as the beam transformed the world.

Tamarina—

Sleep came finally. It wasn't nearly long enough. He awoke with dreary, winter sunlight slanting through the window. The clock on the dresser said ten. But Joe wasn't fully conscious of his surroundings. They were a kind of mist that floated against a greater reality of wet beach and an ugly sea, and waist-high

grass pounded by the rain.

And a girl named Tamarina.

He thought of her name and remembered her golden hair flying in the rain as she dragged him toward a crimson column of light with a core of white. And her answer to the question: "When will I see you again?"

"Never!"

It couldn't have happened.

But what *did* happen? Dream? Illusion? Drugs? He knew that the whole experience may have been contained only in his own mind, that it may have had nothing to do with the real world.

But he didn't believe it. He was going to find Tamarina again.

Somehow.

And then he remembered the thing that had almost slipped his mind. Her name, Tamarina. He had seen it clearly written in Bill Bradley's papers.

Bill Bradley knew Tamarina. He was the key to all that had happened.

Joe dressed quickly, determined to find Bill Bradley and find out what had happened last night on Huntington's Hill. He checked the office for Bill's schedule, and found he was in an advanced physics class at eleven o'clock. It was near Joe's own freshman physics lab. He waited near the door for Bill Bradley to go into class.

A score of students entered, but no Bill Bradley. The instructor put his hand on the door to close it. "May I help you?"

Joe shook his head and walked away. He tried again at Bill's math class. He didn't show up there, either. As far as Joe's own classes were concerned, the day was a bust. He couldn't concentrate on anything, and he was, of course, unprepared in

Kinematics of Machines. In the afternoon he gave it up. There were two later classes, but it was no use. He got into the Chevy wreck and drove back to his room.

The door wasn't locked, as he had left it, and the two men were going through his things when he kicked it open.

"What the hell?" he said. He dropped his briefcase and took a defensive position. "What do you think you're doing?"

One of them, the pudgy one, turned back his coat and showed his badge. "Police," he said.

"Let me see your search warrant."

The officer ignored the demand. "Missing person case. We're just doing a little checking around. You know a fellow named Bill Bradley?"

"Sure. I've been looking for him all day."

"When did you last see him?"

"Last night—out at his place."

"The old Huntington place?"

"That's where he lives. Now tell me what this is all about."

Joe stayed near the door. The other officer was going through desk drawers as if he thought he'd find incriminating papers among Joe's lecture notes and lab books. But he was the big one; Joe intended to stay away from him.

"I guess you're the one, all right. Bradley's uncle called us this morning **and said Bill** Bradley went out last night and never came **back. He said** some fellow came inquiring **about Bill** and **had** gone up to the Hill, where **Bill did** some kind of experiments. The fellow came back, but Bill Bradley didn't. He hasn't shown up yet.

"The uncle found your name on some papers in Bill's room and decided you must be the visitor, since Bill never had

anybody come out from school. Is this right?"

"Roughly. I was there. I found Bill on top of the Hill, and we talked a little and he asked me to wait while he ran down to the house. He said he'd be back in a minute, but he never showed up again. I got tired of waiting around and went back-looking for him. His uncle said Bill wasn't there. I decided -they were all nuts and came back home."

"What did you go to see Bradley for?"

"Those papers his uncle found. Bill got hold of them in a mix up we had. I needed them for a class today."

"And you didn't get them."

"Of course not."

The officer rubbed a bare spot in the rug with the toe of his shoe. "The old man said a funny thing when we talked with him this morning. He said you arrived with a heavy car coat, but when you came back to the house asking for Bill you were in shirtsleeves. Is that right?"

Joe hesitated, his stomach reacting to the sense of entrapment. He never had been any good in the lying business. But he had to lie. He couldn't tell these clods about the experience on the Hill. There'd be only one alternative choice then: How did he want his cell—padded or barred?

"I loaned it to Bill," said Joe. "He didn't have one." This last was the truth, he remembered. "Why *he* was out there without a coat I don't know. I guess he just ran out of the house for a minute and didn't expect to need one for that short time. Ask his uncle. *He* knows all about coats!

"Anyway, Bill was freezing by the time I got to him and I offered to loan mine for his trip back to the house. I expected him to return with one of his own and give mine back."

"Why did he want *you* to stay on the Hill while he left—in shirtsleeves?"

"I don't know. He does nutty, absentminded things —the Professor type, you know. Anyway, he asked me to wait and said he'd be back in a minute with something he wanted to show me."

"And it was necessary to show it to you on the Hill in the middle of a snowstorm with a twenty-degree temperature and ask you to wait in shirtsleeves while he went to the house and back."

Joe nodded. "I said he does some nutty things." It was the best story he could come up with, and they didn't believe a word of it.

The big guy straightened from his business with the drawers. "There's nothing here."

"All right," said the pudgy one. "Don't go away, Simmons. We'll be wanting to talk to you some more."

Joe backed into the hall to let them pass. They moved on down the stairs without looking back. He went into the room and closed the door and locked it, simply from reaction. He was trembling all over.

Somehow, it wasn't like this with Charley out there in the jungle. He knew what he had to do there, and what the odds were.

But this stupid Bill Bradley! What had happened to him? Maybe he should cut and run now while he had the chance, Joe thought. If Bill Bradley had met with some kind of accident and his body should be found under suspicious circumstances, Joe Simmons would be the pigeon. That pair of country cops would see to that, he was sure.

Of course, if Bill shouldn't show up, they couldn't hang anything on him. So he could take his choice of chances: Bill Bradley had met with an accident and was dead; he had disappeared and would never show up; he could call—someday soon—and give Joe hell for lousing up whatever he had been doing on the Hill.

Tamarina.

Real or imaginary, he knew he would never see her again unless he saw Bill Bradley first—alive and able to explain what had happened on the Hill. So he wasn't going to run. He'd stay and gamble that Bill wasn't going to be found dead.

The rest of the week—Tuesday through Friday— passed and nothing happened. On Thursday the two policemen came back with a few more questions. They had been anticipating a sensational college slaying—over a girl, perhaps, but with no corpse they had no case. And Bill hadn't turned up as a corpse. But Joe sensed that if Bill Bradley didn't turn up soon—dead or alive—he'd be in for a session with rubber hoses down at the station house.

Once again, he considered running. But unless he adopted a false identity for the rest of his life he would be tracked through Army records, school re-cords, Social Security records. It's hardly possible to run any more.

He decided to wait until morning to make up his mind. He was thoroughly beat by the events of the week.

He went to bed about ten, and was wakened at two by clomping on the stairs. He looked at the clock and swore in exhaustion. It was that drunk Conley in the next apartment again. He tied one on about twice a month and Joe was fed up with it.

Wide awake, he listened to Conley's heavy stomp as he planted one foot on a step and dragged the other up to it. Then once again—stomp, drag— stomp, drag—

Sometimes Conley stumbled and fell on the steps with an assorted clattering. Joe waited for him to stumble, but Conley seemed a little steadier than usual. And slower. There were fourteen steps. At his normal rhythm it took just about six and a half minutes to negotiate. But tonight it would take half an hour at the rate he was going.

It came again. A clomp—not as heavy as usual— and a slow

drag. Joe got out of bed irritably and threw on a bathrobe. He was either going to throw Conley back down the stairs or drag him up and toss a bucket of water on him.

He flung open the door. At the same time the door across the hall opened a crack and a face leered him. Conley's.

"Fooled you!" Conley wagged his fingers and slammed the door. Drunk, all right. But in his own room—

Joe turned to the figure on the stairs. It looked like a bundle of shredded rags. There was dirt over the torn clothing, and Joe recognized the brown dark stains as blood. The figure was resting half way down the stairs before plodding one more step. Then he looked up and gasped a little as if recognizing after an eternity of struggle that the task was impossible, after all. He slumped and lay motionless.

But Joe had glimpsed and recognized that bloody, battered face before it turned away.

Bill Bradley.

IV

Joe scrambled down the stairs three steps at a time to the level where the injured Bill Bradley lay. He raised Bill's head and tipped back an eyelid from a staring eye.

Bill was completely unconscious. His face was unshaven and his beard matted. His hair was thick with dirt and shreds of grass and twigs. Joe hoisted him carefully in a shoulder carry and found Bill's rangy frame was a lot heavier than he had expected. Joe had carried a lot of guys like that in the jungle. Most of them dead, he found afterwards.

He kicked wider the door to his own room, which had been left partially open. He carried Bill inside and kicked the door shut behind them. He didn't think anyone had seen them. Conley was probably too drunk to remember that he had heard or seen anyone on the stairs.

Joe laid Bill on the bed, on top of the cover, and began stripping off the muddy, blood-stained clothes. They smelled of the jungle, the familiar stench that Joe knew so well. He wondered if possibly Bill had been somewhere on the same world where he and Tamarina had spent those unbelievable hours.

There was a jagged gash in Bill's chest, and enormous bruises blackened his right shoulder and upper arm. It looked as if he had fallen against a sharp boulder or a tree branch. When Joe touched the crusted mat of hair on Bill's head he found an open wound that began to seep blood as he disturbed it.

Bill's body was warm, and his pulse was strong. He did not appear to be in shock, but rather in a condition of exhaustion and unconsciousness from his injuries. Joe brought a bucket of warm water from the bathroom and bathed Bill quickly and dressed him in a pair of Joe's own pajamas. He dressed the chest wound as best he could. It would need stitches later on. He saved the head wound until last. There, he clipped the crusted hair and bathed the long cut and swabbed it with antiseptic. It, too, needed stitches, but Joe bandaged and taped it for the time being. He covered Bill warmly with blankets.

By the time Joe had finished, Bill was stirring and moaning. Joe suspected one problem was lack of food. Bill's lips were parched, and his big frame looked more gaunt than normal. Joe spooned some warm water to Bill's lips. Then he heated a can of bouillon, and Bill sipped eagerly a few spoonful before he lapsed into unconsciousness once more.

Joe knew he was taking a risk. He ought to get Bill to a hospital. Bill might be closer to shock than he appeared. But Joe wanted desperately to talk with him for just a few minutes to learn what he could of Tamarina. If Bill could regain consciousness for-just that long—

Joe sat by the bed and watched the face of the unconscious man. A few days ago he had felt a rage toward Bill Bradley for their collision on the campus. Now he felt a kind of special affinity. The collision had been Joe's fault. And without it he would never have known the experience of those hours on the alien world with Tamarina.

Now Joe shared the experience of Huntington's Hill with Bill Bradley. How it came about or what it meant he did not know. He wondered if Bill did.

But, whatever it meant, the experience bound them in a way neither of them could ignore.

Joe liked what he saw in the face of his companion. Bill's square face, with its unyielding jaw line, was in character with his big, rangy frame. He looked more like a farmer than a physics major, but Joe suspected that rough, angular frame held intense drive and determination. Methodical and slower paced, in contrast to Joe's often impulsive fury, Bill provided a compensation that would make a good combination of the two of them in any enterprise they might undertake together.

As Joe watched, Bill moaned again and muttered a few rambling words periodically. Joe determined he would wait until morning. If Bill was not rational by then, he would get him to the hospital.

After another hour, Bill broke into a violent chill that shook the bed. Joe put an electric pad under the covers and piled on more blankets. He plugged in an electric heater and turned it toward the heap on the bed.

The chill subsided in time, and beads of sweat began to stream down Bill's face. Joe wiped the sweat away and removed the heater and the pad, but he kept all the covers on. Then, after a time, Bill's face relaxed, and the tenseness drained away as he fell into normal sleep.

Joe relaxed too and sat back in relief. Bill's breathing was regular and deep now, and it was entirely possible he might arouse in a state of clear headed-ness.

Sunrise was near, and Joe's eyes were closed in a brief snatch of sleep when Bill opened his eyes. His grunting inquiry woke Joe as he mumbled, "Where—?" Then he recognized Joe and paused as if to sort out his recollections. His head, which had been raised, dropped back to the pillow. "You—Joe

Simmons. You blundered into the time channel. You killed her. You killed Tamarina—"

Joe leaped from the chair and knelt by the side of the bed. "She was all right! I saw her—on that world —and she was all right. She sent me back here—"

"Where is she? If you saw her, why isn't she here?"

"She told me she was sending me ahead—back to my own time—and she would follow to her own place. Where did she come from, Bill? How can we find her again?"

Bill Bradley rolled his head from side to side as if in an extreme of agony. "Something's wrong— something went wrong—or I would never have experienced the Time Wind. That means Tamarina is lost. If you hadn't blundered it would never have happened. But now that you're in it you've got to help me—provided we can ever reopen the channel."

"I'll do anything I can. Just tell me what needs to be done."

"I've got to get back to the Hill. You've got to take me there." x

"You're in no shape to get on your feet. How did you get here, anyway? How did you know where to find me?"

"I was dropped near the campus by the Time Wind. I had a piece of one of your papers in my pocket. It happened to have your address on it. You were the closest one I knew here in town." He straightened and looked about. "How bad are these cuts? Can we tape them together? I haven't got time to get them sewed up."

"I've taped them. You ought to see a doctor."

"No time." Bill Bradley closed his eyes with a sigh and lay still so long that Joe wondered if he'd lapsed back into unconsciousness. It would take at least a week for him to recover from these injuries. Joe wondered with a sick anxiety if Tamarina was being subjected to the same dangers.

Bill opened his eyes at last. "Get me something to eat. It's like a year since I last ate. Then I'll be ready to go."

Joe opened a can of vegetable soup and made some toast. Bill was in no shape to go back to the Hill. Yet he had to. Tamarina's life depended on it, Joe was sure.

When the soup was ready, Bill sat up on the edge of the bed and pulled the covers around his shoulders. He ate slowly and looked around, his eyes focussing better now as he looked at Joe. "You couldn't help it. I couldn't help it. Who knows how these things happen?" he said haltingly. "It's no one's fault, and it's everyone's fault." He smiled bitterly at his own words. "It sounds crazy, but when you seen what I've seen you'll know—"

"What have you seen?" said Joe softly.

Bill's eyes stared into the distance. "Worlds upon worlds. So many worlds you wouldn't know the universe could hold them all."

"Tamarina's world—?"

Bill looked startled. "What do you know of Tamarina? Oh, yes—you've seen Tamarina. You know. You know." He shook his head as if to clear the fog.

"What do we have to do for Tamarina? Where is she now?"

"I don't know. We have to go back to the Hill to find out."

He tackled the bowl of soup fiercely now. When he had finished, his eyes were bright, and he seemed alert. His delirium was fading, Joe thought.

"I suppose you thought Tamarina might be something you had dreamed. Well, she's real. The most real thing in all the universe." Bill's eyes were focussed far away, upon distant scenes no other Earthman had looked upon. He was dreaming dreams an Earthman had no right to dream.

And Joe thought: He's in love with her. That's what it's all

about.

"Tamarina comes from a world called Algor, so far distant you could never imagine it. And so long ago that its ashes are strung the width of a galaxy—" Bill swayed with sudden vertigo.

Joe took the bowl and the plate. "Lie down again, Bill. Let that food settle, and then we'll figure out how to get back to the Hill."

"You think I'm off my rocker?" Bill sank back on the bed, but he glared angrily. "Look, you've got to know about Tamarina and her people and Algor. Shut up and listen while I tell you."

Joe let him go on. Bill seemed compelled to talk now.

"Tamarina's people can travel in space—to any world they choose, in any galaxy of the universe. Time and space mean nothing to them. They have conquered both these barriers."

"One or the other has to mean something," said Joe. "If they've got a faster-than-light drive they're still going to distort time. The world they leave will not be there when they return."

"That's the crude logic of *our* science. They do it the other way about. They travel in time to obtain their transference through space."

Joe looked at him blankly. "Come again."

"That's what I said, too, when she first explained it to me. Look, time *and* space do not exist as such. We know that. Right?"

"The time-space continuum—"

"Yes. Time-space. But never time *and* space. They don't exist except as the continuum. So if you travel one vector you automatically travel the other. We've always thought in terms of space as the primary vector and worried about what happened to time as we did so. They don't. They travel the time vector and accept what happens in the space vector." . "I don't get it."

"It can be shown mathematically that in an infinity of time every particle of matter will occupy every coordinate of space. In other words, if I just sit right here for an infinite length of time I will see every galaxy, every sun, every planet right here next to me. O.K.?"

"I'm not that deep in the math."

"Take my word for it. It's true. Now, that means that if you can travel in time at will you can reach any particle of matter because it will simply appear in the adjoining space—at some point in time. Therefore, by traveling selectively in time you automatically travel in space—by waiting until the particles of matter in which you are interested come to you."

"Even if we suppose it works that way you would never be there at the time you wanted. You might be a hundred billion years from now—on that particular world."

"What does it matter?" said Bill. " 'Now' is when and where you are. There is no absolute measure of time. It's meaningless to consider such. If you visit another planet all you care about is the condition when you are there. That is *now* as far as you are concerned. It makes no difference if the place you came from is a few billion years one way or the other. Wherever you are is 'now'. And when you get back home it's the same 'now' as when you started. A single 'now' exists throughout the universe: The 'now' of any given observer."

"So at some point in time Earth is adjacent to the world of Tamarina—Algor. She travels to that point in time and just steps from her world to ours, Is that it?"

"That's it. As simple as that."

As simple as that, Joe thought. "But now she's lost. What must we do?"

"We have to undo the results of your blundering into the time channel." Bill's face darkened at the memory of the accident, but his voice was not quite so bitter.

"What did I do?"

"The time channel is set very precisely for the individuals who are traveling in it. Tamarina on her world, and I on mine were set to embark on an exploration of one of her favorite worlds. The time channel was set to bring us both there at the same point in the time-space continuum. When you blundered into my end of it you threw off the coordinates. But the control had already been set to transmitting position—on Algor. It was only by the merest split second that you were able to get into the channel before it closed.

"The net result was that we were all thrown far off the intended coordinates. Luckily, we landed on planets and not in empty space. You and Tamarina were drawn to one. I was transported to another."

"Then on the return," Joe said anxiously, "I was brought back here, and Tamarina—why didn't she go to her own world as she planned? And how can you be sure she didn't? Maybe she's all right," he added hopefully.

Bill shook his head. "Instead of being brought directly back here I was thrown into what is called a Time Wind. Not too much is known of this phenomenon. It's some kind of oscillation that bounces the traveller from one space-time point to another in wild swings. I landed on a dozen different worlds and was pummeled by storms and earthquakes and floods until I finally swung back here—not quite to my starting point, but near the campus."

"And Tamarina may have been caught in a Time Wind, too?"

"Not necessarily. The presence of a Time Wind always indicates some interference in the temporal channel. It could—and probably does—mean that the Bakori tapped the channel and captured Tamarina out of it before she arrived at Algor."

"The Bakori? What are you talking about?"

Bill closed his eyes and rubbed them harshly. "I didn't tell you

about the Bakori, did I? According to the Algorans, the Bakori are another race from far outside our time-space continuum, far beyond the edge of space, you might say."

"How can there be another continuum?"

"There are an infinity of them. The mathematical proof is available. Take my word for it. The Bakori are from one of them. The Algorans have discovered the Bakori are invading our continuum. The Bakori techniques are primitive, but they have found a way to latch onto some of the Algoran time channels and have wedged entries here and there. As a result, they have devastated a considerable number of galaxies out on the Rim.

"They could have tapped the channel in which Tamarina was returning to Algor and diverted her to their own world, widening the wedge a little further."

Joe felt a bitter chill of apprehension. He didn't understand who or what the Bakori were, but he sensed the menace implied by their very name. "If this has happened, how can we ever find her? Even if we contact Algor, what can we do?"

"Get them to send us to Bakor," said Bill.

V

Joe dug out some of his own clothes to replace the rags Bill had worn on his arrival. The clothes clutched uncomfortably at the length of Bill's rangy frame, but he nodded in satisfaction. "They'll do great until I get some of my own at home." He turned abruptly to Joe. "I want you to know I appreciate all this. I don't blame you for what happened. You didn't know what you were doing."

Joe nodded and let it go. He accepted Bill's attempt to make up for his earlier bitterness. Joe was bitter himself when he thought of the danger to Tamarina.

Bill swayed as he took steps around the small apartment. He saw Joe watching doubtfully. "I'll be all right. Let's get going."

Joe slipped on another coat, replacing the one he had abandoned in the jungle. He loaned Bill an Army overcoat that hugged as tightly as the rest of the garb. They went down the stairs, Bill clutching the railing for support until they reached the lower landing. There, Bill sat on the bottom step to rest. "Bring that heap of yours around to the door and I'll meet you."

"You're sure you can make it?"

"Tamarina's out there—somewhere."

Joe hurried to the back of the rooming house and brought the ancient Chevy to the front curb. Bill heaved himself up and moved with clumsy rapidity to the sidewalk. He stumbled into the car and slammed the door shut. "Get it going."

The day was only partly cloudy, and the road was not as slick as it had been that snowy night when Joe last made his way to Huntington's Hill. Traffic was light beyond the edge of the small college town. Patches of sunshine on the snow-covered fields were bright enough to hurt the eyes.

Joe glanced over the fields, the distant plains, the low hills jutting here and there, the farmhouses—it was all so ordinary and real. Could the experience with Tamarina actually have happened? He glanced at Bill Bradley out of the corner of his eye. He thought Bill might have dozed off, but his companion was simply staring out across the white fields. Seeing what? Joe wondered. Who was Bill Bradley, anyway? How did he come to be involved with a girl called Tamarina and a world called Algor? And a frightening menace called the Bakori, from beyond the edge of space?

"Are you from around here?" said Joe abruptly.

"No. I come from up north. Merrimec."

"I didn't think I'd seen you before. I've been around here all my life, except for the Army years. I don't remember your aunt and uncle being out at the old Huntington place."

"They just bought it a couple of years ago. Uncle Murph

thought he could farm the place, but it's hopeless. The ground's worn out."

"How did you first make contact with the Algorans —and Tamarina?"

"The Hill is one of their terminal spots. They've used it for years. I happened up there one night last summer when I saw that silvery glow stretching up like it went clear to infinity. I thought I was out of my mind. Hallucinations. It seemed like a gateway to another world. And when it died away, *she* was there.

"I couldn't believe it. I was just going to watch from where I was hiding. But she knew I was there.

I found that out later. And she came straight for me. She spoke to me in English and asked my name. The Algorans have language translators that enable them to pick up the language of the place they are visiting in a matter of minutes. She already knew English, however, because she had visited many times before.

"She came to the house with me, and my aunt gave her a room. I told them the girl's car had broken down, and Auntie didn't believe a word of it. I took Tamarina into town the next day, and she took a room at the Haslam Place. It was a whole week before she told me about herself and that she wanted my help in studying this area. In return, she promised me visits to her home world and other places.

"I couldn't believe it was real. But it was real enough. If we ever get through this and get her back, I'll tell you some of the things I've seen.

"But we've got to get her back!"

Bill Bradley said this suddenly with a fierce intensity that was like a cry of anguish. Joe turned sharply to look at him.

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "You don't know what it's like, the uncertainty of not knowing what's out there—"

"You love her," said Joe.

Bill leaned his forehead against his fist and pressed harshly. "Of course I love her," he said. "Of course I love Tamarina."

Joe turned the car off the road onto the lane to the farmhouse. Beyond, Huntington's Hill was bathed in snowy sunlight, bright, like some ancient temple mound.

"Are you going in the house?" Joe asked.

"I've got to get some of my own clothes. I'll only be a minute."

"I'll go on up to the Hill if it's all right."

"Yeah. Nothing can go wrong now." Faint bitterness crept back into Bill's voice.

Joe braked the car and climbed out. Bill went on into the house, and Joe wondered what the old man, his uncle, would think of Bill's sudden return in such battered condition. It didn't matter now. The police wouldn't be worrying any more about a corpse they couldn't find.

Joe looked up to the top of the Hill and began walking slowly towards it. The sun on the snow at the top made a kind of brilliant crown of light. In imagination he saw Tamarina there as she must have appeared many times to Bill Bradley. And now she was lost—somewhere between the worlds, or in the hands of the Bakori. He could never forget that if he had not stumbled so carelessly into the channel that night she would have been all right. His clumsiness had put her life in danger. It didn't matter that he couldn't have known, that there was no way for him to have known—

He trudged up the side of the Hill, breaking trail over the old path Bill used. He reached the top, and from there he looked down over the surrounding farms and the town of Midland off to the south. He could see the buildings of the campus. He looked up, straight above him, and wondered. He could see infinity from there.

He remembered that dawn on the alien beach when the white tube of light had appeared inside the crimson column and he had beat against it trying to get back to Tamarina. He *had* wanted to get back to her. He had wanted that more than he had ever wanted anything in the whole world.

He wondered what would happen now. How would they signal the Algorans? Did Bill have some kind of schedule worked out with them?

He glanced down the Hill. Bill was struggling pain-fully up the slippery trail. He had changed to some of his own clothes and had on the ancient woolen cap he'd worn the time they collided on the campus. He had a knapsack of some sort on his back.

He swung the bag off his shoulders as he reached the top of the Hill. "I grabbed some groceries, just in case."

Joe didn't ask him, in case of what?

Bill removed something from his coat pocket, and Joe recognized it as a small cube like one of those Tamarina had posted on the beach. Bill flipped it out of its container.

"She gave me some of these for emergency use. I've never used one before, ^'m not sure what will happen." He placed one in the center of the Hill in a spot cleared of snow.

"That's what she used on the beach where we were lost," said Joe. "She made a square out of eight of them. It was about a hundred yards on a side."

"She said to use only one. It's a beacon, she said."

"It's only that she used more," said Joe.

They stood back, watching. Freed of its capsule, the cube brightened in the way Joe had seen the others. A single pencil of crimson light rose to the heavens. It extended beyond sight, steadily intensifying.

"They're coded in some way," said Bill. The Al-gorans have a

scanner that sweeps constantly through the full time vector of this continuum. When it strikes one of these beams they know who's at the other end, according to the code."

"Will they be expecting Tamarina or you?"

"She said to use it if I ever needed to get in touch with her urgently. That's all I know."

They waited, looking upward to where the red beam pierced the clouds. They hunched their shoulders against the wind. It whipped the snow and tore the clouds to shreds that scudded swiftly through the red beam and past it. The sun appeared and vanished behind the clouds in periods of warmth and chill. There was no sign in the heavens.

Joe stomped his feet against the snow and packed it into ice. "Do you have another cube?"

"I don't want to waste thim. She gave me only five."

"Maybe one isn't powerful enough."

By midafternoon the sky thickened again with gray clouds that closed over the sun. The wind grew more chill. Bill glanced at his watch and tried to pierce the clouded sky with his eyes. He had been sitting on the knapsack for a while, but now he was standing, and Joe could see he was wobbly on his legs.

"Why don't you go down to the house? I can call you if anything happens."

"And miss the beam? I'll stay here till hell freezes over if I have to. But maybe you're right about the power." He unpackaged another cube and set it beside the first. "If that doesn't work I'll put out all the rest of them."

"Is there any chance that Algor has been overrun by the Bakori?"

"The Algorans aren't worried. That's one thing I don't understand about them. They don't seem to consider the Bakori

their problem at all."

As it grew darker the beam stood out more brightly. It would be visible all the way back to town, Joe thought. It would attract attention. Then, as he looked off into the distance at the shadowy outlines of Midland, he heard a sudden exclamation from Bill. He whirled about.

"It's coming!" said Bill. "The channel's opening!"

Joe could hardly see it at first. There seemed only a ghostly shadow that wavered like a silver aurora in the winter twilight. Then it intensified, and he saw a firm, faint column of light reaching to the ground, enclosing the red beam at its center. Where it pierced the sky the clouds seemed to flow around it as if it were a solid column. He felt a trembling in his legs. "When do we go in?"

Bill seemed to be watching for some sign of readiness, some optimum intensity. He held out his hand to keep Joe back. Then he beckoned. "Now. The channel is ready."

He stepped into the column of light. Joe followed.

Joe was determined to remain aware of what was happening and try to understand the mechanics of the transition. But there was nothing of which he was conscious. One moment they were standing in the center of the column looking through the silvery curtain of light to the snow covered landscape surrounding Huntington's Hill.

The next moment the white column of light had vanished. A hot wind swept a stinging spray of desert sand against them. "We're here," said Bill. "This is Algor."

VI

Joe didn't know what he had expected. He had envisioned perhaps a lush and luxuriant world, a Garden-of-Eden perfection. A world where nature had been completely conquered and molded to the inhabitants' desires.

Anything but this.

They were on a rock ledge a few feet above a desert floor. Behind and above them stretched a jagged cliff of red and purple rock hundreds of feet high and into the endless distance on either side.

They were at the base of a giant escarpment. To the left Joe observed a huddle of buildings at the end of a trail leading from the ledge on which they stood. Farther out in the desert that reached to the horizon there appeared a vast cluster of buildings, a great city.

Or, it had once been a great city Joe saw as he looked closer. All that remained now were ruins half covered by the drifting sands. No sign of animal or plant life appeared.

The two men saw only the skeletal remains of a dead or dying world. Joe stared in disbelief. "This is Algor?"

"Algor. We'd better get down to the terminal building. They'll be expecting us."

Dismayed by the ruin about them, Joe lifted the knapsack and followed Bill down the trail. Bill's frame slouched from side to side as if each step might be the last. He'd have to take time to recuperate before they embarked on any search for Tamarina, Joe thought.

The trail was only a quarter mile long before it leveled out into a broad, gravelled area at the entrance to a building. The building appeared to be made of a white concrete, and Joe could see now that the structures were all set into the face of the mountain, as if extending far back into the rock.

There were no windows. The surfaces consisted of planes adjoining each other at random angles. These gave the effect of giant crystals against the face of the escarpment. One of the plane surfaces slid aside as they approached.

Joe wondered if they would face a hostile reception as a result of Tamarina's loss.

Inside the doorway a man waited for them. Taller and thinner than Earth normal, he had a fragile appearance. But a glance at his face showed the man was anything but fragile. The face was hard and brown. Rusted steel was the thought that came to Joe's mind. The jaw moved with a mechanical motion as the man said in clear cut English, "Welcome. Please follow me."

There was no smile. The eyes penetrated as if projecting tiny beams capable of piercing all they looked upon. The man turned and walked away, down a long hall leading to the interior of the escarpment. Bill and Joe followed silently.

Inside, the walls appeared to be of the same white concrete as the exterior. The floor was of a darker, slightly resilient material. The chair and benches in the entrance room were plain and upright. There was no evidence of wood or other plant life materials.

In the darker areas of the interior the walls and ceiling flowed in self illumination. A hundred feet d[^]wn the hallway their guide stopped. A section of the wall slid aside to form a doorway. The guide invited them to enter and motioned them to a backless bench before the desk at which he took his seat.

"I am Choral," he said to Joe, "chief receptionist and guide to alien representatives. Bill Bradley has met me before. It is my duty to see that you are satisfied and given proper transportation to your destination world. Where do you wish to go? If you don't have a specific destination you may describe what you wish to experience, and I will show you a choice of worlds where this may be found."

"We want to see Tamarina," said Bill.

The Algoran punched a series of buttons on a small panel in front of him. He read off some lighted characters that appeared in his own language. "Tamarina is a Lost One," he said. "She is not available. We will, however, continue to honor the passes she has issued to you."

The Algoran's words froze Joe's belly. Bill's face paled. "What do you mean, Lost One?" he demanded. "What has happened to

her?"

Choral studied the screen once more. "She was misaligned through interference and went to a planet of—but you wouldn't recognize our reference. I believe you, Joe Simmons, were with her."

"She sent me back, and said she was going home."

"She never arrived. She was diverted by the Bakori. There has been no further contact. She has been designated a Lost One."

"What the devil does that mean?" Bill exclaimed. "Aren't you going to try to get her back?"

"Mr. Bradley," Choral said with his unchanging iciness. "I think you have been acquainted with our customs, even though Mr. Simmons may not be aware of them.

"We do not like visitors from our corresponding worlds. Our people occasionally give passes to those whom they wish to favor, such as Tamarina has given you. We do our best to honor such passes. They give you no license, however, to question our customs and laws. Now, if you will explain your desires I will see what can be done to satisfy your requirements."

Joe spread his hands in loss. "We came to see Tamarina. That's all we want. I do not understand— tell me, what does Lost One mean?"

Choral said, "In travelling to alien worlds, and coping with alien peoples and customs there is an inevitable element of danger. Scores of our people are in trouble of some kind constantly. They are captured, injured, lost, killed. The risk is accepted by the individual each time he begins a journey. His only lifeline is the beacon he carries. If he gets in trouble and is able to establish a beacon signal we send a rescue channel as was done in your case, Mr. Simmons, when you were lost with Tamarina. Beyond that, we cannot go. We cannot send out search parties or rescue teams for everyone who is in trouble or lost. We all know that when we go out. This risk is accepted."

"So nothing will be done for Tamarina?"

"Only if by some slight chance she is able to use a beacon to signal her location and condition."

Joe sat up straight. "How many of the cubes do travellers carry?"

"Eight."

"She used them all! She has no more to set up a beacon."

Choral's expression did not change. "We all take that risk," he repeated.

"Send us to Bakor, then," said Bill. "We will find her and bring her home."

"We do not pursue the Lost Ones. That is a basic rule of all our activities. I cannot be responsible for its infraction."

"The rule is yours. It applies to Algorans. But it need not apply to us. We could go without breaking your rule."

"I cannot take such responsibility."

"Then let us take our case to Susselein."

The name was one that Joe remembered from Bill's papers. It was the one he had mentioned to Tamarina, which startled her.

"Susselein does not accept demands. However, if you insist, I will see if he will give you audience. Wait here until I return." Choral got up and left the room, his long, thin body moving with cold hostility.

"Who is this Susselein?" Joe said. "What can he do for us?"

"He runs things here, everything connected with the travel operation, at least. I was introduced to him by Tamarina once. My request was a shot in the dark., I didn't know if we'd be able to get to him or not. But it seems to have worked."

Joe was astonished by the statements of Choral, the Algoran, concerning the attitude of the Algorans toward one another. It was another facet of the people Tamarina had partially described in telling him of her parents. There were no ties, no concerns that bound Algorans to one another. It was a world of individuality gone mad. "How can you figure these people out?" Joe said. "Not even trying to bail somebody out when he falls in the soup." He realized he was talking too loud. He wanted to hit something. "What could happen to Tamarina if the Bakori have her?"

Choral returned before Bill could make an answer. "Susselein will see you," said the Algoran. "You may present your request."

"Thank you," said Bill. "Please don't misunderstand us. We are concerned only about Tamarina."

Choral said nothing but led them through the door and a long way down the corridor to a chamber at the end. It was an outer chamber, and Choral left them there, indicating they would be called when Susselein was ready.

They sat down in chairs which were the first that had any degree of comfort. Bill slumped in exhaustion and closed his eyes.

"Do you have any idea what our chances are?" Joe asked.

Bill shook his head, eyes still closed. "I knew about this no-rescue bit, but I didn't think it would apply to Tamarina. I thought they would be willing to send us without any argument, and they would consider it an opportunity to get some intelligence on the Bakori. I was wrong on both counts."

"This world—it's a ruin. I thought it would be some kind of paradise."

"It took me a while to get used to it. It's a ruin because nobody lives here except a few die-hards out in desert villages, and a kind of priestly class dedicated to serving the machinery that enables the rest of them to live where they will."

"Nobody cares about Algor. Why should they? After they discovered time-space travel they could live where they pleased. Let other races develop worlds. Algorans can have the pick of the universe. Whatever luxury they want they can find already in existence—somewhere. A few of them do contribute to the worlds on which they live, but those are very much in the minority. The rest are parasites."

"Tamarina?"

Bill hesitated. "She's young. She's the product of the culture that reared her. She can change."

A door beyond them opened suddenly. An Al-goran entered slowly, smiling at the two Earthmen. He was tall, like the first Algoran, but much older. His hair was white and his face showed experience and wisdom, where Choral's had shown only determination and rigidity.

The Earthmen stood up, but the Algoran waved them to their seats. "We may as well sit here," he said. "It's comfortable." He took a seat beside them. "I am Susselein. I remember you, Bill Bradley. Tamarina brought you here." He turned to Joe. "And you are a friend of Bill and Tamarina?"

Joe nodded, wondering if the man understood the meaning of the word any better than Tamarina had. "I am Joe Simmons. It was my fault that Tamarina was lost. She helped me back to my own time but failed to return here."

Susselein nodded. "Yes. We regret that she is numbered among the Lost Ones."

"We want you to send us to Bakor to bring her back," said Bill.

Susselein regarded him with a smile of sad amusement. "You would penetrate a world which has devastated galaxies and suppose you could return with one of their captives? You must have some strange motive. I think it could only be that you love this daughter of Algor." He turned to Joe. "And what sends you to such a quest? It can only be that you, also, must go for the same reason. And so you two, who love equally this daughter of

Algor are determined to bring her back."

Joe avoided the sudden intense gaze of Bill Bradley. "Or else I don't understand the difficulty and the danger," Joe said.

"Ah, no," said Susselein. "Even ignorance is not reason enough to send a man to Hell looking for his treasure. You Earthmen are a strange kind. I have heard a few things about you from Tamarina and others. I only wish I had time to taste of your world first hand."

"Is it so impossible?" said Joe quietly. "This request of ours—"

"None of us Algorans have ever gone to Bakor. Voluntarily, that is. And none at all have ever come back."

"Aren't you concerned about their onslaught upon the worlds of this continuum? Aren't you concerned about driving them back?"

Susselein smiled again. "If we undertook to police the universe—this or any other—and punish marauders, we would do nothing else. And we would have long ago fallen before them. There is no time when, in some part of this universe, worlds are not preying on each other. Whole galaxies are sometimes oppressed or destroyed, and it is regrettable. But we cannot make all the quarrels of the universe our affair."

"And what about sending us to Bakor?"

"You persist? With no knowledge whatever of what you might encounter, or the odds against you—in this total ignorance you still desire to go?"

"You must know something about them. You could provide us with weapons, advice, equipment," said Bill.

"Tamarina is there," said Joe simply. He avoided Bill's eyes.

"Your chances of coming back are virtually nonexistent."

"But if we want to risk it—?"

"There is, I think, just one faint possibility of your success," said Susselein. "But if I am wrong you will never return from Bakor. What will become of you I do not know, but it will not be pleasant. There may be a chance, however, because I believe the Bakori are expecting you."

Joe and Bill stared at the Algoran.

"They will be expecting you, because they have taken Tamarina as bait. They expect someone to follow to her rescue. They are not aware of Algoran customs. And if someone does come I think they will be full of apologies and gladly hand her over to you."

"Why would they do that?" said Bill. "What would be their purpose?"

"Because you would then take Tamarina and return here by time channel, and they would try to wedge open the channel to force full entry into this sector."

"Could they do that?" asked Joe.

"They could not touch Algor. It is possible they might penetrate other areas by means of our channel, but we would simply seal off those areas. We are quite safe here. There is no cause for concern about Algor."

"And if they have not planned as you suggest—?" said Bill.

"You will not return, as I said. If you go, you will be gambling entirely on whether my estimate of the Bakori intentions is correct or not. Do you wish to take that risk?"

They nodded simultaneously.

"I can speak only for myself," said Bill. "Nothing else matters but trying to find Tamarina." He turned to Joe. "But there's no need for you to take this risk. Let them send you back to jparth. I'll get in touch with you when I return."

"I want Tamarina safe, too," Joe said quietly.

VII

Bill's injuries were treated by the Algorans and healed in a matter of hours. The Earthmen were assigned quarters and acquainted with the food service and other facilities of the living area.

The following day Susselein met with them and began to outline the plans and preparation for the transfer to Bakor. Afterwards, he said, "Would you care to see the machinery of the terminal? It might be of interest to see what lies behind the excursions that take Algorans all over the universe."

"We certainly would," said Joe. Bill nodded enthusiastic agreement. He had never been invited to see this, even though he had been on Algor numerous times.

Susselein led them to elevators that took them down through the solid rock of the escarpment to levels far below the desert. They came out on a balcony overlooking a floor on which endless bays of unrecognizable equipment stretched for hundreds of feet into the distance. Scores of operators sat at monitoring stations checking communications with tens of thousands of Algorans and checking their transfers between the galaxies.

"This is our main operating floor," said Susselein. "Each of the bays you see controls one time-space channel. Transfers are entirely automatic unless the traveller wants special information. Then he is relayed to an operator who provides the information.

"The equipment is largely self-operating and self-repairing. Dual installations for each channel prevent a breakdown in transit. We have no losses as a result of mechanical failure."

Bill was ecstatic at the sight. "I never dreamed there was so much—. Do you use a nuclear power source?"

Susselein nodded. "It is the only thing left to us on Algor. I wanted to show you this to help you understand the scope of our work. Our people here are dedicated to maintaining this service for Algorans throughout the universe. I wanted you to know that

we are not just a few old men here on an abandoned world with little boxes of gadgets."

"We never supposed that," said Bill defensively.

"But without seeing, you would not understand."

"No. I didn't understand how enormous an operation you have."

"Are there other communities on Algor?" said Joe.

"None like this. This is the only time terminal. Other communities are mostly small desert villages of people who cling to old ways and have never desired to travel among the worlds. We pay no attention to them. We scarcely know they exist."

"How long has the terminal been in existence?"

"In terms of your time, about five hundred years."

Joe reflected again on what he had learned of the Algorans. For five centuries they had lived as total individuals, without regard for one another. It must have come gradually. They must have started as a people who lived in families and worked together and cared for one another. But could they ever again understand the possibility of cooperative, group action? Could they understand the meaning of a family, a city, a nation? Yet the technicians remained. There must be something that held them together. Without them, the whole system would break down.

Joe asked the question, "What keeps the technicians here? How do you recruit new ones?"

"We have surrounded the post with what you would call mystique," replied Susselein. "We select intelligent, loyal, apprentices from out in the field. One in a hundred is finally qualified. It's the one thing that unifies our scattered people—the honor and exalted station of being called to serve at Base Terminal. So far, we have survived on that mystique. If it ever dies, Algor will die."

Algor would die, then, Joe thought. Someday it would fail. A mystique was not enough to maintain a vast technology. The technology itself had to have meaning and significance. There was none here. Tamarina had testified to that.

Joe felt depressed as he grasped the utter futility of the whole Algoran enterprise. He studied Susselein closely. The Algoran was highly intelligent. Did his personal views coincide with his devotion to duty? Joe suspected a more candid expression might turn up a difference. But he didn't risk probing now. They had gone far enough in questioning the Algoran system.

"We appreciate seeing the terminal," he said. "On Bakor we'll be more comfortable knowing all this is behind us."

"On Bakor," said Susselein sharply, "nothing will be behind you except an old man's intuition and hunch. You could not be going with more feeble support!"

The preparations were intense. Bill, even with all his experience, had not realized what would be involved in going to Bakor.

Since Bakor was not in the same time-space continuum as the common universe of Earth and Algor it was necessary to cross the border between the continuums. There was no fixed reference common to any two continuums so it was impossible to find the precise coordinates of Bakor from Algor.

Only if a beacon had been set up on Bakor would this have been possible.

As a result it was necessary to take a ship equipped as a time terminal. The ship would be projected from Algor to an approximation of Bakor's locality. From that point, a more precise determination would be made, and the two Earthmen would land on Bakor as if they were ordinary spacemen in that continuum.

"I didn't expect to become a space pilot," Joe said. "That takes *years*."

"We won't do much piloting. It will be handled mostly by computer, so automatic that about all we'll have to do is push the button, 'B for Bakor', and we'll get off there. Just like an automatic elevator."

"The Algorans can do this, and I wonder what else they might do if they chose. Yet they are content to be parasites. They refuse to take any stand against the Bakori. What a waste!"

"Maybe they've learned something we haven't."

"They could organize galaxies, spread knowledge throughout the universe, stop the deprivations of the Bakori and their kind. If their philosophy is correct, everything man has struggled for all these thousands of years is futile."

"And maybe *that's* the great secret the Algorans have learned," said Bill. "Anyway, nothing we say or do is going to change their life style. Our problem is to get to Bakor and bring Tamarina back."

The ship made available by the Algorans was a comparatively tiny thing, a yellow, egg-shaped vehicle, no more than thirty feet long. The interior was crammed with propulsion machinery and tune channel controls. The space for the crew was scarcely larger than that of the old Apollo moon ships.

After some ground instruction and a half dozen flights with an Algoran instructor the ship was turned over to Joe and Bill for a trial run. The ship was cradled on a small launching platform at the focus of a time channel. They entered and strapped themselves in, checked the life support systems, and closed the hatch. Bill signalled they were ready. One moment they were on the platform under the glaring sunlight of Algor. The next, they were in the blackness of outer space. Through the ports Joe glimpsed the pinpoint stars, hard and unwinking.

"We moved ten months into the future with respect to our previous point," said Bill. "That's Algor off to your left."

Joe glanced at the bright star. "I wonder if Earth is out there somewhere."

"It must be, but I wouldn't know how to find our sun." Bill checked the chronometer. "Time to get on with the exercise. If we miss schedule, Algor won't be there when we get back."

"And nobody would mind a bit." Joe thought of Tamarina. "They'd label us Lost Ones and forget about us."

Bill made no answer. He checked the list in front of him and prepared to operate the controls as the hands of the chronometer moved to the set time.

Joe checked his own list as Bill pressed the controls that set the ship moving under its own power.

"Acceleration point one two green," Bill called off.

"Check."

"Course eight one, absolute."

"Check."

It went like clockwork. Bill had been right. All they had to do was press the 'A for Algor' button or the 'B for Bakor'. Joe let his mind flicker a moment over the vast unknowns surrounding them—an alien segment of space, at a time which could be within a range of a million years of their own, manipulating a ship built by creatures on a world they had never seen—'

He jerked his attention back to the checklist.

"O.K." Bill said. "We touched the target coordinates on dead center. Now to get back to Algor."

Joe read from his checklist. "Spatial displacement has gained us a plus component of three and one-half hours, and the time required for the traverse was point three six hours. At zero, zero, six ten we reset for time return."

"Right. Everything is on the button so far. These Algorans may not be much on housekeeping—letting Algor run down the way they have, but they're some gadget makers."

"They didn't build this ship, did they?"

"No. They designed it, and farmed the fabrication out to one of the worlds they visit. They do that with everything. They have no factories or shops for work this size. Here we go—"

He set the controls, and the ship's computer selected the precise time for activation. In an instant the blackness of space disappeared and they were blinded by the light of the Algoran sun pouring through the ports.

Susselein was outside when they opened the hatch. "A perfect alignment," he congratulated them. "You act as if you've been doing it all your lives. I expected at least to have you end up a few miles out there in the desert."

"It's your machine," said Bill. "We just punched the buttons the checklist said to punch."

"You're ready to go," said Susselein. "There's nothing more you need from us. Provided you're still determined to go—"

Bill scraped the drifted sand on the platform with his shoe. "We'll go."

Joe nodded agreement and looked up at the sky. "I'd just like to know where Earth is from here."

Susselein smiled. "So far in both time and space you couldn't comprehend it. A dead, nameless cinder. You wouldn't want to know about Earth in that condition. Think always of it in the 'now' that you know. Then you'll be all right."

Much of their briefing had concerned the conditions they would find on Bakor and the supplies and equipment needed. Bakor was a dark, hot world, far from its sun, which gave only a dim light, scarcely more than a full moon on Earth. Its heat came from internal fires of radioactive tumult that still burned at its core.

The Bakori themselves were biped creatures, as hair-covered as apes. Their skin was dark, and their features were not unlike

those of men and Algorans. This much the Algorans knew from communication with devastated worlds overrun by the Bakori, although no Algoran had even seen a Bakori in person. None, that is, who had returned to tell about it. Many Lost Ones were suspected of having encountered the Bakori.

Bakori science in time-space travel was far behind that of Algor. But in the field of psychic powers and weapons the Bakori were superior to any. It was through such forces that they attacked and conquered. They could cast illusions before the minds of a whole planet, illusions which drove the populations to destruction. They had no need for explosive, burning, corrosive weapons, which destroyed a planet as well as its people. When their attack was completed, the world remained almost whole.

It was not planned that the Earthmen should attempt any deception on Bakor. They were to gamble on the intuition of Susselein that the Bakori would welcome them and lead them to Tamarina. If the gamble failed, they had no second course.

The yellow egg of the little starship came into the alien continuum within range of the Bakori sun. It was a blinding, blue-white fireball. Bill consulted the computer charts. "We're on the opposite side from Bakor. We've got to cross the whole solar system."

It was slow, even at the best speed the ship could muster. They had traveled untold millions of light years in the flick of an eyelid, and now they plodded at snail's pace across the alien solar system to Bakor, which was farthest from its sun.

They amused themselves and passed the time irritably with games and problems, knowing that every moment increased the danger to Tamarina. When at last they were only a twenty-four-hour day from landfall Bill said quietly, "I think we ought to talk about something."

"What?"

"Us. And Tamarina."

"We're going after her. What is there to talk about?"

Bill shifted awkwardly in the bulky, padded couch. "What Susselein said back there that first day—is it true?"

"He said a million things. Which one am I supposed to know if it's true or not?"

"Damn it!" Bill raged suddenly. "You know what I'm talking about. Tamarina. Are you hi love with her?"

"How could I be? I've seen her only once." Joe's thoughts went back to that first day in the jungle. In his mind he saw again the rain-drenched spitfire calling down the wrath of a dozen galaxies on him. He remembered the aching loneliness when she disappeared in her little blue egg on the sand that night— and the relief when she came back for him. Most of all, he remembered that awful moment when he beat against the walls of light that enclosed him to return him to Earth while Tamarina faded from view beyond the imprisoning light. He remembered that feeling. His smile faded. "I think that once is all it would take," he said.

"I wanted to know," Bill said. "We both had to know."

"Is she like the rest of them, really?" Joe felt a sadness now, thinking of her. "Spoiled, selfish, not caring for anything in the universe except her own little corner of pleasure?"

"She's all of that, and more. She's stubborn, tyrannical, narrow—"

"Then we must both be crazy."

"But she can change," said Bill solemnly. "She can be changed. She's the product of her culture. She's | never known any life but a frantic plunge from one end of time to the other, always searching for some new pleasure, some new excitement. But she knows there's another way to live by confronting existence instead of forever running from it. All she needs is someone to show her."

"And you're the one to do that?"

"I intend to be."

"Does she know?"

Bill shook his head. "I'll give you one brotherly tip: Don't let her know you're interested in her—yet. Don't make the mistake I made. It almost lost me access to the time channels completely. She's not ready. She simply wants to go—to this time, to that—to this world, to that one. It's like a drug. They never seem to get enough, and they care for nothing else. Tamarina is no different from the rest."

"Tamarina is different, or we wouldn't be here."

"Yes," said Bill. "We both know there's something beyond the selfishness and coldness—or we wouldn't be here. But in the end she may have nothing to do with either of us."

Their eyes ranged the ship's course shown on the screen in front of them. At last Joe said, "I'm sorry. I wish it were some other way—"

Bill smiled with friendly warmth. "I don't. I know you won't let me down no matter what happens, as long as we're trying to get Tamarina back home. You won't let Tamarina down. You might otherwise be tempted to give up when the Bakori start to show their teeth. So it's good the way it is."

VIII

Joe watched the screen, the myriad alien worlds that did not belong even to the same space-time in which he and Bill and Tamarina had been born. Nightmare worlds, born of suns that had no being.

Bill studied the computer indications. "That must be Bakor, that faint disc." It was so dark they could have passed it without being aware, if their instruments had not been set to detect it.

They set the computer-linked telescope to scan the surface of the planet during its rotation as they slowly advanced upon it.

The computers would find for them the centers of population and determine where spacecraft were harbored.

The ship was equipped with radiation detectors and decoders. There was a wealth of electromagnetic radiation emanating from the planet, but the output of the decoders when fed into the language translators did not result in anything intelligible to the Earthmen. They had been relying on the Algoran language translators to put them in communication with the Bakori. Now they worried that they might not be able to make themselves understood.

"The translators may work differently in face to face conversation," said Bill.

"I don't see why they should. I wonder of Susse-lein could advise us now if we told him what we've found so far."

"We're on our own. I'm sure he's given us all he can. Besides we've used all the time we can afford.

If the Bakori should decide no one is coming for the bait, they would destroy Tamarina."

The ship approached on the night side of the planet. Their screens showed buildings, conglomerate clusters, hive-type structures. There were streets and vehicles. But there were almost as many small air vehicles as there were ground types. It seemed a busy place, even on the night side.

They located the spaceport at the point marked by the computer. Visual confirmation showed it must, indeed, be a major space facility. Numerous craft of all designs and configurations occupied pad space. From some of them, figures could be seen emerging. Others were entering.

"Bakor International Spaceport," murmured Bill. "Space travel must be a big thing here. I wonder how *they* manage the language problem."

Cautiously, they neared, watching for challenges, barriers, interceptors. It seemed impossible a warlike planet such as

Bakor would permit unchallenged entry of an unidentified ship.

There was nothing.

Then men felt uneasy. It was like walking into ambush. A challenge would have relieved the tension. Bill took the manual controls and eased the ship toward an empty berth on the vast, circular field. "It looks like they're going to let us in and ask questions later."

Joe remained silent, watching the approaching dark landscape. He wondered when they would be making the trip in the opposite direction—or if they would.

Minutes later, the ship touched down. The spaceport showed on their screens. Figures moved in the distance, but no one approached their ship.

"Let's move it," said Bill.

The external sensors told them the temperature was an unpleasant 98, and the humidity was an even more unpleasant 90 percent. The atmospheric pressure was 1.4 Earth normal. Gravity was 1.2. Oxygen was 17 percent, and no noxious gases were indicated.

"A hell of a place to take a walk," said Bill. "If internal heat can give that kind of atmospheric conditions there must be enough radioactivity to blow the place up."

He and Joe donned the lightest clothes available and swung their complex packs to their shoulders. Supplies and equipment had been carefully allotted and packaged before embarking from Algor. They carried concentrated foods, medical supplies, tools, weapons, and fifty time beacon cubes—enough to establish communication with Algor through the continuum boundary, it was hoped.

Joe cracked the seal on the door and opened it slowly. The dense, humid atmosphere washed over them with its fetid, jungle smell. It reminded Joe of his days of Asian warfare, so far away now that he wondered if it had ever happened.

He stepped to the ground, sweating already in the jungle atmosphere. Bill followed and closed the door behind him, setting the intricate combination latch that would keep it sealed against intruders.

Joe scanned the surroundings. He pointed to a cluster of structures to their right a quarter of a mile around the circumference of the field. "If they've got anything that serves the purpose of administration buildings that must be it."

Bill agreed. "Let's go."

Walking in the humid atmosphere with heavy packs and the extra weight of their own bodies drenched them in sweat. They sucked the oxygen-light atmosphere in heavy gulps and slowed their pace. "Breathing this hellish stuff is like filling your lungs with cotton," said Joe. "I wonder how long a human being could stand it. I wonder if Tamarina—"

He stopped in midsentence as a flare of light caught the corner of his eye. He whirled, grasping Bill's arm fiercely. "The ship—!"

Behind them, the ports of the little vessel showed a surging yellow glare. "Fire—!" Bill cried.

They raced back toward the vessel, gasping and stumbling under their own heavy weight. But before they had covered half the distance they knew it was too late. The outer skin of the ship was already bright from the heat of the internal fires.

They stopped, their lungs heaving, silent at the disaster before them. Then, with a small puff, no greater than the explosion of a popped balloon, the vessel burst open. Its burning contents hurtled lazily through the air. The flames of a score of tiny flares slowly burned out.

"So that's why they didn't challenge us," Joe said finally. "They waited until we landed and were out of it. Then they blew up the ship. But why didn't they do it while we were still inside?"

"We don't know they did it. Maybe something went wrong.

Something we did ourselves."

"Ill take all bets on that," said Joe.

Numbed by the destruction of their only physical means of return, they automatically felt of the packets in which they carried the time beacons. The cubes were now the only link with Algor—and with Earth.

Joe felt cold in his belly in spite of the atmospheric heat. "Maybe we're going to find out what caused it. It looks like the welcoming committee is headed this way."

Bill turned back to the direction in which they had been heading. Halfway from the buildings a group of six Bakori marched swiftly toward the Earthmen. It was the men's first glimpse of the fabled and dreaded Bakori at close range.

The Bakori were as they had been described— humanoid in general features, covered with hair almost of the density of fur, except for hands and face. Their skin was not truly black, but, rather, a deep purple hue. In contrast to heavy, thick bodies, their facial features were thin and fine to the point of handsomeness by earth standards. Their eyes were sharp and intelligent.

They wore loose clothing consisting of baggy trousers of coarsely woven material and abbreviated shirts that seemed more for convenience in holding a number of pocketed objects rather than for covering. They wore a sandal type footwear.

They appeared weaponless, but Joe kept his hand within grasping distance of the gun at his waist. Bill saw the movement. "Easy—"

The Bakori approached and ranged themselves in a semicircle about the men, their eyes inspecting every detail. The men remained motionless, waiting for some action from the aliens, but none came. At last, Bill shifted his translator hanging from his shoulder and turned it on.

At this, the Bakori in the center of the group smiled faintly

and spoke. "Put it away. We will use your language. There is no need for such crude devices."

"How do you know it?" exclaimed Joe.

"We look at your faces, we know your language. That is all that is necessary."

Joe remembered what he had heard of the psychic powers of the Bakori and he felt a small chill at the back of his neck. If they knew this much, what else did they know?

"We have been expecting you," the Bakori said.

"Allow us to accompany you to the Director, who will tell you what you want to know."

The men cast a final look in the direction of their ship, whose fires had almost died. The Bakori leader followed their glance. "It is unfortunate your vessel had such an accident. There is no loss. We will provide you a ship and a crew to return you to your home port. You will need only to navigate."

The men walked on in silence. The Bakori surrounded them with what seemed unnecessary care. Joe wondered where he and Bill would run to if they took it in mind to flee.

The Bakori walked fast. The two men were breathing in gasps by the time they reached the buildings, but neither of them wanted to show the Bakori they could not keep up.

It was difficult to get used to the dimness of the light, which seemed as oppressive as the atmosphere. Dim light panels and bulbs illumined the walls and hung from posts at intervals. These apparently matched the intensity of the feeble sunlight the Bakori were accustomed to.

The building to which they came seemed a planless accumulation of molded chambers piled atop one another at random and connected by tunnel-like passageways.

"It is night," said Joe to the Bakori leader. "Your Director will

not want to be disturbed."

"You are expected," the Bakori said again. "The Director awaits your arrival."

Joe wondered how accurate was Susselein's estimate of the situation. Just how were they expected, and what was planned for their reception?

They entered the building, whose walls seemed cast of porous, volcanic stone. Dimly lit passageways wound tortuously in no rational pattern through the structure. The men quickly lost all sense of direction and could only stumble blindly beside the Bakori in the dimness.

After much climbing, the group halted at the end of a long tunnel, the straightest of any they'd traversed so far. They halted at an open doorway.

The room to which they came was large and magnificent in contrast to the plainness of all they had seen so far. The wall hangings and the floor covering were of luxurious fabric that gave the Earthmen the impression of a palace room out of the Arabian Nights. The furniture was exquisitely carved of natural wood, both plain and with rich grain, and upholstered in green and golden fabrics.

At the far end of the room a single Bakori was seated. He rose as the men entered, sweeping his arm grandly in a gesture of welcome. "Welcome, Earth-men," he said. "Welcome to the presence of Amular, Director of Bakor."

He was tall, bigger than the largest of the Bakori that now retreated from about them. His dress was similar in style, but luxurious in fabric and design. The cloth of his shirt glistened iridescently in the faint light. He beckoned. "Come."

Joe and Bill moved slowly forward, treading silently on the thick carpeting. "We are honored," said Bill as they came to a stop. "We observe that we have arrived in the night time and regret the disturbance."

The Bakori gestured deprecatingly. "Nothing," he said. "I am pleased to welcome you." He waved them to nearby seats on a couch fashioned in the form of a great beast in a stylized manner, lying prone to support the sitters on its back. Joe wondered what jungle world harbored such a beast.

Amular sat across from them on a pile of soft cushioning, like an Oriental potentate. "We will have refreshments presently," he said. "I believe we shall match your tastes quite well, although the form may be unfamiliar. We would not want it said that the Bakori are not good hosts."

Joe thought of the stories of Bakori deprivations on scores of worlds and contrasted it with Amular's concern about good manners. And then Joe sensed a flash of insight as he glanced once more about the room. These luxurious furnishings were not of Bakori manufacture. They were loot of conquered worlds.

Amular caught his glance. "Beautiful, is it not? We hunted ten galaxies for such treasures as these. Here on Bakor you will find the art and treasures of a half billion years of workmanship in a thousand galaxies.' • I hope we may show you more of our treasures before you leave. But now—your reason for the extreme pleasure of your visit."

"We were told," said Bill slowly, "that we were expected. You know, then, our purpose in coming. One of our people has been lost in a time channel between the worlds. The Bakori have great skills in time communication so our search has led us here. This person is known as Tamarina and is very dear to many of us. We would hope that she may be found among the Bakori."

The Director smiled in amiable agreement. "Your hope is well founded. She is here. We expected someone would surely come searching for her, although she has no such hope for herself."

Joe could not quiet the sudden hard pulse in his chest. "Is she well?"

"Yes. She is distressed because she believes there is no way to return home. But your coming will relieve that distress."

"When may we see her?" Joe could not restrain his irnmilsiveness. Bill frowned warningly.

The Bakori seemed to enjoy the eagerness of the

Earthman. "Your Tamarina is not here. She arrived at a place quite some distance away and has not been moved. Tomorrow you will be furnished transportation and directions to lead you to her. For now, however, I suggest you participate in our refreshments and rest yourselves. It is somewhat of a tedious journey to her location."

Joe did not need to be warned again that they had best accept the Bakori hospitality. He sensed that the big alien leader was intent on showing his stolen riches and his fine foods and the Earthmen had better appreciate them.

And then, with a rising apprehension, he recognized what they were confronting. Even though they had come out of their own time and space they were facing one of the oldest phenomena of Earth. The barbarian mentality.

The barbarian takes pride in captured riches. He exults in his power to capture, and his power to destroy if he chooses. But he never creates. He destroys that which he can't understand, that which he envies, that which is superior to him.

That was the pattern that fit the Bakori. That was the pattern that filled this, room. It fit the unabashed gloating of Amular.

The barbarian lacked capacity for friendship equally. Joe looked at the heaping platters and trays of unfamiliar foods that were being placed on the low table in front of them. It was not likely that the foods would be poisoned. That belonged to a higher level of civilization than the barbarian. They were more likely to be strangled in their beds as they slept.

But that would not happen, either. Not as long as the Bakori were looking for something to which the Earthmen and the Algorans could lead them. Not as long as Susselein's predictions held up.

Joe glanced at Bill, and the two men followed the lead of the Bakori hi picking up with their fingers a delicately steaming piece of white meat.

"Lizard," said the Bakori with a hearty laugh. "Not the kind of thing you are accustomed to, probably. But very tasty, is it not?"

It was. "Very good," said Bill. "Very delicious." He helped himself to another piece, following carefully the lead of Amular. Bill had recognized the qualities of Amular, Joe thought. He knew, too, they sat in a barbarian presence.

IX

The sleeping rooms to which they were introduced were in keeping with everything else Amular had shown them. Silk-like fabrics that Amular assured them had come from a now-dead system a thousand light years from Bakor. A tub for bathing that held cleansing liquids that seemed to grasp the skin like tiny, massaging fingers. It left them soothed and relaxed to the point of lethargy. Each in his separate room dropped into a bed of luxury that somehow matched its own firmness to the desires and motion of its occupant. In spite of themselves, they slept.

Awakening came with a start. Joe raised his head and glanced about, not recognizing his surroundings for a moment. Then he remembered the events of the night: the landing, the destruction of the spaceship, the meeting with the Bakori leader, their meal, and assignment to these rooms.

It was lighter than it had been. The sun must be up, its feeble light offering all the illumination they were going to see. But that wasn't what had wakened him. He remembered now. A sound. He cocked his ear to the window which overlooked a courtyard below their second story quarters. The sound came again, a fierce hissing noise, concluding with a sharp crack, as if a stick of wood had snapped.

Joe jumped out of the bed. Bill entered the room from the connecting door. "You heard it?" he said. "What the devil is it?"

"I don't know. It seemed to come from right outside the window."

From the window they peered into the dim courtyard below. Then Bill jumped back, almost falling to the floor. A shadowy object passed before the pane of transparent material—which resembled glass but which flexed to the touch.

Joe swore softly and stared, his head craning to follow the movement outside. "Did you see that? I don't believe it—"

Bill returned to the window. The object reappeared, a narrow, pointed bill of a bird. The bill was at least three feet long, and the bird was standing on the ground of the courtyard fifteen feet below the level of that bill.

The bill touched the window substance and flexed it inward gently. Then the eye appeared, a red and white staring eye as big as a saucer. It remained, glaring at them, the whole creature immobile while the men stared back.

"Those wings—" said Bill. "They look like leather. The whole thing is like a giant pterodactyl."

The creature hissed again as if in violent disdain of what it saw and then snapped its beak with the sound of cracking wood. It moved away from the window, stalking stiffly on spindly legs.

The men could now see the entire creature. It looked as near like reconstructions of pterodactyls as could be imagined, except that the wings were even longer.

"Pets—maybe?" said Bill.

They turned at a movement behind them. It was a Bakori, one of those who had served them the night before. He bowed faintly and smiled. "You are interested in the Creals?"

"The birds out there—is that what you call them?" said Joe.

The Bakori nodded. "The Creals. They are very fine, aren't they now?"

"Without having seen any others, I don't have much basis for comparison, but I'd say they are very fine Creerals."

"You will see. They are the best. They are to be yours."

"Ours?"

The Bakori went on. "The Director wishes you for breakfast now. Will you come? He does not like to be kept waiting." The Bakori added the last as if it were his own idea to insert a note of warning.

"We'll be ready as soon as we wash up and get our clothes on. Ten minutes."

The Bakori servant bowed assent and went out.

"How do you like that?" Joe exclaimed "It looks like we own a Creeral."

"Maybe three." Bill was looking out the window. Joe came up to see. There were indeed three of the creatures stalking majestically and defiantly about the courtyard.

"I don't know what we'll do with them, but I know we had better say yes to anything Amular wants to bestow on us," said Joe.

They finished dressing and stepped out into the hall, where the Bakori servant awaited them. He led them along another labyrinth of corridors and then at last to Amular's breakfast room.

The Director was just entering from the opposite end. "Good morning, my friends!" he boomed cordially. "I trust you slept well."

"Very well," said Joe. "Never slept better."

The Bakori Director looked pleased. "Very fine accommodations, are they not?"

"The best we've ever had," Bill reassured him.

Amular seemed to have a need to dispel some nagging doubt that the accommodations he furnished were equal to the very best.

Breakfast consisted of another series of unknown foods, with Amular's running comment on each of them. Finally, near the end of the meal, he said, "I understand you have already become acquainted with your Creeals. They were outside your window this morning."

"Very interesting creatures," Joe said politely.

"Yes. You will find them even more so as they take you to your Tamarina."

Joe stopped eating. "Take us to Tamarina?"

Bill tried to signal to let the Bakori continue without interruption.

The Bakori seemed genuinely surprised at the question. Then he relaxed and smiled. "Of course! This, too, is unfamiliar to you. The Creeals will take you on their backs. You will ride them. Surely you have creatures you ride for transportation?"

Joe swallowed hard. "We have four-footed animals called horses. They run on the ground. We have nothing that flies."

And then he remembered the flurry of what they had thought were small aircraft seen on their screens as they approached the city the night before. What they had seen must have been scores of Creeals in flight over the city.

"It's unusual," said Bill. "Quite unfamiliar to us. That's why we are surprised at the idea."

"We have aircraft, of course," said Amular disdainfully. "And the surface of our planet is not conducive to ground transportation. Our ancestors harnessed the great birds for hundreds of years. It is hard to give up the old ways. Besides, our people enjoy flying the Creeals. I thought perhaps you and your Tamarina would find them pleasurable also."

"Of course, we'd like to ride them," said Joe enthusiastically. "It's just strange to us, that's all."

After breakfast they went to the courtyard where the great birds were tethered. "How do we know where to go, and how do we guide the Creeals?" said Joe.

"They are trained," said Amular. "A Creeal is taught to fly between only two destinations. That way, there is no need for navigation or guidance. You leave it all up to the Creeal."

"I'd hate to get lost in some of the country we saw coming in here."

Amular looked offended, and Bill groaned to himself. "They will never fail you," said Amular. "It's so very simple." He clapped his hands sharply and " rapidly twice, paused, and clapped again. The nearest Creeal approached and knelt down before them.

Camel-like, Joe thought. Then he noticed the saddle strapped to the bird's back at the base of its neck. A huge jewelled medallion adorned the front of the neck opposite the saddle. Amular invited him to mount.

"You may grasp the Creeal's neck," said Amular, "or hold to the bar at the rear of the saddle. Put your feet in the hooks suspended from the saddle and fasten the two straps across your legs. Now, you are safe and ready to go."

The Bakori stepped back, laughing heartily and clapped once, paused and clapped again. The bird rose to its feet, ran a short distance and soared into the air. Joe clung fiercely as the land dropped away beneath him. The great wings hissed faintly in the air as they beat in slow rhythm over the city.

Bill watched in wonder. "We had similar creatures on our world long before man appeared," he said to Amular. "Our scientists have concluded that such creatures were not very efficient flyers and could not take off in flight from level ground."

"You can tell them now how wrong they are. See how easily

the Creeals land and how gentle they are.

Such beautiful creatures. There is nothing like them in all the universe."

The Creeal dropped to the ground, ran a short way, and dropped to its squatting position in front of Bill and Amular. Joe released himself and jumped down, his expression dazed. "When can we go?"

"At once," said Amular. "Get your possessions and you may go. It is a full day's journey, and you will want to arrive before nightfall."

They returned to their quarters. As soon as they were alone, Joe spoke in a low voice to Bill. "How does it look to you, what we've seen so far? Do you think we've got a chance?"

Bill shook his head inconclusively. "I don't know. As I see it, Amular is going to send us after Tama-rina, and we will bring her back here. He will give us a ship to get us offworld. But I don't know what happens after that. Obviously, he expects us to set up a time channel from the ship to Algor. Equally obviously, he expects to force that channel to remain open to gain free access to our continuum."

"Can he do that?"

"Susselein said Algor could be protected from any such invasion. But I've been wondering what about the rest of the continuum? What of Earth? The Bakori might attack Earth itself as a result of this!"

"If there's any such possibility—we don't go back," said Joe. "But how do we know? The Algorans would have no concern if that happened."

"I just don't know enough about this stuff. I think we must see Tamarina and find out what she can tell us. If she can't assure us that Earth will be safe if we use a time channel to return the ship and ourselves to Algor, then you're right—we don't go back."

Joe looked out the window once more at the three monstrous Creeals striding slowly past. "And I can imagine Amular, in that case, would like nothing better than to give those Creeals the signal to start pecking the meat off our bones."

Joe looked around for anything they might have left, then closed the fasteners on his pack. He checked the wide belts about his waist where the time beacon capsules reposed.

"Ready?" Bill called.

Joe nodded. He didn't know where they were going, or what they would find at the end of their journey, but it was a journey that had to be made.

They returned to the courtyard, where Amular was idly feeding some berries picked from nearby trees to the Creeals. "You will return no later than two days from now," he said. "You will find your Tamarina well and safe, and then we will provide you escort toward your home worlds. And we will ask you to spread the word throughout the universe that the Bakori are generous and hospitable folk."

The men took their places and buckled the straps of the saddles. "We appreciate your kindness," said Bill. "We will see that it is remembered."

Amular nodded, smiling, and backed away. He gave the handclap signal, and the three giant birds lifted their leathery wings and took to the air.

They climbed until they reached an altitude the men judged to be seven or eight thousand feet, then leveled off. The air at the higher altitude was cooler and less oppressive than below.

The landscape grew rugged immediately. Sharp mountain peaks and volcanic cones prevailed, and they were covered with dense wilderness growth. It was easy to see how the ready availability of the captive birds had kept the Bakori development of roads to a minimum. Here and there a road existed, probably for the transport of freight, the men supposed, but individual travel was by Creal.

Cities appeared below them and drifted by. The men were too high to observe much detail, but the same random approach to layout seemed visible in all the works of the Bakori. They didn't seem to know the meaning of a straight line.

The sensation of riding the great birds was somewhat like that of riding a roller coaster. The creatures dipped and soared with the air currents, and the pulsing force of their powerful wings made a gentle undulation that could have caused the men to be very sick if they were subject to air sickness. Their speed, as near as they could judge, was between forty and fifty miles per hour.

After a time Bill and Joe turned on their communication sets and exchanged comments about the landscape. But there was little of importance to be said now. They were committed to a course that had an improbable future.

For a time the birds followed a wide river that glistened faintly in the sunlight below. Joe had thought earlier of trying to map the path of their flight, but it would not have been possible to hold writing materials in the air stream, and the landmarks were too indistinguishable from each other.

About midday the terrain changed. They came over a desert area that stood strangely alone amid the lush vegetation that surrounded it on all sides. Joe estimated the desert to be at least fifty miles across.

Amular's servant had packed food and water for their trip, and when the sun was overhead they made a lunch of it. The air stream plucked at them from all sides. Some of the food was lost, but they ate enough to last until the end of the day.

The sun moved down the sky at their backs in a passing that seemed about as long as an earth day. When it came within a diameter or two of the horizon behind them they began looking for a city which might be their goal.

A number of towns appeared, but the Creeals passed them by. Then, beyond the last one, the birds dipped and began a long, downward glide. "Where are they going?" Joe asked. "There's

nothing down there."

Bill made no reply but kept watching the landscape below. Suddenly he pointed. "There's a little clearing—a few buildings. We may be headed for that spot."

Joe squinted ahead. It was not a town or village. It was an isolated huddle of buildings surrounded by dense vegetation. A jungle redoubt.

"This has got to be a Bakori time terminal," said Bill as they spiraled down. "Their equipment is primitive in comparison with the Algoran, but they know how to tap Algoran channels. They must have brought Tamarina to Bakor at this point and kept her here because they didn't know just how rescuers might appear—if at all.

"Probably they were prepared to tap a rescuing channel. We foxed them by using the ship, because that's the only way we knew."

"There must be a hundred Bakori down there," said Joe. "They're waiting for us to land. I hope their reception is as friendly as Amular's."

"They don't know the meaning of the word. They're vicious. They're just playing with us because they think we're going to lead them right into our own continuum."

"And the only way to avoid that—and still get back—is to set up a channel where they don't expect it," said Joe.

"Right. But the chances here look like zero. Let's not try for a break here with Bakori crawling all over the place."

"I'd like to know where we're going to make it, then. Once we get back on these flying lizards we won't be able to get off until we're in Amular's kind care and keeping again—and you know what he has in mind."

"I know. We'll have to find out what Tamarina thinks, but I know we're not going to make it down there. There's got to be

another way."

The birds slowed and let themselves sink more rapidly. Joe was not an experienced flyer, but he knew what a dive was like. This was it, but with no safe, secure airplane around him. He felt naked to the sky as the bird plunged.

The Creeals neared the ground, then pulled up and circled slowly until they hovered over the small clear space in the cluster of buildings. They settled with a small hop and jump of their powerful legs and knelt for the riders to dismount. The Bakori swarmed around.

Joe loosened the straps and rubbed his legs where the binding had held him tightly. Bill jumped down and almost fell on his face as the circulation sprang into his legs. He hadn't realized he had bound them so tightly.

As they stood, rubbing to restore more liberal circulation, a Bakori stepped from the group.

"We come from Amular," said Joe. "He sends us for Tamarina, the stranger."

The Bakori stared at them a moment, as Amular and the others had done when they first saw the Earthmen, and then he spoke in English. "Welcome, Earthmen. You may see your companion immediately."

That's all it took to get the language, Joe thought. The Bakori look at you and they know your language. He wished he knew what other tricks they were capable of.

Still limping slightly, the two men followed the Bakori through the crowd that parted before them, and entered the building. Their eyes once again fought the darkness of Bakori illumination. At the end of a short corridor, the Bakori motioned them in to a room.

Light panels glowed on the walls, and a dozen spheres of light hung from poles, as if the occupant was trying to make as much light as possible in the room. Soft carpeting and luxurious

furnishings reminded them of the one in which Amular had received them.

Then, in the far corner of the room, on a massive couch they saw her. Tamarina.

She was dressed in Bakori garments, but there was no mistaking her features and the cloud of long, gold hair that surrounded her head.

"Tamarina," Bill called.

She turned and stood, staring at them unbelievably. Then she uttered a sharp cry of endless grief and crumpled on the couch, burying her face in her hands. Sobs shook her body.

X

It was a different Tamarina who sat across from them and described her experiences since she had disappeared.

Her face was thin and marked by the long hours of anxiety and hopelessness she had endured. Her hands trembled ever so slightly as she touched her cheek.

"I knew I was a Lost One," she said slowly. "I had heard the term all my life, ever since I first learned of time channel travel. Algorans talk so glibly of taking the risks that traveling involves. We all knew we risked becoming a Lost One every time we went out. We talked about it and were ever so brave. But none of us had ever talked to a Lost One."

Her eyes were still red from crying, and they stared unseeingly across the room. "That day when I sent you back, Joe—I stepped into the beam a minute or two later. I knew instantly that something was wrong. I wasn't going to reach Algor. And I remembered all my beacons were gone.

"Instead of Algor, it was this dark and ugly world I arrived at. I knew it was Bakor and that they had tapped the open time channel just before I was to reach Algor terminal.

"Most of all, then, I realized no one would come for me. I could not communicate with Algor. I knew I would be a forgotten Lost One. You can't understand what that means. It's not just being unable to get back. It's knowing that you have been abandoned and there's no one concerned."

Her hands clenched desperately. "It's the way my people are. But how can they be that way? How can they live like that—not caring anything about whether someone they know is lost or not?"

She brought her gaze back to the room, back to the faces of the two men who sat opposite her. "I was like that, too, wasn't I? I didn't care, either. One of the girls I knew since I first went to Algor became a Lost One one day, and I just laughed about it and said that's the risk we all take."

"But you have learned," said Bill gently. "And you are not that way any more."

"No, I am not that way any more. But you never were that way, were you? Tell me! Were you?"

"We came here for you," said Joe simply.

"Why?"

Bill spread his hands in a gesture of obviousness. "We didn't want you lost. We wanted to find you. Because we cared."

She looked from the face of one to the other as if utterly astonished. "You had seen me only a few times—Joe only once. And you cared enough to risk the Bakori to find me. How much my people could learn from you!"

"One of yours cares enough to become involved with your rescue. Susselein."

She nodded, gazing far away again. "Susselein. What a strange one he is. Not like the rest of us, yet he controls all of our time-channel traveling. He sent you?"

"He allowed us to come," said Bill. "He believed the Bakori would let us see you without hindrance. And he was right."

He related their discussions with Susselein and their experience to date with the Bakori.

Tamarina remained silent as he finished. Then she said at last, "But you are the ones who came. Because you cared."

Joe tried to imagine her experience. He could imagine her lonely terror because he had experienced such emotion many times in the tumult of jungle warfare. Yet he had always known there were buddies who cared, provided they could reach him. For Tamarina it had been the realization that no one wanted to reach out a hand. He thought of the discussion Bill and he had had about her in the ship on the way to Bakor. Tamarina was not the same girl they had talked about that day.

"We're here," said Bill at last, "and now we need to talk about getting back. We know—"

Tamarina shook her head vigorously. "Not here," she whispered. "Tomorrow. Outside. Alone."

The two men were provided food and quarters in one of the small buildings. The Creeals were fed and cared for by the Bakori, who explained that this was a way station for travelers and their Creeals.

Joe smiled at this explanation. "A flying motel. You might know there would have to be something like this!"

Tamarina ate with them. There was little conversation, however. Joe wondered if it were true they could be overheard by the Bakori, or if it was just Tamarina's suspicions. He dared not ask.

They retired immediately, but Joe found he could not sleep, although he was exhausted. His mind churned with thoughts of tomorrow. He wondered if Tamarina knew any means of getting back which Bill and he did not know. She must have some secret plan, he told himself, otherwise she wouldn't be concerned about

the Bakori overhearing them.

When the faint dawn broke it seemed to Joe that he had not slept at all. The muscles of his body ached with an incredible soreness, and he wondered how he could endure another day on the back of the Creeal.

He got up and limped into Bill's room. BUI groaned as Joe called his name and shook the bed. "Another day in the saddle," said Joe. "I hope your back is as sore as mine."

Bill sat up painfully. "Back and everything else. Bronc busting must be a cinch compared to this!"

Joe crept closer. "Let's get outside in a hurry and see what Tamarina wants to tell us. I don't see any way out of this, myself."

"Shut up, you fool," Bill whispered. He crawled painfully out of bed. "Git along, little Creeal, git along—!"

They bathed and dressed and found Tamarina waiting in the breakfast room for them. "You get up early," said Joe.

"There's not much to lie in bed for. I haven't slept much since I've been here. Let's eat and be on our way."

They ate hurriedly, again with little to say, except for Joe's nonsense. "I'd like to get a franchise to import these birds to Earth," he said. "I'll bet you could clean up. Take a flying vacation—no pilot's license required. Fly your own."

"It's when the customers ask, your own what? that you'd be in trouble," said Bill.

"Why would that be?" asked Tamarina seriously.

"Because I don't think many citizens in our neck of the woods would take to going by birdback. Especially when that bird is an overgrown, extinct lizard. Nope, I don't think this is any competition for the airlines."

They arose from the table and moved outside to the courtyard where the Creeals were tethered. The creatures had been fed, and they hissed contentedly as the men and Tamarina approached.

"I guess all we've got to do is get our bags and be on our way," said Joe boisterously. He moved beside one of the great reptilian birds and patted the cold, leathery hide affectionately.

Tamarina stood close and spoke in a whisper. "Have you got a cutting tool—one for each of us?"

Joe looked at her blankly. Bill said, "We have a small kit with cutters in it. Three of them—yes, there are a couple of kinds of cutting pliers. What—"

"When we're inside, give me one," said Tamarina. "When we're in flight, watch me closely and do what I do. Say nothing more."

She moved away, inspecting the Creeal she was to ride. "I hope I don't end up as crippled as you two after one day's ride."

They returned inside. The Bakori greeted them affably and asked if everything was all right.

"Just checking the tires and the gas tank," said Joe. "It looks like everything is ready to go."

The Bakori looked startled. His grasp of the Earth-men's language was not quite that complete.

Bill extended a hand. "We appreciate your hospitality. Especially do we appreciate your kindness in caring for Tamarina while she has been here."

The Bakori accepted the handclasp in understanding. "May you have a pleasant flight. Our thoughts go with you."

Joe nodded, hoping fervently the last statement was not true.

Inside, they gathered their possessions. Bill handed a tranceiver to Tamarina and showed her how to use it. At the

same time he slipped a cutter into her hand.

Outside once again, they mounted their strange steeds. The Bakori helped Tamarina and showed her how to balance in the saddle. Then, one by one, Joe leading, followed by Tamarina and then Bill, they were on their way. The huge Creeals beat their wings furiously against the morning air, gaining altitude as they speared their way over the jagged countryside back to Bakori headquarters.

Joe flipped on the communication channel and glanced across the intervening space to Tamarina. "Are you all right?"

"I'm doing fine. I rode a creature like this once before, on a planet called Manel. It's not too far from your galaxy. But they were true birds, not lizards."

He wanted to ask her what she had in mind, what possible scheme could enable them to escape the Bakori, but Tamarina said nothing about her plans. They might have attempted a time-channel setup at the redoubt where she was held, but that was out of the question, with the place crawling with Bakori. And once back on the Creeals there was no escape.

He wondered what she wanted the cutters for.

She was subdued from the wild, carefree creature she had been on the jungle world where they had met. Yet she seemed to be enjoying the experience now. She kept her face into the airstream and laughed at the undulations of the Creeals as they beat their heavy wings.

The feeble sun rose slowly behind them and cast dim light and shadows on the rugged landscape. Joe could make out the forms of giant trees that must be one to two hundred feet in height. They grew on terrain as jagged as lava flow. Bluish-green shades of vegetation were almost black in the dim light of the sun.

"Spooky," said Joe. "I'd hate for these birds to run out of wind along here. I wonder how far they can fly, anyway."

"I'm not anxious to find out," said Bill.

As the morning passed, they could see the boundary of the great desert ahead of them. Clouds of sand and dust spiraled up from the surface in giant whirlwinds.

"I wish these dumb birds would go around that thing," Joe said. "It was bad enough crossing it yesterday. Now it looks like we'll be flying right through a sandstorm."

For the first time Tamarina stirred and appeared anxious. "No— We must see the desert. We will go across it, won't we?"

Joe hesitated. "Yeah, sure—as far as I know. These birds don't seem to know any other route." He waited for her to go on, but she settled back, saying no more. She kept her eyes steadily on the misty outlines of the desert ahead.

By noon they were at the edge of it. The fitful winds had quieted. Only a scattered half dozen spirals of dust devils reached to the sky. The Creeals seemed to have sense enough to avoid them.

When they had crossed enough desert that the boundary of green was a thin line on the horizon behind them, Tamarina spoke sharply. "Now," she said. "The jeweled medallion on the neck."

Joe and BUI looked at her. She had the cutters in her hand, furiously attacking the two chains that held the huge medallion about the neck of the Creeal.

Without questioning, the men followed her example. Joe squeezed the tool in his hand with all his strength, and it seemed to scarcely indent the tough metal. He squeezed again, twisting and bending the link of the first chain in the jaws of the cutter until it parted.

He wondered if Tamarina had the strength to cut the chains, but then he remembered her grasp when she had thrown off his hand that touched her on the jungle world.

From the corner of his eye he saw that she had one chain cut now and that Bill was likewise attacking his second. Joe grasped

the metal and squeezed and twisted once more. The medallion was finally loose. He held it dangling in his hand and looked toward Tamarina.

The girl gestured to the sands below. Joe dropped the ornament and watched it plummet.

Almost instantly the Creeal soared up and over with a nearly sixty degree bank that threw Joe violently against the restraining straps.

"The neck!" Tamarina cried. "Put your hands as high as possible on the neck. Press your fingers in the direction you want the Creeal to go. That is the way of manual control. But your hands must be just below the head."

Joe struggled to get his hands on that slithery neck and to keep from being thrown from the Creeal's back. He squeezed with a vengeance, as if to choke the creature into submission. It seemed to stabilize the Creeal's flight. Joe's two companions each had a two-handed grip on the neck of the mount.

"Down!" Tamarina cried. "Down and to the right. Try for the middle of the desert!"

Joe withheld his questions. He applied pressure to turn the Creeal. The bird went into a sideslip and a dive that left Joe's stomach crouched against his backbone.

Suddenly the wind struck a blow as if a giant hand had slapped them. The flying creatures reeled and slid toward the desert sands. The sky darkened, and a wailing cry beat upon the ears of the Earthmen and Tamarina.

"The Bakori!" Tamarina cried. "They've discovered the loss of control of the Creeals already. They're attacking us directly—with illusions."

Joe yelled into the microphone above the terrifying wails that filled their ears. "For something imaginary this has got a lot of wallop!"

"Ignore it. They'll try to make us maneuver to destroy ourselves. We must land as quickly as we can."

From out of nowhere, boiling clouds of murk surged around them, almost cutting off their vision of one another. "Don't get separated!" Tamarina cried.

Joe didn't see how they were going to keep from it. The blackness billowed about them until he could scarcely see the tips of the Creeal's wings. While he struggled to control the bird he managed to extract a hand lantern with a wrist band from his kit. He got it over his wrist and switched on the powerful beam. Once, he thought he caught a glimpse of a beam from Bill, but it disappeared, if it was ever there.

"Can you see my beam?" he called over the transceiver. There was no reply. Only an incessant roar of electrical static filled his ears. He turned down the useless sound.

Thrusts of lightning speared the darkness in all directions. The roar of thunder rumbled in crescent-does that focussed upon him and burst like a sea-borne tidal wave crashing against a cliff.

The Creeal rocked and faltered before the surging wind and the hammering blast of sound and light. Joe concentrated on getting the bird down. He had no idea where Bill and Tamarina might be.

Responding to his pressure on its neck, the Creeal dove and slipped through the sky, faltering, plunging, beaten by the wind. He sensed the great beast was weakening under the strain of the pounding air. He had no idea how much altitude remained, but he urged the bird lower as fast as he dared. His own orientation was almost completely lost. If he had been flying an airplane without instruments he wouldn't have known up from down. He hoped the Creeal did.

Without warning, the bird pulled up and lowered its legs. Then it was running its stumbling, awkward walk across the sands. Joe unbuckled the straps that held him to the saddle and leaped off. He stood there, wondering how Tamarina could call

this illusion when the sandblast all but blinded him. He shined the powerful beam of his light upward, hoping that his companions might see it and be able to guide their Creals near him. He saw nothing.

Then, almost by intuition alone, he whirled in time to see the great, awkward Creal bearing down upon him. Half running, half flying, it raced towards him, its spearlike beak aimed for his body.

He plunged to the ground and rolled, the bird's monstrous feet catching him in midsection. He grabbed for his gun as the bird spun and sought him again. From a dozen feet away, its long neck flicked downward, plunging that murderous beak toward him again.

Joe fired from his prone position. He wasn't sure he had hit his target. The Creal plunged on, its beak burying itself in the sand as he rolled once again.

It fell, the great wings flapping. Joe knew now that he had hit the bird just below the head. The bullet must have angled upward into the brain. He got to his feet on the run as he fled from the death struggles of the great bird.

He didn't know why it had attacked him. He supposed the Bakori had somehow directed it to do so. Away from the dying bird, blackness closed him in again. The sand beat against his skin as if it would strip the flesh from his bones. Futilely, he waved the wrist lantern about, its beam feeble against the blackness.

His companions could be a few feet or miles from him. There was no use wasting his strength wandering about. He sat down with his back to the sandblast and pulled his collar as high about his neck as he could.

The Bakori had won, he thought.

How easily they had won.

XI

After a short time Joe knew he could not remain immobile. Even though death was certain in this roiling desert it would be easier to keep moving as long as he had strength left. With his back to the wind he began a slow walk to nowhere.

He could not tell whether the sun had gone down or whether it was still in the sky. His watch told him it must be about sunset, Bakoran time. He was beginning to feel hunger, but dryness was the worst. Already the desert seemed to have sponged all moisture out of him, and this was but the beginning of what was to come.

After hours of walking he fell once more on the sand. He lay face down and drew his collar up. He realized after a time that he must have dozed. He checked his watch by the light of the lantern. Two hours.

He scanned the atmosphere in hope that the wind might be dying, but there was no sign of it. The dust and blackness around him was as thick as ever. Not that it really mattered. This was the way it was going to end, and the intensity or variations of it didn't matter.

The wailing sound that rose and fell had never stopped. He had almost become used to it. Wild threads of lightning broke the thick darkness intermittently.

After a time he noticed there were flashes of other color than white streaks of lightning. Ahead of him and to the right there was a reddish glow that pulsed with the sheets of sand blowing through the air. It, too, must be some manifestation of the Bakori. He lay watching it for a long time, wondering why it didn't shift about like everything else.

Then, abruptly, he was on his feet, running desperately in the direction of that light. He remembered where he had seen a light like that before. Once, so very long ago on a beach beside a dirty, brown sea where a golden haired girl had placed some little cubes in a methodical pattern. The cubes had begun to glow until they sent a mighty, crimson light into the sky—toward

infinity.

He cursed himself for not recognizing the glow when he first saw it. He might be too late. His lungs burned fiercely as he pounded the desert sand with agonized steps. The light seemed to get no nearer.

Was it Bill alone who had decided to attempt the use of the beacon? Or was Tamarina with him? Bill carried half the cubes, Joe the other half. But it hadn't occurred to Joe to use them to attempt contact with Algor. Apparently Bill was determined to do so as a last desperate chance. But surely he wouldn't without Tamarina—

The cubes provided a visual beacon that penetrated even the thickest of the black cloud that swirled over the sands. And now Joe knew he was making progress. He could detect he was approaching the red beam at a perceptible rate.

His pace quickened in spite of his burning lungs. He had been running forever. Then, almost abruptly, he was in the circle of crimson glow. He tried to reach the column of light. His legs gave way, and he plunged on his face before he reached the beacon.

Bill grasped him and turned him over. "The cubes, Joe—we need the rest of the cubes! Tamarina says the beacon is not strong enough to cross the continuum boundary without the rest of them."

Joe couldn't speak for the dryness of his throat, but he held back the packet of cubes at his waist. He motioned desperately. Finally, he forced out the words, "Earth—Bill, what of Earth—do we know it won't—Bakori on Earth—"

"Tamarina doesn't know. If we hurry, we should be all right."

Joe wanted to resist further, but he couldn't withhold as Bill rolled him over and extracted the cubes. Then, as Bill placed them in the square, Joe saw Tamarina standing a little distance away. The crimson light suffused her face, and she smiled at him.

There must be fifty cubes there now, Joe thought dully as he watched Bill again. Tamarina was kneeling beside him then. "I'm so glad you found your way here. I knew the column could be seen through this blackness, if anything could. That's why I asked Bill to set it up, even though it was too weak to reach Algor. But we'll be all right now. It's strong enough for them to find us through the boundary."

Almost as she spoke there appeared the white cylinder of light inside the crimson square. "Quickly!" she said. She urged him to his feet and helped him up. "They have to close the channel quickly!"

He still thought of Earth and the danger of the Bakori. Bill helped drag him with stumbling footsteps into the center of the light. Outside, the sand whipped in wild new fury, beating against the column. They could see it rise like a wave and slash against the wall of light, then slide down its surface to form a mound at the foot of it.

And then it was gone.

The desert was the familiar desert of Algor.

They flung their hands to their eyes against the sudden painful light that was a thousand times brighter than the day of Bakor. They lay on the ground at the terminal point where Joe had gained his first sight of the decaying planet. Slowly, as the seconds passed, they moved their hands and exposed their eyes increasingly to the strong light. Tamarina stared between her fingers at the burning red sands, the ancient ruined city, the endless escarpment. She began crying softly, and the men remained back, letting her cry her grief and her gladness.

Joe found the agonizing dryness had gone from his mouth and throat. The fiery burning had left his skin where it had been blasted by the Bakoran sands. The bloody slashes of the Creal's claws were miraculously gone.

As she pressed the wetness from her eyes, Tamarina saw him inspecting himself in wonder. "They were never there," she said. "It was illusion—all of it. That is the power of the Bakori."

"Their illusion could have killed us. *That* would have been no illusion!"

"It could have killed us," she agreed. "They have killed whole planets that way."

Bill pointed toward the entrance to the building in the escarpment. "It looks like the whole town has turned out to see us home."

A couple of dozen or more Algorans were waiting for them. Susselein was at the head of the group, and beside him, Choral. Joe recognized none of the others. Bill knew some, and Tamarina knew them all.

The girl's smile was a little bitter as she looked at her fellow Algorans. "They don't see a Lost One return every day. I'm probably the first any of them has ever seen. It's quite an event."

Joe glanced at her. He understood her bitterness. But Tamarina did not seem anxious to move from the terminal point. She stood with her face uplifted now to the full light of the sky and to the hot, gentle desert breeze. "I never knew I would be so glad to see it again," she said. "I never knew Algor was such a wonderful place. I was always so anxious to go somewhere else. Algor is a beautiful world, isn't it?"

"It's your world," said Joe gently. "Your home."

"Yes, that's what makes it beautiful, isn't it? I suppose to you it looks like a burned-out derelict, but it will never be that way to me again."

They turned and followed Bill, who was already part way down the trail. Susselein and a few others advanced to meet them. Susselein shook hands with Bill and Joe, Earth fashion. He put his arms around Tamarina and drew her close. His face was like a father's as he pressed his cheek against her hair. "We are so glad you are back—so very glad," he said. "We had counted you a Lost One until your friends insisted on bearing the risk of finding you. You owe your life to them."

"I think I owe a great deal more than that," she said.

Susselein thought he knew what she meant. He hoped he was right.

They were assigned apartments within the building, and given fresh clothing. They were told they could eat whenever they were ready.

Joe felt he was starving, but he lingered over his bath and lay on the bed before dressing. So much had happened in so short a time that it seemed as if his mind could not keep up with the reality of events. He was already beginning to have half doubts—

The desert storm—the Creéal attack— How could Amular and his kind create such havoc entirely within a mind? How could they do it to a whole world— until that world died?

It seemed strange now that they had escaped the Bakori, the destroyers of worlds. The Bakori should be invincible. The time channel had been the means, of course. The Bakori were far behind the Algorans in their manipulation of time, but there must have been heavier artillery they could have brought to bear to prevent the use of the time channel.

He didn't know the answer, and he didn't care much. He only worried about the possibility of the Bakori on Earth. But that seemed to dim from his mind now as the reality of Algor impressed itself upon him. He only knew one thing for certain: he would never again touch down on the planet of Bakor or cross purposes with the Bakori.

But what was going to happen now?

To him?

To Bill?

To Tamarina?

They'd send him and Bill home, he supposed. And then what?

That couldn't be the end of it. They couldn't shut him off from all that he had been shown, the way to the stars, the way to worlds beyond time and space.

And Tamarina.

He was in love with her. There was no use kidding himself about it. And Bill loved her, too.

Tamarina had given no sign that she held any special affection for either of them. Except for one thing: Joe remembered how she had smiled at him only a short time before when he lay exhausted by the beacon while Bill placed the cubes.

Such a small thing, and he remembered it so vividly.

He dressed and went out to the community room that served the several apartments. Bill and Tamarina were already there. Susselein was seated with them talking of experiences he had known on other worlds when he was young and did much traveling himself.

Bill glanced up at Joe. "I thought you'd fallen in. What kept you so long?"

"After the last couple of days I've quit hurrying anywhere."

Susselein smiled at him. "You young people have had quite an experience. If you'll permit me, I'll show you where dinner is waiting. Then I'll have to ask you to excuse me. I have some important analysis to do."

He led them down the corridor a short distance to a small dining room. The furnishings were nothing like those of Amular, the Bakori. But the food looked as good. Joe approached the table hungrily. "It's been quite a while," he said.

Bill took a chair beside Tamarina. Joe sat opposite them. The Algoran who served them explained the nature of each dish and told where it came from. The meal encompassed an entire galaxy. Joe thought of the barren desert outside—Tamarina's beautiful Al-gor—and wondered what it would grow.

They listened to entertainment in the evening. Music from a dozen worlds. Some short plays that were translated into English for their benefit, but whose substance was completely pointless to them.

"There must be a principle here," said Bill. "You can't be amused or entertained by anything that is not totally familiar to you. It must be something completely known, but put into a contrasting setting. Otherwise, it becomes a study instead of an entertainment."

Joe felt depressed now. Everything seemed coming to an end. A conclusion he couldn't confront. "I'm going to knock it off and hit the sack," he said.

"Don't forget Susselein's conference in the morning," said Tamarina.

"I didn't hear anything about it."

"He wants to talk to us about the Bakori experience. He mentioned it before you came in. He says there's something important we need to talk about."

"The less I hear about the Bakori, the better I'll like it. Good night."

"I'll be right with you," said Bill.

Joe went to bed, but sleep was impossible. He may have dozed for a short time, because he dreamed he was strapped to the back of a Creeal and it was plunging relentlessly toward a burning desert. Then he was awake again, hopelessly wakeful. He checked his watch. The night was half gone, but it was useless to lie in an agony of sleeplessness.

He dressed and left the room quietly. The light panels in the corridor still glowed, and he thought he could find his way outside. After a couple of false turns he made it. He wasn't quite sure how to operate the door, but he finally found the panel that controlled it. He stepped out into the Algoran night.

The night coolness of the desert enveloped him as he walked up the trail to the terminal point. It could easily have been a desert scene somewhere on Earth —except for the unfamiliar constellations overhead.

He was torn once again by the realization that the episode was over. So few days, and so much had happened! Beginning with his accidental collision with Bill Bradley that snowy afternoon on the campus, and ending here now on a desert of a planet he had never known existed. Not quite ended, of course, but a flick of a switch would put them back on Hunt-ington's Hill as if nothing had happened. Nothing at all.

He wondered what Bill Bradley thought about it all. What were Bill's plans? Did he expect to maintain contact with the Algorans—with Tamarina? If Bill Bradley could do so, then why not Joe Simmons? But he felt he was not included in anyone's plans for continued contact.

Only the desert starlight illumined the landscape, but the black silhouette of the escarpment, the ruins, and the nearby piles of rocks stood like paper cutouts against the sky. He advanced up the rocky, sloping trail to the terminal point.

Halfway there he discovered he was not alone. A movement of a silhouette against the sky told him someone else was there. A figure stood and moved. It must have turned and now looked down in his direction, for he had not been careful about the noise of his footsteps and sliding rocks.

He had decided to turn and find some other nighttime refuge when a voice called out to him. "Bill— Joe—is it you?"

It was Tamarina's voice.

"It's Joe," he said. "I couldn't sleep. I won't disturb you." He started back down the trail.

"No. Come up. Please. Come and join me."

He resumed his upward climb, anticipating moments alone with Tamarina. She was leaning her back against the rock cliff

behind the ledge.

"I have nightmares of Creeals and black deserts," he said. "I decided I might as well come out and look at the stars. I don't want to intrude—"

"You aren't," said Tamarina. "It was the same with me. I couldn't sleep. It's so hard to believe I'm actually back on Algor."

"Was it bad—there on Bakor?"

"They treated me well enough. It was just knowing that I was a Lost One, as I told you when you found me."

"Susselein explained the rules to us—how it is impossible to eliminate the risk and provide rescue for travelers who get in trouble. But he understood the situation you were in. He knew the Bakori had taken you as bait so that someone would follow to rescue you."

"The Bakori apparently don't know us very well."

"Their capturing you, plus the fact of our being Earthmen and not subject to your rules were the factors that finally persuaded him to let us go, I believe."

"And so the Bakori planned to have you establish a time channel from one of their ships—which undoubtedly was equipped with their best time equipment. If that had happened they would have certainly had a free opening to this continuum sector."

"Are we sure they didn't accomplish that purpose?"

Tamarina shook her head. "I think we defeated them by bringing the Creeals down in the desert. They wouldn't have had time to align their equipment on that channel before we closed it. I think we are safe now. And I'm sure our technicians are providing a shield for our channels from now on, which will keep the Bakori from penetrating. We should have no more to worry about from the Bakori."

"How did you learn the Creeals were controlled through the medallions?"

"I saw many Bakori arrive during the time I was at the terminal. Some of the Creeals did not have the medallions, and I saw the Bakori control them by hand. Most, however, did have the medallions, and I noticed these all flew with no visible means of control. So I knew the control must be centered in the medallions, and that we could gain control by getting rid of the medallions. The Bakori knew instantly, by some means, that we had done so. As a result, they threw at us the psychic forces that gave the illusions of the desert storm and the attack of the Creal upon you."

After Tamarina ceased speaking they remained silent in the night and the stillness of the desert. Joe wondered if he should go in and leave her with her own thoughts. But she broke the silence again, "It's over now, and everything is the same as it was before for you and Bill. For me, nothing will ever be the same."

"Why?"

"I told you some things that night on Bakor. Being a Lost One was enough to change me forever. But I learned so many things I never knew before." She turned abruptly to face him. "Am I the same person I was when we first met in the jungle on Clor?"

"You've grown since then. You care for things you never cared for then."

"I care for Algor," Tamarina said. "I am sick when I see what it has become, what we have done to it. That city out there in the desert, Carnopis—it once held five million people who were glad to call it home. Now there is no place an Algoran can call home. For hundreds of years we have lived off other races, other worlds, without doing anything to make a world of our own. We turn our backs on each other. The designation of Lost One is not a necessity. It's only a sign of our indifference to one another. Time-space travel has been a curse to us. It should never have happened."

"The experience on Bakor made you see this?" said Joe softly.

Tamarina nodded in the darkness. "Maybe I had always thought such things. I don't know. You just don't allow yourself such thoughts if you're an Algoran. If you do, you're one of the Old Ones, who live out there." She gestured to the far distance, beyond the ruins.

"The Old Ones?" said Joe. "The ones who still live in the villages and towns of Algor?"

"Primitive. They don't want anything to do with time-space travel. All they have ever wanted is Algor. Now I think I understand them. I think they may be the wise ones, after all."

"What of Bill and me?" Joe pressed the question now that had tormented his mind. "Are we to be sent home and the door closed behind us, or can we be friends and visitors to Algor?"

"Be glad you've got a home to go to," said Tamarina sharply. "There's nothing here for you. It's up to us to make something of Algor, but it does not concern you."

"There is something here for me," said Joe slowly. "Something I should hate to lose."

"What is that?"

"I have been taught to call it Tamarina."

He caught her sharp glance as she turned from the desert to look at him. He thought she voiced an exclamation of satisfaction and acceptance. But she said, "The Bakori must have touched your mind, after all, Earthman. There is nothing called Tamarina here for any one."

XII

Susselein requested them to come into conference with him immediately after breakfast the next morning. Choral, as dour as ever, called for them and led them to the meeting place. There was a long brown table in a room that was quietly shaded in an off-white color. There were a couple of dozen chairs around the

table, but there were only seven Algorans other than Tamarina.

Joe whispered to Bill, "I wonder what this is all about. Why don't they just send us back home and be done with it?"

"We may have unfinished business here."

"I don't see anything else for us to do."

Tamarina sat between the two Earthmen as Susselein stood at the head of the table. His face was serious this morning, in a way that made Joe's stomach feel queasy.

"I will introduce you," said Susselein, "so that you may be acquainted with one another. I use the Earth-men's language for their convenience, and I hope no one will object to that."

He introduced Bill and Joe, and then named the Algorans the two men did not know. There was the Director of Technical Services, the Director of Social Relationships, the Director of Algoran Laws and Customs, the Director of Algoran Administration, and the Director of History.

As he concluded the introductions, Susselein hesitated and looked away from the Earthmen. Then, as if forcing himself to look at them, he continued.

"What I have to say concerns mostly you, Bill Bradley, and you, Joe Simmons, and a decision you have to make. We are grateful for the contributions you have made in penetrating the Bakori world and returning Tamarina to us, and bringing us much information about this beligerent world. We would like to reward you properly, but we can make you only one gift, and ask for your decision to take it or not."

There were no more decisions, Joe told himself. Just send them home and forget about them. That's what Tamarina had said last night. She had told him she did not expect the time channel to Earth to ever be opened again after they were returned home.

"We thought we had outwitted the Bakori quite smartly,"

Susselein continued. "It turns out just the opposite, however. We did exactly what they wanted us to do, with exactly the consequences they desired."

Joe sat up now, his heart pounding in apprehension.

"The Bakori have succeeded in holding open the channel by which you left their world. It gives them an almost unlimited access to this continuum, and we can't close it. We must now retreat further and shut ourselves off from such sectors as they have access to."

"That should be no problem," said Choral. "We have done that many times before."

"But they couldn't have!" exclaimed Tamarina. "We brought the Creeals down in a completely unexpected place. And we kept the channel open only the minimum time. They had no equipment in the area. They couldn't have focussed on the channel in that time."

"You brought the Creeals down exactly where they wanted you to bring them down," said Susselein.

"They expected you to discover the means of control of the Creeals and disable it. They left you your guns and tools, expecting you to use them for that purpose. They know you would want a broad, open space to establish the channel. That's why they took you over the desert. All their talk about offering a ship to take you out to space to the jump point was cover up. They knew you would make your own way, and they knew what way that would be. They set up their equipment on each side of the desert along the line of the birds' flight. Both stations had you aligned almost immediately."

Tamarina sat down, her face white with anger and remorse. Joe and Bill felt stupid and ashamed at then-easy manipulation by Amular.

"It is not my purpose," said Susselein, "to arouse recriminations, self-directed or otherwise. You literally had no chance to do other than what you did. The Bakori could have

crushed you at any moment, but they wanted you to open the channel. They could even have destroyed you and opened it themselves, but they weren't entirely sure of how it was done. It was easier for them the way it was."

Joe squirmed. Susselein didn't need to rub it in that hard. But the fear kept tightening his chest until he could but breathe with difficulty. He knew now that Susselein had much more to say.

"What does it mean?" Bill demanded. "What will the Bakori do?"

"The same thing they have done everywhere else. Their psychic powers cannot be opposed. You saw what they did to you in creating the illusion of the storm.

"When they attack a world they do it in a thousand different ways, but always by distorting in some fashion the accepted reality of the place. They induce bizarre actions in the populace by affecting the apparent reality to which the populace has been accustomed. They are very inventive in this. It evidently amuses the Bakori to play with a world in this manner. They induce confusions, wars, disasters. The population is thus induced to destroy itself.

"Algor, of course, will be safe from these effects because we know how to shut ourselves off from such an affected sector, but it does mean that we have to take action to do this."

"What about Earth?" Joe demanded in sudden fury. "Is Earth within the Bakori influence?" And he knew the answer before the Algoran replied.

"It saddens me to say that it is," said Susselein. "And that is why we wanted to talk to you this morning. We wish to offer you the chance to remain with us. To become Algorans, if you will.

"Your planet will eventually be overwhelmed by the Bakori influence, so there is no use in your returning there. On the other hand, you can be of great help to us, and we wish to propose that you remain."

Joe and Bill stared at the Algorans in horror. This was exactly what they had feared when they were on Bakor. And now it had happened. They should have recognized that Amular was playing with them, laughing at them all the while.

Joe thought of Midland campus. The Asian jungles. The Pacific Ocean. New York City. The country cops that had suspected him of doing away with Bill Bradley. Huntington's Hill. Earth—home.

The men couldn't comprehend the enormity of what Susselein had said. Yet they knew what he meant. They had seen the Bakori in action on a minute scale. They sensed, rather than understood, what a full scale Bakori attack on Earth might be like.

Joe got to his feet with a kind of slow motion fury. His face burned as he looked slowly at each of the Algorans. They remained silent before the rage in his gaze.

"Earth is our home," he said in level, pounding tones. "I wonder if there is any one of you who can understand what that means. You have abandoned your own home and made playthings of the worlds and homes of other races. You abandon each other when you become Lost Ones. You have concern for nothing. You create nothing. You steal what you want from other worlds and other races. The Bakori are barbarians who destroy' openly and coldly. But the Algorans are parasites who infest and destroy slowly and carelessly. I doubt there is any choice as to which is the more deadly in the end."

He dropped to his chair to give the Algorans time to absorb his blast. There was more to be said. A great deal more. He didn't know how to say it, how to get across to the stone faced aliens that stared mutely at him.

Susselein, who had remained standing, spoke finally. "We can forgive your lack of understanding of our culture, but your turbulence may be a factor, after all, that we cannot accommodate."

The Director of Social Relationships, Rafeno, was a round

little man who giggled suddenly as if he could not endure the tension longer. "What you don't understand is that there is no end of worlds. Worlds are infinite. Worlds are cheap."

"Especially when they don't belong to you!" Joe snapped.

Choral was ice. He shifted in his chair and looked at Joe. "We will return you to your precious Earth home. You certainly have no welcome here. There, you can remain to welcome the Bakori when they come."

"If the time channels had never been opened," said Joe. "The Bakori would be nowhere in range of Earth. Now that it has happened a way has to be found to combat this enemy."

"That's what thousands of little panic-stricken worlds have said," replied Susselein. "They are gone. When I told you we could not police the entire universe I was telling you the truth. The universe is infinite. We don't need every corner of it. Worlds *are* cheap, in spite of your sentiment about your own. And there are thousands of races like the Bakori. We could not undertake to defy them all."

"But you *do* protect Algor," said Joe, "in spite of the miserable ruin to which you have let it fall."

"Only because it's our base. Not because of sentiment. We could just as well use any of a million other worlds."

Joe's body began trembling now with the full realization of what he had heard. He passed a hand over his face. Beside him, Tamarina arose.

"We claim to be the time masters of the universe. No one else knows as much as Algor about the manipulation of the time-space continuum. We even cross the barriers between the continuums.

"But we run from the Bakori. We run from the very sound of their name. Do you have any idea how many galaxies are closed to us because the Bakori have set foot in them? You do, because you have closed them yourselves. And it is our time channels, *our*

techniques that the Bakori use to perfect their conquests. Without what they have stolen from us they would have no conquests.

"It's time for us to stop running from the Bakori. It's time for us to turn and drive them back—out of existence!"

Choral nodded to her with a wry smile. "A very pretty speech my dear Tamarina. And just how do you propose that we wipe them out? We sent two men and gave them the best equipment and training we possessed, to bring you back. You came, all right, but the Bakori have made fools of us in the process."

Susselein held up his hand. "There is no point in outbursts. We all know what can and what cannot be done. My colleagues here—!" He swept a hand about the table to include the Algoran leaders—"know the reality of this situation. We are all agreed. The only thing we have to offer is sanctuary to two Earthmen to whom we are indebted, and in spite of your reaction toward us I am again moved to extend that offer. But we cannot maintain extended time channel communication with Earth and remain in safety ourselves. You may wish a little time to think about our proposal," he said to Bill and Joe. "We will allow you until tomorrow morning to give us your decision."

Bill Bradley and Joe Simmons left the conference room without further comment. They went through the corridors to the desert outdoors once again and moved up the short trail to the terminal landing where Joe and Tamarina had stood the night before.

Beyond them, over the roofless houses and buried streets of the city of Carnopis violent dust devils spun the sand to heights of a thousand feet.

"It could have lived," Joe said, nodding toward the ancient ruin. "It died because they didn't care."

"I wonder if we care too much," said Bill. "Earth-men cling to things: old houses, old cities, old books. We like to remember how things used to be and tell stories of past generations."

"Would you trade it for *that*?" Joe gestured violently toward the ruin.

"Of course not! But I wonder if there is nothing the Algorans can teach us."

"They can teach us one hell of a lot: Don't end up like they have."

"They have technology. They have a capacity to absorb experience that goes beyond anything we know. They can teach us those."

"Perhaps. But the only thing we need now is technology to block the Bakori. I think they are capable of that."

"I think they are, too."

The men turned at the sound of the new voice. Tamarina had followed them, and they had stood unaware of her presence.

She advanced between them as they looked out over the ruin. "I'm sorry, so terribly sorry it has happened to your world—your home."

"There has to be a way out," said Joe. "Your science has to be capable of blocking the Bakori."

"I think it is," said Tamarina. "It's just that no one wants to try to find a way. It would take a great effort—to do something they don't believe in doing. It's far easier to block off an invaded area and move on to other worlds and times."

Joe's mouth pursed in silent anger.

"Don't blame them too much," she said. "They have never known any different way. They don't know the meaning of the word 'home', just as I never knew the meaning of the word 'friend'. I know how it is for them. I had known no other way until I experienced what it was to be a Lost One. I learned then about myself—and about my people. Things you Earthmen always knew."

Joe said, "It's impossible not to be bitter when they tell us we can join the Algoran Lifetime Tours, but that we must forget about Earth and let the Bakori have it."

Tamarina looked away. At last she said, "What are you going to do?"

The men looked at each other. "Go back home," said Joe. "What else?"

"Let me try once more," said Tamarina. "Let me try to reason with Susselein. He's a strange man. Seldom does anyone know the real depth of his thoughts, I am sure. He has meanings that no one would ever guess. I think I can talk to him."

"You're welcome to try, as far as we're concerned," said Joe. "We have our deadline—make up our minds by tomorrow morning. We don't need all that time. We already know what we're going to do, don't we?"

Bill looked at Tamarina. "We have to go back. It's a small chance, but maybe we can find something on our own to halt the Bakori. But even if we can't, we have to go back. It's our home."

Tamarina nodded in half understanding. "I think I know what you mean. Give me time. They'll delay their demand for your answer if I can make them consider your need. If I can persuade Susselein, he can persuade the rest of them."

She turned and ran down the slope to the entrance to the building in the escarpment. The two men watched her until she disappeared.

"She isn't for either of us," said Bill softly, "but it was a wonderful dream—"

"This is not at an end yet."

"I knew it that day I came to your room. Nothing could have kept you from coming back to the Hill with me, could it?"

"I guess not. I had to see her again."

"If things were normal, we could shake hands nobly and say, 'May the best man win', and all that sort of stuff. As it is, there's nothing for either of us, the way it appears now."

Joe's face hardened. "We're standing here talking about something that can destroy Earth—and I can't believe it yet. I keep thinking that once we get back there—if we get back—that everything will be safe and normal, and nothing like the Bakori can possibly exist."

"I know what you mean," said Bill. "Maybe that's another characteristic of our kind. Bury your head in the sand when things are so bad you can't believe it. We've done that often enough in our history—and then the roof has fallen in."

"We've made a lot of come-backs, too, after that happened."

"Yes, we have. But I can't see any come-back from this one, unless the Algorans can help us. No one on Earth except us will have any idea what is happening when the Bakori hit."

"And we don't really know what to expect."

"The episode on Bakor gives us a pretty good idea."

XIII

Tamarina found Susselein in his own study. He looked up expectantly as she entered at his invitation. "Come in, Tamarina. Have you decided on a new venture yet? I should think you'd want to rest a while in one of your favorite places after the experience you've been through."

She sat down across from him in the simple, blank-walled study. "I want to go to Earth."

Susselein offered no change of expression. "That would be a surprising thing at this time—especially when you know the power of the Bakori. I would even call it a foolish thing. You must have some purpose I don't understand."

"You know my purpose!" She leaned across the table intently. "We can help them. You know we can. Is there any reason why we shouldn't?"

"What makes you so sure we can help? Do you know of some scientific miracles we have performed that I am not aware of?"

"Please. I am not a simple first-tripper. I have a right to this plea. I don't know any great secrets; I am just confident that our science knows how to stop the Bakori. I know my people, too. They're soft. They can be crushed. And somehow this universe is going to crush them if they don't stop taking and never giving anything in return."

"You sound like an Earthman," said Susselein.

"And is that a compliment or a condemnation? Never matter. I don't care which it is. The Earthmen are right about us. But even they don't know the whole truth. I had much time to think during those days on Bakor when I was a Lost One. How many of us are there? Does anyone know? Do we keep records that mean anything?"

"How many Algorans? I'm sure no one knows. Is it of any significance? There are thousands out there who haven't been heard of for many years. Some may be dead, some are still alive. It means nothing— knowing how many there are."

"It means whether Algor exists or not. Our instruments at least keep a record of the number of trips. And every year there are fewer and fewer trips. You are certainly aware of that. And that alone is enough to tell us there are fewer and fewer Algorans. Where do they go? They become Lost Ones—designated or not. And nobody cares. And someday the last Al-goran will go out—and never return. All that will be left will be a few old men tending machines that no longer have purpose or meaning or use."

Susselein smiled tolerantly. "You paint a dark picture."

"It's a true one. Can you say you know it is not a true picture?"

"You forget yourself. I do not have to say anything at all, my dear. I am afraid you have had too much association with the violent Earthmen."

"Forgive me. Let us do it, then, not for the Earth-men, but for ourselves. For the first time in the history of our time travel let us give something back to the universe from which we have taken so much. Let us give it in the form of aid to the Earthmen, who need it so desperately—and who wouldn't need it at all if our time channels had never touched them."

Susselein regarded her for a long time, his eyes searching her face. She returned his gaze, her eyes trying to read what was written in the deep lines of his face.

"You're a very different person," he said at last. "Almost I am tempted to say a very strange person, but at least very different from the Tamarina who used to take trips to Earth for the amusement of examining the local specimens. You ascribe it to your experience on Bakor when you were a Lost One. But I wonder if there is a different experience that partly explains it, also. I wonder if you have not discovered the quality the Earthmen call love."

Tamarina blinked and struggled to suppress the anger that surged up. "Such things have nothing to do with the request I am making."

"I wonder which it might be, which of the two of them?"

"Will my request be considered?" Tamarina said evenly.

Susselein nodded. "You persuade me to consider it. I don't know if you are correct in your estimate of our capability, but our staff might find it an interesting and entertaining project. That would be their only reason for participating in it, you understand. Your plea moves me, because I understand your reasons. There is nothing there, however, that any of the staff could understand. Your evaluation of our cultural qualities would be laughable."

"All I care is that the Earthmen have some chance to save

their home."

"I promise you they shall have it if we can provide it."

It was very late when she left Susselein's study, and Tamarina was too weary to face Joe and Bill even with good news. She waited until the following morning when she found them as they were emerging from their quarters.

"They're going to try," she told them. "I have Susselein's promise that he'll try to persuade the staff to attack the problem of turning back the Bakori, and that means they will do it."

"That's welcome news, at least," said Bill. "Do they have any idea how to approach it, or are they starting entirely cold?"

"I don't know. Susselein didn't say. He acted as if it would be something entirely new, but I doubt that. Anyway, you've got more time now. All you want. He wants you to join him today in giving the staff some information about Earth, its astronomy and its physical features." She spoke to Bill, and then smiled wryly at Joe. "You aren't invited just yet. You made some of them too uncomfortable yesterday with what you said."

Joe shrugged. "It makes no difference as long as they're stirred up enough to be willing to help."

"They will help in spite of your comments, not because of them."

Bill left to join Susselein in his study. Joe asked Tamarina, "Are you going, too?"

She shook her head. "I thought you might like to see one of my favorite worlds."

"I've got to get back as soon as Bill—"

"There's nothing you can do. Absolutely nothing."

He felt anything but relaxed enough to go touring—even with Tamarina, but he said finally, "All right. I'm ready."

Tamarina went through the routine of what Joe thought of as 'filing a flight plan'. She was given coordinates and time schedules and instructions for return. She packed a lunch, as if they were going to the mountains for a picnic.

"Anything special I need?" Joe asked.

"Nothing. We'll be gone only a few hours."

They mounted the ramp to the terminal overlooking the ruins. Joe stood close, watching Tamarina's intense face as she checked the chronometer. "That's it," she said. "Here we—are!"

Joe looked about. The desert was gone. They stood at the edge of a grassy meadow that lay in the morning shadow of mountains like the Alps. Faint, smoky mist covered the landscape. Joe half expected to see a chalet nestled against the foothills. But there was nothing, no sign of human or animal life of any kind.

He took a step and felt oddly light. He had the sensation that the landscape rippled as if painted on a backdrop. Tamarina laughed gently. "It takes a little getting used to, as you say. There's nothing quite like it anywhere else. It's real enough, but you don't always feel sure of it."

"What is it?" Joe said. "Why this feeling?"

"This is what we call a 'fringe world'. It is at the absolute limit of the time-space continuum to which we can go. Our scientists don't fully understand it, but here time itself is not fully formed. It's in the process of forming, if you can conceive that."

"I can't," said Joe. "But I can understand why this is a favorite place of yours."

There was a sense of timelessness in the still air, as if the present moment would last forever. Only the mist drifted slowly, and somewhere nearby, a stream of water could be heard. It must have been this way in the Garden of Eden, Joe thought. *This could be a Garden of Eden.*

Together, he and Tamarina strolled past the edge of the meadow and skirted a grove of trees. They came to the stream, that plunged out of the nearby mountains.

Tamarina sat down on the grassy bank. "I come here many times," she said. "I've often thought that if I were to call any world mine, this would be the one."

Joe watched her face as her eyes scanned the serene landscape about them. A little breeze came up and ruffled the leaves on the trees, and Tamarina's hair. "You're not at all what you seemed when I first met you."

"I told you I changed on Bakor—"

"No. More than that. You were always the way you are right now, but you didn't let it show through. I think all your endless searching on all the worlds you have seen has been for just one purpose."

"Yes? What do you think that is?"

"You were looking for a home. You always wanted a home, whether you knew it or not."

"You might be right. Maybe that's what I feel here. I just didn't know what a home was. Algorans' have never known."

"I want to give you a home," Joe said. "On Earth. With me. I love you, Tamarina, and I want you to come to Earth with me when this is all over."

She stiffened, as if in anger. "You may think Algorans have no principles, but there is at least one we do observe. That principle is that there may be no union between us and a person on any other world. The historical consequences to both races would be catastrophic, regardless of whose home was adopted by them."

"I don't understand. There must be a way—"

"Do all Earthmen believe 'there must be a way' no matter whether the obstacle is an enemy or a natural law?" Her voice

was angry and bitter now, and he wondered how he could have offended her so greatly.

Then she began crying softly and rested her head on his shoulder. "Earth is your home, and I could never share it. It's all as simple as that, and there's nothing more to be said."

He touched her shoulder to draw her close, but she resisted. He let her head rest on his shoulder and looked at the timeless valley before them. They could stay here forever, he thought. A single moment on this world could be forever.

When they returned, they were called immediately into Susselein's study. Bill was there, and some of the Algoran scientific staff.

"We have reached some decisions," said Susselein, "and it is necessary that you and Bill return to Earth at once and begin preparations.

"We consider it possible to construct a time-shift device which could shift Bakor to a dead-end branch of time. Such branches are known to exist. Some of our people have been unfortunate enough to encounter them. Upon such an occurrence, anything located on that branch simply runs out of time and ceases to exist. If we could fabricate a time-shift device and plant it on Bakor we could shift the entire planet to a dead-end time branch, and the planet and everything on it would cease to exist.

"We feel this is the only possible approach. It is hopeless to consider weapons and any kind of direct confrontation with the Bakori on any battlefield that might be conceived. There are not enough of us, and we don't understand the psychic weapons the Bakori employ. But we know far more than they do about time. We should be able to bring their time to an end."

"It sounds great," said Joe. "I don't understand what you are saying, but we'll do anything we can to help. What do you need from us?"

"The device will be fabricated on Earth," said Susselein. "We

have no tools or facilities or components here on Algor. We will design the equipment. You will build it. This is a common practice with us, as I'm sure you know. It is fortunate that we already have a very large library of specifications of Earth components, which we have recently built up because we anticipated farming out a number of items for construction on Earth."

Joe looked dubiously at Bill. "Can we do it?"

"I think so. I can round up enough engineering talent on the campus. It won't take many people, from what I've learned here, no more than a half dozen besides ourselves. We'll have to rent space— I'll bet that place where Mason's Garage used to be would be adequate."

"Great. What do we use for money?"

Susselein smiled. "You have accused us of thievery, and I guess we are among the best." He reached behind him and laid an enormous stack of currency on the table. "This will get you started."

Joe stared at the bundle.

"It's legitimate," said Bill. "I've already asked that. It's not identifiable. It can be used. The idea is that we go home and get started quickly on some preliminary items they can give us now. As they develop their design, they will feed it to us. When the device is completed we'll bring it here for test and use. All we have to do is attack this problem faster than the Bakori attack Earth."

It was decided they should leave that night. They were loaded with plans and documents of hardware items to be fabricated. Joe was uncertain they could handle the documentation in spite of the Algorans' care to translate everything into Earth terms. Bill was confident there would be no difficulty in using it.

They moved up the ramp to the terminal landing for the final time. Susselein and Tamarina went up with them and stood outside the boundary of the channel. Joe looked at Tamarina,

and a vast ache filled him as he recognized that it was quite possible he would never see her again. He raised a careless hand to wave, as did Bill.

And then they were gone, and it was night on Huntington's Hill.

XIV

It had been agreed that Bill would take an apartment in the aged rooming house where Joe lived. He would move into town with his few belongings the next morning.

Alone, Joe drove his ancient car back to town. Only an afternoon had elapsed since their departure. And once again he found it would be easy to tell himself nothing had happened. He had never been away.

The night was cold, but he drove slowly, watching the chill, bright stars above Midland. Somewhere out there, a half billion light years away and a million years in the future, was a desert world and a girl named Tamarina. Tamarina, he thought, whom he loved, and whom he could never touch. He didn't understand why.

He could imagine how it would be to drive along the streets and lanes of Midland with her beside him. How it would be to build for her the home for which she had longed all her life without knowing what she really wanted. How could such a simple thing have catastrophic effects on the history of two worlds? She had said that it would. And she had accused him of always believing "there has to be a way."

There *would* be a way for them, he thought.

After the Bakori were dealt with.

It was hard to believe in them, too, watching the stars slowly shift as he drove toward the little college town. Bakori. Who were they? He shook his head to clear the dizzying impact of time. How much time?

Weeks on Algor. Hours on Earth. Where was reality any more?

The Bakori.

What would they do? How would they come? What fearful and deadly illusions would they inject into the minds of Earthmen?

How long would it take?

How long would Joe and Bill have to prepare a defense?

No one knew.

And why couldn't the Algorans, even though their work might take many months, deliver their solution to Earth tomorrow? Just as they had delivered Joe and Bill back the same day after weeks on Algor and Bakor? They said it couldn't be done that way. They had tried to explain why, but Joe couldn't understand. So many things he couldn't understand had to be accepted because that was the way they were. Or, at least, the way the Algorans said they were.

He reached town and drove through the almost vacant streets to his own place. Home, he thought, and almost laughed aloud at the dilapidated place he occupied. But that wasn't really it, he thought. All of Earth was home. Midland was home. The school was home. The shabby rooming house—he'd have better places in times to come. But even that was home in a sense that Algorans never knew.

He made a sandwich in the kitchen and ate alone, thinking of Bill. He was glad it was Bill Bradley with whom he was sharing this experience. There had never been anyone, not even in the Army, he'd rather be sharing it with than Bill.

It was hell that both of them should have loved Tamarina. But it didn't matter now since it was impossible for either of them to have her.

But Joe knew what Tamarina felt. She loved him.

She had shown him her private world in the fringe area, which was a place she could almost call home.

She hadn't shown Bill the fringe world. She never would. It was her secret—and Joe's.

He slept almost around the clock and was scarcely shaved and dressed when Bill banged on the door. Joe let him in, the sense of unreality clinging to them both as they regarded each other in the bright daylight of Earth.

"Here are the plans and specs," said Bill. He dropped a bundle of documents on the sofa. They were inscribed on the Algoran paper-like substance, which was heavier than paper—and which they obtained from one of their satellite worlds.

"Breakfast?" said Joe.

"Aunt Louise made some before I left. It just about broke them up when I said I was leaving. I told them I had to get closer to the school."

"School's out."

"Of course."

"We ought to try to withdraw. We might want to get back—someday."

Bill shook his head. "No time. You see if you can rent Mason's Garage while I see about rounding up some talent to help."

"We'll need some engineers full time, but they won't want to drop out of school. Not unless we tell them why."

"We couldn't do that. Nobody would believe us. And there isn't time for lengthy persuasion."

"If we paid them enough—"

"We'll offer them two thousand a month. Tell them we're on a high priority defense contract which we wangled in the name of Small Business. It would make it worth dropping a quarter for

them. If it takes longer than a quarter to find the answer I don't think we'll be worrying about the problem any more."

Bill moved his few belongings to the adjacent apartment while Joe finished breakfast. Then they separated on their individual errands.

Mason's Garage was an ancient building that had been unused since old Mr. Mason died two years previously. There was about 2500 square feet of space, which Mrs. Mason was glad to rent on the year's lease Joe offered her. "Going into the repair business there, now?" she said. "I hear it's pretty good, with the high price of everything."

"I think not, Mrs. Mason. We're going to try manufacturing some little things. Maybe some toys. We're not quite sure yet."

"Well, good luck to you, whatever you do. I'm sure you'll find it suitable."

He hired a crew of high school kids that afternoon to clean up the debris of twenty-five years of garage work in the building. He bought a pickup truck with Algoran cash and used it to haul junk to the dump. They had to have a truck for the operation of building the time shifter.

Bill showed up while the clean up was in progress. "Six of them," he said. "Best guys in the class. They were a little hard to convince, but when I offered a month's advance they decided it was for real."

Joe surveyed the crew shoveling debris into the pickup. "What a hell of a place to be trying to save the world."

For the rest of the week they cleaned, painted, and built work furniture. Except Bill, who spent full time pouring over the documents of the Algorans. They were prepared in English, but even so, it was difficult to decipher some of the directions and specifications. Bill made supplementary sheets as necessary.

Toward the end of the week he flew to Chicago to get some commitments from machine shops on fabrication of parts. By

the time he was back, the build-ing was ready, and he turned the engineers loose on the rest of the documents.

Joe and Bill turned their lives into eighteen-hour work days. There were complex electronic circuits to be duplicated with components available on Earth. But by the end of the second week they felt they were going to be able to fabricate the electronics given them so far. They had no idea of the complexity that was still to come.

It worried them, too, that there had been no word. They had supposed that in two weeks' time the Al-gorans would ha've had something to offer or would have inquired how *they* were doing. There was nothing.

They worried, too, about the Bakori. There was no sign of enemy activity. Not that they wanted any. It was just nerve wracking, wondering where the first strike would be made and what it would consist of.

It was while they were hastily munching lunch sandwiches put up for them by their housekeeper that Joe idly scanned the three-day old newspaper they were wrapped in. He glanced at a small, four-inch story on the inside of the front page. He stopped eating.

Bill glanced up at him. "What's the matter?" Joe's face was set. He passed the paper over without answering. Bill read the item.

North Shepington, England. Mrs. Doris Healey just had modern plumbing installed in her 300 year old Yorkshire farmhouse last week and was prepared for the luxury of a lifetime, running water in the house. Mrs. Healey claims, however, that she didn't get what she bargained for. What came out of the tap when she turned it on for the first time was red. And Mrs. Healey claims it was not just red water but red blood.

Every other resident on the block turned theirs on within the next few minutes and claimed the same result. By the end of the morning every faucet in North Shepington was claimed to be running pure red blood down the drain.

Hysterical housewives gathering in the streets attracted the attention of the police. They investigated and reported nothing but clear, cold water flowing from the taps. The women saw it, too, as they returned to their homes, but they were adamant—Bill laid the paper down. "So maybe it's started. What do you think?"

"There were a lot of funny things long before the Bakori were ever heard of. Miles of red snow. And that story of giant footprints in the snow in England, extending over twenty miles and crossing over houses, fields, barns, and other buildings. Utterly inexplicable, but there it was. Charles Fort stuff. There have been a million things like that. Maybe this—?"

"We'd better watch the papers more closely. This could be the way it's going to start."

The next day they interrupted their work to scan the morning paper. There was only one small thing. A banker in Waukegan had reported that he had opened his vault the day before and found every piece of paper inside charred to ashes. Negotiable bonds, treasury bills, cash. A loss of a million and a half dollars. No one believed the assertion of spontaneous burning of the papers, but it was curious how such great care had been taken to incinerate every piece of paper in its own place—on shelves, in safety deposit boxes, in ledgers. Everything had just neatly turned to ashes without being moved out of place.

Joe seldom dreamed. He prided himself on being able to conk off as soon as he hit the sack and not know anything until it was time to get up. That night he dreamed, however. A dream of blackness. Blackness that was tangible and as thick as the depths of space. It pressed-and confined, and enveloped him on all sides.

That was all.

Blackness.

Infinite, unending blackness in every direction, that yielded to his hand but sprang back again when he released it.

Blackness and terror.

He had never known such terror even when he was pinned down by machine gun fire in a black jungle hell for twelve hours, not knowing whether anyone else was alive or not.

He awoke with sweat drenching himself and his bedclothes. For a moment he lay looking at the ceiling in an agony of exhaustion. This is it, he told himself. They're really here, and this is only the beginning.

Bill hadn't been affected, but Joe was so exhausted during the day that he was scarcely able to work. "We'd better lay in a supply of tranquilizers against this sort of thing. I'll check the dispensary at school. They won't know we're checked out yet."

"We can't live on drugs and do this work," said Bill. "Those things make you as dopey as the nightmares do."

"Wait'll you have one yourself!"

The dispensary, however, was out of tranquilizers.

There had been a considerable run on them the past few days, the nurse said. "Mid-term exams, I guess, although I can't remember anything like this before.

Everybody's got the jitters. I'll give you a prescription for the drug store in town, but I don't think they can fill it. They were out a couple of days ago and didn't know when their next supply was coming in."

The drug store would be out, and so would the wholesalers. He could see how it was building now. A little probing here and there to find out the characteristics of the human mind, then a wholesale attack on the sanity of men when the Bakori found their psychic weaknesses.

It was confirmed a day later in a broadcast that physicians throughout the country were suddenly besieged by patients asking for tranquilizers to help them through a rash of nightmare sleeplessness.

"It's going to affect job production in every industry and

profession," said Joe, as he fought against the heaviness in his head that afternoon. "There'll be accidents, slowdowns. Things will come to a gradual halt."

Bill looked grim and exhausted himself. "If we don't hear from Algor soon I'm going to set up a beacon on the Hill and see if we can find out what's going on. When the Bakori attack gets some momentum our society could collapse very quickly."

XV

The giant 747 of flight 861 out of San Francisco was about half way to Honolulu. The late afternoon sun slanted directly into its windshield. Captain Maxim and copilot Downs watched the sky and water absently as the plane bore through the sky on auto-pilot.

Ahead of them, just above the horizon, massive cumulus lay between them and their destination. The Captain glanced at the radar screen, where the cloud mass was just beginning to show. The plane was far above the altitude of the clouds.

"Check Honolulu on it," the Captain said.

Honolulu reported favorable conditions. The storm was a local disturbance, fairly small. Captain Maxim decided there was no cause for deviation in course or altitude.

Downs continued watching the radar scope. A small blip of light was crawling out of the storm area. The copilot nodded toward the screen. "I wonder who that is." He glanced at his watch. "Must be military. There shouldn't be any commercials in that area at this time."

The Captain glanced at the image briefly. He wasn't concerned about who it was. There were a thousand possibilities—all of them probably wrong. But Downs always got worked up about knowing exactly who and what and where everything was.

"Probably," the Captain said absently. He picked up the phone

to check with the girls on conditions in the passenger areas. That was his greatest concern.

He wanted to be sure the passengers were happy and would have no complaints about service or flight conditions. That, in turn, was what made the Company happy. Not the identity of every blip on the radar screen.

"That thing's heading straight for us," said Downs. "It's been on a collision course for the last ten minutes."

"What altitude?"

"Same as ours."

The Captain could no longer avoid giving the object his attention. They were still a considerable distance apart, but they were closing at a rate of over twelve hundred miles an hour. Two hundred miles was only ten minutes. "Try to raise them and tell them to get into their own flight level. I'll change course."

The Captain took the wheel and disengaged the auto-pilot. Carefully, he shifted course 10 degrees left of his former heading. He put the ship back on automatic.

"Nothing," said Downs. "I can't raise anybody." He watched the screen again in sudden disbelief. "Look—"

Captain Maxim had already seen it. The unknown object had also shifted course—to remain exactly on a collision course with the 747.

The Captain felt moisture on his face. He switched on the radio and called Honolulu. "Flight 861. Request permission to alter flight level. Unknown object on collision course on my level, five minutes away."

There was a moment's silence. Then, "Permission granted. Increase altitude two thousand."

"Is the level below also clear if we need to go down?"

"Affirmative. Do you have any identification of the unknown?"

"Negative. No radio response. We are increasing altitude by two thousand."

He drew back the wheel as he spoke. The horizon dipped as the nose of the plane assumed a sharp angle that would bring it above the level of the unknown. This would upset the passengers, but there was no time to make it a shallower climb. Downs had already switched on the cabin seat belt signs.

At the target altitude the Captain leveled off and glanced ahead. The unknown ship ought to be visually observable now somewhere ahead and below. He checked the screen, then looked out once more. The object was not below but had climbed even as the 747 had climbed. It was now at the same altitude. He could see it plainly ahead of him.

It looked as big as the 747, but there was something strangely wrong with it. It had no contours like those of any airplane he had ever seen. Its lines were not rigid, but changed slowly and perceptibly. He leaned partway out of his seat for a moment, long enough to gasp, "Bird!"

He, leaned on the wheel and thrust it forward. The huge plane tipped in a dive it was never constructed to enter. For five thousand feet it plunged toward the ocean, and then Captain Maxim pulled back on the wheel. The servos strained to turn the control surfaces back into the airstream and bring the vast plane to level flight.

From somewhere in the ship came a sudden pounding like the beating of a giant hand on the fuselage. Captain Maxim glanced at the wingtip on his left. It was fluttering violently.

He eased the pressure on the wheel and let the ship drop more rapidly. But it was too late. With a high, squealing, tearing sound the wing broke in half and flung itself away.

The ship began to spin. Faster and faster, until it hit the water like a giant silver pod that split open to discharge its contents into the ocean.

The Honolulu controller continued shouting into his microphone for another minute or two. "Flight 861, flight 861, come in, flight 861." He stopped then and shook his head at his Chief, who came forward to find out what was wrong. They all knew then as much about the fate of flight 861 as any one would ever know, and they would play the tape over and over again and wonder about Captain Maxim's last incredible exclamation: "Bird!"

Joe Simmons and Bill Bradley read about the disappearance of the airplane. They noted it—along with increasing numbers of other unexplained accidents that began appearing in news reports. There was no possibility of identifying them as Bakori incidents, but their frequency was increasing rapidly.

The machine shop work was progressing well. Fabrications were beginning to flow in. The electronics were shaping up satisfactorily.

But nothing had come through from Algor.

In San Francisco only a few early morning winos along Market Street were the first to see the vast shadow that appeared like some enormous tent rippling lazily in the off-shore wind. It stretched upwards about twenty feet and filled the street to that width. It was over a hundred feet long.

Early traffic detoured around it. Market Street was always filled with construction projects blocking off the street for one reason or another. It made no difference what this one was. It was a tolerable nuisance like all the rest. A few policemen who drove past it reached the same conclusions, although they didn't remember any advance information on such a blockage.

It was only when the first gray light of dawn suffused over the thing that it was seen to have a color.

Green.

And that it was alive and moving.

A worm-like creature of incredible size.

By eight o'clock the side streets leading to Market were jammed with sightseers wanting to get a look at the "sea monster" that had been announced on radio and TV. Even the freeways passing nearby were blocked by cars whose drivers had stopped to get a look at the incredible sight below.

In the Mayor's office the debate was how to get rid of the thing. Proposals to kill it immediately were reconsidered in the light of the disposal problem. How many tons of putrefying ichor would the carcass of the creature yield if it were killed?" The most favored alternate proposal was to guide it—coax it, force it—down to the Embarcadero and shove it into the bay. There the disposal problem would not be so great. But nobody had any ideas as to how to persuade the creature to move.

During the day it was the object of nervous humor on the part of the press and TV elements. How many tomatoes did it take to make *that* tomato worm? If it turned into a butterfly could it lift as much as a Huey Cobra helicopter?

And how many more were there where this one came from?

By evening the creature had negotiated only a few hundred feet of Market Street. The tone of the public response changed. Lights were set up along the movable barricades constructed behind and on either side of the worm. But along with daylight, the humor vanished. Fear and nervousness remained.

Where *had* the creature come from?

Were there indeed more of them?

Night came on, and San Francisco began to be afraid.

From below San Diego to the northern end of

Puget Sound the sea began a dark congealing after dusk. Gelatinous rolls and sheets formed out beyond the breakers and were carried slowly landward. At the edge of the sand the stuff reached out with little fingers and pulled itself forward. When the sea retreated it lay quivering and shiny on the moonlit beaches.

Two thousand miles of it.

A million little fingers drawing it forward.

No one knows who was really the first to see it, but Jack Benton of the Los Angeles Times claimed to be the first. He had gone to the beach at Santa Barbara for the week end, and when he took a dawn walk along the sand he thought it was an oil spill again. He poked with a stick and looked at the oily stain that extended out of sight in both directions along the beach.

He collected a sample of the stuff in a tin can and ran back to his car to find a helicopter service that would fly him up and down the beach. He radioed his paper and flew along the beach for two hours without seeing the end of the stuff—whatever it was.

By midmorning, the entire West Coast was aware of the new encroachment. Tens of thousands of persons prodded and poked at the jelly-like material. Biologists came out to sample and examine it.

Until they saw what happened to a few dogs and cats and crabs and one child who got enmeshed in the substance. Skeletal remains were all that were visible after ten or twelve minutes.

Very quickly it was tied to the monster on Market Street, but no one was sure what relationship there might be. They were both unknowns.

It covered boats that lay at anchor in unprotected places. It crawled and smeared its way over beachfront buildings, walks, and every other structure that lay in its way. By nightfall it had advanced as much as fifty feet from the water line.

There was no humor here. There was almost instant terror along the entire West Coast of the United States that night.

Joe Simmons dreaded the coming of night. His night terrors remained. Always the same. The blackness. The endless, resilient, enclosing blackness that left him in a sweat of anguish by dawn.

In contrast, Bill was not affected in this manner. So far, his only effect was an enormous fatigue from the hours they worked.

But over the rest of the world the Bakori had found man's vulnerability. Where the enemy could touch his secret terrors he could be defeated. And in the night his terrors could easily be found.

The Bakori stirred up all the night-fears that lay in every man all the way back to his first cruel expulsion into the world. And beyond that, a thousand generations to cave terrors and fire, and wild things that spring in the night.

Man had survived only because he could put away these things and remember them no more. But the Bakori knew how to dredge them up and leave all man's psychic wounds raw in the sun.

Joe and Bill spent less time following the news now. They could almost anticipate it. They could easily envision the chaos and destruction induced by the Bakori. Man's industrial society was coming apart at the seams because the Bakori were uncovering all his hidden terrors for him to live with. It was so simple, Joe thought. No guns, no bombs, no chemicals or disease germs. No propaganda, even. Just a prodding of what every man already carried within him. He could imagine the amusement of Amular.

But there would be guns and bombs yet. Production would fall. Famine would come. And then men would begin to destroy each other. And sometime after that, the Bakori would loot the planet at their leisure.

The first batch of fabrication was virtually complete. Joe said, "We're just marking time. We've got to try to contact Algor. What do you think?"

Bill agreed. "How about tomorrow afternoon after we get this last module wrapped up? We'll go out to the Hill and set up a beacon."

They never went to bed earlier than midnight and had just

gotten to sleep when the phone rang in Bill's room. It was his Aunt Louise. She was hysterical.

"It's coming in the house, Bill! You've got to do something. You've got to get us out of here!"

He shook his head, fuzzy with sleep. "Who—? Is this you, Aunt Louise? What's coming in the house? What are you talking about?"

"The stuff that's been running off the hill all day. I thought you knew what it was all about. You're up there all the time. It looks like green slime, and it's all around the house and coming in under the kitchen door."

"Get in the car and head for town. I'll meet you on the way."

"The car won't start. Murph's already tried. The engine's all full of the stuff."

"Can you walk—run—down the lane toward the road? We'll come as fast as we can and pick you up. You ought to be able to get far enough ahead of the stuff to keep out of its way."

"It's already inches deep in front of the house—"

"Wade through it. Get your coats and boots on and get out there and wade through it. Run out to the highway. Will you do that?"

"All right. All right, Bill. But don't be long in coming—"

He slammed the receiver down and pounded on the wall next to Joe's room. Joe growled in sleepy response. Bill called through the thin wall. "Get your clothes on. It's hit the Hill. We've got to get Aunt Louise and Uncle Murph."

They dressed and were on their way in the pickup in less than ten minutes. The trip to Huntington's Hill was a short one compared with what it was in the old Chevy. The snow was gone, and the road was dry and firm. Joe pushed the pickup as much as he dared.

There was a full moon, and under its light they saw the Hill long before they reached it. They could not make out what was on it except for a shininess that looked like water.

As they came up to the lane they saw Bill's aunt and uncle standing by the mailbox. Behind them, a slow; shining river moved toward the road.

Joe and Bill looked at the Hill. "They must have known this was our terminal," said Joe."

"Whether they knew or not, they've wiped us out as far as the Hill goes. We have no terminal with Algor."

XVI

They found a room at a motel for Bill's aunt and uncle, and returned to their own rooms. It was after three. They felt little like sleeping now and sat in Joe's room slumped low in the worn chairs.

"Will Algor know?" said Joe. "Will they get any kind of warning that the terminal is overrun?" - "Not until they try to use it, I think."

"If anyone tries to come through, maybe the Bakori will deflect the channel again." .

"No," said Bill. "You remember the Algorans had just figured a way to put a double barrier on the channels. The Bakori won't be able to repeat their abduction. The channel just won't register. It will be like looking at a blank wall from the Algoran end."

"Maybe the Algorans have failed and have given up. We don't even know if they're still trying to complete the design. A million things could have happened."

"I know. I think we've got to use the beacon anyway and see if they will pick us up on routine scanning."

"Where?"

"The area behind the shop is fairly large and hidden by the fence. We could try it from there."

"The beam will attract attention."

"We'll have to risk that. Let's hit the sack now for what's left of the night."

Joe thought of the night terrors awaiting him. "I'd as soon stay awake."

Bill got up to leave. Joe stood up and held the door to lock it after Bill left. Abruptly, the lights in the room flickered, went out momentarily, and came back on.

"Bakori in the power station," said Joe. "I wonder why they haven't done that yet—cut off all the power everywhere? We ought to get an auxiliary power set down at the shop."

"Look—!" Bill stared toward the center of the room. A pulsating cylinder of light was forming, now bright, now all but vanished. It pulsed and glowed, becoming a little brighter each cycle.

"What is it?" said Joe.

But then he recognized in the center of it a familiar figure. Wavering, as if reflected in water, the image of Tamarina was slowly forming. Her lips moved as if she were trying desperately to speak.

He called out to her. "Tamarina—!"

She seemed frozen behind a wall of distorting glass. But then her image became more firm and clear, and her words were audible. "The Bakori are putting pressure to block all channels between Earth and Algor," she said. "We've got to have auxiliary equipment at your end. The Hill terminal is destroyed—"

"We know," said Joe.

"Set up the beacon at your shop, and we'll send some equipment through to reinforce the channel."

"How are—?" Joe began to ask about the work on the weapon, but the image faded, and the girl was gone.

He and Bill looked at each other in the vacuum left by her departure. "The Algorans must be having a rougher time to hold back the Bakori than they anticipated," said Bill.

"Suppose they can't keep a channel open?"

Bill spread his hands in resignation. "Then they'll block off this sector as they originally planned."

"There's no use trying to sleep any more tonight. Let's get up to the shop and set up the beacon. We've got to find out what's going on."

Bill went to his own room for his coat. They gathered the beacon cubes from a dozen hiding places around the apartments and collected others hidden at the shop. They went to the enclosed area at the rear of the building and arranged a square of a dozen cubes. The space only allowed it to be twenty feet on a side. "I wish we could have asked how much power we need," said Joe.

The dozen cubes were apparently enough. Within a few minutes the familiar white cylinder formed within the red beacon. Tamarina and two other Algorans appeared with large cases of equipment. They stepped out of the channel, dragging the cases with them.

"Quickly," said Tamarina. "We must get these inside and in operation."

Bill opened the garage door, and the four men shifted the cases into the shop. The Algorans touched a small tool to the corner of each case, and the packing split open, revealing the time channel mechanisms.

The Algorans began setting it up, and Tamarina called Joe

and Bill aside. "This terminal establishes an anchor at this end so that the Bakori cannot distort it as they can a single ended channel. We underestimated the strength of their machines. We almost lost this channel."

"What about the time shifter?" said Joe.

"That's why we have come. The design is complete. We have the remainder of the drawings and specifications for you."

The Earthmen felt a wave of relief. "We wondered if you might have been unable to complete it. We can't hold on much longer here," Joe said.

"What have the Bakori done?"

Briefly, the men outlined what had occurred.

"We're scarcely in time," said Tamarina. "So far, they've just done preliminary probing, testing to find the most effective attack."

"It seems to me they've already found it!" said Bill.

"They will apply what they have learned and concentrate on the leaders of your governments and industry. That's their usual pattern. Then there will be a total breakdown of your society. Suicide, rioting, and civil war will destroy your people."

"How much time have we got?"

"Very little. Less than a month, certainly, before you pass the point of no return."

"I wonder if we can complete the fabrication in that time," said Joe.

"You must. There's no other solution. The design has been made to your standards. We had to work as rapidly as possible on our end, and there was no time to provide a backup design to be built on some other world. Susselein has performed a miracle in getting our scientists to work on this program as if their own

world depended on it. If some of our people can help fabricate we will send them, but they are not skilled in that end of it."

"We'll study the remaining design and let you know if we need help," said Bill. "We have a few very skillful people. They've done some miracles themselves up to now."

The two Algorans had completed setting up the terminal equipment. "It's ready," said Tamarina. "Let them show you how to operate it. Then we must go."

During the next half hour Joe and Bill learned the operation of the terminal equipment so they could project the channel faultlessly. Then the three Al-gorans returned to the channel outside the shop and re-entered the columns of light. They waved a brief farewell and were gone.

The new time channel equipment stood in the corner of the shop. The operation of a few controls could put them in touch with Algor immediately, Joe reflected. And if they chose, he and Bill could escape the Bakori onslaught completely.

He was so damned tired, he thought—or he wouldn't even be thinking a thought like that.

"Almost time for breakfast," said Bill. "I think you ought to get some sack time. You look like hell."

"We've got to get the crew started on these new items for fabrication. Let's go down to Marie's and get that breakfast you were talking about and then get back to work."

A pattern of suicide began to appear in the next few days, just as Tamarina had predicted. The alleged reasons were not important. How the Bakori induced the self destruction was not important. The fact that it happened was all that mattered.

It began on some college campuses. Then it spread to local government circles. Some Chiefs of Police. Some Mayors. A couple of Governors. One of the Cabinet officers.

There was a riot one day in Congress. A senator accused

another of deliberately trying to ruin him. He drew a gun on the Senate floor and wounded the accused man. The Canadian Prime Minister was assassinated. The British Prime Minister died under circumstances that could have been either assassination or suicide.

The most critical effect of the rising chaos was a suddenly growing shortage of electronic components. The engineers had already made several trips to Chicago and New York, and even to the West Coast in search of scarce items. Now, with the new items required by the last batch of Algoran documents, the supply problem was multiplied.

Air travel had all but ceased, paralyzed by increasing numbers of accidents resulting from pilot error, inadequate maintenance, and sabotage. Trains were overloaded, slow, and erratic in schedule. Buses were still traveling, but highway accidents had reached epidemic proportions. Crowded buses rolled from the highways and burned.

Steve Marple was one of the student engineers, who suggested to Joe, "Let me take the pickup to Chicago and see what I can find. It's no good to call. You just get the run-around on the phone. The only way is to get the guy to look on his shelves in the back room while you wait."

"You may be right," said Joe. "Break off and leave right now."

"I haven't got anything to break off from," said Steve. "I've run out." He hesitated. "This contract— with everything coming apart at the seams—does it really mean anything?"

"More than ever," said Joe. "The military is going to need our little item real bad."

"If I didn't think so, I'd head for some place out West until this thing blows over—if it ever does."

"We'd do it ourselves, but this is important, believe me."

Steve left at midmorning. At ten o'clock that night Joe got a phone call. It was from the Illinois Highway Patrol. "You Joe

Simmons, owner of a pickup, license ZD-4380?"

"Yes—"

"Your driver, Steve Marple, Midland—"

"What's happened to Steve?"

"I'm sorry to tell you they shot your truck off the road. They aren't letting anything that looks like a truck in or out of Chicago. It went off the road and totalled out."

"Steve—"

"Killed. Best to have his next of kin allow a burial here. There's just no way of getting a body from here to Midland now."

Joe hung up slowly while the sheriff was still talking. Bill saw his despairing face. "What's happened?"

Joe told him. "It's taken too long," Joe said wearily. "We aren't going to make it at this rate. Things are falling apart too fast. How are we going to find parts?"

They stopped work early for lack of components, but continued pouring over the Algoran documents. There was the matter of Steve's folks to notify, but he was from out of town and no one knew exactly where. Al Barnes and Walton Rees offered to follow up and locate his family. Bill and Joe went to their apartments and tried to sleep.

At the usual time the next morning they went down to the shop. A short time later the engineers came in together, Al Barnes leading the way.

The engineers look exhausted but determined. "We've decided to give it up," said Al. "We don't like to leave you this way, but we can't believe there's any importance in what we're doing here. Nothing's important anymore. The country's all gone to hell for no reason that anybody can figure out. Same thing all over the world. We don't know what's happening, but we're going to find some back country to hole up in."

Joe watched their tired, resigned faces. He had been expecting this without realizing it, he thought. He should have been prepared. "What would it take to convince you it's important that you stay?" he said.

"I can't think of a single thing," said Al.

Joe and Bill looked at each other in silent agreement that there was only one thing to do. If these five walked out now the project would be utterly beyond hope—provided it wasn't that way already.

Joe sat on the edge of the desk and faced the engineers. "I can tell you guys it's the most important thing in the world for any of us to just stay right here and slug away at this project until it's done. And I'm going to tell you a real weird story to prove it. You won't believe the story, either, but remember I'm saying we can show you proof the story is true."

Slowly, then, he told them of the Algorans and how they came to Earth, the Bakori and how they came to be attacking Earth, and how the equipment being built in the shop was the only possible hope for the whole planet.

The five had nothing to say. They listened in grim disbelief until he was through. Then Al spoke finally. "We're waiting for the proof you said you had."

"What would prove it to you?"

Al shook his head. "I don't think anything would. Your story is like all the rest of the crazy nightmares people are living with."

"If you saw a time channel in operation would you be convinced?"

"It would help."

"When we get this stuff completed, we'll ship it to Algor by time channel. You can see it for yourselves at that time."

"That will be never, without parts." Al shook his head. "In a

month we could be a long way from here. What are you going to do for parts?"

"That's the problem we've all got to concentrate on now."

The group withdrew and conferred among themselves. Finally, they returned. "We'll give it another week to see if parts can be located," said Al. "If nothing has happened by then, we'll be moving on."

Joe nodded in acceptance of the compromise. "We'll buy that," he said.

When they were gone, Joe put his head down on his hands at his desk.

"Bad night again?" said Bill.

"One of the rougher ones." He raised his head. "We've got to tell Algor we're out of parts. We haven't got a chance in hell of getting any more. Maybe some could be found on other worlds."

"It's like Tamarina said, they wouldn't be compatible with ours. The designers would have to start all over again."

"I don't see why they didn't set up the hardware program somewhere else anyway. There must be a million other planets where this work could be done."

"No one else would have the incentive we have."

Joe snorted. "A lot of good incentive is without electronic components."

For the twentieth time they went over the manufacturers' catalogues, the telephone directories, and the wholesale house flyers of every supply source within a hundred, two hundred, five hundred, and a thousand miles. They got on the phones again to try to coax more than a dribble out of the suppliers. By afternoon, it looked as if a small percentage could be obtained by making a five thousand mile automobile trip to scores of different places.

But that included places where many roadblocks now existed.

At midafternoon, they gave up for lunch. Al approached them at the same time. "We're caught up on practically everything," he said. "There's no use of our staying around any more today. We're not walking out, but we're bushed and might as well take off while we can."

"Sure," said Joe. "We'll have something worked out by morning."

They left the shop and walked down to the lunchroom and sat at the counter. "The same," said Joe.

"Sorry," said Marie. "All I've got left today is a few cans of soup. No coffee, no rolls, no steaks. I don't think I'm going to open tomorrow. People are buying out the grocery stores like crazy. I can't even get a pound of coffee."

"I guess we'll take the soup, then."

They sat in silence, reflecting on what it must be like in the large metropolitan centers. Transportation down for the most part. Food shortages. Hoarding, Rioting. That's what Tamarina had said would happen. He didn't see how they could hang on in Midland for as much as a month. He wondered if there would even be a grocery store open in another few days.

They finished the tasteless soup and wandered out into the late afternoon sunlight again.- Few people were on the streets, and these appeared as if they felt like fugitives by their manner of slinking and avoiding the glance of anyone else.

They walked toward the campus, which was mostly deserted. A few figures were seen. Classes had been closed for over two weeks, because of the crisis, but there were still some types working in the labs on projects for theses. Some for whom the world had never really existed anyway, Joe thought.

They passed the physics building. Joe stopped at an intersection of the walks. "Remember this spot— a million years ago?"

"No. Oh, yeah—where we mowed each other down. It *was* a million years ago, wasn't it?"

"Do you suppose that none of this would have happened if we hadn't collided that afternoon?" said Joe. "We wouldn't have gotten mixed up, Tamarina wouldn't have been abducted by the Bakori.

They wouldn't have wedged open the time channel giving them access to this sector. They wouldn't now be attacking Earth."

"Who knows?" said Bill. "Personally, I think the Bakori would have found their way here, regardless. And without our pushing the Algorans to help we would have been wiped out by now. Without *your* pushing; I don't have what it takes to push them as you did. So you might say our collision was an act of Providence to give Earth a chance."

"I hope you're right."

"Want to go in?"

Joe shrugged. "Why not? The janitor can throw us out if we're trespassing."

They entered the halls that were mostly silent. The first floor custodian nodded but did not ask them to leave. Some of the professors were in their offices. A few students were in the labs. Otherwise, the building was silent.

They went up to the third floor, where the electronics labs were. "Too bad *their* stock isn't big enough to help out," said Bill.

"It might have been if old Peterson had imagination enough to run a real lab."

They passed the large computer area, which was closed and locked. The big 1197 was used for both scientific and administrative work and was the pride of the scientific side of the campus.

"It gives me the creeps, seeing this place all battened down like this," said Bill. "Let's go back outside."

"I don't want to go= back to the shop."

"Me, either. What do we do? Call Algor and tell them we can't make it, and ask if we can still join them?"

So Bill had been thinking of it, too. Joe shook his head. "We stay here—no matter what—don't we?"

"Yeah—no matter what. Maybe we should head West and hole up and try to ride it out like Barnes and the other guys want to do."

"You know there's no hiding from the Bakori. Earth will be wiped clean of the last living thing if they aren't stopped."

They came to the east end of the campus where the warehouses and storage areas were. Through the dusty glass of a warehouse window they caught a glimpse of olive drab shapes. "That's some of the surplus equipment the Government gave schools all over the country during the past few years. I've heard they got some pretty advanced radar and drone equipment, but it's never been taken out of storage."

They stopped and looked at each other. "Parts," said Bill. "There must be tons of stuff in there."

"Wait—not there," said Joe. He glanced back at the physics building. "Don't you see it?"

"What?"

"The computer. The 1197 computer. Maybe some of this stuff in here, too. But mostly the computer."

"Have you lost your mind? What's the computer got to do with it?"

"Thousands and thousands of tiny little parts," said Joe. "Just what we need, all neatly mounted on printed circuit boards, and

they are all plugged into neat little card receptacles from which they can be removed."

"Dummies!" breathed Bill. "Why in the world didn't we think of that before?"

"Because it's not easy to steal the guts out of a half million dollar computer even without anybody standing around watching you."

XVII

They accomplished it two nights later. Joe hid himself in a closet in the physics laboratory until the building was closed for the night. He let Bill in, and they taped the glass in the door of the computer room and smashed it. Once inside, they removed the plug-in modules and loaded them in baskets. These were lowered to the ground from a window on the dark side of the building, which faced inward to the campus. Al Barnes and his group quickly transferred the modules to the new pickup they had obtained. Then they loaded three truckloads of assemblies from the surplus military equipment in the warehouse. Before the first touch of dawn they had their materials safely stored in the shop. They locked up and left to grab short hours of sleep before returning to work.

Whether the Bakori were aware of their efforts or sensed their existence on Earth Joe and Bill never knew. But after their return to all-out effort with complete design and adequate parts the Bakori attack intensified world wide. Maybe the enemy sensed the Earthmen's efforts, maybe it was only adherence to schedule as Tamarina had described it. The effect was a staggering burden to the desperate effort in the dilapidated garage in Midland.

Joe's night attacks swelled and stayed with him throughout the day. He worked against a background of nightmares where demons howled and laughed and screamed derision. Bill slumped before illusory worlds which fought and suppressed the world of

Mason's Garage, Midland, and the Algoran time shifter.

The engineers struggled, too, against the wash of Bakori terror and illusion. The effort slowed, errors crept in. These had to be found, corrected, and the circuits rebuilt. Time shortened, and they fought to work around the clock.

Around the world the Bakori darkness poured out of space and filled the minds of men, each with his own private hell, amplified, multiplied, increased a million fold. The demons that men had fought to put down for a half million years were nourished, sustained, and given the breath of life by the invading powers.

Demons of night and all dark places seized new life from the Bakori and showed themselves anew to their human hosts. They could not be put down now by sunlight or frantic prayers. They walked at noonday and jibed at the efforts of men to put them away in hiding again.

There were demons of hate and demons of fear, and demons of murder and all disorder. They commanded now, and slowly Earthmen bent to their will.

Yet, on a day three weeks after Tamarina's last appearance the last integrated circuit was laid in its bed of epoxy. The last solder joint was completed.

It was midnight of a day when storm and fury had beat at Midland. It was the desert storm of Bakor multiplied ten fold. In a frantic mixture of terror the wind ripped structures and battered the town with sandblast and rain. And then the temperature fell and blizzard snow piled thick on the town.

Lights were out. Power had failed long ago, except for the emergency motor-generator set installed by Joe and Bill.

Joe did not believe it when he finished the last connection, but he said, "That's it. It's done." He turned to the engineers at their work stations around the table. He said to Al Barnes, "I guess we can show you what we promised. It's ready to go." The room seemed to ripple before his eyes.

"It doesn't really matter any more," said Al Barnes. "I guess you made us believe in you. That's why we stayed. Anybody that would deliberately go through the hell you've seen the last month is worth following. So it doesn't really matter whether your story is true or not.

"We're going West, maybe north to Canada. If your story is true and the machine works I guess we'll know it. If not, I guess we'll know that, too."

"Yes," said Joe. "You'll know it either way." He turned to Bill. "We can't take this equipment out in that storm. Can we open the channel here inside?"

"It can be done." Bill rose unsteadily in his exhaustion and moved to the control panels. "Clear the center of the room."

They shoved back the work tables to clear a twenty-foot square. Bill manipulated the controls and watched anxiously. Only the silver glow appeared now, ghostly at first and then deepening. He shifted controls to center the column.

"I'll tell them we're ready," said Joe.

Bill nodded agreement. Joe stepped into the white column and disappeared from the sight of his companions. The engineers could not hide their start at his disappearance.

He was back in twenty minutes. "They're ready for us—and surprised that we're ready. The other end of the channel opens into their laboratory now. All we've got to do is wheel this stuff in."

Twelve large consoles of time shifting equipment were mounted on wheeled dollies. One by one, the men moved them into the column of light and watched them disappear.

The last one vanished, and the blizzard wind outside renewed its fury. A pane of glass shattered in the front window of the shop. Hastily the engineers mounted a piece of plywood to the entire window surface and nailed it tight.

"You have the proof of our story," Joe said to Al. He gestured to the column, where the consoles had disappeared.

Al nodded. "It's enough. What happens next?"

"We follow," said Joe. "We may not see you again. We're grateful for your help. Good luck— wherever you decide to go."

They shook hands and stepped into the beam. In a moment the room was gone. A timer turned off the channel in the shop. The two men were on Algor once more.

The relief of stepping beyond the Bakori influence was like a wave of fresh and invigorating air. The nightmares were gone. The men felt light and reborn. Bill stumbled with relief as he stepped out onto the laboratory floor. He held his hands to his head and looked about. "I never knew it was so bad," he said.

"That's what I found out the first time I came," said Joe. "How'd you like to go back into it now?"

"When we next go back, *they'll* be gone." Tamarina greeted them first. "We're happy you finished so quickly! You'll rest now before you begin training in the time boat. Our people will install the shifter; you won't have to worry about that."

Tamarina tried to lead them away, but suddenly the way was blocked by the group of Algoran scientists and designers who swarmed about. The Algor-ans were smiling. They clamored to shake the hands of the Earthmen and wish them well in the remainder of their mission.

A deep sense of camaraderie enveloped them. Joe and Bill sensed this was something of a landmark experience for the Algorans, that never had they allowed such feelings toward men of another world. The urgency of their work shaped a bond between the Earthmen and the Algorans.

Susselein stood back, smiling. He stepped forward as the last of the scientists shook the Earthmen's hands. "My congratulations, also," he said. "You have done a magnificent job."

"We are grateful for your providing the means," said Joe. "I hope we can finish it quickly now."

"You will. Tomorrow we'll begin training." He clapped them on the back as Tamarina led them away.

"You may not know it," she said, "but you have made some kind of history. Our people have never demonstrated like that as far back as anyone can remember."

"I suspected that was the case," said Bill. "Maybe something good is happening to both of us."

They were given the same quarters they had previously occupied. After a bath and food they both slept until evening, reveling in the luxury of freedom from the Bakori onslaught.

Afterwards, Tamarina and Susselein took them to the ship, the time boat, which would carry them and their equipment to Bakor. It was located in a large cavern next to the laboratory. Much larger than their previous ship, the time boat was at least a hundred feet long and a third that in diameter.

"The forward two thirds is the ship itself," said Susselein. "The rear portion contains the time shifter equipment and is detachable. Your mission is to land on Bakor and leave the time shifter segment of the ship there.

"During the flight to Bakor you will be enclosed in a time cell, generated within the ship. This is a shell of pure time stasis, through which nothing can pass, neither matter nor radiation. A small porthole moves very rapidly at random over the cell to permit observation and data necessary to navigation. A time-charge weapon is included to provide offense and defense action when and if necessary.

"The most critical phase is the separation of the two parts of the vessel. The time cell must close simultaneously and very accurately over both parts to keep the protection intact. When that occurs, you may leave Bakor and return here. The time shifter will remain to do its work."

"What will the Bakori be doing all this time?" Joe said.

"They will be throwing everything they've got at you. Your one vulnerable spot is the porthole, but anything coming through that will be slight. The time cell will protect you against all physical weapons and radiation. We believe it will be entirely effective against their psychic barrage also."

"If we can place the time shifter and wipe out the Bakori that's all that matters."

"Your chance of doing that is almost a certainty. Now, the two of you had better get a good night's sleep and be ready to begin training tomorrow."

"Two?" said Tamarina. "You haven't forgotten that I'm going?"

Susselein turned to her. "I hadn't planned on it."

"I am. I must! There's room enough. I can perform crew duties."

"Yes," said Susselein at last. "I see you must. Very well. We will plan on your going."

The time shifter was checked and debugged and installed during the night. There was very little error in the equipment. It corresponded almost perfectly to the design, a miracle in the sight of the Algoran scientists and technicians. And no one would agree more with that evaluation than Joe and Bill. It *was* a miracle.

The time boat was little different from the earlier ship they had learned to handle. It was bigger and had more flexibility, and it included the time shifter and time cell controls.

Bill and Joe were at the laboratory early, along with Tamarina. Their instructor was a young Al-goran named Donal, and he had something only a little less than hero worship for the Earthmen.

They took their places in the ship, and, by means of a time channel, the ship was moved from the laboratory to outer space. Then for the next six hours Donal showed them how to put the ship through its paces. They each took their place at all the controls and practised the use of the time charge weapon.

The routine was repeated three days in a row. At the end of the time Donal pronounced them ready to go.

There was little preparation on the morning of their departure. They donned ordinary Algoran clothing. The time boat had been thoroughly checked for the final time during the night. A small stock of food supplies was aboard in the event of delay in returning. They did not feel they were about to do battle with the enemy for control of a world.

They approached the ship through the crowd of Algorans who had worked on the time shifter and who operated the great time terminal. A hail of well wishes and exclamations of cheer showered over them. Susselein stood by the hatch of the ship.

"You'll be back in a few hours, and the Bakori menace will be at an end for both of our peoples," he said.

Joe and Bill acknowledged the greetings and said nothing. Tamarina's face was sober. They entered the ship and closed the hatch. Then they took their preassigned places: Joe as control pilot, Tamarina as co-pilot, and Bill as time operator and gunner— if the time charge gun were to be used.

They performed a lengthy checklist, then waited for the red light on the control panel to go out. In a moment it extinguished and was replaced by a green one. Abruptly, the walls of the cavern vanished from the screen in front of them. The night of space was in their view.

The continuum had been crossed. They were once again in the continuum of the Bakori. Within the Bakori solar system, they hoped.

Bill checked his instruments quickly. "We're very close this time. On the same side of the sun, nine degrees above the plane

of Bakor, and only sixteen degrees ahead of it in arc."

He set the figures quickly into the ship's computer. "Computer ready," he said.

"Time cell?" Joe questioned.

"Locked. Scanner open."

Joe pressed the controls that activated the engines. The computer set a course for Bakor. "On course. 1 g acceleration," said Joe.

Abruptly the ship rocked as if a blast had exploded under the forward deck.

"Welcome from the Bakori," said Joe grimly.

"There weren't supposed to get through the time cell with anything—anything at all," said Bill.

Tamarina was white-faced. "That was a time thrust," she said. "A time discontinuity thrown in our path. We didn't know the Bakori had that capability."

The computer had automatically compensated for the thrust. The ship moved on. "They may have some other surprises for us," said Joe. "They certainly found we were here quickly enough."

Joe increased the acceleration and kept the telescopic screen on Bakor. There were no signs of enemy vessels.

"They're tracking us," said Tamarina. "They have a time-deviant field that must cover the solar system. When any object on a different time scale approaches they get a warning. With our time cell, we must be flashing across their screens like a beacon."

"We didn't expect to come in undetected."

Joe wished they might use a time channel for the final approach, but it was too subject to distortion by the Bakori. They might find themselves—at the other end of it—a thousand

miles below the surface of the planet. The slow mechanical approach was the only way they could come in.

The planet grew in their screens, and Joe watched for signs of attack. Suddenly he felt it, a wisp of nightmare crossing his mind. He rubbed a hand hard across his eyes.

"They're here," said Tamarina softly.

The invasion had to be coming through the random port that enabled them to navigate. "Reduce the port to minimum," Joe said.

Bill complied. The image of the planet dimmed on their screens, but they could still make it out. The nightmare dwindled.

"I think Susselein has underestimated our friends' ability to project through the time cell," said Joe.

Neither of his companions replied. The ship bore on through enemy space, its occupants silent. Joe wondered what weapons the Bakori might yet have to unleash. The time thrust was a sample. So was the brief nightmare invasion they had felt. These, like their initial attacks on Earth, could be just probing.

"Something—" said Bill abruptly. He watched his instruments intently. "The power in the time cell is decreasing—like something is sucking it out. Just a little bit, but it's there."

"If the Bakori can absorb power out of it they will break it down," said Joe. "Boost it back up."

"I'll try."

Bill adjusted the cell controls. "Cell power up," he said. "The drain is steady."

"I suppose it becomes a question then if we can supply power faster than they can drain it off. If we can't, the shield goes down." He looked question-ingly at Tamarina.

"That is right," she said. "We must be able to hold the input higher than the drain."

Bill cursed in frustration at his panel. "If I understood some of this time technology maybe I'd have some idea of what I'm doing!"

The time boat moved in toward Bakor. An occasional time thrust jolted the vessel. Bill watched his power meters slowly climb as he compensated for the Bakori drain on the time cell. They were now within ten thousand miles of Bakor, and the computer had begun to plot a dozen possible landings.

"I'd like to plant the shifter in the desert where we brought the Creals down," said Joe.

"Unfortunately it is on a line of their terminal stations—as we found out before. We want to stay away from them," said Tamarina.

"It looks like we're headed for that broad area of forested mountain tops. That's no place to try to land!"

"Power drain is accelerating," said Bill. Input is almost up to maximum. That means our shield is going to start going down—"

"We're at maximum approach rate," said Joe.

Then they began to feel it again, like tiny rodent feet racing through miles of darkened corridors. The whisper of nightmare. The rustling of fear. "It's com-ing through," said Bill. "I can't increase the input power to the time cell."

Joe turned to Tamarina. "Is there any other maneuver we can make?"

"No. The capacity of the Bakori to drain the cell to this extent was not recognized. We have to go through it."

"Five more minutes, and we're down."

Each second was endless. The screaming demons that they thought had been left on Earth paraded once more in insane glee across their consciousness. Joe brushed a hand across his face as if to wipe them away.

"I'll watch the controls," said Tamarina. "We're almost there. I've had training in resisting things like this."

Joe shut his eyes a moment. Then he opened them and smiled at Tamarina. "I'm all right," he said.

Bill uttered a sudden exclamation of alarm and pointed to the screen. "That ball of fire—it's going to hit us!"

For a moment Joe dismissed it as a crazed illusion of the Bakori. Then he looked hard at the screen, too. An object was hurtling toward them like a flaming meteorite. He dipped the control to turn the ship aside. The flaming ball hissed on into space.

"They're shooting missiles at us. They must be seekers of some kind to find us at this speed."

Tamarina moved the view controls until she spotted a distant object above the planet's surface. She increased the magnification. "That's it. That ship. It's firing the time charge missiles. And there's a whole fleet behind it—"

"What can they do?" said Joe.

"Nothing—if our time cell is intact. If it is weak enough for one of them to penetrate it will destroy us."

Bill had been taught what to do. He turned to the panel controls of their own weapon and sought a fix on the Bakori ship. The computer locked on it. Bill pressed the button that released their own time charge. It fled toward the target at nearly instantaneous velocity.

And missed.

Bill sought a new fix, waited an instant for the computer and

fired again.

There was no discharge.

Tamarina turned and uttered a scream of grief and terror. Joe followed her staring gaze.

Bill was not there.

XVIII

Joe heard his own voice screaming wildly. "Bill— Bill—Bill—!" His voice broke in a cry of anguish.

Tamarina screamed back at him. "Shut up—! Hold course—hold course—!"

He gripped the edge of the panel and sought their landing spot on the screen. "What happened? What happened to Bill?"

Tamarina crawled from her position and sought the weapon's control button. She pressed the release. The time charge surged and swelled and caught the enemy vessel in a nova of fire.

She crept back to her control station. "They synchronized a channel with the weapon port and drew Bill out."

"Where? Where can we find him—?"

"Nowhere. He's dead. He would have died very quickly."

"Bill—" If I'd ever had a brother I would have wanted him to be Bill. The nightmare demons shrieked at Joe from every rim and panel of the ship.

"Get the ship down!" Tamarina commanded harshly. "Forget Bill. He's gone. Earth depends on our getting down."

It was almost a crash landing. They smashed the upper tiers of a giant forest and burned a mile-wide swath before the ship came to rest. The demons that surrounded them had physical force now. Joe smashed his way through them to the controls

that unlocked the time shifter segment of the time boat

He operated them and felt the responding thud as the retractors drew away.

At the same instant the time cell closed off the fissure between the two so that each was now enclosed in its own cell. Joe scanned the instruments. They wavered and floated about the walls. He fought back the demons and pressed his face against each meter.

"They're all right. Separation is complete," the far away voice of Tamarina assured him.

He pressed his face to the view screen. Giant blobs of light were swelling from a hundred sources. "The fleet—it's firing time charge missiles— Take off! Time channel orientation."

"We can't go back!" Tamarina exclaimed. "The cell is too far gone. If we touch it with a channel the Bakori can enter the shifter capsule and change the settings. We can't go back!"

Joe seemed to hear the girl's voice faintly. It came as if from some vast distance. She was saying some insane thing about they couldn't go back. His fingers sought the controls. They had to go back or they would be wiped out when the time shifter blasted the planet out of existence.

Bill—Bill Bradley—where are you, Bill? They'd have to get Bill back, too.

He felt a sharp pain explode in his fingers. He clutched them in agony to his face. A wavering, shimmering vision of Tamarina—he had almost forgotten Tamarina—he had to get Tamarina back to Algor, too—

He had a vision of her standing over him with a bar. And then he understood. He couldn't believe it, but he understood. She had smashed the bar across his hand.

He sought to reach for her, but the pain in his hand wouldn't let him. She was doing something to the controls. Something

wrong. She had said they couldn't go back to Algor. What was she doing with the ship, then? Why didn't she just sit back and forget about everything? In a moment Bakor and everything on it would cease to exist, as if it had never been.

Bill—Bill Bradley-Tarn arin a—

I loved you both. How did we get to this place? What demons led us here to this end?

It was like a sudden release from a long illness. An illness of mind and body so intense that life had been in doubt. Now it was over.

He sat looking in dumb fascination at his smashed and swollen fingers.

"I'm sorry," said Tamarina. "You were almost to activate the time channel. It would have destroyed everything."

He looked at her. They were still alive. He loved her more than ever. "Where are we?" he said.

"The fringe. It's the only place we could go and not leave the damaged cell wide open to the Bakori. I think we made it. Watch the screen. It's still set to the Bakori continuum."

He saw it. A nova. A bursting sun that flung itself mightily in the direction of all the stars as if to challenge their glory. But, unlike them, it did not stay. Even as it burst and swelled, filling the space of a solar system, it died. The bright sparks became ash, vanished and turned to nothing.

"They're gone," Tamarina whispered. "The Bakori are gone. A million worlds can rest now."

"Bill—" said Joe. "There must be a way to find him. Isn't there a chance he's—somewhere?"

Tamarina shook her head slowly. "None. He's dead, Joe. I'm sorry."

He still felt as if recovering from a long illness.

"Where are we in the fringe? You said we couldn't go back."

"Not then, but we can now. We're near the world I showed you. Let's go down and rest for a while." They landed again on the Garden of Eden world, as Joe had come to think of it in his own mind. The same meadow, and the same mountains, and the same stream—they looked as if they would never change to the end of time. And that was right, he thought. There was no end of time here. There was only a single moment, and it lasted for all eternity.

They stood on the same grassy spot by the stream. A fragment of the lunch they'd had was still there. It looked unspoiled, unchanged.

"Now you can truly go home," said Tamarina. "Not alone," said Joe. "Not without you—"

"I told you before how it is."

"Then I don't want to go back to Earth. If there's no finding a home together, let's just wander the worlds with each other. Show me everything you've seen, and then let's find a million new ones. We'll see everything. We'll know everything. We'll be the most experienced, the wisest in all the galaxies!" He threw his arms wide in exultation.

Tamarina laughed, but sobered quickly. "There are no wonders out there. All worlds are the same— after you've seen a few hundred of them. Creatures are born, they live, they struggle, they die. They build artifacts of infinite variety—but the very variety is exhausting. Is that what you want?" "With you, yes. What else?" She hesitated, looking away for a moment. Then she turned back to him. "There's one thing I didn't tell you—because I thought the only place you would ever recognize as home is Earth. I didn't tell you that in the fringe it is possible. There would be no repercussions on our worlds from here."

He stared at her, then looked around at the paradise that lay about them. "You mean here—we could stay together all the rest

of our lives here?" She nodded.

They called Susselein on the ship's communication system, which operated by means of time channel. The Algoran looked aged and worn as he appeared on their screen. "It took so long," he said. "I thought you had failed. Why did it take so long? Where are you now? What of Bakor?"

"Bakor is gone," said Tamarina. "Bill was taken by synchronized time channel during the battle. The time cell was breaking down from Bakori power drainage. Joe and I had to run for the fringe until Bakor was gone. Now we have decided to stay together on my own private world I told you so much about."

Susselein smiled. His face relaxed from the intense strain it had showed. "That is good. It is very good. I am sorry about Bill, but I am happy for you. We will talk together often. Perhaps others will wish to join you in time."

"We wouldn't want it to get crowded," said Joe. "You will decide on your own neighbors. Is that fair enough?"

"Fair enough," said Joe. "I want you to know again how grateful I am for your making it possible to save my home world from the Bakori."

"*You* saved it," said Susselein. "We merely provided the means. You saved not one world, but two. Algor is grateful to you."

Joe frowned. "I don't understand."

"Algor has a new lease on life, too. The word went out to all our people that we were striking back at the Bakori and no longer running from them. It astounded our people, and it gave them new life. It gave them purpose to see their own world responsible for a righteous, defiant action. They have started coming home, Joe, and when they learn that you were successful many thousands of them will come.

"Algor will be resurrected. We'll rebuild our cities and make

new ones. We'll make gardens out of those deserts you saw."

The Algoran's eyes shone with a fervent light that was a sudden revelation to Joe. "You planned all this!" he said. "You planned it to come out this way—"

"All my life," said Susselein quietly. "All my life I have planned it. I saw my people becoming what you recognized—slothful, indolent spectators of life, parasites. You were quite right, there is no other term for Algorans which is quite so apt. You accurately described my people as uncaring, unattached, incapable of affection. But they were not always that way, and some of us hoped and planned that our people might somehow, some day be redeemed."

"You risked all of Earth with your plans!" Joe could not keep the anger from rising in his voice.

"Ah, no—believe me, we did nothing that would not have happened anyway. We did not place Earth in the path of the Bakori; your world was already in that path.

"I began long ago, and some of those around me almost as long. We dreamed of a way to bring our people back from their wanderings, to make them want a home again. To this end we sent many of them to worlds like yours, where homes were valued, where our races might mingle. We led them to fringe worlds and populated many with mixtures that will become fine, vigorous races, even as yours and Tamarina's.

"But we still dreamed of bringing Algorans back to their own home world and rebuilding it. The Bakori gave us our chance. Our people had been content to abandon galaxy after galaxy to the invaders. There were always an infinity more to be explored and played with. But we wanted to show them an Algor that would no longer abandon everything to Bakor, an Algor that was strong enough to be a home for Algorans.

"When Tamarina first visited Earth I saw she was affected by your people and your lives. She kept going back again and again. She visited your whole world, but she liked most of all the little town where you and Bill Bradley lived. She was grieved that she

could not stay there and find a companion, because she was certain no one who had lived there would want to share a fringe world, which was all she had to offer.

"Bill Bradley would have done so, but she was not sure of Bill. And when you stumbled into that jungle world with her she knew she was right. It was you, not Bill, she wanted to share her fringe world with."

Joe looked at Tamarina. She smiled at him in acknowledgement.

"When the Bakori captured Tamarina," Susselein continued. "I immediately declared her a Lost One. I expected Bill to attempt a rescue. I didn't know of you until that time, of course. If you and Bill had not gone after her I would have done so myself.

"The results were what I expected. The Bakori used the incident to force entry into this sector. But at some time in the future they would have done so anyway, as their technology developed. It was much to our advantage to force the situation now, before they reached a higher stage of development in time manipulation.

"It was a very great gamble, I admit. I regret the cost to Earth, but I honestly think your planet was spared a future desolation, when there would have been no countering the Bakori attack. Earth can now rebuild. Other worlds where the Bakori have been cannot. There's no one left to rebuild.

"We have established a small bridge between our people, and where it will lead I cannot say. What my people will become, I cannot know. The only thing I know is that they are returning home and I have accomplished my purpose. I am an old man now, and I have to be content with this much."

Joe and Tamarina watched him on the screen, and Joe knew that what he had said was true. Both worlds had been given a new chance through the events they had endured. Earth had been spared a future Bakoran onslaught when no defense would have been available. And Algor was receiving its wandering

homeless ones, who were coming home at last.

Joe could imagine those great deserts being turned into green places again. New cities built to replace the ancient ones. A people thankful for a home.

He put an arm around Tamarina as the image of Susselein disappeared from the screen. They went outside to the world that was theirs.

Tamarina looked up at him. "I have spent so many hours here alone I didn't even know that I wanted someone to share it with. I hope you never regret you gave up Earth for this."

"With you, it's home," he said. "No one wants any more than that."