

1. The Rat and the Snake
2. Ersatz Eternal
3. The Cataaaa
4. Resurrection
5. The Barbarian

A.E. Van Vogt

### THE RAT AND THE SNAKE

Mark Gray's main pleasure in life was feeding rats to his pet python. He kept the python in a blocked-off room in the old house in which he lived alone. Each mealtime, he would put the rat in a narrow tunnel he had rigged. At the end of the tunnel was an opening. The rat, going through the narrow space into the bright room beyond, automatically spring-locked a gate across the opening.

It would then find itself in the room with the python, with no way of escape.

Mark liked to listen to its squeaks as it became aware of its danger, and then he would hear its mad scurrying to escape the irresistible enemy. Sometimes he watched the exciting scene through a plate-glass window, but he actually preferred the sound to the fight, conjuring his own delectable mental pictures, always from the viewpoint of the python.

During World War III, the O.P.A. forgot to put a ceiling price on rats. The catching of rats got no special priority. Rat catchers were drafted into the armed forces as readily as the other people. The supply of rats grew less. Mark was soon reduced to catching his own rats; but he had to work for a living in the ever-leaner times of war, so that there were periods of time when the python was fed infrequently.

Then one day Mark, ever searching, glimpsed some white rats through a window of an old commercial-style building.

He peered in eagerly, and though the room was dimly lighted with wartime regulation bulbs, he was able to make out that it was a large room with hundreds of cages in it and that each of the cages contained rats.

He made it to the front of the building at a dead run. In pausing to catch his breath, he noticed the words on the doors CARRON LABORATORIES, Research.

He found himself presently in a dim hallway of a business office. Because everybody was clearly working twice as hard because of the war, it took a little while to attract the attention of one of the women employees; and there were other delays such as just sitting and waiting while it seemed as if he was the forgotten man. But after all those minutes he was finally led into the office of a small, tight-faced man, who was introduced as Erie Plode and who listened to his request and the reason for it.

When Mark described his poor, starving python, the small man laughed a sudden, explosive laughter, but his eyes remained cold. Moments later he curtly rejected the request.

Whereupon he made a personal thing out of it. "And don't get any ideas," he snarled. "Stay away from our rats. If we catch you filching around here, we'll have the law on you."

Until those words were spoken, Mark hadn't really thought about becoming a rat-stealing criminal. Except for his peculiar love for his python, he was a law-abiding, tax-paying nobody.

As Mark was leaving, Plode hastily sent a man to follow him. Then, smiling grimly, he walked into an office that had printed on the door: HENRY GARRON, Private.

"Well, Hank," he said gaily. "I think we've got our subject."

Carron said, "This had better be good since we can't even get prisoners of war assigned us for the job."

The remark made Plode frown a little. He had a tendency toward ironic thoughts, and he had often thought recently, "Good God they're going to use the process on millions of the unsuspecting enemy after we get it tested, but they won't give us a G.D. so-and-so to try it out on because of some kind of prisoner of war convention."

Aloud, he said smugly, "I suppose by a stretch of the imagination you could call him human."

"That bad?"

Plode described Mark and his hobby, finished, "I suppose it's a matter of point of view, but I won't feel any guilt, particularly if he sneaks over tonight and with criminal intent tries to steal some of our rats." He grinned mirthlessly, "Can you think of anything lower than a rat stealer?"

Henry Carron hesitated but only for moments. Millions of people were dead and dying, and a test absolutely had to be made on a human being. Because if something went wrong on the battlefield, the effect of surprise might be lost with who knew what repercussions.

"One thing sure," he nodded "there'll be no evidence against us. So go ahead."

It seemed to Mark, as he came stealthily back that night, that these people with their thousands of rats would never miss the equivalent of one rat a week or so. He was especially pleased when he discovered that the window was unlocked and that the menagerie was unguarded. No doubt, he thought good-humoredly, babysitters for rats were in scarce supply because of the wartime worker shortage.

The next day he thrilled again to the familiar sound of a rat squeaking in fear of the python. Toward evening his phone rang. It was Erie Plode.

"I warned you," said the small man in a vicious tone. "Now you must pay the penalty."

Plode felt better for having issued the warning. "Be it on his own soul," he said sanctimoniously, "if he's there."

Mark hung up, contemptuous. Let them try to prove anything.

In his sleep that night he seemed to be suffocating. He woke up, and he was not lying on his bed but instead was on a hard floor. He groped for the light switch but could not find it. There was a bright rectangle of light about twenty feet away. He headed for it.

Crash! A gate slammed shut behind him as he emerged.

He was in a vast room, larger than anything he had ever seen. Yet it was vaguely familiar. Except for its size it resembled the room in which he kept his python.

On the floor in front of him, an object that he had noticed and regarded as some sort of a leathery rug, thicker than he was tall, stirred and moved toward him.

Realization came suddenly, horrendously.

He was the size of a rat. This was the python slithering across the floor with distended jaws.

Mad squealing as Mark Gray experienced the ultimate thrill of the strange method by which he had enjoyed life for so many years ... Experienced it this one and only time from the viewpoint of the rat.

A.E. Van Vogt

ERSATZ ETERNAL

Grayson removed the irons from the other's wrists and legs. "Hart!" he said sharply.

The young man on the cot did not stir. Grayson hesitated and then deliberately kicked the man. "Damn you, Hart, listen to me! I'm releasing you - just in case I don't come back "

John Hart neither opened his eyes nor showed any awareness of the blow he had received. He lay inert; and the only evidence of life in him was that he was limp, not rigid. There was almost no color in his cheeks. His black hair was damp and stringy.

Grayson said earnestly, "Hart, I'm going out to look for Malkins. Remember, he left four days ago, intending only to be gone twenty-four hours."

When there was no response, the older man started to turn away, but he hesitated and said, "Hart, if I don't come back, you must realize where we are, This is a new planet, understand. We've never been here before. Our ship was wrecked, and the three of us came down in a lifeboat, and what we need is fuel. That's what Malkins went out to look for, and now I'm going out to look for Malkins."

The figure on the cot remained blank. And Grayson walked reluctantly out the door and off toward the hills. He had no particular hope.

Three men were down on a planet God-only-knew-where - and one of those men was violently insane.

As he walked along, he glanced around him in occasional puzzlement. The scenery was very earthlike: trees, shrubs, grass, and distant mountains misted by blue haze. It was still a little odd that when they had landed Malkins and he had had the distinct impression that they were coming down onto a barren world without atmosphere and without life.

A soft breeze touched his cheeks. The scent of flowers was in the air. He saw birds flitting among the trees, and once he heard a song that was startlingly like that of a meadow lark.

He walked all day and saw no sign of Malkins. Nor was there any habitation to indicate that the planet had intelligent life. Just before dusk he heard a woman calling his name.

Grayson turned with a start, and it was his mother, looking much younger than he remembered her in her coffin eight years before. She came up, and she said severely, "'Billie, don't forget your rubbers."

Grayson stared at her with eyes that kept twisting away in disbelief. Then, deliberately, he walked over and touched her. She caught his hand, and her fingers were warm and lifelike.

She said, "I want you to go tell your father that dinner is ready."

Grayson released himself and stepped back and looked tensely around him. The two of them stood on an empty, grassy plain. Far in the distance was the gleam of a silvershining river.

He turned away from her and strode on into the twilight. When he looked back, there was no one in sight. But presently a boy was moving in step beside him. Grayson paid no attention at first, but presently he stole a glance at his companion.

It was himself at the age of fifteen.

Just before the gathering night blotted out any chance of recognition, he saw that a second boy was now striding along beside the

first. Himself, aged about eleven.

Three Bill Graysons, thought Grayson. He began to laugh wildly.

Then he began to run. When he looked back, he was alone. Sobbing under his breath, he slowed to a walk, and almost immediately heard the laughter of children in the soft darkness. Familiar sounds, yet the impact of them was stunning.

Grayson babbled at them, "All me, at different ages. Get away! I know you're only hallucinations."

When he had worn himself out, when there was nothing left to his voice but a harsh whisper, he thought, Only hallucinations? Am I sure?

He felt unutterably depressed and exhausted. "Hart and me," he said aloud wearily, "we belong in the same asylum."

Dawn came, cool; and his hope was that sunrise would bring an end to the madness of the night. As the slow light lengthened over the land, Grayson looked around him in bewilderment. He was on a hill, and below him spread his home town of Calypso, Ohio.

He stared down at it with unbelieving eyes, and then, because it looked as real as life, he started to run toward it.

It was Calypso, but as it had been when he was a boy. He headed for his own house. And there he was; he'd know that boy of ten anywhere. He called out to the youngster, who took one look at him, turned away, and ran into the house.

Grayson lay down on the lawn, and covered his eyes. "Someone," he told himself "something is taking pictures out of my mind and making me see them."

It seemed to him that if he hoped to remain sane - and alive - he'd have to hold that thought.

It was the sixth day after Grayson's departure. Aboard the lifeboat, John Hart stirred and opened his eyes. "Hungry," he said aloud to no one in particular. He waited he knew not for what and then wearily sat up, slipped off the cot, and made his way to the galley. When he had eaten, he walked to the lock-door, and stood for a long time staring out over the earthlike scene that spread before him. It made him feel better, vaguely.

He jumped abruptly down to the ground and began to walk toward the nearest hilltop. Darkness was falling rapidly but it did not occur to him to turn back.

Soon the ship was lost in the night behind him.

A girlfriend of his youth was the first to talk to him. She came out of the blackness. and they had a long conversation. In the end they decided to marry

The ceremony was immediately completed by a minister who drove up in a car and found both families assembled in a beautiful home in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. The clergyman was an old man whom Hart had known in his childhood.

The young couple went to New York City and to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon, then headed by aere-taxi for California to make their home. Suddenly there were three children, and they owned a hundred-thousand-acre ranch with a million cattle on it, and there were cowboys who dressed like movie stars,

For Grayson, the civilization that sprang into full-grown existence around him on what had originally been a barren, airless planet had nightmarish qualities. The people he met had a life expectancy of less than seventy years. Children were born in nine months and ten days after conception.

He buried six generations of one family that he had founded. And then, one day as he was crossing Broadway - in New York City - the small sturdiness, the walk, and the manner of a man coming from the opposite direction made him stop short.

"Henry!" he shouted. "Henry Malkins!"

"Well, I'll be - Bill Grayson."

They shook hands, silent after the first excited greeting. Malkins spoke first. "There's a bar around the corner."

During the middle of the second drink John Hart's name came up.

"A life force seeking form used his mind' said Grayson matter-of-factly. "It apparently has no expression of its own. It tried to use me -" He glanced at Malkins questioningly.

The other man nodded. "And me!" he said, "I guess we resisted too hard."

Malkins wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Bill," he said, "it's all like a dream. I get married and divorced every forty years. I marry what seems to be a twenty-year-old girl. In a few decades she looks five hundred."

"Do you think it's all in our minds?"

"No no-nothing like that. I think all this civilization exists - whatever I mean by existence." Malkins groaned. "Let's not get into that. When I read some of the philosophy explaining life, I feel as if I'm on the edge of an abyss. If only we could get rid of Hart, somehow."

Grayson was smiling grimly. "So you haven't found out yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you got a weapon on you?"

Silently, Malkins produced a needle-beam projector. Grayson took it, pointed it at his own right temple, and pressed the curved firing pin - as Malkins grabbed at him frantically but too late.

The thin, white beam seemed to penetrate Grayson's head. It burned a round, black, smoldering hole in the woodwork beyond. Coolly, the unhurt Grayson pointed the triangular muzzle at his companion.

"Like me to try it on you?" he asked jovially.

The older man shuddered and grabbed at the weapon. "Give me that!" he said.

He calmed presently and asked, "I've noticed that I'm no older. Bill, what are we going to do?"

"I think we're being held in reserve," said Grayson.

He stood up and held out his hand. "Well, Henry, it's been good seeing you. Suppose we meet here every year from now on and compare notes."

"But -"

Grayson smiled a little tauntly. "Brace up, my friend. Don't you see? This is the biggest thing in the universe. We're going to live forever. We're possible substitutes if anything goes wrong."

"But what is it? What's doing it?"

"Ask me a million years from now. Maybe I'll have an answer."

He turned and walked out of the bar. He did not look back.

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

1

THE CATAAAA

By A. E. Van Vogt

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

2

THE CATAAAA

by A. E. Van Vogt

A Little Classic By One Of The Most Brilliant Science-Fiction Writers of Our Day.

Several years ago this startling story appeared in a Los Angeles publication, FANTASY BOOK, and it immediately created a furor among the local sf faithful. With the resumption of

MARVEL, we thought it should be brought to a larger audience, particularly since its author has meantime won recognition as one of America's most brilliant science-fiction writers. We think you'll agree that "The Cataaaa" is a masterpiece.

The cat turned and touched Silkey's face gently.

THE USUAL group was gathering in the bar. Cathy was already pretending she was far gone.

Ted was busy putting on his stupid look. Myra giggled three times the way a musician tunes his instrument for the evening. Jones was talking to Gord in his positive fashion. Gord said "Glub!" every few seconds, just as if he was listening. And Morton tried to draw attention to himself by remaining aloof and intellectual looking far down in his chair.

No one noticed the slight, slim man sitting on a stool before the bar. The man kept glancing at the group; but just when he joined them, or who invited him, no one had any clear idea. Nor did it occur to anyone to tell him to go away.

The stranger said, "You were talking about the basic characteristics of human nature--"

Myra giggled, "Is that what we were talking about? I wondered."

The laughter that followed did not deter the newcomer.

"It so happens that I have had an experience which illustrates the point. It began one day when I was glancing through the newspaper, and I ran across a circus advertisement . . . "

At the top of the ad (he went on) was a large question mark followed by some equally large exclamation marks. Then:

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

3

WHAT IS IT?

IT'S THE CAT

COME AND SEE THE CAT

THE CAT WILL STARTLE YOU

THE CAT WILL AMAZE YOU

SEE THE CAT AT THE CIRCUS

FREAK SHOW

In smaller letters at the bottom of the ad was the information that the cat was being "shown under the personal direction of Silkey Travis."

Until that point I had been reading with a vague interest and curiosity. The name made me jump.

"Good lord!" I thought. "It's him. It's Silkey Travis on that card."

I hurried to my desk, and took out a card that had come in the mail two days before. At the time it had made no sense to me at all. The words written on the back in a fine script seemed pure gibberish, and the photograph on the front, though familiar, unlocked no real memory. It was of a man with a haunted look on his face, sitting in a small cage. I now recognized it as being a likeness of Silkey Travis, not as I had known him fifteen or so years before, but plumper, older, as he would be now.

I returned to my chair, and sat musing about the past.

Even in those days, his name had fitted Silkey Travis. At high school he organized the bathing beauty contest, and gave the first prize to his cousin and the second prize to the girl who was the teacher's pet of most of the teachers. The students' science exhibition, a collection of local lizards, snakes, insects and a few Indian artifacts was an annual affair, which brought a turnout of admiring parents. Invariably, it was Silkey who organized it. Plays, holiday shows and other paraphernalia of school pastimes felt the weight of his guiding hand and circus spirit.

After graduating from high school, I went on to State college to major in biology, and I lost sight of Silkey for seven years. Then I saw an item in one of the papers to the effect that local boy Silkey Travis was doing well in the big town, having just purchased a "piece" of a vaudeville show, and that he also owned a "piece" in a beach concession in New Jersey.

Again, there was silence. And now, here he was, no doubt "piece" owner of the circus freak show.

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

4

Having solved the mystery of the postcard, so it seemed to me, I felt amused and tolerant. I wondered if Silkey had sent the card to all his former school companions. I decided not to puzzle any more about the meaning of the words written on the back. The scheme behind them was all too obvious.

Sitting there, I had absolutely no intention of going to the circus. I went to bed at my usual hour, and woke up with a start some hours later to realize that I was not alone. The sensations that came to me as I lay there have been described by Johnson in his book on morbid fears.

I lived in a quiet neighborhood, and the silence was intense. Presently, I could hear the labored pounding of my heart. Poisons surged into my stomach; gas formed and leaked up to my mouth

bringing a bitter taste. I had to fight to keep my breath steady.

And still I could see nothing. The dark fears ran their courses, and the first thought came that I must have had a nightmare. I began to feel ashamed of myself. I mumbled:

"Who's there?"

No answer.

I climbed out of bed, and turned on the light. The room was empty. But still I wasn't satisfied. I went out into the hall, then I examined the clothes closet and bathroom. Finally, dissatisfied, I tested the window fastenings--and it was there I received my shock. Painted on the outer side of the pane of one of the windows were the letters:

"The cat requests that you come to the circus."

I went back to bed so furious that I thought of having Silkey arrested. When I woke up in the morning the sign was gone from the window.

BY THE TIME breakfast was over, my temper of the night had cooled. I was even able to feel a pitying amusement at the desperate desire of Silkey to let his old acquaintances know what a big shot he was. Before starting off to my morning classes at State, I looked under my bedroom window. I found what looked like footprints, but they were not human, so I decided that Silkey must have taken care to leave no tracks of his own.

At class, just before noon, one of the students asked me whether there was any good explanation in biological science for freaks. I gave the usual explanation of variabilities, nutritional deficiencies[sic], diseases, frustration of brain development affecting the shape of the body, and so on. I finished drily that for further information I would direct him to my old friend, Silkey Travis, director of freaks at the Pagley-Matterson circus.

The offhand remark caused a sensation. I was informed that a freak at this circus had prompted the original question. "A strange, cat-like creature," the student said in a hushed voice, "that examines you with the same interest that you examine it."

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

5

The bell rang at that moment, and I was spared the necessity of making a comment. I remember thinking, however, that people hadn't changed much. They were still primarily interested in eccentricity whereas, as a scientist, the processes of normalcy seemed to me far more fascinating. I still had no intention of going to the circus. But on the way home that afternoon I put my hand in my breast pocket, and drew out the postcard with the photograph of Silkey on the front. I turned it over absently, and read again the message that was on it:

"The interspatial problem of delivering mail involves enormous energy problems, which effect time differentials. Accordingly, it is possible that this card will arrive before I know who you are. As a precaution I am sending another one to the circus with your name and address on it, and the two cards will go out together.

"Do not worry too much about the method of delivery. I simply put an instrument into a mail box. This precipitates the cards into the box on earth, and they will then be picked up and delivered in the usual fashion. The precipitator then dissolves.

The photograph speaks for itself."

It didn't. Which is what began to irritate me again. I jammed the card back into my pocket, halfminded to phone up Silkey and ask him what the silly thing meant, if anything. I refrained, of course. It wasn't important enough.

When I got out of bed the next morning, the words, "The cat wants to talk to you!" were scrawled on the outside of the same window pane. They must have been there a long time. Because, even as I stared at them, they began to fade. By the time I finished breakfast they were gone.

I was disturbed now rather than angry. Such persistence on Silkey's part indicated neurotic overtones in his character. It was possible that I ought to go to his show, and so give him the petty victory that would lay his ghost, which had now haunted me two nights running. However, it was not till after lunch that a thought occurred to me that suddenly clinched my intention. I remembered Virginia.

For two years I had been professor of biology at State. It was an early ambition which, now that I had realized it, left me at a loose end for the first time in my life. Accordingly, for the first time in my rather drab existence the mating urge was upon me. Virginia was the girl, and, unfortunately, she regarded me as a cross between a fossil and a precision brain. I felt sure that the idea of marrying me had not yet occurred to her.

For some time it had seemed to me that if I could only convince her, without loss of dignity, that I was a romantic fellow she might be fooled into saying yes. What better method than to pretend that I still got excited over circuses, and, as a grand climax to the evening I would take her in to

## THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

6

see Silkey Travis, and hope that my acquaintance with such a character would thrill her exotic soul.

The first hurdle was bridged when I called her up, and she agreed to go to the circus with me. I put the best possible face on for the preliminaries, riding the ferris wheel and such juvenilia. But the moment of the evening for me came when I suggested that we go and see the freaks being shown by my friend, Silkey Travis.

It really went over. Virginia stopped and looked at me almost accusingly.

"Philip," she said, "you're not trying to pretend that you know a person called Silkey? She drew a deep breath. "That I have to see."

Silkey came through beautifully. He was not in when we entered, but the ticket taker called into some rear compartment. And a minute later Silkey came charging into the main freak tent. He was plump with the plumpness of a well fed shark. His eyes were narrowed as if he had spent the past fifteen years calculating the best methods of using other people for his own advantage. He had none of the haunted look of the photograph, but there were ghosts in his face. Ghosts of greed and easy vices, ghosts of sharp dealing and ruthlessness. He was all that I had hoped for, and, best of all, he was pathetically glad to see me. His joy had the special quality of the lonely nomad who is at last looking longingly at the settled side of life. We both overdid the greeting a little but we were about equally pleased at each other's enthusiasm. The hellos and introductions over, Silkey grew condescending.

"Brick was in a while ago. Said you were teaching at State. Congrats. Always knew you had it in you.

I passed over that as quickly as possible. "How about showing us around, Silkey, and telling us about yourself?"

WE HAD already seen the fat woman and the human skeleton, but Silkey took us back and told us his life history with them. How he had found them, and helped them to their present fame. He was a little verbose, so on occasion I had to hurry him along. But finally we came to a small tent within the tent, over the closed canvas entrance of which was painted simply, "THE CAT". I had noticed it before, and the chatter of the barker who stood in front of it had already roused my curiosity:

"The cat . . . come in and see the cat. Folks, this is no ordinary event, but the thrill of a lifetime. Never before has such an animal as this been seen in a circus. A biological phenomenon that has amazed scientists all over the country... Folks, this is special. Tickets are twenty-five cents, but if you're not satisfied you can get your money back. That's right. That's what I said. You get your money back merely by stepping up and asking for it..."

And so on. However, his ballyhoo was not the most enticing angle. What began to titillate my nerves was the reaction of the people who went inside. They were allowed to enter in groups, and there must have been a guide inside, because his barely audible voice would mumble on for THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

7

some minutes, and then it would rise to a hearable level, as he said, "And now, folks, I will draw aside the curtain and show you--the cat!"

The curtain must have been pulled with a single jerk, on a carefully timed basis. For the word, cat was scarcely out of his mouth, when the audience reaction would sound:

"Aaaaaa!"

Distinct, unmistakable exhalation of the breaths of a dozen startled people. There would follow an uncomfortable silence. Then, slowly the people would emerge and hurry to the outer exit. Not one, that I was aware of, asked for his money back.

There was a little embarrassment at the gate. Silkey started to mumble something about only owning part of the show, so he couldn't give passes. But I ended that by quickly purchasing the necessary tickets, and we went inside with the next group.

The animal that sat in an armchair on the dais was about five feet long and quite slender. It had a cat's head and vestiges of fur. It looked like an exaggerated version of the walkey-talkey animals in comic books.

At that point resemblance to normalcy ended.

It was alien. It was not a cat at all. I recognized that instantly. The structure was all wrong. It took me a moment to identify the radical variations.

The head! High foreheaded it was, and not low and receding. The face was smooth and almost hairless. It had character and strength, and intelligence. The body was well balanced on long, straight legs. The arms were smooth, ending in short but unmistakable fingers, surmounted by thin, sharp claws.



But it was the eyes that were really different. They looked normal enough, slightly slanted, properly lidded, about the same size as the eyes of human beings. But they danced. They shifted twice, even three times as swiftly as human eyes. Their balanced movement at such a high speed indicated vision that could read photographically reduced print across a room. What sharp, what incredibly sharp images that brain must see.

All this I saw within the space of a few seconds. Then the creature moved.

It stood up, not hurriedly, but casually, easily, and yawned and stretched. Finally, it took a step forward. Brief panic ensued among the women in the audience, that ended as the guide said quietly:

"It's all right, folks. He frequently comes down and looks us over. He's harmless.

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

8

The crowd stood its ground, as the cat came down the steps from the dais and approached me. The animal paused in front of me, and peered at me curiously. Then it reached gingerly forward, opened my coat, and examined the inside breast pocket.

It came up holding the postcard with the picture of Silkey on it. I had brought it along, intending to ask Silkey about it.

For a long moment the cat examined the card, and then it held it out to Silkey. Silkey looked at me.

"Okay?" he said.

I nodded. I had a feeling that I was witnessing a drama the motivations of which I did not understand. I realized that I was watching Silkey intently.

He looked at the picture on the card, and then started to hand it to me. Then he stopped. Jerkily, he pulled the card back, and stared at the photograph.

"For cripes sake," he gasped. "It's a picture of me."

There was no doubt about his surprise. It was so genuine that it startled me. I said:

"Didn't you send that to me? Didn't you write what's on the back there?"

Silkey did not answer immediately. He turned the card over and glared down at the writing. He began to shake his head.

"Doesn't make sense," he muttered. "Hmmm, it was mailed in Marstown. That's where we were three days last week."

He handed it back to me. "Never saw it before in my life. Funny."

His denial was convincing. I held the card in my hand, and looked questioningly at the cat. But it had already lost interest. As we stood there, watching, it turned and climbed back up to the dais, and slumped into a chair. It yawned. It closed its eyes.

And that's all that happened. We all left the tent, and Virginia and I said goodbye to Silkey.

Later, on our way home, the episode seemed even more meaningless than when it had happened.

I don't know how long I had been asleep before I wakened. I turned over intending to go right back to sleep. And then I saw that my bedside light was burning. I sat up with a start.

The cat was sitting in a chair beside the bed, not more than three feet away.

Part Two of

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

9

THERE WAS silence. I couldn't have spoken at the beginning. Slowly, I sat up. Memory came of what the guide at the show had said... "Harmless!" But I didn't believe that anymore.

Three times now this beast had come here, twice to leave messages. I let my mind run over those messages, and I quailed " . . . The cat wants to talk to you!" Was it possible that this thing could talk.

The very inactivity of the animal finally gave me courage. I licked my lips and said:

"Can you talk?"

The cat stirred. It raised an arm in the unhurried fashion of somebody who does not want to cause alarm. It pointed at the night table beside my bed. I followed the pointing finger and saw that an instrument was standing under the lamp. The instrument spoke at me:

"I cannot emit human sounds with my own body, but as you can hear this is an excellent intermediary."

I have to confess that I jumped, that my mind scurried into a deep corner of my head--and only slowly came out again as the silence continued, and no attempt was made to harm me. I don't know why I should have assumed that its ability to speak through a mechanical device was a threat to me. But I had.

I suppose it was really a mental shrinking, my mind unwilling to accept the reality that was here.

Before I could think clearly, the instrument on the table said:

"The problem of conveying thoughts through an electronic device depends on rhythmic

utilization of brain energies."

The statement stirred me. I had read considerable on that subject, beginning with Professor Hans Berger's report on brain rhythms in 1929. The cat's statements didn't quite fit.

"Isn't the energy potential too small?" I asked. "And besides you have your eyes open. The rhythms are always interfered with when the eyes are open, and in fact such a large part of the cortex yields to the visual centers that no rhythm whatever is detectable at such times."

It didn't strike me then, but I think now that I actually distracted the animal from its purpose.

"What measurements have been taken?" it asked. Even through the mind radio, it sounded interested.

"Photoelectric cells," I said, "have measured as much (or as little, which is really more accurate) as 50 microvolts of energy, mostly in the active regions of the brain. Do you know what a microvolt is?"

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

10

The creature nodded. It said after a moment, "I won't tell you what energy my brain develops. It would probably frighten you, but it isn't all intelligence. I am a student on a tour of the galaxy, what might be called a postgraduate tour. Now, we have certain rules--" It stopped. "You opened your mouth. Did you wish to say something?"

I felt dumb, overwhelmed. Then, weakly, "You said galaxy."

That is correct."

"B-but wouldn't that take years?" My brain was reaching out, striving to grasp, to understand.

"My tour will last about a thousand of your years," said the cat.

"You're immortal?"

"Oh, no."

"But--"

There I stopped. I couldn't go on. I sat there, blank-brained, while the creature went on:

"The rules of the fraternity of students require that we tell one person about ourselves before we leave the planet. And that we take with us a symbolical souvenir of the civilization of the beings on it. I'm curious to know what you would suggest as a souvenir of earth. It can be anything, so long as it tells at a glance the dominating character of the race."

The question calmed me. My brain stopped its alternation of mad whirling followed by blankness. I began to feel distinctly better. I shifted myself into a more comfortable position and stroked my jaw thoughtfully. I sincerely hoped that I was giving the impression that I was an intelligent person whose opinion would be worthwhile.

A sense of incredible complication began to seize on me. I had realized it before, but now, with an actual decision to make, it seemed to me that human beings were really immensely intricate creatures. How could anybody pick one facet of their nature, and say, "This is man!" Or "This represents man!" I said slowly:

"A work of art, science, or any useful article--you include those?"

"Anything."

My interest was now at its peak. My whole being accepted the wonderfulness of what had happened. It seemed tremendously important that the great race that could travel the breadth and length of the galaxy should have some true representation of man's civilization. It amazed me, when I finally thought of the answer, that it had taken me so long. But the moment it occurred to me, I knew I had it.

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

11

"Man," I said, "is primarily a religious animal. From times too remote to be a written record, he has needed a faith in something. Once, he believed almost entirely in animate gods like rivers, storms, plants, then his gods became invisible; now they are once more becoming animate. An economic system, science--whatever it will be, the dominating article of it will be that he worships it without regard to reason, in other words in a purely religious fashion.

I finished with a quiet satisfaction, "All you need is an image of a man in a durable metal, his head tilted back, his arms raised to the sky, a rapt expression on his face, and written on the base of the inscription, 'I believe'."

I saw that the creature was staring at me. "Very interesting," it said at last. "I think you are very close to it, but you haven't quite got the answer."

It stood up. "But now I want you to come with me."

"Eh?"

"Dress, please."

It was unemotionally said. The fear that had been held deep inside me for minutes came back like a fire that had reached a new cycle of energy.

I DROVE MY car. The cat sat beside me. The night was cool and refreshing, but dark. A fraction of a moon peered out occasionally from scurrying clouds, and there were glimpses of star filtered dark blue sky. The realization that, from somewhere up there, this creature had come down to our earth dimmed my tenseness. I ventured:

"Your people--have they progressed much further than we to the innermost meaning of truth?" It sounded drab and precise, a pedagogical rather than a vitally alive question. I added quickly: "I hope you won't mind answering a few questions."

Again it sounded inadequate. It seemed to me in an abrupt agony of despair that I was muffing the opportunity of the centuries. Silently, I cursed my professional training that made my every word sound as dry as dust.

"That card," I said. "You sent that?"

"Yes." The machine on the cat's lap spoke quietly but clearly.

"How did you know my address and my name?"

"I didn't."

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

12

Before I could say anything, the cat went on, "You will understand all that before the night's over."

"Oh!" The words held me for a second. I could feel the tightness crawling into my stomach. I had been trying not to think of what was going to happen before this night was over. ". . . Questions?" I croaked. "Will you answer them?"

I parted my lips to start a machine gun patter of queries. And then, I closed them again. What did I want to know? The vast implications of that reply throttled my voice. Why, oh, why, are human beings so emotional at the great moments of their lives? I couldn't think, for what seemed an endless time. And when I finally spoke again, my first question was trite and not at all what I intended. I said:

"You came in a spaceship?"

The cat looked at one thoughtfully. "No," it replied slowly. "I use the energy in my brain."

"Eh! You came through space in your own body?"

"In a sense. One of these years human beings will make the initial discoveries about the rhythmic use of energy. It will be a dazzling moment for science."

"We have," I said, "already made certain discoveries about our nervous systems and rhythm."

"The end of that road," was the answer, "is control of the powers of nature. I will say more about that."

I was silent, but only briefly. The questions were bubbling now. "Is it possible," I asked, "to develop an atomic powered spaceship?"

"Not in the way you think," said the cat. "An atomic explosion cannot be confined except when it is drawn out in a series of timed frustrations. And that is an engineering problem, and has very little to do with creative physics."

"Life," I mumbled, "where did life come from?"

"Electronic accidents occurring in a suitable environment."

I had to stop there. I couldn't help it. "Electronic accidents. What do you mean?"

"The difference between an inorganic and an organic atom is the arrangement of the internal structure. The hydrocarbon compounds being the most easily affected under certain conditions are the most common form of life. But now that you have atomic energy you will discover that life can be created from any element or compound of elements. Be careful. The hydrocarbon is a weak life structure that could be easily overwhelmed in its present state of development."

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

13

I felt a chill. I could just picture the research that would be going on in government laboratories.

"You mean," I gulped, "there are life forms that would be dangerous the moment they are created?"

"Dangerous to man," said the cat. It pointed suddenly. "Turn up that street, and then through a side entrance into the circus grounds."

I had been wondering tensely where we were going. Strangely, it was a shock to realize the truth. A few minutes later we entered the dark, silent tent of the freaks. And I knew that the final drama of the cat on earth was about to be enacted. A tiny light flickered in the shadows. It came nearer, and I saw that there was a man walking underneath it. It was too dark to recognize him, but the light grew stronger, and I saw that it had no source. And suddenly I recognized Silkey Travis. He was sound asleep. He came forward, and stood in front of the cat. He looked unnatural, forlorn, like a woman caught without her makeup on. One long trembling look I took at him, and then I stammered:

"What are you going to do?"

The machine the cat carried did not reply immediately. The cat turned and stared at me thoughtfully, then it touched Silkey's face, gently, with one finger. Silkey's eyes opened, but he made no other reaction. I realized that one part of his consciousness had been made aware of what was happening. I whispered:

"Can he hear?"

The cat nodded.

"Can he think?"

The cat shook its head; and then it said:

"In your analysis of the basic nature of human beings you selected a symptom only. Man is religious because of a certain characteristic. I'll give you a clue. When an alien arrives on an inhabited planet, there is usually only one way that he can pass among the intelligent beings on that planet without being recognized for what he is. When you find that method, you have attained understanding of the fundamental character of the race."

It was hard for me to think. In the dim emptiness of the freak tent, the great silence of the circus grounds all around, what was happening seemed unnatural. I was not afraid of the cat. But there was a fear inside me, as strong as terror, as dark as night. I looked at the unmoving Silkey with all the lines of his years flabby on his face. And then I stared at the light that hovered above him. And finally I looked at the cat, and I said:

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

14

"Curiosity. You mean, man's curiosity. His interest in strange objects makes him accept them as natural when he sees them."

The cat said, "It seems incredible that you, an intelligent man, have never realized the one character of all human beings." It turned briskly, straightening. "But now, enough of this conversation. I have fulfilled the basic requirements of my domicile here. I have lived for a period without being suspected, and I have told one inhabitant that I have been here. It remains for me to send home a significant artifact of your civilization--and then I can be on my way . . . elsewhere."

I ventured, shakily, "Surely, the artifact isn't Silkey."

"We seldom," said the cat, "choose actual inhabitants of a planet, but when we do we give them a compensation designed to balance what we take away. In his case, virtual immortality."

I felt desperate, suddenly. Seconds only remained; and it wasn't that I had any emotion for Silkey. He stood there like a clod, and even though later he would remember, it didn't matter. It seemed to me that the cat had discovered some innate secret of human nature which I, as a biologist, must know.

"For God's sake," I said, "you haven't explained anything yet. What is this basic human characteristic. And what about the postcard you sent me. And--"

"You have all the clues." The creature started to turn away. "Your inability to comprehend is no concern of mine. We have a code, we students, that is all."

"But what," I asked desperately "shall I tell the world? Have you no message for humankind, something--"

The cat was looking at me again. "If you can possibly restrain yourself," it said, "don't tell anyone anything."

This time, when it moved away, it did not look back. I saw, with a start, that the mist of light above Silkey's head was expanding, growing. Brighter, vaster, it grew. It began to pulse with a gentle but unbroken rhythm. Inside its coalescing fire the cat and Silkey were dim forms, like shadows in a fire.

Abruptly, the shadows faded; and then the mist of light began to dim. Slowly, it sagged to the ground, and lay for minutes blurring into the darkness.

Of Silkey and the creature there was no sign.

THE GROUP sitting around the table in the bar was briefly silent. Finally, Gord said, "Glub!" and Jones said in a positive fashion:

"You solved the problem of the postcard, of course?"

THE CATAAAA

Get any book for free on: [www.Abika.com](http://www.Abika.com)

15

The slim, professorish man nodded. "I think so. The reference in the card to time differentials is the clue. The card was sent after Silkey was put on exhibition in the school museum of the cat people, but because of time variations in transmission it arrived before I knew Silkey would be in town."

Morton came up out of the depths of his chair. "And what about this basic human characteristic, of which religion is merely an outward expression?"

The stranger made a gesture. "Silkey, exhibiting freaks, was really exhibiting himself. Religion is self-dramatization before a god. Self-love, narcissism--in our own little way we show ourselves off . . . and so a strange being could come into our midst unsuspected."

Cathy hiccoughed, and said, "The love interest is what I like. Did you marry Virginia? You are the professor of biology at State, aren't you?"

The other shook his head. "I was," he said. "I should have followed the cat's advice. But I felt it was important to tell other people what had happened. I was dismissed after three months, and I won't tell you what I'm doing now. But I must go on. The world must know about the weakness that makes us so vulnerable. Virginia? She married a pilot of big air firms. She fell for his line of self-dramatization."

He stood up. "Well, I guess I'll be on my way. I've got a lot of bars to visit tonight."

When he had gone, Ted paused momentarily in his evening's task of looking stupid. "There," he said, "is a guy who really has a line. Just imagine. He's going to tell that story about five times tonight. What a set-up for a fellow who wants to be the center of attention."

Myra giggled. Jones began to talk to Gord in his know-it-all fashion. Gord said, "Glub!" every few seconds, just as if he was listening. Cathy put her head on the table and snored drunkenly. And Morton sagged lower and lower in his chair.

## RESURRECTION

by A. E. van Vogt

THE GREAT ship poised a quarter of a mile above one of the cities. Below was a cosmic desolation. As he floated down in his energy bubble, Enash saw that the buildings were crumbling with age.

"No signs of war damage!" "The bodiless voice touched his ears momentarily. Enash turned it out.

On the ground he collapsed his bubble. He found himself in a walled enclosure overgrown with weeds. Several skeletons lay in the tall grass beside the rakish building.

They were of long, two-legged, two-armed beings with skulls in each case mounted at the end of a thin spine. The skeletons, all of adults, seemed in excellent preservation, but when he bent down and touched one, a whole section of it crumbled into a fine powder. As he straightened, he saw that Yoal was floating down nearby. Enash waited until the historian had stepped out of his bubble, then he said:

"Do you think we ought to use our method of reviving the long dead?"

Yoal was thoughtful. "I have been asking questions of the various people who have landed, and there is something wrong here. This planet has no surviving life, not even insect life. We'll have to find out what happened before we risk any colonization."

Enash said nothing. A soft wind was blowing. It rustled through a clump of trees nearby. He motioned towards the trees. Yoal nodded and said, "Yes, the plant life has not been harmed, but plants after all are not affected in the same way as the active life forms."

There was an interruption. A voice spoke from Yoal's receiver: "A museum has been found at approximately the centre of the city. A red light has been fixed on the roof." Enash said, "I'll go with you, Yoal. "There might be skeletons of animals and of the intelligent being in various stages of his evolution. You didn't answer my question. Are you going to revive these things?"

Yoal said slowly, "I intend to discuss the matter with the council, but I think there is no doubt. We must know the cause of this disaster." He waved one sucker vaguely to take in half the compass. He added as an afterthought, "We shall proceed cautiously, of course, beginning with an obviously early development. The absence of the skeletons of children indicates that the race had developed personal immortality."

The council came to look at the exhibits. It was, Enash knew, a formal preliminary only. The decision was made. There would be revivals. It was more than that. They were curious. Space was vast, the journeys through it long and lonely, landing always a stimulating experience, with its prospect of new life forms to be seen and studied.

The museum looked ordinary. High-domed ceilings, vast rooms. Plastic models of strange beasts, many artifacts too many to see and comprehend in so short a time. The life span of a race was imprisoned here in a progressive array of relics. Enash looked with the others, and was glad when they came to the line of skeletons and preserved bodies. He seated himself behind the energy screen, and watched the biological experts take a preserved body out of a stone sarcophagus. It was wrapped in windings of cloth, many of them. The experts did not bother to unravel the rotted material. Their forceps reached through, pinched a piece of skull that was the accepted procedure. Any part of the skeleton could be used, but the most perfect revivals, the most complete reconstructions resulted when a certain section of the skull was used.

Hamar, the chief biologist, explained the choice of body. "The chemicals used to preserve this mummy show a sketchy knowledge of chemistry. The carvings on the sarcophagus indicate a crude and unmechanical culture. In such a civilization there would not be much development of the potentialities of the nervous system. Our speech experts have been analysing the recorded voice mechanism which is a part of each exhibit, and though many languages are involved evidence that the ancient language spoken at the time the body was alive has been reproduced they found no difficulty in translating the meanings. They have now adapted our universal speech machine, so that anyone who wishes to need only speak into his communicator, and so will have his words translated into the language of the revived person. The reverse, naturally, is also true. Ah, I see we are ready for the first body."

Enash watched intently with the others as the lid was clamped down on the plastic reconstructor, and the growth processes were started. He could feel himself becoming tense. For there was nothing haphazard about what was happening. In a few minutes a full-grown ancient inhabitant of this planet would sit up and stare at them. The science involved was simple and always fully effective. ~

.... Out of the shadows of smallness, life grows. The level of beginning and ending, of life and not life; in that dim region matter oscillates easily between old and new habits. The habit of organic, or the habit of inorganic. Electrons do not have life and un-life values. Atoms form

into molecules, there is a step in the process, one tiny step, that is of life if life begins at all. One step, and then darkness. Or aliveness.

A stone or a living cell. A grain of gold or a blade of grass, the sands of the sea or the equally numerous animalcules inhabiting the endless fishy waters—the difference is there in the twilight zone of matter. Each living cell has in it the whole form. The crab grows a new leg when the old one is torn from its flesh. Both ends of the planarian worm elongate, and soon there are two worms, two identities, two digestive systems each as greedy as the original, each a whole, unwounded, unharmed by its experience. Each cell can be the whole. Each cell remembers in detail so intricate that no totality of words could ever describe the completeness achieved.

But paradox memory is not organic. An ordinary wax record remembers sounds. A wire recorder easily gives up a duplicate of the voice that spoke into it years before. Memory is a physiological impression, a mark on matter, a change in the shape of a molecule, so that when a reaction is desired the shape emits the same rhythm of response. Out of the mummy's skull had come the multi-quadrillion memory shapes from which a response was now being evoked. As ever, the memory held true.

A man blinked, and opened his eyes.

"It is true, then," he said aloud, and the words were translated into the Ganae tongue as he spoke them. "Death is merely an opening into another life but where are my attendants?" At the end, his voice took on a complaining tone.

He sat up, and climbed out of the case, which had automatically opened as he came to life. He saw his captors. He froze, but only for a moment. He had a pride and a very special arrogant courage, which served him now. Reluctantly, he sank to his knees and made obeisance, but doubt must have been strong in him. "Am I in the presence of the gods of Egypt?" He climbed to his feet. "What nonsense is this? I do not bow to nameless demons."

Captain Gorsid said, "Kill him!"

The two-legged monster dissolved, writhing in the beam of a ray gun.

The second revived man stood up, pale, and trembled with fear. "My God, I swear I won't touch the stuff again. Talk about pink elephants"

Yoal was curious. "To what stuff do you refer, revived one?"

"The old hooch, the poison in the hip pocket flask, the juice they gave me at that speak . . . my lordie!"

Captain Gorsid looked questioningly at Yoal, "Need we linger?"

Yoal hesitated. "I am curious." He addressed the man. "If I were to tell you that we were visitors from another star, what would be your reaction?"

The man stared at him. He was obviously puzzled, but the fear was stronger. "Now, look," he said, "I was driving along, minding my own business. I admit I'd had a shot or two too many, but it's the liquor they serve these days. I swear I didn't see the other car and if this is some new idea of punishing people who drink and drive, well, you've won. I won't touch another drop as long as I live, so help me."

Yoal said, "He drives a 'car' and thinks nothing of it. Yet we saw no cars. They didn't even bother to preserve them in the museums."

Enash noticed that everyone waited for everyone else to

comment. He stirred as he realized the circle of silence would be complete unless he spoke. He said, "Ask him to describe the car. How does it work?"

"Now, you're talking," said the man. "Bring on your line of chalk, and I'll walk it, and ask any questions you please. I may be so tight that I can't see straight, but I can always drive. How does it work? You just put her in gear, and step on the gas."

"Gas," said engineering officer Veed. "The internal combustion engine. That places him."

Captain Gorsid motioned to the guard with the ray gun.

The third man sat up, and looked at them thoughtfully.

"From the stars?" he said finally. "Have you a system, or was it blind chance?"

The Ganae councillors in that domed room stirred uneasily in their curved chairs. Enash caught Yoal's eye on him. "The shock in the historian's eye alarmed the meteorologist. He thought: "The two-legged one's adjustment to a new situation, his grasp of realities, was unnormally rapid. No Ganae could have equalled the swiftness of the reaction."

Hamar, the chief biologist, said, "Speed of thought is not necessarily a sign of superiority. The slow, careful thinker has his place in the hierarchy of intellect."

But Enash found himself thinking, it was not the speed; it was the accuracy of the response. He tried to imagine himself being revived from the dead, and understanding instantly the meaning of the presence of aliens from the stars. He couldn't have done it.

He forgot his thought, for the man was out of the case. As Enash watched with the others, he walked briskly over to the window and looked out. One glance, and then he turned back.

"Is it all like this?" he asked.

Once again, the speed of his understanding caused a sensation. It was Yoal who finally replied.

"Yes. Desolation. Death. Ruin. Have you any ideas as to what happened?"

The man came back and stood in front of the energy screen that guarded the Ganae. "May I look over the museum? I have to estimate what age I am in. We had certain possibilities of destruction when I was last alive, but which one was realized depends on the time elapsed."

The councillors looked at Captain Gorsid, who hesitated; then, "Watch him," he said to the guard with the ray gun. He faced the man. "We understand your aspirations fully. You would like to seize control of this situation and ensure your own safety. Let me reassure you. Make no false moves, and all will be well."

Whether or not the man believed the lie, he gave no sign.

Nor did he show by a glance or a movement that he had seen the scarred floor where the ray gun had burned his two predecessors into nothingness. He walked curiously to the nearest doorway, studied the other guard who waited there for him, and then, gingerly, stepped through. The first guard followed him, then came the mobile energy screen, and finally, ~ trailing one another, the councillors.

Enash was the third to pass through the doorway. The room contained skeletons and plastic models of animals. The room beyond that was what, for want of a better term, Enash called a culture room. It contained the artifacts from a single period of civilization. It looked very advanced. He had examined some of the machines when they first passed through it, and had thought: Atomic energy. He was not alone in his recognition. From behind him. Captain Gorsid said to the



man:

"You are forbidden to touch anything. A false move will be the signal for the guards to fire."

The man stood at ease in the centre of the room. In spite of a curious anxiety, Enash had to admire his calmness. He must have known what his fate would be, but he stood there thoughtfully, and said finally, deliberately, "I do not need to go any farther. Perhaps you will be able to judge better than I of the time that has elapsed since I was born and these machines were built. I see over there an instrument which, according to the sign above it, counts atoms when they explode. As soon as the proper number have exploded it shuts off the power automatically, and for just the right length of time to prevent a chain explosion. In my time we had a thousand crude devices for limiting the size of an atomic reaction, but it required two thousand years to develop those devices from the early beginnings of atomic energy. Can you make a comparison?"

The councillors glanced at Veed. The engineering officer hesitated. At last, reluctantly, he said, "Nine thousand years ago we had a thousand methods of limiting atomic explosions." He paused, then even more slowly, "I have never heard of an instrument that counts out atoms for such a purpose."

"And yet," murmured Shuri, the astronomer, breathlessly, "the race was destroyed."

There was silence. It ended as Gorsid said to the nearest guard, "Kill the monster!"

But it was the guard who went down, bursting into flame. Not just one guard, but the guards! Simultaneously down, burning with a blue flame. The flame licked at the screen, recoiled, and licked more furiously, recoiled and burned brighter. Through a haze of fire, Enash saw that the man had retreated to the far door, and that the machine that counted atoms was glowing with a blue intensity.

Captain Gorsid shouted into his communicator, "Guard all exits with ray guns. Spaceships stand by to kill alien with heavy guns."

Somebody said, "Mental control. Some kind of mental control. What have we run into?"

They were retreating. The blue flame was at the ceiling, struggling to break through the screen. Enash had a last glimpse of the machine. It must still be counting atoms, for it was a hellish blue. Enash raced with the others to the room where the man had been resurrected. There, another energy screen crashed to their rescue. Safe now, they retreated into their separate bubbles and whisked through outer doors and up to the ship. As the great ship soared, an atomic bomb hurtled down from it. The mushroom of flame blotted out the museum and the city below.

"But we still don't know why the race died," Yoal whispered into Enash's ear, after the thunder had died from the heavens behind them.

The pale yellow sun crept over the horizon on the third morning after the bomb was dropped, the eighth day since the landing. Enash floated with the others down on a new city. He had come to argue against any further revival.

"As a meteorologist," he said, "I pronounce this planet safe for Ganae colonization. I cannot see the need for taking any risks. This race has discovered the secrets of its nervous system, and we cannot afford"

He was interrupted. Hamar, the biologist, said dryly, "If they knew so much why didn't they migrate to other star systems and save themselves?"

"I will concede," said Enash, "that very possibly they had

not discovered our system of locating stars with planetary families." He looked earnestly around the circle of his friends. "We have agreed that was a unique accidental discovery. We were lucky, not clever."

He saw by the expressions on their faces that they were mentally refuting his arguments. He felt a helpless sense of imminent catastrophe. For he could see that picture of a great race facing death. It must have come swiftly, but not so swiftly that they didn't know about it. There were too many skeletons in the open, lying in the gardens of magnificent homes, as if each man and his wife had come out to wait for the doom of his kind. He tried to picture it for the council, that last day long, long ago, when a race had calmly met its ending. But his visualization failed somehow, for the others shifted impatiently in the seats that had been set up behind the series of energy screens, and Captain Gorsid said, "Exactly what aroused this intense emotional reaction in you, Enash?"

The question gave Enash pause. He hadn't thought of it as emotional. He hadn't realized the nature of his obsession, so subtly had it stolen upon him. Abruptly now, he realized. "It was the third one," he said slowly. "I saw him through the haze of energy fire, and he was standing there in the distant doorway watching us curiously, just before we turned to run. His bravery, his calm, the skilful way he had duped us it all added up."

"Added up to his death!" said Hamar. And everybody laughed.

"Come now, Enash," said Vice-captain Mayad good-humouredly, "you're not going to pretend that this race is braver than our own, or that, with all the precautions we have now taken, we need fear one man?"

Enash was silent, feeling foolish. The discovery that he had had an emotional obsession abashed him. He did not want to appear unreasonable. He made a final protest, "I merely wish to point out," he said doggedly, "that this desire to discover what happened to a dead race does not seem absolutely essential to me."

Captain Gorsid waved at the biologist, "Proceed," he said, "with the revival."

To Enash, he said, "Do we dare return to Gana, and recommend mass migrations and then admit that we did not actually complete our investigations here? It's impossible, my friend."

It was the old argument, but reluctantly now Enash admitted there was something to be said for that point of view. He forgot that, for the fourth man was stirring.

The man sat up. And vanished.

There was a blank, horrified silence. Then Captain Gorsid said harshly, "He can't get out of there. We know that. He's in there somewhere."

All around Enash, the Ganae were out of their chairs, peering into the energy shell. The guards stood with ray guns held limply in their suckers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the protective screen technicians beckon to Veed, who went over. He came back grim. He said, "I'm told the needles jumped ten points when he first disappeared. That's on the nucleome level."

"By ancient Ganae!" Shun whispered. "We've run into what we've always feared."

Gorsid was shouting into the communicator. "Destroy all the locators on the ship. Destroy them, do you hear!"

He turned with glaring eyes. "Shuri," he bellowed. "They don't seem to understand. Tell those subordinates of your to act. All locators and reconstructors must be destroyed."

"Hurry, hurry!" said Shuri weakly.

When that was done they breathed more easily. There were grim smiles and a tensed satisfaction. "At least," said Vice-captain Mayad. "he cannot now ever discover Gana. Our great system of locating suns with planets remains our secret. There can be no retaliation for" He stopped, said slowly, "What am I talking about? We haven't done anything. We've not responsible for the disaster that has befallen the inhabitants of this planet."

But Enash knew what he had meant. The guilt feelings came to the surface at such moments as this the ghosts of all the races destroyed by the Ganae, the remorseless will that had been in them, when they first landed, to annihilate whatever was here. The dark abyss of voiceless hate and terror that lay behind them; the days on end when they had mercilessly poured poisonous radiation down upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of peaceful planets all that had been in Mayad's words.

"I still refuse to believe he has escaped." That was Captain Gorsid. "He's in there. He's waiting for us to take down our screens, so he can escape. Well, we won't do it."

There was silence again as they stared expectantly into the emptiness of the energy shell. The reconstructor rested on metal supports, a glittering affair. But there was nothing else. Not a flicker of unnatural light or shade. The yellow rays of the sun bathed the open spaces with a brilliance that left no room for concealment.

"Guards," said Gorsid, "destroy the reconstructor. I thought he might come back to examine it, but we can't take a chance on that."

It burned with a white fury. And Enash, who had hoped somehow that the deadly energy would force the two-legged thing into the open, felt his hopes sag within him.

"But where can he have gone?" Yoal whispered.

Enash turned to discuss the matter. In the act of swinging around, he saw that the monster was standing under a tree a score of feet to one side, watching them. He must have arrived at that moment, for there was a collective gasp from the councillors. Everybody drew back. One of the screen technicians, using great presence of mind, jerked up an energy-screen between the Ganae and the monster. The creature came forward slowly. He was slim of build, he held his head well back. His eyes shone as from an inner fire.

He stopped as he came to the screen, reached out and touched it with his fingers. It flared, blurred with changing colours. The colours grew brighter, and extended in an intricate pattern all the way from his head to the ground. The blur cleared. The pattern faded into invisibility. The man was through the screen.

He laughed, a soft curious sound; then sobered. "When I first awakened," he said, "I was curious about the situation. The question was, what should I do with you?"

The words had a fateful ring to Enash on the still morning air of that planet of the dead. A voice broke the silence, a voice so strained and unnatural that a moment passed before he recognized it as belonging to Captain Gorsid.

"Kill him!"

When the blasters ceased their effort, the unkillable thing remained standing. He walked slowly forward until he was only a half dozen feet from the nearest Ganae. Enash had a position well to the rear. The man said slowly:

"Two courses suggest themselves, one based on gratitude for reviving me, the other based on reality. I know you for what you are. Yes, know you and that is unfortunate. It is

hard to feel merciful. To begin with," he went on, "let us suppose you surrender the secret of the locator. Naturally, now that a system exists, we shall never again be caught as we were."

Enash had been intent, his mind so alive with the potentialities of the disaster that was here that it seemed impossible that he could think of anything else. And yet, a part of his attention was stirred now. "What did happen?" he asked. The man changed colour. The emotions of that far day thickened his voice. "A nucleonic storm. It swept in from outer space. It brushed this edge of our galaxy. It was about ninety light-years in diameter, beyond the farthest limit of our power. There was no escape from it. We had dispensed with spaceships, and had no time to construct any. Castor, the only star with planets ever discovered by us, was also in the path of the storm." He stopped. "The secret?" he said. Around Enash, the councillors were breathing easier. The fear of race destruction that had come to them was lifting. Enash saw with pride that the first shock was over, and they were not even afraid for themselves.

"Ah," said Yoal softly, "you don't know the secret. In spite of all your great development, we alone can conquer the galaxy." He looked at the others, smiling confidently. "Gentlemen," he said, "our pride in a great Ganae achievement is justified. I suggest we return to our ship. We have no further business on this planet."

There was a confused moment while their bubbles formed, when Enash wondered if the two-legged one would try to stop their departure. But when he looked back, he saw that the man was walking in a leisurely fashion along a street.

That was the memory Enash carried with him, as the ship began to move. That and the fact that the three atomic bombs they dropped, one after the other, failed to explode. "We will not," said Captain Gorsid, "give up a planet as easily as that. I propose another interview with the creature." They were floating down again into the city, Enash and Yoal and Veed and the commander. Captain Gorsid's voice tuned in once more:

"... As I visualize it" through the mist Enash could see the transparent glint of the other three bubbles around him "we jumped to conclusions about this creature, not justified by the evidence. For instance, when he awakened, he vanished. Why? Because he was afraid, of course. He wanted to size up the situation. He didn't believe he was omnipotent."

It was sound logic. Enash found himself taking heart from it. Suddenly, he was astonished that he had become panicky so easily. He began to see the danger in a new light. Only one man alive on a new planet. If they were determined enough, colonists could be moved in as if he did not exist. It had been done before, he recalled. On several planets, small groups of the original populations had survived the destroying radiation, and taken refuge in remote areas. In almost every case, the new colonists gradually hunted them down. In two instances, however, that Enash remembered, native races were still holding small sections of their planets. In each case, it had been found impractical to destroy them because it would have endangered the Ganae on the planet. So the survivors were tolerated. One man would not take up very much room.

When they found him, he was busily sweeping out the lower floor of a small bungalow. He put the broom aside and stepped on to the terrace outside. He had put on sandals, and he wore a loose-fitting robe made of very shiny material. He eyed them indolently but he said nothing.

It was Captain Gorsid who made the proposition. Enash had to admire the story he told into the language machine. The commander was very frank. That approach had been decided on. He pointed out that the Ganae could not be expected to revive the dead of this planet. Such altruism would be unnatural considering that the ever-growing Ganae hordes had a continual need for new worlds. Each vast new population increment was a problem that could be solved by one method only. In this instance, the colonists would gladly respect the rights of the sole survivor of this world.

It was at this point that the man interrupted. "But what is the purpose of this endless expansion?" He seemed genuinely curious. "What will happen when you finally occupy every planet in this galaxy?"

Captain Gorsid's puzzled eyes met Yoal's, then flashed to Veed, then Enash. Enash shrugged his torso negatively, and felt pity for the creature. The man didn't understand, possibly never could understand. It was the old story of two different viewpoints, the virile and the decadent, the race that aspired to the stars and the race that declined the call of destiny.

"Why not," urged the man, "control the breeding chambers?"

"And have the government overthrown!" said Yoal.

He spoke tolerantly, and Enash saw that the others were smiling at the man's naivete. He felt the intellectual gulf between them widening. The creature had no comprehension of the natural life forces that were at work. The man spoke again:

"Well, if you don't control them, we will control them for you."

There was silence.

They began to stiffen. Enash felt it in himself, saw the signs of it in the others. His gaze flicked from face to face, then back to the creature in the doorway. Not for the first time, Enash had the thought that their enemy seemed helpless.

"Why," he decided, "I could put my suckers around him and crush him."

He wondered if mental control of nucleonic, nuclear, and gravitonic energies included the ability to defend oneself from a macrocosmic attack. He had an idea it did. The exhibition of power two hours before might have had limitations, but if so, it was not apparent. Strength or weakness could make no difference. The threat of threats had been made: "If you don't control we will."

The words echoed in Enash's brain, and, as the meaning penetrated deeper, his aloofness faded. He had always regarded himself as a spectator. Even when, earlier, he had argued against the revival, he had been aware of a detached part of himself watching the scene rather than being a part of it. He saw with a sharp clarity that that was why he had finally yielded to the conviction of the others. Going back beyond that to remoter days, he saw that he had never quite considered himself a participant in the seizure of the planets of other races. He was the one who looked on, and thought of reality, and speculated on a life that seemed to have no meaning. It was meaningless no longer. He was caught by a tide of irresistible emotion, and swept along. He felt himself sinking, merging with the Ganae mass being. All the strength and all the will of the race surged up in his veins.

He snarled, "Creature, if you have any hopes of reviving your dead race, abandon them now."

The man looked at him, but said nothing. Enash rushed on, "If you could destroy us, you would have done so already."

But the truth is that you operate within limitations. Our ship is so built that no conceivable chain reaction could be started in it. For every plate of potential unstable material in it there is a counteracting plate, which prevents the development of a critical pile. You might be able to set off -explosions in our engines, but they, too, would be limited, and would merely start the process for which they are intended confined in their proper space."

He was aware of Yoal touching his arm. "Careful," warned the historian. "Do not in your just anger give away vital information."

Enash shook off the restraining sucker. "Let us not be unrealistic," he said harshly. "This thing has divined most of our racial secrets, apparently merely by looking at our bodies. We would be acting childishly if we assumed that he has not already realized the possibilities of the situation."

"Eruishi" Captain Gorsid's voice was imperative.

As swiftly as it had come, Enash's rage subsided. He stepped back. "Yes, commander."

"I think I know what you intended to say," said Captain Gorsid. "I assure you, I am in full accord, but I believe also that I, as the top Ganae official, should deliver the ultimatum." He turned. His homy body towered above the man. "You have made the unforgivable threat. You have told us, in effect, that you will attempt to restrict the vaulting Ganae spirit."

"Not the spirit," said the man.

The commander ignored the interruption. "Accordingly, we have no alternative. We are assuming that, given time to locate the materials and develop the tools, you might be able to build a reconstructor. In our opinion it will be at least two years before you can complete it, even if you know how. It is an immensely intricate machine, not easily assembled by the lone survivor of a race that gave up its machines millennia before disaster struck.

"You did not have time to build a spaceship. We won't give you time to build a reconstructor.

"Within a few minutes our ship will start dropping bombs. It is possible you will be able to prevent explosions in your vicinity. We will start, accordingly, on the other side of the planet. If you stop us there, then we will assume we need help. In six months of travelling at top acceleration, we can reach a point where the nearest Ganae planet would hear our messages. They will send a fleet so vast that all your powers of resistance will be overcome. By dropping a hundred or a thousand bombs every minute, we will succeed in devastating every city so that not a grain of dust will remain of the skeletons of your people.

"That is our plan. So it shall be. Now, do your worst to us who are at your mercy."

The man shook his head. "I shall do nothing now!" he said. He paused, then thoughtfully, "Your reasoning is fairly accurate. Fairly. Naturally, I am not all powerful, but it seems to me you have forgotten one little point. I won't tell you what it is. And now," he said, "good day to you. Get back to your ship, and be on your way. I have much to do."

Enash had been standing quietly, aware of the fury building up in him again. Now, with a hiss, he sprang forward, suckers outstretched. They were almost touching the smooth flesh when something snatched at him.

He was back on the ship.

He had no memory of movement, no sense of being dazed or harmed. He was aware of Veed and Yoal and Captain Gorsid standing near him as astonished as he himself. Enash remained very still, thinking of what the man had said:

"... Forgotten one little point." Forgotten? That meant they knew. What could it be? He was still pondering about it when Yoal said:

"We can be reasonably certain our bombs alone will not work."

They didn't.

Forty light-years out from Earth, Enash was summoned to the council chambers. Yoal greeted him wanly. "The monster is aboard."

The thunder of that poured through Enash, and with it came a sudden comprehension. "That was what he meant we had forgotten," he said finally, aloud and wonderingly. "That he can travel through space at will within a limit what was the figure he once used of ninety light-years."

He sighed. He was not surprised that the Ganae, who had to use ships, would not have thought immediately of such a possibility. Slowly, he began to retreat from the reality. Now that the shock had come, he felt old and weary, a sense of his mind withdrawing again to its earlier state of aloofness. It required a few minutes to get the story. A physicist's assistant, on his way to the storeroom, had caught a glimpse of a man in a lower corridor. In such a heavily manned ship, the wonder was that the intruder had escaped earlier observation. Enash had a thought.

"But after all we are not going all the way to one of our planets. How does he expect to make use of us to locate it if we only use the video" he stopped. That was it, of course. Directional video beams would have to be used, and the man would travel in the right direction the instant contact was made.

Enash saw the decision in the eyes of his companions, the only possible decision under the circumstances. And yet, it seemed to him they were missing some vital point. He walked slowly to the great video plate at one end of the chamber. There was a picture on it, so sharp, so vivid, so majestic that the unaccustomed mind would have reeled as from a stunning blow. Even to him, who knew the scene, there came a constriction, a sense of unthinkable vastness. It was a video view of a section of the milky way. Four hundred million stars as seen through telescopes that could pick up the light of a red dwarf at thirty thousand light-years.

The video plate was twenty-five yards in diameter a scene that had no parallel elsewhere in the plenum. Other galaxies simply did not have that many stars.

Only one in two hundred thousand of those gloving suns had planets.

That was the colossal fact that compelled them now to an irrevocable act. Warily, Enash looked around him.

"The monster has been very clever," he said quietly. "If we go ahead, he goes with us, obtains a reconstructor, and returns by his method to his planet. If we use the directional beam, he flashes along it, obtains a reconstructor, and again reaches his planet first. In either event, by the time our fleets arrived back here, he would have revived enough of his kind to thwart any attack we could mount."

He shook his torso. The picture was accurate, he felt sure, but it still seemed incomplete. He said slowly, "We have one advantage now. Whatever decision we make, there is no language machine to enable him to learn what is it. We can carry out our plans without his knowing what they will be. He knows that neither he nor we can blow up the ship. That leaves us one real alternative."

It was Captain Gorsid who broke the silence that followed.

"Well, gentlemen, I see we know our minds. We will set the

engines, blow up the controls, and take him with us."

They looked at each other, race pride in their eyes. Enash touched suckers with each in turn.

An hour later, when the heat was already considerable, Enash had the thought that sent him staggering to the communicator, to call Shuri, the astronomer. "Shun," he yelled, "when the monster first awakened remember Captain Gorsid had difficulty getting your subordinates to destroy the locators. We never thought to ask them what the delay was. Ask them ... ask them"

There was a pause, then Shuri's voice came weakly over the roar of the static. "They. . . couldn't. . . get. . . into the... room. The door was locked."

Enash sagged to the floor. They had missed more than one point, he realized. The man had awakened, realized the situation; and, when he vanished, he had gone to the ship, and there discovered the secret of the locator and possibly the secret of the reconstructor if he didn't know it previously. By the time he reappeared, he already had from them what he wanted. All the rest must have been designed to lead them to this act of desperation.

In a few moments, now, he would be leaving the ship, secure in the knowledge that shortly no alien mind would know his planet existed. Knowing, too, that his race would live again, and this time never die.

Enash staggered to his feet, clawed at the roaring communicator, and shouted his new understanding into it. There was no answer. It clattered with the static of uncontrollable and inconceivable energy. The heat was peeling his armoured hide as he struggled to the matter transmitter. It flashed at him with purple flame. Back to the communicator he ran shouting and screaming.

He was still whimpering into it a few minutes later when the mighty ship plunged into the heart of a blue-white sun.

A.E. Van Vogt

#### THE BARBARIAN

In his initial address to the Patronate, following his return from Venus, Tews said among other things, "It is difficult for us to realize, but Linn is now without formidable enemies anywhere. Our opponents on Mars and Venus having been decisively defeated by our forces in the past two decades, we are now in a unique historical position: the sole great power in the world of man. A period of unlimited peace and creative reconstruction seems inevitable."

He returned to the palace with the cheers of the Patronate ringing in his ears, his mood one of thoughtful jubilation. His spies had already reported that the patrons gave him a great deal of the credit for the victory on Venus. After all, the war had dragged on for a long time before his arrival. And then, abruptly, almost overnight, it had ended. The



conclusion was that his brilliant leadership had made a decisive contribution. It required no astuteness for Tews to realize that, under such circumstances, he could generously bestow a triumph on Jerrin, and lose nothing by the other's honors.

Despite his own words to the Patronate, he found himself, as the peaceful weeks went by, progressively amazed at the reality of what he had said: no enemies. Nothing to fear. Even yet, it seemed hard to believe that the universe belonged to Linn; and that, as the Lord Adviser, he was now in his own sphere in a position of power over more subjects than any man had ever been. So it seemed to the dazzled Tews.

He would be a devoted leader, of course - he reassured himself hastily, disowning the momentary pride. He visualized great works that would reflect the glory of Linn and the golden age of Tews. The vision was so noble and inspiring that for long he merely toyed with hazy, magnificent plans and took no concrete action of any kind.

He was informed presently that Clane had returned from Venus. Shortly thereafter he received a message from the mutation.

His Excellency,  
Lord Adviser Tews

My most honored uncle: I should like to visit you and describe to you the result of several conversations between my brother Jerrin and myself concerning potential dangers for the empire. They do not seem severe, but we are both concerned about the preponderance of slaves as against citizens on Earth, and we are unhappy about our lack of knowledge of the present situation among the peoples of the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Since these are the only dangers in sight, the sooner we examine every aspect of the problem the more certain we can be that the destiny of Linn will be under the control of intelligent action and not governed in future by the necessary opportunism that has been for so many generations the main element of government.

Your obedient nephew,  
Clane

The letter irritated Tews. It seemed meddlesome, It reminded him that his control of Linn and of the glorious future he envisaged for the empire was not complete, that in fact these nephews might urge compromises that would dim the beauty that only he, apparently, could see. Nevertheless, his reply was diplomatic:

My dear Clane: It was a pleasure to hear from you, and as soon as I return from the mountans, I shall be happy to receive you and discuss all these matters in the most thoroughgoing fashion. I have instructed various departments to gather data so that when we do get together, we can talk on the basis of facts. Tews, Lord Adviser

He actually issued the instructions and actually listened to a brief account from an official who was an "expert" concerning conditions on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. They were all inhabited by tribes in various stages of barbaric culture. Recent reports gleaned from questioning of primitives who came from there and from the Linnan traders who visited certain ports of entry indicated that the old game of intrigue and murder among tribal chieftains seeking ascendancy was still going on.

Relieved in spite of his previous conviction that the situation was exactly as it was now described, Tews departed on his mountain vacation with a retinue of three hundred courtiers and five hundred slaves. He was still there a month later when a second message arrived from Clane.

Most gracious Lord Adviser Tews: Your response to my message was a great relief to me. I wonder if I could further impose upon your good offices and have your department heads determine how many are still here and where they are presently concentrated. The reason for this inquiry is that I have discovered that several of my agents on Europa, the great moon of Jupiter, were suddenly executed about a year ago and that actually my own information from that territory is based upon reports, all of which are not less than two years old, and those are extremely vague. It seems that about five years ago a new leader began to unify Europa; and my agents' reports - when I now examine the data they furnished - grew less clear with each month after that. I suspect that I have been victimized by

carefully prepared propaganda. If this be so, the fact that somebody was astute enough to seize my channels of information worries me.

These are only suspicions, of course but it would seem advisable to have your people make inquiries with the possibility in mind that our present information sources are unreliable.

Your faithful servant, and nephew,  
Clane

The reference to the mutation's "agents" reminded Tews unpleasantly that he lived in a world of spies. I suppose, he thought wearily, propaganda is even now being circulated against me because I am on a vacation. People cannot possibly realize what great plans my engineers and I are making for the State on this so-called pleasure trip.

He wondered if, by releasing a series of public statements about the grandiose future, he might successfully head off criticism.

That irritation lasted for a day, and then he read Clane's letter again and decided that an unruffled and diplomatic approach was desirable. He must ever be in a position to say that he invariably took the most thorough precaution against any eventuality.

He gave the necessary instructions, advised Clane that he had done so - and then began to consider seriously the situation that would exist when Jerrin returned from Venus six or eight months hence to receive his triumph. It no longer seemed quite the satisfactory prospect that it had been when he himself had first returned from Venus. These nephews of his tended to interfere in State affairs, and indeed both had the legal right to be advisers of the government. Each, according to law, had a Council vote in Linnan affairs, although neither could directly interfere with administration.

I suppose, Tews grudgingly acknowledged to himself, Clane is within his rights; but what was it mother once said: "It is an unwise man who always exercises his rights." He laughed, grimacing.

That night, just before he went to sleep, Tews had a flash of insight: I'm slipping back into suspicion - the same fears that disturbed me when I was on Venus. I'm being influenced by this damnable palace atmosphere.

He felt personally incapable of base thoughts, and accepted their presence in others - he told himself - with the greatest reluctance, and then only because of the possible effect on the State.

His sense of duty - that was the real pressure on him, he felt convinced. It compelled him to be aware of, and actually to look for, scheming and plotting, even though he was revolted by any indications of intrigue.

The realization of his own fundamental integrity reassured Tews. After all, he thought, I may occasionally be misled, but I cannot be wrong if I remain constantly on the alert for danger from all sources. And even a mutation with scientific knowledge and weapons is a matter about which I, as guardian of the State, must take cognizance.

He had already given considerable thought to the weapons he had seen Clane use on Venus. And during the days that followed he came to the conclusion that he must take action. He kept saying to himself how reluctant he was to do so, but finally he advised Clane:

My dear nephew:

Although you have evidently not felt free to ask for the protection to which your rank and the value of your work entitles you, I am sure you will be happy to hear that the State is prepared to undertake protection of the material that you have rescued from the pits of the gods and from other ancient sources.

The safest place for all this material is at your residence in Linn. Accordingly, I am authorizing funds to transport to the city any such equipment that you have at your country estate. A guards unit will arrive at the estate within the week with adequate transport, and another guards unit is this day taking up guard duty at your town residence.

The captain of the guard, while of course responsible to me, will naturally grant you every facility for carrying on your work.

It is with pleasure, my dear Clane, that I extend to you this costly but earned protection.

At some time not too far in the future I should like to have the privilege of a personally conducted tour so that I may see for myself what treasures you have in your collection, with a view to finding further uses for them for the general welfare.

With cordial best wishes  
Tews, Lord Adviser

At least, thought Tews, after he had dispatched the message and given the necessary orders to the military forces, that will for the present get the material all in one place. Later, a further more stringent control is always possible - not that it will ever be necessary, of course.

The wise leader simply planned for any contingency. Even the actions of his most dearly beloved relatives must be examined objectively.

He learned presently that Clane had offered no resistance and that the material had been transported to Linn without incident.

He was still at the mountain palace of the Linns when a third letter arrived from Clane. Though briefly stated, it was a major social document. The preamble read:

To our uncle, the Lord Adviser:

It being the considered opinion of Lords Jertin and Clane Linn that a dangerous preponderance of slaves exists in Linn and that indeed the condition of slavery is wholly undesirable in a healthy State, it is herewith proposed that Lord Adviser Tews during his government lay down as a guiding rule for future generations the following principles:

1. All law-abiding human beings are entitled to the free control of their own persons.
2. Where free control does not now obtain, it shall be delivered to the individual on a rising scale, the first two steps of which shall become effective immediately.
3. The first step shall be that no slave shall in future be physically punished except by the order of a court.
4. The second step shall be that the slave's work day shall not in future exceed ten hours.

The other steps outlined a method of gradually freeing the slaves until after twenty years only incorrigibles would be 'not free,' and all of these would be controlled by the State itself under laws whereby each was dealt with "as an individual."

Tews read the document with amazement and amusement. He recalled another saying of his mother's: "Don't ever worry about the idealists. The mob will cut their throats at the proper moment."

His amusement faded rapidly. These boys are really interfering in the affairs of state in Linn itself, which is only remotely in their province. As, the summer over, he made preparations to return to the city, Tews scowlingly considered the threat "to the State," which - it seemed to him - was building up with alarming speed.

On the second day after his return to Linn he received another letter from Clane. This one requested an audience to discuss "those matters relating to the defense of the empire, about which your departments have been gathering information."

What infuriated Tews about the letter was that the mutation was not even giving him time to settle down after his return. True, the work of reestablishment did not involve him - but it was a matter of courtesy to the office he held. On that level, Tews decided in an icy rage, Clane's persistence bore all the earmarks of a deliberate insult.

He sent a curt note in reply, which stated simply:

My dear Clane:

I will advise you as soon as I am free of the more pressing problems of administration. Please await word from me.

Tews

He slept that night, confident that he was at last taking a firm stand and that it was about time.

He awoke to news of disaster.

The only warning was a steely glinting of metal in the early-morning sky. The invaders swooped down on the city of Linn in three hundred spaceships. There must have been advance spying, for they landed in force at the gates that were heavily guarded and at the main troop barracks inside the city. From each ship debouched two hundred-odd men.

"Sixty thousand soldiers!" said Lord Adviser Tews after he had studied the reports. He issued instructions for the defense of the palace and sent a carrier pigeon to the three legions encamped outside the city, ordering two of them to attack when ready. And then he sat pale but composed, watching the spectacle from a window that overlooked the hazy vastness of Linn proper.

Everything was vague and unreal. Most of the invading ships had disappeared behind large buildings. A few lay in the open, but they looked dead. It was hard to grasp that vicious fighting was going on in their vicinity. At nine o'clock, a messenger arrived from the Lady Lydia:

DearSon:

Have you any news? Who is attacking us? Is it a limited assault or an invasion of the empire. Have you contacted Clane?

L.

The first prisoner was brought in while Tews was scowling over the unpalatable suggestion that he seek the advice of his relative. The mutation was the last person he wanted to see. The prisoner, a bearded giant, proudly confessed that he was from Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter, and that he feared neither man nor god. The man's size and obvious physical prowess startled Tews. But his naive outlook on life was cheering. Subsequent prisoners had similar physical and mental characteristics. And so, long before noon, Tews had a fairly clear picture of the situation.

This was a barbarian invasion from Europa. It was obviously for loot only. But unless he acted swiftly, Linn would be divested in a few days of treasures garnered over the centuries. Bloodthirsty commands flowed from Tews' lips. Put all prisoners to the sword. Destroy their ships, their weapons, their clothing. Leave not one vestige of their presence to pollute the eternal city.

The morning ran its slow course. Tews considered making an inspection of the city escorted by the palace cavalry. He abandoned the plan when he realized it would be impossible for commanders to send him reports if he were on the move. For the same reason he could not transfer his headquarters to a less clearly marked building. Just before noon, the relieving report arrived that two of three camp legions were attacking in force at the main gates.

The news steadied him. He began to think in terms of broader, more basic information about what had happened. He remembered unhappily that his departments probably had the information that - spurred by Clane - he had asked for months ago. Hastily, he called in several experts and sat somberly while each of the men in turn told what he had learned.

There was actually a great deal of data. Europa, the great moon of Jupiter, had been inhabited from legendary times by fiercely quarreling tribes. Its vast atmosphere was said to have been created artificially with the help of the atom gods by the scientists of the golden age. Like all the artificial atmosphere, it contained a high proportion of the gas, teneol, which admitted sunlight but did not allow much heat to escape into space.

Starting about five years before, travelers had begun to bring out reports of a leader named Czinczar who was ruthlessly welding all the hating factions of the planet into one nation. For a while it was such a dangerous territory that traders landed only at specified ports of entry. The information they received was that Czinczar's attempt at unification

had faired. Contact grew even more vague after that; and it was clear to the listening Tews that the new leader had actually succeeded in his conquests and that any word to the contrary was propaganda. The cunning Czinczar had seized outgoing communication sources and confused them while he consolidated his position among the barbarous forces of the planet.

Czinczar. The name had a sinister rhythm to it, a ring of leashed violence, a harsh, metallic tintinnabulation. If such a man and his followers escaped with even a fraction of the portable wealth of Linn, the inhabited solar system would echo with the exploit. The government of Lord Adviser Tews might tumble like a house of cards.

Tews had been hesitating. There was a plan in his mind that would work better if carried out in the dead of night. But that meant giving the attackers precious extra hours for loot. He decided not to wait, but dispatched a command to the third - still unengaged - camp legion to enter the tunnel that led into the central palace.

As a precaution, and with the hope of distracting the enemy leader, he sent a message to Czinczar in the care of a captured barbarian officer. In it he pointed out the foolishness of an attack that could only result in bloody reprisals on Europa itself and suggested that there was still time for an honorable withdrawal. There was only one thing wrong with all these schemings. Czinczar had concentrated a large force of his own for the purpose of capturing the Imperial party. And had held back in the hope that he would learn definitely whether or not the Lord Adviser was inside the palace. The released prisoner, who delivered Tews' message, established his presence inside.

The attack in force that followed captured the Central Palace and everyone in it, and surprised the legionnaires who were beginning to emerge from the secret passageway. Czinczar's men poured all the oil in the large palace tanks into the downward sloping passageway and set it afire.

Thus died an entire legion of men.

That night a hundred reserve barbarian spaceships landed behind the Linnan soldiers besieging the gates. And in the morning, when the barbarians inside the city launched an attack, the two remaining legions were cut to pieces.

Of these events the Lord Adviser Tews knew nothing. His skull had been turned over the previous day to Czinczar's favorite goldsmith, to be plated with Linnan gold and shaped into a goblet to celebrate the greatest victory of the century.

To Lord Clane Linn, going over his accounts on his country estate, the news of the fall of Linn came as a special shock. With unimportant exceptions, all his atomic material was in Liun. He dismissed the messenger, who had unwisely shouted the news as he entered the door of the accounting department. And then sat at his desk - and realized that he had better accept for the time being the figures of his slave bookkeepers on the condition of the estate.

As he glanced around the room after announcing the postponement, it seemed to him that at least one of the slaves showed visible relief. He did not delay, but called the man before him instantly. He had an inexorable system in dealing with slaves, a system inherited from his long - dead mentor, Joquin, along with the estate itself.

Integrity, hard work, loyalty, and a positive attitude produced better conditions, shorter working hours, more freedom of action, after thirty the right to marry, after forty legal freedom. Laziness and other negative attitudes such as cheating were punished by a set pattern of demotions. Short of changing the law of the land, Clane could not at the moment imagine a better system in view of the existence of slavery. And now, in spite of his personal anxieties, he carried out the precept of Joquin as it applied to a situation where no immediate evidence was available. He told the man, Oorag, what had aroused his suspicions and asked him if they were justified. "If you are guilty and confess," he said, "you will receive only one demotion. If you do not confess and you are later proven guilty, there will be three demotions, which means physical

labor, as you know."

The slave, a big man, shrugged and said with a sneer, "By the time Czinczar is finished with you Linnans, you will be working for me." "Field labor," said Clane curtly, "for three months, ten hours a day."

It was no time for mercy. An empire under attack did not flinch from the harshest acts. Anything that could be construed as weakness would be disastrous.

As the slave was led out by guards, he shouted a final insult over his shoulder. "You wretched mutation," he said, "you'll be where you belong when Czinczar gets here."

Clane did not answer. He considered it doubtful that the new conqueror had been selected by fate to punish all the evildoers of Liun according to their desserts. It would take too long. He put the thought out of his mind and walked to the doorway. There he paused and faced the dozen trusted slaves who sat at their various desks.

"Do nothing rash," he said slowly in a clear voice, "any of you. If you harbor emotions similar to those expressed by Oorag, restrain yourselves. The fall of one city in a surprise attack is not important." He hesitated. He was, he realized, appealing to their cautious instincts, but his reason told him that in a great crisis men did not always consider all the potentialities.

"I am aware," he said finally, "there is no great pleasure in being a slave, though it has advantages - economic security, free craft training. But Oorag's wild words are a proof that if young slaves were free to do as they pleased, they would constitute a jarring, if not revolutionary factor in the community. It is unfortunately true that people of different races can only gradually learn to live together."

He went out, satisfied that he had done the best possible under the circumstances. He had no doubt whatsoever that here, in this defiance of Oorag, the whole problem of a slave empire had again shown itself in miniature. If Czinczar were to conquer any important portion of Earth, a slave uprising would follow automatically. There were too many slaves, far too many for safety, in the Linnan empire.

Outside, he saw his first refugees. They were coming down near the main granaries in a variety of colorful skyscooters. Clane watched them for a moment, trying to picture their departure from Linn. The amazing thing was that they had waited till the forenoon of the second day. People must simply have refused to believe that the city was in danger, though, of course, early fugitives could have fled in other directions. And so not come near the estate.

Clane emerged decisively out of his reverie. He called a slave and dispatched him to the scene of the arrivals with a command to his personal guards. "Tell these people who have rapid transportation to keep moving. Here, eighty miles from Linn, we shall take care only of the foot-weary."

Briskly now, he went into his official residence and called the commanding officer of his troops. "I want volunteers," he explained, "particularly men with strong religious beliefs who on this second night after the invasion are prepared to fly into Linn and remove all the transportable equipment from my laboratory."

His plan, as he outlined it finally to some forty volunteers, was simplicity itself. In the confusion of taking over a vast city it would probably be several days before the barbarian army would actually occupy all the important residences. Particularly, on these early days, they might miss a house situated, as his was, behind a barrier of trees.

If by some unfortunate chance it was already occupied, it would probably be so loosely held that bold men could easily kill every alien on the premises and so accomplish their purpose.

"I want to impress upon you," Clane went on "the importance of this task. As all of you know, I am a member of the temple hierarchy. I have been entrusted with sacred god metals and sacred equipment, including material taken from the very homes of the gods. It would be a disaster if these precious relics were to fall into unclean hands, I, therefore, charge you that if you should by some mischance be captured, do not reveal the real purpose of your presence. Say that you came to rescue your

owner's private property. Even admit you were foolish to sacrifice yourself for such a reason."

Mindful of Tews' guard unit, he finished his instructions. "It may be that Linnan soldiers are guarding the equipment, in which case give the officer in command this letter."

He handed the document to the captain of the volunteers. It was an authorization signed by Clane with the seal of his rank. Since the death of Tews, such an authorization would not be lightly ignored.

When they had gone out to prepare for the mission, Clane dispatched one of his private spaceships to the nearby city of Goram and asked the commander there, a friend of his, what kind of counteraction was being prepared against the invader. "Are the authorities in the cities and towns," he asked, "showing that they understand the patterns of action required of them in a major emergency? Or must the old law be explained to them from the beginning?"

The answer arrived in the shortest possible time, something under forty minutes. The general placed his forces at Clane's command and advised that he had dispatched messengers to every major city on Earth in the name of "his excellency, Lord Clane Linn, ranking survivor on Earth of the noble Tews, the late Lord Adviser, who perished at the head of his troops, defending the city of Linn from the foul and murderous surprise attack launched by a barbarian horde of beastlike men who seek to destroy the fairest civilization that ever existed."

There was more in the same vein, but it was not the excess of verbiage that startled Clane. It was the offer itself and the implications. In his name an army was being organized.

After rereading the message, he walked slowly to the full-length mirror in the adjoining bathroom and stared at his image. He was dressed in the fairly presentable reading gown of a temple scientist. Like all his temple clothing, the shoulder cloth folds of this concealed his "differences" from casual view. An observer would have to be very acute to see how carefully the cloak was drawn around his neck, and how it was built up to hide the slant of his body from the neck down, and how tightly the arm ends were tied together at his wrists.

It would take three months to advise Lord Jerrin on Venus and four to reach Lord Draid on Mars, both planets being on the far side of the sun from Earth. It would require almost, but not quite, twice as long to receive a message from them. Only a member of the ruling family could possibly win the support of the diversified elements of the empire. Of the fate of the Lord Adviser's immediate family, there was as yet no word. Besides, they were women. Which left Lord Glane, youngest brother of Jerrin, grandson of the late Lord Leader. For not less than six months accordingly he would be the acting Lord Leader of Linn.

The afternoon of that second day of the invasion waned slowly. Great ships began to arrive, bringing soldiers. By dusk, more than a thousand men were encamped along the road to the city of Linn and by the riverside. Darting small craft and the wary full-sized spaceships floated overhead, and foot patrols were out, guarding all approaches to the estate.

The roads themselves were virtually deserted. It was too soon for the mobs from Linn, which air-seoater scouts reported were fleeing the captured city by the gates that, at midafternoon, were still open.

During the last hour before dark, the air patrols reported that the gates were being shut one by one. And that the stream of refugees was dwindling to a trickle near the darkening city. All through that last hour, the sky was free of scooters transporting refugees. It seemed clear that the people who could afford the costly machines were either already safe or had waited too long, possibly in the hope of succoring some absent member of the family.

At midnight the volunteers departed on their dangerous mission in ten scooters and one spaceship. As a first gesture of his new authority Glane augmented their forces by adding a hundred soldiers from the regular army. He watched of those general officers who had had time to arrive. A dozen men climbed to their feet as he entered. They saluted, then stood at attention.

Clane stopped short. He had intended to be calm, matter-of-fact, pretending even to himself that what was happening was natural. The feeling wasn't like that. An emotion came, familiar, terrifying. He could feel it tingling up the remoter reflexes of his nervous system as of old, the beginning of the dangerous childish panic, product of his early, horrible days as a tormented mutation. The muscles of his face worked. Three times he swallowed with difficulty. Then, with a stiff gesture, he returned the salute, and walking hastily to the head of the table, he sat down.

Clane waited till they had seated themselves, then asked for brief reports as to available troops. He noted down the figures given by each man for his province and at the end added up the columns.

"With four provinces still to be heard from," he announced, "we have a total of eighteen thousand trained soldiers, six thousand party trained reserves and some five hundred thousand able-bodied civilians."

"Your excellency," said his friend Morkid, "the Linnan empire maintains normally a standing army of one million men. On Earth by far the greatest forces were stationed in or near the city of Linn, and they have been annihilated. Some four hundred thousand men are still on Venus and slightly more than two hundred thousand on Mars."

Clane, who had been mentally adding up the figures given, said quickly, "That doesn't add up to a million men."

Morkid nodded gravely. "For the first time in years, the army is under strength. The conquest of Venus seemed to eliminate all potential enemies of Linn, and Lord Adviser Tews considered it a good time to economize."

"I see," said Clane. He felt pale and bloodless, like a man who has suddenly discovered that he cannot walk by himself.

Lydia climbed heavily out of her sedan chair, conscious of how old and unattractive she must seem to the grinning barbarians in the courtyard. She didn't let it worry her too much. She had been old a long time now, and her image in a mirror no longer shocked her. The important thing was that her request for an interview had been granted by Czinczar after she had, at his insistence, withdrawn the proviso that she be given a safe conduct.

The old woman smiled mirthlessly. She no longer valued highly the combination of skin and bones that was her body. But there was exhilaration in the realization that she was probably going to her death. Despite her age and some self-disgust, she felt reluctant to accept oblivion. But Clane had asked her to take the risk. It vaguely amazed Lydia that the idea of the mutation's holding the Lord Leadership did not dismay her any more. She had her own private reasons for believing Clane capable. She walked slowly along the familiar hallways through the gleaming arches, and across rooms that glittered with the treasures of the Linn family. Everywhere were the big, bearded young men who had come from far Europa to conquer an empire about which they could only have heard by hearsay. Looking at them, she felt justified in all the pitiless actions she had taken in her day. They were, it seemed to the grim old woman living personifications of the chaos that she had fought against all her life.

As she entered the throne room, the darker thoughts faded from her mind. She glanced around with sharp eyes for the mysterious leader. There was no one on or near the throne. Groups of men stood around talking. In one of the groups was a tall, graceful young man, different from all the others in the room. They were bearded. He was clean-shaven.

He saw her and stopped listening to what one of his companions was saying, stopped so noticeably that a silence fell on the group. The silence communicated itself to other groups. After not more than a minute, the roomful of men had faced about and was staring at her, waiting for their commander to speak. Lydia waited, also, examining him swiftly. Czinczar was not a handsome man but he had an appearance of strength, always a form of good looks. And yet it was not enough. This barbarian world was full of strong-looking men. Lydia, who had expected outstanding



qualities, was puzzled.

His face was sensitive rather than brutal, which was unusual. But still not enough to account for the fact that he was absolute lord of an enormous undisciplined horde.

The great man came forward. "Lady," he said, "you have asked to see me."

And then she knew his power. In all her long life she had never heard a baritone voice so resonant, so wonderfully beautiful, so assured of command. It changed him. She realized suddenly that she had been mistaken about his looks. She had sought normal clean-cut handsomeness. This man was beautiful.

The first fear came to her. A voice like that, a personality like that -

She had a vision of this man persuading the Linnan empire to do his will. Mobs hypnotized. The greatest men bewitched. She broke the spell with an effort of will. She said, "You are Czinczar?"

"I am Czinczar."

The definite identification gave Lydia another, though briefer, pause. But this time she recovered more swiftly. And this time, also, her recovery was complete. Her eyes narrowed. She stared at the great man with a developing hostility. "I can see," she said acridly, "that my purpose in coming to see you is going to fail."

"Naturally." Czinczar inclined his head, shrugged. He did not ask her what was her purpose. He seemed incurious. He stood politely, waiting for her to finish what she had to say.

"Until I saw you," said Lydia grimly, "I took it for granted that you were an astute general. Now I see that you consider yourself a man of destiny. I can already see you being lowered into your grave."

There was an angry murmur from the other men in the room. Czinczar waved them into silence. "Madam," he said, "such remarks are offensive to my officers. State your case, and then I will decide what to do with you."

Lydia nodded, but she noted that he did not say that he was offended. She sighed inwardly. She had her mental picture now of this man, and it depressed her. All through known history these natural leaders had been spewed up by the inarticulate masses. They had a will in them to rule or die. But the fact that they frequently died young made no great difference. Their impact on their times was colossal. Such a man could, even in his death throes, drag down long-established dynasties with him. Already he had killed the legal ruler of Linn and struck a staggering blow at the heart of the empire. By a military freak, it was true - but history accepted such accidents without a qualm.

Lydia said quietly, "I shall be brief since you are no doubt planning high policy and further military campaigns. I have come here at the request of my grandson, Lord Clane Linn."

"The mutation!" Czinczar nodded. His remark was noncommittal, an identification, not a comment.

Lydia felt an inward shock that Czinczar's knowledge of the ruling faction should extend to Clane, who had tried to keep himself in the background of Linnan life. She dared not pause to consider the potentialities. She continued quietly. "Lord Clane is a temple scientist, and, as such, he has for many years been engaged in humanitarian scientific experiments. Most of his equipment unfortunately is here in Linn." Lydia shrugged. "It is quite valueless to you and your men, but it would be a great loss to civilization if it were destroyed or casually removed. Lord Clane therefore requests that you permit him to send slaves to his town house to remove these scientific instruments to his country estate. In return -"

"Yes," echoed Czinczar, "in return -" His tone was ever so faintly derisive; and Lydia had a sudden realization that he was playing with her. It was not a possibility that she could pay any attention to.

"In return," she said, "he will pay you in precious metals and jewels any reasonable price which you care to name." Having finished, she took a deep breath and waited.

There was a thoughtful expression on the barbarian leader's face. "I

have heard," he said, "of Lord Clane's experiments with the so-called" - he hesitated - "god metals of Linn. Very curious stories, some of them; and as soon as I am free from my military duties, I intend to examine this laboratory with my own eyes. You may tell your grandson," he continued with a tone of finality, "that his little scheme to retrieve the greatest treasures in the entire Linnan empire was hopeless from the beginning. Five spaceships descended in the first few minutes of the attack on the estate of Lord Clane to insure that the mysterious weapons there were not used against my invading fleet, and I consider it a great misfortune that he himself was absent in the country at the time. You may tell him that we were not caught by surprise by his midnight attempt two days ago to remove the equipment and that his worst fears as to its fate are justified." He finished, "It is a great relief to know that most of his equipment is safe in our hands."

Lydia said nothing. The phrase, "You may tell him," had had a profound chemical effect on her body.

She hadn't realized she was so tense. It seemed to her that if she spoke she would reveal her own tremendous personal relief. "You may tell him -" There could be only one interpretation. She was going to be allowed to depart. Once more she waited.

Czinczar walked forward until he was standing directly in front of her. Something of his barbarous origin, so carefully suppressed until now, came into his manner. A hint of a sneer, the contempt of a physically strong man for decadence, a feeling of genuine basic superiority to the refinement that was in Lydia. When he spoke, he showed that he was consciously aware that he was granting mercy.

"Old woman," he said, "I am letting you go because you did me a great favor when you maneuvered your son, Lord Tews, into the - what did he call it - Lord Advisership. That move, and that alone, gave me the chance I needed to make my attack on the vast Linnan empire." He smiled. "You may depart, bearing that thought in mind."

For some time, Lydia had condemned the sentimental action that had brought Tews into supreme power. But it was a different matter to realize that, far away in interplanetary space, a man had analyzed the move as a major Linnan disaster. She went out without another word.

Czinczar slowly climbed the hill leading up to the low, ugly fence that fronted Lord Clane's town house. He paused at the fence, recognized the temple building material of which it was composed - and then walked on thoughtfully. With the same narrow-eyed interest a few minutes later, he stared at the gushing fountains of boiling water. He beckoned finally to the engineer who had directed the construction of the spaceships that had brought his army to Earth. "How does it work?" he asked.

The designer examined the base of the fountain. He was in no hurry, a big fattish man with a reputation for telling jokes so coarse that strong men winced with shame. He had already set up house in one of the great palaces with three Linnan girls as mistresses and a hundred Linnan men and women as slaves. He was a happy man, with little personal conceit and very little pride as yet to restrain his movements. He located the opening into the fountain and knelt in the dirt like any worker. In that, however, he was not unique. Czinczar knelt beside him, little realizing how his actions shocked the high-born Linnans who belonged to his personal slave retinue. The two men peered into the gloom. "Temple building material," said Meewan, the designer.

Czinczar nodded. They climbed to their feet without further comment, for these were matters that they had discussed at length over a period of years. At the house, a few minutes later, the leader and his henchman both lifted the heavy draperies that covered the walls of a corridor leading into the main laboratory. Like the fence outside, the walls were warm as from some inner heat.

Temple building material! Once again no comment passed between them. They walked on into the laboratory proper; and now they looked at each other in amazement. The room had been noticeably enlarged from its original size, although this they did not know. A great section had been

torn out of one wall, and the gap, although it was completely filled in, was still rough and unfinished. But that was only the environment. On almost every square yard of the vast new floor were machines opaque and machines transparent, machines big and small, some apparently complete, others unmistakably mere fragments.

For a moment there was a distinct sense of too much to see. Czinczar walked forward speculatively, glanced at several of the transparent articles with an eye that tried to skim the essentials of shape and inner design. At no time during those first moments did he have any intention of pausing for a detailed examination. And then, out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement.

A glow. He bent down and peered into a long, partly transparent metal case, roughly shaped like a coffin, even as to the colorful and costly-looking lining. The inside, however, curved down to form a narrow channel. Along this channel rolled a ball of light. It turned over sedately, taking approximately one minute to cover the distance to the far side. With the same lack of haste, it paused, seemed to meditate on its next action, and then, with immense deliberation began its return journey.

The very meaningless of the movement fascinated Czinczar. He extended his hand gingerly to within an inch of the ball. Nothing happened. He drew back and pursed his lips. In spite of his attack on Linn, he was not a man who took risks. He beckoned toward a guard. "Bring a slave," he said. Under his direction a former Linnan nobleman, perspiring from every pore, extended his finger and touched the moving ball. His finger went in as if there were nothing there.

He drew back, startled. But the inexorable Czinczar was not through with him. Once more the reluctant, though no longer quite so fearful, finger penetrated the moving ball. The ball rolled into it, through it, beyond it. Czinczar motioned the slave aside and stood looking at him thoughtfully. There must have been something of his purpose in his face, for the man gave a low cry of horror: "Master, I understand nothing of what I have seen. Nothing. Nothing."

"Kill him," said Czinczar.

He turned, scowling, back to the machine. "There must be," he said, and there was a stubborn note in his glorious voice, "some reason for its movements, for - its existence."

Half an hour later he was still examining it.

"If I could only -" thought Clane many times. And knew that he dared not. Not yet.

He had with a certain cynicism permitted the soldiers sent by Lord Tews to remove his equipment to Linn. This included the prize of all his findings, a ball that rolled to and fro in a coffinlike container; a discovery of the golden age that had shaken his certainties to the core of his being.

Because of the ball of energy he had not hesitated to let Tews take control of the artifacts of that ancient and wonderful culture.

He need merely go into the presence of the ball and because of his knowledge of its function could attune himself to it.

It could then be mentally controlled from a distance; all its strange power available - for about three days. At some not precisely determinable time on the third day, it would cease to "come" when he "called" it.

Then he would have to visit it while it was in its container and by direct contact reestablish rapport.

It had seemed evident from Tews' action that the Lord Adviser had not intended to bar him from the equipment. And so the location of the ball in his own Linnan residence under guard had not mattered.

He had not despite his anxieties anticipated a major attack that would capture Linn in one swift assault.

And so the weapon that could end the war was out of his reach, unless he could somehow get to it by cunning means.

He did not yet feel that desperate.

Nor actually were the Linnan forces strong enough to take advantage of a miracle.

Even as in a kind of mental agony he wondered how he would get into Linn, and into his house, he devoted himself to the grim business of training an army as it fought.

There was an old saying in the Linnan army to the effect that, during his first month, a trainee, if put into battle, caused the death of his trained companions. During the second month he hindered retreats made necessary by his presence. And during the third month he was just good enough to get himself killed in the first engagement.

Clane, watching a group of trainees after several weeks of drilling, experienced all the agony of realizing how true the adage was. Learning to fire a bow effectively required complex integration of mind and body. In-fighting with swords had to include the capacity for cooperating with companions. And effective spear fighting was an art in itself.

The plan he outlined that night to the full general staff was an attempt to cover up against the weakness. It was a frank determination to use unfit men as first-line defense troops. He put in a word for the unfit. "Do not overexercise them. Get them out into the open air and simply teach them the first elements of how to use weapons. First bows and arrows, then spears, and finally swords."

After the meeting, long into the night, he examined reports on the cities of Nouris and Gulf, which had fallen virtually without a fight. As the barbarians attacked, the slaves simply rose up and murdered their masters. A supplementary general-staff report recommended mass execution for all able-bodied male slaves.

The uneasy Clane dispatched messengers to gather commercial and industrial leaders for a morning conference and then unhappily took the slave problem to bed with him.

At ten o'clock he called the meeting to order and told the hundred-odd assembled representative merchants that the army had recommended universal death for male slaves.

His statement caused an immediate uproar.

One man said, "Your excellency, it is impossible. We cannot destroy so much valuable property."

With two exceptions, that seemed to be the attitude. Both exceptions were young men, one of whom said, "Gentleman, this is a necessary action."

The other said, "My own feeling is that this crisis makes possible a great progressive act - the end of slavery in Linn."

Both men were shouted down by enraged merchants.

Clane stepped forward and raised his hand. When he had silence, he began. "There is no time for half-measures. We must adopt one or the other of these alternatives."

There followed a series of conferences among groups of merchants. Finally a bland spokesman said, "Your excellency, the merchants here present favor promising the slaves freedom."

For a long moment Clane gazed at his grinning audience, then abruptly turned his back on them and left the room. That afternoon he prepared a special bulletin:

#### FREEDOM FOR LOYAL SERVANTS

By order of his excellency, Lord Clane Linn, Leader of Linn, temple scientist, beloved of the Atom Gods themselves, it is hereby commanded, and so it shall be forevermore:

GREETINGS to all those good men and women who have quietly and efficiently served the empire in atonement for sins of leaders who rashly led them into hopeless wars against the god-protected Linnan empire - here is the chance of complete freedom that you have earned by your actions and attitudes during the past years.

The empire has been attacked by a cruel and barbarous invader. His reign of terror cannot but be temporary, for invincible forces are gathering against him, An army of a million men is on the way from Mars and Venus, and here on Earth irresistible forces totaling more than two million men are already organizing for battle.

The enemy numbers less than sixty thousand soldiers. To this small army, which gained its initial victory by a surprise and base attack, a

few foolish men and women have rashly attached themselves. All the women, unless they are convicted of major crimes, will be spared. For the men who have already gone over to the enemy, there is but one hope: Escape immediately from the barbarian enemy and REPORT TO THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS listed at the bottom of this proclamation. There will be no guards at the camps, but weekly roll calls will be made. And every man whose name appears regularly on these rolls will be granted full freedom when the enemy is defeated.

For hardened recalcitrants the penalty is death.

To those men and women still loyally serving at their appointed tasks, I, Lord Clane, acting Lord Leader of Linn, give the following commands:

All women and children will remain at their present residences, continuing to serve as in the past. All men report to their masters and say, "It is my intention to take advantage of the offer of Lord Clane. Give me a week's food so that I, too, may report to a concentration camp."

Having done this, and having received the food, leave at once. DO NOT DELAY A SINGLE HOUR.

If for some reason your master is not at home, take the food and go without permission. No one will hinder you in your departure from the city.

Any man to whom this order applies who is found lurking within any city or town twenty-four hours after this proclamation is posted will be suspected of treasonable intent.

The penalty is death.

Any man who after one week is found within a fifty-mile radius of a city will be suspected of treasonable intent.

The penalty is death.

To save yourself, go to a concentration camp and appear regularly for roll call. If the barbarians attack your camp, scatter into the forests and hills and hide, or go to another camp. Adequate food rations will be supplied all camps.

All those of proven loyalty will receive freedom when the war is over. They will immediately have the right to marry. Settlement land will be opened up. After five years citizenship rights, granted alien immigrants, will be available on application.

This is the end of slavery in the Linn empire.

BE WISE - BE SAFE - BE FREE

It was a document that had its weak points. Before issuing it, Clane spent time arguing its merits to a group of doubtful officers - he ignored the merchants; they were too venal to be considered. He pointed out that it would be impossible to keep secret a general order for mass execution. A majority of the slaves would escape, and then they would really be dangerous. He admitted that the proclamation, though he meant every word of the promise in it, was full of lies. A million slaves in Linn alone had gone over to Czinczar, many of them trained soldiers. Czinczar could use them to garrison any city he might capture and thus have his own army free for battle. It was Morkid, sardonic and scathing, who ended the argument late in the afternoon.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you do not seem to be aware that our commander-in-chief has at one stroke cut through all our illusions and false hopes, and penetrated straight to the roots of the situation in which we find ourselves. What is clear by the very nature of our discussion is that we have no choice." His voice went up. "In this period when disaster is so imminent, we are fortunate in having as our leader a genius of the first rank who has already set us on the only military path that can lead to victory.

"Gentlemen" - his voice rang with the tribute - "I give you Lord Clane Linn, acting Lord Leader of Linn."

The clapping lasted for five minutes.

Clane watched the battle for Goram from a patrol craft that darted from strong point to strong point. Enemy squadrons tried again and again to close in on him, but his own machine was faster and more maneuverable.

The familiar trick of getting above him was tried, an old device in patrol craft and spaceship fighting. But the expected energy flow upward did not take place. His small vessel did not even sag, which was normally the minimum reaction when two sources of atomic energy operated on a gravity line.

The efforts worried Clane. Czinczar was, of course, aware by this time that his enemy knew more about the metals of the gods than he or his technicians. But it would be unfortunate if they should conclude from the actions of this one ship that Clane himself was inside. He wanted to see this battle. In spite of evening, minute by minute, he saw it.

The defense was tough, tougher than he had anticipated from the fact that four more cities had fallen in the past four weeks. The untrained were fighting grimly for their lives. Arrows took a toll of the attackers. Spears, awkwardly but desperately manipulated, inflicted wounds and sometimes death. The sword-fighting stage was the worst. The muscular and powerful barbarians, once they penetrated the weapons that could attack them from a distance, made shortwork of their weaker adversaries.

The first line was down, devastated, defeated. The secondline battle began. Barbarian reserves came forward and were met by waves of arrows that darkened the sky - and took their toll when they struck the advancing groups of men. Hoarse cries of pain, curses, the shrieks of the desperately wounded, the agonized horror of Linnans suddenly cut off and doomed, rose up to the ears of those in the darting small craft. The defenders strove to stay together. That was part of their instructions. Retreat slowly to the central squares - which were strongly held against a surprise rear attack.

Retreat, and at the last minute spaceships would land and rescue the hard-pressed, but theoretically still intact army of what had once been able-bodied civilians. After a month and a half of training they were too valuable to sacrifice in a last-ditch fight.

As it was, their dogged resistance was shaping the pattern of the war. Surely, Czinczar, counting his men after each battle, must already be having his own private doubts, His army as a whole, augmented by the unrepentant among the slaves, was increasing daily. But the larger the army grew, the smaller was his chance of controlling it.

Yet there was no doubt about this battle, or this city, As the dark tide of night slipped in from the east, victory fires began to burn in all the important streets. The smoke wreathed into the sky, and blood-red flames licked up into the blackness. The Linnans below, at this very moment enduring the beginning of a barbarian occupation, would not be in a humor to appreciate that their grudgingly accepted defeat represented a possible turning point in the war.

The time had come to decide when and where and under what conditions the main Linnan force would be thrown into a decisive battle for the control of the planet. And there was another decision, also, involving an immensely risk attempt to get near the ball of light. Clane shifted uneasily and drew his cloak tightly around his thin shoulders.

He was still considering ways and means when a message was brought him by a released Linnan nobleman who had been captured by the barbarians.

The message was a one-sentence question from Czinczar. "Have you ever wondered, my dear Lord Clane, how the civilization of the golden age was so completely destroyed?"

It was a problem about which Clane had pondered many times. But it had never occurred to him that the answer might be known to a barbarian from a remote moon of Jupiter.

He questioned the released nobleman, a middle-aged knight of the empire, as to conditions in Linn. The answers were not pleasant. Many slaves had taken revenge on their former masters. Numerous Linnan women of rank had been reduced to the status of prostitute.

In questioning the man for any news of his Linnan residence, he learned that Czinczar had publicly invited temple scientists to take care of "certain relics" formerly in the possession of Lord Clane.

Clane said at that point, "He actually mentioned my name."

"It was posted," was the reply, and the man shrugged. "I read it on

one of my errands out of the palace grounds."

Long after the interview was over, Clane considered that. He suspected a trap - and yet Czinczar could not know how immensely valuable that sphere was.

If the barbarian leader had looked into it through a hollow tube, he might be startled at what was "inside." But still it would do him no good. Nevertheless, suppose it was a trap.

It still made no difference. For his purpose, momentary proximity to the ball was all that would be required. Dared he take the chance?

He was still considering the gamble when another released nobleman brought a second message from Czinczar:

I shall like to have a conversation with you and should like to show you an object the like of which - I'll wager - you have never seen. Can you think of a way in which such a meeting could be arranged?

Lord Clane showed the message to the general staff at its meeting the following morning. They unanimously forbade such a rendezvous but agreed that it was an opportunity to send a formal message to the barbarian leader.

The mutation, who had his own reasons for appearing firm, had already written the communication. He read it to the assembled officers:

To the barbarian chieftain, Czinczar:

Your cowardly attempt to win mercy for your crimes against humanity by a personal appeal to myself is of no avail. Get off this planet with your barbarous forces. Only immediate compliance can save you and Europa from destruction. Take heed!

Clane,  
Acting Lord Leader

The message was approved and dispatched in the care of a captured barbarian officer. Clane began immediately to complete preparations for launching an attack against the city of Linn. Such an attack had been discussed several times by the staff and had been agreed on reluctantly, as a feint. The generals felt that a landing might confuse the defenders of the city and thus enable the Linnan army to recapture key outlying cities, which would indeed be the real goal. It was understood that the assault force would withdraw from Linn during the night of the day of attack.

Clane was content with this. He set out for the city of Linn the day before the attack, making the initial part of the journey in an air scooter. From this, in a secluded spot, he unloaded a donkey and a cart of vegetables, and trudged beside it the final twelve miles.

In his drab work garb of a temple initiate, he was one of many carts; and at no time was there any problem. So vast was the slave army that held Linn that Czinczar's forces had quickly sought to establish a normal flow of food from the surrounding countryside into the city to ward off starvation.

Linnan scouts had long since reported that the gates were open.

Clane entered without interference from the former slaves who guarded that particular gate. Once inside, he was even less conspicuous, and no one questioned his right to go along the street toward his city residence. He climbed the hill at the trades entrance and was permitted to take his cart through an opening in the low fence by the single barbarian soldier who guarded that section of it.

Dutifully, as if he were sent on lawful business, he headed for the trades entrance of the house, and he turned the vegetables over to two women and said, "Who is in charge today?"

He was given a barbarian name, "Cleedon!"

"Where is he?" Clane asked.

"In the office of course-through there." The older woman pointed along the main hallway, which led through the large central room where most of the precious machinery and equipment had been stored.

As he entered the great room, he saw that there were a dozen barbarian soldiers at the various entrances. He saw also that the container with the ball of light was at the center of the chamber.

... Misty sphere, vaguely glowing as if from an inner flame, rolling to and fro ...

He could walk by and touch it in passing.

Without appearing too hurried, he walked forward, put his finger through the flimsy surface of the sphere, and, without pausing, continued on toward the office.

He was sorely tempted, at this point, to take no further chances. If he acted at once and seized the house, then he would have control of the box.

But if he carried through with his original plan and then the boxes were removed so that he could not find it during the three days that the sphere would not be activated - He shuddered and refused to think of such an eventuality.

He had been impressed by Czinczar's communications. The barbarian leader had important information to give. Somehow, somewhere, he had gotten hold of an object so valuable that he had risked his self-esteem in attempting to establish contact.

If too hasty action were taken, that knowledge might be lost.

Even as he walked on through the room, the mutation silently reaffirmed his purpose. A moment later he entered the office and informed the barbarian officer there that he had come for the job of taking care of the relics of the atom gods.

The big man stood up and squinted down at him, gave an almost naive start of recognition, and then called two soldiers from the hallway.

And then he said, "Lord Clane Linn, you are under arrest."

To one of the soldiers he commanded, "Get ropes. Tie him up."

Meekly, the mutation submitted to being bound.

The moment the news arrived, Czinczar headed for Linn. He was met on the roof of the central palace by Meewan. The big man had a smile on his plump, good-fellow face. "Your theory was right," he said admiringly. "You thought he would take a chance at the critical period of the invasion. He arrived this morning."

"Tell me exactly how you accepted his services." The golden voice spoke softly. The strange face was thoughtful as the other man gave his detailed account. There seemed no end to his interest. When the story was finished, he asked question after question. Each answer seemed merely to stimulate new questions. Meewan said finally, querulously:

"Your excellency, I have no doubt that our men have put the best face on the capture to make themselves look good. They claim to have captured him as he entered the building, before he could do anything or touch anything. Since they're a lax bunch of rascals, I question this. But what does it matter? What are you doubtful about?"

That gave Czinczar pause; he had not realized how tense he was. After all, he told himself, the situation was simple enough. He had issued an open invitation for temple scientists to come and take care of "some god-metal relics" that had fallen into possession of the conquerors. It was a cleverly worded request, designed to win general approval from the defeated even as it drew the temple scientist to his own undoing. Its only stipulation, very guardedly worded, was that in return for the privilege of sharing the "safe-guarding of the relics," experiments should be continued as if no war were being waged.

"The gods," Czinczar had said sanctimoniously in the invitation, "are above the petty quarrels of mankind."

Apparently, at least one of its purposes was accomplished. The mutation himself had applied for the job. Czinczar meditated cautiously on tactics. "Bring him here," he said finally. "We can't take any risks of his having established control over anything at his house. We know too little and he too much."

While he waited, he examined the rod of force - which was one of the few workable instruments that had been found in the house. He was not a



man who accepted past truths as final. That it had worked a week ago did not mean that it would work now. He tested it from a great window, pointing it at the upper foliage of a nearby tree. No sound, no visible light spewed forth - but the upper section of the tree crashed down onto a pathway below. Czinczar experienced the satisfaction of a logical man whose logic had proved correct. It was not an uncommon satisfaction. From the early days when he had been a backcountry transcriber of messages to the days of his rise to power, he had taken risks that seemed necessary, no more, no less. Even now he could not be sure that the atomic wizard, Lord Clane, would not defeat him by some decisive wile. For several minutes, he pondered that and then ordered a box brought in from the ice room of the palace. The contents of the box had come all the way from Europa packed in ice. He was indicating to the slaves where to place the box when an officer burst breathlessly into the throne room.

"Excellency," he cried. "Hundreds of spaceships. It's an attack."

Standing at the windows a moment later, watching the ships settling down, Czinczar realized that his hazy suspicions had been correct. The appearance of Clane in the city was part of a planned maneuver that would now run its deadly course. It was a pleasure to know that Lord Clane himself was caught in a trap.

He wasted no time watching a battle that he could not hope to see from the palace in any important detail. Nor did he have the feeling Tews had had months earlier that it was necessary for commanders to know where he was in the early stages of the engagement. He issued quick instructions, ordering the ice-packed box sent after him, and wrote a note for Meewan. Then he rode with a strong escort to the headquarters of the reserve army in the middle of the city.

The reserve contained a barbarian core, but like the main defense of the city it was overwhelmingly made up of slaves. Czinczar's arrival was greeted by a roar of excitement. The cheers did not die down until long after he had entered the building.

He talked over the situation with some of the slave officers and found them calm and confident. According to their estimates sixty thousand Linnan soldiers had landed in the first wave. That that was exactly the number of barbarians who had originally invaded the city did not seem to occur to the slaves. But the comparison struck Czinczar sharply. He wondered if it was designed to have some symbolic meaning. The possibility made him sardonic. Not symbols but swords spoke the language of victory.

As the afternoon dragged on, the Linnan attack was being held everywhere. The box, still dripping, was delivered from the palace about three. Since there was no longer any immediate danger, Czinczar sent a messenger to Meewan. At three-thirty Meewan came in grinning broadly. He was followed by slave Linnans carrying a sedan chair. In the chair, bound hand and foot, was the acting Lord Leader of Linn. There was complete silence as the chair was set down, and the slaves withdrew.

Clane studied the barbarian leader with genuine interest. Lady Lydia's opinion of the man had impressed him more than he cared to admit. The question was, could this strong, fine-looking military genius be panicked into thinking that the atom gods existed? Panicked now, during the next half hour? Fortunately, for the first time in his career as an atomic scientist, he had behind him the greatest power ever developed by the wizards of the fabulous days of the legends. He saw that the impersonal expression on the other's face was transforming into the beginning of contempt.

"By the god pits," said Czinczar in disgust, "you Linnans are all the same - weaklings every one."

Clane said nothing. He had looked often with regret into mirrors that showed him exactly what Czinczar was seeing. A slim, young man with a face that was white and womanish and ... well, it couldn't be helped.

Czinczar's face changed again. There was suddenly irony in it. "I am speaking," he asked politely, "to Lord Clane Linn? We have not made a mistake?"

Clane couldn't let the opening pass. "No mistake," he said quietly. "I came into Linn for the sole purpose of talking to you while the battle

was on. And here I am."

It must have sounded ridiculous, coming from a man bound as he was. The near guards guffawed, and Meewan giggled. Only Czinczar showed no sign. And his marvelous voice was as steady as steel as he said, "I have not the time to flirt with words, nor the inclination. I can see that you are counting on something to save you, and I presume it has something to do with your knowledge of atomic energy."

He fingered the rod of force suggestively. "So far as I can see, we can kill you in less than a second whenever we desire."

Clane shook his head. "You are in error. It is quite impossible for you to kill me."

There was a sound from Meewan. The engineer came forward. "Czinczar," he said darkly, "this man is intolerable. Give me permission to slap his face, and we shall see if his atom gods protect him from indignity."

Czinczar waved him aside. But he stared down at the prisoner with eyes that were abnormally bright. The swiftness with which tension had come into the room amazed him. And, incredibly, it was the prisoner who had seized the advantage - "Impossible to kill me!" In one sentence he dared them to make the attempt.

There was a crinkle of frown in Czinczar's forehead. He had been careful in his handling of Clane as a matter of common sense, not because he actually anticipated disaster. But now, quite frankly, he admitted to himself that the man was not reacting normally. The words Clane had spoken had a ring in them, a conviction that could no longer be ignored. The purpose of his own invasion of the Linnan empire could be in danger.

He said urgently, "I have something to show you. No attempt will be made to kill you until you have seen it. For your part, do nothing hasty, take no action, whatever power you have, until you have gazed with understanding."

He was aware of Meewan's giving him an astounded glance.

"Power!" exclaimed the designer and it was like a curse. "The power he has!"

Czinczar paid no attention. This was his own special secret, and there could be no delay.

"Guards," he said, "bring the box over here." It was soaking wet when they brought it. It left a dirty trail of water on the priceless rug, and a pool began to accumulate immediately in the place where it was set down. There was a delay while sweating men pried off the top. Even the guards at far doors strained to see the contents. A gasp of horror broke the tension of waiting.

What was inside was about eight feet long. Its width was indeterminable, for it seemed to have folds in its body that gave an impression of great size. It had obviously died only a short time before it was packed in ice. It looked fresh, almost alive, there in its case of ice, unhuman, staring with sightless eyes at the ornate ceiling.

"Where did you get it?" Clane asked at last.

"It was found on one of the moons - within hours after a strange ship was sighted."

"How long ago?" The mutation spoke in a steady tone.

"Two years, Earth time."

"It would seem that whoever was in the ship will have departed by now."

Czinczar shook his head. "Miners found a second body exactly like this on a meteorite in a spacesuit - seven months ago."

For a long time the mutation gazed down at the creature. Finally he looked, and his eyes met Czinczar's waiting gaze. He said slowly, "What is your theory?"

"A nonhuman race of great scientific attainments. Ruthless, unfriendly - for there are reports of sudden destruction in outlying areas of Europa which puzzled me until this body was found ... I tend to wonder if this might not be a second visitation to the solar system. I cannot give you briefly all the logical relationships I have visualized, but my feeling is that the civilization of the golden age was destroyed by the first visitation."

Clane said, "I am glad that you have shown me this, but what is your purpose in doing so?"

Czinczar drew a deep breath. And made his second move to avert the catastrophe suggested by every action and manner of this unorthodox prisoner. He said, "It would be a grave error for either of us to destroy each other's armies."

"You are asking for mercy?"

That was too strong to take. The barbarian showed his teeth in a snarl. "I am asking for common sense," he said.

"It's impossible" said Clane "The people must have their revenge. In victory they will accept nothing less than your death."

The words brought an obscene curse from Meewan. "Czinczar," he shouted "what is all this nonsense? I have never seen you like this. I follow no man who accepts defeat in advance. I'll show you what we'll do with this ... this - " He broke off, "Guards, put a spear into him."

Nobody moved. The soldiers looked uneasily at Czinczar, who nodded coolly. "Go right ahead," he said. "If he can be killed, I'd like to know."

Still nobody moved. It was apparently too mild an order, or something of the leader's tension had communicated to the men. They looked at each other, and they were standing there doubtfully when Meewan snatched a sword from one of them and turned toward the bound man.

That was as far as he got. Where he had been was a ball of light.

"Try," came the voice of Clane "to use the rod of force against me."

A fateful pause. "Try. It won't kill you."

Czinczar raised the rod of force and pressed the activator. Nothing happened - Wait! The ball of light was growing brighter.

Clane's voice split the silence tantalizingly. "Do you still not believe in the gods?"

"I am astonished," said Czinczar "that you do not fear the spread of superstition more than the spread of knowledge. We so-called barbarians, "he said proudly," despise you for your attempt to fence in the human spirit. We are freethinkers, and all your atomic energy will fail in the end to imprison us."

He shrugged. "As for your control over that ball, I do not pretend to understand it."

At last, he had shocked the mutation out of his ice-cold manner. "You actually," said Clane incredulously, "do not believe in the atom gods?"

"Guards," shouted Czinczar piercingly, "attack him from every side."

The ball of light flickered but did not seem to move. There were no guards.

"Now do you believe?" Clane asked.

The barbarian looked haggard and old. But he shook his head. "I have lost the war," he mumbled. "Only that I recognize. It is up to you to take up the mantle which has fallen from my shoulders." He broke off. "What in the name of your gods is that ball?"

"It contains the entire sidereal universe." Czinczar knit his brow and leaned forward as if he were trying to understand.

"The what universe?" he asked at last.

"When you look inside through a hollow tube," Clane explained patiently, "you see stars. It's like a window into space - only it's not a window. It's the universe itself."

The barbarian leader looked genuinely bewildered, "This universe?" he said blankly.

Clane nodded but made no comment. It hadn't been easy to grasp so vast an idea, even with the written explanations that he had found.

Czinczar shook his head. "You mean the Earth is in there?" He pointed at the glowing sphere.

"It's a fourth-dimensional idea," said Clane; and still he remained patient. He could recognize a bemused man when he saw one. It was not the moment to press any other point.

The barbarian narrowed his eyes and said at last, "How can you get a large object into a smaller one?" His tone appealed for a logical explanation.

Clane shrugged. "When largeness or smallness are illusions of viewpoints, the problem does not exist."

Czinczar scowled at that and straightened. "I have been assuming," he said, "that at this point in our relations you would be speaking nothing but truth. Evidently, you are not prepared to tell me anything valid about your weapon. Naturally, I reject this fanciful story."

Clane shook his head but said nothing. He had given the only explanation he had, and it had run up against the other man's magnificent realism. Not that he blamed the barbarian. Only gradually had he himself been able to accept the idea that matter and energy were different than they appeared to the sense perceptions of the body.

But now it was time to act, to force, to convince. The bonds fell from him as if they did not exist. He stood up, and now that crown among all the jewels of the ages rode above his head in a matchless perfect rhythm with his movements.

Czinczar said stubbornly, "It would be a mistake to kill any able-bodied man, slave or otherwise."

Clane said, "The gods demand absolute surrender."

Czinczar said in fury, "You fool, I am offering you the solar system! Has this monster in the box not changed your mind in the slightest degree?"

"It has."

"But then -"

"I do not," said Clane, believe in joint-leadership arrangements."

A pause. Then Czinczar said, "You have come far - who once used atomic power merely to stay alive."

"Yes," said Clane, "I have come far."

Czinczar frowned down at the thing in the box. "The real threat to Linn is there. Will you promise to try for the Lord Leadership?"

"I," Clane said, "can promise nothing."

They looked at each other, two men who almost understood each other. It was Czinczar who broke the silence. "I make an absolute surrender," he said and it was a sigh, "to you and you alone, of all my forces - in the belief that you have the courage and common sense to shirk none of your new duties as Protector of the Solar System. It was a role," he finished somewhat unnecessarily, suddenly gloomy, "that I originally intended for myself."

In a well-guarded room in a remote suburb of Linn a core of energy rolled sedately back and forth along a narrow path. In all the solar system there was nothing else like that core. It looked small, but that was an illusion of man's senses. The books that described it and the men who had written the books knew but a part of its secrets.

They knew that the micro-universe inside it pulsed with a multiform of minus forces. It reacted to cosmic rays and atomic energy like some insatiable sponge. No submolecular energy released in its presence could escape it. And the moment it reached its own strange variation of critical mass it could start a meson chain reaction in anything it touched.

One weakness it had, and men had seized upon that in their own greedy fashion. It imitated thought. Or so it seemed. So it seemed.

The great question that Clane, and before him the ancients, asked after observing this remarkable characteristic was: Did this mean that ... man controlled the universe or that the universe controlled man?