

# NEMESIS

BRON FANE

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However, there were those who had seen the conflict coming, and who had taken steps accordingly. Man in his natural state would not have been able to survive, but Hengist and MacIlraith, working desperately against time, had produced something different.



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Could a tiny handful of strangely changed human beings succeed in surviving against such incredible odds? Could they do more than survive? Could they strike back in the name of massacred humanity?



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They emerged  
to find the  
aliens probing  
the ruins of  
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# **NEMESIS**

**by**

**BRON FANE**



**All the characters in this book are fictional,  
and any resemblance to persons, living or  
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## NEMESIS

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*They emerged to find the Aliens  
probing the ruins of their world.*

### CHAPTER ONE

#### *The Vanishing Trick*

PETER HENGIST was a short, square, bearded individual with a high domed forehead, eyes that sparkled with intelligence and ears that protruded a little further than would have been acceptable to the average casting director. He sat deeply and comfortably in a chrome and rexine chair in the Senior Common Room of the Hemmingate Atomic Research Establishment.

"MacIlraith, have you had my 'Times'?" he asked in a voice that was as deep and as penetrating as the rumble of water over a high concrete dam.

MacIlraith was tall and thin, sandy haired and generally melancholy of feature. He boasted a drooping moustache and sad rather baggy eyes, like the optic orbs of a bloodhound. His voice was thin and rather reedy; it reminded Peter Hengist of a bagpipe heard dimly through mountain mist.

"I am just finishing the crossword," confessed MacIlraith.

"You have a confounded impertinence," said Hengist darkly into his beard.

"I thought it was the spare Common Room 'Times'," said MacIraith.

"You know perfectly well that the spare Common Room 'Times' has not yet been put on the rack," said Hengist, "I went considerably out of my way to have mine brought in early."

"I'm sorry, I'm sure." MacIraith sounded anything but sorry. He had the knack of being able to apologise with a tone of voice that made it sound like an accusation.

"One of these days," said Peter Hengist darkly, "I'm going to take hold of your long scraggy neck and tie a knot in it, MacIraith."

"I suppose one might have expected a primitive proletarian remark of that nature from a man of your background," MacIraith piped on reedily. Hengist growled an unscientific and unprintable obscenity into his dark chin fungus and snatched his 'Times' out of MacIraith's long bony paws as though he were snatching at some rare historic document of religious significance, which had inadvertently fallen into the hands of an unbeliever.

MacIraith stormed over to the other side of the Common Room and rang the bell furiously for the Research Establishment's Steward.

The Steward appeared; he looked up expectantly and obsequiously at Ian MacIraith.

"Will you go at once and see what has become of the Senior Common Room 'Times'."

"Of course sir, at once." The Steward turned and departed. He was thinking to himself that MacIraith sounded like a catty old woman.

MacIraith turned his back on Hengist and sat in high dudgeon staring out of the Common Room window. Hengist began to peruse the crossword. He suddenly gave a bellow of triumph.

"The fool who filled this in has made a mistake on seventeen down. The answer is 'diplodocus'."

"No it isn't," MacIraith piped up, "the answer that I have is perfectly correct."

"It's 'diplodocus'," said Hengist with savage determination.

"If you can't appreciate the subtlety of the clues I am afraid there is no point in continuing the discussion," said MacIraith petulantly.

"It is you who can't understand the clues," growled Hengist.

MacIraith gave a disdainful sniff. There was a sudden peculiar vibration. MacIraith turned and looked at Hengist; the ridiculous, disproportionate quarrel that had flared up over the 'Times' crossword vanished as though it had never been.

"What the devil was that?" demanded Hengist.

"I'm sure I don't know. What do you think it was?" MacIraith sounded frightened.

"I don't know either."

Hengist got up and took a pace across the Common Room floor.

"That whole place is vibrating; you don't think anything has gone wrong with the Reactor?" MacIraith sounded nervous.

"There would have been more than a vibration if the Reactor had gone, I can assure you of that," said Hengist.

"Then what is it?" MacIraith's voice was rising to a higher and more excited treble piping with each syllable that he uttered.

"It's getting more pronounced," grunted Hengist.

"I think we ought to get outside; it may be an earth tremor." MacIraith clutched at unlikely solutions like a drowning man clutching at a straw.

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

The two scientists stood looking at one another.

"I think . . ." Hengist's words were cut off in mid-sentence.

The vibration stopped. The Steward opened the door carrying the Common Room copy of the

"Times" as though it were some emblem of sacred national importance.

"I have your 'Times' here, Mr. MacIlraith." He broke off, "Mr. MacIlraith?" His voice was interrogative. "*Mr. MacIlraith?*"

The Steward stood in the empty Common Room scratching his head.

"It's damn queer," he said, "they were both in here a minute ago; there is only this one door and they didn't come down the passage outside or I would have seen them. This is a rum go." He stopped scratching his head and looked all around the Common Room. The windows were closed and there was, as he had just remarked, only one door. He put the 'Times' down on the Common Room reading table and looked round again. "Mr. Hengist?" There was no answer from the empty room. "Mr. MacIlraith?" The Steward began to sound desperate and frightened. There was still no answer from the empty room. "Oh Gawd!" exclaimed the Steward. "They must have been kidnapped or something, but how?" His thoughts flashed dramatically in the direction of the Security Organization. There was a big red alarm bell with thick glass covering and protecting it from the errant fingers of would-be practical jokers. The Steward snatched an anti-macassar from one of the rexine and chromium chairs, wrapped it around his fist, punched out the glass and rang the iron button.

Lights began to flash on and the alarm bell jangled shrilly from one side of the Hemmingate Atomic Research Station to the other.

Col. Stephen Dawson, following the complex electrical alarm system, raced to the Senior Common Room brandishing a large business-like Service 45. He looked at the trembling Steward.

"Well Smithson, what's the matter?" he roared.

"Please sir, it's Mr. Hengist and Mr. MacIlraith, sir," blurted the Steward.

"Hengist and MacIlraith," echoed Col. Dawson, "what has happened to them? Where are they?"

"That's just it sir," said Smithson.

"Explain yourself, man." The Colonel was a man of few words. He was not terse but he detested undue verbosity. Flowery language was a thing that had never appealed to him. He spoke as though words cost money.

"Well sir, I came in a few minutes ago when Mr. MacIlraith rang sir."

"Go on," said the Colonel.

"Apparently Mr. MacIlraith and Mr. Hengist were having an argument about the 'Times' sir. Mr. MacIlraith told me to go out and get the Common Room copy as it hadn't been put on the reading table yet. I wasn't gone above two or three minutes and when I came back Mr. Hengist and Mr. MacIlraith had gone."

"Is that why you rang the alarm bell?" said Stephen Dawson.

"Yes, sir," confessed the Steward, "did I do wrong sir?"

"Well it may well prove to be a false alarm. It is rather like taking a sledge hammer to crack a nut, isn't it."

"I'm sorry sir, I though I was doing right." The Steward was shaking a little; he looked white and nervous.

"All right," said Dawson, "you did the right thing after all. I would rather have a hundred false alarms than have a genuine case get overlooked. Possibly Mr. Hengist and Mr. MacIlraith just went out."

"That was why I rang the alarm bell sir, they couldn't have done without me seeing them. When I went across to the Stationery Department to get the new 'Times' I was in view of the Common Room corridor all the time, sir, and I'm sure I would have seen them coming out."

"Yes, I think perhaps you would," said Dawson, "You didn't take a sledge hammer to crack a nut

after all, you took a sledge hammer to drive in a steel rail, which is what sledge hammers are for." He paused, looking round him, in thoughtful silence.

Blue uniformed Security men were swarming in behind him. They looked a little crestfallen when they found nothing more dramatic than the empty Common Room.

"I want a thorough search made of the Establishment for Peter Hengist and Ian MacIraith," said Colonel Stephen Dawson. Security Officers saluted smartly and dispersed rapidly in all directions in a co-ordinated search for the missing scientists. Stephen Dawson went across to the Common Room internal telephone and rang the gates.

"I want no one in or out till further orders," he said grimly.

"Right sir," said the gatekeeper.

Dawson left the Common Room and began supervising the search party. For two hours trained, diligent, blue-uniformed Security Officers ransacked the Hemminggate establishment in the vain search for Peter Hengist and Ian MacIraith. Stephen Dawson sat in his office mixing three headache powders in a glass of water. He knocked back the draft and sat with his head in his hands lost in thought. The whole thing was completely senseless. Hengist and MacIraith had vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up, they had vanished as though they had been suddenly transported to some other bourne of time and space. They had vanished as mysteriously as Benjamin Bathurst had vanished on his way home from Austria during the Napoleonic Wars. Hengist and MacIraith had gone as neatly and as adroitly as though they had been accomplices of an expert conjurer performing a vanishing trick. They had disappeared as only Houdini could have made them disappear and yet Colonel Stephen Dawson was really loathe to accept the evidence of his own senses. There had to be some sort of rational scientific explanation, he told

himself. And yet, deep down within his mind there was a doubt. A nasty nagging doubt. On sudden impulse he reached for the telephone. He knew one man and one man only who could make some kind of sense out of the crazy enigma in which he now found himself involved. He picked up the receiver and called a Fleet Street Number.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Telephone Call*

MAC, the irascible old Scots editor of the "Daily Globe" wandered into Val Stearman's office, looking for all the world like an avuncular cockroach that has just found a particularly warm corner of the bed. His wizened, parchment face creased itself awkwardly into a smile.

"Val, I've got to hand it to ye!"

"What have you got to hand to me?" asked Stearman, without looking up.

"I've been in the editorial chair for more years than I like to remember," went on Mac. He sat on Stearman's desk, perching like a little wizened monkey on a barrel organ. The simile occurred to Stearman; he went through the motions of turning an invisible handle.

"You're an impudent devil, Val Spearman!" said the old editor. He peered at the big reporter of the supernatural, the world famous journalist adventurer, who was responsible for keeping the "Daily Globe" half a million ahead of its nearest circulation rivals.

Val finished scribbling the last sheet of copy, rang his bell for the boy, handed in the sheets and waved him out of the office, with a broad grin. When the door closed behind the scurrying lad Stearman leaned back expansively in his chair and looked up at the hunched figure of the wizened little editor.

"What brings King Spider to this area of its web?" asked Val.

"It's to do with one of the health articles," replied Mac, "it says that occasional exercise is beneficial to the circulation."

"Paper's circulation, or yours?" asked Stearman.

"Both," answered Mac, modestly.

"I know. The 'Globe' couldn't live without you," retorted Val.

"I came here, in a mood of eulogy and praise," said Mac "if I am to be confronted by your ignorance and impertinence, the mood will rapidly pass, and I shall revert to my normal castigation."

"Which will bounce off my rhinocerine hide," replied Stearman. He had a voice so deep and powerful that it shook the desk on which the old editor balanced precariously.

"Does that foghorn that does duty for your voice have a soft pedal?" demanded Mac. "I'd be glad if you'd manipulate the aforementioned control," he added.

"Now, tell me," said Val, smiling broadly at the old editor, "why have you really come?"

"I came because, besides reading the article on medicine that the new young fella has just done, and thinking that perhaps the exercise will be good for my figure, I have also been reading that little psychological piece."

"I haven't seen that myself," said Val. "Is it good?"

"Yes, it's very good! I think it'll put figures up a few hundred thousand by the end of the year. I think people are interested in psychology. It's the vogue, believe me, it is."

"It'll never replace a clear conscience," replied Val.

"You're only a boy yet," said Mac, "but you're learning wisdom!"

"That's the nicest think you've said to me in years," answered Stearman.

"Ah, well. That's the psychology article, you see," said Mac. "Ye ken it's against my principles to take any notice of anything that anybody on the staff writes, not after the first ten years as an editor."

"That must have been about fifty years ago, in your case," retorted Stearman.

"Now, there you go again," said Mac. "I come, bearing the flag of truce, you know it's very rare for you and I to exchange a civil word!"

"I always thought it was your liver that was responsible for most of it," said Stearman.

"My liver is a fine, healthy organ," snapped Mac. "My bile flows in the proper channels, in perfect harmony with the rest of by biological organization."

"You *have* been reading a medical article," commented Stearman. "It's gone to your head, old son."

"Well, that's just where it should go," said Mac. "A healthy mind is a healthy body. Psycho-somatic medicine . . . a perfect unity, mind, body and soul."

"Have you been reading the religious page as well?" demanded Stearman.

"Aye, and it hasn't done me any harm," said the old editor.

"Perhaps," said Val, rather unkindly, "you feel that after a long and mis-spent life, it is time for you to mend your ways. Do you see the sunset approaching?"

Old Mac smiled even more fixedly. "I'll tell you why I came Val. It was the psychological article, combined with the medical article that made me think I ought to get a wee bit of exercise. You see, the psychology fella said that it was a very good

thing to give praise and commendation where it was due."

"In other words," said Val, "put him on his little flat head and tell him he's a good boy."

"It is only fair that the greatest praise should come where the greatest credit has been earned."

"You don't mean me?" murmured Val.

"I've never known you to be so modest before. How many are the times that you have stood in my office and told me that you could write a better column than any journalist in Fleet Street? How many times have you stood in my office and told me that you can fight any man your weight, your age, or younger?"

"Several," agreed Val Stearman.

"How many times have you stood in my office and argued both plausibly and logically, that you were the most indispensable thing to journalism, since printing ink was invented?"

"Oh, several times," said Stearman again.

"Now," said old Mac, his voice rising a little with excitement, "I come along full of burning zeal to show that I read and understand the new psychology; I come to tell my star reporter, that he has done something outstanding, even by his tremendous standards."

"When you're flannelling a man," said Val, "there's only one rule to bear in mind, that is, that you can't overdo it. Once he's bitten the first piece, and got the hook well down his throat, he'll swallow anything."

"You're a hard man," complained Mac.

"I think I prefer you as you were before you read the cheap psychology article," retorted Val.

"Articles commissioned by the 'Daily Globe' are not cheap," said Mac.

"They would be, if you had your way," said Val.

"You're incorrigible!"

"That's better," said Stearman, "you're getting angry."

"I have every right to get angry!" snapped the Scots editor.

"Think of your blood pressure," chortled Val, "go and read your medical article!"

"Blast and damn you, Stearman! I came in here to say I appreciated the article you'd done on 'Strange Disappearances.' I came in to say that it was the best thing you'd ever done, and your stuff is always good. I came in here to fly the flag of truce, to put out the hand of conciliation and friendship, to bury the hatchet . . ."

"How many hands have you got?" demanded Stearman. "If you've got the flag of truce in one hand, and you're holding out the other, what are you going to bury the hatchet with—your teeth?"

"You drive me mad! *Mad!*" said Mac.

"That's fine," said Val, "I've always wanted to see an insane Scots editor jump off the top of the 'Daily Globe' building! This, I feel, is something that would shake Fleet Street from one end to the other!"

"It would shake Fleet Street from one end to the other if I threw you through that window!" said Mac. He had leapt off the desk and was stamping up and down Stearman's office.

"That's better," said Val. "This is my old, dear, friendly Mac. This is the man I understand! Take your psychology and burn it. Then be like this, all the time! Like this I know you, understand you; I can handle you."

"I am not handled by any man. I am the man who handles other men!" snorted Mac.

"Indeed," said Val, incredulously.

"I am the boss. When I crack my whip other men jump."

"Crack your whip," said Stearman, "and watch this man sit!"

"I've got you now," said Mac. "You're a mental sadist, you're a pervert!"

"I've been called some odd things, but never that! I thought you knew my tastes by this time!"

"I don't mean it in the every day, ordinary sense!" said Mac. "I know your ideas on sex are direct and wholesome. You've only got to take a look at that beautiful wife of yours to know that. What I meant was, that you've got a nasty, psychological kink. You like to see me get angry. It amuses you. That's why you're a sadist."

"No, I don't," answered Stearman.

"No, you don't what?" demanded Mac.

"Like you to get angry," said Stearman, "but I prefer you angry to this new psychological bilge. It doesn't suit you, Mac. You're like a man in somebody else's raincoat, it doesn't fit."

"Don't call a mackintosh a raincoat," snapped Mac.

"I might reply, 'don't call a raincoat a Mackintosh'," said Stearman.

"Sassenach!" said Mac bitterly.

The conversation was interrupted by a sudden jangling of the phone.

Val picked it up.

"'Daily Globe', Val Stearman's office," he said automatically.

"One of your admirers ringing up to congratulate you on the column, perhaps? I hope you treat his or her praises as brusquely as you treat mine!" said Mac.

"Now look here," said Val. "I don't mean my lighthearted jargon, any more than you mean your pseudo anger. Beneath that crusty old exterior, Mac, you have a heart of gold, and I appreciate it. In spite of my unforgivable rudeness, you know I'd do anything I could for you and your perishing paper! Now get off my new office carpet and let me get on with some work."

Mac was grinning, but as his eyes met Stearman's the grin faded. Val looked serious and excited at the same time. He clapped his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Hang on a minute, Mac," he said. "Something

fantastic just coming through. It's old Steve Dawson, up at the atomic research place."

"The security officer?" said Mac.

"That's the bloke. But I don't think we can use this."

"What is it?"

"Pick up the extension," advised Val.

Mac grabbed the extension phone, "Hello, Steve," said Val again, "I've got the gov'nor on the extension. Anything you can say to me you can say to him."

"Right!" Colonel Dawson's voice was crisp and business like. "By a strange coincidence, Val, I had just read your article on 'Strange Disappearances' your Bathurst story was incredible—"

"—but true!" interposed Stearman.

"I've got a Bathurst mystery of my own, but twice as big," said the atomic establishment security officer, tersely.

"Tell me more," invited Stearman.

"Two of our people have disappeared in completely impossible circumstances! It would obviously be unwise for me to say anything more over the telephone but it looks as if it might be your line of country."

"My line of country?" said Val. "I'm the supernatural reporter!"

"That's what I mean," said Dawson.

"You don't mean ghosts have captured your two scientists, do you?"

"I'd like to have you up here for a day or two, to have a look. I can get your clearance from M.I.5., like the last time we worked together. Your clearance still stands."

"O.K.," replied Val, "you can count on me."

"He never asks his editor, Colonel Dawson! That's one of the minor ethics of Fleet Street, but Mr. Stearman is above such niceties!" broke in Mac.

"Well, if he won't ask you, Mac, I will," said

Colonel Dawson. "May I borrow Stearman for a few days? That's put him in his place, hasn't it?"

Mac laughed. "Aye, I should think it has!"

"I hate these three sided conversations," said Stearman. "I always think three's a crowd on a telephone."

"When can I expect you?" asked Dawson.

"He's leaving this afternoon," said Mac.

"Thank you very much," the Colonel hung up.

"All right, off you go," said Mac, "and mark this well, Stearman, you bring me back a good story! For every day's absence I want a boost of a hundred thousand in the circulation."

"You're nothing if not ambitious," said Stearman.

"I shall not be satisfied," said Mac, "until the 'Globe's' circulation exceeds the population of the world! Then I shall know, that besides the copies bought for libraries and Athenaeum clubs, every man, woman and wee bairn can pass the day with a copy of the 'Daily Globe'."

"And in this rosy and Utopian future, what has become of all our competitors?" demanded Val.

"They've all been devoured by the 'Globe'" said Mac, "and although it has 'Globe' in banner headlines, it will say 'Incorporating' and then, all the giants of Fleet Street will be there, like names on a tombstone, in little, wee print, under my big Gothic capitals. Oh, it'll be a big day for the 'Globe'!"

"Pretty rough day for the rest of Fleet Street," said Stearman.

"You see, when I've got them all under my thumb," said Mac, "then I shall know you won't be able to get a job anywhere else, and I'll have ye where I want ye!"

"By this time," said Val, "I shall have amassed so much money that I shall be able to retire, and breed race horses down in Devonshire, or something equally plausible."

"Ye'll no retire," said Mac. "Ye're not the type! Ye'll no more retire than I can!"

"Aren't you going to retire?" asked Val.

"What me?" snapped Mac. "No, laddy, I've been with the 'Globe' so long now, I couldn't live without it. Good job there's no compulsory retirement age for editors!"

"What about all these promising youngsters who are waiting to get your job," said Val.

"They'll have to wait, the way I had to wait!"

"Oh, yes, you were over eighty when you took over, weren't you?" chipped Stearman.

"If you want to live to reach that august old age," said the wizened Scots editor dourly, "it'll pay ye to mind your tongue. I'm no so spry as I was a year or two back, but I still pack a deadly left hand!"

"You're too big for me," said Stearman. He grinned. Mac weighed something in the region of eight stone at the outside. Val was in the fifteen to sixteen region. One of the giant adventurer's great fists was as big as Mac's two hands put together. Stearman could have lifted his editor on the palm of one hand, and hoisted him above his head as easily as if he had been a feather.

"Well, I suppose ye'd best be on your way," said Mac.

"All right," agreed Val.

"The sooner you're gone the sooner ye'll be back, and then we can get back to normal, as normal as anything ever is, with you involved in it."

"Charming," said Stearman, he bowed with mock courtesy as the editor left his office.

"Don't let the moths destroy too many of my valuable papers, will you, Mac?"

"As long as the moths don't get you, Stearman, you'll be all right!" said the dour old Scots editor.

Val made his way out of the office and down to the garage below the big 'Globe' building, where his sports saloon was garaged in a position of immediate accessibility.

Val got into the enormous car and drove skillfully through the mid-morning traffic, back to the luxurious apartment at the other side of the city.

"Hello, darling, you're home early." La Noire opened the door with some surprise. Val swept his beautiful, Cleopatrine wife into his arms, and kissed her.

"Couldn't stay away any longer, darling!"

"You've got the sack!" she accused.

"Not quite," he said. "I'm sorry to disappoint you. I know you look forward to having me at home all day under your feet while you do the cleaning!"

"Val, my darling, you are incorrigible!" said La Noire.

"So was Admiral Nelson, but I believe Lady Hamilton was very glad of it."

"Oh indubitably!" she answered.

Then she looked at him seriously.

"What has happened, darling?"

"Something very odd," he told her. "I had a phone call from Steve Dawson."

"What, the chap at Hemmingate?"

"That's the one."

"What's on, then, darling?"

"A couple of characters have apparently vanished," he said.

"Isn't Steve in charge of security up there?" asked La Noire.

"The very same!"

"Why should he call you?"

"Because," answered Stearman, with a broad grin, "I am the ideal man to call in any peculiar, dangerous, troublesome, or awkward situation! Stearman, unlimited!"

"If it's security, wouldn't his own people handle it?" asked La Noire.

"It's our line of country, rather than his," said Val. "He didn't tell me much on the 'blower' but he said, incidentally, that he had read my latest article—you know, the one about the Bathurst business,

and the disappearing acts of various people over the centuries."

La Noire nodded her lovely head. Her beautiful, jet black hair cascaded ravishingly. Val put his hand gently under her chin, and looked into her superb black eyes, wherein lay all the mystery and depths of the eternal Eve that she was.

"Darling," he whispered softly, "you're the most beautiful woman in the world." He kissed her again, "Now, where was I?"

"You were telling me about mysterious disappearances at Hemmingate," said La Noire.

"I promised Steve I'd go up there for a few days."

"When do we leave?" she said.

"Soon as we're packed."

"Twenty minutes," she answered.

"You're something of a packing expert now, aren't you?" said Val.

"Should be!"

"I'll check on the route while you're bunging things into cases," said Val jovially.

La Noire finished the packing while Val organised the best route to Hemmingate.

"It's not the easiest of places to reach up there, on the west coast," he said.

"We'll get there," said La Noire, "we always do!"

"True," said Val, "we always do."

The big journalist adventurer took the first turn at the wheel. There are two ways to drive a car, and Stearman was a master of both styles. Today he felt that speed was important, and he pushed the mammoth sports saloon to its limits, even on the new stretches of motorway. It was the road rather than the car which decreed their maximum speed. Stearman's enormous sports saloon had been turned and modified until it would cruise at well over the ton, and it had a great deal in hand after that.

It's acceleration, braking, and general all-round performance put it in a class apart. It was a car which would have done more than justice to its

manufacturer on any racing circuit in the world. Val and La Noire were inordinately proud of the big machine. They reached Hemmingate after driving in turns over a fast, but otherwise uneventful, four hundred mile journey.

The Hemmingate Research Station was isolated. Hemmingate itself was isolated; there were no more than seventy or eighty inhabitants. The Research Establishment overshadowed it and engulfed it. To the west of them lay the great, grey rollers of the Atlantic, to the east, the Cumberland hills. La Noire and Val had performed a minor, motoring miracle, in arriving in time for tea. Steve was waiting at the gate to greet them.

"I had a feeling you wouldn't be much longer," he said pleasantly as he gave them their security clearance. "I've fixed everything up at headquarters, Val. It's the mixture as before, as far as they are concerned."

"I'm glad they still love me," said Stearman.

"I wouldn't say that, but they're still glad to have your services. Their offer is still open, by the way, if ever you get tired of pushing a pen!"

"Maybe, one day," said Val.

"They really want you, you know," said Steve, "and I'd be delighted to have you here; anywhere in my section."

"Ah, I might get a few more accolades than I do from old Mac," said Val, "but to tell you the truth, Steve, I should miss the poor old man so much I wouldn't know what to do. I shall have to have him stuffed and bring him with me, I think. Sit him on my desk!"

"Of course, you could always have him wired for sound," said Steve. "Have a tape loop going round inside his head saying 'Stearman you're fired! Stearman you're useless'."

"That would be charming," agreed Val. "That would be absolutely charming! The great advantage being, of course, that you could switch it off when

you'd had enough. But I'm afraid I'm wasting time in banter."

There was silence for a moment, then Dawson said, "Seriously, Val, this thing is getting me down."

"Don't worry about it," said the journalist adventurer good naturedly, "I'm here now!"

"That makes a difference!" agreed Dawson.

"Any chance of some tea?" asked La Noire, practically.

"You must think I'm terribly rude! Of course, we'll go and eat first."

Dawson led them over to the security canteen. Over tea he filled in the details. When they had finished their meal Val replaced his cup with a clink into the saucer, and Dawson led the way to the common room where the two scientists had last been seen. Val and La Noire began a thorough search of the room itself.

A security guard appeared with a message for Dawson.

"Excuse me a minute!" he called and went into the corridor beyond.

Suddenly the room seemed to vibrate. Val turned swiftly and went towards La Noire.

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know, darling, but I think there is some connection between this and what happened," he said.

"Yes, I think so, too," she agreed. A strange feeling of unreality gripped them. *When Steve came back the common room was empty . . .*

## CHAPTER THREE

*Into The Unknown*

VAL was aware of a peculiar greyness, it seemed to well up out of the ordinary, everyday objects in the Common Room. It took hold of his entire being, the greyness soaked up until it drowned the table, the rexine chairs, the walls and finally the ceiling. The greyness was as powerful as the vibration. Stearman tried to shout to his wife but he seemed frozen by the greyness. He was still aware of his own identity, his mind still had the ability to say 'I am' but that was all. He hung on to existence and identity in a world which had become a phantasmagoria of greyness.

The vibrations grew stronger and stronger still. He felt that La Noire was with him but he was not conscious of her presence in any physical sense, he just knew that her mind was somewhere near his. He tried to call out again unsuccessfully. A feeling that might have been wild panic shot through his strangely disjointed being. Panic was something which was completely alien to Val Stearman's character—he fought the panic and it was replaced by a cold calculating anger. He felt furious with whoever or whatever had caused the greyness that had swept him suddenly out of reality. He wanted to

strike at it in some way, to use fist and feet against the hideous cloud of misty translucent grey—strange granular grey—that obscured reality and seemed to be drawing him into itself.

The next thing he was aware of was being involved in a vortex of some kind. He felt as though he were being sucked into an ethereal maelstrom. It was like being in a grey whirlpool. He was a cork being flung round and about and round and about again in the great Scandinavian whirlpool. It was not only his physical being which seemed to be disjointed. Not only was he experiencing a peculiar out-of-the-body sensation, but his time sense had also been shattered to smithereens. His natural in-built concepts of teliology had been blown to atoms. Val Stearman seemed to be living in a world in which time no longer existed or at least a world in which time was no longer a significant factor. Somewhere in the grey maelstrom Stearman was aware that his disembodied being was losing consciousness. He opened his eyes, remembering only shreds of the strange enigmatical experience and the shreds came to him like fronds and fragments of a broken dream.

He found himself sitting on a broad plain that was covered in some kind of pale blue vegetation. There was a springy turf-like quality to the vegetation on which he found himself squatting and it had a smell that was unusual but by no means unpleasant.

Val looked all around him. The light was poor and he judged that wherever he was it must be night, or at least early evening. His first thoughts were for La Noire. More shredded memories came back. He recalled the Common Room, the strange vibration, the greyness; she had been with him then, he had felt aware of her mental proximity, if nothing more tangible, during the peculiar transitional experience in the grey maelstrom.

"La Noire," he called desperately, "darling, where are you?"

A sudden movement in the gloom, a little to the

left, caused him to spin around rapidly and face in that direction every sense on the alert. His nerves were tingling and vibrating like steel wires on a guitar pitched high and tight and touched by a guitarist's plectrum.

"Darling."

She rushed towards him and threw herself into his arms. For a moment—a long moment—he held her close comforting and supporting her.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"I've got no more idea than the man in the moon," said Val. "One moment we were in the Common Room at the Hemmingate Research establishment and the next minute we are here."

"Well, whatever has happened to us I suppose it . . . it is the same thing . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

"You were going to say the same thing that got Hengist and MacIlraith," said Stearman.

"Yes, it is what I was thinking," she said suddenly.

"But if anybody has got us in that sense," said Val, "where are we and what is the point and purpose of it all?"

La Noire gave a sudden cry and pointed up into the sky. The light grew preceptibly brighter, even as she pointed and as Val followed the direction of her long graceful finger he realised where the illumination was coming from. La Noire was pointing to the disc of a pale pink moon which hung low in the sky and looked very unlike any satellite, real or artificial, which Stearman had ever seen before.

"I've heard of a blue moon," said Val grimly, "but never a pink one."

"What is it darling?" she asked. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've no idea, wish I knew."

"There's another," said La Noire.

A few degrees around the horizon another pink satellite had appeared. This nocturnal illuminary

also increased the light of the strange blue plain on which the Stearmans now stood.

Val and La Noire continued to stare in thoughtful silence for several seconds at the two peculiar moons that looked as though they were chasing one another.

"There's another," shouted La Noire as she pointed again to a spot just above the horizon. Sure enough another of the strange pink satellites had just come into their field of vision.

"Three pink moons," said Val. La Noire looked at him, her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Val darling," she whispered, "wherever this is it is nowhere in the solar system."

"We are a long way from home," said Stearman, "how did we get here?"

La Noire sniffed appreciatively at the night air.

"We are obviously on some other planet darling," she said, "but where, and how far away is it?" Val looked up into the night sky beyond the three pink moons.

"Some of those constellations look just vaguely familiar," he said, "some make no sense at all, others look as though they have just been twisted a bit. You know darling."

"Let me try and work this out," said La Noire whose knowledge of astronomy and astrology was considerable. She looked at Val finally, with a kind of frightened bewilderment. She held his hand and clung to him tightly.

"You've worked something out," he said.

"Yes I have," she whispered.

"Where do you think we are?"

"Oh Val it's a long, long way away."

"Where?" he insisted.

"We seem to be somewhere in the region of Polaris."

"Polaris! It's a long long way off," said Stearman. She nodded. He grinned. "At least we are in our home galaxy," he said. She smiled.

"Yes, we are still in our own galaxy, in fact

Polaris is practically a next door neighbour. Speaking in astronomical terms," said Val again.

"How did we get here?" asked La Noire.

"It occurs to me," said Val, "that the greyness through which we travelled was some form of hyperspace." La Noire nodded.

"It seems such a long time since our last adventure in space," she said, "well, I was forgetting."

"I know," said Stearman, "when we get back to Earth and ordinary everyday life presses hard we become so enmeshed in it that we forget the enormity of space outside Mankind is always so occupied with the little things that don't really matter that we forget the great things, the things that are of cosmic significance and universal importance."

"If Hengist and MacIlraith came this way," said La Noire, "then surely they must be about here somewhere?"

"Then how did they come?" said Val, "by the same route as we did?"

"Just being sucked into hyperspace," suggested La Noire.

"It wasn't like our previous experience of hyperspace," said Stearman thoughtfully.

"No darling it wasn't," she agreed. He looked up at the three pink moons.

"If we are going to find out anything at all we shall have to go and explore," said Val.

"I agree," she murmured.

Holding her hand Stearman led the way across the springy blue turf in the direction of a distant shadowy looking object that seemed to be showing up in the light of the three bright pink satellites.

"What's that we are heading for?" asked La Noire.

"I'm not altogether sure myself," said Val, "but it just offers some kind of objective, it makes a change from this blue springy stuff that we are walking on."

"You don't think it's a city of some kind?" asked La Noire.

"I don't know," said Val, "it could be."

"Then this Planet, whatever it is called," said La Noire, "it's inhabited. Maybe it's inhabited by something pretty intelligent."

"Our last adventure taught us a great deal about man's place in the Universe," said Stearman. She nodded.

"Do you think we needed that lesson?" she asked.

"No, perhaps we didn't," said Val, "but we got it."

"Yes," she agreed, "we got it."

They continued moving across the springy blue turf in the direction of the mysterious outline close to the horizon. The springy blue vegetation grew sparser as they approached the outline of what they suspected might turn out to be a city. A few hundred paces more and they were confronted by massive walls of what looked like smooth sheer rock.

"I wish we had some extra light. I mean some illumination over and above the power of those pink satellites," said Val.

"We still don't know if it is natural or artificial," said La Noire as she stretched out one of her beautiful hands and touched the strange smooth stone-like material that rose sharp and sheer above them and blocked all further advance for the time being.

"If it is a city," said Stearman, "I am surprised there are no lights."

"There is no noise either," said La Noire.

"Yes that's odd," said Val, "I hadn't spotted that."

"Of course light and noise are not the only attributes of a city," said La Noire, "I mean by our standards I suppose they are the first two attributes that come to mind, but I suppose there must be cities where light and noise are not the automatic by-product of community life."

Val seized her arm and drew her back a little. His action was an instinctive and protective one. In the smooth sheer surface which their hands had been

exploring a few seconds before, something that looked like a gigantic doorway now appeared to be sliding open. As it slid they could see light that had not been visible as they walked across the springy blue turf.

"What is it?" whispered La Noire pointing to the widening crescent of light making itself visible around the edge of the sliding doorway.

"It's a portal of some sort," said Val Stearman.

"The gate of a city?" asked La Noire.

"It looks as if it is meant to be some kind of a way in or out," said Val thoughtfully.

The light that they saw shining crescent-like around the edge of the great door was not by any means brilliant or dazzling. It gave a very good illumination but there was no glare to it. It was one of the most *controlled* lights which Val had ever seen. If it was an artifact then it was an artifact that belonged to a society with a high degree of technology and culture.

Val and La Noire stood staring at one another in silence in the blue-pink gloom that seemed to reflect from the turf they had crossed. The reflected and refracted light from the three pink moons was not apparently obeying the terrestrial laws of optics. Somehow Val found it strangely disconcerting that the light was not behaving in exactly the pattern which a competent terrestrial physicist would have prescribed for it.

Before Val could expound his ideas more fully to La Noire they were aware that they were no longer alone. A group of people, who, at this distance at any rate, appeared as human as they were themselves, was emerging from the great open doorway. Val paused for a moment wondering whether to stand his ground or turn to run dragging La Noire with him. He decided from the look of the people and from the evidence of the technology which he had already seen, there would be little point in running and he had not yet picked up any unfriendly

vibrations, psychic or otherwise. Just as a music hall star can gauge an audience, just as an orator can tell whether or not the crowd are with him or against him. Just as a musician can get the pitch of the hall in which he plays and the psychic pitch of the audience for whom he makes his music, so Val Stearman had a particular and invaluable gift for deciding whether an atmosphere was good or evil, whether it was friendly or unfriendly, whether its action was as near to neutral in ethical content as it was possible for any action to be.

In the light of the three pink moons Val and La Noire watched the strange Aliens coming towards them. The procession was led by two men who did not look like the rest. There was a certain charm, a certain style, a particular kind of grace about the way that the long robed members of the procession were moving. The two men in the front looked odd, almost incongruous. Val clasped La Noire's hand tightly.

"Unless I miss my guess those two gentlemen in the lead are Messrs. Hengist and MacIlraith," he said.

"You think so?" she asked.

"It seems likely; they don't seem to fit in with the rest," said Val grimly.

"At least they are alive; the natives can't be too unfriendly," said La Noire.

"I wonder if we really are on a Planet that revolves around Polaris as you suspected," said Val.

"Call them," said La Noire suddenly.

Val needed no second bidding he had always been a man of whom action and impulsive action at that, were the keystones and corner stones of life.

"Hengist," he roared, "MacIlraith!" The two leading figures started at the sound of his voice. They held a brief, hurried conversation in a language which made little or no sense to Stearman but appeared to make a good deal of sense to the leading

members of the procession to whom the Earthmen spoke.

"We are Hengist and MacIlraith. Who are you?" called one of them suddenly.

In the light of the triumvirate of pink moons Stearman could see that the men who claimed to be Hengist and MacIlraith had certain terrestrial characters which he was not able to observe on the faces of any of the others. Hengist looked powerful and the bull-like quality of his beard added to the appearance of strength. MacIlraith looked like a tall thin, sad, drooping Scottish bloodhound, thought Stearman. No doubt it wasn't MacIlraith's fault but that didn't make him look any more prepossessing as far as Val was concerned.

The gap had narrowed until the two scientists and the slightly different local humanoids were only a few feet away from Val and La Noire Stearman. The journalist adventurer introduced himself, feeling as he did so that he must sound as incongruous as Stanley had sounded when he had gone up to the immortal missionary and said "Dr. Livingstone I presume?"

"How did you get here?" asked Val feeling even as he posed the question that it sounded somehow weak and fatuous.

"The same way that you undoubtedly did," said the bearded Hengist. He didn't sound particularly friendly. He gave the impression of a man who easily becomes impatient with questions which seem to him either irrelevant or incompetent.

"Sorry I'm sure." Stearman was also the kind of man who could pronounce the word sorry and make it sound like an accusation.

"Well, we'll tell you all we can," said MacIlraith, "though that is little enough."

Val looked inquiringly from one to the other. It was La Noire who spoke first.

"Please go on," she said.

Hengist looked at the exciting, exotic Cleopatrine

beauty of the girl in the triply softening and gloriously flattering light of the three pink moons.

"Well, a little while ago," said Hengist, he sounded less grudging but nevertheless he was still far from being amiable, "we were in the Common Room at Hemmingate. Do you know Hemmingate?"

"Yes, it was Colonel Stephen Dawson who sent for me," said Val.

"May we ask whether you also disappeared from the Common Room?" asked Hengist.

"Yes we did," said Stearman.

"Ah!" The tall, slim drooping MacIlraith appeared to be digesting the information which Val had just given him.

"Stephen Dawson sent for me," said Val again.

"Oh! The Security man," said Hengist, with less certainty.

It seemed incredible to Stearman that anybody could take this whole crazy business as imperturbably as the two scientists appeared to be taking it.

"You look as if you understand this thing," said Stearman, "you look as if you have got the whole situation cut and dried."

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," said Hengist, "but we know a great deal more than we did this morning."

"I would be very grateful if you would tell us," said Val.

"Well you're getting it handed to you on a plate rather, aren't you?" said MacIlraith, "I mean we had to discover it for ourselves, the hard way."

"It was hard; it was almost mind shattering until the native humanoids here gave us an induction course in their language; then we got the facts quickly enough and straight enough," said Hengist.

"Oh, just what *are* the facts?" asked Stearman.

"Be a good thing if you had an induction course in the language as well," said MacIlraith changing the subject a little.

"I'm not altogether sure that I want one," said

Val, "is it reversible? Do you think it has any permanent effects."

"Very unlikely," said MacIlraith.

Val looked at La Noire; she returned his gaze.

"Apparently," said Hengist, "this Planet is known as 'Awan' and is inhabited, naturally enough, by a race calling themselves the Awanese." He gestured towards the non-terrestrial humanoids who were forming up like a guard of honour and escorting Val and La Noire back to the city through the lighted gateway, together with the two missing scientists from Hemmingate.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Aliens*

VAL and La Noire went further in towards the city between Peter Hengist and Ian MacIlraith. They had been deep in conversation for some time, and as the strange shapes of the Awanese settlement loomed about them, the big journalist-adventurer and his wife found themselves listening less to the excited ejaculations of the two ex-scientists, and paying attention increasingly to the vast edifices between which they walked.

"And so," concluded Hengist, his beard wagging like an uprooted shrub on his broad, stubby chest, "that's all I know about it. We arrived here, and we found that two of the native humanoids, who, in their own tongue, rejoiced in the names of Xux and Yede, had been apparently experimenting with some kind of teleportation device."

Val forced his attention back to Hengist and off the tall columns of the Awanese buildings.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I was looking at the city."

"You'd never think, would you," said Ian MacIlraith, in a broad Scots accent, "that all this existed behind that strange, dark wall. We felt very much the same when we came in from the outside, didn't we, Hengist?"

"Yes, yes we did!" Peter looked at Ian. "I will say one thing for Awan," he went on, "it gives you an idea of perspective, to see yourself as you really are. It shows you that there are bigger things in the universe than quarrels over who does the 'Times' crossword..." Val looked from one to the other as though seeking some kind of explanation, but none seemed to be forthcoming.

"You were saying," he turned to MacIlraith, "that you got the information from these people as a result of some kind of hypnotic induction language course."

"That's about the long and short of it," replied MacIlraith, "they put us to sleep with some kind of hypnotic device of their own. I'm a nuclear physicist; I know very little electronics. It looked like a cross between a computer and a ladies' hairdrier, in a hairdressing saloon."

"Are you familiar with hair driers in Ladies' Saloons?" asked La Noire, with what might have been the faintest trace of humour.

The nuclear physicist looked at La Noire rather dourly, but nobody could be dour with La Noire for very long.

"I suppose I asked for that," he said, and walked on a little further. The Awanese humonoids around them had fallen strangely silent.

Even Val was almost overawed by the size of the buildings.

"Tell me some more about Yede and Xux," he said suddenly.

Ian MacIlraith gave him a sidelong glance. He had his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his tunic.

"There isn't very much to tell, except that when

we came round from the induction course into the language—they'll probably want to give you one shortly—we found that what they said made sense."

Stearman nodded. "I see."

"After that we met these two characters; teleportation experts, we learnt they were, and they explained, rather apologetically, what had happened."

"And what *had* happened?" demanded Stearman. "I'd like to know something of this myself."

"It seems, as far as I can understand the mechanism of it," said MacIraith, "and for once Hengist is in agreement with me—isn't that so, Peter?"

"Yes, yes," answered Peter Hengist, rather absently.

"—that this thing is still very much in the *experimental* stage," concluded MacIraith.

"Yes, yes," murmured Hengist again. He had apparently sunk down into some internal layer of deep thought, and although he was making polite noises, as a contribution to the conversation, it was obvious that his thoughts were elsewhere. "The peculiar thing about all this, to my way of thinking," said MacIraith, looking up at the domed cover of the great city, "is *why* the need is so absolutely desperate to get the teleportation going? There's a great deal we don't understand yet . . . Ah!" One of the local humanoids came up to them. Val and La Noire listened helplessly, as Hengist and MacIraith carried on a deep, rapid fire conversation with the Awanese.

Hengist turned to Val, and said: "They would like you to undergo the language induction, if you would? It's in this building here."

"What exactly do you mean by 'it'?" asked Stearman rather cautiously.

"The induction equipment," answered Hengist.

"Carry on. I'd rather let them have a go at that than wander about not knowing what the blighters are saying. What do you say, darling?" asked Val.

"Yes. I don't think it will do us any harm," said La Noire. "They seem to be friendly."

"Yes. I don't feel any serious doubts about them," said MacIraith.

"You're too trusting!" retorted Hengist. "You're far too trusting, Ian!"

"I think you're too suspicious," said the Scot. The two nuclear physicists looked at each other rather dubiously for a moment, as though the earlier quarrel of the morning—now so long ago and far away—was about to resurrect itself. Stearman moved placatingly between them.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "perhaps you'd explain to me what I have to do in order to get this induction completed."

His interpolation was successful in diverting the scientists from each other. Both began explaining briefly what was required. Val and La Noire moved through the magnificently proportioned doorway of the building on their immediate left, and allowed themselves to be led to a pair of padded couches, above which banks of valves, relays, and other highly complicated electronic equipment could be seen. There were transistors and transducers, together with a number of coils and ripple controls, at whose purpose the Stearmans could only guess. One of the native Awanese was talking volubly to Hengist, who held up a hand for silence and then relayed the instructions to Val and La Noire.

"He says there's absolutely nothing to be afraid of, and I can second that. Just lie back, relax, and they'll put the contacts over your head."

Two huge, chromium helmets, rather after the style of the helmets used in hairdressing saloons, were lowered into position. Val found that it was difficult, but not impossible, to hear once the helmet had been slipped into place. He cast a swift, sideways glance at La Noire, who was composing herself gracefully on the next couch.

"All right, darling?" he said. He saw that she

was looking at his moving lips, then he realised that she could not hear any better than he could. He saw that her lips were moving, too. He read their message: Then, there was a faint buzzing sound from inside their helmets. It was as though soft, innocuous, harmless, tropical insects, were buzzing lazily from flower to flower in a scent laden paradise. Val and La Noire felt as if they were drifting off on fluffy pink clouds, or as if they were floating down warm rivers between oleanders and lotus blossoms.

Stearman was also vaguely aware of words, a whole river of words, a great flood of vocal thought forms. Then the words slowed to a trickle. It seemed that the river which bore them up was reaching the end of its course. The oleanders and lotus blossoms were passing him less rapidly . . . The invisible mental boat which had rafted him down the course of this strange, intellectual journey, beached itself gently and Val found himself coming back to full consciousness. He got the impression that he was lying at the bottom of a deep well, in which he had been placed for safety below thousands of feet of feather-soft cotton wool.

The cotton wool seemed to be in the process of being removed a small wad at a time. As the process continued Val became increasingly aware of a light source not very far distant from his face. The light source grew brighter. The last of the suppositional cotton wool was plucked away by the powerful fingers of returning consciousness. Stearman found that he was lying on a softly padded bunk, looking at La Noire.

He got up, extricating his head carefully from the gleaming, metallic helmet, which had encased it. He recognised Hengist and MacIlraith, he also saw a number of extra-terrestrial humanoids. He knew that they were called Awanese, that this was Awan, their planet, and that it was the sixth planet of the star which had been known as 'Polaris' back on Earth. He knew several other important factors

about the planet, for it is impossible to learn a language, which, after all, is only the tool of thought, without learning a great deal of thought itself. As well as the Awanese language, Val and La Noire had absorbed a great deal of important survival data. He knew that in terms of the old comparisons, this planet was very Earth-like, that it possessed three characteristically pink satellites, and that its next nearest neighbour in the Polaris planetary system, boasted of a ring system, very similar to that of Saturn in the solar system. All this and much more flooded through Val Stearman's mind. His consciousness played with thoughts after the manner of a child who runs his hand through a great box of coloured beads or marbles, delighting in them and at the same time allowing them to trickle down into the lower reaches of the box. The facts trickled through Stearman's mental awareness and fell back into the deeper recesses of his subconscious mind.

The next thing that struck him as both interesting, and, at the same time, almost incredible, because of its suddenness, was his ability to share and understand, clearly and easily, the thoughts of the native Awanese as they spoke to him. It was a rather musical language, a beautiful and highly civilised language. Val found himself—lover of words that he was—enjoying using this new medium of expression, simply for its own sake. It had always been one of his deepest regrets back at home on earth that he had been really fluent in one language only. Word-smith that he was, he knew, he felt instinctively, that there were some expressions to which justice could only be done in their *native* language. There are certain terms in French, and German, particularly, which simply lose their force and power, when they are translated into idiomatic English.

There is a beauty and a resonance in Greek poetry which loses incalculable power if it is translated into the more modern tongue. Stearman knew that the

strength and precision of classical Latin could not really be captured by any other language. He was glad now of the fluency in their own tongue which the Awanese had given to him. They had placed into his hands a fresh instrument of expression, and for a few moments, all that Val wanted to do was talk—about anything and everything, simply for the sake of exercising his new-found gift.

He was like a warrior who had been given a new sword, a marksman who has been presented with a new rifle, a musician who had been handed a Stradivarius for the first time. The feeling gradually subsided and settled down to a more mature usage of the language. Val was no longer brandishing his new verbal sword simply for the sake of brandishing it! He was no longer flourishing a violin bow of words simply to run up and down scales and arepeggios. He had ceased to sight the new rifle on any imagined, or fancied target, merely for the sake of sighting it. He wanted a real target for the gun that he wielded for the first time. He wanted music to play on the violin. He wanted an opponent with whom to duel with his newly acquired sword. It suddenly dawned on him just how volubly he had been speaking and he smiled a little. A lesser man would have been embarrassed. Stearman was too big to feel embarrassed. Stearman was the kind of man who could look at life with a breadth of judgement, and a width of vision so wide, and so great, that he could realise that he himself had done something incongruous or ingenuous, and yet his knowledge of human nature, gained both by introspection and by observation, told him that despite the incongruity and ingenuousness, of whatever it was that he had done, the thing was nevertheless understandable. It was the kind of verbal display which others with similar mentalities might have made, so Val Stearman was not embarrassed.

They walked from the induction building towards a central square, in the very heart of the city. Here

Val, and La Noire drew a little closer to MacIrraith and Hengist. There was a large building in the middle of the central square. It was obvious that their companions were guiding them in the general direction of this building. It had a rather over-bearing quality, a look of great dignity and importance. Val cast a questioning glance at the bearded Hengist.

"What is this place, do you know?"

"I think it's the seat of government," said Hengist, "we haven't met their leader yet," he added.

"You haven't?" said Val interrogatively.

Hengist shook his head.

"Looks as if we're going to, at any moment," said Val.

"I think that is very likely," agreed La Noire.

MacIrraith looked questioningly from Val to La Noire, and back again.

"I suppose," said Stearman, "all things being equal, we can regard it as something in the nature of a compliment!"

"Aye, perhaps we can," agreed MacIrraith.

The native Awanese humanoid on their immediate left, drew a little closer to Val, La Noire, and the two nuclear physicists. He smiled and pointed to the building.

"Zaw, our leader, has been looking forward to meeting you."

"Thank you," Val nodded. "I'm afraid I'm not very good on names, even terrestrial names that I'm accustomed to," he said.

"I am Vir," said the Awanese beside him, Val looked him up and down carefully, trying to judge him by terrestrial standards; he moved as a ballet dancer. He had a lithe, lissome grace. Stearman normally found that he was put off by anything that was too dainty, too graceful and too smooth. He would have regarded most ballet dancers as effeminate. He was a man to whom rugged masculinity was an all-important attribute. But, looking at this light, almost catlike Awanese, Val got the impres-

sion that the man was no weakling. There was a cat-like, almost leonine strength in the feline movement of the Awanese national, who called himself Vir.

They had reached the tall, imposing, central building. Val opened a door as Vir stood back and gestured him forward. In a situation like this, thought La Noire, looking at the broad, muscular outline of her husband's back, many men would have been hesitant, but not so Val Stearman. There was nothing false about his confidence, it was merely the confidence of a man who knows that his actions are justifiable. He moved with poise and serenity. In a few moments La Noire, Hengist and MacIlraith had followed Val into the central building, where Vir had told him they would encounter Zaw, the leader of the Awanese. Inside, Val hesitated for a moment, not because he was in the least nervous about proceeding further, but only to allow La Noire, Hengist and MacIlraith to catch up. He stood looking up at a high, domed ceiling, which reminded him more of a miniature planetarium than anything else he had ever seen; yet this dome was elongated. Val got the impression that he was standing at the base of a colossal spheroid. It was like looking up into a high cone, whose point, at the apex, had been rounded by the gentle application of sandpaper. It was like standing inside half a Rugby ball . . . As the others drew level with him again, Val reached out and took La Noire's hand. The dome was empty apart from the four terrestrial humanoids, and Vir, who now stood slightly behind them, and looked not a little obsequious, thought Val, but certainly diffident. There was a whirring noise, very faint and far away, as to be practically unheard; it grew louder with each passing second. The floor about thirty yards ahead of the place where Stearman and the others now stood, folded back on itself, like the opening and closing mechanism of a camera aperture. Val found it fascinating and a little frightening at the same time, to observe the aperture that

was now appearing in the floor ahead of him. The whirring noise stopped; the hole now stood at about ten feet in diameter and at that it remained constant.

Val, La Noire and the two nuclear physicists stood like Eskimo children round a hole in an ice floe, waiting for some nocturnal denizen of the frozen seas to appear. There was a hissing sound. Val thought of it as a pneumatic hissing. Up from some depth below them, a platform began to slide. There was a throne with a canopy over it. It looked very old, and, at the same time, very impressive. The platform continued to rise, until it stood about two feet above the level of the main floor on which Stearman and his companions were standing. Val started forward impetuously. Seated on the ancient throne was a tall, impressively robed figure, with a long white beard, and a pair of crystal lensed spectacles. They were thicker than any which Stearman had ever encountered, anywhere. The man wore some kind of conical crown on his head. It looked like the traditional head dress of a thirteenth century princess from mediæval Europe, thought Stearman. The figure held a long, translucent rod in his left hand. He held it out to each of them in turn, in some form of ceremonial greeting. Scarcely knowing why he did so, Val bowed respectfully. He saw that his companions were following suit, and that Vir had prostrated himself to the floor.

Zaw, the aged leader of the Awanese, rose slowly to his feet. It was obvious to Val and the other terrestrials that the aged leader of the humanoids on this strange planet of Polaris, did not rise without difficulty, yet, there was nothing doddering, shakey or senile, in his movements. He paused, breathing heavily for a moment, as though the effort of standing had tried him more than he had expected. The old eyes, behind their gargantuan spectacles, regarded Val, La Noire, and the others with a penetrating, searching, gaze.

"I bid you welcome. Xux and Yede have done very well with their experiment. I am a man without much time left, you will forgive me, therefore, if I come straight to the point. Without involving myself in a lengthy rigmarole of explanation, will you take my word for it that from time to time, our experiments in the 4th dimension have led us to an increasing knowledge of your planet.

Obviously no normal communications could have reached us via signals travelling at the speed of light. However, our experiments in the fourth dimension have brought us certain essential pieces of information about your planet. It has shown us something of the kind of people we might expect to encounter if our teleportation experiments were satisfactory and successful. Do I make myself clear?" He looked at La Noire and at the other three.

"We understand," murmured the girl. She looked at the leader. He drew a deep, rather shuddering breath, as though speaking tired him.

"I have stood to receive you, as guests. Perhaps you will now forgive me, if I resume my throne."

"Of course," agreed La Noire. "You needn't have stood really. We would have taken the thought for the deed."

"You are very kind, terrestrial lady," said the ancient ruler of the Awanese. His old eyes travelled searchingly round the group again, but he didn't move.

"It is fitting that my people should be represented by an old man, for we are an old race. Although your world closely resembles our planet insofar as we have been able to examine it, from such scraps of information as have percolated through to us from 4-D experiments, ours is a considerably *older* planet than your homely Earth. Because of its age we have become, not exactly senile, or effete, but we are no longer a sturdy, vigorous race, as you are yourselves. We look back on five million years of

recorded history. We have made as many mistakes as you have made—perhaps more—but we have also learned something of the folly, the futility, the unforgettable horror of war and destruction."

The old man paused. Val and La Noire, and the two nuclear physicists wondered what was coming next. He didn't keep them long in suspense.

"Although we do not believe in war, neither do we really believe in standing by helplessly while a race, too strange and inhuman to appreciate ethics and moral standards as we understand them, destroys us piecemeal . . ."

"And are you in such danger now?" asked Stearman. The resonant boom of his deep bass-baritone contrasted strangely with the thin tones of the aged Zaw, leader of the Awanese.

"We are in such danger now," affirmed Zaw.

"From where does this danger come?" asked Hengist.

"From another planet of our own system," replied Zaw, "from our neighbouring planet, in fact, from Barthis."

"What kind of creatures are the inhabitants of Barthis?" asked Stearman. "Surely, with a culture as old as yours, you must have a weapon technology which would . . ."

The old man shook his head sadly.

"No weapon technology. It is against our principles." Stearman's mind flashed back to the prewar days of disarmament and appeasement. The word 'Munich' flashed into his mind . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

*The Raid*

THERE was a sudden flashing of emergency screens all around the vast conical dome inside which Stearman and the others were talking to Zaw the ageing leader of the Awanese. The grey bearded patriarch turned with unexpected speed for so venerable a being.

"Quickly, quickly," he quavered, "stand close to the throne."

"Without stopping to argue Val and La Noire, Hengist and MacIlraith stepped on to the moving platform upon which the old man had ascended from the unknown depths that lay deep below this central Government building. The whirring sound began again and La Noire clung tightly to Val as she realised that the platform upon which they were standing was descending into the enigmatical pit from which it had descended originally, bearing the ancient ruler of Awan.

"What's happening?" asked Val. The danger signals were flashing on the screens all around. Stearman had the impression that he was a hapless, helpless fly which had wandered unsuspectingly into a pin-table arcade and had slipped down behind the glass of the auto-scoring mechanism on one of the machines. The flashing of the danger signals grew brighter, more vivid and increasingly frequent. There was a roar in the distance even as their peculiar platform took them below the level of the normal flooring of the building.

Val, La Noire and the two Nuclear physicists exchanged glances. "What's happened?" Val's deep bass baritone boomed the question undeniably in the direction of Zaw the aged leader of the Awanese humanoids.

"The Barthisians," said the ancient patriarch, "I fear it is the Barthisians." The shaft into which they were now descending seemed to be vibrating and trembling as the platform made its uneasy voyage downwards.

"It sounded like a nuclear explosion," said the bearded Hengist with commendable aplomb.

"I would agree with you for once," said Ian MacIlraith thinly and dourly.

Val looked at the two nuclear physicists with something that was little short of amazement. He too had suspected that the reverberating roars and thunderous fiendish crashing sounds were occasioned by a nuclear bombardment of some kind. Stearman was a man who had always prided himself on having at least his fair share of both moral and physical courage, but now he found himself on the blink of fear. And yet, in the same environment, in the same circumstances, he was listening to these two rather quarrelsome nuclear physicists calmly discussing the possibilities that the violent explosion which was rocking this subterranean shaft was of an atomic origin.

Val realised, that in referring to the shaft as being subterranean, he was subconsciously thinking in terrestrial terms. The shaft led from the ground, true, and they were moving equally into the ground but it was not a *subterranean* shaft. In all truth and honesty the word subterranean could only be employed, thought Val, for that which was under the *Earth*. A shaft which merely sank into Awan, 6th Planet of Polaris, was not *subterranean*, but *subawanean*.

"We shall soon be below the danger zone," said the venerable Zaw.

"I'm glad to hear it," said La Noire. She smiled. It was a brave smile and it had cost her a considerable effort of will. Val reckoned he knew as much about her as anyone could hope to know, and yet, even so, he felt he knew very little. But he did feel that the insight which he had gained into her mysterious and fascinatingly attractive character was sufficient to show him that even La Noire was perturbed by the nuclear weapons which were at that moment devastating and annihilating huge areas of the surface of Awan.

The platform, on which they were descending, sank for a few feet more, then came to rest.

"This is as far as we are able to travel on this particular vehicle," said the old Awanese potentate.

"I see," Val looked at him, questionally. "What do we do now?"

"Well, in a few moments, some of my young cour-tiers will arrive to convey us to a place of safety," said the old man. There was another fantastically loud explosion and a small piece of a hard, plastic-like material shook itself loose from the roof and fell almost at the feet of the enthroned patriarch. It had narrowly missed Val Stearman's cheek as it fell and he stooped now with a mixed feeling of hostility and curiosity and picked it up. He held the fragment a few feet away from the old patriarch as the whole group of terrestrial humanoids examined it. The old man stretched out a hand for it. Val, who had been able to make nothing of it, handed it across to him.

"We have a saying," murmured the old man quietly, "that when the roofs of the shelters begin to fall, then the days of the Awanese are numbered."

"Do you believe in such things?" asked Stearman.

"It's difficult to know what to believe in, when the Barthisians are throwing down atomic weapons of such power and such violence," mused the old man.

"Well?" asked La Noire.

"No, beautiful one," said the Awanese leader, "All is not well."

"That is not quite what I meant," said La Noire, gently.

"You must forgive the facetiousness of an old man, even if he is the ruler of a once-great nation. Nay, more, the ruler of a once-great planet." Old Zaw sighed, "Perhaps, at moments like these, it is all too easy to be critical. But, if one adds stringent, unbiased self criticism to the general castigation, then perhaps there is a certain amount of justice and fairness in the blame that one apportioned."

"Your words, obviously, cover a very deep meaning," said Hengist, and his beard wagged on his chest like the loose end of a horsehair sofa that had been attacked by a vicious dog.

"I mean only to imply," said the old man, "that it is easy for me now to stand and blame all those who have contributed to the failure of my people."

"You talk as if the war was over," said Stearman.

"It might as well be," said the old man.

"Why," said Val. "Surely you've got something to hit back with?"

The old man shook his head. "Not really," he said. "You see, these things, although well within the scope of our technology, are not within the sphere of the moral approval of my people." He was wheezing and gasping for breath.

"You mean, in the face of an annihilating attack," asked Val, incredulously, "you are prepared to sit and wait for death? You are prepared to resign yourselves to the inevitable?"

"I am prepared and my people are prepared," said the aged Zaw.

"God of the Universe!" exclaimed Stearman. "Why?"

"In your own exclamation, you have given the answer," said the aged one.

"I don't understand," said Val.

"Do you believe that a God of peace wants men to be at war?"

"I believe that there are times when war is justified," said Stearman.

"Never," said old Zaw.

"Look, on our own world," said Val, "we have beasts, savage beasts, lions, tigers, elephants. There are sharks in our seas, and eagles that fly in our mountain crags. There are predators, red in tooth and claw."

"There are such creatures on Awan," said the old man. "Where is this illustration leading us in our discussion?" he pursued, still breathing with difficulty.

"What I'm trying to say, is this," expostulated Stearman, "I would not be prepared to stand by and allow an eagle, a lion, a tiger or any other creature to destroy me."

"And neither would my people," said the old man. "Your simile is not a perfect parallel."

"But these aliens, these Barthisians who are attacking you," said Stearman. "You're a peaceful people, but surely you're not going to stand by and allow them to destroy you without a fight?"

The old man signed, "No," he said, and left the sentence unfinished. Only the negative monosyllable had been spoken.

"What are you going to do?" asked Stearman. The ground was still shaking, rattling and roaring all around them.

"We have done all that can be done," said the old man, rather sadly.

"I just don't understand you," said Val. "It doesn't make sense to me."

"Ah, but it makes sense to my people," said the old man. Stearman shook his head.

"How?" he said. "Why? I want to ask you a thousand questions and there just aren't enough words."

"We have waged a *defensive* war," panted the old

man, "A defensive war, don't . . . don't you understand?"

"I don't," said Stearman.

The old man held out the fragment which had fallen from the underground chamber in which they were now.

"Remember the saying I quoted to you? When this falls . . ." the old man paused. Something that might have been a tear shone in his aged eyes, trickled down the cheek behind the thick, crystal spectacles, ". . . when this falls, we fall. This has been a defensive war," he repeated. "Our whole city was domed against them. Domed with a material that had been considered impregnable by many foes. Surely on your planet there are creatures that retire into their shells or behind prickly or scaly armours when danger threatens?"

"There are such creatures, yes," said Stearman. "There is the hedgehog, the armadillo, the hermit crab."

The old man nodded. "Such things might be. There are similar things here on Awan," he said.

"Now I still don't see what you're driving at," said Val.

"Do you think that this is really the time or the place, to become involved in lengthy dialectic?" asked La Noire. Val flashed her a swift, understanding glance.

"You're probably right, darling," he said, out of the side of his mouth. There was a long, thoughtful pause. Hengist and MacIlraith were looking at the white-bearded patriarch. He had a dignity that nothing could take from him.

"The defensive war," he said, suddenly and without quaver, "is a war in which even the most pure and gentle pacifists can join. A defensive war," he continued, "does *not* consist of striking a blow only in retaliation, but of *not striking a blow at all*, of building instead, an impregnable fence through which your enemy will be unable to penetrate."

"I think I begin to see a little of what you're trying to get at," said Stearman.

"If you find," went on the old man, sadly addressing his remarks more to the damaged ceiling than to Val or any of the rest of the terrestrial humanoids, "that your impregnable defences are no longer impregnable, then you have lost such a defensive war."

"I think I understand you," said Hengist. "When it is possible to retire behind your domes and your barricades, and into your underground shelters, you can let your enemy do his worst, but as you are taking no harm from it, or at least, no serious harm, then you can consider yourself as winning such a war, for time is on your side. Although the destruction that the enemy is doing is costing you dear, it is obviously not possible to inflict vast damage on skilfully constructed defences, not without enormous economic expense, no matter in what economic units that expense is measured."

"True," quavered the old patriarch; the eyes behind the thick crystal turned in the direction of the bearded nuclear physicist. "True," he repeated.

"This concerns the reasons for our sending for you," whispered the old man.

There was the noise of an efficient trolley-like apparatus arriving from some point along the long passage in which they all stood.

"Ah, my young men have come to bear us to a safer level," said the old patriarch.

"I can't say that I think highly of your security arrangements," said Stearman. The old man laughed.

"There is no security anywhere left on Awan," he said, in a voice that might have been tinged with dry irony. "There was a time when we felt the domes alone were more than enough. Now we know that they are like tissue paper. The weapons which our enemy is able to launch against us are far too strong and far too numerous." He looked at Hengist, "You

thought, perhaps because I was the leader of a great nation, I should say perhaps, a once-great nation—that I would have had a special safety arrangement." He shook his head, "Although you see my people treat me with deference and diffidence, it is not because they fear me, but my office is loved and respected. We regard each other here as brothers and as equals. The life of any citizen is worth no more and no less than the life of any other citizen. True, in certain aspects, I represent the State, but I am only a representative. Anyone could represent the State, I am only a symbol, a figurehead. If I was killed, other symbols, other figureheads would be found. I would not feel happy if I had an arrangement to shelter in some extra-deep and well-shielded spot while my people were exposed to the hazards of the aliens from Barthia."

"I understand and admire your courage," said Val Stearman softly.

"I think, perhaps you are too lavish with your praise," said the old man, "But come, now that my younger courtiers have arrived they will lead us to one of the points where the others are gathered."

With their 'subterranean' tunnels rocking and vibrating in the Barthisian nuclear bombardment, Val, La Noire, the two nuclear physicists and the quietly serene old patriarch of Awan sped along on the strange vehicles in which the young men had come to find him and to convey him to a safer place.

Hengist, sitting next to MacIlraith, was looking very thoughtful. Their pensive appearance was by no means lost on the observant Stearman.

"Something going through your mind?" he said.

"Yes . . . yes, there is," said Hengist.

"You understand now, why we sent for you," said the old man, as though, he, too, had divined some small reflection of the thought which was occupying the brilliant minds of the terrestrial atomic scientists.

"I have a plan," said Hengist. "You see, Mac-

Ilraith and I, despite certain differences, have been engaged on a new piece of research, a piece of research which I believe might prove fundamental to the problems which are confronting the Awanese."

The old man looked towards them, eagerly. "Tell me," he quavered, "Tell me of this plan."

They moved on into the darkness of the trembling tunnel . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Modification*

THE nuclear barrage continued to thunder, to crash and to reverberate all around them. Hengist and MacIlraith, specialists that they were, made educated guesses at the kind of havoc which the bombs were producing. Zaw, the aged leader of the Awanese seemed to be collapsing strangely within himself and his ancient physique appeared to be imploding. It was as though the atoms, molecules, living cells and body tissues of his ancient frame were all falling into one another and into themselves.

Val had never seen a man ageing so quickly.

"My people." Zaw's voice was faint and distant like the sound of a lonely bell at sunset. "My people," he whispered again. "All that we have lived for here on Awan, all that we have hoped for, everything that we have worked for, the totality of our national existence, *finished*." The word slid through his lips as though embalmed and enveloped by some lubricant poison. "It is *all* finished," he whispered again.

"No," said Hengist softly. "It is not finished. MacIlraith looked at him strangely, the bearded nuclear scientist looked back at his tall, slender Scottish colleague and then at Stearman and La Noire. "You are Awanese and we are terrestrials," said Hengist,

"but whatever those things are out there, those Barthisians who are attacking you, do not be afraid."

Hengist spoke like a man possessed. Stearman looked at him in surprise.

"What are you getting at?" asked the big journalist adventurer.

"As I said," went on Hengist, "we are terrestrials, you are Awanese, but we are all human, we have more in common than we realise at this stage."

The other man seemed to stop collapsing, the eyes glittered again and he looked at Hengist.

"What are you saying?" There was a note that might have been hope in his voice.

"I am saying that I have a plan," said Hengist.

"A plan," echoed MacIlraith.

"What is this plan?" asked Stearman.

"'A man with a plan is a dangerous man,'" quoted La Noire. They looked at her, "I'm sorry," she said, "it seemed to come out so naturally I just couldn't help quoting it then."

"I like it," said MacIlraith.

"You mean you haven't heard it before?" said La Noire, "it's old."

"A man with a plan is a dangerous man," repeated the Scottish nuclear physicist, "yes I definitely like it." There was silence for a few moments. Stearman found himself looking questioningly around the group.

"How long do you think it will be before your defences are breached completely?" asked Hengist.

"Oh they may hold for a few years in some of the deepest spots," said the aged Zaw, with unfounded optimism.

"That's at the best," prompted Stearman. "What about the worst?"

"Three or four bombardments like this and they could collapse tomorrow. Before the three pink moons have left the sky all could be down," answered Zaw.

"I see," said Val.

"My plan briefly," said Hengist speaking as though he were addressing nothing more dangerous than an annual convention of the Royal Society, "is this."

Despite the roaring and the cataclysmic explosions shaking their underground sanctuary, Stearman, La Noire and the others found themselves listening to Hengist as he began to outline his plan.

Almost as though the two nuclear physicists were in some kind of telepathic communication, Hengist and MacIraith developed the later stages of the scheme between them. Although MacIraith's interpolations and interjections were quite spontaneous and involuntary, Val, La Noire and even the aged Zaw, leader of the Awanese, gleaned the impression that they were listening to a highly polished dialogue. Val felt his expression changing as he listened to the plan Hengist and MacIraith were unfolding.

"To sum it up then," said the bearded nuclear physicist, and his eyes were agleam with enthusiasm as he spoke, "you've got moral scruples that prevent you from turning this defensive war of yours into an aggressive war."

"Yes that is so," said the aged Zaw.

"To meet aggression with aggression would mean to surrender those ethical values and moral standards which, to us are more than life," broke in one of the young Awanese.

"I think I understand a great deal of this," echoed Stearman.

"I will continue with my summing up," said Hengist.

"By all means," said Val. He lapsed into silence as the nuclear physicist continued.

"The problem is to survive in an environment which will not permit a survival of Awanese humanity or," and here he shrugged his shoulders resignedly, "*terrestrial* humanity."

"Who or what can then survive?" asked old Zaw

rhetorically. He spread his arms in a gesture of resignation.

"Who can survive?" said Hengist, and he too was using the words rhetorically. "This is the whole point of my argument; this is the core and the essence of what I have been saying. Look, this is my plan, *modification*, and the modification of human beings. It must be possible for science to treat a man in such a way that he is able to withstand colossal doses of radiation. Don't you remember," he turned to Val, "the poisons on Earth?"

"What am I supposed to remember about poisons back on Earth?" asked Stearman.

"You're not being very helpful," said Hengist, he sounded angry.

"I don't quite follow you at the moment," said Stearman.

"Poisons back on Earth," said Hengist. He was not speaking as fluently or coherently as he might have been and Val was a little annoyed.

The reverberations and crashing vibrations of the almost ceaseless nuclear bombardment, which were shaking the planet, were wearing down even Val Stearman's iron nerves.

"It's like this," said Hengist. The others looked at him expectantly. He drew a deep breath. "A team of nuclear physicists working with a team of biologists could produce the necessary modifications."

"What about these old terrestrial poisons?" said Stearman, "you didn't finish that remark."

"No. No I didn't," said Hengist, "the poisons. I was going to say that although some are cumulative, others seem to teach the human body how to build up a tolerance to them."

"Ah, I see what you're getting at," said Val. He stroked his chin thoughtfully and looked at the bearded Hengist, the tall, dour MacIraith and the sad old figure of Zaw, aged leader of the Awanese.

"You want to subject a number of my people to various biological and nuclear treatments so that

they will be able to survive in an atomic aftermath," said the old man. The way he phrased it, the words sounded as though they were part question and part statement.

"That is the long and short of it," said Hengist.

"I would have to give long and careful consideration to the moral and ethical aspects of this," quavered the old man.

"There won't be time to give long and lengthy consideration to anything," said Hengist.

The crashing reverberation of the nuclear bombardment on the surface above them gave an awful import and significance to his words.

"No there won't," said the old man.

They moved on through deeper and deeper labyrinths of underground defence works. Looking at them Stearman did not need all his shrewdness or his trained powers of journalistic observation to see that they had been made during different periods of Awanese history.

"Your people have believed in defensive wars for a long time?" He raised one eyebrow interrogatively in the direction of Zaw. The old Awanese nodded.

"For a very long time," he replied.

Val continued to stare about him at the passage ways through which they were travelling. It was obvious to the big journalist-adventurer that Zaw's thoughts were engrossed with the idea which Hengist and MacIlraith had put forward. The vehicle in which they were moving came to rest and a number of Awanese humanoids moved swiftly towards them. Willing, reverent, deferential hands aided the old patriarch to a seat of greater comfort and safety. He nodded and smiled his thanks to his people then he looked questioningly at Hengist.

"Your idea, will it modify the mind or change the ethic?"

"I will not pretend that it will leave the mind and the ethical development, which is dependent on mind.

entirely as they are," said Hengist with commendable frankness.

"At least you are honest," quavered the aged Zaw. "I can appreciate honesty."

"But even if there are certain modifications which are an essential by-product of the plan I have suggested," said Hengist in an impassioned voice, "surely, surely," he repeated "it is worth it. You said a little while ago that it was the finish for your people. Ask them now. Ask them whether they would rather have modified survivors or no survivors at all. Ask them what they think. You are their leader; you have their interests at heart. You more than anyone else should care about survival."

"I do not want survival of the wrong kind," said the old man. "Survival for survival's sake is of no use. If I could live as a worm or a slug, and I use terms which must be as familiar to you as they are to me for I know from the experience of the astronauts of our race, that such creatures are practically ubiquitous wherever life exists." He broke off short. "What was I saying?" he quavered.

"You were saying that you would rather not survive as a slug or worm," said Stearman.

"That's right, that's right," said the old man. He had lost a great deal of majesty and poise. He looked a tired and resigned old man, nothing more—nothing less, and yet, though a lot of his power seemed to have fallen from him, although a certain part of his personality had appeared to collapse and disintegrate there was still a certain tragic dignity about him. He made Val Stearman think of a theatrical representation of King Priam of Troy.

"Ask your people," persisted Hengist desperately, "ask them. Take this random selection here; I'm not a statistician but a nuclear physicist; take a random sample and ask yourself whether or not they echo the views of the rest."

Old Zaw seemed overawed to some extent by the terrestrial nuclear physicist's words.

"Very well," he said, "I will question my random sample." He beckoned to one of the Awanese humanoids. "Come here." The man bowed low before his leader apparently quite unaffected by the roaring vibrating sound of the bombs which were still falling. "Tell me," said the old leader, "if our race could be changed, if some of our people could be changed medically so that as a result of the treatment they were able to withstand radiation, so that they could survive after this awful destruction, would you think that this would be a good thing?"

"It would depend where the changes were made, O great one," said the Awanese to whom Zaw spoke.

"You have answered well," said the old man.

"If only small changes were made," broke in Hengist.

"Then perhaps," said the Awanese, "I would think it a good thing."

"He is choosing life in preference to death," said MacIlraith.

"But not the life of the worm or slug," cautioned old Zaw.

"How great would these changes be, O mighty one," asked the Awanese who was being questioned by his leader.

"That we do not know," said Zaw.

"Then, Lord, I would say that I was in favour of the idea which the strangers have put to us, but with reservations."

"You see!" said Hengist, "ask some more. Ask any of your people, *any* of them. I knew that human beings were not so very different on our planet or on yours; they love life; they want life. They want light, not darkness; they don't want to die."

"Death comes in the end," said old Zaw, "it has a certain terrible inevitability, a dark inevitability."

"It need not come to everybody unless you decree it so," challenged Hengist.

"Very well, if you think there is anything you can do at this stage." Some of the old man's power seem-

ed to have rallied a little. He was trembling as he addressed Hengist. "Our teleportation brought you here in the hope that you would have ideas, in the hope that your fresh minds, other humanoid minds sympathetic to ours, could provide some sort of a solution. You have provided a solution for us."

"This teleportation," said MacIlraith, "couldn't you evacuate your planet? Couldn't your people come to Earth via these teleportation machines?"

"Ah!" said the old man with a weary sigh, "would that they could, think of the time! The area is so limited. It would be like trying to squeeze a thousand tons of toothpaste through the nozzle of one tube."

"Yes that would create quite a problem," said Stearman, "even for a strong man." La Noire laughed.

"Probably isn't a very humorous time," she said, "but I can't help seeing the incongruity of the simile."

Old Zaw was nodding his head.

"Incongruity," he echoed sounding like an advanced case of echolalia.

"The problem would be to select a small group of your people," said Hengist, "who would be willing to take part in this experiment."

"If they know the choice is the experiment or certain death as a result of the Barthisian atomic weapons," said the slim, dour MacIlraith, "then I don't think they will need much persuading."

"You do not know my people as well as I do," said the aged Zaw.

"This teleportation machine," said Hengist. He turned to MacIlraith. "The idea that we had interests me a great deal but there is no need for all of us to stay here, if the machine is still functioning."

"There is certain essential experimental equipment deep below the surface," said the old man.

"I would like our friends sent back to Earth," said Hengist.

"Wait a minute," said Stearman, "I'm not putting up with that; you are not sending me back to Earth."

"What else?" Hengist shrugged his shoulders and looked at Val and La Noire questioningly. Stearman and his wife exchanged glances.

"What about you and MacIlraith?" asked Val.

"We shall stay here for a time to work on the modifications," said Hengist.

"This all requires a certain amount of clarification and recapitulation in the mind," said Stearman, but as he spoke bombs continued to fall. "You and MacIlraith want to stay here and work this scheme of yours for adapting and modifying, or helping people to adapt and modify themselves, to the enormous level of radiation which will be present on the surface should they ever reach it again."

"Correct," said MacIlraith.

Stearman looked at the two nuclear physicists searchingly.

"If we are successful," said MacIlraith, "if this idea works, then it would be possible for you to come back, we could use the teleportation machines."

"But this may take years," said Stearman, "years," he repeated. "Now look we are in this adventure as much as you are and we will stay here and see it through."

"Your friend is right," quavered the aged leader of the Awanese.

"It is my command that you go back, we have no right to keep you here to face death with us. You are human as we are but your humanity is not quite the same as ours; you were born on a different world."

"I'm not sure that we want to go," said La Noire. Bombs continued to fall.

"Mind you," said Val with a friendly infectious lopsided grin, "I wouldn't go so far as to say that this is the most healthy and welcoming place that I have ever visited." The old man smiled at them rather sadly and wryly.

"If you could have seen us," he said sadly, "during some epochs of our history you would have thought that this place was a veritable paradise—a heaven, a planet of Elysian fields *but not any more.*"

"No," said Val grimly.

"Not any more," echoed the old man.

Val looked questioningly at La Noire.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Let me put my case a little more selfishly," said Hengist, "the idea of trying to work out some kind of modification which would enable a remnant at least of the Awanese humanoids to survive what these Barthisians are doing, would be to give them some kind of immortality. To give them at least some hope of revival, of survival," he corrected himself stressing and emphasizing his point with swift significant gestures.

Stearman looked at him waiting for him to complete the thread of the argument.

"Now, if this doesn't come off," went on MacIlraith "it will mean that we shan't come back to tell the story. And, if we fail to come back, then I believe that just as the Awanese are entitled to make their attempt to preserve at least a few of their people, albeit in a slightly modified form, then we can have our try for a little eternity too. We can reach out and grasp for the worthwhile."

"What exactly are you saying now?" asked La Noire; her eyes, deep, receptive and mysterious, rested on the two nuclear scientists.

"I was saying that if you and your husband go back to Earth, Mrs. Stearman," said the dour MacIlraith, sounding strangely formal as he spoke, "then, at least, if what we do comes to nothing we shall have the satisfaction of knowing someone has chronicled our attempt."

"It is better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all," quoted Hengist into his beard.

"Of course all this pre-supposes that our teleportation equipment is still in some kind of func-

tioning order. I said that we had some experimental stuff at the deeper levels," said the old man, "but there is no guarantee that even that has escaped."

Val shook hands suddenly, impulsively with Hengist, his grip was firm.

"All right," said Stearman, "I'll let myself be talked into a trip back to Earth, if you can make it."

They found the Awanese teleportation experts again and almost before they realised what was happening Val and La Noire were submerged once more in that weird maelstrom of greyness that plunged them between the worlds back to Earth.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Reappearance

THE Senior Common Room of the Hemmingate Atomic Research Establishment was as effectively sealed off as an Edwardian fever hospital. The members of the Establishment entitled to use that room had moved *en bloc* to another section of the Establishment building. They had not moved without considerable grumbling. Men who have, in the course of their work, to spend a great deal of time in limited recreational circumstances, become particularly attached to a favourite chair or table. Even the angle at which a piece of furniture obtrudes from the wall can be quite a serious matter . . .

To be disrupted completely by being told that the Common Room is no longer available, had had a marked effect on a number of the most valuable and important research workers on the whole of the

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and today I have won £232 10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931"

## JOAN THE WAD



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER  
FROM THE LUCKY SAINTS' WELL

"For 10 years I have enjoyed the most unbelievable good fortune and have always had my J.T.W. by me. Unfortunately I have lost her and feel exactly as if I had lost a human relative. My friend tells me b s wife's mother has had Joan for 40 years and would not part with her for all the tea in China."

**SUCCESS FOR SEVEN YEARS.** Another writes . . . "I sent for Joan the Wad seven years ago, during which time I have had many wins on Pools, including one of £72 2s. 0d. and another of £542 15s. 0d. I lost Joan and things immediately began to go wrong. Please send me another, for which I enclose P.O. 6s." Mr. D. H. R., Greatham, Hants. 26.1.56.

**WON HOLIDAY CONTEST.** Mrs. B. E. H., of Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, writes, 12.4.56 . . . "I really feel I must write and tell you of my good fortune. After having J.T.W. for only a month or so I have just won a Holiday Contest and I feel I owe my good luck to the little lady. It has made me feel very happy."

**ANOTHER POOLS WINNER.** "Please send me 3 Histories. Enclosed is 3s. I want them for friends. By the way, you may be interested to know that I had only received my J.T.W. two weeks when I won £1,000 on the Football Pools—thanks to Joan the Wad, and since I have sent for 4 others for friends and now want 3 more as soon as possible please," writes Mrs. E. M., of Seabington, Cheshire, 6.2.56.

**COMPLETELY CURED. FOUND A JOB. PROMOTION TWICE. OWN HOME.** Mrs. D. J., of Stockport, writes, 29.5.56: "On coming to England 24 years ago we were dogged by ill-luck. A friend told me I ought to have 'Joan' for my husband and 'Jack O' Lantern' for myself. I did, and from that very week all our luck changed for the better. My husband was a very sick man and is now completely cured. He had no job, and very soon he got a job and promotion twice. I myself bettered my position. We are now in our own house, which we are succeeding to buy. We are a happy and most contented little family and attribute all our present happiness and success to J.T.W. and J.O.L. Thank you for all you have done for us. I tell everyone about it."

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Hemmingate project. Nuclear physicists, particularly experimental nuclear physicists, require a degree of concentration which would tend to make most other men's mental absorption look trivial by comparison. The peculiar psycho-somatic chemistry of the human body is so arranged that emotional disturbances affect the ability to concentrate, and the Hemmingate psychiatrist was busy working himself towards grey hairs and ulcers. So far, the loss of the common room had not resulted in any kind of major upheaval, but the 'head-shrinker' was prone to watch his charges with the vigilance of an affectionate old broody hen that has a number of lame chicks in its charge.

Donovan, the psychiatrist, was talking to Colonel Stephen Dawson. They were strolling together in the direction of the cordoned-off common room.

"I must admit," he said, speaking quietly, "that this whole affair has baffled me completely." Dawson shrugged his shoulders and turned to Mick Donovan for help and sympathy. "I sent for Stearman because I thought he was the one man who could untangle it, and now he's gone! I just don't know what we're going to do!"

"There has to be some kind of logical, rational explanation," rejoined the psychiatrist. He frowned thoughtfully.

"Has there?" demanded Dawson. "Hengist and MacIlraith vanished as though the floor had opened and swallowed them up. Stearman and his wife investigate the common room and they vanish!"

"When I said 'there had to be a logical and rational explanation,'" said the psychiatrist, "I didn't necessarily mean one that was understandable in terms of our science."

"What are you advocating, then?" asked the security colonel. "Do you suspect little green men with vortices, or all the other weird things that science fiction writers like?"

"Has it ever occurred to you," said the psychia-

trist, "that well over seventy per cent. of the ideas which spring from reputable science fiction authors, ultimately find their way into our society? Look at Jules Vern and the submarine. Take G. H. Wells and the ideas that he put forward."

"Yes, I'll give you a point there," admitted Dawson, but I feel that seventy per cent. is putting the figure very high."

"Science fiction of to-day changes into the science fact of tomorrow," said Donovan. He was a tall, almost rapier thin individual, with a pair of very large, round, horn-rimmed spectacles balanced on a beaky nose. He had the gaunt, rather protruding forehead of the kind of intellectual who is often portrayed as a revolutionary in Right Wing cartoons. The psychiatrist, however, felt that his appearance was a living label upon him. He knew that he had a gaunt, and rather bird-like look, often as he glanced in his shaving mirror, he formed a picture of himself which was a cross between the 'lean and hungry' Cassius of Shakespeare's "Caesar," and a lonely stork looking for the roof of a maternity hospital.

The psychiatrist paused. They were a few feet from the cordon of blue uniformed security men, demarcating the area which Colonel Stephen Dawson no longer considered safe. Beyond it, a neatly lettered sign, "Senior Common Room" seemed almost mockingly inappropriate. The psychiatrist pointed to the board, its lettering discernible in the moonlight, augmented as it was by the powerful illumination of the project itself. Darkness had little or no chance at Hemmingate!

"I would have thought," said Mick Donovan, with a touch of Irish humour, "that you would have done well to have labelled that place the 'un-Common Room'."

"Very funny," returned Dawson. He turned to the nearest of the waiting, watching, security cordon.

"Nothing happened, I suppose?"

"No, sir, not that we're aware of," answered a sergeant.

"All right." Donovan and the security colonel made their way round the side of the cordon. There was a sudden, violent noise from the common room, a shout, and the sound of furniture going over.

"I thought that place was empty!" snapped Dawson. "Who's inside there?" He paused. "I gave strict orders . . ."

"There's no one in there, sir," replied the security sergeant, looking up respectfully but adamantly at his colonel.

"You mean there wasn't anyone inside," murmured the psychiatrist. "There must be somebody there now, unless it's a poltergeist phenomenon."

"That," he said drily, "would be all we need! *Poltergeists!*"

The security colonel's gun was in his hand. A number of blue uniformed men stood peering tensely towards the doorway of the common room. A micro-second later there was another crash, another shout, a stumbling sound . . . then a man and a woman emerged, blinking a little in the strong light.

The man was tall, well over six feet, he didn't look his height because of his gargantuan barrel chest, and enormously wide shoulders. The woman, although she was blinking and stumbling a little in the strong light for a few seconds, had about her a grace, a charm and an allure that seemed both timeless and indestructible, even to a casual observer.

Stephen Dawson's observers were far from casual! The security chief ran forward as he recognised Val Stearman and La Noire.

"Val! Val!" he shouted, scarcely able to control the emotion in his voice.

Stearman shook his head a little as though to clear it, and then waved cheerfully.

"Hello, Steve!"

The big journalist-adventurer's voice was as deep, powerful and sonorous, as ever.

"What's been happening?" asked Dawson.

"A lot of things!" replied Val, "and that's the under statement of the decade, possibly the understatement of the century!"

Dawson hesitated a few feet away from Stearman, and looking at him, Val realised that the security officer, the official, the man of duty, dressed in discipline, had taken over from the Steve Dawson who was Stearman's personal friend.

"Val," said Steve, and his hand slid down to the top of his revolver.

"Yes?" Stearman raised an eyebrow interrogatively. "Val, I'm going to have to regard you as a suspect for the time being."

"What on earth for, Steve?" asked La Noire.

"It's pretty obvious," put in Stearman, turning to his wife.

"I—I don't understand, Val!" She looked bewildered for a moment, but even bewilderment did not cloud the beauty of her face. Then she seemed to realise all at once the significance of Colonel Dawson's words, illuminating her mind in one clear flash that was so sudden it might almost have been a telepathic communication, with Val. She nodded her lovely head, and the softly waving, Cleopatrine black hair moved deliciously across her shoulders.

"Val," she said suddenly, "they suspect that something's happened to us." She was speaking hesitantly and although her voice had lost none of its rich, exciting quality, there was a certain sadness in it. She looked at Stephen Dawson with an expression that was close to being reproachful. Then, slowly the expression changed.

"All right, Stephen, you've got your job to do," said La Noire. "What do you want us to do?"

"Val—La Noire—" Dawson was looking desperately from one to the other, "please don't make this any harder for me than it has to be, anyway . . . Put yourself in my position. It's not generally known outside the security organization, but—well—there

are certain regulations in force that have been drawn up in advance to deal with the possibility of alien invasion. One of the eventualities with which we have tried to cope, in the regulations, is the possibility of someone *Out There* taking over a human mind, a human body, or both . . ."

"So you think we may have been taken over by aliens?" Val shrugged a little, his face broke into a lop-sided grin.

"Look, Steve, this is going to be very difficult to prove, or disprove, one way or the other. Maybe it won't be too hard because we've been friends for a long time, because we know each other well. At the same time, this is the kind of situation, which could develop into something insurmountably difficult. Can't you see that if this got out of hand it could become a mania, a witch hunt; it could be a kind of invisible Nazi-ism or MacCarthyism!"

"Yes, I do realise all these things," said Stephen Dawson, "but I still have to comply with the regulations. I have already said I'm sorry. I *am* sorry! You came at my invitation, heaven alone knows what you've been through since you vanished, but regulations are regulations! When the circumstances are particularly mysterious, then it is necessary for certain safety proceedings to be put into effect. I consider that the circumstances here are sufficiently strange and any other security officer here would agree with me for me to have to bring these new regulations into effect."

"It's odd," mused Stearman, "it's both odd and ironic, that the fussy, foisty, slow-moving wheels of officialdom and red tape, which exist even throughout the Intelligence Department, should have moved ahead in this one particular sphere. Normally we are hide-bound by regulations which were formulated about the time of the Zulu War!"

Steve Dawson allowed himself a thin, brief smile.

"I guess I asked for that," he said, sounding apologetic.

"I realise you have a job to do," said Stearman, "but all the realisation in the world doesn't make it any easier from my point of view. I came back with a great deal of information. I have an almost incredible story to tell."

Steve Dawson nodded, "I can imagine that," he agreed.

"Now," went on Stearman, "you tell me that the new security regulations devised to meet the possibility of encounter with non-terrestrial intelligence—" he paused, then completed the sentence differently, "you tell me that because of these pettifogging regulations, I have to go into some sort of quarantine until you can decide whether or not La Noire and I are in possession of our faculties, and have not been taken over by an alien." He glared at Dawson angrily. "What are you going to do? Get a priest and exorcise me in case I've got hold of an evil spirit from somewhere? Are you going to get some 'trick cyclist', or pet head-shrinker, to come and tap me on the knee with a rubber hammer?"

Mick Donovan flinched at the biting sarcasm. Steve Dawson have become grimly silent.

He looked petulant.

"Would you be good enough to go over to that building there, Val." His voice sounded strangely formal.

"All right, if that's the way you want it," replied Stearman. "Come on, darling," he put his arm around La Noire's waist and led her in the direction of the hut which Steve had indicated. There was a low whispering, a kind of sullen murmur among the blue uniformed security men. Stearman could feel a fear and hostility, oozing out of them. He turned and spoke over his shoulder.

"Steve," he said, "I hope you know what you're doing!"

"I think I know what I'm doing," retorted Dawson.

"Remember what I said about witch hunts. You

pointed a finger at us, Steve; I think it's not justified and it's not fair."

"I think it is justified," returned Dawson. "How do I know that something from out there isn't sitting in your mind?"

"You've said all that once," roared Stearman, and he looked at the grim ranks of blue uniformed security men. He did a swift mental calculation. Val Stearman was not a victim of false modesty, neither was he a man who over estimated his tremendous ability. He knew that without exaggerating his own prowess he could have dealt with any six men, armed or unarmed. But there were more than six security police. And besides, Val realised that taking a swing at authority, as represented by the security forces, was a vastly different thing from taking a swing at the ranks of the ungodly, as he liked to think of the opposition. The ranks of the ungodly were split, were isolated units, distinct from one another. True, there had been occasions when vying factions of Black Magicians, cheap crooks, and various other unpleasant specimens, had united, temporarily, against Stearman. These alliances had been transient, and very short lived. Val knew that if he struck against Steve Dawson's security forces at the Hemmingate research station, he would be putting himself outside the pale. He would be putting himself in a completely invidious position. And Stearman, whatever his other faults, preferred to stay inside the pale. He wanted to be on the side of the angels. It was essential; some vital ingredient in Val Stearman's deepest ego had to be acceptable. For Val Stearman to be acceptable did not carry the meaning that was understood by lesser mortals. Acceptability, to Val, was a quality, an asset of character, which meant that, viewed broadly and generously, his actions, in his own eyes, and from the standpoint of that greater ethic and vaster moral, were good rather than bad. Val himself would have been almost at a loss to define the con-

cept of acceptability as he himself understood it. But it meant something definite and significant *to him*. As it was primarily his concern as long as he had himself understood it, his inability to define it was not as serious a hazard or drawback, as it might have been.

He reached the door of the building to which Steve Dawson had pointed. He opened it, and stood back to allow La Noire to go inside.

"This machinery of yours, Steve, what is it? What sort of test have we got to go through?"

Dawson came a little closer.

"Difficult for me to explain this to you now, Val, after the unpleasant remark you made about psychiatrists."

"I see. A 'head shrinker'! And who is this worthy gentleman?"

"I don't believe you've met Mick Donovan, have you?" Steve Dawson indicated the tall, slim, bespectacled individual beside him.

"All the trappings," said Stearman. "Bulging forehead, big round glasses, earnest expression! *Ach!*"

"I gather you don't like psychiatrists, Mr. Stearman?" said Mick Donovan, with an accent that dripped Irishness, like the Blarney Stone itself.

"I'm not in love with them as a breed, but I think I've reached that point of discrimination and maturity which enables me to dislike a thing, in the abstract, without disliking the people who are attached to it," replied Val.

The psychiatrist nodded. "Fair enough. I'll take it in the spirit in which it was meant," he said.

"With a name like Donovan, and an accent like that," said Stearman, challengingly, as Donovan admitted himself to the building with them, and closed the door behind him, "you ought to be Irish; are you?" It was a joke, rather than a question. It was a wise-crack rather than an interrogation.

"Yes, I'm Irish," agreed Donovan.

"As long as you don't start talking like a music-hall Irishman, I shan't mind," said Val. "I think a genuine Irish accent is one of the most beautiful and musical sounds I have ever heard, but if every third sentence ends with 'begorrah' and 'to be sure' I shall begin to suspect that you are spurious."

"And you'd be right to suspect it, as well!" agreed the psychiatrist.

Steven Dawson stood outside the hut, as Stearman went on answering Mick Donovan's questions, with half his mind giving attention. The other part of him was racing ahead. It was ice-cool, but it was moving at tremendous speed. This part of his mind seemed to Val to resemble a jet air liner flying high through an icy sky. Speed combined with coolness; Val was thinking that it would be necessary to pull something really exceptional out of the bag if he was going to extricate both La Noire and himself from their present highly unenviable situation. He interrupted the psychiatrist's flow of questions.

"Do you think you could get Colonel Dawson in here a minute?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes, I expect so," answered Donovan, "Steve!"

"What's the matter?" asked Dawson.

"Can you come in here a minute?" asked Donovan, unsuspectingly. Steve opened the door of the building and closed it again behind him; he stood a few inches away from Stearman.

"What is this?" asked Dawson.

"I don't know. It seemed a reasonable enough request, there seemed no reason why you shouldn't comply with it," said Donovan.

"All right, I'm honestly sorry, Val. I've given this a lot of thought, all the time you've been talking to Mick I've been thinking."

"All right!" said Stearman. "You've been thinking." He put a hand out slowly as though to shake. The colonel looked at it suspiciously for a second, and then they shook hands, solemnly.

"All is forgiven what happened on peace night,

eh?" said Stearman, quoting the Cockney line with a dour smile. "See that fellow there," Stearman pointed to the nearest of the guards.

"The sergeant, you mean?"

"Yes. I'd like a word with him."

Donovan looked at him. He seemed rather puzzled.

"All right," agreed Dawson. "Sergeant!" he called. The subordinate security officer came across.

"I'd like to shake hands with you," said Stearman. The sergeant looked a bit dubious, and cast a questioning glance at his colonel.

"All right," said Dawson.

The sergeant held out his hand as though Stearman's massive right mauler was red hot.

Val shook hands with him formally, and then released his grip.

"That's all I wanted, thank you, Steve," he said. "I'll have another brief word with your psychiatrist now." Dawson looked at him a little suspiciously, a little reluctantly, a little reproachfully.

"I don't get this," he said.

"Perhaps you will in a few minutes," replied Val, "at least, I hope so . . ."

The colonel moved out and rejoined the cordon outside the isolated senior Common Room.

Stearman continued answering routine, psychiatric questions, and then he paused and glanced at his watch.

"I think that's about long enough to prove my point," he said to La Noire.

She looked at him trustingly, but her face was as puzzled as Donovan's.

Val went to the window.

"Steve," he called.

"Yes, Val?"

"Steve, when you were in here we shook hands—personal contact, right?"

"Yes?" Dawson sounded surprised.

"I also shook hands with your sergeant. You've

been standing in a close group with a number of other men, while you have been talking, men in your group have moved around and spoken to men in another group . . . One or two of them have even gone off duty. There is no knowing who they have spoken to, or touched. Now, if there was anything that had been able to take possession of my mind, or to take possession of my body while we were gone, whatever it was, or whatever you suspected it might have been, has also had opportunity to get hold of you, your sergeant, or any man with whom you have come into contact. Now, think about this logically, please!"

"My God, he's right!" gasped Dawson. "I wondered what the hell you were up to Stearman! Betrayed us to *Them*, have you?"

"Nothing of the kind!" snorted Val. "You know me better than that, Dawson! Think, man, do you feel any different. Has anything taken possession of you?"

"No, of course not!"

"Like the sergeant, does he feel any different? The men you have been talking to, do they feel any different?" Several of the security men shook their heads, and looked sheepish.

"Now you see how this kind of witch hunt starts," went on Stearman, angrily, "and you also see how ridiculous it is! Could you *prove* that nothing had happened to you? Could you *prove* you are still in complete control of your own destiny? That your mind is in complete control of your body and that your soul is in control of your mind? Use any figure of speech or simile that you like, could you *prove* it? You *know* it, but *proving* it is a different matter, isn't it?"

"Yes—yes, it is . . ."

"We can't prove it, either," returned Stearman. "You've got to accept us at face value, just as people have to accept you at face value, and all the people you have touched."

"I've got to hand it to you, Val. If you hadn't been a journalist you'd have made a great lawyer," said Steve. "All right, let them out. All over!"

"Regulations!" Val grinned at Steve and slapped him playfully on the back. "*Regulations*, I know, must be complied with, but there is such a thing as the Nelson touch; there is such a thing as the blind eye, old son."

"Yes, I suppose there is," Dawson sounded very sheepish.

"No regulation can be proved to be a piece of effective legislature until it's been tried, until it's been experienced," said Val. "They have to be left flexible. It's a good thing there should be certain safe-guards, and it's an even better thing that those who formulate the regulations should get ahead of the circumstances for once, but this particular piece of legislation needs more—*mellowing*. It needs to be matured a bit before it's used inflexibly, otherwise you can see its danger."

"Yes, I certainly can," agreed Stephen Dawson. "You've taught me a great deal, Val."

Stearman grinned. "It's not usually my line of country," he said. "I was in a pretty desperate situation, and to put that alien stamp on me, or yourself, or on anyone else, is like shouting 'leper'! It's like putting the Indian sign on someone."

"Yes. I thought I was doing my duty," answered Steve, "I thought I was doing the right thing."

"Duty is a word which should be eradicated from the language," said Stearman. "Humanity is what counts. When we think only of our duty to the majority, and forget the individual, when we forget that individual happiness is all important, and that the majority is only composed of individuals, then there are dangers."

"There certainly are," agreed the security colonel. "O.K., Val, the point is made, and conceded. Now, come over to my office and we'll open a bottle of the 'hard stuff', as Donovan would call it."

The psychiatrist grinned behind the great tortoiseshell frames. "You can tell us all about what happened to you while you were wherever-you-were," he said.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *The March of Time*

THE infernal barrage that had been shaking the labyrinthine shelters deep below the surface of Awan finally eased. Hengist and the slim, laconic MacIlraith looked at one another and at Zaw, the aged Awanese leader, who stood now, framed between Yede and Xux, after the fashion of a tomato plant supported by two stronger, straighter poles. There were other Awanese humanoids nearby, Vir, Imoch and one of the Awanese whom Hengist and MacIlraith had met, and who rejoiced in the name of Geddo.

"It appears," quoted the old leader of the humanoids on the sixth planet of Polaris, "that our unfriendly neighbours have just terminated their barrage."

Yede and Xux moved away from Zaw slowly and rather reluctantly. The two of them stood looking up at the flaking ceiling of their deepest air-raid shelter.

"What kind of damage do you think has been perpetrated upon the surface?" asked Xux. He looked at the teleportation equipment. Yede brought his eyes down from the ceiling until he, too, was looking at

## VARICOSE ULCERS, ECZEMA and PSORIASIS

Is your leg painful with wounds or ulcers which do not heal?—Is your leg raw, sore, inflamed and burning?—Do you suffer from dry, scaly eczema, or weeping eczema?—Do you suffer from swelling, tiredness, heaviness and aching pain in the legs—Is your scalp or your skin affected by psoriasis eruptions?

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the dials and gauges which ornamented the panels of the teleportation unit.

"Were you wishing that you had gone?" asked Vir, suddenly.

"Yes, I was," replied Xux, with commendable honesty and frankness. The old leader, Zaw, shook his head sadly.

"Earth for the terrestrials and Awan for the Awanese," he murmured. It sounded like a truism or a platitude, but the way the old man said it, it wasn't platitudinous. There was nothing trite about it. There was a long and strangely awkward silence for a few moments and then Yede moved quickly towards another set of dials that were fastened into what looked to Hengist and MacIlraith, like a set of organ pipes ascending up into the ceiling.

"What are those?" asked Hengist, stroking his beard and nodding in the direction of the dials at the base of the things that looked like organ pipes.

"These sensitive conductors are connected with the surface," explained Yede. "They record a variety of side effects attendant upon nuclear devastation of the kind we have just received."

"What sort of things do they record?" asked Hengist, with a professional interest.

Yede, Xux, MacIlraith and Hengist became absorbed in the technicalities of the factors which were recorded and to some extent, translated, by the dials of the gauges at the foot of the sensitive tubes which connected them to the surface.

"What was it that took your attention particularly?" asked Hengist, thoughtfully. Yede was pointing to a specific reading.

"The radiations that have been released by the weapons that they employed against us on this last sortie are harder than anything we have as yet encountered."

Gradually, Hengist and MacIlraith were able to do some very difficult mental translating and transposing in order to turn the calibrations on the alien

Awanese dials into röntgens. When they had completed this piece of mental gymnastics neither of them felt very happy about the results.

Old Zaw moved across and he, too, studied the readings through his thick-lensed spectacles. When he had concluded his observations, he shook his old head sadly and murmured something too low for any of them to hear.

Hengist, MacIlraith and one or two of the native Awanese looked expectantly towards their venerable leader, but he made no effort to repeat the inaudible, incoherent remark which had eluded their ears. Its very incoherence and inaudibility seemed somehow a symbol, a premonition, a dark harbinger of the downfall of the Awanese race. Hengist moved around until he was confronting the old man.

"You must let us begin our work now, while there is a temporary respite," he pleaded. The old man nodded.

"Yes," he said. He sat down, his voice sounded faint and far away, "Yeee . . . s . . . s." he quavered again. He looked to Hengist like a senile nonagenarian who has just suffered a serious stroke. There was silence for a few moments. It was a tense, electrical silence, a silence that was vibrant with emotion and supercharged with sentiment.

"You have my permission to do whatever is necessary," said the old man, breaking the silence in a voice that was so weak, it frightened Xux and Yede. Vir and Geddo looked up with deep anxiety at their aged patriarch. The old man looked back at them through the enormously thick crystalline lenses of the optic aids that he wore.

"Do . . . do not distress . . . yourselves on my account," he breathed, "I . . . I . . . am an old man, even by our own long life standards, here on . . . on . . . Awan. I am by no means young," he chuckled, "and in terrestrial terms I must be well on the way to achieving a . . . a longevity record."

"The oldest man of whom we have any sort of

record was Methuselah," explained Hengist. He was stroking his beard thoughtfully as he spoke.

"Methuselah! An interesting name," replied the venerable patriarch, "Metheuslah," he repeated as if he liked the sound of the word. "And just how old was your Methuselah?"

"I'm not an expert on such matters," said Hengist. He grinned, "It hardly comes within the province of nuclear physics, but he was round about the thousand mark I think."

"You mean a thousand of your terrestrial years?" quavered the old man.

"That's right," answered the normally dour and rather laconic Scot. It was some time since he had spoken and Hengist wondered what had been going on in MacIlraith's mind during the time that he had remained silent.

\* \* \*

It would have been difficult if not impossible, thought Hengist, to describe the modifications which he and MacIlraith, together with a number of Awanese medical experts and fellow physicists had been able to accomplish. Deep within the labyrinthine shelters they had been working on grim faced volunteers who were prepared to undergo the necessary transmogrification which would transform them from ordinary Awanese into those strange changed people who Hengist and MacIlraith, in the course of their work, had dubbed rather euphemistically 'the Sons of Tomorrow'.

"The Sons of Tomorrow" had undergone a number of drastic surgical changes and had undertaken courses of drug therapy which had been minor miracles in themselves considering the limitations of the equipment and supplies which the Awanese had had available in the labyrinth below the scorched, blasted surface of their atomically murdered world. Throughout the time that Hengist and MacIlraith

had put their specific atomic knowledge into effect. Zaw, the aged leader of the Awanese had been growing progressively weaker and more strangely light-headed. It seemed now that the old man was ageing and collapsing so fast that even minutes were discernible fractions of what remained to him of the great adventure called life.

The alien bombardments, which had seemed to be irresistible before, had if anything increased in ferocity and in density. The Awanese humanoids had succumbed, thought Hengist as he looked round at the nearest ones to him, to a kind of lethargic resignation. A number of biologists and Awanese nuclear experts were co-operating with MacIlraith and himself on the 'Sons of Tomorrow' project but they seemed to be co-operating more out of politeness to their terrestrial 'guests' than for any real positive reason of their own.

With each new Barthisian bombardment, more and more of the underground labyrinth of shelters collapsed and became unusable. The once impregnable sub-Awanean (the Awanese equivalent of subterranean!) defences had failed with a finality that had dispirited those who had placed their trust in them with such justification for so long. It became obvious to Hengist and MacIlraith that even if their fellow workers would not admit it, old Zaw was very close indeed to the end. There was a charade of the optimistic, a pretence surrounding the nearness of his death. It was as though the devotion of his loyal Awanese people was somehow keeping him alive. It was as if the masquerade was adding minutes and seconds to the sands of time that were running out so fast for the venerable Awanese patriach. He seemed to rally, suddenly as his personal attendants who now supported him wherever he went brought him close to the terrestrial nuclear physicists. His voice was so low they could scarcely hear him but there was even yet an essence of authority and a vestigial trace of command in the feeble tones.

"You have done all that can be done, your idea and your work has ensured that *something* will survive," he croaked.

"Perhaps," said Hengist modestly with a shrug of his shoulders, "we hope that we have not worked in vain either for ourselves or for your people."

"You are good, very good, you are kind." The old man was wheezing and this together with the weakness of his voice made him almost, but not quite, inaudible. "Go," he breathed, "go as the others went; soon the teleportation device will no longer work. We have no knowledge even now that your friends the Stearmans reached Earth again safely but . . . t." the old man faltered, "but, you will have more chance of life in the machine than you will here."

"Very well." Hengist looked at MacIlraith and the Scot looked back at his companion. They nodded almost as if by some pre-arranged signal.

"We have done all that we could, we didn't ask to come but when your experimental teleportation device brought us here we tried to justify our presence; we sought to make the most of our time with you, not only for our own sakes, in fact that was very much a secondary consideration, but for your people."

"They have launched a new attack," quavered the dying Zaw. It was true, a fantastic nuclear cataclysm, which made even the previous big scale attacks seem like friendly overtures for diplomatic negotiations by comparison, was now rocking and shaking the planet until it seemed to Hengist that the whole of Awan must shortly come apart at the seams. He and the rather tall laconic MacIlraith made their way into the trembling aperture of the teleportation projector through which Val Stearman and La Noire had vanished from Awan.

"Goodbye," said Hengist. He addressed his words to Zaw, not only as leader of the Awanese but as a man who had come to mean something to him as a person.

"Goodbye and may the Power in which we all believe strengthen and sustain you." Zaw gave them his blessing and then as Hengist and MacIraith faded into nothingness in the teleportation device, the old man's soul sped through the worn out body, fired straight and true as an arrow from a gnarled old yew bow.

Hengist and MacIraith found themselves plunged into the greyness between the worlds. The Barthisian bombardment of Awan meant little or nothing to them out here. There was nothing to matter except greyness and the one thought that kept them sane was that the greyness would end in the ordinary daily sanity of Earth—at least they hoped it would.

The 'Sons of Tomorrow' waited grimly in the deepest part of the Awanese labyrinth and while the un-modified Awanese humanoids fell to the deadly radiations, the 'Sons of Tomorrow' waited for destiny.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *The 'Sons of Tomorrow'*

THE war fleet of Barthis began on a raid of equal if not superior magnitude to that which had shattered the almost impregnable defences of Awan. The Barthisian nuclear cataclysm continued until it seemed that the explosive fury of the Universe must surely have reached its climax but still the infernal crescendo increased.

Below the Barthisian war fleet the Awanese defences collapsed and fell, crumbled and broke and radio-active death drifted in hostile clouds on the malevolent surface of a once great planet. The Barthisian fleet was turned like a flock of circling vultures and made its way up out of the tortured

atmosphere away into the void beyond and back in the direction of their own World.

The strange living crystalline forms of the Barthisians were able to withstand considerably higher doses of radiation than the humanoids of Awan. On the other hand, the Barthisians were as liable to succumb ultimately to nuclear bombardment as any other race of living beings and they knew that the devastation which they wrought on the surface of their paralysed neighbouring planet would prevent them from putting their now indisputable claim to ownership into effect. It would in fact, be some considerable time before the palliative anlygestic forces of nature restored some sort of balance which would permit life to function freely and happily once more on the tortured world which the atomic weapons had ravaged into a life-forbidding inferno.

As time passed and the healing hand of nature combined with winds and rains soothed the angry radiations into gentler calmer moods, there was a strange silence and an awful peace on the surface of Awan. The whole planet had become a kind of cosmic graveyard. It was as if the entire globe had been transformed into a huge planetary tomb—a neglected tomb—unattended by sexton or mourners.

\* \* \*

Far below the ashes a man stirred. He stirred out of a state that had resembled suspended animation. He moved awkwardly into an upright position and looked around him. He saw that there were other men and women in this deep alloy-lined chamber. His mind was as blank as the grey walls at which he found himself looking and then slowly as his circulation quickened and as his brain seemed to re-awaken to a new fullness of life he began to remember a little of where he was and what had happened. There had been war with Barthis he told himself and at the beginning it had been neither new

nor frightening, it had merely meant he had joined a retreat into the hitherto impregnable domes and subterranean labyrinths. But something had gone wrong. The Awanese peace policy, the Awanese defence mechanisms had failed. For untold centuries the Awanese had been able to live by their ethic of peace because when sweet reason had failed they had only needed to withdraw behind their impregnable fortifications and allow their enemies to vent their spleen fruitlessly on the impenetrable defences. This time it hadn't worked. This time the crystalloid Barthisians had attacked with such fury and violence that the impregnable defences had failed to live up to their name. The Awanese expectations had collapsed about them. Even their deep labyrinthine passages below the dome-protected cities had collapsed under the frenzied bombardment of the Barthisians.

The teleportation experts whose experiments had put them into a kind of contact with distant Earth had succeeded in bringing over four terrestrial humanoids. Desperate situations had called for more desperate remedies. The terrestrial visitors had put forward a remedy, and it was as a result of their work, remembered the stirring man, that he was now living when elsewhere on Awan there was nothing but death. What had they done? he asked himself; he was trying to remember. What had they done? he asked himself again. There had been surgical and biological treatment, there had been progressive subjection to nuclear bombardments, there had been controlled acclimatisation to Alpha, Beta and Gamma rays; there had been other things. The initiation had been neither painless nor easy. Some of the volunteers had died during the course but not all. He turned and looked over his shoulder; others were stirring. Why? he asked himself, after resting for the Universe alone knew how long, why should they have awoken at this precise moment? Was it an accident or had Hengist, MacIlraith and the other

experimenters worked in some kind of trigger mechanism? Perhaps it had been arranged that when the radiation level on the surface fell to a certain point some device connecting their chamber with the surface, some sensitive electronic equipment, would give off a signal that would wake them.

The man tried hard to remember his name. Vir, it came to him quite suddenly; he had been called Vir. Somehow it didn't seem to matter much; he looked at the others, some sitting, some turning over drowsily in their sleep, others rising until they stood, like him, upright and tall, staring about them, trying to remember, as he had remembered. What was it they had been called before they had slept? The 'Sons of Tomorrow', that was it. He looked at the mixed party, sons and daughters of tomorrow. He drew a deep breath. So, he thought to himself and the monosyllable was alive with meaning in his own mind; it was the kind of monosyllable that could convey more thought than volumes of elaborate prose.

He turned towards the others. Several of them were looking at him expectantly in the cold grey light of the alloy-lined niche deep, *deep* in the labyrinth. They were looking at him as though he were their leader. Had that been arranged, he asked himself, perhaps? But he had no way of knowing; his thoughts were by no means clear. In some ways, he felt that all the experience of his previous lifetime was of no value; he felt that although he had an adult body he was in many ways like a new born child.

He turned slowly, looking round the group as he did so.

"We are the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow," he said softly, "our planet, our people were attacked by the Barthisians, we volunteered to be changed. We have survived, we are awake again. Those who made us what we are have gone out there," he pointed with his head, "the surface is alive with radiations and there may be other things. It may be

that those who destroyed our world have come back to claim what they believe is theirs. We shall see to it that they do not benefit by their massacre of our people."

He could see that they were agreeing with him, that they were inclining their heads and murmuring their agreements. He could feel it; he could sense it, almost as though he were able to pick up their thoughts. He looked around again, he was growing increasingly confident with his new powers of leadership.

"Come," he said quietly. It was partly invitation, partly command. They began moving forward eagerly, resolutely. It was not easy picking their way over the collapsed sections of the labyrinth. In their own chamber, thought Vir, a cold light emanating from the wall panels had provided adequate illumination, but now they were out of their own chamber the light was fitful. Here there were illuminations, there there were none. In places wall panels had been shattered and destroyed so that their light had gone for ever. In other places, two or three illuminatory units had been thrown together. The cold light panels which had been built into the labyrinth were self-regenerating; they could have lasted for millennia without attention.

In the dark sections of the labyrinth there was danger. Tall, twisted, jagged alloy reached out to inflict what could so easily have been fatal wounds. Vir realised that he had to think of some way of obviating this difficulty. There had to be an answer to the problem. He had known answers once but that had been in another environment, that had been in other circumstances. This was a completely new environment. Nearly all his old survival data meant nothing here; he had to learn again from the beginning; he had to start from scratch. Memory of the old life was vague and imperfect. He had to work even the simplest things out from the beginning.

A portable light, that was what was needed; ob-

viously they could pick up one of the broken panels, or a piece of one of the broken panels and use that. Not too large a piece for obvious reasons. Once he had realised this the sheer simplicity of it almost overwhelmed him. He knew, even as he had paused to think the thing out again, that the remote ancestors of his people had carried primitive lights when they had dwelt in caves on the surface countless years before. Why had it taken him so long to think out so simple a thing? *Why?* He bit his lip and a puzzled frown crossed his face.

The treatment they had received, he told himself, that was it; they had no means of knowing how long they had lain in suspended animation. How many revolutions of Polaris had Awan made while they slept in that cracked niche deep below the labyrinth? He raised a hand and called out.

"Halt." Obediently the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow halted with him. "We must take lights," said Vir, "then we will see in the dark places." They looked at him in surprise, as though his words had been a complete revelation to them. It took several seconds for the full import of his idea to penetrate their minds, and then, quickly and eagerly they began picking up fragments of broken light panels. Like a procession of human glow-worms they continued on their way. It was much safer now and much easier to make progress.

They were ascending quite rapidly from one floor of the labyrinth to another, from one strata to the next, from one level to the level above.

"Soon we will reach the surface; there we may see the Barthisian enemies," said Vir. There was a new sentiment in his mind, a new feeling. "The Barthisian *enemies*," he repeated. This was a change. Something that was anger was welling up inside him. It was a feeling that was utterly strange to him. In his previous existence as a normal Awanese humanoid he would not have been capable of feeling anger, at least not anger like this; this was hatred;

this was murderous; this was a cold, bleak, primitive desire for vengeance. He was shocked and thrilled by it at the same time.

He looked at the others. He could see it in their eyes, even the women; a hatred of Barthis and all things Barthisian. A desire to put that hatred into practical terms, to full effect, to find an expression for it, filled him.

Looking at the others he felt almost afraid of the intensity of the hatred which seemed to have been born inside them.

"Barthis must be destroyed, as our world was destroyed," he said in a voice choking with emotion. They stood around him like worshippers with their high priest. The words became a kind of chant. "Barthis must be destroyed. *Barthis must be destroyed.* BARTHIS MUST BE DESTROYED."

He seemed to lose himself in the hatred, it became a kind of religious ceremony, a thing more important than life, a thing more important than personality.

Immediately ahead of them they could see the light of Polaris illuminating the surface of their shattered world. They climbed out of the shaft and stood surveying the blistered, ash-strewn dereliction that stretched in every direction as far as their eyes could see.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Encounter*

A SAD, slow wind moved spirals of grey ash on the surface of Awan. Vir and his party had emerged from the vertical shaft that ascended from the labyrinth. They stood as immobile as rocks, as stationery as the ruins that had once been their world. Nothing was moving except the wind and the dust.

Vir felt the anger that had spurred him on up the shaft abate and ebb with unexpected suddenness. A deep sadness replaced it. The whole planet had become a place of dry tears. It was a sorrow too great for weeping. It was a sadness too deep for crying. It was not only the loss of all the friends they had known and loved in the previous life, it was not only the loss of the culture and the civilization. It was the loss of a World that hit them so hard and so deeply that neither word nor thought could give adequate expression to the emotion and sentiment that now monopolized their beings. Time seemed to stand still while they stood gazing out into the grey ruins.

Vir stooped and picked up a handful of dust. He let it trickle through his fingers.

"What were you?" he asked the dust, "were you part of a skimmer, were you once some fine machine in which our people travelled or which entertained them? Were you some part of our culture." He stirred the dust again with his hands. "Were you once one of us, a man or woman, friend or kinsman?" He turned to those who stood with him in

the same numbed silence and flung a handful of dust into the air. "See!" he called. They jerked out of their reverie and looked up at the dust which drifted slowly in the wind and fell to the ground like the dry tears that they could not shed.

"See your homes, your families, your friends, your cities, YOUR PLANET, dust because of the Barthisians." His voice shook and trembled with emotion. "Because of the Barthisians." Sorrow and anger were replacing one another so rapidly inside his heart, inside his mind, that the speed of their changing gave him a sense of confusion. He didn't know whether he was crying with anger or shouting with sadness, so mixed were the emotions, so closely had they emulsified in his soul; both feelings ebbed away to be replaced by a dead coldness, a dead coldness that matched the dead coldness of the planetary surface.

Vir and his companions began walking away from the shaft. They had covered five or six miles—as a terrestrial would have measured the distance—when Vir spotted something gleaming, glittering and shining on the horizon. He called a halt and they paused crouching in the ruins.

"What is it?" asked Geddo.

"I do not know yet," said Vir, "but it may be a ship."

"An alien ship?" asked Geddo, "one of the Barthisians perhaps?" His voice dripped hatred, every word was saturated with a psychic venom. If it is possible to hate a man to death, Geddo was hating.

"Shall we go and investigate?" asked one of the women. Vir turned to her and nodded. He looked long and searchingly into her face. This Daughter of Tomorrow, he thought to himself, was hating with as much intensity as he or Geddo or any of the men.

Like a flash of light from some distant star he remembered a phrase, an old but striking phrase

which he had heard either Hengist or MacIlraith use during the course of their work.

"The female of the species is more deadly than the male."

Was it true? Was the implacable hatred in the face of this woman an indication of the ferocity of her feelings? We knew that facial expressions were poor uncertain guides, but he also knew that there was no subterfuge, no camouflage, no deception, or cunning art, among the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow. He felt certain and confident that in the woman's face he had read a hatred so deep, a fury so violent, that if fury was any gauge or standard by which success or failure could be judged then the Barthisians had cause to fear these strangely changed remnants of the Awañese who now moved like *Nemesis* across the surface of their massacred World.

He wondered whether vengeance personified was a man or woman, whether retribution was male or female. Looking at the woman whose face had become a mask of hatred he thought he knew.

"We must make our way carefully," he said suddenly, to break the spell, the hypnotic spell, the mesmerismic enchantment of that pure, vibrant, living hatred. "We must make our way carefully," he went on, "to the place where that object is. We must approach them without their being aware of our approach. We must reach them without their knowing that we even exist. Their ignorance shall be our greatest strength."

"Good," murmured Geddo.

"So shall it be," said the woman.

Some remnant of the gentleness and defensive pacifism that had been his long ago, in that other life that now seemed so far away, stirred again at some deep hidden level of Vir's mind and he shuddered inwardly, physically as he saw the unleashed fury of his companions. Perhaps the thing that

frightened him most was to realise that this same fury lived and moved and had its being within his own body.

The Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow began making their way in the direction of the ship, if it was a ship, which gleamed, glinted and beckoned like some elusive will-o-the-wisp on the horizon.

From ruin to ruin, from blistered ashen crag to broken wall, shattered dome and scorched field they crawled with the stealth and caution of carnivorous predators. Onward they moved, slowly but remorselessly, carefully but relentlessly, until the ship was no longer on the horizon in the far distance but a few hundred yards away. They crouched in a ditch. It was full of grey brackish water; it smelled strange, dead, barren and sterile.

In the distance Polaris was setting in grey-red glory. A pink moon, first of the triumvirate that filled the nocturnal Awanese sky, came slowly and reluctantly over the opposite horizon, as though it were loathe to see the grey ruin that had once been the planet it illuminated.

"We will wait for darkness," said Vir.

"I am hungry," said Geddo suddenly. It occurred to Vir that he too felt hungry. Geddo had expressed the feelings of the whole group. They had walked for a long weary day and the intensity of their feelings had kept even the primitive instinct of hunger at bay. Now, however, that they had, as near as matters, reached their objective, they were aware of gnawing hunger. They were also aware of the terrible barrenness of the shattered planet.

"What shall we eat?" asked Geddo.

In the gathering twilight under the pink eye of the first of the three moons they looked around.

"There is no food here," said Vir.

"There is no food," echoed Geddo.

Vir felt somehow that it was his responsibility to

find food and drink and to find them quickly. Somewhere, he told himself, somewhere there had to be at least some primitive plant life that had survived. It couldn't all be dead. Had the radiation been as thorough in its sterilizing, life-destroying powers as that, had it killed every single cell and tissue? There had to be *something* alive; there *had* to be. "Where?" he asked himself; that was the problem. If it lived, where did it live? His mind, particularly his memory, leaned out over the planet as it had been. In the deepest valleys perhaps, between tall protective mountains something might have survived. The mountains were far away, they would all be dead long before they reached them. Drink was a more desperate problem than food. The strange crystalline Barthisians would have supplies aboard their ship but their metabolism differed so completely from the metabolism of the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow, that food which would nourish Barthisians would be of no use to the changed Awanese humanoids.

Vir was racking his brains to produce a solution—any kind of solution—there had to be an answer he told himself and he had to find it quickly. Barthis he knew, from what he remembered in snatches of the old life, had contained mammalian life, animal life and plant life, as well as the strange crystalline beings who had become the predominant race. Perhaps they could reach Barthis *with* the aliens before hunger and thirst overcame them? If they could get on board that ship, he thought, they would find there enough liquids to keep away the agonies of thirst and the problem of food could be solved in some other way.

Already, a dark and horrible design was making its way into his mind, born of the intense hatred of the Barthisians. No sacrifice was too great for the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow if it would enable them to strike back at the Barthisians in the name of massacred humanity.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*The Second Re-appearance*

THE Security cordon surrounding the ill-fated Senior Common Room at the atomic Research Establishment had not relaxed its intensity. The vigilance was acute. Val and La Noire were staying on at the Project Headquarters with Steve Dawson for a few days. The slightly strained feeling which had permeated their relations for a day or two after the Stearmans' return, had now gone. Dawson felt a somewhat sadder, wiser man after the revelation which had come to him when Val had proved conclusively just how dangerous witch hunting was when it was inspired by fear, particularly, fear of the unknown.

Val and La Noire were sitting now in the lounge of Dawson's comfortable quarters watching television. It was a Saturday evening and T.W.3. had just finished. Dawson got up and turned off the set.

"That's a magnificent show," said Stearman.

"Superb," agreed the Security Colonel.

"I've never seen anything that I enjoyed more," said La Noire.

Val glanced at her curiously for a second, for it seemed that in that simple statement she had paid a far higher tribute than either of the two men. Val caught undertones in her words which were not evi-

dent to Steve Dawson. It made him wonder about the length and experience from which his beautiful wife was calling. He looked at her. Twenty years he thought. Twenty years and she hadn't changed in the slightest. She was as young, as fresh, as youthful and as beautiful as the day they had met. How old was she then? he asked himself. Eighteen . . . Twenty . . . Twentyfive? There was no way of knowing. She combined the beauty of youth with the eternal mystery of Eve. There was about her an ageless Cleopatrine quality that refused to be subservient to the march of time. Just occasionally she would say things, or make remarks like the one she had just made, which gave Val the impression that there was some frightening mystery about her. And yet, a kind of invisible psychic barrier prevented him from crossing too closely to the source of that mystery.

It was Steve Dawson's voice that brought Val Stearman back to the immediate reality of the lounge in which they sat and the television programme they had just seen.

"The thing that annoys me more than anything else," said Dawson, "is the way that some of the pompous would-be censors who fail to understand this programme, complain about it so bitterly."

"That annoys me too," said Val.

"After all," said La Noire, "if it offends the timid, and the sensitive, if it hits the pompous below the belt, if it deflates the arrogant, the simplest remedy is to turn off the switch."

"True," said Val, "this is my argument against all forms of imposed censorship. Nobody is compelled to listen or to watch."

"In my opinion," said Steve Dawson, "the small minded should not have the right to dictate to the rest of us what we may see and what we may hear."

"Agreed," said Stearman.

"After all," said La Noire, "the narrow minded, the bigots and the extreme puritans, are such a tiny

minority that they make themselves heard out of all proportion of their numerical strength and the vast majority of intelligent modern people who enjoy broad minded satire don't always bother to reply because they feel assured that they are well in the majority."

"On the other hand," said Dawson, "I think those of us who enjoy programmes like T.W.3. ought to write in and say so. Of course while the broad minded progressive majority sit quietly back and let bigots, puritans and fanatics tell them what is good for them, they are in danger of being cramped by this tiny minority."

Stearman nodded.

"Well through the pages of the 'Globe'," he said, "this is a point of view that I have tried to put over from time to time. I only wish that I was the T.V. critic sometimes."

"I think you do your own job best," said Steve Dawson. He looked at Val. "Somehow I can't see you being satisfied with watching half a dozen shows and then writing them up the following day."

"It would be a little quiet after the kind of life I've been used to living," said Stearman.

"Put it on one side for your retirement," suggested Steve Dawson.

"It's a good idea," said Val.

"Yes, I can just imagine you becoming a T.V. Critic in your declining years," said La Noire. She smiled but the incongruity of the thought struck her as humorous and then there were tears behind the smile and Val suddenly realised that she had suddenly said *your* declining years not *our* declining years. He added it to the accumulation of other strange things she had said, apparently inadvertently over the years, strange things which had worried and disturbed the big journalistic adventurer. In twenty years he had aged, not rapidly, for Val Stearman was a man who looked after himself. Like the aged retainer who had served the hero of 'As you

Like It' so faithfully and well in the words of the Immortal Bard he had not 'poured riotous liquors into his blood'. Val was not quite sure whether he had remembered the quotation accurately. He thought he had, but his love of Shakespeare was not by any means tantamount to his ability to remember the Swan of Avon's words with the accuracy he would have liked.

There was a sudden knock at the door. A Security man burst in, saluted smartly and began to speak. Before he had finished the first two sentences Steve Dawson and the Stearmans were on their feet.

"There is a noise from the Senior Common Room, sir," panted the Security man. It was obvious that he had been running. "Sounds like somebody else has arrived, sir."

Val and La Noire followed Steve Dawson out of the room. They left the door open behind them. Oddly enough it struck Val as bad practice for a Security Officer to be so excited that he forgot to shut his own door.

They raced out into the cool autumnal air laden with the tang of approaching winter, the suspicion of the frosts that were to come. Steve Dawson reached the Security cordon that surrounded the Senior Common Room. There was a strange silence among the listening Security Officers on duty. But, from inside there were crashing, tumbling sounds, as though men were blundering awkwardly among arm chairs and tables.

Dawson and the Stearmans flung open the door and ran boldly inside. The Security Colonel snapped on all the lights with one sweeping movement of his hand that carried all six switches from an up-turned to a downward position. The almost simultaneous clicking sounded like a rapid burst from a sten gun. Val and La Noire looked instinctively towards that central point of the Senior Common Room where they themselves had re-appeared from the bewildering greyness.

Hengist, a bearded blundering figure was leaning against an armchair panting breathlessly and blinking bewilderedly.

MacIlraith had draped himself over a fallen coffee table.

Val, La Noire and Steve Dawson got the two scientists comfortably into armchairs.

"What . . . what happened to me?" MacIlraith sounded almost petulant and childish.

"It's all right," said Val.

"What happened?" repeated MacIlraith.

"Just sit quiet, everything is okay," said Steve Dawson.

Hengist put a hand instinctively to his beard as though to assure himself that it was still there. Psychologically, thought Stearman, something of the man's personality, his ego, must be wrapped up in and associated with the hirsute appendage Hengist sprouted defiantly from his mandible. It took five minutes or so before the bewildered nuclear physicists to sort themselves out.

"Strange experience," said Hengist. His face looked brighter; he was still fingering his beard as he spoke to Val Stearman.

"Yes," said Val, "very strange experience."

"Tell me" asked Dawson, "are you well enough to let us have a story?"

"I think so," said MacIlraith, "perhaps we could go over to your quarters, Colonel?" They both looked a bit shaky. Val was recalling how he and La Noire had felt after their hectic voyage through the weird greyness that was part and parcel of hyperspace travel, that was part and parcel of teleportation. He thought too of the kind of reception he had got from Dawson and his Security Officers.

It was just as well reflected Val that he and La Noire had come first. Hengist and MacIlraith were not fools; they were men of very high intelligence. On the other hand Val knew that the two nuclear physicists lacked that particular adventurous in-

stinct which had become engrained in La Noire and himself. The difference between their calculating logical experience and the way which he and La Noire would set about dealing with the situation, was rather like the difference between a man who plays rapid piece-taking chess and the man who spends three hours of slow logical thought dealing with the 'Times' chess problem. There was a sense in which Hengist and MacIlraith worked with the trained logicity of Spartan hoplites, whereas Val and La Noire had the spontaneity of Athenians. The ability to improvise, to move with the speed of lubricated lightning was a faculty which Val and his wife had developed to a high degree. This was the faculty which had enabled Stearman to get them out of what could have been one of the most horrible situations in which they had ever found themselves. This was the faculty that had enabled him to show Steve Dawson and his Security men that too much suspicion is as dangerous as too little and that to be over-cautious is as bad as to be ingenuous.

Val and La Noire both knew instinctively within themselves that if Hengist and MacIlraith, despite their intelligence, had been faced with the grimly challenging situation which had confronted them, the Stearmans, when they returned, Hengist and MacIlraith would probably have been sitting fuming and desperate in the Security prison while red tape and suspicion had entwined them with ever increasing toils.

The two men followed the Stearmans and Steve Dawson out of the ill-fated Senior Common Room and back into Dawson's well lighted Lounge. The door stood open invitingly. It was like the door leading back to sanity and to everyday life. As he stroked his beard, Hengist wondered whether everything that had happened to MacIlraith and himself since they had been snatched from their armchairs had, in fact, been truth or fiction. Or, had it been no more than some wild insane dream that they had

shared together? It had to be more than that; the experience had been so intense, so deep, so personal, so real. The thing had to be more than a dream. *It had to be*, he told himself and yet things were so improbable. Could the improbable be true? He tried to deal with the milling questions accurately, logically and scientifically. But the questions refused to be dealt with in that way; they buzzed around in his head like a swarm of angry bees; they zoomed around in his mind like furious hornets seeking some escape, stinging the very fabric of his sanity as they flew.

MacIlraith and Hengist found themselves sitting on the couch while Dawson poured drinks from the Cocktail Cabinet. Val and La Noire were ensconced in two of Steve's comfortable easy chairs while they listened expectantly and attentively to hear what had happened since they themselves had left Awan.

"Now, where do you want me to start?" said Hengist suddenly.

"Well," said Val, "let's begin with the point where we left, you remember that old Zaw insisted that we should go back while there was still time?"

"Yes," said Hengist.

"Well, everything, as you can see," said Stearman, "worked satisfactorily for us. Now, what happened to you?"

"That's a long story," said Hengist. MacIlraith nodded. "Aye it's a long story indeed," he said cryptically.

"All the more reason to make a start on it as soon as possible," said Stearman as he handed the drinks around.

"It's a long time since I tasted a good Scotch Whisky," said MacIlraith appreciatively.

"Well, there is plenty more where that came from."

"Aye," said MacIlraith and smiled at the bottle.

Val took a long pull at his lager and sat back receptively to listen to the story Hengist and Mac-

Ilraith had to tell. They told of their work on the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow. They spoke in simple non-technical lay terms comprehensible to Val, La Noire and the Security Colonel of the modifications which had been produced by surgery, biochemistry and radiation in the bodies of the volunteers. They spoke of the placing of the volunteers in suspended animation and the trigger mechanisms when radiation levels fell. They spoke of the resignation and acceptance of the end of all that their civilisation stood for by the Awanese.

"I think," said Hengist, "that a race can grow old just as a man grows old and when senility replaces maturity there is a tendency to accept the inevitable. This may or may not be a good thing but there is also a tendency to accept as inevitable that which only appears inevitable but which is actually avoidable."

Val nodded.

"I see," said Steve Dawson.

"What we have done," said MacIlraith taking up the thread of Hengist's words, "is to rejuvenate a small group of these people and now looking back in retrospect on what we have done I myself am beginning to doubt the wisdom of our actions."

"I am not altogether certain that I understand you," said Stearman.

"I think I do," said La Noire, "what you mean is this, isn't it, Mr. MacIlraith, that you are wondering about the moral aspect? You are wondering whether what you have done will be evil rather than good."

"Aye," said MacIlraith, "we have given back the feelings that they lost in the course of growing up as a race and I am wondering just what sort of powers we have unleashed. They will survive but their gentleness, their pacifism, their maturity is gone and in its place stark primitive emotions may come to the surface. You see in order to rejuvenate, all that is

good in maturity is swept aside with all that is undesirable in senility."

"Yes, I follow you," said Stearman. He cast a glance up towards the ceiling as though his eyes sought to travel across the light years to Polaris and the planets which revolved around it. "I wonder what is happening up there," he said softly.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Barthis*

THE second of the pink moons rose in the Awanese sky followed by the third. Vir and his companions waited with the patience of statues while the three moons travelled slowly in their orbits across the purple-black sky beyond. Stars came out, planets emerged. Among the memories that stirred in Vir's changed mind were mirrors of astronomical constellations. He looked hard into the sky and his eyes narrowed into slits of hatred as he looked at Barthis that had risen mockingly above the horizon of shattered Awan.

"Curse upon you," hissed the Son of Tomorrow. "Curse upon you for the evil that your children have wrought upon my world. Beware my vengeance. Fear my revenge." He spoke so low his words were scarcely audible and yet he knew that the other Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow had heard. He was glad that they had heard. He knew that they shared his hatred; he knew that streams of loathing and abhorrence were pouring from their hearts, their minds and their souls in rivers of primitive fury and violence towards that distant world. If hatred by itself could have shrivelled the planet to dust and ashes, then Barthis at that moment would have vanished from the sky.

The first of the pink satellites set. Time passed. The second moon went down. More time passed and the third pink orb dipped below the horizon.

"The time is now," whispered Vir.

"The time is now," echoed Geddo.

They moved purposefully forward, creeping like dark grey shadows across the dark grey world. Vir glanced up to where the bright proud disc of Barthis looked down contemptuously on the planet it had beaten.

"Beware, O bright one," whispered Vir as he looked up at the small round light in the sky which was their enemy. "Beware, for you shall be made grey as my world is grey. You shall die as my world has died." He spoke very low but the whispers that he heard from the other Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow told him that they had received his words.

The whole party moved on like moss encroaching a stone. Like a spider spinning its web around a trapped wasp, wrapping the body of its powerful foe in strands of unbreakable sticky silk. They had fanned out and then circled until the Barthesian ship was completely surrounded. They studied the lock.

"Look! It is open," whispered Vir.

"There is a ladder," said Geddo.

"We will climb," said Vir.

"Two of us," suggested Geddo.

"Two will be enough; the rest will wait," ordered Vir.

Hunger and thirst, added to the burning hatred, spurred on Vir and Geddo as they climbed the ladder.

"It is as though Destiny has opened the lock," said Vir very softly.

"It is as though Fate had breached the portal for us," agreed Geddo with equal sibilance.

They climbed aboard. The chamber immediately behind the lock was obviously some sort of ante-room. It was empty. No sound came from the sleeping ship.

"This is excellent," said Vir.

"Fortune is with us," hissed Geddo. He beckoned in the darkness, wondering whether the others would see.

"Come," he hissed.

Silently the avengers ascended the ladder leading to the open hatch of the Barthisian ship. When the entire party had assembled in the room immediately beyond the hatch Vir slipped his hand along the panel directly in front of him. It opened soundlessly and easily. It occurred to him as an interesting theory that the strange crystalline aliens needed to sleep as did mammalian beings.

Inside the next compartment one of the crystalline Barthisians lay motionless on a padded bunk. It struck Vir as somehow strange and incongruous that crystalline things should require padding. He realised how little he and his fellows knew, or had known, about the Barthisians. If he argued within himself, they needed padding to withstand the rigours of space flight then they must have certain frailties and weaknesses which would have not been suspected by a casual observer. Thoughts began locking themselves together in sequences in his mind. Perhaps for all their apparent strength these crystalline things with their weird geometric shapes were *fragile*? It was a long way down the ladder and the ashen surface was hard. A little to the side of the ladder a low black rock protruded a foot or so above the ashes.

Vir, Geddo and the others circled around the sleeping crystalline thing silently. It would take scarcely more than a moment to pick it up and fling it across the ante-room to the rock below. They had no other weapon to use. Whether the sound of its impact would awaken the others was something they would have to risk. Nothing, thought Vir, can be achieved without some degree of risk.

"Seize him and fling him down," whispered the

leader of the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow. They nodded soundlessly in the dim light of the sleeping Barthisian's cabin.

Vir, Geddo and the others seized the edges of the crystalline bodied Barthisian's torso and with a quick, half-running, half-pushing movement, they swept him from the padded bunk on which he lay, across the ante-room and out through the lock, a little to the side, so that he crashed with stunning, shattering force on to the stone below.

There was a sound like the sound of stone falling on stone, as the Barthisian's body shattered and broke on the rock. Vir and the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow looked down at the wreckage they had created and felt like children playing some enthusiastic, exuberant game which had led to the inadvertent destruction of some priceless family heirloom which had stood in safety for centuries in a glass case on a mantelpiece.

"He is dead," whispered Geddo.

"Dead," agreed Vir

The reality of death had blunted the sharp edge of their hatred and then Vir looked again at the grey ruins that had been their world and Geddo gazed at the ashes. The others were also studying the desolation which had once been their home. Somehow the dead, broken Barthisian seemed part of the desolation and what had been the cold hard admonitory finger of death became something normal, something comprehensible and something understandable.

There were sounds inside the ship. Sounds of movement and alarm, sounds of wakefulness.

"We must find weapons and take action," said Vir slowly. Geddo looked at him.

"How shall we reach Barthis and food if we destroy this one?" he said.

Vir felt for a second that his leadership was being questioned and then he realised that Geddo's interrogation was by no means insubordinate in nature.

"You are right," he said, "we must find places of

concealment." He gestured vaguely to the interior of the ship. "Hide yourselves."

The Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow spread out through the alien ship. There are many places on board a large space vessel where it is possible to conceal a human being. Some made their way in the direction of the garbage ejector shafts. Others found themselves nooks in storage lockers. Vir and Geddo concealed themselves under a bunk on which the dead Barthisian had lain until recently. They heard the strange sounds of movement, movement made by crystalline limbs, strange prehensile rock-like things which moved uncertainly on the end of those weird limbs.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *The Voyage of Nemesis*

THE sounds of crystalline movement grated in the ears of the concealed Awānese for some time, and then, as they froze into silent immobility, scarcely daring to breathe, Vir and his companions heard the sounds of Barthisian movement dying softly away. Vir considered that it was now safe to whisper to Geddo.

"What do you thing's happening?" Geddo's voice came back to him out of the darkness, under the bunk where they were concealed.

"I should think they've seen the fellow dead on the rock below."

"Perhaps they think it was an accident?"

"Do you reckon they have found any of our people?" Vir's voice was interrogative.

"No. I think we would have heard. Surely, if they had caught one of us, he or she would have made some kind of sound."

"It is possible," said Vir.

"What do you think we should do now?" asked Geddo.

"We must remain in concealment and hope that they will take off very soon. Hunger is gnawing at me like an enemy!"

"I also feel this," said Geddo.

"It is not good," said Vir.

"How long will it take on this journey?" asked Geddo suddenly.

"If they take off now, perhaps twelve, or fourteen hours."

"We must find liquid, and find it soon," said Vir.

"Liquid . . . water . . ." Geddo sounded parched.

"Tanks," said Vir. "There must be tanks of water somewhere, cooling fluids, if nothing else. No matter how alien they are, they will need liquids; even crystalline bodies, such as theirs, require some kind of fluid."

"We'll find it, somehow," said Geddo.

"What of the others?" wondered Vir. "How shall we take it to the others?" He and Geddo lapsed into thoughtful silence for several moments. Then an idea flashed into Vir's mind.

"I have it," he said.

"What?" asked Geddo.

"We have been thinking in terms of concealment. We have been planning to arrive as fugitives and stowaways. This we will not do."

"No?" Geddo sounded doubtful.

"We will take over the ship. They will fly us there as our prisoners."

"How will we do this?"

"I do not know," admitted Vir, "—yet!" He crawled out from under the bunk, "I am not thinking clearly." He spoke with difficulty, his teeth clenched, "all I can think of is my hatred of these things. I loathe them! I detest them! I despise them! I want to destroy them, as they destroyed our world, as they have destroyed us!"

"We are not destroyed," said Geddo.

"Yes, we are! We live, yes, but not as true Awanese! We are not the men that we were. Our women are not the women that they were. Hengist, Mac-Illraith, and those others who made it possible for us to survive the radiation, have turned us into 'things'. When I remember the man I was, when I remember thoughts of peace and culture, when I remember love and beauty, I feel a deep, aching, at the uttermost depths of my being. Now I am a killer! I am a thing that seeks only vengeance! And so are you! So are all of us! Our mission can have only one outcome. He who seeks to destroy, destroys only himself. This destruction may not come swiftly, it may be a slow and gradual thing, but it is nevertheless inexorable. We have been made into the instruments of vengeance, we are all the tools of vengeance, which ultimately turns back upon itself. This I know, and yet I cannot help myself. I can observe my own hatred destroy my energies, and destroy me at the same time, but I cannot turn off that hatred! The processes which were carried out in our minds and bodies, these processes have made us the victims of our own wild passions and powerful emotions. Without those emotions we would not survive. And yet, although they are the means of our survival, they are also the means of our destructions."

"You say strange things," whispered Geddo, in horror.

"I think strange thoughts!" returned Vir. He looked at the metal rail securing the side of the bunk. "See if there are tools in that locker," he said. Geddo searched, and found a number of implements.

"It is good," said Vir.

It was a comparatively simple matter to unfasten the rail. It was five feet long, and although, not particularly heavy, it had a very high tensile strength.

"I think we will find this a suitable weapon, to use against our enemies," said Vir darkly.

"What shall I use?" asked Geddo. Vir glanced swiftly through the tools.

"This will be heavy enough." He selected a large, adjustable, spanner-like device. Neither he nor Geddo were exactly familiar with its workings, but it was similar enough to instruments with which they were familiar for them to understand roughly what it was for.

Vir balanced the long bar in his hand.

"This will be a fine thing," he said, in strangely excited tones.

"One comes!" hissed Geddo. There was a certain amount of anxiety in his voice. It was not a personal fear for himself. The Sons of Tomorrow didn't experience personal feeling in quite that way. It was just an anxiety that they should accomplish their purpose.

"We must not strike too hard. It must live. It must live so that we can achieve our ends," said Vir. A panel slid back. Vir and Geddo waited on either side of the aperture. The Barthisian alien came through. It was very similar to the one which they had already seen on the couch. Vir thrust the long, metal bunk-rail between its strange, crystalline legs, and levered powerfully. The surprised Barthisian crashed forward, with a thud that made the ship vibrate.

"That noise will bring others," warned Geddo. Vir stood above it, with the metal bar held menacingly. The strange, crystalline head possessed two bright, transparent facets, that turned now in his direction. They moved as though mounted on jeweled bearings.

"I hope, for all our sakes, that you understand our language, Barthisian! I hope, for all our sakes, that you can communicate. Speak, if you can, communicate in any way you can, or die now! Die as that one died!" He pointed dramatically to the empty bunk.

The transparent facets which served the Barthi-

sian for eyes, rested meaningfully on Vir and the alloy rod which he held. Then, jointed crystals moved below the eyes. In that way, at least, the strange Barthisians bore some superficial resemblance to humanoid life form. The voice, when it emerged, was a strange, gravelly sound. It was the kind of sound that could have been made by shaking small stones on the surface of a flat rock, and yet, for all its strangeness, it was articulate enough to be coherent.

"We understand your language. Before our assault we had learned all we were able to learn about Awan from loose broadcast waves. We were able to record and to analyse your speech. All who were engaged in the war learnt this tongue."

"Then you make our task much simpler," announced Vir. "You have destroyed our world. No doubt you thought you had destroyed all our people?"

The expression on the rocky face—if such a peculiar, angular, crystalline thing could be called a 'face', seemed to show acceptance of the statement Vir had made.

"Now," said Geddo, brandishing the spanner-like weapon threateningly, "you see that you are wrong! You see that our race is strong, that it can endure the worst that your atomic weapons can induce, and still live!"

"We did not seek war," said Vir. He held the pole of alloy so threateningly and menacingly that the rock-creature seemed to cower away from him, to shrink into itself a little.

"The time has come to exact retribution," said Geddo.

"The time for vengeance has arrived," said Vir.

"Revenge is ours!" affirmed Geddo.

"What are you going to do with me?" intoned the gravel-voiced alien.

"We may let you live," said Vir, "on certain conditions. Do you want to live?"

"Yes, I wish to live," said the stone creature.

"Then you will fly this ship at once to Barthis."

"You want me to fly you to Barthis?" The Barthisian crystalloid sounded as though he were unable to believe what he heard. "Why?" he asked.

"We have our reasons," said Vir.

"Reasons," echoed Geddo.

"And if I fly you to Barthis, you will let me live?"

"We will let you live," croaked Vir. He deliberately refrained from saying *for how long!*

"I am not alone in the ship," said the Barthisian, suddenly and practically.

"How many of you?" asked Geddo.

"There were five," said the Barthisian.

"What weapons do you have?" demanded Geddo, raising the heavy spanner threateningly. The Barthisian rock creature cringed away from it. Both Geddo and Vir were surprised to find how effete and cowardly the things were. Despite their forbidding, crystalline exterior, they seemed fragile and puny in many ways. "What weapons have you?" asked Geddo again.

"We have small blasters that we can carry. Energy guns that will destroy at limited range . . ."

"Where are these guns?"

"Mine is in this locker." The floored crystalline Barthisian pointed with a rock-like, prehensile limb-extremity. It would have been inaccurate to call such a thing a 'hand'.

"Fetch it," ordered Vir. Geddo moved across to the storage locker which the Barthisian had indicated and returned with a tubular, metallic object.

"This is the hand weapon?" he asked.

"That is so," agreed the Barthisian.

"I see. It is loaded and ready to use?" asked Geddo..

"It is loaded," agered the alien.

"There will be others like this?" asked Vir.

"Yes," asquiesced the Barthisian captive.

"You will take us now around the rest of the ship."

You will show us where the others are. If you make one false move I will smash you with this. Is that understood?"

"I understand," said the Barthisian.

"That is good," said Vir. He was enjoying the Barthisian's fear. This enjoyment was in itself a primitive and an evil thing which his old nature would have despised and abhorred. The Barthisian led them through into another compartment of the ship.

"Here," he whispered, "here you will find another." It was difficult for the Barthisian to whisper. Even at its quietest the gravel voice had a certain loudness and a penetration that was undesirable as far as Vir and Geddo were concerned.

Hatred and a desperate thirst came uppermost in Geddo's mind at that moment.

"When we have dealt with this one we must get water."

"Of course," agreed Vir.

He took the weapon from the storage locker which their first captive pointed out to them.

"So far," said Vir, "you act wisely. You may expect to live." He cast a sideways glance at Geddo as though his omission of the length of time was deliberate and calculated. When the second Barthisian turned and looked round, he found himself looking into the deadly muzzle of his own gun.

"You are our prisoner," announced Vir, grimly.

"Who are you?" gasped the gravel voiced Barthisian.

"We are Awanese."

"What do you want?" demanded the Barthisian, moving slowly off his bunk.

"We want this ship, we want it flown to Barthis," said Geddo.

"Barthis?" said the crystalline one. He sounded as surprised as the first Barthisian had sounded. There was a strange silence in the compartment for

a few moments, and then Vir turned to their first prisoner.

"How many of you are needed to fly the ship, safely?" he asked, through clenched teeth.

The two Barthisians exchanged meaningful glances with their transparent eye facets.

"Two of us," said the first Barthisian.

"That is good," said Vir.

There was the grating, scraping sound of a panel on the far side of the apartment flying open. The Awanese moved swiftly to places of concealment on either side of the aperture. Their grim expressions warned the Barthisians not to make any signal or sound to their fellow crewman, who was at that moment coming suspiciously through the aperture, his gun held at the ready. He addressed the two Barthisians whom the Sons of Tomorrow had already encountered. He addressed them in their own tongue . . . It was a guttural, gravelly sound which made no sense to Vir and Geddo.

The two captive Barthisians made no answer, and the newcomer repeated the gravelly noise. He took a step forward, but as he did so, Vir stepped from concealment and blasted him at point blank range. The rock-man collapsed in a heap of little brittle shards, and grey, crumbly powder.

"Why did you destroy him?" asked the first of their prisoners.

"Because he is superfluous to our plans," said Vir. He nodded to Geddo. "Find and destroy the fourth, and then fetch water." Geddo nodded, and made his way through the aperture from which the Barthisian had just come. Vir stirred the greyish white crumbling powder that had been a Barthisian a few seconds before, with his foot. It gave him a deep animal thought of satisfaction; he thought of the grey ruin that had once been his world. He thought of the desolate monochrome ash that covered Awan, and as he looked at the pathetically dead Barthisian, there was no pity in his heart, but only jubilation.

His finer nature was being pushed further and further back into the limbo of forgotten things; with each succeeding act of violence he was becoming an increasingly violent creature; something deep within himself, a warning bell of half-remembered sanity, told him that the only end of violence could be violence; that the only end of the destroyer could be destruction, but he ignored the voice.

He was concerned only to destroy. He wanted to be involved, to be the inaugurator of an era of annihilation. He bludgeoned the voice of yesterday into mental silence.

He was a 'Son of To-morrow', he told himself, and the Sons of To-morrow could have no dealings with the voice of yesterday. Yesterday had been a world of culture, of civilisation, of tradition, of history, of standards, morals and ethics. In such a world it was possible to breed a moral and an ethical man, but that world had been destroyed, had been destroyed by the Barthisians. He had risen like a phoenix from the ashes, but he was something other than a phoenix. He was a singularly ugly, deadly, evil thing. He was not prepared to do anything but in the most desperate, dramatic and straight forward way. There was the sound of an energy gun exploding. A few moments later a triumphant Geddo returned.

"It is done," he said, with a certain justifiable pride.

"Shout to the rest of our people to come out of concealment," said Vir.

"I will!" Geddo threw back his head and shouted, "The ship is ours! Come out of your hiding places! The ship is ours!" From a dozen hastily found places of concealment the Awanese, Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, emerged like rats pouring from their holes. The two Barthisian prisoners trembled in strange, crystalline fear.

"Take off" ordered Vir. "Take off!"

The terrified Barthisians needed no second bid-

ding. Some of the Daughters of To-morrow did not even pause long enough to find themselves places of safety to withstand the rigours of the take off. They took the increased 'g' where they stood. Pain and discomfort seemed to mean nothing to them. Vengeance was their anaesthetic. Revenge was their analgesic.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *The Arrival of Nemesis*

THE Barthisian vessel was in space. It flew like a glittering silver dart until the light and dark side of shattered Awan were visible behind it. It was an odd spectacle for the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, as they looked through the observation ports of the Barthisian vessel which they had captured, and saw, far behind them, the Polaris-lit hemisphere of Awan on one side, with the dark aspect on the other and the three strange satellites, like ill-clad mourners at the cosmic funeral of their cadaverous planet.

The vessel which they had taken over flew on towards Barthis. The disc of the enemy grew larger and larger. Vir, Geddo and the others had quenched their thirst, but hunger had now become so major a problem that it obsessed every waking hour of their consciousness, and filled every moment of their dreams. They found themselves indulging in weird, bizarre fantasies. Life became a kind of nightmare until the dark thoughts which had permeated Vir's mind some time back, burst up to the surface of his

consciousness with an undeniable force and intensity. He knew that when he had said that no sacrifice was too great for the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow he had spoken nothing but the simple truth. Leaving Geddo to guard their Barthisian prisoners, Vir called the others together in a conclave. He looked at them gravely.

"You remember that I said we must take steps to overcome this hunger. There is nothing on board this vessel which we can use as food. *Nothing!* It will be at least another ten hours before we arrive on Barthis. If, on our arrival we are desperate with hunger, we shall be in no condition to carry out any kind of action. Do you agree with me?"

"We agree," said the other members of the group.

"Then I propose," said Vir, "that we draw lots—" he left the sentence unfinished. They looked at him, and then at one another.

"No sacrifice is too great," reminded Vir. There was a long silence. "I will prepare some slips of paper," said one of the women. She spoke in a cold, flat, resigned voice.

"One for everybody," said Vir, "including Geddo and myself."

"What will happen to the man on whom the lot falls, or the woman?" asked one of the Sons of To-morrow, as he looked up interrogatively, not only at Vir but at the whole group.

"It will be best if he or she does the job alone," said Vir.

The man who had asked the question, nodded. Vir placed one of the captured Barthisian hand blasters in the centre of the cabin. It lay there, a stark challenge for all of them.

"I will draw for Geddo as well as for myself," said Vir.

"One paper has a black spot," said the woman who had prepared them. "The rest are plain." Vir reached out a hand that was as steady as a rock and drew a paper from the clasped, closed hands of the

girl who had prepared them. He held it up for all the rest to see.

"It is plain," he said. "Now I draw for Geddo. He pulled another plain piece from between her clasped palms. There was an increase in the tension. One by one the others moved forward and took a paper. The eleventh piece held the black spot. The man who had drawn it looked at the others. He looked at Vir, stopped and picked up the gun.

"May I speak?"

"Of course." Vir felt a terrible sorrow, but this had to be. He felt revulsion, and horror, and hatred of himself but above all, a deeper, more implacable hatred of the Barthisians, whose action in inaugurating the war had led to this kind of situation.

The Son of To-morrow who had drawn the deadly paper, held it up for all to see.

"We were agreed," he said, "that no sacrifice was too great to enable us to bring about our vengeance. Any of us, including our leader, could have drawn this; I do not feel afraid. I do not feel sorry. I am aware of tense emotion, deep inside myself. I am also aware that I am not dying in vain. This gives me the courage to take the gun and do what must be done." He drew a deep breath. "I am dying that you may live. When you wreak our vengeance upon the accursed Barthisians, remember that it is my life that has given you the strength to bring about our revenge. In your moment of triumph, *remember me!*"

"We will," said Vir, in a hoarse whisper. "We will remember you."

The Son of To-morrow who had drawn the black spot, pressed the energy gun to his temple and fired a comparatively gentle burst of lethal energy into his head.

As his body fell to the floor Vir retrieved the gun. "What has to be done," said Vir, fighting madly against the gnawing hunger in his intestines, "is a horrible thing. Let it be done as decently as so horrible a business can be done. Although we are forced to act like beasts, at least let us act like clean beasts.

Let there be nothing of shame that can be avoided in a deed that is itself both blemished and shameful."

"We understand," chorused the others . . .

\* \* \*

When their hunger was satisfied Vir and the other Sons and Daughters of To-morrow committed the bones and the hair, together with one or two other inedible portions of their late companion, into the cold, clean, merciful darkness of outer space. Somehow, Vir felt no different for having done this deed. So far, he thought, so far have we come; we who were men of peace, and culture, we, who were a people of gentleness and developed minds, have come to this! The evolutionists had said, he thought, that man sprang originally from the beast, and the beast in turn, from *primaeval*, primitive slime. The Barthisians had destroyed Awan, and now the last, strangely modified Awanese were destroying themselves. The problems that were posed in Vir's mind by the environment in which he found himself, with his fellow Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, were insurmountable problems. When a mind that has once been a fine thinking instrument finds itself confronted with too many insurmountable problems, it switches itself off, cuts itself out. When there is no obvious way in which a rest can be obtained, the mind finds rest from some deep subconscious level of its own. Vir seemed to become strangely insensitive to the emotions and the promptings of the muffled conscience which he had tried so hard to ignore.

The ship flew on. Vir, Geddo and the others, amused themselves by exploring it as thoroughly as possible. When they had finished exploring they interrogated the two prisoners again, but although the frightened Barthisians were more than willing to answer each and every question, the interrogation did not leave the Sons of To-morrow any closer to a new plan of attack, for use when they arrived on

Barthis. This disc of the enemy world had now become so big that it fitted all the observation panels on that side of the ship, the ship which the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow had taken over.

"Remember," gritted Vir to the Barthisians, "if you seek to betray us, then you can expect no mercy at all!" As it is, he thought to himself, they need expect little! Perhaps the grimness of his face betrayed something of his thoughts, even to the crystalline-faced aliens.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Nemesis begins to Act*

THE ship landed. It landed uneventfully, and with no apparent stir of interest from the rock like Barthisians that had their being on the vicinity of the space port on which the vessel had descended. One or two of the space port 'personnel' began moving slowly and perfunctorily in the direction of the ship, but their actions were the actions of creatures who carry out routine functions with monotony and boredom. I am making the mistake, thought Vir, as he looked at the approaching Barthisians, of thinking there is something anthropopathic in their make-up. He looked at them again and thought to himself that in all probability there was neither resentment nor reluctance in the way that they moved. His body was so different from theirs, his mind so completely alien from theirs that he could no more completely attempt to understand them than they could attempt to under-

stand him. Perhaps it was the huge degree of difference and incompatibility between the Barthisians and the largely late lamented Awanese, that caused the high degree of antipathy between the two races. Vir wondered whether there had really been any serious antipathy as far as the Awanese were concerned. They had never really considered the Barthisians. Barthis and its inhabitants had been outside their sphere of reference. Until the beginnings of those cataclysmic nuclear halocausts that had destroyed their world, they had had no indication to really and seriously consider the Barthisians. They had not really considered anybody. Of course, a few visionaries like Xux and Yede had felt that both psychologically and physiologically, any chance of recovery and revitalisation, or rejuvenation of the race, must come from outside. Men like Xux and Yede with their teleportation equipment, had contacted the terrestrial humanoids. Vir found himself wondering what one of the terrestrial humanoids would have done in his place now. If that big man Stearman, the bearded Hengist, or the tall, laconic MacIlraith had been standing where he was standing now, and looking out at this enemy spaceport, what would they have done? What could they have done? What would they have felt? What sentiments would they have experienced? The thoughts were whimsical, and to a great extent, purely conjectural and fantastic. Vir brought himself back to the present reality with a sharp effort of will that was in itself something of a pure mental discipline. He drew a deep breath and forced himself to move away from the observation panel before the approaching Barthisians observed him. He had already discovered from his two captives that three space port workers would come aboard and begin to carry out routine maintenance on the ship. Obviously Vir knew that it would not be possible to maintain an unlimited quantity of prisoners. With a certain fatal grimness, he knew that the best kept secrets of all were

those known only to the dead. He decided that what would have to be done would have to be done very swiftly when the space port personnel entered the ship. It would seem natural for the maintenance 'men' to be on board while the crew members or some of them at least, were off the ship. The problem, he thought, was to find a way of getting the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow off the ship without their being observed or even suspected. Under cover of darkness this would not have presented any serious difficulties. In broad daylight, in the white rays of Polaris, on the wide, open expanse of the space port, it was going to be extremely hard. But Vir and the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow had not made the sacrifices that they had made, or come this far, to be defeated now. Vir's mind was turning over very fast. There had to be a way, he told himself. There had to be a solution to the problem. He was assessing all the data, putting forward rough theories in outline and discarding them again as rapidly as he formed them.

The first of the Barthisian space port workers ascended the ladder, the alloy runged ladder that led up into the lock. He came aboard and spoke briefly to the first of the Barthisian prisoners who stood in the anteroom, covered by Vir's gun, as he crouched below the bunk. It was the same bunk as that on which they had found their first Barthisian victim. Vir could not understand one word that was passing between the Barthisians. He wished with a desperate longing for a knowledge of their language. They could have been planning almost anything, he thought, yet his knowledge of their cowardice, prompted him to believe that his prisoner would not be communicating any dangerous or significant information.

The technician came into the compartment beyond the anteroom and the other two technicians joined him. They were all under the surveillance of Vir's gun, and Vir had every intention of using the wea-

pon at the slightest provocation. He, in company with the other Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, was a great believer in the old maxim that 'he who shoots first, lasts.' He was also a believer in the allied adage to the effect that there are many occasions in which it is wise to shoot first and ask questions afterwards! From a purely utilitarian point of view, in circumstances like these, he reflected, the modification which had been wrought in the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow had increased their chances of survival beyond the wildest dreams of their forbears, and yet, even as he thought this, he realised that the same ruthlessness which was serving them well in a ruthless environment, must, of its very nature, lead to the same kind of destruction which he was perpetrating on his enemies. He felt no remorse and no regret. Geddo, at a pre-arranged signal, moved unexpectedly into the room, and gestured with his gun for the technicians to move to one side. As soon as they were together and looking as surprised as their stony faces would permit, on the far side of the compartment from the other Barthisian prisoners, Vir emerged from below the bunk, and with a swift, grim purposefulness, he and Geddo dispatched the technicians. The plot, their first prisoner, contorted his crystalline features into an expression which even a humanoid could interpret as regret and repugnance. For a moment Vir tried to put himself into the creature's position. Just for a moment, some of the old sensitivity and culture of the man he had been, flashed up to replace the hard, ruthless efficiency of the man he had become, the *thing* he had become, the Son of To-morrow that he had become.

He tried to imagine how the Barthisian must feel, if indeed a thing of crystals could have feelings. He saw in his mind, through the eyes of a Barthisian. Humanoids were flabby and pink, and repulsive; they must be regarded as a humanoid would regard snails or slugs, as loathesome and reptilian. Perhaps

in some fantastic way the Barthisians even felt that they were performing some kind of ethical service by wiping out the repugnant, soft bodied, humanoids, that had lived on Awan?

Whose fault was it? Vir asked himself mentally. The question was a purely rhetorical one, but for the first time nagging doubts began to arise, right at the back of his mind.

The cold, implacable hatred drove out the doubts as a broom drives out a layer of dust. Yet, some of the dust persisted. A few specks of doubt settled on odd ledges of the modified mind of the thing that had once been a peaceful Awanese humanoid.

Vir motioned to the Barthisian pilot of the ship which they had commandeered.

"I would like these put out of sight," he said coldly. His foot indicated the powdery, shattered remains of the three technicians whom he and Geddo had gunned down with such dispassionate efficiency. With every appearance of sorrow and revulsion, the pilot of the Barthisian ship transferred the pathetic, crumbly grey dust to a steerage locker. He had the air of a creature being forced to do something irreverent and blasphemous very much against his will. The Sons to To-morrow looked on with cold, hard eyes, as cold and as hard, in fact, as the eyes of the stone creatures. Vir looked from the Barthisian to Geddo and then back to the Barthisian. It was difficult to tell which was flesh and blood and which was crystalline, he thought. Perhaps the quality of humanity, the very essence of being human, is not in the flesh or the blood, but in some deep and secret compartment of the mind, and once that is gone, mere flesh and blood are no substitute for it.

He cleared his mind of these thoughts by a deliberate effort of will, and looked at Geddo. Outside, through the observation port, he could see at a glance that the field was empty, in this quarter at any rate.

"We have destroyed three more of our enemies," said Geddo suddenly. He said it after the manner of

an accountant adding up the dividends and interim payments.

"We have destroyed them," agreed Vir.

"What is our next step?" asked Geddo.

"I am not certain," said Vir, "but if we are to wreak the kind of havoc upon this planet that they have wreaked upon our world, then we must escape from this ship and we must find ways and means of destroying those who have destroyed us."

"There must be great stocks of nuclear weapons somewhere," said Geddo . . . Vir turned to the pilot.

"Do you know where such stocks are kept?"

He had scarcely expected his question to be answered. The cowardly pilot must have known why Vir and Geddo wanted access to nuclear stock piles, and yet when the choice before him was his own miserable survival, or the survival of the planet as a habitable unit, he spoke.

"I know of such places."

"We wish to reach them," said Vir.

"There are many," said the pilot.

"Your fellow prisoner, does he know how to reach such places?" asked Vir.

"He knows of some of them," answered the pilot.

"Then we will divide into two parties," said Vir.

"Geddo, with half our people, you will take this one. Unless you would rather choose in a moment."

"So shall it be," agreed Geddo. They shouted for the other Barthisian captive, and their fellow avengers. The other Barthisian came through with the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow surrounding him like a pack of angry hounds about to pull down a fox. But there was none of the nobility of the animal at bay in the stone features of the Barthisian prisoner. He did not look like a fox, a stag, or a great bear about to turn on his pursuers. He looked like a cornered rat, a cornered rat carved from strange crystals of moving stone, frightened and desperate; Vir felt a contempt so strong that in its depth it

could almost have been pity—yet it was a pity that had gone sour.

"Now, which do you choose?" asked Vir.

"I will take that one," said Geddo. He pointed to the second of the Barthisians.

"Then I will take you," said Vir. His gun was trained on the pilot.

"But you cannot leave the ship! Everyone will see you."

"We do not intend to leave the ship—yet," said Vir. "*New* plans come into my mind at every passing moment." His gun was trained on the pilot.

"You cannot leave the ship in daylight; they will see you!"

"We have no intention of leaving the ship, as yet," said Vir.

"We thought about staying in the ship till dark, then sneaking away on foot," said Geddo.

"This would take too long. When a handful of men are fighting a planet, when a tiny group of human beings are ranged against a world full of strange stone monsters like you—" he jerked the gun menacingly forward towards the crystalline creature, "then," he went on, "time is of paramount importance. Time is of the utmost importance, for time is on your side. The more time we take the less chance we have of succeeding," said Vir.

There were murmurs of ascent from the other Sons and Daughters of To-morrow. A cold hatred bound them together, so deep and so strong that it had about it the power of a fanatically held religious faith. To them destruction of the Barthisians was a *Jehad*, a Holy War, and this *Jehad* upon which they were engaged was of more importance than their lives, than their survival . . .

"My new plan is this," said Vir. Even though he dignified it with the name 'plan' he realised that what he had in mind was only a new improvisation.

Geddo and the others watched and listened. They

were hanging on his every word. It was something that Vir appreciated and enjoyed.

"The ship will take off," he said, "the ship will take off and will land a first party near one of the nuclear stock piles. Then it will land a second party close to another of the nuclear stock piles. And after that—"

"Wait," said the Barthisian pilot, "one of us cannot fly the ship alone."

"For the second, and last, journey, the only help available will be the help of my people," said Vir. "Failure to fly the ship satisfactorily will mean death; you must know whether that is possible."

"I will try," said the Barthisian. He sounded limp.

"Then try just as hard as you wish to try to live," ordered Vir, "for it is Geddo whom you will leave at the first point, while we go on to the second."

The Barthisian inclined its scaly head. The transparent crystals which served it as eyes had about them a look that was colder and harder than usual.

"Let us waste no more time," said Vir, "let us begin."

The ship trembled and vibrated, then lifted itself on a plume of flame that carried it high above the space port. In a matter of minutes they were flying a level course at high altitude above the surface of Barthis. Through the observation port Vir could see that a number of other Barthisian vessels were taking off from the space port they had left. It was a huge place, and it had looked almost deserted, but from this altitude Vir could see that the appearance which it gave at ground level belied its true nature. It was not as empty as it had seemed. Only its great size had given it the appearance of emptiness and of dereliction. They could see now that something in the nature of half a squadron of Barthisian warships had been stationed, well away from one another, around its rim, around its perimeter.

An emergency signalling device suddenly crackled into frightening life.

"Interpret," ordered Vir.

The terrified Barthisian pilot moved his stony jaw, and gravel toned words emanated from his crystalline mandible.

"They ask why we have taken off. They warn that we must return at once, or they will intercept." He sounded desperate. "What shall I do? What shall I say?"

"Tell them you and your crew have a strange disease which you believe was contracted on Awan." Vir spoke like a man inspired. "Tell them that you have taken off because you were afraid the disease would spread among them. Tell them that you will remain in orbit until such time as you receive further instructions."

"If they think that we are carrying a dangerous disease," grated the Barthisian, "they will destroy us with fire and heat."

"That we must risk."

"You do not know them," said the Barthisian.

"We know them only too well," said Geddo.

The Barthisian began talking rapidly. Something that looked like thick grey water was seeping from the joints of his crystalline structure. If it had been an animal of flesh and blood, Vir, Geddo and the others, would have thought that it was sweating. Perhaps, mused Geddo, this was the Barthisian equivalent. The terrified crystalline creature turned off the signalling device and collapsed under the bunk. Grey drops which it had been exuding before increased in number and it wiped its face on a piece of absorbent tissue from one of the lockers in the compartment.

"Well?" said Vir, heartlessly.

"I said I did not think the disease could be fatal; they are going to give us a little time in orbit, but if progress is not satisfactory we shall have to be destroyed."

"All we need is a little time," said Vir.

"How will we be able to land? Surely they will keep us under observation?" said the Barthisian pilot.

"In a short while you will say that everyone has now recovered, that you are all in perfect health, that you are coming down. They will then call off their vigil and all will be well," said Vir.

"All will be well!" echoed the Barthisian with an air of dreadful pathos and irony.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *The Destiny of Nemesis*

THEY were approaching the dark side of Barthis, by the time the captive Barthisian indicated to Vir and his companions that they were close to one of the nuclear arsenals.

"This is the second largest of the whole of our planet," said the pilot.

"How well is it guarded?" asked Vir.

"It is guarded," said the Barthisian, "but not very well; it has never been considered really necessary to place a strong guard upon it."

"Why?" demanded Vir.

"No enemies would have been able to reach the surface of Barthis before our fleet could intercept," said the gravel voiced pilot, "and none of our own people would have gone near."

"But in my own person, and in the persons of my friends, you see the faults in your reasoning," countered Vir, with a cold triumph in his voice.

"Yes," there was a cold, dejected sound in the pilot's voice. "Yes," rasped the Barthisian again.

They were no longer escorted, and in the twilight zone between light and darkness the captured ship began to descend. Lower it came and lower still, turning a few thousand feet above the surface of Barthis, until it was descending, with its tail rockets acting as brakes.

"Soon," said Vir, "soon!" He put a hand on Geddo's shoulder. "This one is yours, do not fail. Remember our world and what they have done to it? Remember that man who died so that there could be strength in our bodies . . . who gave his life so that we should have the strength to avenge Awan. For him, for Awan, for me, for all of us, for untold ages of history, and for the future that now will never be, because of these people, *do not fail!* At least"—and Vir's voice sang to a sibilant hiss, "at least we can prevent these accursed Barthisians from doing to others what they have done to us."

"At least," agreed Geddo, "we can do this . . ."

The moment the ship touched down the lock was opened and Geddo, prodding the other captured Barthisian along at gun point, led his half of the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, out of the vessel which had brought them from Awan on their mission of vengeance.

As soon as they were clear of the exhaust blast area and before any questions could be asked over the communicator unit, the Barthisian vessel flew up again. The communicating unit crackled suddenly into life.

"Tell them that it was engine trouble," said Vir.

Perhaps it was instinct, but as he watched he felt that he had to draw his guns and shatter the communicator panel. The look of unmistakable guilt and fear in the eyes of the Barthisian pilot, told him that he had not been mistaken. The Barthisian had been planning some kind of last minute double dealing.

"I wonder what you said in your own language," mused Vir. He, and the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, who had remained with him, stood around the Barthisian.

"Without me you will not reach your objective," warned the gravel voiced man of stone.

"You are a part of our objective," said Vir. "I do not know much about your race, but I am sure that, like other races, it is possible for your race to die slowly or quickly. I do not know what is the equivalent of pain to you men of stone, but I have no doubt that there is one."

He picked up the alloy bar that he had originally taken from the bunk. He swung it experimentally through the air, letting the Barthisian feel the swish of it, as it moved close to his crystalline head.

"Well?" prompted Vir.

The Barthisian seemed to collapse into itself.

"I will fly you to the place that you seek," it said. The ship sped on . . .

Like a silver arrow from a bow, like a streak of polished grey lightning, like a line of white fire across a blue-black purple sky, it flew on, carrying the hapless Barthisian pilot and the terrible Sons and Daughters of To-morrow with their cold, hard leader.

"We are almost there," said the Barthisian. He gave a few quiet, simple instructions to the Awanese who were assisting in the actual mechanics of flying the ship. It turned and began to descend. Out of the dark sky above two brilliantly lit, Barthisian warships descended on it, their guns raking the air with spectacular blasts and bolts of multi-coloured energy. Heat rays seared the ground. The vegetation smoked and burst into flame. The Barthisian pilot turned his transparent, crystalline eyes in the direction of Vir, and the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow with an expression that was a mixture of hopeless resignation, apathy triumph and defeat. It was as though every emotion which had been fight-

ing for pride of place in its peculiar stony mind now registered simultaneously in its transparent eyes. Vir, implacable as ever, ordered his captive to land the ship.

Slowly, very, very slowly and softly, so slowly that it seemed impossible they would be able to avoid the savage rays of their pursuers, the ship landed.

The nuclear arsenal was not difficult to see, and it did not look, to Vir, as though it would be impossible to reach. He and the other Sons of To-morrow raced towards the hatch.

"What about me?" grated the gravel-voiced thing.

"Your reward," said Vir coldly, and shot him with a full charge. The eyes looked at Vir reproachfully, for one fractional microsecond, as the body of stone disintegrated into a crumbly grey powder.

Vir felt neither remorse nor compunction as he and the others scrambled rapidly down the ladder and spread out in all directions. The heat rays and huge super charged energy guns of the pursuers blistered and tore into the empty ship, as though they were hungry predators, seeking to devour their hapless prey. The carnivorous rays ate into the ship until it buckled over, a pathetic tangle of scorched, seared, blistered alloy. Acrid, burning smells, and the dusts of high temperature oxides filled the area until the wind wafted and dispersed them further afield. Vir and his small party of Awanese survivors made their way rapidly in the direction of the grim mound which they knew must be the nuclear arsenal which they sought.

Vir, gun in hand, saw the patrolling figure of a Barthisian sentry, like a walking statue on crystal bearings, the man of stone made its leisurely way around its beat. Vir fired from thirty yards. The full charge missed, for the range was too considerable for any degree of accuracy. Without lifting his finger Vir slewed the gun round.

The Barthisian sentry had dropped with surprising speed for so ungainly looking a creature. It was

firing back. Two of the Sons of To-morrow collapsed as they caught the full charge of the energy blast. But others, guns blazing, were closing in on the sentry. The whole party of them swept over the place where the sentry had been, and where, now, only a heap of grey powder marked the final resting place of the Barthisian guard. Other guards were on the move. The pilot had been right; the place was defended, but the defence was apparently a purely nominal one, and there was nothing nominal about the attack which the fanatical Sons and Daughters of To-morrow were launching upon the enemy arsenal. A few seconds before they reached it a violent roar, preceded by a vivid white flash, shattered the horizon. Even as they watched, a mushroom cloud, of proportions of which they had never dreamed, raced up towards the sky.

"Enough radiation to kill half a planet!" exclaimed Vir. "So Geddo and the others reached it." The surviving Sons and Daughters of To-morrow gave a loud, desperate, defiant cheer.

"Then we must do no less than they!" cried Vir. They moved resolutely on towards the great nuclear pile. They concentrated their fire on the central doorway. The doorway collapsed. Neither Vir nor his companions were nuclear experts, but they were shrewd enough to know that a sufficient concentration of energy must surely detonate one or other of the nuclear devices of this huge arsenal in which they now stood.

Vir made his way towards the door of the arsenal. He was poignantly aware of his own innermost feelings. Pausing to look at the group who accompanied him he saw his feelings mirrored in every face, every line of their bodies, every gesture they made. He and the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow in his party were the personifications of Nemesis. Their Yesterday had been taken from them. Their cultural heritage had been destroyed. More than that, their psysical heritage had been annihilated.

The Barthisians had disendowed them. They were exiled not only from their culture and their native planet but from their own true identities. The Awanese they *had been* were as dead as the Dodo. The things they had become revolted their original natures, but, at the same time, filled them with a determination to see this thing through to its logical and irrevocable conclusion.

Vir reached the door of the arsenal, determined that the cleansing power of the destruction atomic fire should purge and purify Barthis, its hideous crystalline inhabitants and the Sons of To-morrow. Vir opened the door and his thoughts dwelt on Hengist and MacIlraith for a long time.

"What have you done to us?" he asked aloud. His eyes travelled to the group again. These men and women had been cultured, educated, refined citizens of a highly complicated socio-economic community. Now they were something akin to savages. The light that reflected from every eye was the unmistakable light of savagery resurgent and barbarism rampant. Vir shrugged as he read the recalcitrant primitivism in every face. Somehow it looked a thousandfold more frightening on the faces of the women.

Hima, a thin-faced, lean, angular Son of To-morrow came up behind Vir. When he spoke his voice was the phonic equivalent of the evil light in the eyes of the whole group. It was a ratchet voice, a grit-in-the-cogwheels voice.

"Why do you wait, Vir?" asked Hima.

"I wait because I am thinking," answered Vir.

There was a shortness in his reply that was not lost on Hima. Hatred is a poor link, a fallible unifying force, thought Vir. Men who combine only because of their common hatred of some other object, some external third party, are not a really strong combination. The force of their hatred was both the weakness and the strength of the strangely transmuted Sons of To-morrow.

"Do you question my authority?" Vir's voice was a whiplash.

"Yes," snarled Hima. The unexpected boldness of it surprised Vir for a second. There was a strange tense silence. Tension mounted. Others were clustering around their angry leader and the usurper who had dared to challenge him.

Vir recovered from the initial shock of Hima's challenge.

"Think carefully, Hima," he roared.

"I have thought. Why should you lead us?"

"Because it is ordained."

"By whom?" demanded Hima.

"By those who made us," answered Vir, simply.

"Not so," growled Hima.

"I speak truth," asserted Vir.

"You lie!" exclaimed Hima.

"I speak only truth," shouted Vir.

"Liar!" the word rang out like the sound of death itself. A terrible silence descended on the group. One of the women ran into the silent, hostile ring.

"See, behind us!" she cried, pointing.

They turned and looked in the direction she indicated. One of the Barthisian war ships was floating down, its lights blazing. It was a bird of ill omen. It did not augur well for the plans of the Sons and Daughters of Tomorrow. It was a harbinger of an ill-disposed Fate as far as they were concerned. The dispute between Vir and Hima lapsed instantly into the limbo of forgotten things.

"We must get inside quickly," said Vir.

"And secure the door," agreed Hima.

They hurried into the arsenal and fastened the great portal behind them.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *The Seige*

THE great door closed with a horrible finality. Vir felt like a man who has just lowered himself into his own coffin and screwed on the lid from the inside. He was aware of the beating of his own heart and the tension in every nerve and fibre of his being. The strange modifications which had been made in him, both atomically and surgically seemed to be intensifying his present feelings instead of reducing them.

"What do we do now?" asked Hima tersely.

"I wish I knew," answered Vir.

"Let us press on to the inner places of the arsenal," suggested one of the others.

"Why?" asked Vir bluntly.

"It is better than standing here," argued Hima.

"This is so," agreed Vir, "we shall accomplish nothing by standing here. We must press on."

They began moving forward. The space in which they found themselves at present was a large open-looking chamber with a very high ceiling. It gave an impression of tragic grandeur which would have reminded Vir of old Vienna, except for the fact that he had never been there.

Now that the immediate danger from the Barthisians was over the angry rivalry between Vir and Hima was springing up again with renewed violence and vitriol.

"We must examine these weapons," said Vir

pointing to the nearby outlines of deathly, sinister grey shapes. Pointed things with metallic fins, waiting they were, like unemployed alloy understakers. They were among the most horrible sights that Vir had ever seen. There was nothing revolting about them. In a strangely odd, aesthetic way they had some sort of claim to beauty of form, to symmetry. Their ugliness lay in their purpose. These things were world eaters. They were predators that lived on civilisations and cultures. Their indiscriminateness was another factor which added to their horror in Vir's opinion. These things engulfed women and children in their terrible nuclear mouths. These tapering, grey metal cylinders enveloped the old, the weak and the helpless along with the young and the vigorous. They were universal involvers. There was something amoral about them rather than something immoral, and in the circumstances Vir felt that amorality was the greater evil. Immorality at least has the appearance of moral cognisance. Vir looked at the great tapering mindless things which the Barthisians had made to destroy planets and as he looked he felt that their very mindlessness was a more terrifying thing than deliberate sentient evil.

"We waste time," complained Hima.

"Let us destroy them, *now*," hissed another voice.

"Soon," promised Vir.

"Who are you to dictate the times of our living and our dying?" demanded Hima.

"I am your leader," answered Vir, with more weariness than anger. The anger still lived in his eyes, just as regality had continued to live in the eyes of the old patriarch of Awan who had died long since on his own shattered world.

"I disagree," said Hima.

"You cannot allow your personal feelings to interfere at this great moment," said Vir coldly as he looked crushingly at Hima.

"They are not my feelings alone," said Hima proudly.

"What have I done to incur your anger?" asked Vir with deceptive softness. There was an energy gun in his tunic pocket. The hand that strayed towards it looked casual and innocent enough.

"You presume upon us," answered Hima.

"Someone must lead," argued Vir.

"But not you," said Hima, "not any longer."

"I think otherwise," murmured Vir. The voice was soft. The eyes were hard. The voice was deception. The eyes were the truth. The hand moved in obedience to the message from the mind that reflected its purpose in the eyes. At the last moment Hima suspected something, but the last moment was not soon enough. The energy weapon, designed for the strange crystalline prehensile forelimb, fitted strangely into the hand of the Son of To-morrow, but its function was in no way limited by its odd shape, or the unaccustomedness of its touch.

Now Hima saw death looking at him from the end of the tube and despite the burning hatred in his soul, the hatred which had brought him, with the other Sons of To-morrow, to face the impending nuclear cataclysm which they were about to unleash against the Barthisians, death in this form was a vastly different proposition. Hatred could have spurred him on to bring destruction about his own head, provided it would accomplish his purpose—but here he was facing death without a purpose, without an end. He was facing it alone and the taste of it was bitter to his soul.

There was a fleeting milli-second in which he saw it leaping at him from the open end of the tube. In that micro-instant of time Hima seemed to experience the coming and going of Eternity itself. For him it was a Moment of Truth, a last Moment of Truth, which was ultimately condensed into an immeasurably small fraction of time.

The soft voice of Vir brought the tension of the assembled group away from the collapsing, shattered body of the Son of To-morrow who had dared

to challenge his leader. The old Vir, deep down within himself, whispered, faintly as a pale ghost, separated by a hundred yesterdays; it was looking in revulsion and awe at the body of a man, who, in that other life, had been a friend and a fellow citizen of a refined, cultured and civilised society. Now the pale, faint ghost of his alter-ego was no more than a whisper of ignored conscience, scarcely that. The new Vir, the Son of To-morrow, smiled a thin, enigmatic, cruel smile, cold, inscrutable . . .

"He said there were others . . ." the soft voice was thin, like the edge of a razor. The Sons and Daughters of To-morrow shrank back from their leader.

"Where are those others? Who questions my leadership? Who feels that someone else should lead? Speak?" There was not even a sullen murmur. There was the futile silence of angry, frightened people, like a crowd of rash school boys caught out in their bravado by some iron-hard, disciplinarian pedagogue. They looked down on the nakedness of their souls and saw fear. They were not really afraid of death, or of the atomic holocaust which would soon consume them. They saw that as inevitable, they knew it was part of life, but to have faced that gun and the annihilating blast that spat from it, was something that none of them were prepared to do.

There was a sound from the outer portal, on the far side of the great anteroom. Vir pointed to one of the Sons of To-morrow who stood in that area.

"Go and tell them," ordered Vir, "that if they attempt to break in we shall detonate the nuclear stock pile immediately. Tell them this, and laugh. Laugh so that they can hear you. Laugh so that the dead of Awan can also hear you and join in. Laugh so that the dust of your ancestors is stirred by your laughter. Do you hear me?"

Dumbly, the Son of To-morrow to whom Vir had spoken, nodded his understanding, and raced towards the great portal. He reached it. From behind it the sounds of drill and cutters could be heard.

The rock-like Barthisians were engaged on cutting through the great door of their new atomic arsenal.

It was a strange position as far as Vir and the Sons of To-morrow were concerned. The minion whom Vir had despatched reached the closed portal and called out his leader's message in a loud clear voice. The drilling stopped. The cutting noises died fitfully away. There was what could only be described as a long, loud silence. It was a persistent silence. It hung in the air like a funereal pall.

Finally a Barthisian voice grated through it. Vir moved closer to the great door in order to be able to hear better. He had been longing to hear the sound of an enemy pleading, or offering terms. He stood receptively by the secured door.

"We wish to discuss terms," urged the Barthisian.

"Terms?" asked Vir icily.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Below the Inferno*

"TERMS?" echoed Vir again.

"Anything within reason," promised the Barthisian.

"Is life within reason?" asked Vir rhetorically.

"Life is reasonable," agreed the gravel-voiced rock-creature.

"Would you give us your planet in exchange for the world you have destroyed?" asked Vir. There was a sinister banter in his voice.

"We would allow you to have any part of our

planet you might choose to live on," promised the crystalline thing.

"How large a part?" Vir was playing with words like an expert angler playing a fish on a thin but tough line. He could feel the rock-man's reactions through the great portal. The crystals seemed to be vibrating as though in violent anger and bitter frustration. The Barthisian spokesman was eating wormwood and drinking gall. His bitterness and desperation were music in the ears of the triumphant Vir.

"If we accept half the planet, as restitution," went on the Awanese leader of the Sons of To-morrow, "we shall want the whole and unpolluted half. Some of my men have already made up for a portion of your attack on our world. We shall not wish to inhabit the area of your planet which we have purged."

The Barthisian made a noise like a pneumatic device being deflated instantaneously. He gave vent to a gravelly hissing sound which would have been impossible to reproduce in phonic symbols.

"Do you accept our terms?" asked Vir with icy politeness.

"I cannot accept," growled the Barthisian.

"You know the alternative?" asked Vir.

"Why are you willing to kill yourselves?" asked the Barthisian desperately.

"Our world is dead. We have little or no wish to outlive it," said Vir acidly. "Perhaps you remember our World? You ought to, your people killed it."

"I am sorry," said the thick voiced rock-creature.

"We do not accept your apology," hissed Vir.

Fury coursed through his veins in place of blood.

"You destroy our world; you turn a civilised paradise into a smoking ruin of atomic desolation and radio-active death clouds and then, when we hold the whip hand, and your planet is threatened you dare to say that you are *sorry*?" Vir spat out the words

as though their taste was abhorrent to him "*Sorry!*" he repeated.

"You do not understand," said the Barthisian.

"Oh! yes we do! We understand only too well, as far as you and your poisonous species are concerned. It is our turn now. When we have destroyed your world we will apologise to you. I will send my ghost, my spirit, my wraith, my radio-active shade, my nuclear phantom, out across your ruins and I will say how *sorry* we are!" Vir sounded utterly merciless. From faint and far away his old civilised self was watching and loathing this cold hard monster he had become. Like the pale light of immeasurably distant stars he saw his old ethics and ideals and deep within his soul he wept for them. The destruction of which he was part, the destruction which was to unseam Barthis, was also destroying him. It had all but destroyed him as it was. He wondered if there could be any redemption for the pale, thin, wan spectre of his former character. He doubted it. In this new modified body, which Hengist and Mac-Iraith had helped to give him, his old ideals had as much chance as an icicle in an inferno. He sighed bitterly. He exhaled resignedly. In his own way, he thought, the noise he was making must sound as repulsive to the Barthisians on the far side of the door, as their noises sounded to him. Why were they still talking, he wondered. Was there some deep, ulterior motive in it? Was it an underhanded Barthisian tactic? Were they playing some secret and sinister deep double game? A kind of intuitive sixth-sense warned him and he began logically to analyse his thoughts on the subject.

Before his logical analysis was even partially completed his suspicions were confirmed by a strange sound that resembled an underground river. It was a low, soft murmuring noise. A frown of concentration crossed his face. That sound meant danger. He was certain of it. Where was the danger? He turned to one of his companions.

"That noise, what do you make of it?"

"It sounds as if they are trying to get underneath us somehow," answered the companion to whom Vir had spoken.

"That's what I thought," agreed the leader of the Sons of To-morrow.

"What can we do about it?" asked the other transformed Awanese.

"It may be possible to forestall them," replied Vir.

"How?" asked his voluble companion.

"We must find the secret point from which they plan to emerge and arrange some sort of welcome for them," said Vir grimly.

"An excellent idea," gloated the other post-Awanese humanoid.

"We must hurry," urged Vir.

He led the party away from the door and back into the complicated heart of the arsenal. The grey torpedo-shaped weapons of ultimate destruction seemed to leer at the hurrying Sons of To-morrow, as they passed the great, grim ranks of waiting death.

Vir got the impression that the hideous missiles were laughing up their sleeves. Irrespective of who lost this contest, they had won. Awan had already fallen victim to them. Was Barthi to be next? Was there no end to their insatiable appetite for death, wondered Vir.

"This way," called one of the women in the party and Vir gestured affirmatively in her direction. The other modified Awanese humanoids made in that direction. It seemed that the woman had super-acute hearing.

"Bliffa," called Vir, turning in her direction.

"How many do you think there are?"

"Perhaps ten, not more," answered the woman. She had been beautiful once, thought Vir, but the treatment which the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow had received from Hengist, MacIraith and

the Awanese biologists had not been primarily conceived as a beauty course. She was by no means repulsive even by pre-cataclysmic standards, thought Vir, as he studied her, but she was not the lovely woman she could have been and should have been. One effect of their treatment had been to coarsen the complexion and impart to it an air of granularity. This had been a mere annoyance and inconvenience for the men. For the women it was something more. Somehow it attacked their basic femininity, it encroached on their fundamental human dignity. All these thoughts flashed rapidly through Vir's mind as he looked at Bliffa.

The girl's keen hearing was leading them unerringly on the track of the noise made by the invading Barthisians under the nuclear arsenal.

"They have stopped," whispered Bliffa.

"Where?" asked Vir.

"Here, I think," she replied.

"Immediately below us?" he asked.

"In this place," her hand pointed to the spot.

"What will they do next?" asked one of the men.

"They will try to surprise us," answered Vir.

"What are your orders?" asked another man. It was obvious now to Vir that his orders were not likely to be questioned again.

"Surround this point; keep your guns ready," he whispered. "Don't make a sound."

"They come," whispered Bliffa. Her voice was so soft as to be barely audible. Part of the flooring slid back to reveal the ugly, angular head and shoulders of a crystalline Barthisian. Vir covered the invader with the deadly barrel of his energy gun. The transparent crystals which served the Barthisian for eyes regarded the gun in Vir's hand with a kind of horrified solemnity and incredulous disbelief.

"Do you wish me to surrender?" asked the Barthisian in a low grating voice.

"Not particularly," smiled Vir with a voice like

silk dipped in arsenic water. The Son of To-morrow levelled his blaster and fired.

The Barthisian dodged with unexpected swiftness and fired back. Vir felt the fringe of the charge as it grazed his shoulder and singed his hair. In a strange way of his own he found the experience almost pleasantly exciting. He threw himself forward without the slightest regard for his own physical safety and loosed off another charge at the rock-creature from the aperture. There were sounds of retreating footsteps.

Vir's strangely treated blood rose like the aroma of ancient Chinese culinary eggs and he uttered a wild curdling war cry as he led the way into the shaft. He was aware that the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow had followed him with the kind of blind obedience that great leaders take for granted. If Vir had heard of the terrestrial Alexander the Great, he would have felt a proud similarity. The shaft went down at a fair angle and they were slithering and sliding as they descended. The angle, however, was not so steep as to preclude the possibility of easy re-ascent. Vir fired at the shadowy rock-creature which he could see ahead of them, vanishing into mysterious intriguing darkness at the end of the shaft. He fired again and had the satisfaction of seeing the rock-thing disintegrate just before the darkness could swallow it protectively.

They advanced a little further, but the passage branched alarmingly into a number of dangerous looking openings.

"Stop," ordered Vir. "If we follow them any further, they'll have us in more ambushes than we have people." The party stopped. The Sons and Daughters of To-morrow halted and drew breath.

"Look," panted Bliffa excitedly. "What's that over there?"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *The Great Discovery*

VIR and Bliffa led the others towards the object that had roused their excitement. It was a tunnel opening, larger than the rest and connected to some sort of downward moving conveyor belt. If Vir had been a terrestrial humanoid he would have said it was akin to an escalator. They stood examining the thing for several seconds and then Vir began to add ideas together in his mind. He tried to put himself in the position of the designers of the arsenal. Stock piles of tremendously powerful nuclear weapons would not only be of value to the Barthisians when they were in conflict with other planets, but in the internal power politics of the world of strange, crystalline creatures, the arsenal would represent a key factor. In the course of some internecine strife, when the ultimate Moment of Truth arrived it might seem a logical policy to have a man in an unassailable position, a man with a row of buttons, each of which was the releasing agent for a powerful avalanche of nuclear death. What more likely place for such a cosmic last stand to be made than in the depth of the arsenal itself? Arsenal above; superfortress below; impregnable! As 'impregnable' as the labyrinths of Awan had been believed to be. The faint spectre of the civilised being whom Vir had once been raised its head with more force and power than it had done for some considerable time. Something that might have been the faint spectre of hope

appeared in Vir's mind. It had seemed to him from the very beginning that his function was to destroy the Barthisians, in the way that the Barthisians had destroyed Awan. Now, from an irrevocable, suicidal mission the faintest ray of the chance of survival appeared. Suppose that there was some way in which he could detonate the Barthisian super weapons here, in their arsenal, and reach the depths of some super shelter before that detonation took place? A part of him longed to die, but part of him, bolder and stronger, had now made itself felt, and he realised that the desire for death had only been part of his mental make-up when it had seemed to be an inevitable factor. It had not been so much a *desire* as an *acceptance* of that which appeared to be inescapable. Whatever else the modifications carried out by Hengist, MacIlraith, and the Awanese biologists had done, they had made Vir into a man of action. Perhaps action is, of itself, a primitive characteristic, but be that as it may, irrespective of its origins, a man of action Vir certainly was.

"Back to the storage dome," he ordered swiftly.

Bliffa and the others followed him with blind, unquestioning obedience, as he turned and led them away from the escalator shaft which had attracted their attention and their interest.

Back to the region above they climbed, where the steel grey messengers of death sat waiting patiently in their deadly racks. Vir looked at the incredible quantity of atomic death. A fuse, he told himself, a man must have a fuse, but what was there to use? He looked desperately in all directions, and then he saw a clock attached to the wall. It was not a particularly complex mechanism. The symbols of it would scarcely have been recognised as numbers by Awanese or terrestrial humanoids, but there was no doubt at all in Vir's mind that this thing was a teleological apparatus. It was a chronometer of some sort. It was a clock in so far as it measured time.

With a swift heave of powerful muscles, Vir lifted

Bliffa on to his shoulders and she unfastened the clock from the wall. It was heavier than she had anticipated, and for a moment the pair of them wobbled precariously. Then, strong hands reached up to steady her, to take the clock from her swaying grasp. It was surprisingly heavy, and as Vir began taking it to pieces he realised that its inner mechanisms were protected by thick, metallic shielding. The clock, apparently, was some kind of highly sensitive and important device, perhaps a part of the rather inefficient security system which they had already penetrated. And its working was considered of sufficient importance for the Barthisians to have protected it with considerable layers of a metal which a terrestrial humanoid would have referred to as lead. While the other Sons and Daughters of To-morrow kept watch for any possible encroachments of Barthisians, Vir dismembered the clock with a speed which was surprising. It was a long time since he had actually handled a mechanical object of this kind. He was not familiar with this variety of clock at all, and yet, deep down within his mind there was a very large amount of ingrained, intuitive mechanical knowledge. It was a gift; it was something with which he had been born, it was innate in the man. The mechanical knowledge was something that had not been disfigured or destroyed, had not been marred or blemished by the modifications which had been carried out by Hengist, MacIlraith and the Awanese biologists. The sound of cutters could be heard on the door once more, on the main portal; Vir motioned silently to the minion he had dispatched before. The minion went to the door again.

"If you do not stop," called the Son of To-morrow, in a voice of acid and icy politeness, "we shall detonate!"

The cutting stopped; a gravelly Barthisian voice came to life on the far side of the door.

"We have been thinking over the 'terms' that you

offered us," said the Barthisian spokesman. Without bothering to look up from his work, Vir shouted to his henchman.

"Tell those crystalline fools that we are no longer interested in talking terms with them, of *any* kind. It does not even amuse us any more."

"Your terms do not concern us," called the Son of To-morrow, through the portal.

"We will offer anything, *anything*," grated the Barthisian's gravelly voice from the far side.

"You are treacherous," said the Son of To-morrow.

"We do not understand," said the Barthisian spokesman. "In what way have we been treacherous?"

"While you speak with our leader," shouted the Son of To-morrow, angrily, "others of your people were trying to attack us by a secret way."

"They must have done this without our knowledge," grated the gravel-voiced Barthisian.

"You lie," said the Son of To-morrow.

"Oh, no, no, we speak the truth! Please listen! We will do—*anything*."

There was such a plaintive note in the gravel voice that Vir paused for a second in his work, and listened, then he laughed coldly into the innards of the disembodying Barthisian clock.

"I have nearly finished," he said to Bliffa, "Tell them to keep him talking while I arrange this." Bliffa nodded and moved without a word towards the door. She whispered softly in the ear of the young Son of To-morrow, who was speaking to the Barthisians through the portal. Vir was doing things to the interior of the clock and incorporating those things with the blaster with which he had dispatched Hima and the Barthisians, whom the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow had pursued into the shaft. That pursuit had subsequently turned out to be a blessing in disguise for Vir. For unless the Barthisians had attempted their treachery—the treachery

which had led to the Awanese descent into the lower parts of the arsenal, then the Sons and Daughters of To-morrow would not have seen the escalator leading down to those untrammelled depths at which they hoped there was every possibility of finding some kind of anti-blast and anti-radiation shelter. It would have to be an incredibly good one, thought Vir, if it was to be of any use at all. In his mind he saw a vision, a plan of a Barthisian nuclear war engineer. He saw the plan of a crystalline alien form, sitting with its transparent eye facets glued to a panel of buttons, while tremendous devastation took place above it, and around it. In his mind's eye he saw the creature pressing buttons with its strange, prehensile, rock-like forelimbs. He saw in his imagination, columns of dirt, dust and mushroom clouds. Vir had always possessed a sensitive and a vivid imagination. The process which he had undergone, at the instigation of Hengist, MacIlraith and the Awanese biologists, had not destroyed his imagination. It had changed it; it had reduced his sensitivity, but the mental organ as such was still there. Some of its chords were broken; broken strands could still vibrate to some effect.

"I've finished," called Vir suddenly. He beckoned to the girl, and to the young Son of To-morrow who had been holding the altercation through the portal of the arsenal with their Barthisian enemies without. The Sons and Daughters of To-morrow left the great high-domed, storage chamber silently. A thing that was a cross between a clock and an energy blaster, was levelled dangerously at the sensitive detonator plate of one of the gigantic nuclear weapons.

"Such a small thing," murmured Vir, looking at it.

"How long have we got?" asked Bliffa.

"You sound as though you were anxious to retain life," said Vir.

"I am no more anxious than the rest," said Bliffa. She looked at him strangely. Vir felt a feeling that

he had not felt since the strange modifications had been made in him.

He found himself looking at Bliffa in a new light. She was by no means repulsive, although in the old days she would not have excited much attention, he thought. And yet, standards change, even standards of beauty. He looked at some of the other Daughters of To-morrow. Bliffa was no worse than any of the rest of them. Vir found his thoughts moving to ideas of survival. He found himself hoping that the escalator that they had discovered would lead them down to some deep layer in which it might be possible for them to continue to live and move and have their being. He thought of what life had been like in the first few hours when they had emerged and groped their way through the shattered, broken labyrinths of crippled Awan. He thought of the journey to Barthis here. He wondered what would happen to the planet when the holocaust was released upon it. Thoughts of anger, thoughts of justice, judgement and revenge mingled in his mind with thoughts of survival. He thought of Geddo and his party, Geddo and the other Sons and Daughters of To-morrow. He wondered if they had had a chance like this. He doubted it. It had all happened so swiftly; there wouldn't have been time for Geddo and his half of the group to find a deep underground shelter, even if such a thing had existed in their particular nuclear arsenal. Vir and the others moved slowly but surely towards the escalator.

"How long have we got," asked Bliffa again.

"We have enough time," said Vir. "It would not have been wise for me to make the fuse too long, a short fuse and a swift result. After all, we had originally planned to have no fuse at all; we had originally planned that a courageous hand would hold the gun, would hold the energy blaster that pointed towards the deadly nose of one of the hideous Barthisian weapons. That hand blaster detonates one, and that one detonates the rest. This great

pile of nuclear potential blasts its way skyward, taking half a planet with it! *Half a planet!*" he repeated.

"And Geddo got the other half," said Bliffa.

"Yes, Geddo. I have not forgotten Geddo."

"Have you forgotten the man who died in the ship?" asked one of the other Sons of To-morrow.

"No, I have not forgotten him," said Vir. He turned to the man who had spoken. "Why do you ask? Am I the sort of man who forgets those who have given their all, so that the cause may prosper? Am I the kind of man who forgets comrades who have fallen by the way in the great cause for which we all work? *Am I?* If you think this, then you shall die as Hima died."

"I do not think this!" gasped the Son of To-morrow who had spoken rashly.

"Think well, then, before you speak," said Vir. "Since Hima challenged my authority, I am inclined to shoot first, and to question subsequently. Do I make myself clear to you?"

"You make yourself abundantly clear to all of us," said Bliffa. There was a mixture of fear and admiration in her voice and perhaps the slightest merest, suspicion of sarcasm. Vir looked at her; his eyes held a question but he remained silent. Bliffa looked back at him, her eyes, too, held a question, something of a challenge. It was Vir who looked away.

They had reached the escalator now and they were moving down, down on the sliding mechanical arrangement, down on the moving machine that carried them lower and lower to some destiny of which they were entirely ignorant. It could have been carrying them down into the very bowels of Barthis for all they knew. It could have been carrying them down into some strange, unknown abyss. They did not know, and in a way they did not care. It was taking them down more and more safely, in their opinion, because it was putting distance, vertical

distance, between them and the enormous holocaust which must surely take place above them in a very short space of time.

The party of Sons and Daughters of To-morrow, the modified Awanees, continued to descend.

It seemed the descent was interminable, but nothing in a transitory place of space and time is interminable. This side of Eternity, all things end. Vir, Bliffa and the others found themselves in a spheroidal compartment. Vir had never seen a terrestrial Rugby football, but if he had, he would have said that they were now in the position of flies on the inside of such a device. The simile which actually crossed his mind was that it must be rather like this on the inside of an eggshell. He wondered how the embryonic bird must feel, inside its protective envelope of membrane and shell.

There were noises above them. Sounds as though metallic shutters were being closed far above their heads, metallic shutters clanging to seal off the blast that would otherwise sear down that tubular escalator shaft. Inside their cocoon-like safety chamber, there were control panels and buttons. Vir looked at them with interest. The Barthisian symbols meant little or nothing to him. The Barthisians *spoke* the Awanese language, and so they could communicate, but these written symbols meant absolutely nothing. Vir simply guessed, and it was an intelligent guess, that the symbols stood for different target locations. It looked so cold, so clinically scientific; names besides buttons. It might have been for the convenience of some organisations which delivered parcels, for the convenience of citizens. But the parcels which were delivered by those buttons and labels were not for the convenience of citizens. It was as though the atom gods were evil, sentient beings on their own.

As though they lived aloof from the hopes, fears, the laughter and the tears of mankind. It was as though they played a weird game of cosmic chess be-

tween worlds and cultures. It was as though they challenged them to find a way to unlock their powers and when men or other beings had uncorked the geni-flask, in which the atom gods dwelt, then, like some powerful djinn, or eldritch spirit of old terrestrial mythology, they would leap from their hiding places and destroy those whose minds had unleashed their ghastly power. Vir did not think exactly in terms of those terrestrial similes, but the thoughts that went through his mind were very similar. They moved in the same logical progression towards the same logical end. Vir was, even now, to some extent, a methodical thinker, a man whose brain had been trained, a man whose brain moved in reasonable orbits of well-oriented thought.

Even as Vir sat looking at the enigmatic buttons on the dashboard of death there was a reverberation from above the inner safety capsule. *Awan had been avenged.* The nuclear arsenal had gone up. Vir and the others looked at the buttons and at each other . . .

"When Hengist and MacIlraith were talking once, long ago," said Vir, "they mentioned something from their world, Earth, something called Nemesis. Hengist explained it to me. He said that it came from the early mythology of the terrestrial humanoids. Nemesis was the servant of the gods; Nemesis was vengeance, revenge, restitution. Nemesis would track the evil doer—forever if necessary, a grim, pursuing shadow." Bliffa looked thoughtfully at Vir.

"There is a question that comes to me," she said simply. "This Nemesis—"

"Yes?" Vir's eyes softened a little as he listened to her question.

"If *he* should offend the gods, *who pursues the pursuer?*" asked the girl. "Who wreaks vengeance on the avenger?"

"Perhaps," said Vir, "even Nemesis can learn how to stop."

The spheroidal survival zone was a tiny oasis of

## NEMESIS

life on a planet of death. The Sons and Daughters of To-morrow filled that oasis with an unanswerable question mark.

THE END

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