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Bob Shaw



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“Yet some there be that by due steps aspire

To lay their hands on just that golden key

That opes the palace of Eternity.”

Milton

PART ONE—The Humans

I

IN SPITE OF all his efforts, Tavernor was unable to remain indoors when it was time for the sky to catch fire.

Tension had been gnawing at his stomach for most of the evening, and the repair job on the boiler turbine seemed to have grown progressively more difficult, although he knew it was simply that his concentration was failing. Finally, he laid his welding pistol down and switched off the lights above the workbench.

Immediately there was a nervous fluttering among the caged leatherwings at the opposite end of the long room. The compact, bat-like creatures disliked any sudden change in light intensity. Tavernor went to the cage and steadied it with his hands, feeling the wires vibrate like harpstrings under his fingers. He put his face close to the cage, swallowing as the cool air from the wingbeats caught in his throat, and projected his thoughts towards the squeaking, silver-eyed mammals.

Be calm, little friends. All is well. All is well ...

The clamor within the cage ceased almost at once, and the leatherwings returned to their perches, the mercury-specks of their eyes shining at him in the similitude of intelligence.

“That’s better,” Tavernor whispered, aware that the creatures’ telepathic faculties had picked up the undercurrents of his own edginess.

He locked the workshop door behind him, crossed the living room and went out of the single-story building into the warm October night. The year on Mnemosyne had almost five hundred days, and there were virtually no seasons, but men had carried their own calendars into space. Back on Earth’s northern hemisphere, trees were being transmuted to copper and gold—so it was October on Mnemosyne and a hundred other colonized worlds.

Tavernor checked the time with his watch. Less than five minutes to go.

He took his pipe from his pocket, loaded it with moist strands of tobacco and lit up. The ignited glowing shreds on top writhed upwards and Tavernor pressed them down with a work-hardened fingertip, calming himself with the rites of patience. He leaned against the wall of the darkened house while the smoke carried its message of sanity away on the night air. Tavernor imagined the fragrance reaching into nests and burrows in the surrounding forest, and wondered what their furry inhabitants would make of it. They had had barely a hundred years to get used to humanity’s presence on the world, and—with the exception of the leatherwings—had maintained a somber, watchful reserve.

At two minutes before zero hour Tavernor transferred his attention to the sky. The heavens above Mnemosyne were unlike those of any planet he had ever visited. Many geological ages earlier two large moons had coursed overhead, drawing closer and closer together until they had collided. Traces of that cosmic impact could be found all over the craters, but the main evidence was in the sky.

A shell of lunar fragments—many of them large enough for their irregularity of outline to be visible to the naked eye—constantly drifted on the background of fainter stars, forming a curtain that reached from pole to pole. The pattern of brilliant shards never repeated itself, and adding to the spectacle was the fact that the screen was dense enough for eclipses to take place on a continuous basis. As Mnemosyne’s shadow swept across the sky groups of moonlets would pass from white right through the colors of the spectrum, vanish into blackness, then reappear, to run the penumbral gamut in reverse. The total light cast was about equal to that of a normal moon but as it was diffused, coming from every part of the sky, there were no shadows—just a faint silvery ambience.

Against a sky like that, even a first magnitude star was difficult to pick out, but Tavernor knew exactly where to look. His eyes fastened on the single, wavering speck of light that was Neilson's Star. Almost seven light-years distant, it was lost in the kaleidoscope of Mnemosyne's night sky, but its insignificance was soon to be a thing of the past.

As the final seconds ticked away, the tension inside Tavernor's guts increased until he could feel it as a hard bullet of apprehension. *I'm indulging this thing*, he told himself. After all, the event itself had taken place seven years ago. *That* had been when Earth's Stellar Engineering Corps (the vainglorious egotism of the title never failed to dismay Tavernor) had selected Neilson's Star, noting with approval that it was of the classical type for their purpose. *A close binary, the popularized reports had stated. Principal component, in the giant sequence of the Hertzsprung-Russell diagram; secondary component, small and dense; planets, none. Prognosis for modification: excellent.*

That was when the Corps' great butterfly ships had come swarming on their magnetic wings surrounding the doomed giant, raking its surface with the stings of their lasers, pouring in energy at gamma ray frequencies until the influx reached insupportable intensities, until...

Tavernor's teeth clenched on the mouthpiece of his pipe as—with the suddenness of a room lamp being switched on—the house, the surrounding forest, the distant mountain ranges, the whole sky, all was bathed in hard white light. Its source was Neilson's Star, which was now a point of searing brilliance so fierce that he had to jerk his eyes away from it. Even at the distance of seven light-years the nova's initial fury could have pricked through his retinas. *Forgive us*, he thought; *please forgive us.*

The forest lay still for a disbelieving moment, as though stunned by the nova's intangible hammer blow, then it erupted in protest against this supremely unnatural event. A billion wings beat the air in a kind of diffused explosion. The flood of light pouring down from the transformed sky was dimmed momentarily as every creature capable of flight projected itself into the air, wheeled and darted for safety. Their concerted defiance of gravity gave Tavernor the fleeting sensation that it was he who was sinking; and then the sound reached him. Screams, squawks, whistles, whimpers, roars, clicks, hisses combined with the flurry of wings, clatter of dry leaves, scampering of feet, followed by ...

Utter silence.

The forest watched and waited.

Tavernor found himself gripped by the ghastly stillness, reduced to the level of one of Mnemosyne's forest creatures, virtually mindless, yet he had in that moment a sense of being aware of Life's relationship to the space-time continuum in a way that men no longer understood. The vast and transparent parameters of the eternal problem seemed to parade on the surface of the gestalt mind which he might suddenly have become a part. Life. Death. Eternity. The numinous. Panspermism. Tavernor felt a tremendous elation. Panspermism—the concept of ubiquitous life. Justification for believing that every mind in existence was linked to every other mind that had ever been? If so, the novae and supernovae were only too well understood by the quivering inhabitants of the dark burrows and shielded nests around him. How many times in this galaxy alone had a star gone berserk? A million times? And in the eternity of galaxies? How many civilizations, how many incomputable billions of lives had been blasted out of existence by the star-death? And had each being, intelligent or otherwise, in that last withering second, fed the same message into the panspermic all-mind, making it available to every sentient creature that would ever exist in the continuum's dark infinities? *Look out, little brother whether you walk, crawl, swim, burrow or fly—when the sky suddenly floods with light, make your peace, make your peace ...*

Tavernor felt his elation increase—he was on the brink of understanding something important—and then, because the emotion was a product of his individuality, the nebulous contact was lost, with an accelerating yearning slide into normalcy. There was a moment of disappointment, but even then

vanished into something less than a memory. He re-lit his pipe and tried to get used to the altered appearance of his surroundings. Statements issued by the War Bureau had said that for two weeks Neilson's Star would become about a million times brighter than before, but would nonetheless still be ten thousand times less brilliant than Mnemosyne's own sun. The effect was similar to bright moonlight on Earth, Tavernor realized. Only the suddenness of the illumination had made it awesome after all—the suddenness and his knowledge of the deadly purpose behind it.

The sound of a ground-effect machine approaching from the direction of the Center disturbed Tavernor's reverie. Tuning his ears to the engine note, he recognized the smoothly expensive whine of Lissa Grenoble's personal machine even before he saw its headlights splaying their topaz fingers through the trees. His heart began to thud steadily and peacefully. He remained immobile until the vehicle had almost reached the house, then became aware that he was deliberately trying to display the attributes she most admired in him—solidity, self-sufficiency, brooding physical power. *There's no fool like a middle-aged fool*, he thought, as he shouldered himself off the wall.

He caught the handle of the passenger door and steadied the machine as it sank to the ground. Lissa got out at the far side, smiling whitely. As always, the sight of her turned his inside into a volcano which had its base somewhere in his loins. Framed by shoulder-length black hair, Lissa's face was dominated by a generous mouth and large gray eyes. Her nose was slightly upturned and a little too broad for classical beauty. It was a face that was almost a caricature of warm femininity, perfectly matching a body in which breasts and thighs were slightly more ample than current fashion demanded.

"Engine still sounds good," he remarked, for want of something better to say.

Lissa Grenoble was the daughter of Howard Grenoble, the planetary administrator, but Tavernor had met her in the same way that he usually met people on Mnemosyne—through being asked to repair a machine. The planet was virtually without metallic deposits, and no butterfly ship could ply through its shell of lunar fragments with cargo from Earth or any of the nearer manufacturing centers. So even Mnemosyne's first family, which was also its richest, preferred to pay for repeated repairs to an old vehicle, rather than go to the fantastic expense of importing a new one by way of butterfly ship, orbital station and reactor-powered stage ship.

"Of course the engine sounds good," Lissa replied lightly. "You made it better than new, didn't you?"

"You've been reading my promotional literature." Tavernor was flattered in spite of himself.

Lissa came around the vehicle, caught his arm and leaned against him, purposefully. He kissed her once, drinking in the incredible reality of her the way a thirsting man gulps his first draught of water. Her tongue felt hot, hotter than any human's ought to feel.

"Hey!" He broke away from her. "You started early tonight."

"What do you mean, Mack?" Lissa pouted beautifully.

"Sparks. You've been drinking sparks."

"Don't be silly. Do I smell of sparks?"

Tavernor sniffed doubtfully, twisting his head away as she playfully tried to nip the end of his nose. The volatile, meadows-in-summer aroma of sparks was absent, but he was not quite satisfied. He never drank the dream-liquor himself, preferring whiskey—another reminder that Lissa was nineteen and he was exactly thirty years older. People no longer showed their age much, so there was no physical barrier between them; but the years were there in his mind just the same.

"Let's go inside," he said. "Away from this ghastly light."

"Ghastly? I think it's romantic."

Tavernor frowned. Lissa was laying it on too thick. "Romantic! You know what it means?" He glanced up at the intense point of light, now easily the most prominent object in the sky, which Neilson's Star had become.

“Yes, of course. It means they’re opening a high-speed commercial lane to Mnemosyne.”

“No.” Tavernor felt his tension return. “The war’s coming this way.”

“Now you *are* being silly.”

Lissa tugged his arm and they went into the house. Tavernor reached for the light switch, but she stayed his hand, closing with him again. He responded instinctively, then part of his mind which never relaxed its guard injected a niggling little idea through the emotional turmoil. *This, he thought, is the clumsiest attempt at a seduction I’ve ever seen.*

Feeling somehow like a cheat, Tavernor abstracted himself sufficiently to be able to review his relationship with Melissa Grenoble, from the time they had met three months earlier until the present moment. Although the attraction had been both instantaneous and mutual, the friendship had been an uneasy one, mainly because of the difference between their positions in Mnemosyne’s tightly knit social structure. Howard Grenoble’s appointment was perhaps the least political of its kind in the Federation—thanks to the planet’s numerous peculiarities—but he still carried the rank of Administrator, and his daughter was not expected to become involved with ...

“Just think of it, Mack,” Lissa was whispering. “Ten whole days on the south coast. Just the two of us.”

Tavernor tried to focus on her words. “Your father would love that.”

“He won’t know. There’s a painting exhibition going south at the same time. I told him I was going on it. Kris Shelby’s organizing the trip, and you know he’s the soul of discretion ...”

“You mean he can be bought like a stick of gum.”

“What’s that got to do with us?” There was the faintest edge of impatience in Lissa’s voice.

“Why are you doing this?” He used calculated stolidity, trying to anger her. “Why now?”

She hesitated, then spoke with a matter-of-factness he found strangely disturbing. “I want you, Mack. I want you, and there’s a limit to how long I can wait. Is that so difficult to understand?”

Standing with her in the confined darkness, breast to breast, thigh to thigh, Tavernor felt his detachment begin to crumble. *Why not?* The blood-red thought hammered at him. *Why not?* Aware of his capitulation, Lissa snaked her arms around his neck and sighed comfortably as he lowered his face to hers. He froze for a second and abruptly pushed her away, filled with a sudden bleak anger.

In her open mouth, visible only because of the room’s utter blackness, he had seen golden fireflies spinning.

“You shouldn’t have stopped me switching on the lights,” Tavernor commented a few minutes later as they drove towards the Center, following the glittering surface of a forest stream.

“Mack! Are you going to tell me what’s the matter?”

“You can kill the smell of sparks easily enough—the luminescence is a little tougher.”

“I ...”

“What’s it all about, Lissa?”

“I’ve told you already.” Her voice was dull.

“Of course. Our beautiful natural relationship. But you had to tank up on sparks first.”

“I don’t see what difference my having a drink makes.”

“Lissa,” he said impatiently. “If we can’t be honest with each other, let’s not speak at all.” *Listen to me, he thought. Old Man Tavernor.*

There was a long silence, during which he concentrated on keeping the fast-skimming vehicle in the center of the stream. The trees on each bank were limned from above with silver from Neilson’s Star and on their undersurfaces with gold from the machine’s powerful headlights, giving them a look of unreality. Tinsel trees lining a fairy highway. Tavernor edged the throttle forward and the finely tuned engine responded immediately.

Traveling at close to a hundred miles an hour, the vehicle screamed out into the stream’s fin-

broadening sweep and arrowed out to sea, slicing the tops off waves and converting them into a undulating plume of white spray which faded away far to the rear. The broad black ocean lay ahead and Tavernor had a sudden urge to escape the war he knew to be coming by pushing the throttle to the end of its slot and holding a straight course, scribing a bright line on the dark waters, until the turbines destroyed themselves, and him, and the vast storehouse of his guilt ...

"That's interesting," Lissa said conversationally. "The rev counter's gone all the way into the red. I've never managed to get it through the orange sector."

"That," said Tavernor, gratefully returning to his senses, "was before I made your power plant better than new. Remember?" He slowed the vehicle to a more respectable speed and eased it into a wide turn which brought the lights of the Center marching across the windshield. "Thanks, Lissa."

"For what?"

"Nothing, perhaps, but thanks just the same. Where are we going?"

"I'm not sure." Lissa paused, and Tavernor found himself listening intently, wondering at his own suspicions. "Oh, yes I am! I'd like to go to Jamai's."

"I don't know, sweetie." Tavernor fenced instinctively. "I doubt if I could face those goddam twitching mirrors tonight."

"Oh, don't be an old troll. I'd like to go to Jamai's."

Tavernor caught the faintest possible emphasis on the word "old," and knew at once he was engaged in an occult duel, fighting with invisible swords. Lissa was trying—with what she doubtless regarded as great subtlety—to pressure him. First there had been the amateurish attempt at seduction, now she was maneuvering to get him to go to a certain bar.

"All right—let's go to Jamai's."

Tavernor wondered why he had agreed so readily. Curiosity? Or was it some kind of penance for the fact that he was thirty years her senior, that he was too old and experienced for her to manipulate him, and, therefore, was failing her in some way he scarcely understood?

He maintained a broody silence until the vehicle had swept up one of The Center's approach ramps and was nestled down in a parking area close to the sea front. Lissa took his hand when they got out and walked close to him, trying to shelter from the salted breezes, until they were on the brightly-lit boulevard which curved around the bay. The windows of the big stores poured their brilliance out to be lost in the sentient-seeming ocean, defying the realization that Man was a newcomer to this world. As she walked, Lissa wistfully pointed out items of clothing and jewelry which appealed to her, keeping up her customary pretense that she was unable to afford anything she fancied.

Tavernor scarcely listened. Lissa's strange behavior had made him feel a lurking unease which brought with it a heightened awareness of his surroundings. There seemed to be many more military uniforms than usual on the streets tonight. Mnemosyne was as far from the combat areas as it was possible to get and still be within the Federation, but the conflict with the Pythysccans had been raging for almost half a century now, and soldiers were to be found on every world. Some were resting, some convalescing, others were vaguely busy in the service of the non-combat branches which proliferated freely in technological warfare. *All the same*, Tavernor thought, *I don't remember seeing so many uniforms before. Is this something to do with the blowing of Neilson's Star? So soon?*

When they reached Jamai's, Lissa went in first. Tavernor followed her into the long, redly-lit room and glanced around, concealing his caution, while Lissa greeted a group of her friends ranged at the bar. They glittered and tinkled like human mobiles, exuding the joyful complacency of intellectuals out for a night on the town. All around them, the mirrors surged and shrank.

"Darling! How nice to see you!" Kris Shelby unfolded his tall, immaculate figure from the bar with a progressive wave-like movement which reminded Tavernor of someone twitching a silk rope.

"Hello, Kris." Lissa smiled and, still holding Tavernor's hand, brought him into the space the group

had made for her at the bar.

~~“Hello, Mack.” Shelby pretended just to have spotted Tavernor. He smiled thinly. “And how’s my jolly artisan tonight?”~~

“Don’t know—I never take much interest in your playmates.” Tavernor stared blandly into the tall man’s face and had the pleasure of seeing the smile disappear. Shelby was rich, had real graphic talent, was a leading light in the art colony which made up so much of Mnemosyne’s permanent population. All these things, in his own estimation, gave him a natural claim on Lissa and he had not been fully able to conceal his irritation when she brought Tavernor into the circle.

“What are you hinting at, Mack?” Shelby had become majestic, pulling rank.

“Nothing,” Tavernor said seriously. “You asked me how your jolly artisan was, and I said I didn’t know the gentleman in question. I was suggesting that you should ask him yourself. Perhaps if you called your apartment ...”

Shelby adopted a bored expression. “You have a tendency to overdo things.”

“Sorry. I didn’t realize I’d touched on a sensitive area,” Tavernor said doggedly, and a girl at the rear of the group giggled, causing Shelby to glance coldly at her.

“I’d like a drink,” Lissa said quickly.

“Allow me.” Shelby signaled a barman with a lacy flourish. “What will it be, Lissa?”

“Sparks.”

“Any special variety?”

“No—just straight relaxers.”

“I’ll have bourbon,” Tavernor put in, unasked, aware he was allowing his dislike for Lissa’s friend to push him into a record display of churlishness. When the drink arrived he swallowed half, set the glass on the bar and put an elbow on each side of it. He glared at his reflection as it flowed and distorted in one of the mirrors that completely sheathed the walls. The mirrors were flexible and changed their shape as solenoids behind them exerted pressures in a random sequence dictated by the heat patterns radiated from the customers’ skins, cigarettes or drinks. On a night when business was good at Jamai’s the walls went mad, convulsing and pounding like the chambers of a gigantic heart.

Tavernor disliked the place intensely. He leaned on the bar, wondering what it was that Lissa thought she had in common with Shelby and his crew of cultural gadflies. *For them, the war simply doesn’t exist*, he thought—and was intrigued by the irrationality of his emotions. He had come to Mnemosyne to forget the war and what it had done to him, yet was angered by people who succeeded in remaining untouched as the great butterfly ships of the Federation sailed out on the ionic winds of space ...

He was so deep in his own thoughts that the argument had been going on for several minutes before he became aware of it.

A red-haired giant in the pale gray whipcords of the Interstellar Mobile Divisions had been sullenly drinking beer at the far end of the long bar. Tavernor had noted the man’s presence as soon as he came in, but he had missed the arrival of a second soldier who had taken a position at the opposite end, close to the door. The latter was dressed in the darker grays of the Tactical Reserve. He was as tall as the other man, but leaner, and had a white desperate face.

“Lousy reservist,” the redhead was snarling drunkenly as Tavernor tuned in on the argument. “Nothing to do but eat, drink and screw *real* soldiers’ wives.”

The Reservist looked up from his drink. “You again, Mullan. How can you be in *every* bar I go into?” Mullan repeated his original remark, word for word.

“Wouldn’t have thought any woman would marry you,” the Reservist commented acidly.

“Waddya say?” Mullan’s deep-throated bellow brought a sudden silence to the whole room.

The Reservist apparently had traces of imagination. “I said that any woman who would marry you would be safe in a cell full of rapists.”

“Waddya say?”

“I said ... Ah, get lost.” The thinner man made a contemptuous gesture and returned to his drink.

“Say that again.”

The Reservist rolled his eyes towards the ceiling, but said nothing. Tavernor glimpsed a white-jacketed bartender disappearing into a phone booth at the other side of the room. The redhead gave an inarticulate roar of fury and began making his way along the bar. He did it by putting one huge orange-fuzzed hand on the chest of the man next to him, hurling him backwards, and moving on to the next. By the time he had removed four of Jamai’s clientele from his path the others had got the idea and there was a rush to get away from the bar. Nobody thought of objecting to the giant’s impropriety.

The group centering on Lissa and Shelby moved out of the line of action in a flurry of excitement with a ripple of laughter from the glittering, tinkling girls. *This isn’t real*, Tavernor thought, *it’s part of a bad movie*. He picked up his glass and was preparing to rejoin Lissa when he caught the triumphant look in Shelby’s eyes.

“That’s right, Mack,” Shelby said soothingly. “Come over here—where it’s safe.”

Numbly, swearing inwardly, Tavernor set his glass down again.

“Don’t be silly, Mack.” Lissa’s voice was taut with alarm. “It isn’t worth it.”

“That’s right, Mack—it isn’t worth it,” Shelby mimicked.

“Stop it,” Lissa half-screamed.

Tavernor turned his back on them and leaned on the bar, staring down into his whiskey, while self-recrimination raged in his brain. *What’s wrong with me? Why do I allow people like Shelby to ...*

A hand like the scoop of a crane closed over his left shoulder and dragged him backwards. He locked his muscles, clamping himself to the smooth wood of the counter, and the hand slipped off him. The redhead gave an incredulous grunt and took a fresh grip on Tavernor’s shoulder. During the first contact Tavernor had sized the big man up, judged him to be a proficient but not especially gifted hand-to-hand combatant, and had decided on a mode of fighting which should put him away quickly but without any lasting damage. He allowed himself to be pulled sideways and his right fist came around in a blurred arc which terminated in the bulge of flesh just below the other man’s ribs. The redhead was too big and heavy to be knocked backwards. He sank vertically as though being lowered into the basement, then the light returned to his eyes and he straightened up again and made to grab Tavernor’s throat.

Tavernor ducked under the converging hands and was shifting his balance to deliver another blow when the familiar, querulous whine of a stungun sounded behind him. He had time for the startled realization that he had been shot by the white-faced Reservist.

Then it got very dark in Jamai’s.

By all the rules, Tavernor should have lost consciousness immediately—but he had stopped stungun charges many times in his life and his nervous system had almost learned to sustain the brutal shock. Almost, but not quite. There was a mindless period during which light was non-directional, swirling over him like sound; voices, the noises of the bar, suddenly acquired polarity, became meaningless radial sprays of vibration.

Eons later came a moment of sensibility. He was out in the street, where the night breezes were seeded with salt water, and rough hands were lifting him into a vehicle. The interior had an evocative smell—dust, engine oil, rope. An army vehicle? On Mnemosyne?

“Is he all right?” The voice was that of a woman.

“He’s all right. How about the money?”

“Here you are. Are you sure he isn’t hint?”

“Yeah. I’m not so sure about Mullan, though. You didn’t say anything about this guy being a gladiator.”

“Forget about Mullan,” the woman said. “You’re both being well paid.”

Tavernor groaned. He had recognized Lissa’s voice—and the pain of the betrayal was something that stayed with him as he fell down the dark, echoing well of night.

II

THE CELL WAS eight feet square, windowless, and so utterly new that Tavernor was able to find little spirals of bright, clean metal in the corner behind the toilet facilities. It smelled of resin and plastic and appeared never to have had a previous occupant.

He found the last fact vaguely disturbing—there was no way of knowing where he was being imprisoned. This certainly was not the cell block in either The Center's police building or the Federal administration complex south of the city. Tavernor had seen both while working on maintenance contracts, and remembered that the cells were bigger, older and had windows. Besides, neither the police nor the Federal men would have left him alone for so long. His watch showed that almost five hours had passed since he had regained consciousness to find himself lying fully clothed on an oblong of resilient green plastic that served as a bed.

He got to his feet and kicked the door with the flat of his foot. The featureless white metal absorbed the blow with a sound that suggested massive solidity. Tavernor swore savagely and lay down again, staring into the luminescent plane of the ceiling.

It had been Lissa's voice, all right. It had been Lissa who had paid the Reservist to set Tavernor up and then knock him down. The whole melodramatic scene at Jamai's had been contrived—but for what reason? Why should Lissa go out to his place, primed with sparks, try to seduce him, and when that had failed maneuver him into a bar where she had set a trap? Could it be a joke? He had known Shelby's crowd to go to some pretty fantastic lengths when they thought they were on to something funny, but surely Lissa would not have gone along with them. Or would she? Tavernor suddenly realized there was much he did not know about Melissa Grenoble. And at the moment, he could not even tell whether it was night or day ...

His rage spilled over once again. He leaped up from the bed and was hurling himself at the door when he saw that a small panel had opened in it. A pair of hard gray eyes was staring at him through the aperture.

"Open the door." Tavernor spoke harshly to cover his surprise. "Let me out of here."

The eyes regarded him unwinkingly for a moment, then the panel snapped shut. A few seconds later the door swung open. Beyond it were three men in dark green uniforms of infantrymen. One was heavily built sergeant with a closely shaven yet blue chin, down which an old laser scar spilled like porridge. The other two men were experienced-looking pfc's who carried rifles with a carelessness which did not deceive anybody. All three looked hostile and ready for any trouble Tavernor might care to offer.

"What the hell's going on here?" Tavernor demanded, deliberately using inflections which would let a practiced ear know that he had once held military rank.

The sergeant's gray eyes abruptly became more stony than ever. "Lieutenant Klee will see you now. Move."

Tavernor considered being awkward about it, but he could see that the sergeant would not be impressed and, in any case, Lieutenant Klee would probably be the best source of information. The direction in which he was to go was indicated by the fact that the three men had closed off the corridor to the left. He shrugged and began walking. The corridor continued for some fifty paces past doorway which looked as though they led into cells similar to the one in which he had awakened. At its end was an elevator operated by another fully-armed infantryman. The sergeant did not need to give an

instructions; the elevator hummed upwards for a very short distance as soon as the doors had closed.

When the elevator had stopped moving they stepped out into another corridor, but this one was lined with glass-walled offices; sloping prisms of morning sunlight broke up the continuity of distance. Uniformed clerical workers moved busily inside their glazed cubes, and columns of cigarette smoke shone in the air like insubstantial trees. The abundance of light gave Tavernor a cold pain in the upper part of his eyeballs, and he realized he was still weak and shaky. He followed the sergeant to a reception area which had a high desk flanked by more uniformed men. Everything about the building had the same smell and appearance of complete newness. A glance through the entrance doors showed the pastel geometries of The Center curving away to the south, following the line of the bay.

But being able to pinpoint his location did not reduce Tavernor's bafflement—he was certain there had been no large building in the area a day or so earlier. It would be quite possible, on any other planet, for military engineers to throw a sizeable structure together in a matter of hours if the requirement was sufficiently urgent. But massive equipment would be needed, and the only way to bring it into Mnemosyne was an old-style reaction-carrier stage ship, the fuel for which had been aptly described as liquid money. Tavernor found it impossible to visualize any development on Mnemosyne which would justify even moderate expenditure by the Federation's armed forces. And yet, he remembered uneasily, they had blown Nielson's Star ...

Lieutenant Klee came out of an office behind the big desk. He was a bony-shouldered youngster with crewed black hair so thick and so soft with washing that it looked like fur.

"Lieutenant," Tavernor began immediately. "I hope you're the one who's going to explain all this."

Ignoring the question, Klee consulted a piece of paper. "You are Mack H. Tavernor?"

"Yes, but ..."

"I've decided not to proceed against you any further. You can go."

"You've *what*?"

"I'm letting you go, Tavernor. But realize I'm doing this only because martial law had been declared a very short while before the incident, and there's a chance you hadn't heard the announcement."

"Martial law?" Tavernor's brain was numb.

"That's what I said. From now on steer clear of uniforms. Don't go looking for trouble."

"Who looked for trouble?" Tavernor was depressingly aware that he sounded like any small-time hoodlum who had been dragged into a precinct station. "I was minding my own—"

"The soldier who disabled you says you struck the only blow. Other witnesses confirmed this."

"They would," Tavernor muttered inadequately. His head was pounding painfully now, his mouth was dry and he felt the need for strong coffee followed by food. "Martial law, you say? What's the reason for it?"

"We can't say."

"You must give some reason."

Klee's mouth twisted sardonically. "There's a war on. Okay?" One of the pfc's gave an appreciative chuckle and the sergeant silenced him with a movement of his hand.

Klee looked at his piece of paper again, then raised speculative eyes to Tavernor's face. "Mnemosyne's Grenobles will be here at ten hundred hours to pick you up—that's in about four minutes from now."

"I won't be here. Tell her to ..."

"To what?" Klee sounded interested.

"Forget it." Tavernor walked to the door, his mind boiling with anger and unanswered questions. His attention was caught by some indefinable strangeness in the section of street he could see beyond the entrance. The passersby looked normal enough, and the traffic was shuttling in its usual way, but the scene struck him as being curiously unreal. There was, perhaps, a subtle wrongness in the quality of the light, as if the world were lit by stage lamps which were not quite able to simulate the sun. He

shook his head slightly and pushed open the door.

“Oh, Tavernor.” Klee’s voice was impersonal.

Tavernor halted. “Yes?”

“I almost forgot. Call and see our civil compensations officer two doors along the block. He’s got some money for you.”

“Tell him to ...” Tavernor strained his mind for something new in obscenities but had to content himself with a disgusted wave. He left the shade of the entrance canopy and headed downtown. Viewed from the outside, the building he had just left was shocking in its newness. The huge glass cube looked as though it might have been dropped into place in a single unit, crushing whatever had been there before. Around its perimeter were small groups of army engineers tidying up the rim of the excavation, compacting the raw clay and fusing it into banks of polished marble with squat olive-green machines. The ozonic air was filled with a fretful crackling of energy, and an occasional extraloud *splat* as a rock temporarily refused to yield the molecular structure it had held for billions of years.

People on the sidewalk looked curiously at the activity, but they kept on walking. Tavernor tried to remember what had been on the block previously, but all he got was a vague impression of cluttered small buildings which might have been stores. He had noticed before that no matter how familiar he was with a street or intersection, as soon as he had seen its redeveloped configuration the memories of the original immediately faded away. For all he knew, he told himself illogically, this might have been one of his favorite haunts before the army messed it up. His resentment increased out of proportion.

At the corner he turned towards the ocean and walked for a few minutes until he found a diner. He was dialing coffee from a dispenser when he glimpsed his darkly stubbled face in the machine’s mirrored surface. The bristles felt longer than he had expected, and an unpleasant suspicion dawned in his mind.

“What day is this?” he demanded of an elderly man sitting in the nearest booth.

“Thursday.” The man’s gray eyebrows twitched and hovered in surprise.

“Thanks.” Tavernor took his coffee to a vacant booth and sat down. His suspicions were confirmed—he had lost two days. A regulation stunner could be set for a low charge which would put a man out for the space of ten minutes, but he had been given the full blast, stretching his synaptic gaps to within microns of permanent disablement. He recalled the face of the Reservist who had shot him and made a special slot in his memory for it. Martial law or no martial law, he owed the Reservist something.

With the coffee warming his stomach, he decided to postpone eating until he had reached home. He cleaned himself up and tended to the leatherwings. They would be hungry and nervous after not seeing him for two days. For a moment he debated phoning for a cab from the diner, then decided it would be as quick to hail one in the street. He went outside and—for the first time since he had been freed—turned his gaze inland towards the forest.

The forest was not there.

In its own way, the shock to Tavernor’s nervous system was as severe as the stungun charge had been. He stood stock still while people brushed impatiently by him, staring at the strangely naked horizon. The Center skirted the bay for a distance of eight miles, but on average it was less than a mile wide, so the forest could always be seen at the end of the cross-town thoroughfares. Its multitudinous greens and muted blues clothed a five-mile plain, and beyond that rose upwards in verdant waves which fell back only when they had reached the bare rock of the continental plateau. On hot days the groves of broad-leaved gymnosperms known as tiethes released columns of water vapor high into the sky, and at night the flowers of the moonseekers sent a sweet heady perfume rolling down through the quiet avenues under the gemmy canopy of Mnemosyne’s shattered moons.

But now there was nothing between the western edge of the city and the gray ramparts of the plateau.

Forgetting about finding a cab, Tavernor walked towards the missing forest while the resentment that had been surging inside him turned into a vast, aching dismay.

This then was what had caused the odd quality of the daylight he had noticed earlier—its familiar green component, reflected from the palisades of trees, was absent. As Tavernor began to clear The Center's commercial belt and pass between apartment blocks he saw ahead of him an untouched expanse of parkland which looked reassuringly normal. Civilian hovercars drifted across it or lay like bright petals on the grass, while family groups picnicked nearby. Feeling that he had strayed into a dream, Tavernor kept walking and gradually reached a low crest from which he was able to get a better view of the plain.

Two separate fences spanned the plain a short distance ahead. The nearer was very high and angled outwards at the top to make it climb-proof; the further had flashing red-and-white posts which meant it was electrified, or something worse. Beyond the fences—where the forest should have been—was a shimmering, glass-smooth plain. Honey-colored, whorled with silver and pale green, it was a frozen fairy sea, a ballroom floor created for the revels of myth-kings.

Tavernor, who had seen such things before, sank to his knees.

“You bastards,” he whispered. “You filthy, murderous bastards!”

III

“COME ON—get up,” the ice cream man said.

Next door, in another universe, a woman sobbed in panic. The sky began to fracture, and Mack thought on starry fragments tumbling down into neat gardens.

“Too slow, *too slow*,” the ice cream man said. He reached down with big questing hands. The fingers were dry icicles, and they seared Mack’s ribs through his pajamas.

“I don’t want a popsicle,” Mack screamed. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“Sorry, son.” The ice cream man’s face flowed, | and suddenly he looked like Mack’s father. He raised Mack into the air and threw him across his shoulder. Mack’s face struck something hard, and the pain brought his eyes fully open. It had been the barrel of his father’s hunting rifle, slung over his shoulder. Abruptly, the bed-warm sleepiness deserted Mack. He began to feel excitement and the first stirrings of alarm.

“I’m ready,” his mother said. She was wearing a hastily-tied dressing gown. Her features were smudged, melting with fear. Mack wanted to protect her, but remembered regretfully that he had broken the string on his bow and lost most of the arrows.

“Then run, for God’s sake.” His father went down the stairs in three bounding strides. Sensing the adult strength, Mack felt both secure and proud. The Pythysiccans were going to be sorry they had ever come near Masonia. His father was a good fighter, the best rifle shot on the whole agproj. In less than a second the door was open and they were out in the cool night air, pounding towards the copter parking circle. The undulating howl of a siren—which he had been only faintly aware of in the hour—dinned into Mack’s ears. Other agproj families were running towards their own machines. The flashes and reports of small arms splintered awareness into compartments in which Mack heard shouts, screams and a peculiar shrill whine which seemed to come from the trees to the north of the village.

“Dave!” It was his mother’s voice, but scarcely recognizable. “Over there! They’re at the copter already!”

Mack felt rather than heard his father’s low moan. He found himself dropped to the ground, then he was being dragged along faster than he could run. His father unslung the rifle with his free hand and began firing at something. The familiar jolting thunder of the weapon reassured Mack—he had seen punch holes in half-inch steel plate—but his father began to swear bitterly between shots. Mack became really afraid.

Ahead, close to the copters, spindle-shapes of unearthly tallness moved in the darkness. Green flashes sped from their limbs, and the ground heaved and shuddered. Somebody whimpered close to Mack. In the fitful garish light he actually saw the Pythysiccans, and he tried to cover his eyes. Miraculously, the copter bulked up in front of him. He leaped for the handle of the door and caught it, but his fingers slipped off the dewy metal. His father came from behind him, wrenched open the door and heaved Mack up onto the deck.

“Spin her up, son—the way I showed you.” His father’s voice was hoarse. “You can do it.”

Mack threw himself at the control console, tumbling switches with the flat of his hand, and the starter cartridge exploded, spinning the turbine into life. The copter stirred expectantly.

“Come on, Dad!” Mack’s voice faltered as he saw his father was alone. “Where’s Mom? Where’s she?”

“I’ll be with her—that’s all I can do for her now. *You get out of here.*” His father turned away and walked towards the spindle-shapes, pajamas flapping in the downdraft of the rotors, rifle blazing hopelessly. Mack half-rose from his seat, but an elongated figure appeared in the open doorway mewling and clicking. In the dim light of the instruments Mack saw that it seemed to be part bone, part slime, and part exposed gut that glistened like pale blue satin. The choking stench of it filled the cabin instantly.

Mack had no real control over what happened next—his instincts and reactions took over. He twisted the throttle savagely and moved the collective pitch lever, and the copter lurched skywards. The alien warrior fell outwards and away.

Within a few seconds the eight-year-old Mack Tavernor had left the battle—and his childhood—far behind.

It was almost exactly forty years later that Tavernor revisited his home planet of Masonia.

As the sole survivor of the Pythsyccan sneak-raid on Masonian Agproj 82 he had been—although he was too young at the time to understand it—a gift to the propaganda arm of the War Bureau. Survivors of any raids were rare enough, as the Pythsyccans had no discernible object other than to kill human beings. They made no attempt to capture or destroy materiel. Even stranger was the fact that Federation ships-of-the-line had fallen into their hands on a number of occasions, and had been left just as they were found: unharmed and—more important from the Federation’s point of view—without their technical secrets unexploited.

The Pythsyccans, arbitrarily named after the planet on which they had first been encountered, had psychologies which baffled all the efforts of Earth’s xenologists; but their failure to learn anything from the butterfly ships was perhaps the greatest mystery they posed. They were familiar with tachyonics, the branch of science which held a mirror to Einsteinian physics, dealing with particles which could not go *slower* than light. They had mastered the even more difficult “tachyonic mode”—the technique of creating microcontinua within which a spaceship composed of normal matter could display some of the attributes of tachyons, and thus travel at huge multiples of the speed of light. But—and in the early years the Federation had scarcely been able to believe its luck—the Pythsyccans had never taken the next logical step in interstellar travel.

That step had been the development of the butterfly ship, known on Earth as the Bussard interstellar ramjet. A butterfly ship could weigh as little as a hundred tons, and got its name from the huge magnetic fields with which it swept up interstellar ions to be used as reaction mass on long-range flights. Spread to their full span of several hundred miles, the magnetic wings enabled the lightweight ship to boost itself efficiently to the speed range above .6C at which the tachyonic mode became viable. The butterfly ship was fast, economical to build and operate, and highly maneuverable—yet the Pythsyccans continued to use vast unwieldy vessels which carried their own reaction mass. Even with the assistance of tachyonic physics and efficient conversion of mass to propulsive energy, a Pythsyccan ship could weigh over a million tons at the beginning of a flight. Lumbering through space on a course that was virtually unalterable, because of the fortune in kinetic energy that would be squandered, one of these ships would consume itself section by section until its reaction mass was exhausted—at which point it had to be close to a fuel depot or become a useless hulk.

The war had been in its second year when Tavernor’s parents had died with their fellow colonists on Masonia. It was then becoming apparent to COMsac, the Federation’s High Command, that—in spite of the inferiority of the Pythsyccan ships—disposing of the aliens was going to be a long and costly affair. There was a problem in that the planets suffering the Pythsyccan attacks were on the edges of the Federation, whereas the money and resources to wage war were tied up in the home systems.

That was where Tavernor—an eight-year-old boy who had seen his parents slaughtered by the alien—came in. His face and voice were featured on every tachyonic communications media, in a propaganda campaign which employed every trick the experts knew. For the purposes of the sustained onslaught on the public mind, his escape in the helicopter was represented as his first flight, although his father had allowed him to handle the controls several times previously. Later he made personal visits to every one of the home systems. By the time Tavernor was fifteen his propaganda potential was exhausted, but at that stage it did not matter—the Pythysyccans had begun to make deeper forays into Federation-controlled regions of space.

Tavernor went into the army almost automatically. During his cadetship and years as a junior officer, his desire simply to destroy Pythysyccans—coupled with intelligence and a kind of remorseless efficiency—dominated his personality and all his official assessments. He put in ten years in what were known as “maximum interpenetration areas,” reaching the rank of major in an environment where the ability merely to stay alive demanded an instinctive genius. Then MACRON was born.

The new computer—satellite-sized, yet as dense as opto-electronics could make it—had been coordinating the Federation’s war effort for less than a week when Tavernor was posted to Earth. He learned that assessment files and aptitude test cards, which had lain for years in obscure offices on a dozen worlds, had been collated and scanned by MACRON. They showed that Tavernor had extraordinarily high gradings in categories such as mechanical aptitude, divergent cerebration (engineering), convergent cerebration (engineering) and weapons theory. MACRON had decided he would best serve the Federation in its Weapon Design and Experimental Department, admirably so, though his combat record had been.

After a short adjustment course on Earth he was shipped to the Department’s Light Weapons (Inert Projectile) Division on McArthur. During the short trip Tavernor, still baffled and dislocated, had turned his mind to the problem of what contribution he could possibly make in a specialist field. Next morning he awoke in his bunk, sweating and shivering at the same time. An old nightmare had come back with renewed force. He was a child again, running in the hellish darkness, stumbling and swinging as his father dragged him along with one hand. Tall spindle-shapes moved up ahead. His father’s rifle was blasting away—but it kept missing, missing, always missing. *Save Mom*, the child Tavernor was screaming silently, *don’t wait for me*. But his father was swearing sadly and bitterly, and as the rifle-thunder continued, the voice of an emasculated god, impotent, futile ...

Tavernor lay quietly under the sheets for a long time, his eyes fixed unmovingly on the cross members of the bunk above. He was in the grip of an idea, paralyzed by the sense of vaulting exultance that accompanies true inspiration.

A year of routine drafting and machine shop experience was behind Tavernor before he dared to put his idea forward. Almost to his surprise, it was received sympathetically. He had been gloomy and certain, once his initial ecstasy had worn off, that the Division would have been too preoccupied with a thousand more advanced and better-formulated projects than his own amateurish musings. But the section superintendent listened to his diffident presentation, meetings were held at various levels, and before he knew it Tavernor found himself promoted to section leader, with not only a superb workshop at his disposal, but the services of a team of specialists who were prepared to translate his first blurbs into functional hardware.

The hardware was a stubby and incredibly ugly weapon which looked like a cross between a bazooka and a submachine gun. It differed from other guns in that only the butt, trigger and fat outer casing were in physical contact with the user. The remaining working parts—barrel, breech, magazine and sights—floated in a tightly contained magnetic field which damped out vibration. Other components not found in a conventional rifle were a gyro stabilization unit, and an analogue computer which analyzed the frequency and intensity of vibrations imposed on the system and modified the magnetic

field accordingly. The gyro stabilization was not used continuously, but was engaged by pressing a button when a target had been selected. As an extra facility on some models, a digital computer and an inertial memory unit were added to accommodate gross movements of the marksman. Although useful in a number of applications, the refinement was introduced, to some extent, as an indulgence of Tavernor by a department which did not really appreciate the need for a rifle with which a man could hit a target one-handed, while running, dragging a child ...

The weapon was officially named the Tavernor Compensating Rifle—a label from which he derived a wry satisfaction. Nobody but he understood what it compensated for; and even he did not quite see how the years of work on it eased the nagging guilt, the conviction that his mother had died because his father had been able to save only one. All he knew was that, for the first time in his adult life, he could live and talk and smile like any other human being. He could breathe without a stench of Pythysccan warrior filling his nostrils.

With the TCR Mk.1 safely into the production phase, Tavernor turned his attention to other projects but his inventive spark seemed to have been quenched and now the work bored him. He struggled against his inclinations for a further three years, then began making applications for transfer to combat service. At that point, even in wartime, it would have been possible for him to resign—their was no scarcity of men—but he found it difficult to imagine life outside the army.

Eventually, at the age of forty-two, Colonel Mack H. Tavernor was returned to active duty—but not in the maximum interpenetration areas where he had learned his trade. He discovered, with a sense of shock, that the Federation was engaged in more than one conflict. The war against the Pythysccans had dragged on for four decades, long enough to have become a permanent background to political life and the Federation's internal problems began to re-emerge. Some systems—particularly those well away from the human-Pythysccan frontier—began objecting to paying for a distant war. The reduced taxes platform promptly exhibited its age-old ability to sustain political leaders of any shade, and the Federation found itself obliged to conduct a series of costly police operations.

Tavernor endured seeing his TCR used against humans for four years—but the breaking point came on Masonia, his home world. The frontier had writhed painfully across that sector three times in a row. And each time the planet had been hit—not seriously, otherwise there would have been no political problem left, but hard enough to convince the population they were foolish in allowing their world to be used as a marshaling center for strategic supplies. A politico-religious leader called Chambers rose to power with the theory, absurd yet attractive to a weary populace, that the Pythysccans were a scourge for nobody but the unjust. He reinforced his brand of neo-conciliation with well-calculated reminders that the just—in his sense of the word—would not have to pay war taxes.

Before Earth could do anything to prevent it, Chambers was in power and had ordered the removal of all war materiel from Masonia. During the resultant police action, a population which had broken under occasional Pythysccan raids quirkishly refused to be subdued by Imperial Earth.

Tavernor, who was elsewhere at the time, knew only the broadest details of the affair: that the planet had been secured by Earth with the minimum bloodshed compatible with maximum speed. He was in the sector when the opportunity for a week's leave arose, and seized the opportunity to spend a few days among the scenes of his boyhood, in the forests around Agproj 82.

The forests were still there—but in vastly different form. They had provided good cover for Masonia's guerrilla fighters, and it had been necessary to turn a reducer on them. Tavernor spent a day walking across the green-and-silver lakes of cellulose. Towards evening he found an area where the flux had run clear.

And from below, the amber surface a dead woman's face looked up at him.

He knelt on the glassy surface for a holy moment, staring down at the pale, drowned ovoid of her face. The black swirls of her hair were frozen, preserved, eternal—like the guilt he had deceived

himself into thinking he had shed.

~~That night, exercising his thirty-year option, he resigned from the army and went looking for~~
somewhere to hide.

IV

Tavernor walked north following the line of the fences.

As he stumbled through the tufted grass, he shielded his eyes and tried to see past the glare from the surface of the plain. The intense light made his headache worse, but he was able to discern signs of activity. Far out across the cellulose lake mirages shimmered. Behind and among them, great buildings were being constructed. The dragonfly shapes of workopters—large even at that distance—drifted through the air, lifting entire walls into place, and the eddies from their rotors churned into the mirages, scattering light and colors into the sky.

By taking bearings from the larger buildings of The Center, Tavernor was able to calculate that the activity was taking place roughly where his house had stood two days earlier. Later he would find out whether it had been reduced to disassociated polysaccharide chains and free-flowing pectins along with the rest of the forest, or whether it had been lifted and transported out of harm's way. The house was unimportant—but millions of small dumb creatures must have perished. His mind went back to the woman he had found on Masonia, staring upwards from her amber prison. *Unfortunate*, they had said, *but we warned all of Chambers' guerrillas to get out of there.*

Ten minutes brought Tavernor to a wide gateway in the fences. It was complete with all the military paraphernalia of barriers, checkpoints and armed guards. A newly made road leading from the plain cut straight across the parkland and neatly aligned itself with one of The Center's main cross-avenues. Already a two-way flow of wheeled and air-cushion vehicles had begun. The sheer quantity of equipment staggered Tavernor—merely getting it down from the translunar orbital station through the screen of moon fragments and onto the ground must have cost millions. Whatever was happening on Mnemosyne, it was something big. Something that had been planned well in advance.

He could have been right when he had guessed the war was coming this way. The blowing of Nielson's Star was flooding the entire region with charged particles, creating a volume of space in which the big ships could reach maximum velocity. The fantastically expensive operation of destroying the star had been carried out seven years previously, so what he was witnessing could be the culmination of seven years' planning on the part of COMsac. But what interest could COMsac have in Mnemosyne? Why should the army invade a backwater world three hundred light-years from the nearest combat area?

Tavernor reached the road and approached the entrance.

"Hi, there." A dapper young guard came out of the nearest checkpoint kiosk. He was smiling patronizingly from under the rim of his helmet. "Looking for something?"

"Information," Tavernor said. "What the hell's going on here?"

The guard's face went blank. "Piss off."

"No information?"

"You heard me."

"Then I'm coming through—my house is over there." Tavernor pointed out across the plain, moving forward at the same time. The guard shrugged his rifle down into his hand, but he did it too slowly. Tavernor caught the rifle and twisted it, locking the sling around the other man's wrist. The guard made to grab Tavernor with his other hand, but Tavernor pulled the muzzle of the rifle forwards and downwards, gaining leverage on the arm.

"Easy," he said quietly. "Or do you *want* your elbow converted to a universal joint?"

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