

# HARRY TURTLEDOVE


The Master  
of Alternate  
History

Author of *The Guns of the South*

**WORLDWAR:**

# IN THE BALANCE

An Alternate History of the Second World War



Suppose  
Roosevelt, Stalin,  
Churchill, Hitler, and  
Hirohito had united to  
conquer an even  
greater foe?

**WORLDWAR:  
IN/TILTING  
THE BALANCE**

**Harry Turtledove**



A Del Rey® Book  
BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

# Table of Contents

## Worldwar: In the Balance

### Other Books By This Author

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

## Worldwar: Tilting the Balance

### Other Books by This Author

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

# **Worldwar: In the Balance**

BOOKS BY HARRY TURTLEDOVE  
*The Guns of the South*

THE WORLDWAR SAGA

*Worldwar: In the Balance*  
*Worldwar: Tilting the Balance*  
*Worldwar: Upsetting the Balance*  
*Worldwar: Striking the Balance*

COLONIZATION

*Colonization: Second Contact*  
*Colonization: Down to Earth*  
*Colonization: Aftershocks*

THE VIDESSOS CYCLE

*The Misplaced Legion*  
*An Emperor for the Legion*  
*The Legion of Videssos*  
*Swords of the Legion*

THE TALE OF KRISPOS

*Krispos Rising*  
*Krispos of Videssos*  
*Krispos the Emperor*

THE TIME OF TROUBLES SERIES

*The Stolen Throne*  
*Hammer and Anvil*  
*The Thousand Cities Videssos Besieged*  
*Noninterference*  
*Kaleidoscope*  
*A World of Difference*  
*Earthgrip*  
*Departures*

*How Few Remain*

THE GREAT WAR

*The Great War: American Front*  
*The Great War: Walk in Hell*

*The Great War: Breakthroughs*  
*American Empire: Blood and Iron*

# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(Characters with names in CAPS are historical, others fictional)

## HUMANS

Aloysius	<i>captive in Fiat, Indiana</i>
ANIELEWICZ, MORDECHAI	<i>guerrilla leader in the Warsaw ghetto</i>
Arenswald, Michael	<i>engineer Heavy Artillery Battalion Dora</i>
Bagnall, George	<i>flight engineer in RAF bomber crew</i>
Bauer, Klaus	<i>hull gunner in Heinrich Jäger's tank</i>
Becker, Karl	<i>engineer Heavy Artillery Battalion Dora</i>
Bell, Douglas	<i>bomb-aimer in RAF bomber crew</i>
BOR-KOMOROWSKI, TADEUSZ	<i>general, Polish Home Army</i>
Brodsky, Nathan	<i>Jewish laborer at Warsaw airport</i>
Burkett, Dr.	<i>biology professor at University of Chicago.</i>
Chase, Otto	<i>cement plant worker at Dixon, Illinois</i>
CHURCHILL, WINSTON	<i>prime minister of Great Britain</i>
Collins, Colonel	<i>U.S. Army officer</i>
COMPTON, ARTHUR	<i>supervisor, University of Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
Daniels, Pete "Mutt"	<i>manager, Decatur Commodores (I-I-I League)</i>
Daphne	<i>barmaid at the White Horse Inn, Dover, England</i>
David	<i>child of Jewish fighter, Warsaw</i>
Doi, Colonel	<i>Japanese interrogator of Teerts</i>
Donlan, Kevin	<i>U.S. Army private in Naperville, Illinois</i>
Embry, Ken	<i>pilot of RAF bomber crew</i>
FERMI, ENRICO	<i>nuclear physicist at the University of Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
Finkelstein, Sam	<i>doctor</i>
Fiore, Bobby	<i>second baseman, Decatur Commodores (I-I-I League)</i>



Fuchs, Stefan            *loader in Heinrich Jäger's tank*

Goldfarb, David            *RAF radarman in Dover England*

Gorbunova, Ludmila            *Red Air Force pilot*

Gordon            *captive in Fiat, Indiana*

GROVES, LESLIE            *U.S. Army colonel*

HITLER, ADOLF            *German Führer*

Höcker, Maximilian            *lieutenant colonel, German Army, Paris*

HULL, CORDELL            *U.S. secretary of state*

Jacobi, Nathan            *BBC newsreader*

Jäger, Heinrich            *major Sixteenth Panzer Division*

Jones, Jerome            *RAF radarman in Dover England*

Karpov, Feofan            *Red Air Force colonel*

Kasherina, Yevdokia            *Red Air Force pilot*

Kobayashi, Lieutenant-Colonel            *Japanese interrogator of Teerts*

Kraniinov, Viktor            *Red Army lieutenant colonel in Moscow*

Lane, Edward "Ted"            *radioman in RI4F bomber crew*

Larssen, Barbara            *graduate student in medieval literature; Jens' wife*

Larssen, Jens            *nuclear physicist, University of Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory*

Leah            *Jewish fighter in Warsaw*

Lejb            *Jew in Hrubieszów, Poland*

Lidov, Boris            *NKVD lieutenant colonel, Moscow*

Liu Han            *Chinese peasant woman*

Marie            *captive in Fiat, Indiana*

MARSHALL, GEORGE            *U.S. Army Chief of Staff*

Max            *Jew who survived Babi Yar; Soviet partisan*

MOLOTOV, VYACHESLAV            *foreign commissar of the USSR*

Okamoto, Major            *Japanese interpreter and interrogator of Teerts*

Old sun            *tailor in China*

PATTON, GEORGE            *U.S. Army major general*

Pavlyuchenko, Kliment kolkhoz            *(collective farm) headman in the Ukraine*

Popova, Yelena            *Red Air Force major*

RIBBENTROP, JOACHIM VON            *German foreign minister*

Riecke, Ernst            *captain, Sixteenth Panzer Division*

Risberg, Buck            *soldier in Aurora, illinois*

Rodney            *captive in Fiat, Indiana*

Russie, Moishe            *ex-medical student in the Warsaw ghetto*

Russie, Reuven            *Moishe Russie 's son*

Russie, Rivka            *Moishe Russie's wife*

Sal            *captive in Fiat, Indiana*

Sanders, Charlie            *black man feeding soldiers in Naperville, Illinois*

Schmidt, Dieter            *driver of Heinrich Jäger's tank*

Schneider, Sergeant            *U.S. Army recruiting sergeant*

Schultz, Georg            *gunner of Heinrich Jäger's tank*

Sebring, Gerald            *nuclear physicist, University of Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory*

Simpkin, Joe            *rear gunner in RAF bomber crew*

SKORZENY, OTTO            *SS Hauptsturmführer*

Spiegel, Michael            *German Army lieutenant colonel in Satu Mare, Romania*

Stansfield, Roger            *Royal Navy commander; CO of HMS Seanymp*

Sullivan, Joe            *pitcher Decatur Commodores (I-I-I League)*

Sylvia            *barmaid at the White Horse Inn, Dover England*

SZILARD, LEO            *nuclear physicist, University of Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory*

THOMSEN, HANS            *German ambassador to the United States*

Thomsen, Pete            *reporter on the Rockford Courier-Journal*

TOGO, SHIGENORI            *Japanese foreign minister*

Tompkins, Charlie            *mechanic in Strasburg, Ohio*

Virgil            *sailor on the merchant ship Caledonia*

Wagner, Eddie            *U.S. Army private near Delphi, Indiana*

Whyte, Alf            *navigator in RAF bomber crew*

Yeager, Sam            *outfielder Decatur Commodores (I-I-I League)*

Yi Min            *Chinese apothecary*

Yossel *Jewish fighter in Poland*

ZINN, WALT *nuclear physicist, University of Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory*

## THE RACE

Atvar *fleetlord, invasion fleet*

Breltan *radar technician, 67th Emperor Sohrheb*

Drefsab *intelligence operator on Atvar's staff*

Erewlo *subleader, communications section*

Feneress *shiplord—member of Straha's faction*

Gefron *killercraft pilot, flight leader*

Gnik *outpost commander at Fiat, Indiana*

Hassov *shiplord—member of Kirel's faction*

Horrep *shiplord—member of Straha's faction*

Kirel *shiplord, 127th Emperor Hetto*

Krefak *missile battery officer*

Krentel *landcruiser commander*

Mozzten *shiplord based in U.S.A.*

Relek *shiplord 16th Emperor Osjess*

Relhost *assault force commander in attack on Chicago*

Ristin *soldier captured by U.S. Army*

Rolvar *killercraft pilot*

Shonar *shiplord—member of Straha's faction*

Ssofeg *prison-camp official in China*

Straha *shiplord 206th Emperor Yower*

Svallah *artillery supervisor in the attack on Chicago*

Teerts *killercraft pilot, flight leader*

Telerep *landcruiser gunner*

Tessrek *senior psychologist*

*Ullhass*      *soldier captured by U.S. Army*  
*Ussmak*      *landcruiser driver*  
*Votal*      *landcruiser commander*  
*Xarol*      *killercraft pilot*  
*Zingiber*      *Northern Flank Commander in the attack on Chicago*  
*Zolraag*      *governor of Warsaw*

Fleetlord Atvar strode briskly into the command station of the invasion fleet bannership *127th Emperor Hetto*. Officers stiffened in their seats as he came in. But for the way his eye turrets swiveled in their sockets, one to the left, the other to the right, he ignored them. Yet had any been so foolish as to omit the proper respect, he would have noticed—and remembered.

Shiplord Kirel, his body paint less elaborate only than Atvar's, joined him at the projector. As Atvar did every morning, he said, "Let us examine the target." Kirel served the fleetlord by touching the control with his own index claw. A blue and gray and white sphere sprang into being, a perfect representation of a life-bearing world floating in space.

All the officers turned both eyes toward the hologram. Atvar, as was his custom, walked around the projector to view it from all sides: Kirel followed him. When they were back where they had begun, Atvar ran out a bifurcated tongue. "Cold-looking place," the fleetlord said, as he usually did. "Cold and wet."

"Yet it will serve the Race and the Emperor," Kirel replied. When he spoke those words, the rest of the officers returned to their assigned tasks; the morning ritual was over. Kirel went on, "Pity such a hot white star as Tosev has hatched so chilly an egg."

"Pity indeed," Atvar agreed. That chilly world revolved around a star more than twice as bright as the sun under which he'd been raised. Unfortunately, it did so toward the outer edge of the biosphere. Not only did Tosev 3 have too much free water, it even had frozen water on the ground here and there. In the Empire's three current worlds, frozen water was rare outside the laboratory.

Kirel said, "Even if Tosev 3 is colder on average than what we're used to, Fleetlord, we won't have any real trouble living there, and parts will be very pleasant." He opened his jaws slightly to display small, sharp, even teeth. "And the natives should give us no difficulty."

"By the Emperor, that's true." Though his sovereign was light-years away, Atvar automatically cast both eyes down to the floor for a moment. So did Kirel. Then Atvar opened his jaws, too, sharing the shiplord's amusement. "Show me the picture sequence from the probe once more."

"It shall be done." Kirel poked delicately at the projector controls. Tosev 3 vanished, to be replaced by a typical inhabitant: a biped with a red-brown skin, rather taller than a typical male of the Race. The biped wore a strip of cloth round its midsection and carried a bow and several stone-tipped arrows. Black fur sprouted from the top of its head

The biped vanished. Another took its place, this one swaddled from head to foot in robes of dirty grayish tan. A curved iron sword hung from a leather belt at its waist. Beside it stood a brown-furred riding animal with a long neck and a hump on its back.

Atvar pointed to the furry animal, then to the biped's robes. "Even the native creatures have to protect themselves from Tosev 3's atrocious climate." He ran a hand down the smooth, glistening scales of his arm.

More bipeds appeared in holographic projection, some with black skins, some golden brown, some a reddish color so light it was almost pink. As the sequence moved on, Kirel opened his jaws in amusement once more. He pointed to the projector. "Behold—now!—the fearsome warrior of Tosev 3."

"Hold that image. Let everyone, look closely at it," Atvar commanded.

"It shall be done." Kirel stopped the flow of images. Every officer in the command station swiveled one eye toward the image, though most kept the other on the tasks before them.

Atvar laughed silently as he studied the Tosevite fighter. This native belonged to the pinkish race, though only one hand and his face were visible to testify to that. Protective gear covered the rest of him almost as comprehensively as had the earlier biped's robes. A pointed iron helmet with several dents sat on top of his head. He wore a suit of rather rusty mail that reached almost to his knees, and heavy leather boots below them. A flimsy coat of bluish stuff helped keep the sun off the mail.

The animal the biped rode, a somewhat more graceful relative of the humped creature, looked bored with the whole business. An iron-headed spear projected upward from the biped's seat. His other armament included a straight sword, a knife, and a shield with a cross painted on it.

"How well do you think his kind is likely to stand up to bullets, armored fighting vehicles, aircraft?" Atvar asked rhetorically. The officers all laughed, looking forward to an easy conquest, to adding a fourth planet and solar system to the dominions of the Emperor.

Not to be outdone in enthusiasm by his commander, Kirel added, "These are recent images, too: they date back only about sixteen hundred years." He paused to poke at a calculator. "That would be about eight hundred of Tosev 3's revolutions. And how much, my fellow warriors, how much can a world change in a mere eight hundred revolutions?"

The officers laughed again, more widely this time. Atvar laughed with them. The history of the Race was more than a hundred thousand years deep; the Ssumaz dynasty had held the throne for almost half that time, ever since techniques for ensuring male heirs were worked out. Under the Ssumaz Emperors, the Race took Rabotev 2 twenty-eight thousand years ago, and seized Halless 1 eighteen thousand years after that. Now it was Tosev 3's turn. The pace of conquest was quickening, Atvar thought.

"Carry on, servants of the Emperor," the fleetlord said. The officers stiffened once

more as he left the command station.

He was back in his suite, busy with the infinite minutiae that accompanied command, when his door buzzer squawked. He looked up from the computer screen with a start. No one was scheduled to interrupt him at this time, and the Race did not lightly break routine. Emergency in space was improbable in the extreme, but who would dare disturb him for anything less?

“Enter,” he growled.

The junior officer who came into the suite looked nervous; his tail stump twitched and his eyes swiveled quickly, now this way, now that, as if he were scanning the room for danger. “Exalted Fleetlord, kinsmale of the Emperor, as you know, we draw very near the Tosev system,” he said, his voice hardly louder than a whisper.

“I had better know that,” Atvar said with heavy sarcasm.

“Y-yes, Exalted Fleetlord.” The junior officer, almost on the point of bolting, visibly gathered himself before continuing: “Exalted Fleetlord, I am Subleader Erewlo, in the communications section. For the past few ship’s days, I have detected unusual radio transmissions coming from that system. These appear to be artificial in nature, and, and”—now he had to force himself to go on and face Atvar’s certain wrath—“from tiny doppler shifts in the signal frequency, appear to be emanating from Tosev 3.”

In fact, the fleetlord was too startled to be furious. “That is ridiculous,” he said. “How dare you presume to tell me that the animal-riding savages our probes photographed have moved in the historic swivel of an eye turret up to electronics when we required tens of millennia for the same advance?”

“Exalted Fleetlord, I presume nothing,” Erewlo quavered. “I merely report to you anomalous data which may be of import to our mission and therefore to the Race.”

“Get out,” Atvar said, his voice flat and deadly dangerous. Erewlo fled.

The fleetlord glared after him. The report was ridiculous, on the face of it. The Race changed but slowly, in tiny, sensible increments. Though both the Rabotevs and the Hallessi were conquered before they developed radio, they had had comparably long, comparably leisurely developments. Surely that was the norm among intelligent races.

Atvar spoke to his computer. The data the subleader had mentioned came up on his screen. He studied them, asked the machine for their implications. The implications were as Erewlo had said: with a probability that approached one, those were artificial radio signals coming from Tosev 3.

The fleetlord snarled a command the computer was not anatomically equipped to obey. If the natives of Tosev 3 had somehow stumbled across radio, what else did they know?

Just as the hologram of Tosev 3 had looked like a world floating in space, so the world itself, seen through an armorglass window, resembled nothing so much as a

holographic image. But to get round to its other side now, Atvar would have to wait for the *127th Emperor Hetto* to finish half an orbit.

The fleetlord glared down at the planet below. He had been glaring at it ever since the fleet arrived, one of his own years before. No one in all the vast history of the Race had ever been handed such a poisonous dilemma. The assembled shiplords stood waiting for Atvar to give them their orders. His the responsibility, his the rewards—and the risks.

“The natives of Tosev 3 are more technologically advanced than we believed they would be when we undertook this expedition,” he said, seeing if gross understatement would pry a reaction from them.

As one, they dipped their heads slightly in assent. Atvar tightened his jaws—would that he might bite down on his officers’ necks. They were going to give him no help at all. His the responsibility. He could not even ask the Emperor for instructions. A message Home would take twenty-four Home years to arrive, the reply another twenty-four. The invasion force could go back into cold sleep and wait—but who could say what the Tosevites would have invented by then?

Atvar said, “The Tosevites appear at the moment to be fighting several wars among themselves. History tells us their disunity will work to our advantage.” *Ancient history*, he thought; the Empire had had a single rule so long that no one, had any practice playing on the politics of disunion. But the manuals said such a thing was possible, and the manuals generally knew what they were talking about.

Kirel assumed the stooping posture of respect, a polite way to show he wished to speak. Atvar turned both eyes on him, relieved someone would say at least part of what he thought. The shiplord of the *127th Emperor Hetto* said, “Is it certain we *can* successfully overcome the Tosevites, Fleetlord? Along with radio and radar, they have aircraft of their own, as well as armored fighting vehicles—our probes have shown them clearly.”

“But these weapons are far inferior to ours of similar types. The probes also show this clearly.” That was Straha, shiplord of the *206th Emperor Yower*. He ranked next highest among the shiplords after Kirel, and wanted to surpass him one day.

Kirel knew of Straha’s ambitions, too. He abandoned the posture of respect to scowl at his rival. “A great many of these weapons are in action, however, and more being manufactured all the time. Our supplies are limited to those we have fetched across the light-years.”

“Have the Tosevites atomics?” Straha jeered. “If other measures fail, we can batter them into submission.”

“Thereby reducing the value of the planet to the colonists who will follow us,” Kirel said.

“What would you have us do?” Straha said. “Boost for home, having accomplished nothing?”



“It is within the fleetlord’s power,” Kirel said stubbornly.

He was right; abandoning the invasion was within Atvar’s power. No censure would fall on him if he started back—no *official* censure. But instead of being remembered through all the ages as Atvar World conqueror, an epithet only two in the long history of the Race had borne before him, he would go down in the annals as Atvar Worldfleeer, a title he would be the first to assume, but hardly one he craved.

*His* the responsibility. In the end, his choice was no choice. “The awakening and orientation of the troops has proceeded satisfactorily?” he asked the shiplords. He did not need their hisses of assent to know the answer to his question; he had been following computer reports since before the fleet took up orbit around Tosev 3. The Emperor’s weapons and warriors were ready.

“We proceed,” he said. The shiplords hissed again.

“Come on, Joe!” Sam Yeager yelled in from left toward his pitcher. “One more to go. You can do it.” *I hope*, Yeager added to himself.

On the mound, Joe Sullivan rocked into his motion, wound up, delivered. Some days, Sullivan couldn’t find the plate with a map. *What do you expect from a seventeen-year-old kid?* Yeager thought. Today, though, the big curve bit the outside corner. The umpire’s right hand came up. A couple of people in the crowd of a couple of hundred cheered.

Sullivan fired again. The batter, a big left-handed-hitting first baseman named Kobeski, swung late, lifted a lazy fly ball to left. “Shit!” he said loudly, and threw down his bat in disgust Yeager drifted back a few steps. The ball smacked his glove; his other hand instantly covered it. He trotted in toward the visitors’ dugout. So did the rest of the Decatur Commodores.

“Final score, Decatur 4, Madison 2,” the announcer said over a scratchy, tinny microphone. “Winner, Sullivan. Loser, Kovacs. The Springfield Brownies start a series with the Blues here at Breese Stephens Field tomorrow. Game time will be noon. Hope to see you then.”

As soon as he got into the dugout, Yeager pulled a pack of Camels from the hip pocket of his wool flannel uniform. He lit up, sucked in a deep drag, blew out a contented cloud of smoke. “That’s the way to do it, Joe,” he called to Sullivan, who was ahead of him in the tunnel that led to the visitors’ locker room. “Keep the ball down and away from a big ox like Kobeski and he’ll never put one over that short right field they have here.”

“Uh, yeah. Thanks, Sam,” the winning pitcher said over his shoulder. He took off his cap, wiped his sweaty forehead with a sleeve. Then he started unbuttoning his shirt.

Yeager stared at Sullivan’s back, slowly shook his head in wonder. The kid hadn’t even known what he was up to; he’d just happened to do the right thing. *He’s only seventeen*, the left fielder reminded himself again. Most of the Commodores were just like Joe, kids too young for the draft. They made Yeager feel even older than the thirty-five years he actually carried.

His “locker” was a nail driven into the wall. He sat down on a milking stool in front of it, began to peel off his uniform.

Bobby Fiore landed heavily on the stool beside him. The second baseman was a veteran, too, and Yeager’s roommate. “I’m getting too old for this,” he said with a grimace.

“You’re what? Two years younger than I am?” Yeager said. “I guess so. Something like that.” Fiore’s dark, heavily bearded face, full of angles and shadows, was made to be a mask of gloom. It also made him a perfect contrast to Yeager, whose blond, ruddy features shouted *farmboy!* to the world. Gloomy now, Fiore went on, “What the hell’s the use of playing in a lousy Class B league when you’re as old as we are? You still think you’re gonna be a big leaguer, Sam?”

“The war goes on long enough, who can say? They may draft everybody ahead of me, and they don’t want to give me a rifle. I tried volunteering six months ago, right after Pearl Harbor.”

“You got store-bought teeth, for Christ’s sake,” Fiore said.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t eat, or shoot, either,” Yeager said. He’d almost died in the influenza epidemic of 1918. His teeth, weakened by fever, rotted in his head and came out over the next few years; he’d worn full upper and lower plates since before he started shaving. Ironically, the only teeth of his own he had now were his four wisdom teeth, the ones that gave everyone else trouble. They’d come in fine, long after the rest were gone.

Fiore just snorted and walked naked to the shower. Yeager followed. He washed quickly; the shower was cold. It could have been worse, he thought as he toweled himself dry. A couple of Three-I League parks didn’t even have showers for the visiting team. Walking back to the hotel in a sticky, smelly uniform was a pleasure of bush-league ball he could do without

He tossed his uniform into a canvas duffel bag, along with his spikes and glove. As he started getting into his street clothes, he picked up the conversation with Fiore: “What am I supposed to do, Bobby, quit? I’ve been going too long for that. Besides, I don’t know a lot besides playing ball.”

“What do you need to know to get a job at a defense plant that pays better’n this?” Fiore asked. But he was slinging his jock into his duffel bag, too.

“Why don’t you, if you’re so fed up?” Yeager said.

Fiore grunted. “Ask me on a day when I didn’t get any hits. Today I went two for four.” He slung the blue bag over his shoulder, picked his, way out of the crowded locker room.

Yeager went with him. The cop at the players’ entrance tipped his cap to them as they walked past; by his white mustache, he might have tried volunteering for the Spanish-American War.

Both ballplayers took a long, deep breath at the same time. They smiled at each other.

The air was sweet with the smell of the rolls and bread baking at Gardner's Bakery across the street' from the park. Fiore said, "I got a cousin who runs a little bakery in Pittsburgh. His place don't smell half as good as this."

"Next time I'm in Pittsburgh, I'll tell your cousin you said that," Yeager said.

"You ain't going to Pittsburgh, or any other big-league town, not even if the war goes on till 1955," Fiore retorted. "What's the best league you ever played in?"

"I put in half a season for Birmingham in 1933," Yeager said. "The Southern Association's Class A-1 ball. Broke my ankle the second game of a Fourth of July doubleheader and I was out for the rest of the year." He knew he'd lost a step, maybe a step and a half, when he came back the next season. He also knew any real chance he'd had of making the majors had snapped along with the bone in his ankle.

"You're ahead of me after all. I put in three weeks at Albany—the Eastern League's Class A—but when I made three errors in one game they shipped me right on out of there. Bastards." Fiore spoke the word without much heat. If you screwed up, another ballplayer was always ready to grab your place. Anybody who didn't understand that had no business playing the game for money.

Yeager stopped at a newsstand around the corner from the hotel and bought a magazine. "Something to look at on the train back to Decatur," he said, handing the fellow at the stand a quarter. The year before, he would have got a nickel back. Now he didn't. When you got a Three-I league salary, every nickel counted. He didn't think going from digest size up to bedsheet was worth the extra five cents.

Fiore's lip curled at his choice of reading matter. "How can you stand that Buck Rogers stuff?"

"I like it." Yeager hung onto the new *Astounding*. He added, "Ten years ago, who would have believed the blitz or aircraft carriers or tanks? They were talking about all that' kind of stuff in here then."

"Yeah, well, I wish they'd been wrong," Fiore said, to which Yeager had no good reply.

They came into the hotel lobby a couple of minutes later. The desk clerk had a radio on to catch the afternoon news. H.V. Kaltenborn's rich, authoritative voice told of fighting in North Africa near Gazala, of fighting in Russia south of Kharkov, of an American landing on the island of Espfritu Santo in the New Hebrides.

Yeager gathered Espfritu Santo lay somewhere in the South Pacific. He had no idea just where. He couldn't have found Gazala or Kharcov without a big atlas and patience, either. The war had a way of throwing up name after name he'd never learned about in school.

Kaltenborn went on, "Daring Czech patriots have struck at the *Reichsprotektor* for occupied Bohemia, Nazi butcher Reinhard Heydrich, in Prague. They say they have slain him. German radio blames the assault on the 'treacherous British,' and maintains Heydrich still lives. Time will tell."

“Nice to hear we’re movin’ forward somewhere, even if I can’t pronounce the name of the place,” Yeager said.

“Means ‘Holy Spirit,’” Fiore told him. “Must be Spanish, but it sounds enough like Italian for me to understand it.”

“Okay,” Yeager said, glad to be enlightened. He walked over to the stairs, Fiore trailing after him. The elevator man sneered at them. That always made Yeager feel like a cheapskate, but he was too used to the feeling to let it worry him much. For that matter, the hotel was cheap, too, with a single bathroom down at the end of the hall on each floor.

He used the room key, tossed his duffel onto the bed, picked up suitcases and tossed them beside the duffel, started transferring clothes from the duffel and the closet to the bags as automatically as he hit the cutoff man on a throw from the outfield. If he’d thought about what he was doing, he would have taken twice as long for a worse job. But after half a lifetime checking out of small-town hotels, where was the need for thought?

On the other bed, Fiore was packing with the same effortless skill. They finished within a few seconds of each other, closed their bags, and hauled them downstairs. They were the first ones back to the lobby; for most of their teammates, packing didn’t come so easy yet.

“Another road trip done,” Yeager said. “Wonder how many miles on the train I’ve put in over the years.”

“I dunno,” Fiore answered. “But if I found a secondhand car with that many miles on it, I sure as hell wouldn’t buy it.”

“You go to the devil.” But Yeager had to laugh. A secondhand car with that many miles on it probably wouldn’t even run.

The rest of the Commodores straggled down by ones and twos. A few came over to shoot the breeze, but most formed their own, bigger group; the bonds of youth were stronger than those of the team. That saddened Yeager, but he understood it. Back when he started playing pro ball in the long-dead days of 1925, he hadn’t dared go up to the veterans either. The war only made things worse by taking away just about everybody between him and Fiore on the one hand and the kids on the other.

The manager, Pete Daniels (universally called “Mutt”), settled accounts with the desk clerk, then turned to his troops and declared, “Come on, boys, we got us a five o’clock train to catch:” His drawl was as thick and sticky as the Mississippi mud he’d grown up farming. He’d caught for part of two seasons with the Cardinals thirty years before, back in the days when they were always near the bottom of the pack, and then a long time in the minors.

Yeager wondered if Mutt still dreamed of a big-league manager’s job. He’d never had the nerve to ask, but he doubted it: the war hadn’t opened those slots. Most likely, Daniels was here because he didn’t know anything better to do. It gave the two of them

something in common.

“Well, let’s go,” Daniels said as soon as the clerk presented him with a receipt. He marched out onto the street, a parade of one. The Decatur Commodores tromped after him. The year before, they would have piled into three or four taxis and gone to the station that way. But with gas and tires in short supply, taxis might as well have been swept off the street. The ballplayers waited on the corner for the crosstown bus, then plopped their nickels into the fare box as they climbed aboard.

The bus rolled west down Washington Avenue. At the intersections with north-south streets, Yeager could see water looking either way; Madison sat on a narrow neck of land between lakes Mendota and Monona. The bus went around Capitol Park before returning to Washington to get to the Illinois Central station. The capitol itself, a granite-domed white marble building in the shape of a Greek cross, dominated the low skyline of the city.

The bus stopped right in front of the station. Mutt Daniels waved train tickets. He’d kept track of things in a four-city swing through Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin; now the Commodores would spend the next month back at Fan’s Field, so he’d only have to worry about lineups for a while.

A colored porter wheeled up a baggage cart. He tipped his cap, grinned to show off a mouthful of gold teeth. “Heah you go, gentlemen,” he said, his accent even richer than the manager’s. Yeager let the fellow heave his bags onto the cart, tipped him a nickel. The gleaming grin got wider.

Sitting beside Yeager in the passenger car, Fiore said, “When my dad first got to New York from the old country, he took the train from there to Pittsburgh, where my uncle Joe already was. First smoke he’s ever seen in his life is the steward, and he’s got gold teeth just like the porter here. For months, my, dad thought all colored folks came that way.”

Yeager laughed, then said, “Hell, I grew up between Lincoln and Omaha, and I never saw anybody who wasn’t white till I went off-to play ball. I’ve barnstormed against colored teams a couple of times, make some extra money during the winter. Some of those boys, if they were white, they could play anywhere.”

“That’s probably true,” Fiore said. “But they ain’t white.” The train started to roll. Fiore twisted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. “I’m gonna sleep for a while, then head back to the dining car after the crowd thins out”

“If you aren’t awake by eight, I’ll give you a shot in the ribs,” Yeager said. Fiore nodded with his eyes closed. He was good at sleeping on trains, better than Yeager, who got out his *Astounding* and started to read. The newest Heinlein serial had ended the month before, but stories by Asimov, Robert Moore Williams, del Rey, Hubbard, and Clement were plenty to keep him entertained. In minutes, he was millions of miles and thousands of years from the mundane reality of an Illinois Central train rolling south over flat prairie fields between one Midwestern town and another.

A field kitchen rolled up to the tank company somewhere south of Kharkov. After a couple of weeks of motoring this way and that, first to halt a Russian attack and then to trap the attackers, Major Heinrich Jäger couldn't have said where he was more precisely than that without a call to Sixteenth Panzer's signal detachment.

The field kitchen didn't properly belong to the company. Like the other two units that made up the Second Panzer Regiment, it had a motorized kitchen that was supposed to stay with it, while this one was horse-drawn. Jäger didn't care. He waved the driver to a halt, shouted to rout out his tank crews.

Some of the men kept on sleeping, in their Panzer IIIs or under them. But the magic word "food" and the savory smell that wafted from the stew kettle got a good many up and moving. "What have you got for us?" Jäger asked the driver and the cook.

"Boiled kasha, sir, with onions and meat," the cook answered.

Jäger had never tasted buckwheat groats till the panzer division smashed its way into southern Russia the July before. They still weren't his top choice, or anywhere close to it, but they filled the belly nicely. He knew better than to ask about the meat—horse, donkey, maybe dog? He didn't want to know. Had it been beef or mutton, the cook would have bragged about it.

He dug out his mess tin, got in line. The cook ladled out a big dollop of steaming stew. He attacked it with gusto. His stomach complained for a moment; it wasn't used to taking on a heavy load in the wee small hours. Then it decided it liked being full, and shut up.

Somewhere off in the distance, a machine gun started chattering, and a few seconds later another one. A frown twisted Jäger's stubbly face as he ate. The Russians were supposed to have been kaput around these parts for most of a week. But then, nobody lived to grow old by counting Russians out too soon. The previous winter had proved that.

As if drawn by a magnet, Jäger peered through the darkness toward the hulk of a T-34 that sat, turret all askew, perhaps fifty meters away. The killed tank was only a vague shape in the darkness, but even a glimpse could make fearful sweat start under his arms.

"If only we had panzers like that," he murmured. He stuck his spoon into the stew still on his tin plate, stroked the black ribbon of his wound badge. Thanks to a T-34, he would have a furrow in his calf till the day he died. The rest of the crew of the Panzer III he'd been in at the time hadn't been so lucky; only one other man had bailed out, and he was back in Germany getting pieced together one operation at a time.

Simply measured tank against tank, a Panzer III, even, one with the new, long 50mm gun, had no business taking on a T-34. The Russian tank boasted a cannon half again as big, thicker armor cleverly sloped to deflect shells, and an engine that was not only more powerful than a Panzer IIIs but a diesel to boot, so it wouldn't go up in flames the way the German machine's petrol-powered Maybach so often did.

"It's not so bad as all that, sir." The cheerful voice at his shoulder belonged to Captain

Ernst Riecke, his second-in-command.

“Ha. You heard me muttering to myself, did you?” Jäger said.

“Yes, sir. You ask me, it’s the same in tanks as it is in screwing, sir.”

Jäger raised an eyebrow. “This I have to hear.”

“Well, in both cases knowing what to do with what you’ve got counts for more than how big it is.”

The company commander snorted. Still, no doubt Riecke had a point. Even after almost a year of painful instruction at the hands of the Germans, the Bolsheviks were still in. the habit of committing their armor by dribs and drabs instead of massing it for maximum effect. That was how the dead T-34 had come to grief: rumbling along without support, it had been set upon and destroyed by three Panzer IIIs.

Still...“Think how fine it would be to have a big one and know what to do with it.”

“It is enjoyable, sir,” Riecke said complacently. “Or were you talking about panzers again?”

“You’re incorrigible,” Jäger said, and then wondered if it was just that the captain was still on the sunny side of thirty. Promotion came quickly on the Russian front. Good officers led their troops forward rather than sending up orders from the rear. That meant good officers died in larger numbers, a twisted sort of natural selection that worried Jäger.

He felt every one of his own forty-three years. He’d fought in the trenches in France in 1918, in the last push toward Paris and then in the grinding retreat to the Rhine. He’d first seen tanks then, the clumsy monsters the British used, and knew at once that if he ever went to war again, he wanted them on his Side for a change. But they were forbidden to the postwar *Reichswehr*. As soon as Hitler took the gloves off and started rearming Germany, Jäger went straight into armor.

He took another couple of mouthfuls of stew, then asked, “How many panzers do we have up and running?”

“Eleven,” Riecke answered. “Maybe we’ll be able to get another one going in the morning, if we scrounge around for some fuel line.”

“Not bad,” Jäger said, as much to console himself as to reassure Riecke. On paper, his company should have had twenty-two Panzer IIIs. In fact, it had had nineteen when the Russians launched their attack. On the eastern front, getting that close to paper strength was no small accomplishment.

“The Reds can’t be in good shape, either,” Riecke said. His voice turned worried, just for a moment: “Can they?”

“We’ve bagged enough of them, the last three weeks,” Jäger said. That was true enough; a couple of hundred thousand Russians had trudged off into captivity when the Germans pinched off the opening through which they’d poured. The enemy threw away more than a thousand tanks and two thousand artillery pieces. Bolshevik losses the

summer before had been on an even more colossal scale.

But before he crossed from Romania into Russia, he'd never imagined how immense the country was; how the plains seemed to stretch on and on forever; how thin a division, a corps, an army, could spread just to hold a front, let alone advance. And from those limitless plains sprang seemingly limitless streams of men and tanks. And they all fought, ferociously if without much skill. Jäger knew too well the *Wehrmacht* was anything but limitless. If every German soldier slew two Red Army men, if every panzer knocked out two T-34s or KVs, the Russians had a net gain.

Riecke lit a cigarette. The flare of the match briefly showed the dirt ground into fatigue lines he'd not had a month before. Yet somehow he still looked boyish. Jäger envied him that; at the rate he himself was going gray, he'd look like a grandfather any day now.

The captain passed him the pack. He took a cigarette, leaned closer to light it from Riecke's. "Thanks," he said, shielding the glowing coal with one hand: no point giving a sniper a free target. Riecke also hid his smoke.

After they'd crushed out the cigarettes under their bootheels, Riecke said suddenly, "Are we, going to get new models anytime soon, sir? What does your brother say?"

"Nothing he shouldn't, which means I don't know for certain," Jäger answered. His brother Johann worked as an engineer for Henschel. His letters were always censored with special zeal, lest they fall into enemy hands on the long road between Germany and somewhere south of Kharkov. But brothers had ways with words that censors could not follow. After a moment, Jäger added, "It might be possible, though I thought size didn't concern you ...?"

"Oh, I'll carry on with what we have," the younger man said breezily. *Not that there's any choice in the matter*, Jäger thought. Riecke went on, "Still, as you say, it would be nice to be better and bigger at the same time."

"So it would." Jäger splashed a little water onto his mess tin from his water bottle, pulled out some fresh spring grass to wipe it more or less clean. Then he yawned. "I'm going to try to sleep till sunup. Don't be afraid to wake me if there's any sign of trouble." He'd given Riecke that order at least a hundred times. As he always did, the captain nodded.

The drone of the four Merlins made every filling in Flight Lieutenant George Bagnall's head feel as if it were shaking loose from its tooth. The Lancaster jounced in the air as 88mm flak burst all around it, filling the night with puffs of smoke that absurdly reminded the flight engineer of dumplings.

Searchlights stabbed up from the ground, seeking to impale a bomber like a bug on a collector's pin. The Lancaster's belly was a flat matte black, but not black enough to make it safe if one of those skewers of light happened to catch it. Fortunately, Bagnall was too busy monitoring engine temperature and revolutions, fuel consumption, oil



pressure, hydraulic lines, and all the other complex systems that had to work if the Lancaster was to keep flying, to be as frightened as he would have been as a mere passenger.

But not even the most mechanically attentive man could have stared at his dials and meters to the exclusion of the spectacle outside the thick Perspex window. Even as Bagnall watched, more flames started in Cologne, some the almost blue-white glare of incendiaries, others spreading red blisters of ordinary fire.

Perhaps half a mile away from Bagnall's plane and a little lower in the sky, a bomber heeled over and plunged ground-ward, one wing a sheet of flame. The flight engineer's shiver had nothing to do with the frigid air through which his Lanc flew.

Ken Embry grunted beside him. "We may have flown a thousand bloody bombers *to* Cologne," the pilot said. "Now we have to see how bloody many fly back *from* it." His voice rang metallically in the intercom earphones.

"Jerry doesn't seem very pleased with us tonight, does he?" Bagnall answered, not about to let his friend outdo him in cynicism and understatement.

Below them in the nose, Douglas Bell let out a whoop like a red Indian. "There's the train station! Hold her steady, steady—Now!" the bombaimer shouted. The Lancaster shuddered again, in a new way this time, as destruction tumbled down on the German city by the Rhine.

"That's for Coventry," Embry said quietly. He'd lost a sister in the German raid on the English town a year and a half before.

"Coventry and then some," Bagnall agreed. "The Germans didn't throw nearly so many aircraft at us, and they don't have a bomber that can touch the Lanc." He set an affectionate gloved hand on the instrument panel in front of him.

The pilot grunted again. "They slaughter our civilians and we slaughter theirs. The same with the soldiers in the desert, the same in Russia. The Japanese are still moving against the Yanks in the Pacific, and Jerry is sinking too many ships in the Atlantic. If I didn't know better, I'd say we were losing the bloody war."

"I wouldn't go that far," Bagnall said after a few seconds of judicious consideration. "But it does rather seem to hang in the balance, doesn't it? Sooner or later, one side or the other will do something monumentally stupid, and that will tell the tale."

"Good Lord, we're doomed if that's so," Embry exclaimed. "Can you imagine anyone more monumentally stupid than an Englishman with his blood up?"

Bagnall scratched at his cheek below the bottom edge of his goggles; those few square inches were the only ones not covered by one or more—usually more—layers of clothing. They were also quite numb. He flogged his brain for some sort of comeback, but nothing occurred to him; this time he'd have to yield the palm of cynicism to the pilot.

He had only a few seconds in which to feel rueful. Then shouts from the rear gunner, and the top turret rang in his ears, almost deafening him: "Enemy fighter to starboard

and low! Bandit! Bandit! *Bloody* fucking bandit!” Machine guns began to hammer, although the .303 rounds were not likely to do much good.

Ken Embry heeled the Lancaster over on its side and dove away from the menace, flying his big, unwieldy aircraft as much like a fighter as he could. The frame groaned in protest. Like any sensible pilot, Embry ignored it. The German up there was more likely to kill him than he was to tear off the Lanc’s wings. He piled power onto the engines of one wing, cut it from those of the other. The Lancaster fell through the air like a stone. Bagnall clapped a hand to his mouth, as if to catch the stomach that was trying to crawl up his throat.

The shouts from the gunners rose to a crescendo. All at once drenched in sweat despite the icy air outside, Bagnall felt shells slam—one, two, three—into the wing and side of the fuselage. A twin-engine plane roared above the windscreen and vanished into the blackness, pursued by tracers from the Lanc’s guns.

“Messerschmitt-110,” Bagnall said shakily.

“Good of you to tell me,” Embry answered. “I was rather too occupied to notice.” He raised his voice. “Everyone present and accounted for?” The seven-man crew’s answers came back high and shrill, but they all came back. Embry turned to Bagnall. “And how did our humble chariot fare?”

Bagnall studied the gauges. “Everything appears—normal,” he said, surprised at how surprised he sounded. He rallied gamely: “We might have been a bit more embarrassed had Jerry chosen to shoot us up *before* we disposed of our cargo.”

“Indeed,” the pilot said. “Having disposed of it, I see no urgent reason to tarry over the scene any longer. Mr. Whyte, will you give us a course for home?”

“With pleasure, sir,” Alf Whyte answered from behind the black curtain that protected his night vision. “I thought for a moment there you were trying to fling me over the side. Fly course two-eight-three. I say again twoeight-three. That should put us on the ground back at Swinderby in about four and a half hours.”

“Or somewhere in England, at any rate,” Embry remarked; long-range navigation at night was anything but an exact science. When Whyte let out an indignant sniff, the pilot added, “Maybe I should have flung you over the side; we’d likely do just as well following a trail of bread crumbs back from Hansel and Gretel Land.”

Despite his ragging, Embry swung the bomber onto the course the navigator had given him. Bagnall kept a close eye on the instrument panel, still worried lest a line had been broken. But all the pointers stayed where they should have; the four Merlins steadily drove the Lancaster through the air at above two hundred miles an hour. The Lanc was a tough bird, especially compared to the Blenheims in which he’d started the war. And—they’d been lucky.

He peered through the windscreen. Other Lancasters, Stirlings, and Manchesters showed up as blacker shapes against the dark sky; engine exhausts glowed red. As burning Cologne receded behind him, he felt the first easing of fear. The worst was over,

and he was likely to live to fly another mission—and be terrified again.

The crew's chatter, full of the same relief he knew himself, rang in his earphones. "Bloody good hiding we gave Jerry," somebody said. Bagnall found himself nodding. There had been flak and there had been fighters (that Me-110 filled his mind's eye for a moment), but he'd seen worse with both—the massive bomber force had half paralyzed Cologne's defenses. Most of his friends—with a little luck, all his friends—would be coming home to Swinderby. He wriggled in his seat, trying to get more comfortable. *Downhill now*, he thought.

Ludmila Gorbunova bounced through the air less than a hundred meters off the ground. Her U-2 biplane seemed hardly more than a toy; any fighter from the last two years of the previous war could have hacked the *Kukuruznik* from the sky with ease. But the Wheatcutter was not just a trainer—it had proved itself as a military plane since the first days of the Great Patriotic War. Tiny and quiet, it was made for slipping undetected past German lines.

She pulled the stick back to gain more altitude. It failed to help. No flashes of artillery came from what had been first the Russian assault position, then the Russian defensive position, and finally, humiliatingly, the Russian pocket trapped inside a fascist ring.

No one had reported artillery fire from within the pocket the night before, or the night before that. Sixth Army was surely dead. But, as if unwilling to believe it, Frontal Aviation kept sending out planes in the hope the corpse might somehow miraculously revive.

Ludmila went gladly. Behind her goggles, tears stung her eyes. The offensive had begun with such promise. Even the fascist radio admitted fear that the Soviets would retake Kharkov. But then—Ludmila was vague on what had happened then, although she'd flown reconnaissance all through the campaign. The Germans managed to pinch off the salient the Soviet forces had driven into their position, and then the battle became one of annihilation.

Her gloved hand tightened on the stick as if it were a fascist invader's neck. She'd got out of Kiev with her mother bare days before the Germans surrounded the city. Both of her brothers and her father were in the army; no letters had come from any of them for months. Sometimes, though it was no proper thought for a Soviet woman born five years after the October Revolution, she wished she knew how to pray. A fire glowed, off in the distance. She turned the plane toward it. From all she had seen, anyone showing lights in the night had to be German. Whatever Soviet troops were still unbagged within the pocket would not dare draw attention to themselves. She brought the *Kukuruznik* down to treetop height. Time to remind the fascists they did not belong here.

As the fire brightened ahead of her, her gut clenched. She bit down hard on the inside of her lower lip, using pain to fight fear. "I am not afraid, I am not afraid, I am not afraid," she said. But she was afraid, every time she flew.

No time for the luxury of fear, not any more. The men lounging in the circle of light round the fire swelled in a moment from ant-sized to big as life. Germans sure enough, in dirty field-gray with coal-scuttle helmets. They started to scatter an instant before she thumbed the firing button mounted on top of her stick.

The two ShVAK machine guns attached under the lower wing of the biplane added their roar to the racket of the five-cylinder radial engine. Ludmila let the guns chatter as she zoomed low above the fire. As it dimmed behind her, she looked back over her shoulder to see what she had accomplished.

A couple of Germans lay sprawled in the dirt, one motionless, the other writhing 'like a fence lizard in the grasp of a cat. "*Khorosho*," Ludmila said softly. Triumph drowned terror. "*Ochen khorosho*." It was very good. Every blow against the fascists helped drive them back—or at least hindered them from coming farther forward..

Flashes from out of the darkness, from two places, then three—not fire, firearms. Terror came roaring back. Ludmila gave the *Kukuruznik* all the meager power it had. A rifle bullet cracked past her head, horridly close. The muzzle flashes continued behind her, but after a few seconds she was out of range.

She let the biplane climb so she could look for another target. The breeze that whistled in over the windscreen of the open cockpit dried the stinking, fear-filled sweat on her forehead and under her arms. The trouble with the Germans was that they were too good at their trade of murder and destruction. They could have had only a few seconds' warning before her plane swooped on them out of the night, but instead of running and hiding, they'd run and then fought back—and almost killed her. She shuddered again, though they were kilometers behind her now.

When they'd first betrayed the treaty of peace and friendship and invaded the Soviet Union, she'd been confident the Red Army would quickly throw them back. But defeat and retreat followed retreat and defeat. Bombers appeared over Kiev, broad-winged Heinkels, Dorniers skinny as flying pencils, graceful Junkers-88s, Stukas that screamed like damned souls as they stooped, hawklike, on their targets. They roamed as they would. No Soviet fighters came up to challenge them.

Once in Rossosh, out of the German grasp, Ludmila happened to mention to a harried clerk that she'd gone through *Osoaviakhim* flight training. Two days later, she found herself enrolled in the Soviet Air Force. She still wondered whether the man did it for the sake of the country or to save himself the trouble of finding her someplace to sleep.

Too late to worry about that now. Whole regiments of women pilots flew night-harassment missions against the fascist invaders. *One day, Ludmila thought, I will graduate to a real fighter instead of my U-2.* Several women had become aces, downing more than five German planes apiece.

For now, though, the reliable old Wheatcutter would do well enough. She spotted another fire, off in the distance. The *Kukuruznik* banked, swung toward it.

Planes roared low overhead. The red suns under their wings and on the sides of their fuselages might have been painted from blood. Machine guns spat flame. The bullets kicked up dust and splashed in the water like the first big drops of a rainstorm.

Liu Han had been swimming and bathing when she heard the Japanese fighters. With a moan of terror, she thrust herself all the way under, until her toes sank deep into the slimy mud bottom of the stream. She held her breath until the need for air drove her to the surface once more, gasped in a quick breath, sank

When she had to come up again, she tossed her head to get the long, straight black hair out of her eyes, then quickly looked around. The fighters had vanished as quickly as they appeared. But she knew the Japanese soldiers would not be far behind. Chinese troops had retreated through her village the day before, falling back toward Hankow.

A few swift strokes and she was at the bank of the stream. She scrambled up, dried herself with a few quick strokes of a rough cotton towel, put on her robe and sandals, and took a couple of steps away from the water.

Another drone of motors, this one higher and farther away than the fighters, a whistle in the air that belonged to no bird...The bomb exploded less than a hundred yards from Liu. The blast lifted her like a toy and flung her back into the stream.

Stunned, half-deafened, she thrashed in the water. She breathed in a great gulp of it. Coughing, choking, retching, she thrust her head up into the precious air, gasped out a prayer to the Buddha: "Amitufo, help me!"

More bombs fell all around. Earth leapt into the air in fountains so perfect and beautiful and transient, they almost made her forget the destruction they represented. The noise of each explosion slapped her in the face, more like a blow, physically felt, than a sound. Metal fragments of bomb casing squealed wildly as they flew. A couple of them splashed into the stream not far from Liu. She moaned again. The year before, a bomb fragment had torn her father in two.

The explosions moved farther away, on toward the village. Awkwardly, robe clinging to, her arms and legs and hindering her every motion, she swam back to the bank, staggered out onto land once more. No point drying herself now, not when her damp towel was covered with earth. She automatically picked it up and started home, praying again to the Amida Buddha that her home still stood.

Bomb craters pocked the fields. Here and there, men and women lay beside them, torn and twisted in death. The dirt road, Liu saw, was untouched; the bombers had left it intact for the Japanese army to use.

She wished for a cigarette. She'd had a pack of Babies in her pocket, but they were soaked now. Water dripped from her hair into her eyes. When she saw columns of smoke rising into the sky, she, began to run. Her sandals went *flap-squelch, flap-squelch* against her feet. Ahead, in the direction of the village, she heard shouts and screams, but with her ears still ringing she could not make out words.

People stared as she ran up. Even in the midst of disaster, her first thought was

embarrassment at the way the wet cloth of her robe molded itself to her body. Even the small swellings of her nipples were plainly visible. “Paying to see a woman’s body” was a euphemism for visiting a whore. No one so much as had to pay to see Liu’s.

But in the chaos that followed the Japanese air attack, a mere woman’s body proved a small concern. Absurdly, some of the people in the village, instead of being terrified and filled with dread like Liu, capered about as if in celebration. She called, “Has everyone here gone crazy, Old Sun?”

“No, no,” the tailor shouted back. “Do you know what the eastern devils’ bombs did? Can you guess?” An enormous grin showed his almosttoothless gums.

“I would say they missed everything, but ...” Liu paused, gestured at the rising smoke. “I see that cannot be so.”

“Almost as good.” Old Sun hugged himself with glee. “No, even better—nearly all their bombs fell right on the yamen.”

“The yamen?” Liu gaped, then started to laugh herself. “Oh, what a pity!” The walled enclosure of the yamen housed the county head’s residence, his audience hail, the jail, the court that sent people there, the treasury, and other government departments. Tang Wen Lan, the county head, was notoriously corrupt, as were most of his clerks, secretaries, and servants.

“Isn’t it sad. I think I’ll go home and put on white for Tang’s funeral,” Old Sun said.

“He’s dead?” Liu exclaimed. “I thought a man as wicked as that would live forever.”

“He’s dead,” Old Sun said positively. “The ghost Life-Is-Transient is taking him to the next world right now—if death’s messenger can find enough pieces to carry. One bomb landed square on the office where he was taking bribes. No one will squeeze us any more. How sad, how terrible!” His elastic features twisted into a mask of mirthful mourning that belonged in a pantomime show.

Yi Min, the local apothecary, was less sanguine than Old Sun. “Wait until the eastern dwarfs come. The Japanese will make stupid dead Tang Wen Lan seem like a prince of generosity. He had to leave us enough rice to get through to next year so he could squeeze us again. The Japanese will keep it all for themselves. They don’t care whether we live or die.”

Too much of China had learned that, to its sorrow. However rapacious and inept the government of Chiang Kai-shek had proved itself, places under Japanese rule suffered worse. For one thing, as Yi Min had said, the invaders took for themselves first and left only what they did not want to the Chinese they con-trolled. For another, while they were rapacious, they were not inept. Like locusts, when they swept a province clean of rice, they swept it *clean*.

Liu said, “Shall we run away, then?”

“A peasant without his plot is nothing,” Old Sun said. “If I am to starve, I would sooner starve at home than somewhere on the road far from my ancestors’ graves.”

Several other villagers agreed. Yi Min said, "But what if it is a choice between living on the road and dying by the graves of your ancestors? What then, Old Sun?"

While the two men argued, Liu Han walked on into the village. Sure enough, it was as Old Sun had said. The yamen was a smoking ruin, its walls smashed down here and there as if by a giant's kicks. The flagpole had been broken like a broomstraw; the Kuomintang flag, white star in a blue field on red, lay crumpled in the dirt.

Through a gap in the wrecked wall, Liu Han stared in at Tang Wen Lan's office. If the county head had been in there when the bomb landed, Old Sun was surely right in thinking him dead. Nothing was left of the building but a hole in the ground and some thatch blown off the roof.

Another bomb had landed on the jail. Whatever the crimes for which the prisoners had been confined, they'd suffered the maximum penalty. Shrieks said some were suffering still. Villagers were already going through the yamen, scavenging what they could and dragging out bodies and pieces of bodies. The thick, meaty smell of blood fought with those of smoke and freshly upturned earth. Liu Han shuddered, thinking how easily others might have been smelling her blood right now.

Her own house stood a couple of blocks beyond the yamen. She saw smoke rising from that direction, but thought nothing of it. No one willingly believes disaster can befall her. Not even when she rounded the last corner and saw the bomb crater where the house had stood did she credit her own eyes. Less was left here than at the county head's office.

*I have no home.* The thought took several seconds to register, and hardly seemed to mean anything even after Liu formed it. She stared clown at the ground, dully wondering what to do next. Something small and dirty lay by her left foot. She recognized it in the same slow, sluggish way she had realized her house was gone. It was her little sons hand. No sign of the rest of him remained.

She stooped and picked up the band, just as if he were there, not merely a mutilated fragment. The flesh was still warm against hers. She heard a loud cry, and needed a little while to know it came from her own throat. The cry went on and on, seemingly without her: when she tried to stop, she found she couldn't.

Slowly, slowly, it stopped being the only sound in her universe. Other noises penetrated, cheerful *pop-pop-pops* like strings of firecrackers going off. But they were not firecrackers. They were rifles. Japanese soldiers were on the way.

David Goldfarb watched the green glow of the radar screen at Dover Station, waiting for the swarm of moving blips that would herald the return of the British bomber armada. He turned to the fellow technician beside him. "I'm sure as hell gladder to be looking for our planes coming back than I was year before last, watching every German in the whole wide world heading straight for London."

"You can say that again." Jerome Jones rubbed his weary eyes. "It was a bit dicey

there for a while, wasn't it?"

"Just a bit, yes." Goldfarb leaned back in his uncomfortable chair, hunched his shoulders. Something in his neck went *snap*. He grunted with relief, then grunted again as he thought about Jones's reply. He'd lived surrounded by British reserve all his twenty-three years, even learned to imitate it, but it still seemed unnatural to him.

His newlywed parents had fled to London to escape Polish pogroms a little before the start of the first World War. A stiff upper lip was not part of the scanty baggage they'd brought with them; they shouted at each other, and eventually at David and his brothers and sister, sometimes angrily, more often lovingly, but always at full throttle. He'd never learned at home to hold back, which made the trick all the harder anywhere else.

The reminiscent smile he'd worn for a moment quickly faded. By the news dribbling out, pogroms rolled through Poland again, worse under the Nazis than ever under the tsars. When Hitler swallowed Czechoslovakia, Saul Goldfarb had written to his own brothers and sisters and cousins in Warsaw, urging them to get out of Poland while they could. No one left. A few months later, it was too late to leave.

A blip on the screen snapped him out of his unhappy reverie. "Blimey," Jones breathed, King's English cast aside in surprise, "lookit that bugger go."

"I'm looking," Goldfarb said. He kept on looking, too, until the target disappeared again. It didn't take long. He sighed. "Now we'll have to fill out a pixie report."

"Third one this week," Jones observed. "Bloody pixies're getting busier, whatever the hell they are."

"Whatever," Goldfarb echoed. For the past several months, radars in England—and, he gathered unofficially, the United States as well—had been showing phantom aircraft flying impossibly high and even more impossibly fast; 90,000 feet and better than 2,000 miles an hour were the numbers he'd heard most often. He said, "I used to think they came from something wrong in the circuits somewhere. I've seen enough now, though, that I have trouble believing it."

"What else could they be?" Jones still belonged to the circuitry-problem school. He fired off the big guns of its argument: "They aren't ours. They don't belong to the Yanks. And if they were Jerry's they'd be dropping things on our heads. What does that leave? Men from Mars?"

"Laugh all you like" Goldfarb said stubbornly. "If there's something wrong in the machinery's guts, why can't the boffins find it and fix it?"

"Crikey, I don't think even the blokes who invented this beast know what all it can and can't do," Jones retorted.

Since that was unquestionably true Goldfarb didn't respond to it directly. Instead, he said, "So why has the machinery only started finding pixies now? Why didn't they show up on the screens from the first day?"

"If the boffins can't figure it out, how do you expect me to know?" Jones said. "Pull out a bloody pixie report form, will you? With luck, we can get it done before we spot



the bombers. Then we won't have to worry about it tomorrow."

"Right." Goldfarb sometimes thought that if the Germans had managed to cross the Channel and invade England, the British could have penned them behind walls of paper and then buried them in more. The pigeonholes under the console at which he sat held enough requisitions, directives, and reports to baffle the most subtle bureaucrat for years.

Nor was the pixie report, blurrily printed on coarse, shoddy paper, properly called by a name anywhere near so simple. The RAF had instead produced a document titled INCIDENT OF APPARENT ANOMALOUS DETECTION OF HIGH-SPEED, HIGH-ALTITUDE TARGET. Lest the form fall into German hands, it nowhere mentioned that the anomalous detections (*apparent detections*, Goldfarb corrected himself) took place by means of radar. As if Jerry doesn't know we've got it, he thought.

He found a stub of pencil, filled in the name of the station, the date, time, and bearing and perceived velocity of the contact, then stuck the form in a manila folder taped to the side of the radar screen. The folder, stuck there by the base CO, was labeled PIXIE REPORTS. With an attitude like that, the CO would never see promotion again.

Jones grunted in satisfaction, as if he'd filled out the form himself. He said, "Off it goes to London tomorrow."

"Yes, so they can compare it to others they've got and work out altitude and such from the figures," Goldfarb said. "They wouldn't bother with that if it were just in the circuits, now, would they?"

"Don't ask me what they'll do in London," Jones said, an attitude Goldfarb also found sensible. Jones went on, "I'd be happier believing the pixies were real if anyone ever saw one anywhere but there." He pointed at the radar screen.

"So would I," Goldfarb admitted, "but look at the trouble we've had even with the Ju-86." The wide-span reconnaissance bombers had been flying over southern England for months, usually above 40,000 feet—so high that Spitfires had enormous trouble climbing up to intercept them.

Jerome Jones remained unconvinced. "The Junkers 86 is just a Jerry crate. It's got a good ceiling, yes, but it's slow and easy to shoot down once we get to it. It's not like that Superman bloke in the Yank funny books, faster than a speeding bullet."

"I know. I'm just saying we can't see a plane that high up even if it's there—and if it's going that fast, even a spotter with binoculars doesn't have long to search before it's gone. What we need are binoculars slaved to the radar, so one could know precisely where to look." As he spoke, Goldfarb wondered if that was practical, and how to go about setting it up if it was.

He got so lost in his own scheme that he didn't really notice the blip on the radar screen for a moment. Then Jones said, "Pixies again." Sure enough, the radar was reporting more of the mysterious targets. Jones's voice changed. "They're acting peculiar."

“Too right they are.” Goldfarb stared at the screen, mentally translating its picture into aircraft (he wondered if Jones, who thought of pixies as something peculiar going on inside the radar set, did the same). “They’re showing up as slower than they ever did before.”

“And there are more of them,” Jones said. “Lots more.” He turned to Goldfarb. No one looked healthy by the green glow of the cathode-ray tube, but now he’ seemed especially pale; the line of his David Niven mustache was the sole color in his thin, sharp-featured face. “David, I think—they must be real.” Goldfarb recognized what was in his voice. It was fear.

Hunger crackled like fire in Moishe Russie's belly. He'd thought lean times and High Holy Days fasts had taught him what hunger meant, but they'd no more prepared him for the Warsaw ghetto than a picture of a lake taught a man to swim.

Long black coat flapping about him like a moving piece of the night, he scurried from one patch of deep shadow to the next. It was long past curfew, which had begun at nine. If a German saw him, he would live only so long as he still amused his tormentor. Fear dilated his nostrils at every breath, made him suck in great draughts of the fetid ghetto air.

But hunger drove harder than fear—and after all, he could become the object of a German's sport at any hour of the day or night, for any reason or none. Only four days before, the Nazis had fallen on the Jews who came to the Leszno Street courthouse to pay their taxes—taxes the Nazis themselves imposed. They robbed the Jews not only of what they claimed was owed, but also of anything else they happened to have on their persons. With the robbery came blows and kicks, as if to remind the Jews in whose clawed grip they lay.

“Not that I needed reminding,” Russie whispered aloud. He was a native of Wolynska Street, and had been in the ghetto since Warsaw surrendered to the Germans. Not many had lasted through two and a half years of hell

He wondered how much longer he would last. He'd been a medical student before September 1939; he could diagnose his own symptoms easily enough. Loose teeth and tender gums warned of the onset of scurvy; poor night vision meant vitamin A deficiency. The diarrhea could have had a dozen fathers. And starvation needed no doctor to give it a name. The hundreds of thousands of Jews packed into four square kilometers had all too intimate an acquaintance with it.

The one advantage of being so thin was that his coat went round him nearly twice. He'd liked it better when it was a proper fit.

His furtive movements became, even more cautious as he, drew near the wall. The red bricks went up twice as high as a man, with barbed wire strung above them to keep the boldest adventurer from climbing over. However much he wanted to, Russie did not aim to try that. Instead, he whirled the sack he carried around and, around like an Olympic hammerthrower, then flung it toward the Polish side of the wall.

The sack flew up and over. Heart pounding, Russie listened to it land. He had padded the silver candlestick with rags, so it bit with a soft, dull thump instead of a clatter. He strained to catch the sound of footfalls on the other side. He was at the Pole's mercy now. If the fellow simply wanted to steal the candlestick, he could. If he had hope of

more, he'd keep the bargain they'd made in Leszno Street.

Waiting stretched like the lengths of wire on the wall and had as many spikes. Try as he would, Russie could hear nothing from the other side. Maybe the Germans had arrested the Pole. Then the precious candlestick would lie abandoned till some passerby came upon it...and Russie would have squandered one of his last remaining resources for nothing.

A soft *plop* on the cobblestones not far away. Russie sprinted over. The rags that bound up the tattered remnants of his shoes made hardly a sound. He held his hat on with one hand; as he grew thinner, even his head seemed to have shrunk.

He snatched up the bag, dashed back toward darkness. Even as he ran, the rich, intoxicating odor of meat flooded his senses, made his mouth gush with saliva. He fumbled at the drawstring, reached inside. His spidery fingers closed round the chunk, gauged its size and weight. Not the half a kilo he'd been promised, but not far from it. He'd expected the Pole to cheat worse: what recourse did a Jew have? Perhaps he could complain to the SS. Sick and starving though he was, the thought raised black laughter in him.

He drew out his hand, licked the salt and fat that clung to it. Water filled his eyes as well as his mouth. His wife, Rivka, and their son, Reuven (and, incidentally, himself), might live a little longer. Too late for their little Sarah, too late for his wife's parents and his own father. But the three of them might go on.

He smacked his lips. Part of the sweetness on his tongue came from the meat's being spoiled (but only slightly; he'd eaten far worse), the rest because it was pork. The rabbis in the ghetto had long since relaxed the prohibitions against forbidden food, but Russie still felt guilty every time it passed his lips. Some Jews chose to starve sooner than break the Law. Had he been alone in the ghetto, Russie might have followed that way. But while he had others to care for, he would live if he could. He'd talk it over with God when he got the chance.

*How best to use the meat?* he wondered. Soup was the only answer: it would last for several days, that way, and make rotten potatoes and moldy cabbage tolerable (only a tiny part of him remembered the dim dead days before the war, when he would have turned aside in scorn from rotten potatoes and moldy cabbage instead of wolfing them down and wishing for more).

He reached into a coat pocket. Now his spit-wet fist closed on a wad of zlotys, enough to bribe a Jewish policeman if he had to. The banknotes were good for little else; mere money was rarely enough to buy food, not in the ghetto.

"I have to get back," he reminded himself under his breath. If he was not at his sewing machine in the factory fifteen minutes after curfew lifted, some other scrawny Jew would praise God for having the chance to take his place. And if he was there but too worn to meet his quota of German uniform trousers, he would not keep his sewing machine long. His narrow, clever hands were made for taking a pulse or removing an appendix, but their agility with bobbin and cloth was what kept him and part of his

family alive.

He wondered how long he would be allowed to maintain even the hellish life he led. He did not so much fear the random murder that stalked the ghetto on German jackboots. But just that day, whispers had slithered from bench to bench at the factory. The Lublin ghetto, they said, had ceased to be: thousands of Jews taken away and—Everyone filled in his own *and*, according to his nightmares.

Russie's *and* was something like a meat-packing plant, with people going through instead of cattle. He prayed that he was wrong, that God would never allow such an abomination. But too many prayers had fallen on deaf ears, too many Jews lay dead on sidewalks until at last, like cordwood, they were piled up and hauled away.

“Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” he murmured softly, “I beg You, give, me a sign that You have not forsaken Your chosen people.”

Like tens of thousands of his fellow sufferers, he sent up that prayer at all hours of the day and night, sent it up because it was the only thing he could do to affect his horrid fate.

“I beg You, Lord,” he murmured again, “give me a sign.”

All at once, noon came to the Warsaw ghetto in the middle of the night. Moishe Russie stared in disbelieving wonder, at the sun-hot point of light blazing in the still-black sky. *Parachute flare*, he thought, remembering the German bombardment of his city.

But it was no flare. Whatever it was, it was bigger and brighter than any flare, by itself lighting the whole of the ghetto—maybe the whole of Warsaw, or the whole of Poland—bright as day. It hung unmoving in the sky, as no flare could. Slowly, slowly, slowly, the point of light became a smudge, began to fade from eye-searing, actinic violet to white and yellow and orange. The brilliance of noon gave way little by little to sunset and then to twilight. The two or three startled birds that burst into song fell silent again, as if embarrassed at being fooled.”

Their sweet notes were in any case all but drowned by the cries from the ghetto and beyond, cries of wonder and fear. Russie heard German voices with fear in them. He had not heard German voices with fear in them since the Nazis forced the Jews into the ghetto. He had not imagined he could hear such voices. Somehow that made them all the sweeter.

Tears poured from his dazzled eyes, ran down his dirty, hollow cheeks into the curls of his beard. He sagged against a torn poster that said *Piwo*. He wondered how long it had been since beer came into the ghetto.

But none of that mattered, not in any real sense of the word. He had asked God for a sign, and God gave him one. He did not know how he could pay God back, but he promised to spend the rest of his life finding out.

Fleetlord Atvar stood before the holographic projection of Tosev 3. As he watched,

points of light blinked into being here and there above the world's ridiculously small landmasses. He wondered if, once Tosev 3 came under the dominion of the Race, manipulation of plate tectonics might bring up more usable territory.

That was a question for the future, though, for five hundred years hence, or five thousand, or twenty-five thousand. Eventually, when everything was decided and planned down to the last detail, the Race would act. That way had served it well for centuries piled on centuries.

Atvar was uneasily aware he lacked the luxury of time. Herd expected to enjoy it, but the Tosevites, having somehow developed with indecent haste the rudiments of an industrial civilization, posed a greater challenge to his forces than he or anyone else back Home had anticipated. If he failed to meet the challenge, only his failure would be remembered.

Accordingly, it was with some concern that he turned to Shiplord Kirel and said, "These devices were properly placed?"

"It is so, Fleetlord," Kirel replied. "All placing vessels report success and have returned safely to the fleet; instruments confirm proper targeting of the thermonuclear devices and their simultaneous ignition above the principal radio communications centers of Tosev 3."

"Excellent." Atvar knew the Tosevites had no way to reach even a fraction of the altitude of the placing vessels. Nevertheless, actually hearing that matters had proceeded as designed was always a relief. "Their systems should be thoroughly scrambled, then."

"As the exalted fleetlord says," Kirel agreed. "Better still, many parts of those systems should be permanently destroyed. Unshielded transistors and microprocessors are extremely vulnerable to electromagnetic pulse and, since the Tosevites have no nuclear power of their own, they will never have seen the necessity for shielding."

"Excellent," Atvar repeated. "Our own shielded aircraft, meanwhile, should have rare sport against them while they writhe like roadcuttlers with fractured vertebrae. We should have no problem clearing areas for landing, and once our troops are on the ground, conquest becomes inevitable." Saying the words brought fresh confidence to the commander. Nothing reassured the Race more than a plan that was going well.

Kirel said, "May it please the exalted fleetlord, as we land, shall we broadcast demands for surrender to be picked up by whatever receivers remain intact down below?"

That was not part of the plan as formulated. Of course, the plan as formulated went back in its essentials to the days when no one thought the Tosevites had any technology worth mentioning. Nevertheless, Atvar felt an almost instinctive reluctance to deviate from it. He said, "No, let them come to us. They will surrender soon enough when they feel the weight of our metal."

"It shall be done as the fleetlord wishes," Kirel said formally. Atvar knew the shiplord

had ambition of his own, and that Kirel would make careful note of any and all mistakes and failures, especially those he had argued against. Let Kirel do as he would. Atvar felt sure this was no mistake.

Flight Leader Teerts stared in disbelieving wonder at the head-Up display reflected against the inside of his windshield. Never in training had he imagined sorties in such a target-rich environment. The great herd of Tosevite aircraft crawled along below and ahead of him, blissfully unaware he was so much as in their solar system.

The voice of one of the other two pilots in the flight rang in the audio button taped to his hearing diaphragm: "Pity we have no more killers to assign to this area. They'd enjoy themselves."

Before he answered, Teerts checked the radio frequency. As ordered, it wasn't one the Tosevites used. Relaxing, he answered, "We're taking on an entire world, Rolvar; we don't have enough killers to knock down all the native junk at once. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we have."

That best gave every sign of being spectacular. All six of his missiles had already selected targets from the herd. He ripple-fired them, one after another. His killercraft bucked slightly under him as the missiles dropped away. Their motors kicked in and spat orange flame; they sprinted downward toward the ungainly Tosevite flying machines.

Even had the locals known they were under attack, they could have done little, not when his missiles had ten times the speed of their aircraft. The head-up display showed his salvo and those of his wingmates streaking home. Then, suddenly, Teerts needed no head-up, display to gauge what was happening: gouts of fire suddenly filled, the darkness below as aircraft tumbled out of the sky.

Rolvar yowled in Teerts' audio button. "Look at them fall! Every shot a clean hit!"

Killercraft pilots were chosen for aggressiveness. Teerts had won flightleader paint because he also kept track of details. After a glance at the display, he said, "I show only seventeen kills. Either a missile was defective or two' went after the same target."

"Who cares?" said Gefron, the other member of the flight. Gefron would not make flight leader if he lived to be a thousand, even counting by double-length Tosevite years. He was a good pilot, though. He went on, "We still have our cannon. Let's use them."

"Right." Teerts led the flight down into gun range. The natives still didn't know what had happened to them, but they knew something horrible had. Like a flock of frenni beset by wild botor, they were scattering, doing their feeble best to get out of harm's way. Teerts' jaws opened in mirth. Their best would not suffice.

His engines changed pitch as they breathed thicker alt Servos squealed, adjusting the sweep of his wings. His speed dropped to little more than that of sound. A target filled his windshield. He stabbed the firing button with the thumbclaw of his stick hand. The nose of his plane disappeared for a moment in the glare of the muzzle blast. When his vision cleared, the Tosevite aircraft, one wing sheared away, was already spinning out

of control toward the ground.

He'd never been among so many aircraft in his life. He bled off still more speed, to avoid collision. Another target, another burst, another kill. A few moments later, another and another.

Off to one side, he saw brief spurts of flame. He turned one eye that way. A Tosevite aircraft was shooting back at him. He abstractly admired the natives' courage. Once pacified, they would serve the Race well. They weren't even bad pilots, given the limitations of the lumbering aircraft they flew. They were maneuvering with everything they had, trying to break contact and escape. But that was his choice, not theirs.

He shot out the front of the aircraft pack, began to circle back toward it for another run. As he did so, a flash on the head-up display made him slew both eyes toward it. Somewhere out there in the night, a native aircraft with better performance than those of the herd was turning in his direction and away from it.

An escorting killercraft? An enemy who thought him a better target? Teerts neither knew nor cared. Whoever the native was, he'd pay for his presumption.

Teerts' cannon was radar-controlled. He fired a burst. Flames sprang from the Tosevite killercraft. At the same moment, it shot back at him. The shells fell short. The native, all afire now, plunged out of the sky.

Teerts raked the stampeding herd of aircraft twice more before his ammunition ran low. Rolvar and Gefron had also done all the damage they could. They streaked for low orbital pickup; soon enough, the Race would have landing strips on the ground. Then the slaughter of Tosevite aircraft would be great indeed.

"Easy as a female in the middle of her season," Gefron exulted.

"They're brave enough, though," Rolvar said. "A couple of their killercraft came right for me; I might even have a hole or two. I'm not so sure I got both of them, either; they're so little and slow, they're a lot more maneuverable than I am."

"I know I got mine," Teerts said. "We'll snatch some sleep and then come down and do it again." His flightmates hissed approval.

One second, the Lancaster below and to the right of George Bagnall's was flying along serenely as you please. The next, it exploded in midair. For a moment, Bagnall saw men and pieces of machine hang suspended, as if on strings from heaven. Then they were gone.

"Jesus!" he said fervently. "I think the whole ruddy world's gone mad. First that great light in the sky—"

"Lit us up like a milliard star shells all at once, didn't it?" Ken Embry agreed. "I wonder how the devil Jerry managed that? If it had stayed lit much longer, every bloody Nazi fighter in the world would have been able to spy us up here."

Another Lane blew up, not far away. "What was that?" Bagnall demanded. "Anybody



see a Jerry plane?”

None of the gunners answered. Neither did the bomb-aimer. Embry spoke to the radioman: “Any better luck there, Ted?”

“Not a bit of it,” Edward Lane answered. “Ever since that light, I’m getting nothing but hash on every frequency.”

“Bloody balls-up, that’s what it is,” Embry said. As if to italicize his words, two more bombers went up in flames. His voice rose to near a scream: “What’s doing that? It’s not flak and it’s not planes, so what the hell is it?”

Next to the pilot, Bagnall shivered in his seat. Flying missions over Germany was frightening enough in and of itself, but when Lanes started getting blown out of the sky for no reason at all...His heart shrank to a small, frozen lump in his chest. His head turned this way and that, trying to see what the devil was murdering his friends. Beyond the polished Perspex, the night remained inscrutable.

Then the big, heavy Lancaster shook in the air for an instant like a leaf on a rippling stream. Even through the growl of the plane’s four Merlins, he heard a shrieking roar that made every hair on his body try to stand erect. A lean shark-shape swept past, impossibly swift, impossibly graceful. Two huge exhausts glared like the red eyes of a beast of prey. One gunner had enough presence of mind to fire at it, but it vanished ahead of the Lane in the blink of an eye.

“Did you—see that?” Ken Embry asked in a tiny voice.

“I—think so,” Bagnall answered as cautiously. He wasn’t quite sure he believed in the terrible apparition himself. “Where did the Germans come up with it?”

“Can’t be German,” the pilot said. “We know what they have, same as they know about us. My dad in a Spitfire above the Somme is likelier than a Jerry in—that.”

“Well, if he’s not a German, who the devil is he?” Bagnall asked.

“Damned if I know, and I don’t care to hang about and learn, in case he decides to come back.” Embry banked away from, the track of the impossible fighter.

“Ground flak—” Bagnall said as he watched the altimeter unwind. Embry ignored him. He shut up, feeling foolish. When set against this monster that swept bombers from the sky like a charwoman wielding her broom against spilled salt, ground flak was hardly worth worrying about.

Jens Larssen’s thumb throbbed fiercely. The nail was already turning black; he suspected he’d lose it. He scowled as darkly as his fair, sunny features allowed. He was a physicist, damn it, not a carpenter. What hurt worse than his maimed digit was the snickers from the young punks who made up most of the work crew that was building strange things in the west stands of Stagg Field.

The evening sun at his back, he tramped along Fifty-seventh Street toward the Quadrangle Club. His appetite wasn’t what it had been before he’d tried driving his

thumbnail into a two-by-four, but food and coffee kept him going in place of sleep. As soon as he'd gulped his meal, he'd be back at the pile again, hammering away—this time, with luck, a little more carefully.

He sucked in a lungful of muggy Chicago air. Having been born and raised in San Francisco, he wondered why three million people chose to live in a place that was too hot and sticky half the time and too damned cold most of the rest.

“They have to be crazy,” he said aloud.

A student going the other way gave him an odd look. He felt himself flush. Dressed as he was in a dirty undershirt and a pair of chinos, he didn't look like anyone who belonged on the University of Chicago campus, let alone a faculty member. He'd draw more looks in the Quadrangle Club. *Too bad for the Latin professors in their moth-eaten Harris tweeds*, he thought.

He walked past Cobb Gate; the grotesques carved on the big stone pile that was the northern entrance to Hull Court always made him smile. Botany Pond, surrounded on three sides by the Hull Biological Laboratories, was a nice place to sit and read when he had the time. Lately, he hadn't had the time very often.

He was coming up to Mitchell Tower when his shadow disappeared. One second it stretched out ahead of him, all fine and proper, the next it was gone. The tower, modeled after that of Magdalen College at Oxford, was suddenly bathed in harsh white light.

Larssen stared up into the sky. The glowing spot there grew and faded and changed color as he watched. Everyone around was pointing at it and exclaiming: “What's that?” “What could it be?” “Have you ever seen anything like that in all your life?” People stuck their heads out of windows and came running outside to see.

The physicist watched and gaped with everyone else. Little by little, the new light dimmed and his old, familiar shadow reasserted itself. Before it had fully recovered, Larssen wheeled and began running back the way he had come. He dodged past dozens of people who were still just standing and gawking. “Where's the fire, buddy?” one of them yelled.

He didn't answer. He just ran harder toward Stagg Field. The fire was in the sky. He knew what sort of fire it had to be, too: the fire he and his colleagues were seeking to call forth from the uranium atom. So far, no atomic pile in the United States had even managed a self-sustaining chain reaction. The crew in the west stands was trying to put together one that would.

No one in his most horrid nightmares imagined the Germans had already devised not just a pile but a bomb, even if the uranium atom had first been split in Germany in 1938. As he ran, Larssen wondered how the Nazis had exploded a bomb over Chicago. So far as he knew, their planes couldn't reach even New York.

For that matter, he wondered why the Germans had set off their bomb so high overhead—too high, really, for it to do any damage. Maybe, he thought, they had it

aboard some oceanbestriding rocket like the ones the pulp magazines talked about. But no one had dreamed the Germans could do that, either.

Nothing about the bomb made any rational sense. The dreadful thing was up there, though, and had to be German. It surely wasn't American or English.

Larssen had an even more horrid thought. What if it was Japanese? He didn't think the Japs had the know-how to build an atomic bomb, but he hadn't thought they had the know-how to bomb Pearl Harbor so devastatingly well, or to take the Philippines, or Guam, or Wake, or Hong Kong and Singapore and Burma from the British, or practically drive the Royal Navy out of the Indian Ocean, or...The further he went, the longer the melancholy list in his head grew.

"Maybe it is the goddamn Japs," he said, and ran harder than ever.

Sam Yeager had the curtain closed over the train window by his seat, to keep the westering sun out of Bobby Fiore's eyes while his roommate slept. In his younger days, he would have resented that: having grown up without traveling more than a couple of days' ride from his folks' farm, he was wild to see as much of the country as he could when he started playing ball. Train and bus windows were his openings on a wider world.

"I've seen the country, all right," he muttered. He'd rolled through just about every piece of it, with swings into Canada and Mexico to boot. Rubbernecking for one more swing through the staid flatlands of Illinois no longer meant as much as it once had.

He remembered the sun rising over the arid mountains near Salt Lake City, shining off the lake and the white salt flats straight into his dazzled eyes. Now that had been scenery worth looking at; he'd carry the picture to his grave with him. Fields and barns and ponds just couldn't compete, though he wouldn't have lived in Salt Lake City for Joe DiMaggio's salary. *Well, maybe for DiMaggio's salary*, he thought.

A lot of the Commodores had headed off to the dining car. Across the aisle, Joe Sullivan was staring out the window with the same avidity Yeager had known in his early days. The pitcher's lips moved as he softly read a Burma Shave sign to himself. That made Yeager smile. Sullivan needed to lather up maybe twice a week.

Suddenly, bright light streamed in through the windows on the pitcher's side of the car. He craned his neck. "Funny thing in the sky," he reported. "Looks like a Fourth of July firework, but it's an awful damn bright one."

Mutt Daniels was sitting on that side of the train, too. "Awful damn bright one is right," the manager said. "Never seen one like that in all my born days. It just keeps hangin' up there, don't seem to move a-tall. Kind of pretty, matter of fact."

The light went from white to yellow to orange to red, fading little by little over several minutes. Yeager thought about getting up and having a look at where it was coming from. He might have done it if Sullivan hadn't compared it to something you'd see on the Fourth of July. Ever since the Fourth when he broke his ankle, he'd had no

use for fireworks. He stuck his nose back into his *Astounding*.

The rising sun snuck under Heinrich Jäger's eyelids, pried his eyes open. He groaned, shook a few of the cobwebs out of his head, got slowly to his feet. Moving as if every joint in his body were rusty, he got in line for breakfast. More kasha stew, his nose told him. He shrugged. It would keep him full.

"No more lights in the sky?" he asked Ernst Riecke, who looked as tired as he felt.

"No, sir," the captain answered. "I don't know if I should have bothered you, but—"

"You did the right thing," Jäger said, mentally adding, *even if it did cost me another hour in my blanket*. "I don't know what the devil that was. It looked like one of our recognition flares, but it was a million times as big and bright. And it didn't fall, either. It stayed in one place till it went out. I wonder what it was."

"One of Ivan's tricks, maybe," Riecke suggested.

"Maybe," But Jäger didn't believe it. "If it was, though, he should have followed it up. No bombers, no artillery...If the Russians were trying something, it didn't work."

Like the rest of the tankmen, Jäger gulped down his stew. When everyone was fed, he reluctantly sent the field kitchen on its way. He hated to part with it, but it wouldn't be able to keep up with the tanks.

One after another, the Panzer IIIs rumbled into life. The whole company let out a cheer when the motor of the twelfth tank caught. Jäger shouted as loud as anybody. He didn't think they'd be facing enemy armor today, but you never could tell in Russia. And if not today, then one day before too long.

He clambered up into the turret of the tank he personally commanded, radioed division headquarters to see if orders had changed since yesterday. "No, we still want you to shift to map square B-9," the signal lieutenant answered. "How do you read my transmission, by the way?"

"Well enough," Jäger said. "Why?"

"We had some trouble earlier," the signalman answered. "After that explosion in the sky, reception went into the toilet for a while. Glad it didn't trouble you."

"Me, too," Jäger said. "Out." He unfolded his map, studied it. If he was where he thought he was, he and his panzers needed to make about twenty kilometers to get to where they were supposed to be. He leaned down into the crew compartment of the tank, called to the driver. "Let's go. East."

"East it is." Dieter Schmidt put the Panzer III into gear. The roar of the Maybach HL120TR engine changed pitch. The tank began to roll ahead, chewing two lines through the grass and dirt of the steppe. The engine went up the scale and down, up and down, as Schmidt worked his way through the six forward speeds of the gearbox.

The dustbin cupola at the back of the turret gave a decent view even when closed down. Like any tank commander worth his black coveralls, Jäger left it open and stood

up in it whenever he could. Not only could he see more than even through good periscopes, the air was fresher and cooler and the racket less—or at least different. He traded being surrounded by engine rumble for the iron clash and rattle of the spare wheels and tracks lashed to the tank's rear deck.

He frowned a little. If the German logistics train were better run, he wouldn't have had to carry his own spares to make sure they were there when he needed them. But the eastern front ran more than three thousand kilometers from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Expecting the high foreheads who were out of harm's way to care what happened to any one tank commander was too much to hope for.

The panzers rolled through the detritus of battle, past graves hastily dug in the rich dark soil of the Ukraine; past stinking, bloated Russian corpses still unburied; past wrecked trucks and tanks of both the *Wehrmacht* and the Red Army. German engineers swarmed over those like flies over the corpses, salvaging whatever they could.

The gently rolling country stretched in all directions as far as the eye could see. Not even war's wounds scarred it too severely. Sometimes when Jäger looked out across that sea of green, his dozen tanks seemed all alone. He grinned when, off in the distance, he spied a German infantry company.

Once or twice, planes buzzed by overhead. That made him grin more widely. Somewhere east of Izyum, Ivan was going to catch hell.

A noise like the end of the world—the panzer a couple of hundred meters to his right went up in a fireball. One second it was there, the next nothing but red and yellow flame and a column of black, greasy smoke mounting to the sky. A moment later came the barks of secondary explosions as the tank's ammunition began going off. The five-man crew couldn't have known what hit them. Jäger told himself that, anyhow, as he dove down inside the turret.

“What the fuck was that?” asked Georg Schultz. The gunner had heard the blast through thick steel and through the racket of his own tank's motor.

“Joachim's tank just went up,” Jäger answered “Must have bit: a mine—but the Ivans aren't supposed to have laid any mines around here.” His voice showed his doubt, the explosion had been very violent for a mine. *Maybe if the blast went up into the gas tank*, the captain thought. No sooner had the idea crossed his mind than another panzer went up with an even louder detonation than the first.

“Jesus!” Schultz shouted. He stared fearfully at the metal floor of the tank, as if wondering when a white-hot jet of flame would burst through it.

Jäger grabbed for the radio that linked him with the rest of the company, hit the all-hands frequency. “All halt!” he bawled. “We're hitting mines.” He shouted the order forward to Dieter Schmidt, then stood up in the cupola to make sure it was being obeyed.

The ten surviving tanks of the company did stop. The rest of the commanders bounced up just like Jäger, each of them trying to see what was going on. But for two blazing

hulks, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Jäger was about to call divisional headquarters to ask for a sapper detachment when a lance of fire tore across the sky and blew the turret clean off one of the stopped panzers. The oily chassis promptly began to burn.

Cursing his own mistake, Jäger let himself fall back into the turret. He grabbed the radio, screamed, “Get moving! They’re rockets from the air, not mines! The Ivans must have found some way to mount *Kasyushas* on their ground-attack planes. If we stay where we are, we’re sitting ducks.” He didn’t need to relay the order to Schmidt this time; his Panzer III was already lurching ahead, the engine roaring flat out.

Only as the captain went up into the cupola again did he consciously realize the trail of fire in the sky had come from the west, from behind him. “Turn the turret around!” he yelled, and cursed the hydraulics as the heavy dome of metal ever so slowly began to traverse. A couple of the other commanders had been more alert. Their tanks’ turrets were already slewing to the rear.

Jäger turned that way himself. As he did so, a fourth panzer was hit in the engine compartment. Flames began to spurt. Turret doors flew open; men started bailing out. One, two, three...commander, gunner, loader. Fire washed over the whole tank. The driver and hull gunner never had a chance.

The company commander frantically scanned the sky. Where was the Stormovik, the armored Russian attack plane that was likeliest to be carrying *Katyusha* rockets? His heart leapt when he spotted a flying shape. The coaxial 7.92mm machine guns of the company’s faster-reacting panzers spat flame at it. They weren’t likely to hurt it, but might keep the pilot from making a low firing run.

They didn’t. Here he came. Jäger got ready to throw himself behind the turret’s armor the instant the Stormovik’s guns started shooting back. Then, as the plane drew swiftly nearer, he noticed it wasn’t a Stormovik. And when it fired, its whole blunt nose went yellow-white with the muzzle blast. Dust fountained around two more panzers. Both of them stopped dead. Smoke poured from them. Along with the reek of flaming gas and oil and cordite, Jäger’s nose caught the roast-pork stink of burning human flesh.

The airplane passed overhead, almost close enough to touch. In spite of everything, Jäger stared at it in disbelief. It was almost the size of a medium bomber, and had no propeller he could see. It bore neither the German cross and swastika nor the Soviet star; in fact, it bore no device at all on its camouflaged wings and body. And it did not roar like every other airplane he had ever known—it shrieked, as if its motive power came from damned souls.

Then it was gone, vanishing into the east more swiftly than any fighter Jäger knew. He gaped after it, mouth fallen open in most unofficerlike fashion. One pass, and half his company was flaming wreckage.

Like his own, Ernst Riecke’s panzer had survived the onslaught. It came rattling over. Riecke was standing up in his cupola. The captain’s face bore the same expression of stunned disbelief Jäger knew his own did. “What—” Riecke had to try twice before he

could get the words out. “What the devil was that?”

“I don’t know.” Jäger found an even worse question: “What if it comes back?”

The Japanese were looting the village. They’d already shot a couple of people for protesting when their possessions were hauled away. The bodies lay as mute warnings in the square beside the ruined wall of the yamen. As if they did not suffice, the invading soldiers swaggered around with fixed bayonets, ready to spit anyone who gave them so much as a hard look.

Liu Han had done her best to make herself invisible to the Japanese. She knew how they recruited their pleasure battalions. Ashes grayed her hair, charcoal added not just filth but also lines to her face, giving her the look of a much older woman. Grief made it easy for her to assume the stooped posture of the elderly. She wandered aimlessly around the edges of the village, in part to keep away from the soldiers, in part because, with home and family gone, she had nothing better to do.

Because she kept away from the noisy chaos that engulfed invaders and townsfolk alike, she might have been the first to hear the thuttering in the air. Her head came up in fright—more bombers on the way? But surely not, not when the village already lay under the Japanese boot.

Or could they be Chinese planes? If the Kuomintang government wanted to hold Hankow, it would need to fight back with everything it had. And the noise was growing from the south! Fear and excitement warred within Liu Han. She wanted the Japanese dead, but did she wish to die with them?

In spite of her anguish, she decided she wanted to live. Stoop forgotten, she ran for the woods—the farther from the village when bombs began to fall, the better. The drone of approaching aircraft swelled in her ears.

She threw herself down in a tangle of bushes and ferns. By then the planes were almost overhead. She, stared up at them through tree branches. Despite anguish and terror, her eyes went wide. The planes she was used to had graceful, birdlike bodies. These flying—things—looked more like dragonflies. They were angular, awkward-seeming, with landing gear projecting from their bodies like insect legs. And they had no wings! If anything save magic kept them in the air, it was the whirling disk above each of them.

They hovered in midair like dragonflies, too. Liu Han had never heard of an airplane that could do such a thing, but then, all she knew of airplanes was the death and devastation they brought.

There these dragonfly planes proved no exception. As they hung in the sky, they fired machine guns and rockets into Liu Han’s poor bleeding village. Screams pierced the rattle of gun-fire and the crash of explosions. So did the deep, harsh cries of the Japanese soldiers. Liu shuddered to hear them; they reminded her of the baying of wolves. Seeing the invaders lashed with such pitiless fire almost made her forget the ruination, of her village.

Then a machine gun began to chatter inside the ruins of the yamen. The Japanese were doing their best to fight back. Tracer bullets drew fiery lines up toward the dragonfly planes. Two rockets snarled groundward. A roar, a flash of light, and the machine gun fell silent. Forgetting she was supposed to be in hiding, Liu Han let out a delighted screech. With chaos all around who was likely to hear one more screech?

A couple of dragonfly planes settled toward the ground, floating through the air as light as windborne snow. Doors opened in their sides as they touched down. Liu Han saw motion inside them. Holding her breath, she waited for soldiers to leap out and finish slaughtering the Japanese.

Could they really be men of the Kuomintang? Liu Han hadn't imagined that her country boasted such marvelous airplanes. Maybe they came from America! The Americans were supposed to be the most clever of all the foreign devils when it came to machines—and they were fighting the Japanese, too. Liu Han had seen an American once, a big, fat Christian missionary who spoke bad Chinese. He'd sounded very fierce, she remembered. She imagined big, fierce American soldiers springing out of the dragonfly planes, each with a sparkling bayonet half as long as he was tall. She hugged herself with glee at the delicious thought.

Helmeted soldiers began springing out of the dragonfly plane. They were not big, fierce Americans. They were not Chinese troops, either. Liu Han's glee turned to horror in the space of a single breath. The Chinese commonly called foreigners "devils"; just a moment before, Liu Han had been thinking about American devils. But here were devils in truth!

They were shorter than people, and skinnier. Their green-brown hides glistened in the afternoon sun like snakeskin. They had no noses; instead, the bottom parts of their faces were pulled out in short muzzles—Liu Han thought first of cats, then of lizards. The devils had tails, too, short blunt ones that hung a third of the way down to their knees. Liu Han rubbed her eyes, hard, but when she opened them again, the devils were still there. She moaned, deep in her throat.

The devils did not move like people, either. Liu Han thought of lizards again; the devils' motion had something of that same loose-joined skitter to it. And when they were still, they were absolutely still, in a way no human save a meditating monk could match.

They did not act like monks. They had things that looked like guns in their hands. The things were guns—they started firing into the village. And what guns! Instead of the *bang, bang, bang* of ordinary rifles, the devils' weapons spat streams of bullets like machine guns.

Despite their barrage, despite the rockets and gunfire from the dragonfly planes, Japanese soldiers in the village kept shooting. The devils on the ground advanced against the invaders, some rushing forward while others covered them. Had she been attacked by such monsters, Liu Han knew she would have either given up at once or fled. The Japanese did neither. They fought on until they were all killed. It did not take



long.

By the time the little battle ended, the whole village was on fire. Peering through a screen of brush, Liu Han saw the townsfolk, those who still lived, scattering in all directions save toward her (the dragonfly planes on the ground were a potent argument against running that way).

After a few minutes, a couple of villagers did come toward the dragonfly planes, chivvied along by the devils with guns. One of those devils lay on the grass just outside the houses. The blood that splashed its scaly hide was red as a man's. Liu Han rubbed her eyes again. She hadn't thought devils could bleed.

Some of the hovering dragonfly planes flew off to the north. Before long, they began firing again. *Good* Liu Han thought. *They're killing more Japanese.*

With resistance in the village—and the village itself—destroyed, the little scaly devils on the ground began prowling about, as if to make sure no more enemies lurked nearby. When one came in her direction, Liu Han frantically tried to bury herself under leaves and branches. If the Amida Buddha was kind, the devil would not see her.

The compassionate Buddha must have been looking somewhere else. The scaly devil yelled something in whatever language devils used among themselves. Liu Han shivered under her makeshift shelter, but did not come out. Then the devil's gun roared. Bullets snarled through the branches around her.

The devil yelled again. She knew it could have killed her had it cared to, so maybe it was ordering her to give up. She stood up, raised her hands above her head. "P-please don't shoot me, master devil," she quavered.

When the devil spoke once more, she saw it had lots of small pointed teeth and a long forked tongue like a lizard's. One of its eyes kept looking at her. The other, unnervingly, swiveled this way and that. When Liu Han took a step toward the devil, it sprang backward and raised its gun in clear warning.

She realized it barely came to her shoulder. "Are you afraid of me?" she said. The idea of a devil's knowing fear was so absurd that she wanted to laugh in spite of all the disasters of this dreadful day.

The little scaly devil didn't act as if it was funny. It gestured with the gun, pointing back toward the dragonfly planes. Some other villagers were already being marched aboard them. Liu Han knew she had no choice but to go in that direction. As she walked past the devil, it stepped back to make sure she didn't come within arm's length. If it wasn't afraid of her, Liu Han couldn't figure out why it was so cautious.

Before she climbed up the ramp into the dragonfly plane, another devil tied her hands together in front of her. It followed her inside, then motioned her into a seat with its gun.

The seat was uncomfortable, being both the wrong shape for her backside and too small; she had to draw her knees up to her chin to fit her legs into a space that would have been fine for one of the little scaly devils. In the seat beside her sat Yi Min, who

looked even more cramped than she felt.

The apothecary looked up dully as she joined him. His face was bloody from a cut by one eye. “So they got you, too, did they?” he said.

“Yes,” Liu Han answered. By village standards, Yi Min was an educated man, so she asked him, “What sort of devils are these? I’ve never seen or heard of anything like them.”

“Neither have I,” he said. “In fact, I hardly believed in devils—I thought they were superstitious rubbish. They—”

The little scaly devil with the gun said something. It put one hand over its muzzle, holding its toothy mouth closed. Then it pointed to Liu Han and Yi Min. After it did that two or three times, she figured out that it didn’t want them to talk. She set a hand over her own mouth. The devil made a noise like a bubbling pot and sat down. Liu Han decided she’d satisfied it.

The dragonfly plane’s engine began to roar. The blades that sprouted from the top of it started spinning, first slowly, then faster and faster until they looked like one of the flickering disks she’d noticed above the dragonfly planes when she was still out in the woods.

Without warning, the machine climbed into the air. Liu Han’s stomach lurched. She let out a frightened, involuntary squeak. The little scaly devil swung both its turreted eyes toward her. “Sorry, master devil,” she said. It kept on glaring. She realized she’d made a new mistake, clapped a hand to her mouth to try to set it right. The devil made that boiling noise again, let its eyes wander away. Had she room, she would have sagged with relief.

She looked out the little window by Yi Min. Through it she could see, frighteningly far below, the burning ruins of her village. Then the dragonfly plane spun in the air and flew off, taking her away from everything she had ever known.

The train had just rolled south past Dixon when everything went to hell. Sam Yeager read the last letter in his *Astounding*, set the magazine down on the seat beside him—Bobby Fiore had woken up and was back in the dining car. Yeager hoped he’d finish soon. He was getting sleepy himself, but how could he doze off when his roommate was going to step over him—or on him—any time now?

Stymied by a complete lack of facts, the Decatur Commodores had given up arguing about, what the light in the sky had been. Several of them were sleeping, some with caps or hats over their eyes to keep out the overhead lights. Yeager yawned, stretched, thought about doing the same thing. Maybe he’d be out by the time Bobby got back.

He’d just decided he would go to sleep when something roared past overhead, so loud it woke up everyone who had been resting. Yeager leaned over and jammed his face against the window, wondering if he’d see an airplane go down in flames. That roar sounded as if it had come from just above the train, and he’d never heard a healthy

engine sound anything like it

Sure enough, a moment later a tremendous bang came from in front of the train, and then another one, even louder. “Jesus,” Yeager said softly. On the other side of the aisle, Joe Sullivan crossed himself.

While Yeager’s head was still ringing from the explosions, the train hit the brakes for all they were worth. He slammed into the seat in front of him. Iron screamed as wheels clenched track. Sparks shot up high enough for him to see them through the window.

The brakes were not worth enough. The passenger car suddenly flipped onto its side. Yeager dropped like a stone, landed on top of Sullivan. The pitcher yelled. Yeager yelled, too, as his head hit what had been the far wall of the car and was now abruptly the floor. His teeth dug into his lip. The hot, metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. He ran his tongue around in there. Luckily, his dentures hadn’t broken.

Through the cries of his teammates and the other people in the car, he listened to the rest of the train derailing. The receding string of crashes and bumps made him think of an earthquake bought on the installment plan.

He tested each limb as he untangled himself from Joe Sullivan. “You all right, kid?” he asked.

“I don’t know. My shoulder—” Sullivan clutched the injured part. His eyes were wide with fear as well as pain—it was his throwing arm.

“I think maybe we’d better get out of here if we can. Come on.” In the darkness, Yeager walked back toward the rear of the car across what had been window frames. Sullivan didn’t follow. Yeager hardly noticed; he was stepping as carefully as he could. Some of the windows were broken, and he didn’t want to slice his leg on jagged glass.

“That you, Sam?” Mutt Daniels asked as he went by. It took more than a derailment to make him sound anything but slow and relaxed.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Yeager listened to the moans, and to one woman who kept letting out little screams every few seconds. “I think we got some hurt people here, Mutt.”

“Reckon you’re right,” the manager said. “How the hell we supposed to put a team together tomorrow when shit like this happens to us?”

“You’re a baseball man, Mutt,” Yeager said. The crash had driven all thoughts of tomorrow’s game out of his head. He decided not to tell Daniels about Joe Sullivan’s shoulder. Poor Mutt would find out soon enough.

The sliding door to the next car back had sprung off its track when the train went sideways. It gaped open. Yeager pulled himself up into the doorway. He sniffed the outside air, didn’t smell smoke. He didn’t see any fire, either. *One thing to be thankful for anyway*, he thought, especially when a man at the front of the car yelled, “Somebody here hurt his neck bad!”

“Don’t move him,” three people said at once.

Mutt Daniels scrambled up beside Yeager. The manager had a tougher time of it,

being both shorter and rounder than his ballplayer. He said, "Wonder what the hell we hit."

"If it was that plane, there'd be burning." Yeager cocked his head. That screaming roar was still in the sky, which meant the plane hadn't crashed after all. But in that case, where had the explosions come from?

The scream got louder, as if the crazy-sounding airplane was coming back. Just when it made Yeager want to scream, too, a new noise joined it, a deep, rapidly repeated bark. The derailed train shook under Yeager and Daniels as shells slammed into it. Glass tinkled. Screams redoubled.

"Holy Jesus God, it's the Gerps shootin' us up!" the manager shouted. He hadn't known whether to say Germans or Japs, and came out with both at once.

Through the railing of the little platform between cars, Yeager watched the airplane—whichever it was—flash past overhead. It went by so fast, it was just an unidentifiable streak in the sky. The roar of its engines beat at him, faded...then began to grow again.

"It's coming back," he said. With all the screaming and yelling up and down the length of the train, that should have come out as a bellow. Instead, it was hardly more than a whisper, as if the louder he said it, the more likely it was to be true.

He said it loud enough to convince Mutt Daniels. The manager paused to stick his head back into the passenger car and yell, "Y'all better git out while y'can!" Then he took his own advice and jumped off the train. His shoes scraped on the graveled roadbed, then clumped more quietly as he reached the soft dirt of the fields.

Yeager hesitated a moment more, but the rising shriek in the sky got him moving. He leapt down, landed heavily. For an instant, he thought he was going to take another fall on that ankle of his, but he managed to catch his balance and stay upright. Young corn plants beat against his legs as he ran between the rows. Their sweet, moist smell took him back to his boyhood.

Mutt Daniels tackled him, lay on top of him in the dirt. "What the hell you doin', Mutt?" he demanded indignantly.

"If he's comin' back for another pass, you don't want to give him no movin' target to shoot at," Daniels said. "Learned that in France back in nineteen an' eighteen. Hadn't thought about it in twenty-odd years, but the stink of blood and shit in that there car brought it right back up to the top o' my mind."

"Oh." So Yeager wasn't the only one who'd had an odor jog his memory. His dredged-up piece of past seemed happier than Mutt's, though.

The plane's gun cut loose just then, lashing the derailed train with another whip of fire. Yeager buried his face in the cool, damp earth. Beside him, Daniels did the same thing. The enemy airplane streaked away. This time, it did not sound as if it was coming back.

"Jesus," Mutt said, cautiously getting up on hands and knees. "Never thought I'd be under artillery fire again, though that's just a squirrel gun if you set it alongside what

the Germans threw at us.”

Yeager gaped at his manager. He hadn't imagined there could be anything worse than what he'd just been through. He tried to pull himself together. “We've got to get the people out of there, Mutt,” he said. His legs wobbled under him when he stood up. That made him angry; he'd never been shot at before, and didn't understand what reaction could do.

“Reckon you're right,” Daniels said. “Good Lord's own miracle the whole train's not on fire.” He looked at his hands. “Son of a bitch—I got the shakes. Ain't done that since nineteen an' eighteen, neither.”

Yeager looked at his hands, too. Now they were steady enough, but that wasn't what he noticed about them: though night had come, he could see them clearly. The train might not have been set afire, but the northern horizon was ablaze. Two big cement plants in Dixon were going up in flames, and most of the rest of the town seemed to be burning, too.

The red flickering light showed Yeager more people scrambling out of the derailed train, and others standing in the cornfield like him and Mutt. He looked down toward the locomotive, and saw at once why the train had overturned: the engine and the coal car behind it had tumbled into a bomb crater.

Mutt Daniels' head made that same slow, incredulous traverse from north to south. “Saw this so't of thing plenty of times in France. My grandpappy talked about what it was like in the States War. I never reckoned the U.S. of A. would get it like this, though.”

Yeager hadn't started thinking about the whole United States yet. The ruined train in front of him was disaster enough to fill his mind for the moment. He started toward it, repeating, “We got to help those people, Mutt.”

Daniels took a couple of steps with him, then grabbed him by the sleeve and held him back. “I hear more planes comin'. Mebbe we don't wanna get too close to a big target.”

Sure enough, a new drone was in the air, or rather several drones, like a swarm of deep-voice bees. They didn't sound like the screaming monster that had bombed the track and shot up the train. “Maybe they're ours,” Yeager said hopefully.

“Mebbe.” The drones got louder. Daniels went on, “Y'all can do what you want, Sam, but I ain't gonna get out in the open till I see the stars painted on their sides. You get shot at from the air once or twice, you plumb lose the taste for it.” The manager squatted, ducked under the corn.

Yeager walked a little closer to the train, more slowly with each stride. He still wanted to rescue the people there, but Daniels' caution made a solid kind of sense...and the closer those droning engines got, the less they sounded like the airplanes with which Yeager was familiar. He got down on his belly. If he was wrong to take cover, he'd cost himself and the injured people on the train a minute or two. But if he was right ...

He rolled onto his side so he could look up through the corn-stalks' bent green leaves.

By the sound, the approaching airplanes were hardly moving: in fact, by the sound they weren't moving at all, just hanging in midair. *But that's impossible*, Yeager thought. Then he saw one of the aircraft, lit up against the night by Dixon's burning cement factories.

The briefest glimpse told him it was no American plane. It hardly looked like a plane at all—more like a flying polliwog. Then Yeager noticed the spinning disk above it. His mind seized on the hovering gyros in Heinlein's "If This Goes On—" But what were those flying marvels from a story set far in the future doing in here-and-now Illinois?

He found the answer a moment later, when they opened fire. The noise of the automatic guns sounded like a giant ripping endless sheets of canvas. He didn't stick his head up to find out what had happened to the people standing in the cornfield. He just thanked his lucky stars—and Mutt Daniels—that he hadn't been one of them.

Staying as low as he could, he crawled backward through the plants. He hoped their waving above him as he moved wouldn't give him away. If it did, he hoped the end would be quick and clean.

He kept backing up, wondering all the while when he'd bump into. Mutt. Surely he'd retreated past where the manager had ducked down. "Idiot," he muttered under his breath. If Mutt had an ounce of sense—and Mutt had a lot more than an ounce—he was getting away from the derailed train, too.

A couple of the gyros settled to earth, one on either side of the train. The one that landed on the eastern side happened to be directly in front of Yeager. His curiosity wrestled down his own good sense, and he stuck out his head far enough to peer out between the rows of corn: he had to know who was attacking the United States. Germans or Japanese, they'd regret it.

His vision path was so narrow that he needed most of a minute to get his first glimpse of an invader. When he did, he thought the soldier had to be a Jap—he was too little to be a German. Then Yeager got a better look at the way the figure by the train moved, the shape of its head

He turned around and crawled through the corn as fast as he could go. He wanted to get up and run, but that would have drawn the invaders' attention for certain. He didn't dare do that, not now.

He almost crawled right over Mutt Daniels, who was still retreating slowly and carefully, head toward the front. "Watch it, boy," Daniels hissed. "You want to get the both of us killed?"

"I saw them, Mutt." Yeager needed all the willpower he possessed to keep his voice low—to keep from screaming, as a matter of fact. He made himself take a deep breath, let it out slowly. Then he continued, "I saw who got down from those hover-planes of theirs."

"Well, who?" the manager demanded when Yeager went no further. "Was it the Boches"—he pronounced it *Boash*—"or the goddamn Japs?"

"Neither one," Yeager said.

“Got to be one or the other,” Daniels said. Then he let out a wheezy laugh. “You ain’t gonna tell me it’s the Eyetalians, are you?”

Yeager shook his head. He wished he hadn’t left *his*, *Astounding* on the train. “Remember that Orson Welles Halloween radio show three, four years ago, the one about Martians that scared the country half out of its shoes?”

“Sure, I remember. Didn’t hear it myself, mind, but I sure heard about it later. But what’s that got to do with—” Daniels broke off, stared. “You expect me to believe—?”

“Mutt, I swear to God it’s true. The Martians have landed, for real this time.”

One second, Bobby Fiore was spooning up thin vegetable soup in the dining car of the train. He’d already spent some time thinking disparaging thoughts about it. All right, there was a war on, so you really couldn’t expect much in the way of meat or chicken. But vegetable soup didn’t have to be dishwater and limp celery. Give his mother some zucchini, carrots, maybe a potato or two, and just a few spices—mind you, just a few—and, she’d make you a soup worth, eating, now. The cook here was cheap or lazy or both.

The next second, everything went to pieces. Fiore heard the same roaring wail in the sky Yeager had, the same twin blasts. Then the train slammed on the brakes, and then it went off the track. Fiore flew through the air. The side of his head fetched up against the side of a table. A silver light flared behind his eyes before everything spiraled down into darkness.

When he woke up, he thought he’d died and gone to hell. He felt like it; his head pounded like a drum in a swing band, and his vision was blurry and distorted. Blurry or no, the face he saw looked more like a devil than anything else, he could think of. It sure (*as hell* whispered through his mind) didn’t belong to any human being he’d ever set eyes on.

The thing had sharper teeth, and more of them, than a person had any business having, and a forked tongue like a snake’s to go with them. It also had eyes that reminded him of those he’d seen on a chameleon in the Pittsburgh zoo when he was a kid: each in its own little conical mounting, with one quite capable of looking north while the other looked south.

Remembering the chameleon was the first thing that made Fiore wonder if he truly had ended up in Satan’s country. The devil—or even *a* devil—should have looked more supernatural and less like a lizard, even an African lizard.

Then he noticed he was still in the flipped dining car, for that matter, he had a butter knife lying on his stomach and a sesame seed roll by one shoe. He was certain hell had to have worse pangs than a dining car, no matter how bad the soup in this one was. *Had been*, he corrected himself.

The—well, if it wasn’t a *devil*, it had to be a *thing*—the thing, then, pointed what looked like a gun at the butter knife near Fiore’s belly button. If he wasn’t in hell at the

moment, he realized, he could get there in a hurry. He smiled the smile a dog smiles after it's lost a fight. "You want to be careful with that," he said, and hoped he was right.

The thing hissed something in reply. Fourteen years of playing ball all over the United States and with and against players with parents from all over Europe and Latin America left Fiore able to recognize a double handful of languages, and swear in several of them. This wasn't any he knew, or anything close.

The thing spoke again, and jerked the barrel of the gun. That Fiore understood. He staggered to his feet, wondering as he did so whether his abused head would fall off. The thing made no effort to help him while he swayed. Indeed, it skittered back to make sure he couldn't reach it.

"If you think I'm bluffing, you're outta your mind," he said. It ignored him. Considering that it came up only to the middle of his chest (and he needed shoes to make the five-eight he always claimed), maybe it had reason to be nervous of him, although he doubted he could have squashed a slug if you gave it a running start.

At another motion of the gun barrel, he started walking forward. After three or four steps, he came to the body of the colored steward. The fellow had a hole in the back of his white mess jacket big enough to throw a cat through. Pieces of him poked through the hole. Fiore's stomach did a flipflop. The gun at his back concentrated his mind remarkably, however. Gulping, he walked on.

Only a few people had been in the dining car when it derailed. So far as Fiore could tell, he was the only person left alive (he did not count his captor as qualifying). The side of the car—actually, it served as the roof just now—was pierced in a dozen places by bullet holes that let in the warm night air. Fiore shivered. Only dumb luck had kept him from stopping a round, or more than one, while he lay unconscious.

The thing made him scramble out of the dining car. More creatures just like it waited outside. For no good reason, that startled the ballplayer—he hadn't imagined there could be more than one of them.

He saw he wasn't the only person being hustled toward some peculiar gadgets that sat on the ground by the train. Not until another of them thundered past overhead did he realize they were flying machines. They didn't look like any flying machines he'd seen before.

One of the captured people tried to run. Fiore had also been thinking about that. He was glad he'd only thought about it when the things—he still didn't know what else to call them—shot the fleeing man in the back. Just as their flying machines didn't look like airplanes, their guns didn't sound like rifles. They sounded like machine guns; he'd heard machine guns once or twice, at fairs after the first World War.

Running away from somebody—or even something—carrying a machine gun wasn't smart. So Fiore let himself be herded onto the flying machine and into a too-small seat. A good many of the scaly things joined him, but no people. The machine took off. His



stomach gave a lurch different from the one he'd felt when he stepped over the dead steward. He'd never been off the ground before.

The things chattered among themselves as they flew through the night. Fiore had no idea which way they were going. He kept sneaking glances at his watch. After about two hours, the darkness outside, the little window turned light, not with daytime but with spots like the ones at a ballpark.

These spots didn't show bleachers, though. They showed—Fiore gaped for the right word. Spaceships? Rockets? They had to be something like that. *Sam Yeager would know for sure*, he thought, and suddenly felt ashamed at teasing his friend over that stupid science-fiction magazine...which turned out not to have been so stupid after all.

Then he wondered if Yeager was still alive, if he was, he'd have found out about the Martians, too.

The *Kukuruznik*'s engine complained about the thin air it was breathing; at four thousand meters, it was way over its proper cruising altitude—up near its ceiling, as a matter of fact. Ludmila Gorbunova's lungs complained, too. The little biplane was not equipped with oxygen, and even sitting in the cockpit made her feel as if she'd just finished a twenty-kilometer run.

She would have gone higher if she could, though. At such a height, the U-2 was hardly more than a speck in the sky—but the Lizards were proving even more skilled than the fascists at spotting such specks and knocking them down.

Ludmila did not even try to fly directly over the new invaders' base. Planes that did that quite simply never came back. The base, a giant ringworm on the smooth skin of the steppe, was visible enough even at the greater distance an oblique view gave.

She counted the huge flying towers that formed the perimeter of the base, shook her head, counted them again. She still got twenty-seven. That was four more than she'd spotted on her last flight, the day before yesterday. From four thousand meters, most things on the ground looked tiny as ants. The towers, though, still bulked large, their shadows darkening great strips of grassland.

They were large, too; from them poured the impossibly deadly planes and tanks that were wresting great tracts of land not only from the Russians who owned it but from the Germans as well. Ludmila still did not know how to feel about that. She hated the Germans with all her soul, but against them one could contend with hope of victory. How could mere men fight the Lizards and their marvels?

Mere men kept trying. Even now, if the radio was to be believed, Soviet tank columns were engaging the Lizards' armor and pushing it back in disarray. Ludmila wondered if anyone believed the radio any more. The year before, the radio had said the Germans were being pushed back from Minsk, then from Kiev, then from Smolensk ...

Such thoughts were dangerous. Ludmila knew that, too. The purges of the thirties had swept through Kiev as they had everywhere else in the Soviet Union. One day a teacher would be there, the next day vanished. You learned not to ask where he'd gone, not unless you wanted to join him there.

Ludmila shook her head, as if to drive the worries out of it. She peered down at the ground again, squinted to sharpen her vision as much as she could. That plume of dust there in the distance—she squinted harder. "Yes, those are tanks down at the bottom of it, may the Devil's grandmother run away with them," she said

The *Kukuruznik* had had a radio fitted when Ludmila went from night harassment to reconnaissance. She did not use it. Aircraft that used radio around the Lizards generally

did not last long afterward; her information, while she thought it important, didn't seem worth dying for.

She banked away from the Lizards' base. She wondered if her own base would still be there when she landed. The new invaders, like the old, pounded every airstrip they could find. But the so-called strip had been only a length of smooth steppe, and she could find another such strip at need. The U-2 didn't need much room in which to set down.

Even when she got to the airstrip, she had to circle twice to be sure it was there. Camouflage nettings and sod roofs disguised the few buildings. A couple of kilometers away stood a strip camouflaged not quite so well. The Lizards had already bombed it twice. That was all right, or better than all right. The planes there were dummies, the buildings repaired every night but uninhabited.

Her teeth clicked together as the Wheatcutter bounced to a halt. Ludmila scrambled down to the ground while the prop was still spinning. The instant it stopped, groundcrew men threw grass-covered nets over the biplane and hauled it away to hide under still more nets which concealed earthen blast barriers.

Ludmila pulled up a corner of, the command shack's camouflage net, hurried through the doorless entrance, let the net fall behind her. With netting over all the windows, the interior of the shack was gloomy. "I return, Comrade Major," she announced.

"So you do, Comrade Pilot," Major Yelena Popova said, returning her salute. "You are most skilled, or most fortunate, or both." In the space of a sentence, she went from mild greeting to pure business: "Tell me at once what you saw."

Ludmila obeyed. Major Popova scowled when she mentioned the four new flying towers on the ground. "These—creatures—swarm onto the soil of the *rodina*—the motherland—like locusts."

"Yes, Comrade Major, and they consume all before them like locusts, too." Ludmila described the column of tanks she'd observed.

The squadron commander's frown, never pleasant, grew downright fearsome. "This is vital information. Those above us must learn of it at once. I shall use the radio. Repeat your statement to me, that I may be sure to report it accurately."

As Ludmila obeyed, Major Popova wrote down what she said, then repeated it back. When Ludmila nodded to show it was right, the major went over to the radio. It and its battery were stowed in a wheelbarrow and covered with hay. Yelena took the wheelbarrow out through the door, started in the direction of the dummy airstrip. To anyone—say, a Lizard—in a plane, she looked like a peasant shambling along.

Ludmila watched her slow progress across the plain. Then the tiny shape that was she disappeared into one of the Potemkin sheds. She emerged a bare minute later, moving much faster than she had on the way over.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a rocket slammed into the empty shed. Flames leapt up from it. The deception team would have, a lot of work to do tonight, Ludmila thought.

After the rocket hit, Major Popova slowed down again. Ludmila did not blame her. Weighted down by radio and battery, the wheelbarrow was heavy.

“The Lizards are *very* good at picking up radio signals,” the major said as she arrived at the real airstrip. She wiped her forehead. Her sleeve came away dark with sweat. But her eyes, narrow and black like a Tatar’s, gleamed in triumph.

Even though the breeze was chilly against his muzzle, landcruiser driver Ussmak preferred moving along unbuttoned when he could. The periscopes didn’t give him nearly the view he enjoyed with his head out. Besides, being cooped up in the driver’s compartment reminded him too much of the cold-sleep coffin in which he’d hibernated away the years between Home and Tosev 3.

He had an audio button taped to one hearing diaphragm. “Better get down, Ussmak,” said Votal, the landcruiser commander. “Airstouts report Big Ugly landcruisers ahead.”

“It shall be done,” Ussmak said, and slid back down into his compartment. Even as he dogged the hatch over his head, he wondered why he was bothering. The Big Ugliers, especially this set that used a red star as its emblem, had lots of landcruisers, but they weren’t very good ones or used very well. But his commander had given the order, so he obeyed. That had been ingrained in him since his hatching day

Gunner Telerep said, “What do you want to bet we don’t even get in on the fun? Our air will probably take them out before they’re in range for us.”

“We may have some work,” Votal said. “The farther away from base we move the thinner our air cover gets. And—” His voice rose to a sudden shout. “Big Ugly airplane!” In his audio button Ussmak heard the commander dive down in the landcruiser’s turret. A roar overhead a couple of shells bouncing off metal and ceramic armor and the natives’ craft sped away its belly almost scraping the grass.

Two landcruisers in the formation fired missiles after it. However fast it was, they were faster. It tumbled to the ground; dust flew from the brown track it plowed through the green. *Brave*, Ussmak thought, *brave but stupid*. The Tosevites seemed like that.

“Tosevite landcruisers!” Telerep said. “Looks like you were right, commander.”

“I see them,” Votal answered. Ussmak still didn’t, being down low in the hull rather than up in the turret. That didn’t matter. Votal told him what to do: “Steer 22, Ussmak.”

Ussmak started turning from north to west. Yes, there they were. Being big and clumsy themselves, the Tosevites built big and clumsy, though these landcruisers didn’t have a bad ballistic shape compared to some others the crews had been briefed about. At least their turret armor sloped...not that that would help them now.

“Gunner!” Votal said loudly. He’d picked a target, then, one from among the several that sought to bar his path. A moment later, he added, “Sabot!”

“Sabot!” Telerep repeated. The automatic loader cranked a round into the breech of the cannon. Ussmak heard it not only in his audio button but also through his whole

body—clang-clang! Another metallic noise announced that the breech had closed. Telerep said, “Up and ready.”

“Landcruiser—front!” That meant Votal had the target Tosevite in his sights.

“Identified.” Telerep saw it, too. Over Ussmak’s head, the gun tube swung slightly as it moved toward the enemy’s center of mass.

“Fire!”

Through his periscopes, Ussmak saw flame leap from the muzzle of the gun. Armor shielded him from the roar of the report. Recoil made the landcruiser seem to hesitate for an instant. The aluminum sabots fell away from the tungsten penetrator arrow. Ussmak did not see that, of course. A heartbeat later, he did see the turret leap off a Tosevite landcruiser. “Hit!” he yelled, along with Votal and Telerep.

Another Tosevite was killed, this one in a pyrotechnic display of exploding ammunition. The Big Ugliers lost whatever formation they were trying to keep. Some of them stopped, as they had to if they hoped to fire accurately. *Their eggs are broken now*, Ussmak thought with cold glee. They were easy enough to kill on the move. Stopped...“Landcruiser—front!” Votal said.

“Identified,” Telerep answered.

As the automatic loader clattered into action, a Tosevite landcruiser spat fire. Ussmak’s jaw opened in a laugh. *Another one down*, he thought, and wondered which of the other landcruisers in his unit had scored the kill. *Then—wham!* Something smote the glacis plate like a kick in the teeth.

“Ussmak!” Votal said. “You all right?”

“Y-yes,” the driver answered, still more than a little shaken. “Didn’t penetrate, the Emperor be praised.” *Or I’d be splashed all over the inside of the compartment*, he added to himself. The Big Ugliers were doing their best to fight back. Their best, fortunately for Ussmak, was not good enough.

He must have been too stunned to listen to the whole command sequence, for the big gun fired then. He had the satisfaction of watching the landcruiser that had almost killed him start to burn. He wondered if any of the crew got out. In a way, they were guildmates of his, and so deserving of respect. On the other hand, they were only Big Ugliers, and knew not the Emperor’s name.

When most of the Tosevite landcruisers were dead, some of the survivors turned tailstump and started to run. Ussmak laughed again. They couldn’t outrun cannon shells.

A funny noise in his audio button, sort of a wet splat. Then a cry of disbelief and rage from Telerep: “Votal! Vo—They’ve killed the commander!”

Ussmak’s belly went strange and empty, as if he’d suddenly been dropped into free-fall. “How could they?” he demanded of the gunner. “We’re slaughtering their landcruisers. They’re hardly fighting back any more.”

“Sniper, or I miss my guess,” Telerep said. “They can’t meet us in honest battle, so they lie in wait instead.”

“We’ll make them pay,” Ussmak said fiercely. “The past Emperors have learned Votal’s name. He is with them now.”

“Of course he is,” the gunner answered. “Now shut up and drive will you? I’m going to conn this landcruiser and run the gun, too, so I’m too busy to chatter. I’m going to be busier than a one-handed male with the underscale itch, as a matter of fact.”

Ussmak drove. When he’d stepped into the starship and slung his gear down beside his cold sleep coffin he’d expected the Race to overrun Tosev 3 without losing a male. It wasn’t turning out to be so simple, not with the Big Ugliers knowing more than anyone had suspected they did. But they didn’t know enough. The Race could still drive them as easily as Ussmak drove his landcruiser.

*Apinng* off the turret—“Steer 25, Ussmak!” Telerep shouted. “I saw the flash!”

The driver obediently turned due west. Another *pinng*, this one off the glacis plate. After taking a hit from a landcruiser cannon, Ussmak ignored the tiny nuisance. He tramped down hard on the accelerator. This time, he’d spotted the muzzle flash, too. He drove straight toward it. The Big Ugly fired again, uselessly, then turned and tried to run.

Telerep cut him down with machine-gun fire. Ussmak ran over the carcass, smashing it into the grass and dirt. His jaws opened wide. Votal was avenged. The landcruiser formation rolled on across the steppe.

Even the smallest noise or flicker of motion in the sky drew Heinrich Jäger’s complete and concerned—he was too stubborn to admit to a word like *fearful*—attention. This time, it was just a linnet flitting past, chirping as it went. This time.

He had three tanks left, three tanks and a combat group of infantry. “Combat group” was the *Wehrmacht* way of describing odds and ends of military meat pressed together in the hope of turning out a sausage. Sometimes it even worked—but when it did, the sausage went right back into the meat grinder again.

Another motion across the sky turned out to be another bird. Jäger shook his head. He could feel how jumpy he was getting. But the Lizards’ aircraft didn’t have to be right overhead to kill. The company had learned that, too, to its sorrow.

He managed something halfway between a laugh and a cough, leaned down into the turret. “I wonder if the Ivans felt this naked after we smashed so many of their planes on the ground last year,” he said.

“If they did, they hid it damned well,” his gunner answered. Georg Schultz wore the ribbon for a wound badge, too.

“So do we—I hope,” Jäger said.

A squad of infantry was posted on a swell of ground a few hundred meters in front of

the tanks. One of the foot soldiers turned and waved urgently. The signal meant only one thing—Lizard panzers, heading across the steppe. Jäger's testicles tried to crawl up into his belly. Schultz looked up at him. The gunner was dirty and unshaven. "We must try," he said. "For the Fatherland."

"For the Fatherland," Jäger echoed. Given that the alternative was bailing out of his tank and trying to foot it across the Ukraine through Lizards and partisans both, fighting for the Fatherland looked like the best bet he had. He leaned down into the turret, called to Dieter Schmidt: "To the prepared position."

The Panzer III slowly rumbled forward. So did the other two survivors of the tank company. In slots dug into the reverse slope of the rise, they exposed only the tops of their turrets to the enemy. Jäger stood up in the cupola, peered ahead with field glasses. He took even fewer chances than he had against the Russians. Shrubs tied to his leather headgear broke up his outline; he used his free hand to shield the binoculars so no sun reflected off their lenses.

Sure enough, there were the Lizards, eight or ten tanks' worth, with more vehicles scurrying along behind to support them. Jäger recognized the ones with small turrets as troop carriers, on the order of the German SdKfz 251 but far more dangerous—they could fight his panzers on largely even terms. And the Lizards' tanks ...

"You know what's the funny thing, Georg?" he said as he lowered himself once more.

"Tell me anything funny about the Lizards, *Herr* Major," the gunner grunted. "I will laugh I promise you." -

"They're lousy tankers," Jäger said. He was a lousy tankman himself, but only in the literal sense of the word. No one who was lousy in the metaphorical sense could have lasted almost a year on the eastern front.

Sure enough, Schultz laughed. "They've been good enough to kick our ass."

"It's the panzers, not the crews," Jäger insisted. "They have better guns than ours, better armor, and God only knows how they make engines that don't smoke. But tactics—*pfui?*" He curled his lip in disdain. "The Russians have better sense. They just motor along shooting at anything that happens to cross their path. They aren't even looking this way, though it's an obvious place for trouble. Stupid!"

"No doubt a run through the *Panzer Lehr* training division would improve their skill, *Herr* Major," Schultz said dryly. "But if the tanks themselves are good enough, how good do the tankers have to be?"

Jäger grunted. It was a cogent question. In Panzer IIIs, little *Pimpfs* from the Hitler Youth, boys too young to shave, could have taken out whole divisions of British tanks from the Great War: the rhomboidal monsters were too slow to run and too lightly armed to fight. He'd thought the Panzer III a great tank until he ran up against his first Russian T-34, and a good tank even afterward. Now—now he might as well have been in one of those obsolete rhomboids himself.

"We do what we can, Georg," he said. The gunner nodded.

Jäger stuck his head out of the cupola again. The Lizards were trundling happily past his strongpoint, no more than five hundred meters away, without the slightest idea he was there. He glanced over to Ernst Riecke and Uwe Tannenwald, his other surviving tank commanders, and held up one finger. Both men waved to show they understood. Hanging around for more than one shot against the Lizards was an invitation to a funeral.

The company commander pointed to one of the troop carriers. “That one, Georg,” he said quietly.

“*Ja*,” the gunner said. He spoke to the loader. “Armor-piercing.”

“Armor-piercing,” Stefan Fuchs echoed. He pulled the black-tipped round out of the ammunition rack, loaded it into the five-centimeter gun, closed the breech.

The gunner traversed the turret a few degrees so it bore on the troop carrier. He took his eyes away from the gunsight for an instant to make sure Fuchs was clear of the recoil, then looked back and squeezed the trigger at almost the same time.

The cannon roared. Through his field glasses, Jäger saw a hole appear in the troop carrier’s flank. “Hit!” he shrieked. The carrier slewed sideways, stopped. It was burning. A hatch came down in the rear. Lizards started bailing out. German foot soldiers opened up on them, picking them off as they emerged.

“Back!” Jäger shouted. If he waited around to see how the foot soldiers did, one of those Lizard panzers would blow him to bits. Already, with terrifying speed, their turrets were traversing to bear on his position. Dieter Schmidt jammed the tank into reverse. It jounced down the low slope. So did Sergeant Tannenwald’s. Ernst Riecke was a split second too slow. Jäger watched in dismay as the turret flew off his panzer and crushed an infantryman who was scrambling to get out of the way.

*Later*, Jäger told himself, *I’ll grieve*. That assumed there would be a *later* for him. At the moment, the assumption looked bad. One of the things he’d learned fighting the Russians was to have more than one firing position available whenever he could. His second one was at the base of the rise.

“Maybe we’ll give ’em a surprise, Major,” Schultz said. He and Fuchs already had another AP round loaded and ready. The gun bore on the place where the Lizard panzers were likeliest to breast the rise.

A couple of foot soldiers dashed forward with satchel charges. That meant the tanks were close, then. Machine guns chattered furiously. An explosion sent up smoke and dirt, then another. Jäger hoped the brave men hadn’t thrown away their lives for nothing.

Then he had no time for hope or fear, for a Lizard panzer nosed over the horizon right where he’d thought it would—the Lizards really were lousy tankmen. The Panzer III’s cannon roared as he drew in breath to yell, “Fire!”

Schultz was an artist with the long gun. He put the AP round right in the middle of the tiny bit of belly plate the enemy tank exposed as it came over the rise. The glacis plate



laughed at even high-velocity five-centimeter shells. The belly plate, as on merely human panzers, was thinner. The shell pierced it. The tank stopped. *They'll have to take the driver out of there with a spoon*, Jäger thought.

Two Lizards popped out of the turret, one after the other. The hull machine gun from Jäger's tank cut them down.

Tannenwald's tank had done almost as well as the company commander's. Its first shot knocked the track off a Lizard panzer's road wheels. The hit tank swerved, out of control. A foot soldier ran up to it, tossed a potato-masher grenade into the open cupola. Its small blast was followed an instant later by a big one as the panzer's ammunition went off.

"Back again!" Jäger told Schmidt. Already they'd hurt the Lizards worse in this engagement than ever before. That was important, but it would matter only so much if he wound up dead...as he probably would as soon as a Lizard panzer made it onto the reverse slope of that little rise.

A scream in the sky—Death would come even without the Lizards' tanks, then. Their aircraft were just as deadly. Jäger resigned himself. Bombs burst all around—the other side of the rise, the side the Lizards were still climbing.

"Stuka!" Georg Schultz screamed in the voice of a man who knows himself reprieved.

"By God, it is," Jäger said. He, by contrast, spoke softly, for he could scarcely believe he might yet live a while longer. The Lizards had taken as dreadful a toll on the *Luftwaffe* as on the *Wehrmacht*. But this pilot, somehow, had still got his dive-bomber into the air and still had the nerve to fly it straight down the Lizards' throats.

More bombs went off in quick succession—he'd loosed the whole stick. Only a direct hit would take out a panzer, but even experienced tankers had to hesitate before advancing through that sudden storm of explosives.

The Stuka pilot couldn't have been more than a hundred meters off the ground when he pulled out of his dive. Two of the Lizard panzers fired their guided rockets at him but the missiles shot harmlessly past his plane. He skimmed away, his landing gear just above the waving grass of the steppe.

"Get us out of here," Jäger told Dieter Schmidt. The Panzer III's engine roared as the driver obeyed. Jäger felt an itch between his shoulder blades. He knew that was stupid. If one of the Lizards' shells got him, he'd be dead too fast to know it.

He looked back toward the rise. If his tank could make it over the next one before the Lizards climbed this one and spotted him, he really did have a chance to get away. He wouldn't have believed it when the engagement started, but it was true. He felt a surge of pride. His troops had hurt the Lizards, and not many units could boast of that. *Gott mit uns*, he thought, *we might even do it again*.

Two Lizard panzers came over the rise. His own tank was only halfway up the next slope. A turret swung his way. His eyes went up to the sky, seeking, praying for, another Stuka. But God lives in only so many machines. The Lizards didn't even need to

slow down to fire.

Less than a heartbeat after the big cannon spat smoke and flame, Jäger felt the mother of all kicks in the arse. His trusty panzer, which had served so well for so long, died under him. Smoke poured up through the engine vents of the rear deck.

“Out, out, out!” he screamed. He had almost been thrown out, on his head. Only two armored walls and the full weight of the engine had kept the enemy shell out of the fighting compartment. Once the fire got going, nothing would hold, that at bay.

Machine-gun bullets stitched the air around him as he pulled himself out of the cupola and dove into the tall grass. Other hatches came open. His crew began bailing out with him. A bullet struck home with a noise like a slap on a bare, wet back. Somebody shrieked.

The clean green smell of the weeds through which Jäger scrambled filled his nostrils. He had two somewhat contradictory goals. He wanted to put the hulk of the killed tank between himself and the oncoming Lizards, but he also wanted to get as far away from that hulk—and from the Lizards—as he could. The ammunition in the Panzer III was going to start cooking off any minute now, maybe any second, and the Lizards were not likely to be well-disposed toward German tankmen, especially a crew that had managed to destroy one of their fancy machines.

Another shell slammed into the Panzer III. It went up with a roar. *Stupid*, Jäger thought, *stupid and wasteful*. That tank was already dead meat. Meanwhile, though, machine-gun bullets probed the grass. They made tiny, whispering *tic-tic-tic* sounds as they clipped the leaves. Jäger wondered what kind of sounds he would make if they clipped him.

The Lizards’ tank rolled majestically past, fewer than fifty meters off. Jäger lay facedown and unmoving. If the enemy saw him, maybe they’d think he was already dead. Not only was it faster than both his Panzer III and a T-34, it was ghost-quiet to boot.

Somewhere a few hundred meters away, an MG-34 began to bark. Bullets ricocheted off the armor of the Lizard panzer. Its machine gun returned fire. The panzer itself turned toward the German machine-gun position.

As he crawled in the opposite direction, Jäger almost bumped into Georg Schultz. After an instant of fright, the two men grinned at each other. “Good to see you, sir,” the gunner said, grin broad and white in his dirty face.

“And you,” Jäger answered. “Have you seen Fuchs?” Schltz’s grin slipped. “He didn’t make it out.”

“That was the shriek, then,” Jäger said. The gunner nodded. Jäger went on, “What about the two up front?”

“Don’t know.”

They found Dieter Schmidt a few minutes later. Klaus Bauer, the hull gunner, remained missing. “We both got out,” Schmidt insisted. “I don’t know what happened to

him afterward.” He didn’t say *nothing good*, but the words hung in the air.

“Lucky we didn’t blow up when we were hit,” Jäger said.

Schmidt surprised him by laughing. “Luck, hell, sir. We were just about dry of petrol, that’s all. We had maybe enough for an-other kilometer or two, no more.”

“Oh,” Jäger said. He started to laugh himself, though it wasn’t really funny. Here he’d just fought what had to be one of the most successful small-unit actions ever against the Lizards, and to what result? Only the final destruction of his tank company. How many actions like that could the *Wehrmacht* take before there wasn’t any *Wehrmacht* any more?

For that matter, even this action wasn’t over yet. Lizard infantry had been moving up along with their armor. Jäger had a pistol in his holster that he hadn’t fired in months. Schultz and Schmidt were both clutching their personal Schmeissers. Submachine guns were better than nothing, but they didn’t have the range to make proper infantry weapons.

“What now, sir?” Schultz asked.

“Now we get out of the sack,” Jäger said. “If we can.”

Moishe Russie held up the Bible, read from the Book of Joshua in a loud voice: “And it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city.”

The crowd of Jews behind him cheered. At his side, his wife, Rivka, beamed at him, her sweet brown eyes enormous in her thin face. Their son, Reuven, was even thinner, his eyes, so like his mother’s, even bigger. A starving child could not help rousing horror and pity in any adult who saw him—save perhaps in the Warsaw ghetto, where the sight had grown so common that even horror and pity failed at last.

“What now, *Reb* Moishe?” someone called.

“I’m no *reb*,” he said, looking modestly down at the ground.

“No *reb*?” several people exclaimed together in tones of disbelief. One added, “Who but you asked the Lord for a sign and was answered?” That tale had run through the ghetto almost be-fore the miraculous light in the sky faded. Every tale with hope in it spread even faster than typhus. With only hope to live on, the Jews made of it a banquet.

Someone else, a woman, said, “He’s no *reb*; he’s a prophet. Like Joshua whose Book he reads, he made the walls fall down.”

The Jews cheered again. Russie felt his ears grow hot. *He* hadn’t made the ghetto walls fall down, and he knew it. But the bombs that screamed out of the sky and smashed brick to powder seemed to have come from the same—people? monsters?—who’d touched off the light in the sky he’d taken for a signal from On High.

The only accounts of them in the ghetto came from garbled shortwave reports. By the rumors he'd heard, Russie knew the Lizards (a name he wondered about) were bombing fortifications all over the world. Nowhere, though, had their explosives done more than in Warsaw.

He wondered whether the Lizards thought the Nazis had an enemy under siege in the heart of the city (if so, they'd been right, though perhaps not in the way they'd believed). Whatever their reasons, they'd attacked the wall less than a week after they revealed their presence.

Russie remembered the German bombers dropping their endless loads of death almost randomly over Warsaw (although they had paid special attention to the Jewish districts). The Lizards' raid was different. Even though they'd come at night, their bombs hit the wall and only the wall, almost as if they were aimed not by men—or even Lizards—but by the hand of the Almighty.

Rivka smiled at him. “Remember how we shivered under our blankets when the explosions started going off?”

“I'm not likely to forget,” Russie answered. Since Warsaw surrendered, the ghetto hadn't known the sounds of real warfare. The dreaded *crummp* of bombs reminded everyone who had managed to endure since 1939 that more straightforward means of death than starvation, disease, and beatings were loose in the world. Russie went on, “And then, when the curfew lifted...Oh, when the curfew lifted!”

Bombs or no bombs, if he didn't get to his sewing machine, he'd lose his job. He knew it, and sallied forth at the usual time. The streets had seemed to fill with amazing speed that morning. People moved along at their usual pace; no one who had work would risk losing it, and no one without would throw away a chance to find some. But somehow everyone managed to stop for a few seconds and gape at one—or more than one—of the holes torn in the wall that sundered the ghetto from the rest of Warsaw.

Russie stood in front of one of those holes now, a three-meter stretch where there was no wall. As he stepped into the bomb crater, the soles of his feet felt every sharp brick fragment through the rags that wrapped them. He did not care. Still holding the Holy Scriptures before him, he walked through the shallow crater and out of the ghetto.

Turning, he said, “Jericho's walls could not hold the Hebrews out, nor can Warsaw's hold us in. The Lord has set us free!”

The crowd of Jews cheered once more. He drank in the shouts of “*Reb Moishe! Reb Moishe!*” The more he heard them, the better they sounded in his ears. God *had* given, him the sign, after all.

Someone in the crowd, though, called, “The Lord may have set us free, but has He bothered to tell the Nazis?”

The word itself was enough to make people look this way and that in alarm, Russie among them. Even without walls, the Germans could have kept the ghetto sealed by posting machine guns in the streets around it. They hadn't done so, which seemed to

Russie another sign of divine intervention.

He took a short, fearful breath. As if thinking of German was enough to conjure them up, here came two. The crowd behind him started to melt away. “Moishe, get back here!” his wife said urgently.

Too late. One of the Germans, an officer by his peaked cap, pointed to Russie. “You, Jew, come here,” he said in peremptory tones. His companion, an enlisted man, had a rifle. If Russie ran, the fellow might shoot, and wasn’t likely to care whether he hit the man he was aiming for or some other fleeing Jew.

Russie took off his hat to the officer—an army man, he saw with relief, not a member of the SS. Some army men were decent. Still, omitting the gesture of respect the Nazis demanded was too dangerous to risk. If he’d been on the sidewalk, he would have stepped down into the street. As it was, he bent his head and said, “Yessir. How can I help you, sir?” in the pure German he’d learned in medical school: he also did not care to risk angering the man by making him try to follow Yiddish or Polish.

“What do you make of—this?” The officer—he was a major, Russie saw by his shoulder straps, which were embroidered but bore no pips—waved at the wreckage of the wall that had surrounded the ghetto.

Russie stayed silent for some time, considering the tone of the question. Germans were like any other folk in that some wanted to hear only that which agreed with what they already thought, while others asked in hope of learning something they did not yet know—and in that, the former type outnumbered the latter by a goodly margin. Safest to say nothing, and say it in a pleasing way.

Safest, yes, but he found all at once that he could not stomach simple safety, not any more, not with a German for once asking a question of a Jew and sounding as if the answer mattered to him. Russie held out the Bible he was carrying. “I take—this—to mean that God has not forgotten us after all.”

Under the outthrust rim of his steel helmet, the enlisted man’s gingercolored eyebrows drew together in anger. The major, however, nodded slowly and thoughtfully. “You may be right. In truth, you would require the aid of God to escape from our hands.”

“That I know.” Russie did not bother to hide his bitterness. With the whole world turned topsy-turvy, somehow it did not seem wrong for the prisoner to speak his mind to his gaoler.

The German major nodded again, as if thinking along the same lines. He said, “Do you know, Jew, the Lizards who bombed these walls are not even human beings, but creatures from some other world?”

Russie shrugged. “How could it matter to us, trapped back in there?” He half-turned and pointed with his chin into the ghetto. “And why should it matter to you Germans, either? You named us *Untermenschen*—subhumans. What difference between subhumans and creatures from some other world?” He repeated the major’s phrase without any real feeling for what it might imply.

“What difference? I’ll tell you what. By all accounts, the Lizards are ugly enough to be *Untermenschen*, but they fight like *Ubermenschen*, like supermen.”

“So do the Russians, by all accounts,” Russie said. Just standing on the far side of the ghetto wall was making him reckless.

He got away with it, too. The German enlisted man’s scowl got deeper, but the major accepted the gibe. With almost British understatement, he said, “The problem with the Lizards is rather worse.”

*Good*, Russie thought. If the mysterious Lizards ever showed up in person in Warsaw, the ghetto Jews would greet them with open arms. No matter how reckless he’d grown, though, he did not say that aloud. Instead, he asked, “And what, sir, do *you* make of this?”

“We are still deciding precisely what to make of it,” the major answered. “I have as yet no orders.”

“Ah,” Russie said. In combat, a German without orders was as deadly as one who had them, for German soldiers were endlessly trained to react and seize the initiative when and as they could. In matters political, though, Germans without orders were as helpless as so many unweaned babes, fearing to take a step in any direction. *A strange folk*, Russie thought, *and all the more dangerous for their strangeness*. He asked, “Then you have no orders to keep us from coming out of the ghetto, *nicht wahr?*”

“That is so,” the major admitted, in the hollow voice of a man who has had too much happen to him too quickly. “In any case, with the Lizards having established a base inside the Polish *Generalgouvernement*, the *Wehrmacht* has more to worry about at the moment than you Jews.”

“Thank you, sir,” Russie breathed. His own sincerity startled him. After a moment, it angered him as well: why should he thank this Nazi for deigning to allow him what should have been his by right?

And, indeed, the German tempered his own moderation: “You would likely do well to remember that the SS never has more to worry about than you Jews. Be careful.” *Be very careful*, the cold gray eyes of the silent enlisted man seemed to add. *Be very careful...kike*.

“We have learned to be careful,” Russie said. “Otherwise we would all be dead by now.”

He wondered how the major would react to that. The man merely nodded, as at any statement of obvious fact. His arm shot up and out in the German salute. “*Heil Hitler!*”

Russie could not bring himself to answer with the Nazi farewell. But the officer had talked to him as man to man, not as master to slave. He said, “God keep you safe from the Lizards, Major.”

The German nodded again, this time brusquely, did a military about-face, and strode away. The enlisted man stalked after him. They left Moishe Russie still standing in Polish Warsaw, outside the ghetto. “Moishe, are you all right?” his wife called from the

other side of the fence. She had not fled, but Reuven was nowhere to be seen—a sensible precaution, for he was all they had left.

“I am all right,” he answered, wonder in his own voice. He repeated the words, louder: “I *am* all right.” Simply standing in broad daylight on what had been forbidden soil was as intoxicating as Purim vodka.

Timidly, Rivka picked her way across the bomb crater and joined him on the far side of the wall. “They spoke with you, and you took no harm.” She sounded as amazed as he had. “Maybe even they felt God working through you.”

“Maybe they did,” Russie said as he slipped his arm around her shoulder. An hour earlier, he had scoffed at the idea that he—a medical student who ate pork if his need was desperate enough—might somehow be a prophet. Now he too began to wonder. God had not actively interfered in the affairs of His chosen people since the days of the Bible. But when since those days had His people been in such peril?

And why, Russie thought, would God choose *him*? He shook his head. “Who am I, to question Him?” he said. “His will be done.”

“It is,” Rivka, said proudly. “Through you.”

The lights were off in the auditorium of the Mills and Petrie Memorial Center; power had been erratic ever since the Lizards’ airplanes started ranging over the Midwest. The gloomy auditorium was packed nonetheless, with youths and men from the village of Ashton and with refugees like Sam Yeager and Mutt Daniels.

Yeager was acutely aware that he’d been wearing the same clothes for several days, that he hadn’t washed either them or himself any time lately, that he’d done a lot of walking and running and hiding, in them. Seeing a good many men as grimy as he, and none of them taking any notice of it, was something of a relief.

A grim-faced, middle-aged man in khaki walked across the stage, stopped in the center. Crowd noises ceased, as abruptly as if cut off by a switch. “Thank you for being here this morning,” the man said. “I want you all to stand and raise your right hands.”

Yeager was already standing; the auditorium had more men in it than seats. He put up his right hand. The man in khaki said, “Repeat after me: ‘I’—state your name—”

“I, Samuel William Yeager,” Yeager repeated, “a. citizen of the United States, do hereby acknowledge to have voluntarily enlisted the eighth day of June, 1942, as a soldier in the Regular Army of the United States of America for the period of four years or the duration of this war under the conditions prescribed by law, unless sooner discharged by proper authority; and do also agree to accept from the United States such bounty, pay, rations, and clothing as are or may be prescribed by law. And I do solemnly swear”—the echoing chorus grew, ragged for a moment, as a few men said *affirm*—“that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the United States of America; that I will serve them honestly and faithfully against all their enemies whatsoever; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States, and the orders of the officers

appointed over me, according to the Rules and Articles of War.”

An enormous grin stretched across Yeager’s face. It had taken an invasion from Mars or wherever the hell the Lizards came from, but he’d made it into the service after all.

“When do we get our guns?” somebody in the crowd shouted. Yeager quivered with that same hot eagerness; he hadn’t yet been to war, unless having his train strafed counted. But he hadn’t been able to shoot back then. Beside him, Mutt Daniels stood quietly. He wasn’t eager—he’d done this before.

Up on the stage, the dour recruiting sergeant—Schneider, his name was—raised his eyebrows to the silent heavens; “Soldier, we don’t have that many guns to give, or uniforms, or much of anything. We’ve been building an army to fight overseas since the Japs jumped us, and now all this shit lands in our own backyard—”

“Uh-huh,” Mutt Daniels said softly. “They did the very same thing in the last war, grabbed the men ’fore there was anything for ‘em to fight with.”

“I want you to form two lines,” Sergeant Schneider said. “One line for Great War veterans, over this way, the other for everybody else over there. Move it, people, and remember you’re in the army now; lying isn’t just a joke any more.”

Daniels went “over this way,” toward a table manned by a younger man in khaki, a corporal; along with most of the men in the auditorium, Yeager went “over there,” a longer line toward a table behind which Schneider himself sat. He suspected that Mutt and the rest of the veterans would get first crack at whatever rifles became available. That was only fair. They had the best idea of what to do with them.

His own line moved much more slowly. He chatted with the men in front and in back of him. He’d come through the hamlet of Franklin Grove on his way to Ashton, and heard President Roosevelt’s defiant speech “from somewhere in the. United States of America.” “He sure can turn a phrase,” the fellow in front of Yeager said. ““This Earth is ours, this nation is ours. No one shall take them from us, so help me God.””

“That’s just what he said,” Yeager said admiringly. “How’d you remember it right on the button like that?”

“I’m a reporter—it’s a trick of the trade,” the man said. He was in his late twenties, with sharp foxy features, a hairline mustache, very blue eyes, and sandy hair combed down slick and close to his skull. He stuck out a hand. “Name’s Pete Thomsen. I’m with the *Rockford Courier-Journal*.”

Yeager shook the proffered hand, then introduced himself. So did the fellow behind him, a bald, muscular man named Otto Chase. He said, “I was just heading to the cement works in Dixon when they blew up in front of me. That’s when I got this here.” He gingerly touched a gash on the top of his head with a blunt forefinger.

At last Yeager stood before Sergeant Schneider. The sergeant paused to sharpen his pencil with a pocket knife, then took Yeager’s name and date of birth. “Married?” he asked.

“No, sir. Divorced,” Yeager said, and made a sour face. Louise had finally gotten sick



of his nomadic ways, and when he wouldn't settle down—

“Children?”

“No, sir,” he said again.

Schneider made a checkmark, then said, “Occupation?”

“Ballplayer,” he answered, which made Schneider look up from the form. He went on, “I play—played, I guess—for the Decatur Commodores. That's my manager over there.” He pointed to Mutt Daniels, who'd already gone through his line and was jawing with several other First World War veterans.

The recruiting sergeant rubbed his chin. “What position you play? You a pitcher?”

“No, sir. Outfield—left, mostly.”

“Hmm. You throw pretty good, though?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing wrong with my arm,” Yeager said without false modesty. He wasn't fast, he wasn't the best fielder in the world, he was a sucker for a slow curve on the outside corner (or, worse yet, just off it), but by God he could throw.

“Okay,” Schneider said. “You'll be able to chuck a grenade farther than most, I expect.” He scribbled a note, then pointed in Mutt's direction himself. “You go over with those fellows. We've got some grenades and we'll be bringing more in—if the Lizards don't shoot up the trucks, anyhow. Go on, now.” The sergeant raised his voice. “Next.”

Rather hesitantly, Yeager walked over to the knot of men with Daniels. He was a rookie on this team; these men, many of them plump or balding or gray, had seen and done things he hadn't. Suddenly what they knew was in demand again. His own taste of combat had been solely on the receiving end, running away from death in the sky like the hordes of bombed-out refugees in Europe.

Mutt helped some by introducing him around. One of the plump gray men there, a fellow named Fred Walters, turned out, to have played a few weeks of Class D ball back around 1912. “I couldn't cut the mustard, and they turned me loose,” he said. “You been makin' a living at it seventeen years? That s pretty fine.” His admiration also helped make Sam feel more at ease.

And, of course, they all had the war—or rather the wars—to talk about. “With the Lizards here are we still fighting the Germans and the Japs?” Yeager asked, adding, “But for Roosevelt's speech, I haven't heard much in the way of news till I got here yesterday.”

“Me neither.” Mutt Daniels ran a hand over his ragged pants and filthy jacket. “We been on the move the last few days, you might say.”

That got him a few wry chuckles. Several of the men standing there were a lot more bedraggled than he was. Fred Walters, by contrast, was clean and well-creased; he lived in Ashton. He said, “Fact of it is, nobody really knows what the hell is going on. I did hear tell, though, that a Jap fleet heading for Hawaii hightailed it back to the Land of the Rising Sun when the Lizards bombed Tokyo.”

“They hit Tokyo,” Yeager said. “First good thing I heard about ’em.”

“They hit Berlin, too,” Walters said, “and a lot of other places besides.”

“One thing this does,” said somebody whose name Yeager hadn’t caught, “is shoot Lend-Lease right in the head. With the damned Lizards right here in the middle of the United States, we don’t have enough for ourselves, let alone for anybody else.”

“Gonna be hard on the Limies and the Russians,” Daniels observed.

“We gotta worry about ourselves first,” the other man said. Heads bobbed up and down, Yeager’s among them. The fellow went on, “Plain fact is, we’re short, too. If we weren’t, we wouldn’t be going through this folderol of separating out the ones who know how to fight to make sure they get guns first.”

“Sergeant Schneider over there as much as told me we don’t have enough guns for all the men who’re joining up here,” Yeager said.

“Plain fact is, gentlemen, we got trouble,” Daniels said. “That’s what the plain fact is, and nothing else but.” Heads bobbed up and down again.

\* \*

Something moving swiftly through the air—Alarm coursed through David Goldfarb as he caught the motion. He whipped his binoculars up to his eyes, took a longer look, relaxed. “Only a sea gull,” he said, relief in his voice.

“Which kind?” Jerome Jones asked with interest. The events of the past few days had turned him into an avid bird-watcher.

“One of the black-headed ones,” Goldfarb answered indifferently; his interest in birds began and ended with poultry.

He sat in a rickety folding chair of canvas and wood a few feet from the edge of the cliffs of Dover, where England dropped straight down into the sea. An observer might have sat thus a quarter of a century before, with the self-same binoculars, maybe even in the self-same folding chair, peering toward Europe in hope of spotting zeppelins. Only the field telephone by the chair was of a model impossible in 1917.

Jerome Jones laughed when he said that aloud. “Likely is the same folding chair; the forms for a new one won’t have got to the proper office yet.” He laughed again, this time mirthlessly. “Like the bloody Pixie Reports.”

“I told you the flaw wasn’t in the radar,” Goldfarb said.

“That you did—and if you keep up with ‘I told you so,’ you’ll make some nice girl very unhappy one day,” Jones retorted. “Besides, don’t you wish you’d been wrong?”

Having taken two solid hits in as many sentences, Goldfarb answered only with a grunt. His eyes traveled back to what had been the radar station that had superseded observers armed with nothing better than field glasses. Nothing there now but rubble and a faint stench, as of meat gone bad. The only reason Goldfarb could sit out here looking at those ruins was that he’d been off duty when the Lizard rockets struck home.

Up and down the English coast, the story was the same: wherever there'd been an active radar, a rocket came along and took it out. That meant only one thing: rockets able to home in on radar beams, even the new shortwave ones Jerry still hadn't figured out.

"Who'd have thought the Lizards could be so much smarter than the Germans?" Goldfarb said; no matter how much he loathed Hitler and the Nazis, he had a solid respect for the technical ability of the enemy across the Channel.

"Wireless says we knocked down a couple of their planes over London," Jones remarked hopefully.

"Good," Goldfarb said; any news of that sort was encouraging. "How many did we lose?"

"The commentator did not announce the full score of the match," Jones said. "Military security, don't you know?"

"Oh indeed," Goldfarb said. "I wonder if their batsman made his century; no doubt it is a cricket score set against one footballers might make. God help us all."

"They've not tried a landing here," Jones said, still looking on the bright side.

"It's only a very small island." Goldfarb pictured a world globe in his mind, and realized all at once just how small England had to look from space.

Not small enough to keep them from bombing us Jones said bitterly. He and Goldfarb both shook their heads. They'd helped their country beat back the most savage air assault the world had ever known, then helped start paying the Germans back. Now they were under attack again. It hardly seemed fair.

"There's something!" Goldfarb exclaimed, pointing. He and Jones both swung their field glasses toward, the moving specks in the sky. The specks—even through binoculars, they were little more than that—were southbound. "Ours, I think," Goldfarb said, "bound for the Lizards' lair in France."

"Lizards and Frogs." Jones laughed at his own wit, but quickly sobered. "I wonder how many of the poor brave buggers'll fly back north again after their run. Worse than the flak over Berlin, they say."

"I wonder if Jerry's hitting back at the Lizards, too." Something else occurred to Goldfarb. "If his planes and ours are both trying to hit them at the same time, do we shoot at each other, too?"

"I hope not," Jones exclaimed. "Wouldn't that be a balls-up?"

"It would indeed," Goldfarb said. "I hope not, too." He laughed, not altogether comfortably. "First time in donkey's years I've wished the Germans anything but a fast trip to the devil."

"The Germans, they're human beings. Stack 'em against things from Mars and I know where my choice lies," Jones said.

Goldfarb answered with a grunt. He was reluctant to concede anything to the Nazis;

he agreed completely with Churchill's quip that, should Satan declare war on Hitler, he would at least give the Devil a favorable mention in the House of Commons. But quips came easy. Now the whole world faced devils it didn't know. Britain had allied with Red Russia when Germany invaded: Germany was worse. If the Lizards were worse than Germany, would alliances swing again?

He scowled. "I'm damned if I want to see us in bed with the Nazis." He wondered again at the fate of his cousins in Poland.

"Would you rather end up in bed with the Lizards?" Jones demanded. Before it could turn into an argument, he added, "Me, I'd rather end up in bed with the barmaid down at the White Horse Inn."

That sufficed to distract Goldfarb. "Which one?" he asked. "Daphne or Sylvia?"

"Daphne by choice. I'm rather keen on blondes, and she has more to hold on to." Jones's hands illustrated just which parts he had in mind. "But, of course, were Sylvia to smile at me in exactly the proper fashion—redheads are interesting because they're unusual, what?"

"They both fancy pilots," Goldfarb said morosely. Along with, no doubt, a great many other nonflying RAF men, he'd had his advances turned into retreats by both girls. For that matter, so had Jerome Jones.

The other radar man said, "Now there's something to say for the Lizards, at any rate." Goldfarb raised an interrogative eyebrow. Jones explained: "if they keep on as they've been doing, we'll soon have no pilots left."

"That's not funny," Goldfarb said. As if to contradict himself, he started laughing;

Then he choked on his laughter. Something screamed past overhead at just above treetop height. He grabbed for the field telephone, cranked as if his life depended on it while more Lizard planes streaked northwest above him. He shouted out his warning over the yowl of their engines.

"If it's London again, the bastards will be there in a minute," Jones yelled at the top of his lungs. He might as well have been whispering; Goldfarb had to read his lips.

Goldfarb did his best to sound hopeful: "Doesn't take long to scramble the Spitfire squadrons."

"Maybe not, but we can't catch their planes even if we do manage to get ours up."

"What's worked best is loitering alongside, their return routes, then striking at them as they go past."

"Dogging and pouncing," Jones said, dropping his voice as the Lizard aircraft receded in the distance. Goldfarb raised that eyebrow again. His friend went on, "I did a bit of history at Cambridge along with the maths. The old Byzantines would let the Arabs into Asia Minor, you see, then wait at the passes for them to come out with their loot."

"Ah," Goldfarb said. "And did it work?"

"Sometimes. But even when it did, of course, Asia Minor took a bit of a hiding."

“Yes. Well, we’ve had hidings before. I hope we can ride out another one,” Goldfarb said. “Not that we’ve much choice in the matter.”

Neither of them said much after that. Goldfarb dug a finger into one ear, trying to make it stop ringing. He had little luck—the Lizards’ engines were just too loud. He wondered if the RAF was having any luck, and wished he could be up in a Spitfire himself. His abilities didn’t lie there, though. He consoled himself with the thought that he’d done what he could by spotting the flight of bombers.

He peered south, out over the English Channel. The springtime air—almost summer now, he reminded himself—was sweet and mild and clear. The French coast was a low, dark smear on the horizon. He raised the binoculars to his eyes. France leapt closer. Three years ago, that coast had been England’s shield. Then, horribly, unexpectedly, the shield fell over, and it served as a base for a thrust at England’s heart.

And now—what? Another thrust at England’s heart, but one at Germany’s as well. Goldfarb wished the Lizards would leave his country alone and go after the Nazis with everything they had. The wish changed the situation about as much as wishes commonly do.

He sighed. “It’s a rum world, sure enough.”

“Aye, it is.” Jones looked at his watch. “Our reliefs should be here any minute now. When we’re off, shall we head over to the White Horse? What they call best bitter’s gone to the dogs since the war (gone through their kidneys, by the taste of it), but there’s always Daphne to stare at, maybe even to chat, up.”

“Why not?” Goldfarb intended to try Sylvia again—his own taste ran to redheads. She wasn’t a Jewish girl to bring home to his family (he’d thought a lot more about that since the war started), but he didn’t aim to marry her—however attractive some of the concomitants of that relationship might be.

He laughed at himself. The next interest in him Sylvia showed would be her first. *Well*, he thought, *she can’t very well show interest if I’m not there to be interesting.*

“Something else to thank the Lizards for,” Jones said. “If they hadn’t smashed up the radar set, we’d be spending all these idle hours fiddling with it instead of chasing skirt. Radar’s all very well, but next to skirt—”

“Right,” Goldfarb said. He pointed. “And here come Reg and Steven, so let’s be off.”

As Jones got up from his canvas chair, he asked, “Can you lend me ten bob?”

Goldfarb stared at him. He grinned back, cheekily confident. Goldfarb got out his wallet, passed over a note. “If you had the gall with Daphne that you do with me ...”

“With ten bob in my pocket, maybe I will.”

“Come on, then.” There was a war on—there were, these last few crazed days, *two* wars on—but life went on, too. Goldfarb hurried through his report to the next watch crew, then hurried off with Jerome Jones toward the White Horse Inn.

*I am flying toward my death.* George Bagnall had had that thought every time the Lancaster made its ungainly leap off the tarmac for a run into Germany. Now, flying against the Lizards, it was much more tightly focused. Death lurked in the air over Germany, yes, but random death: a flak shell that happened to burst just where you were, or a night fighter coming close enough to spot your exhaust.

Going against the Lizards, death was not random. This was Bagnall's third sortie into France, and he had seen that for himself. If the Lizards chose your plane, you *would* go down. Their rockets came after you as if they knew your home address. You couldn't run; shooting at the missiles did no good to speak of; Bagnall wanted to hide.

He glanced over at Ken Embry. The pilot's face was set, the skin stretched tight across his cheekbones, his mouth nothing but a bloodless slash. They were coming in low tonight, too low to bother with oxygen, so Embry's whole face was visible. Going in high just made them better targets. The RAP had learned that lesson the hard way.

Bagnall sighed. "Pity we couldn't have come down with a case of magneto drop or some such, eh?"

"You're the engineer, Mr. Bagnall," Embry said. "Arranging a convenient mechanical failure should be your speciality."

"Pity I didn't think of it as we were running through the checklists," Bagnall murmured. Embry's answering grin stretched his mouth wider, but did nothing to banish the look of haunted determination from his features. Like Bagnall, he knew what the odds were. They'd been lucky twice—three times, if you counted the wild melee in the air over Cologne on what everyone was starting to call *The Night the Martians Landed*. But how long could luck hold?"

Embry said, "Feels odd, flying out of formation."

"It did seem rather like lining up all the ducks to be knocked over one by one," Bagnall said. The first attack on the Lizards—in which, fortunately, his Lanc had not been involved—had been a failure horrific enough to make Bomber Command change tactics in a hurry, something the flight engineer hadn't previously imagined possible.

And attacking low and dispersed did work better than pouring in high and in formation, as if the Lizards were nothing but Germans to be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Bagnall's bomber had made it back to England twice.

"Five miles to commencement of target area," the navigator announced over the intercom.

"Thank you, Alf," Ken Embry said. Ahead of them, streaks of fire began leaping up from the ground. *Fully laden bombers* exploded in midair, one after another, blazing through the night like great orange chrysanthemums of flame. They would have been even more beautiful bad each one not meant the deaths of so many men.

Bagnall waited for one of those fiery streaks to burn straight for his Lanc. It hadn't happened yet, but—

Embry whooped, pounded his thigh with a fist. "Did you see that? Did you bloody see

that? One of them missed. Somebody dodged it.” Sure enough, one of the rockets kept flying up and up, then went off in a blast not much more impressive than a Guy Fawkes Day firework Embry quickly sobered. “But there’s so many that don’t miss.”

From his glassed-in window in the bottom front of the Lanc’s nose, Douglas Bell said, “Coming up on something that looks like it belongs to the Lizards.”

That was good enough for Embry. “Commencing bombing run under your direction, Bomb-Aimer.”

“Very good,” Bell said. “Steer slightly west, toward that—bloody hell, I don’t know what it is, but it never came from Earth.”

“Slightly west; straightening my course on the object ahead,” the pilot acknowledged.

Peering ahead through the Perspex, Bagnall too saw against the horizon the great tower ahead. It looked more like a pregnant skyscraper than anything else he could think of, though even the Yankees’ famous Empire State Building might have shrunk by comparison, for the tower was still miles ahead. It assuredly did not belong in the French countryside, a good long way south and east of Paris.

It was not the only tower—*spaceship*, Bagnall supposed the proper word was—in the neighborhood, either. The Lizards kept setting down more and more of them. And to attack the spaceships themselves was certain death. Nobody had succeeded in knocking one out; nobody had come back from trying, either.

The bomb-aimer, while as brave a man as could be hoped for—he was up here, after all, wasn’t he?—was not actively trying to kill himself. He said, “Slightly more to the west, if you please, sir—three degrees or so. I think that’s the tank park we were told of in the briefing, don’t you?”

Embry and Bagnall both leaned forward to look now. Something big and orderly was going on down on the ground, that was certain. If it wasn’t German, it had to belong to the Lizards. And if it was German, Bagnall thought, well, too bad for Jerry. His eyes flicked over to Embry’s. The pilot nodded, said, “I think you’re right, Bomb-Aimer. Carry on.”

“Very good,” Bell repeated. “Steady course, steady ...” His voice rose to a shout. “Commence bombing!” The fuselage rattled and groaned as bombs rained down on the target. Bagnall took a moment to pity the poor French peasants below. They were, after all, his allies, now suffering under the double yoke of the Nazis and the Lizards, and some of them were only too likely to die in the bombardment that was at the moment the only hope of getting them free.

The Lanc staggered in the air. For a dreadful instant, Bagnall thought it was hit. But it was only plowing through the turbulence kicked up by exploding bombs—the plane was usually two or three miles higher above them when they went off.

“Let’s get out of here.” Embry heeled the bomber over and swung its nose toward England. “Give us a course for home, Mr. Whyte.”

“Due north will do for now; I’ll fine it up momentarily,” the navigator said.

“Due north it is. I wonder how many will land with us,” Embry said.

*I wonder if we'll be lucky enough to land*, Bagnall thought. He would not give the evil omen strength by speaking it aloud. Green-yellow tracers zipped past the windscreen, too close for comfort. Along with their rockets, the Lizards boasted formidable light flak. Embry threw the Lancaster into a series of evasive jinks and jerks that rattled everyone's teeth.

The rear gunner called, “We've a fighter to starboard, looking us over”

Whatever spit was left in Bagnall's mouth dried up as his eyes swung rightward. But the plane there, a deeper blackness against black night, was not a Lizard jet, only—only!—a Focke-Wulf 190. It wagged its wings at the Lanc and darted away at a speed the British bomber could not hope to match.

When he breathed again Bagnall discovered he'd forgotten to for some time. Then another Lizard flak battery started up below. With a sound like a giant poking his fist through a tin roof shells slammed into, the Lancaster's left wing. Flames spurted from both engines there. To his subsequent amazement, the flight engineer performed exactly as he'd been trained. A glance at the gauges told him those Merlins would never fly again. He shut them down, shut down the fuel feed to them, feathered the props.

Embry flicked a toggle, made a face. “Flaps aren't responding on that side.”

“No hydraulic pressure,” Bagnall said after another check of his instruments. He watched the pilot fight the controls; already the Lanc was trying to swing in an anticlockwise circle. “Appears we have a bit of a problem.”

“A bit, yes,” Embry said, nodding. “Look for a field or a road. I'm going to try to set her down.” Still sounding calm, he went on, “Sooner pick my time for it than have the aircraft choose for me, eh?”

“As you say,” Bagnall agreed. The pilot's couple of sentences told the same story as his own bank of instruments: the aircraft would not make it back to England. He pointed. “There's as likely a stretch of highway as we're apt to find. One thing for the war—we're not likely to run over Uncle Pierre's Citroën.”

“Right.” Embry raised his voice. “Crew prepare for crash landing. Mr. Bagnall, lower the landing gear, if you please.”

The right wheel descended smoothly; without hydraulics, the left refused to budge. Bagnall worked the hand crank. From the belly turret, a gunner said, “It's down. I can see it.”

“One thing fewer to worry about,” Embry remarked, with what seemed to Bagnall to be quite excessive good cheer. Then the pilot added, “That leaves only two or three hundred thousand, unless I miss my count.”

“We could be trying this up in Normandy, where the hedge-rows grow right alongside the roadbed,” Bagnall said helpfully.

Embry corrected himself: “Two things fewer. You do so relieve my mind, George.”



“Happy to be of service,” Bagnall answered. Joking about what was going to happen was easier than just sitting back and watching it. A forced landing in a damaged aircraft on a French road in the middle of the night without lights was not easy to contemplate in cold blood.

As if to underscore that, Embry said, “Aircrew may bail out if they find that preferable to attempting a landing. I shall endeavor to remain airborne an extra minute or two to allow them to avail themselves of the opportunity. Had we suffered this misfortune a month ago, I would bail out myself and permit the aircraft to crash, thus denying it to the Germans. As you have seen this evening, however, that situation has for the moment changed. If you do intend to, parachute, please so inform me at this time.”

The intercom stayed silent until someone in the back of the plane said, “You’ll get us down all right, sir.”

“Let us hope such touching confidence is not misplaced,” Embry said. “Thank you, gentlemen, one and all, and good luck to you.” He brought the stick forward, reduced power to the two surviving Merlins.

“To us,” Bagnall amended. The road, a dark gray line arrowing through black fields, was almost close enough to reach out and touch. Embry brought the Lanc’s nose up a little, cut power still more. The bomber met the road with a bump, but Bagnall had been through worse landings at Swinderby. Cheers erupted in the intercom.

Then, just as the Lancaster slowed toward a stop, its right wing clipped a telegraph pole. It spun clockwise. The left landing gear went off the asphalt and into soft dirt. It buckled. The wing snapped off where the shells had chewed it. The stump dug into the ground. The aircraft’s spars groaned like a man on the rack. Bagnall wondered if it would flip over. It didn’t. Even as it was spinning, Embry had shut off the engines altogether.

Into sudden silence, a second round of cheers rang out. “Thank you, friends,” Embry said. Now at last, when it no longer mattered, he let himself sound wrung out. He turned to Bagnall with a tired grin. “*Est-ce que vous parlezfrançais, monsieur?*”

“Hell, no,” Bagnall answered. They both laughed like schoolboys.

A metallic rumble echoed through *127th Emperor Hetto* as the transfer craft's airlock engaged with one of the bannership's docking collars. A speaker chimed softly in Fleetlord Atvar's office. "The Tosevite is here, Exalted Fleetlord," a junior officer announced.

"Fetch him hither," Atvar said.

"It shall be done."

Atvar hung in midair as he awaited the arrival of the Tosevite official He'd ordered the spin taken off the bannership when he began receiving natives. He was used to free-fall; while he did not particularly enjoy it, he endured it without trouble, as did his crew. The Tosevites, however, were without space travel. Finding themselves weightless might fluster them and put them at a disadvantage. Atvar hoped so, at any rate.

He let his jaws fall open in amusement as he remembered the unfortunate native from the empire called Deutschland who had lost all his stomach contents, luckily while still in the transfer craft. That poor befuddled Ribbensomething had been in no state even to try to negotiate his empire's submission to *the* Empire.

The door to the office opened. An officer charged with learning the appropriate Tosevite dialect floated outside along with the native for whom he would interpret. The officer said, "Exalted Fleetlord, I present to you the emissary of the empire called the *Soyuz Sovietskikh Sotzialesticheskikh Respublik*—SSSR for short. His name is Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov."

"Give him my polite greetings," Atvar answered, thinking the Tosevite empire was too small to deserve such a big name. Like most Tosevites, though, the emissary himself was substantially larger than the fleetlord.

The interpreter talked haltingly in Molotov's speech. Part of the problem was that Tosevite languages did not fit well in the mouths of the Race: to Atvar, all Tosevites sounded as if they had their mouths full of pap. Tosevite languages were also hard for the Race because they were so maddeningly irregular; they had not spent long millennia being smoothed into efficient rationality. And, even without those difficulties, the languages remained incompletely familiar to the officers assigned to learn them. Up until the actual landings on Tosev 3, they'd had only radio transmissions from which to work (the first convenient thing Atvar could see about the Tosevites' possessing radio), and comprehension had emerged slowly out of those, even with the help of computers programmed to deduce probable word meanings by statistics.

Molotov listened to the fleetlord's greeting, gave back one of his own. Unlike the Tosevite from Deutschland, he had sense enough to speak slowly so as not to overwhelm

the interpreter. Also unlike that Tosevite, he gave no sign of discomfiture at being off his home planet and in free-fall for the first time in his life.

A viewscreen showed a hologram of Tosev 3 as it appeared from the *127th Emperor Hetto*, but Molotov did not even deign to glance at it. Through the corrective lenses hooked in front of his fiat, immobile eyes, he stared straight toward Atvar. The fleetlord approved. He had not thought to find such singleness of purpose among these big barbarians.

Molotov spoke again, still slowly and without raising his voice. The interpreter turned both eye turrets toward Atvar in embarrassment; the fleetlord should have enjoyed the privilege of first address. But what could a Big Ugly know of proper protocol? Atvar said, “Never mind his manners. Just tell me what he says.”

“It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord. Vyacheslav Mikhailovich—this is the polite way to address the Tosevites who speak Ruskaa: by their own name and that of their father—well, never mind that; the Tosevite demands the immediate unconditional withdrawal of all our forces from the land and air belonging to the empire of the SSSR.”

“Oh, he does, does he?” The fleetlord let his jaws gape in a guffaw. “Remind him he is in no position to make demands. If he occupied Home, he might have the right to bend us to his will. But it is the surrender of the SSSR that is under discussion, not ours.”

Molotov listened to the interpreter’s translation without changing expression. To Atvar, the Tosevites he’d seen and met owned extraordinarily mobile features; his own facial hide and musculature were far less flexible. But this native might have been carved from stone. Still stubbornly ignoring his surroundings, he paused to think, then replied:

“We shall not yield. We have fought the Gitlerites [“By which he means the Deutsch Tosevites, exalted fleetlord,” the interpreter explained] to a standstill when they expected us to collapse. Our land is vast, our resources widespread. We are not to be easily overcome.”

“Tell him that his *vast* empire”—Atvar loaded the word with scorn—“would vanish almost without trace on any of the three worlds of *the* Empire.”

Molotov again listened, thought, answered: “All three of your worlds are not here with you, and you seek to conquer not just the SSSR but the whole of this world. Consider if you have not overextended yourselves.”

Atvar glared at the impassive Tosevite. The native might be barbarous, but he was no fool. A whole world—even a world with too much water like Tosev 3—was a big place, bigger than the fleetlord had truly understood until he began this campaign. He hadn’t expected to face industrialized opposition, either.

Nevertheless, he and the Race had advantages, too. He bludgeoned Molotov with them: “We strike you as we please, but you come to grief whenever you try to hit us back. Once all your factories are in ruins, how do you propose to hit back at all? Yield now, and you will still have something left for your own people.”

Molotov wore the same sort of bulky garments most Tosevites preferred. His face was damp and shiny with water exuded as a metabolic coolant; the *127th Emperor Hetto* was at a temperature comfortable to the Race, not for natives. But he still answered back boldly enough: “We have many factories. We have many men. You have won battles against us, but you are far from winning your war. We will fight on. Even the Gitlerites have more sense than to yield to you.”

“As a matter of fact, I recently spoke with the foreign minister of Deutschland,” Atvar said. That Tosevite had also been too stubborn to yield until his empire was pounded flat, but Molotov did not have to know it.

The native looked intently at the fleetlord. “And what had he to say?” Since the SSSR and Deutschland were at war before the Race reached Tosev 3, it stood to reason that they had little reason to trust each other.

“We discussed the feasibility of Deutschland’s acknowledging the authority of the Emperor,” Atvar answered. On speaking of his sovereign, he cast down his eyes for a moment. So did the interpreter.

“Emperor, you say? I want to be sure I understand you correctly,” Molotov said. “Your—nation—is headed by a person who rules because he is a member of a family that has ruled for many years before him? Is that what you tell me?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Atvar said, puzzled by the Tosevite’s puzzlement. “Who else would rule an empire—the Empire—but the Emperor? The Tosevite named Stalin, I gather, is the emperor of your SSSR.”

So far as the fleetlord could see, Molotov still did not change expression. Nor was his voice anything but its usual mushy monotone. But what he said made the interpreter hiss in rage and astonishment, and even lash his tail stump back and forth as if in mortal combat. The officer mastered himself, spoke in Molotov’s language. Molotov answered. The interpreter trembled. Slowly, he mastered himself. Even more slowly, he turned to Atvar.

He still hesitated to speak. “What does the Big Ugly say?” Atvar demanded.

“Exalted Fleetlord,” the interpreter stammered, “this—this thing of a Tosevite tells me to tell you that the people—the people of his SSSR—that they, they executed—murdered—their emperor and all his family twenty-five years ago. That would be about fifty of our years,” he added, remembering his function as translator. “They murdered their emperor, and this Stalin, this leader of theirs, is no emperor at all, but the chief of the group of bandits that killed him”

Atvar was a mature, disciplined male, so he did not show his feelings with a hiss as the interpreter had. But he was shocked to the very core of his being. Imagining a government without an emperor at its head was almost beyond him. Home had been unified for scores of millennia, and even in the distant days before unity had seen only the struggle between one empire and another. Halless 1 was a single empire when the Race conquered it; Rabotev 2 had been divided, but also among competing empires.

What other way was there to organize intelligent beings? The fleetlord could conceive of none.

Molotov said, “You should know, invader from another world, that Deutschland has no emperor either, nor does the United—” The interpreter went back and forth with him for a little-while, then explained, “He means the empire—or not-empire, I should say—in the northern part of the small landmass.”

“These Tosevites are utterly mad,” Atvar burst out. He added, “You need not translate that But they are. By the Emperor”—just saying the name was a comfort—“it must have to do with the world’s beastly climate and excess water.”

“Yes, Exalted Fleetlord,” the interpreter said. “It may be so. But what shall I tell the creature here?”

“I don’t know.” Atvar felt befouled at even contemplating speech with anyone, no matter how alien, who was involved in impericide—a crime whose existence he had not thought of until this moment. All at once, cratering the whole world of Tosev 3 with nuclear weapons looked much more attractive than it had. But the fleet had only a limited number of them—against the sort of fight the Tosevites were expected to put up, even a few would have been more than necessary. And with Tosev 3’s land surface so limited, ruining any of it went against his grain.

He gathered himself. “Tell this Molotov that what he and his bandits did before the Race arrived will not concern us unless they refuse to yield and thereby force us to take notice of it. But if need be, we will avenge their murdered emperor.” Thinking of a murdered emperor, the fleetlord knew the first pity he’d felt for any Tosevite.

If his threat frightened Molotov, the Big Ugly gave no sign of it; the native truly was as frozen of countenance as anyone of the Race. He said, “It is true, then, that when you speak of an empire, you mean it in the exact and literal sense of the word, with an emperor and a court and all the trappings of the outworn past?”

“Of course that is true,” Atvar answered. “How else would we mean it?”

“The enlightened people of the SSSR have cast the rule of despots onto the ash-heap of history,” Molotov said.

Atvar laughed in his flat face. “The Race has flourished under its Emperors for a hundred thousand years. What do you know of history, when you were savages the last time we looked over your miserable pesthole of a planet?” The fleetlord heartily wished the Tosevites had stayed savages, too.

“History may be slow, but it is certain,” Molotov said stubbornly. “One day the inevitable revolution will come to your people, too, when their economic conditions dictate its necessity. I think that day will be soon. You are imperialists, and imperialism is the last phase of capitalism, as Marx and Lenin have shown.”

The interpreter stumbled through the translation of that last sentence, and added, “I have trouble rendering the natives’ religious terms into our language, Exalted Fleetlord. Marx and Lenin are gods or prophets in the SSSR.” He spoke briefly with Molotov, then

said, "Prophets. Vyacheslav Mikhailovich knew this Lenin himself."

Molotov said, "Lenin led the revolution which overthrew our emperor and established the rule of the people and workers of the SSSR. I am proud to say I assisted in this worthy task."

Atvar stared at the Tosevite in disgust. He spoke to the interpreter: "Tell the bandit I have nothing further to say to him. If he and his murderers will not yield themselves to us, their punishment shall only be the harsher."

The interpreter slowly, haltingly, turned the crisp words into the mushy native language. Molotov answered with one word. "*Nyet.*" The fleetlord glanced with one quick flick of an eye at the interpreter to see if that meant what he thought. It did.

"Get him off this ship," Atvar snapped. "I am sorry he comes here under truce, or I would treat him as he deserves." The idea of wantonly slaughtering an emperor—even a Tosevite emperor—gave him an atavistic urge to bite something: Molotov by choice, though the Big Ugly looked anything but appetizing.

The doorway out of Atvar's office hissed open. The interpreter pushed off from the chair whose back he'd been holding and shot through it. Molotov followed more awkwardly, the graceless garments he wore flapping about him. As soon as he was gone, Atvar shut the door behind him. The rather sharp smell of his body remained, like a bad memory. The fleetlord turned up the air scrubbers to make it go away.

While it still lingered, he phoned Kirel. When the shiplord's face appeared in his screen, he said, "You will come to my quarters immediately."

"It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord." Kirel blanked the screen. He was as good as his word. When he chimed for admittance, Atvar let him in, then closed the door again. Kirel asked, "How fare the talks with the Tosevites, Exalted Fleetlord?"

"Less well than I had hoped." Atvar let his breath hiss out in a long, frustrated sigh. "All their greatest empires still refuse to acknowledge the glory of the Emperor." He cast his eyes down in the ritual gesture. He would not tell Kirel what he'd learned from Molotov, not yet; his own pain remained too raw to permit it.

"This is altogether a more difficult task than we looked for when we set out from Home," Kirel said. The shiplord had tact. He forbore to remind Atvar that he had urged a surrender demand before actual ground combat got under way. After a moment, he went on, "It has been too many generations since the Race fought a real war."

"What do you mean?" Atvar tried to hold sudden suspicion from his voice. Tactful or not, Kirel coveted the ornate body paint the fleetlord wore. Atvar continued, "We are trained for this mission as well as we could possibly be."

"Indeed we are," Kirel agreed gravely, which only made Atvar more suspicious. "But the Tosevites are not merely trained; they are experienced. Weapon for weapon, we far surpass them. In craft on the battlefield, though, they exceed us. That has hurt us, again and again."

"I know. They are worse foes than I expected them to be even after we learned of

their abnormal technological growth. Not only are they wily, as you say, they are stubborn. I was confident they would break when they realized the advantages we enjoyed over them. But they keep fighting, as best they can.”

“It is so,” Kirel said. “Perhaps already being locked in combat among themselves has given them the discipline they need to carry on against us. Along with being stubborn, they are well-trained and skilled. We can continue to smash them for a long time yet; one of our landcruisers, one of our aircraft, is worth anywhere from ten to twenty-five of theirs. But we have only so many munitions. If we cannot overawe them, we may face difficulties. In my coldest dreams, I see our last missile wrecking a clumsy Tosevite landcruiser—while another such landcruiser rolls out of a factory and toward us.”

Of themselves, Atvar’s clawed hands twitched as if to tear a foe in front of him. “That is a cold dream. You should have left it in your coffin when you awoke. We have set down our factory ships here and there, you know. As we gain raw materials, we shall be able to increase our stocks.”

“As you say, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel answered. He did not say—presumably because he knew Atvar knew it as well as himself—that the factories, even at top output, could not produce in a day more than a small part of the supplies the Race’s armed forces used during that day. Back on Home, no one had reckoned that the armada would use as much as it had.

As if to turn away from that unpleasant reflection, Atvar said, “For all the bluster the Big Ugly envoys show, they may yet prove tractable. The male from the empire called Deutschland, despite his sickness, showed some comprehension of our might.” All at once, he remembered that Molotov had said Deutschland was a not-empire. He wondered queasily if its emperor had been murdered, too.

Shiplord Kirel said, “Deutschland? Interesting. May I use your screen to show you an image a reconnaissance satellite caught for us yesterday?” Atvar opened, his hands wide to show assent. Kirel punched commands in the *127th Emperor Hetto’s* data storage system.

The screen lit to show green land and grayish sea. A spot of fire appeared in one corner of the land, not far from a clump of big wood buildings. The fire suddenly spread and got brighter, then went out more slowly. “One of our bombing runs?” Atvar asked.

“No. Let me show it to you again, this time in slow motion with maximum magnification and image processing.”

The amplified image came up on the screen. Atvar stared at it, then at Kirel. “That is a missile he said accusingly as if it were the shiplord’s fault. He did not want to believe what he had just seen.

But Kirel said, “Yes, Exalted Fleetlord, this is a missile, or at least was intended to be one. Since it exploded on its launching pad, we are unable to gain estimates of its range or guidance system, if any, but to judge from its size, it appears more likely to be strategic than tactical.”

“I presume we have eradicated this site,” Atvar said.

“It was done, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel agreed.

The shiplord’s doleful voice told Atvar what he already knew: even though this site was gone, the Race had no sure way of telling how many others the Deutsche possessed—until a missile roared toward them. And swatting missiles out of, the sky was an order of magnitude harder than dealing with these slow, clumsy Tosevite airplanes. Even the airplanes were hurting his forces now and again, because the Big Ugliers kept sending them out no matter how many got knocked down. As Kirel had said, their courage and skill went some of the way toward making up for their poor technology.

“We have to destroy the factories in which these weapons are produced,” Atvar said.

“Yes Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel answered.

*Not*, Atvar noted, “*It shall be done.*” From the air, one factory looked like another. Destroying *all* the factories in Deutschland was a tall order. Compared to the size of the planet, Deutschland was a small empire, but even small empires, Atvar was learning, covered a lot of ground. The other Tosevite empires had factories, too. How close were they to making missiles?

The fleetlord did his best to look on the bright side. “Their failure gives us the warning we need. We shall not be taken unawares even if they succeed in launching missiles at us.” *We had better not be*, his tone said.

“Our preparations are adequate,” Kirel said. He did his best to keep on sounding businesslike and military, but his voice had an edge to it that Atvar understood perfectly well: if that was the bright side, it was hardly worth looking for.

The train chuffed to a halt somewhere on the south Russian steppe; men in field gray sprang down and went efficiently to work. They would have been more efficient still, Karl Becker thought, if they’d been allowed to proceed in their usual methodical fashion rather than at a dead run. But an order from the *Führer* was an order from the *Führer*. At the dead run they went.

“The ground will not be adequately prepared, Karl,” Michael Arenswald said sadly. Both men were part of the engineering detachment of Heavy Artillery Battalion Dora.

“This is true, of course,” Becker said with a fatalistic nod, “but how many shots are we likely to be able to fire before the Lizards descend on us?” They were sixty kilometers from the Lizard base. With aircraft, though, especially the ones the Lizards flew, sixty kilometers passed in the blink of an eye. Karl Becker was a long way from stupid; he recognized a suicide mission when he heard one.

If Arenswald did, too, he kept it to himself. “We might even get off half a dozen before they figure out what’s happening to them.”

“Oh, *quatsch!*” said Becker, a Berliner. He jabbed an index finger out at his friend. “You are a dead man, I am a dead man, we are all dead men, the whole battalion of us.”



The only question left unanswered is whether we can take enough Lizards with us to make our deaths worth something.”

“Sooner or later, we are all dead men.” Arenswald laughed. “We’ll give them a surprise before we go, at any rate.”

“With luck, we may manage that,” Becker admitted. “We—” He broke off and started coughing. The battalion had a chemical unit attached to it, to send up, smoke and hide, it from view from the air while it was setting up for action. Some of the smoke came from nothing more sophisticated than flaming buckets of motor oil. Breathing it was probably doing Becker’s lungs no good, but odds were it wouldn’t kill him before he died of other causes. He coughed again, then ignored it.

Men swarmed over the tram like ants. Special tracks had been laid for the heavy artillery battalion, four gently curved arcs, each always a constant distance from its neighbors. The inner two sets of rails were exactly twenty feet apart. Crews began moving specially built diesel construction cranes to the outer pair of tracks for aid in the upcoming assembly process.

Looking at all the purposeful activity, Arenswald laughed again. “Not bad, considering how understrength we are.” The smoke was already turning his face sooty.

“A lot of people we don’t need, considering we won’t be here long.” When Heavy Artillery Battalion Dora came into Russia, it was accompanied by a security unit that included three hundred infantry and secret police with dogs, and by a four-hundred-man reinforced flak battalion. Neither the one nor the other mattered now. If the Lizards chose to come this way, German infantry could not hold them off, and the flak battalion could not keep their planes away. Dora’s only hope of accomplishing anything was going into action before the enemy noticed it was there. And considering what Dora was ...

Becker laughed, too. Arenswald gave him a curious look. He explained: “Keeping Dora a secret is like taking an elephant out of its enclosure at the Berlin *Tiergarten* and walking it out of the-zoo without the keepers’ paying you any mind.”

“Something to that.” Arenswald waved at the ever-denser smoke all around. “But you see, Karl, we have a very large pocket here.”

“We have a very large elephant, too.” Becker hopped down from the train and walked between the two center tracks, the ones that would have to bear Dora’s weight. The tracks were laid with closely spaced cross ties to help strengthen the roadbed, but the ground was not nearly so stony as it should have been. That would matter a great deal if Dora stayed here a long while. For the few shots it was likely to get off, the ground was less important.

The next few days passed in a berserk blaze of work, with sleep, snatched in odd moments, often under the train to give some protection in case Lizard aircraft did come by. The manuals said assembling Dora needed a week. Driven by the lash of fear for the fatherland, the heavy artillery battalion did it in four and a half days.

The two pieces of the bottom half of the gun carriage went onto the two central tracks and were aligned with each other. They rested on twenty rail trucks, again to distribute Dora's mass as widely as possible. Becker was part of the crew that hydraulically leveled the lower mount.

The diesel cranes lifted crossbeams onto the lower mount, then placed the two-piece upper mount where it belonged. The top of the carriage held Dora's loading assembly and the trunnion supports. It was joined to the lower mount by dozens of heavy bolts. Becker went down one side of the carriage and Arenswald down the other, checking that every one was in place.

They met at the rear, grinned, exchanged drawings, then went *up* the carriage to check each other's sides. Everything had to work once the shooting started; things would go wrong soon enough after that.

Assembly went faster once the carriage was together. The trunnions, the gun cradle, the breech, and the barrel sections all were raised to their proper positions. When Dora was at last complete, Becker admired the monster gun through blowing smoke. Carnage and all, the 80-centimeter cannon was fifty meters long and eleven meters tall; its barrel alone was thirty meters long. Somewhere far above the smoke, Becker heard a Lizard plane whine past. His shoulders slumped; his hands made futile fists. "No, God," he said, almost as a threat, "not now, not when we were so close."

Michael Arenswald clapped him on the shoulder. "They've flown over us before, Karl. It will be all right; you'll see."

No bombs fell on them; no guided rockets exploded by the gun carriage. A crane lifted from a freight car a seven-tonne shell, slowly swung the great projectile, more than five meters long and almost a meter thick, onto the loading assembly. It didn't look like an artillery shell, not to Becker. It looked like something more primeval, as if *Tyrannosaurus rex* had been reincarnated as artillery.

The breech received the shell, was closed with a clang that sounded like a factory noise. The whole battalion cheered as the gun barrel slowly rose, its tip no doubt projecting out of the smoke screen now. Laughing, Arenswald said, "It reminds me of the world's biggest prick getting hard."

"That's one hell of a hard-on, all right," Becker said.

The barrel reached an angle of almost forty-five degrees, stopped. Along with everyone else around, Becker turned away: from it, covered his ears, opened his mouth.

The blast was like nothing he'd ever imagined. It sucked all the air out of his lungs, shook him like a terrier shaking a rat. Stunned, he staggered, stumbled, sat down hard on the ground. His head roared. He wondered if he would ever hear anything through that oceanic clamor again. But he could still see. Sprawled in the dirt beside him, Michael Arenswald gave a big thumbs-up.

A radar technician on the grounded transport ship *67th Emperor Sohrheb* stared at the

screen in front of him, hissed in dismay. Automatic alarms began to yammer even before Breltan shrieked, “Missile incoming!” A warning had come down that the Big Ugliers were playing with missiles, but he’d never expected to encounter one of their toys so soon. He raised both eye turrets to the ceiling in bemusement. The Big Ugliers just weren’t *like* the Race. They were always in a hairy.

Their missile was in a hurry, too, chewing away the distance to the grounded ships. Breltan’s jaws opened again, this time in amusement. So the Tosevites had discovered missiles, had they? Well and good, but they hadn’t yet discovered that missiles too could be killed.

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than the radars showed missiles leaping up to smash the intruder. Breltan laughed again, said, “You’ll have to do better than that, Big Ugliers.”

A missile, as a rule, is a flimsy thing, no stronger than it has to be—any excess weight degrades performance. If another missile—or even a fragment hurled from an exploding warhead—hits it, odds are it will be wrecked.

The shell from Dora, however, had to be armored to withstand the monstrous force that had sent it on its way. A missile exploded a couple of meters from it. The fragments bounced off its brass sides. Another missile struck it a glancing blow before exploding and spun away, ruined.

The shell, undisturbed, flew on.

Breltan watched the radar screen in disbelief mixed with equal measures of horror and fascination. “It can’t do that,” he said. But it could—the Tosevite missile shrugged off everything the Race threw at it and kept coming. Coming right at Breltan.

“Emperor save me,” he whimpered, and dove under his seat in the approved position for protection against attack from the air.

The shell landed about ten meters in front of the *67th Emperor Sohrheb*. Just under a tonne of its mass was high explosives. The rest, in a time measured in microseconds, turned to knife-edged, red-hot fragments of every shape and size.

Like all starships of the invasion fleet, the *67th Emperor Sohrheb* drew its primary power from an atomic pile. But, like most of the ships that landed on Tosev 3, it used a fair part of the energy from that pile to electrolyze water into oxygen and the hydrogen that fueled the Race’s air and ground vehicles.

When it blew, it blew sky-high. No one ever found a trace of Breltan—or his seat.

The fireball was big enough to be visible across sixty kilometers. When it lit up the northern horizon, the men of Heavy Artillery Battalion Dora screamed with: delight, loud enough for Karl Becker to hear them even with his abused ears. “Hit! Hit! Hit!” he

shouted, and danced in a clumsy circle with Michael Arenswald.

“Now *that’s* what I call an orgasm,” Arenswald yelled.

The brigadier commanding the heavy artillery battalion climbed up onto the immense gun carriage, megaphone in hand. “Back to it!” he bawled to his capering crew. “We want to hit them again before they hit us.”

Nothing could have been better calculated to send the battalion back to work at full speed. Unlike a tank gun, Dora could not traverse. A locomotive attached to the front end of the carriage moved forward a few meters, pulling nearly 1,500 tonnes of cannon and mounting along the curved track into its preplanned next firing position.

Even as the flagman brought the engine to a halt right at the mark painted on the track, Becker was dashing forward to make sure the gun carriage had remained level after the stress of the round and the move. The bubbles in the spirit levels at all four corners of the carriage hadn’t stirred a millimeter. He waved up to the reloading gang. “All good here!”

The long barrel lifted a degree or two. A crane was already lifting the expended shell casing out of the breech. “Clear below!” the crane operator shouted. Men scattered. The casing thudded to the ground beside the gun carriage. That wasn’t the way the manuals said to get rid of such casings, but it was the fastest way. The crane swung to pick up a new shell.

Karl Becker kept an eye on his watch. Twenty-nine minutes after Dora spoke for the first time, the great gun spoke again.

Krefak felt the heat from the burning *67th Emperor Sohrheb*, though his missile battery was posted a good ways away from the luckless starship. He was heartily glad of that; the blast when the ship went up had taken out several units closer to it.

Krefak also felt the heat from his own commander, who’d waxed eloquent over his failure to shoot down, the Big Ugliers’ missile. He’d done everything right; he knew he had. The battery had intercepted the Tosevite projectile at least twice. Tapes from the radars proved it. But how was he supposed to say so, with only smoking rubble left where a proud starship had stood mere heartbeats before?

One of the males at a radar screen let out a frightened hiss. “The eggless creatures launched another one!” he exclaimed.

Krefak gaped in shocked surprise. Once was catastrophe enough, but twice—He couldn’t imagine twice. He didn’t *want* to imagine twice. His voice rose to a most-unofficerlike screech:

“Shoot it down!”

Roars from the launchers showed him that the computers hadn’t waited for his orders. He ran, to the screen, watched the missiles fly. As they had before, they went straight to the mark, exploded...and were gone. So far as the Tosevite missile was concerned, they

might as well never have been fired. It proceeded inexorably on its ordained course.

Below the radar screen that marked its track through the air was another that evaluated the ground target at which it was aimed. “No,” he said softly. “By the Emperors, launch more missiles!”

“The battery has expended all the ones we had on launchers, superior sir,” the male answered helplessly. “More are coming.” Then he too took a look at where the Tosevite missile was heading. “Not the *56th Emperor Jossano*.” His eye turrets quivered with fright as he stared at Krefak.

“Yes, with most of our nuclear weapons on board. To treachery with colonizing this stinking planet; we should have sterilized it to be rid of the Tosevites once and for all. We—” His voice was lost in the roar of the exploding missile, and in the much, much bigger roar that subsumed it.

The *56th Emperor Jossano* went up in the same sort of blast as had taken the *67th Emperor Sohrheb*. The fission and fusion weapons were stored in the very heart of the ship, in a strongly armored chamber. It did not save them. As the *56th Emperor Jossano* blew to pieces and burned, the explosives that triggered the rapid joining of precisely machined chunks of plutonium began going off, as if they were rounds of ammunition in a flaming tank.

The bombs themselves did not go off; the triggering charges did not ignite in the precise order or at the precise rate that required. But the casings were wrecked, the chunks of plutonium warped out of shape and broken and, indeed, scattered over a goodly part of the Tosevite landscape as explosion after explosion wracked the *56th Emperor Jossano*.

They were very likely the most valuable pieces of metal on the face of the Earth, or would have been had any human being known they were there or what to do with them. No human being did, not then.

More screams of glee rose from Dora’s firing crew. They did not waste motion dancing at the sight of this new flame on the distant horizon, but immediately set to work reloading the 80-centimeter cannon.

Michael Arenswald bellowed in Becker’s ear. “Six! Didn’t I tell you we’d get off six?”

“We’ve been lucky twice,” Becker said. “That’s more than I expected right there. Maybe we’ll go again—third time’s the charm, they say.”

For an instant too long, he thought the scream in the sky was part of the way his head rang after the second detonation of the monster gun. The locomotive had just finished hauling Dora to its next marked firing position. Becker started over to the gun carriage to see if it had stayed level yet again.

The first bomb blast, a few meters behind him, hurled him facefirst into that great

mountain of metal. He felt things break—his nose, a cheekbone, several ribs, a hip. He opened his mouth to scream. Another bomb went off, this one even closer.

Jens Larssen's apartment lay a few blocks west of the Union Stockyards. The neighborhood wasn't much, but he'd still been surprised at how cheap he got the place. The incessant Chicago wind came from the west that day. A couple of days later, it started blowing off Lake Michigan, and he understood. But it was too late by then—he'd already signed the lease.

The wind blew off the lake the day his wife, Barbara, got into town, too. He still remembered the way her eyes got wide. She put the smell into one raised eyebrow and four words: "Essence of terrified cow."

The wind was blowing off the lake tonight, but Larssen hardly noticed the rich manure stink. He could smell his own fear, and Barbara's. Lizard planes were over Chicago again. He'd listened to Edward R. Murrow on crackling shortwave from England, listened to that deep, raspy voice and its trademark opening: "This is London." Such was Murrow's magic that he'd imagined he understood what being a Londoner in the Blitz was like. Now he knew better.

More planes screeched past; more bombs fell, some, by the way the windows rattled, quite close by. He clung to Barbara, and she to him, under the kitchen table. Chicago had no shelters. "Hitting the stockyards again," she said into his ear.

He nodded. "Anything with rails." The Lizards were inhumanly methodical about pasting transportation hubs, and Chicago was nothing else but. It was also close to the landing zone they'd carved out for themselves in downstate Illinois, Missouri, and Kentucky. Thanks to both those things, the town was taking a heavy pounding.

Only a couple of candles lit the one-bedroom apartment. Their light did not get past the blankets tacked up to serve as blackout curtains. The blankets would not have contained electric lights, but the power had been off more often than it was on the past few days. It made Larssen glad for once that he had only an old-fashioned icebox; not a fancy electric refrigerator. As long as the ice man kept coming around—as long as the ice man still had ice—his food would stay fresh.

Antiaircraft guns, pitifully few and pitifully ineffective, added their barks to the cacophony. Shrapnel pattered down on rooftops like hot metal hail. Air-raid sirens wailed, lost souls in the night.

After a while, Larssen noticed he heard no more Lizard planes, though the rest of the fireworks display continued as gunners blazed away at their imaginations. "I think it's over," he said.

"This time," Barbara answered. He felt her tremble in his arms; for that matter, he felt pretty shaky himself. One by one, sirens fell silent. His wife went on, "I don't know how much more of this I can handle." Like a tightstretched wire, her voice vibrated with hidden stress.

“The English stuck it out,” he said, remembering Murrow again.

“God knows how,” she said. “I don’t.” She squeezed him even tighter than she had when the bombs were falling.

Being a thoroughly rational young man, he opened his mouth to explain to her how bad a beating London had taken, and for how long, and how the Lizards seemed, for the moment anyhow, to be much more selective than the Nazis about hitting civilian targets. But however thoroughly rational he was, the springy firmness of her body locked against his reminded him that he was young. Instead of explaining, he kissed her.

Her mouth came open against his; she moaned a little, deep in her throat, whether from fear or desire or both commingled he never knew. She pressed the warm palm of her hand against his hair. He rolled on top of her, careful even then not to knock his head on the underside of the table. When at last their kiss broke, he whispered, “Shall we go in the bedroom?”

“No,” she said, startling him. Then she giggled. “Let’s do it right here, on the floor. It’ll remind me of those times in the backseat of your old Chevy.”

“All right,” he said, by then too eager to care much where. He shifted his weight. “Raise up, just a little.” When she moved, he undid the buttons on the back of her blouse and unhooked her bra with one hand. He hadn’t tried that since they were married, but the ease with which he accomplished it said his hand remembered the backseat of the old Chevy, too.

He tossed the cotton blouse and bra aside. Presently, he said, “Lift up again.” He slowly slid her panties down her legs. Instead of pulling off her skirt, he hiked it up. That made her laugh again. She kissed him, long and slow. His hands wandered where they would.

So did hers, unbuckling his belt, opening his trouser button, and, with several delicious pauses, lowering his zipper. He yanked down his pants and jockey shorts, just far enough. They were both laughing by then. Laughing still, he plunged into her, leaving behind for a little while the terror outside the blacked-out apartment.

“I should have taken off my shirt,” he said when they were through. “Now it’s all sweaty.”

“It? What about me?” Barbara brought both hands up to his chest, made as if to push him vertically away from her. He raised up on his elbows and knees—and this time did catch the back of his head on the bottom of the kitchen table, hard enough to see stars. He swore, first in English, then in the fragments of Norwegian he’d picked up from his grandfather.

Barbara, whose maiden name was Baker and who had a couple of several-times-great-grandfathers who’d fought in the Revolution, always thought that was the funniest thing in the world. “You’re in no position to laugh now, wench,” he said, and tickled her conveniently bare ribs. The linoleum made moist squelching noises under her backside as she tried to wriggle away. That set him laughing, too. He grabbed her. They might

have begun again, but the telephone chose that moment to ring.

Larssen jerked up in surprise—he hadn't thought the phone was working—and, gave himself another crack in the head. This time he started out swearing in Norwegian. Trousers flopping around his ankles, he hobbled into the bedroom. "Hello?" he growled, annoyed as if it were the caller's fault he'd knocked his brains loose.

"That is you, Jens? You are all right, you and Barbara?"

The accented voice on the other end of the line threw ice water on his steam. "Yes, Dr. Fermi," he said, and made a hasty grab for his pants. Of course Fermi could not see him, but he was embarrassed even to be talking to the Italian physicist, a dignified man if ever there was one, with trousers at half-mast. "We came through safe again, thank you."

"Safe?" Fermi echoed bitterly. "This is a word without meaning in the world today. I *thought it had one when Laura and I* came here four years ago, but I am wrong. But never mind that. Here is the reason I call: Szilard says—and he, is right—we must all meet tomorrow, and tomorrow early. Seven o'clock. He would say six if he could."

"I'll be there," Larssen promised. "What's up?"

"The Lizards, they are moving toward Chicago."

The words seemed to hang on the wire. "But they can't," Jens said, though he knew perfectly well they could. What the devil was there to stop them?

Fermi understood what he meant. "You are right—they must not. If they come here, everything we do since we begin is lost. Too much time lost, time we have not to waste even against Germany, to say nothing of these creatures."

"Germany." Larssen kept his voice flat. He'd been relieved past all measure when the atomic bomb that exploded above Chicago proved not to have a swastika painted on its casing. He once more had no idea how far along the Nazis were on their own bomb program. It would be a hell of a note, though, for humanity to have to depend on them alone for a weapon with which to do the Lizards some real damage. He wondered if he would sooner see Earth conquered than Adolf Hitler its savior. *Just maybe*, he thought. On the line, Fermi cleared his throat. That brought Larssen back to the here-and-now. "I'll be there," he said again.

"Good," Fermi said. "I go, then—many others to call while phones are working. I see you in the morning." He hung up without saying good-bye. Larssen sat down on the bed, thinking hard. His pants slid back down to his ankles. He didn't notice.

His wife walked into the bedroom. She carried a candle to light her way. Outside, fire-engine sirens rang through the night as their crews fought to douse the fires the Lizards had started. "What's up?" Barbara asked. She tossed her blouse and underwear into the wickerwork laundry hamper.

"Big meeting tomorrow," he answered, then repeated Fermi's grim news.

"That's not good," she said. She had no real notion of what he was working on under



Stagg Field; she'd been studying medieval English literature when they met at Berkeley. But she knew the project was important. She asked, "How are we going to stop them?"

"You come up with the answer to that one and you win the sixty-four dollars."

She smiled at that, then set the candle in a silver stick—a wedding present Larssen had never thought they'd use—on top of the dresser. With both hands, she took off her skirt and threw it at the hamper. She glanced over to him. "You still haven't pulled up your pants."

"I did so," he said, then had to add lamely, "They must have fallen down again."

"Well, shall I put on a nightgown now, or not?"

He considered. The meeting in the morning was early, but if he poured down enough coffee, he'd get through it okay...and Barbara, naked in the candlelight, made him want to forget tomorrow anyhow. "Not," he said.

"Good. This time, take your shirt off, too."

Nothing was running the next morning when Larssen headed for the University of Chicago, not the buses, not the elevated, nothing. Only a few cars crawled cautiously along the street, inhibited not only by the gas shortage but also now by the risk of rubble.

A rifle-toting air-raid warden in a British-style tin hat and a Civil Defense armband nodded to Jens as he walked past. The wardens had flowered like weeds after a drought in the panicky weeks following Pearl Harbor, then disappeared almost as quickly when their services proved unnecessary. But these days, they really were needed. This one looked as though he hadn't slept in a month. His face was covered with graying stubble; an unlit cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. But he was going on as best he could, like everyone else.

An hour's brisk walk got Larssen onto the university campus. While he supposed that was good for him, he also gave some serious thought to trying to get his hands on a bicycle. The sooner the better, he decided, before everyone got the same idea and the price went sky-high. He didn't have two hours to spare every day going back and forth to work.

Eckhart Hall stood on the southeast corner of the Quadrangle. It was a new building, having opened in 1930. New or not, however, it didn't boast air conditioning; the windows to the commons room were open, allowing fresh warm muggy air to replace the stale warm muggy air already inside. In deference to the hour, someone had put out a big pot of coffee and a tray of sweet rolls on a table set under those windows.

Larssen made a beeline for that table, poured himself a paper cup of coffee, gulped it down hot and black, then grabbed a roll and got a second cup. With the caffeine jolt kicking in, he drank this one more slowly.

But as he carried the coffee and sweet roll to a chair, he wondered how long such things would continue to exist in Chicago. The coffee was imported, of course, and so were some of the ingredients in the roll—the cinnamon, certainly. How long could

commerce continue at even its wartime level with Lizard bases scattered over the United States like growing tumors?

He nodded to Enrico Fermi, one of the two or three men who had beaten him to the meeting. The Italian physicist was wiping his mouth on a paper napkin (the pulp from which it was made was yet another import, Larssen thought). “We’d best enjoy life while we can,” the younger man said, and explained his reasoning.

Fermi nodded. His receding hairline and oval face made him the literal embodiment of the word *egghead*, and also made him look older than his forty-one years. His smile now was sweet and rather sad. “My world has already turned upside down once of late. Another time seems somehow less distressing—and I doubt the Lizards concern themselves over my wife’s religion.”

Brought up comfortably Lutheran in a land where one could fairly comfortably be anything, Jens had never much concerned himself with religion. But Laura Fermi had been a Jew in fascist Italy. The Italians were not rabid on the subject like the Germans, but they had made matters sticky enough for the Fermis to be glad to get out.

“I wonder how far along this trail the Axis would be if Hitler only had the sense to leave some of his brightest people alone and let them work for him,” Larssen said.

“I am not to any great degree a political man, but it has always seemed to me that fascism and sense do not mingle,” Fermi said. He raised his voice to address a newcomer: “Is this not so, Leo?”

Leo Szilard was short and stocky, and wore a suit with padded shoulders which emphasized the fact. “What do you say, Enrico?” he asked. When Fermi repeated himself, he screwed up his broad, fleshy face in thought before answering, “Authoritarianism in any form makes for bad science, I believe, for its postulates are not rational. The Nazis are bad for this, yes, but anyone who thinks the American government—and hence its projects like our so-called Metallurgical Laboratory here—free of such preconceived idiocy is himself an idiot.”

Larssen nodded vehemently at that. If Washington had really believed in what the Met Lab was doing, it would have poured in three times the research money and support from the day Einstein first suggested the violent release of atomic energy was possible.

Nodding also helped Jens keep a straight face. Szilard was both brilliant and cultured, and expressed himself so. But the Hungarian scientist’s accent never failed to remind Larssen of Bela Lugosi’s in *Dracula*. He wondered if Szilard had ever seen the movie, but lacked the nerve to ask.

More people drifted in, by ones and twos. Szilard looked pointedly at his watch every few minutes; his attitude declared that being bombarded by creatures from another planet wasn’t a good enough excuse for missing an important meeting.

Finally, at about twenty-five after seven, he decided he could wait no more. He said loudly, “We have a question to face today: in light of the Lizards’ move on Chicago, what is our proper course? Shall we abandon our research here, and seek some new arid

safer place to continue it, accepting all the loss of time and effort and probably also of material this would entail? Or shall we seek to persuade the government to defend this city with everything in its power for our sake, knowing the army may well fail and the Lizards succeed here as they have so many other places? Discussion, gentlemen?”

Gerald Sebring said, “God knows I want an excuse to get out of Chicago—” That occasioned general laughter. Sebring had been planning to go do some research back in Berkeley in early June—and, incidentally, to marry another physicist’s secretary while he was out there. The arrival of the Lizards changed his plans, as it did so many others’ (come to that, Laura Fermi was still back in New York).

Sebring waited for the chuckles to die down before he went on. “Everything we’re doing here, though, feels like it’s right on the point of coming to fruition. Isn’t that so, people? We’d lose a year, maybe more, if we had to pull up stakes now. I don’t think we can afford it. I don’t think the world can afford it.”

Several people nodded. Larssen stuck up a hand. Leo Szilard saw him, aimed a stubby forefinger in his direction. He said, “Strikes me this doesn’t have to be an either-or proposition. We can go on with a lot of our work here at the same time as we get ready to pull out as fast as possible if we have to.” He found he had trouble baldly saying, *if the Lizards take Chicago*.

“That is sensible, and practical for some of our projects,” Szilard agreed. “The chemical extraction of plutonium, for instance, though it requires the most delicate balances, can proceed elsewhere—not least because we have as yet very little plutonium to extract. Other lines of research, however, the pile you are assembling among them—”

“Tearing it down now would be most unfortunate, the more so if that proves unnecessary,” Fermi said. “Our  $k$  factor on this one should be above 1.00 at least, perhaps as high as 1.04. To break off work just when we are at last on the point of achieving a sustained chain reaction, that would be very bad.” His wide, mobile mouth twisted to show just how bad he thought it would be.

“Besides,” Sebring said, “where the heck are we likely to stay safe from the Lizards anyhow?” He was far from a handsome man, with a long face, heavy eyebrows, and buck teeth, but as usual spoke forcefully and seriously.

Szilard said, “Are we agreed, then, that while, as Jens says, we take what precautions we can, we ought to stay here in Chicago as long as that remains possible?” No one spoke. Szilard clicked his tongue between his teeth. When he continued, he sounded angry: “We are not authoritarians here. Anyone who thinks leaving wiser, tell us why this is so. Persuade us if you can—if you prove right, you will have done us great service.” Arthur Compton, who was in charge of the Metallurgical Laboratory, said, “I think Sebring put it best, Leo: where can we run that the Lizards will not follow?”

Again, no one disagreed. That was not because Compton headed the project, nor because of his formidable physical presence—he was tall and lean and sternly handsome, and looked more like a Barrymore than the Nobel prize-winning physicist he was. But the rest of the talented crew in the commons room were far too independent to

follow a leader simply because he was the leader. Here, though, they had all reached the same conclusion.

Szilard saw that. He said, "If it is decided, then, that Chicago must be held, we must convince the army of the importance of this as well."

"They will fight to hold Chicago anyhow," Compton said. "It is the hinge upon which the United States pivots, and they know it."

"It is more important than that," Fermi said quietly. "With what we do here, Chicago is the hinge on which the world pivots, and the army, it does not know *that*. We must send someone to tell them."

"We must send some two," Szilard said, and all at once Larssen was certain he and Fermi had planned their strategy together ahead of time. "We must send two, and separately, in case one meets with misfortune along the way. The war is here among us now; this can happen."

Sure enough, Fermi spoke up again, as if with the next line of dialogue in an ancient Greek play: "We should send also native-born Americans; officers are more likely to hear them with attention than some foreigner, some enemy alien who is not fully to be trusted even now when the Lizards, true aliens, have come."

Larssen was nodding, impressed by Fermi's logic at the same time as he regretted the truths that underlay it, when Gerald Sebring raised a hand and said, "I'll go."

"So will I," Larssen heard himself saying. He blinked in surprise; he hadn't known he was going to volunteer until the words were out of his mouth. But speaking up turned out to make sense, even to him: "Walt Zinn can ride herd, on the gang of hooligans working on the pile."

Zinn nodded. "As long as I can keep 'em out of jail, I'll get along all right." He gave away his Canadian origins by saying *oat* for *out*.

"Then it is settled." Szilard rubbed his hands in satisfaction. Fermi also looked pleased. Szilard went on, "You will leave as soon as possible. One of you will go by car—Larssen, that will be you, I think. Gerald, you will take the train. I hope both of you get to Washington safe and sound—and I hope Washington will still be in human hands when you arrive."

That sent a nasty chill through Larssen. He hadn't imagined Lizards marching up Pennsylvania Avenue past the White House. But if they could move on Chicago, they could surely move on Washington. He wondered if the invaders from another world had figured out it was the capital of the United States.

Looking at Szilard's smug expression, he realized the Hungarian had gotten exactly what he wanted. For all his devotion to democracy, Szilard had maneuvered the meeting like a Chicago wardheeler. Larssen chuckled. Well, if that wasn't democracy, what was it? A question better left unanswered in Chicago, perhaps.

The chuckle turned into a guffaw that Larssen fortunately managed to strangle before it got loose. If you played with the letters in Dr. Szilard's name just a little...Larssen

wondered if Szilard himself had noticed, and how one said *lizard* in Magyar.

I can report one riddle solved, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said

“That will be a pleasant novelty;” Atvar snapped; the longer he wrestled with Tosev 3; the testier he became. But he could not afford to irk Kirel excessively. All bowed to the Emperor, yes, but those below him competed. Even officers’ cabals were not unknown. And so Atvar softened his tone: “What new things have you learned of the Big Uglies, then?”

“Our technicians have discovered why the high-burst nuclear weapons of our initial bombardment failed to completely disrupt their radio communications.”

Kirel beckoned to, one of those technicians, who floated up with a captured Tosevite radio set. Atvar opened his jaws in mocking laughter. “Big and ugly and clumsy, just like the Tosevites themselves,” he said.

“You speak truth, Exalted Fleetlord,” the technician said. “Also clumsy and primitive. The electronics are not even solid-state, as ours have been through almost all our recorded history. The Tosevites use as clumsy makeshifts these large vacuum-filled tubes here.” He pulled off the back plate of the set to point to the parts he meant. “They are bulky, as you see, Exalted Fleetlord, and the amount of waste heat they produce is appalling—they are most inefficient. But exactly because they are so large and so—so gross, if I may use an imprecise word, they are much less susceptible to electromagnetic pulse than unshielded integrated circuits would be.”

“Thank you, Technician-Second,” Atvar said, reading the male’s body paint for his rank. “Your data are valuable. Service to the Emperor.” Hearing himself dismissed, the technician cast down his eyes in salute to the sovereign, then took back the radio set and pushed himself away from the fleetlord’s presence.

“You see, Exalted Fleetlord, the Tosevites’ communications system retained its utility only because it is so primitive,” Kirel said.

“Their radios are primitive, and that ends up being useful to them. They don’t yet know how to make decent missiles, so they fling outsized artillery shells instead, and that ends up being useful. Now they *are* trying to build missiles. Where will it end, Shiplord?”

“In our victory,” Kirel said stoutly.

Atvar gave him a grateful look. Maybe the only reason Kirel was acting so loyally was that he did not want command of what looked like an effort that promised more in the way of trouble than glory. At the moment, Atvar didn’t care. Just having someone to whom he could complain worked wonders.

And complain he did: “When the Tosevites aren’t primitive, they hurt us, too. By the memories of all the ancient Emperors, who would have been mad enough to imagine making boats big enough to put airplanes on them? Who but the Big Uglies, I mean?”

Home, Rabotev 2, and Halless 1 all had free water, yes, but in the form of rivers and ponds and lakes (Rabotev 2 even had a couple of smallish seas). None of them was troubled by the vast, world-bestridding oceans of Tosev 3, and neither the Race, the Rabotevs, nor the Hallessi used their waters to anything like the extent the Big Uglies did. Having planes appear out of nowhere, as when they raided the base on the Chinese Coast, was a rude surprise. So were the ships with big guns that pounded bases anywhere near water.

Kirel wagged his fingers in a shrug. “Now that we know they fight from the sea, we can sink their big boats, and faster than they can hope to build them. The boats aren’t exactly inconspicuous, either. That problem will go away, and soon.”

“May it, be so.” But once Atvar got to worrying out loud, he wasn’t about to let himself be mollified so easily, “These missiles they’re trying to build—how are we supposed to shoot them all down? We came here intending, to fight savages whose only missiles came from bows. And do you know what the latest is?”

“Tell me, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said, in the tones of a male who understands he’d better listen sympathetically if he knows what’s good for him.

“In the past few days, for the first time, jet planes rose against our aircraft from both Deutschland and Britain, They’re still badly inferior to ours—especially the British ones—but not nearly so much so as the primitive crates with revolving airfoils we’ve been facing.”

“I—hadn’t heard that, Exalted Fleetlord.” Now Atvar really had Kirel’s attention again. After that moment of surprise, the shiplord continued, “Wait a bit. Deutschland and Britain were enemies to each other before we landed, am I right?”

“Yes, yes. Britain and the U.S.A. and the SSSR and China against Deutschland and Italia; Britain and the U.S.A. and China against Nippon; but not, for some eggless reason, Nippon against the SSSR. If the Tosevites didn’t keep coming up with new things to throw at us, I’d swear on the Emperor’s name they were all mad.”

“Wait a bit,” Kirel repeated. “If Deutschland and Britain were foes until we landed, it’s not likely they’d share jet plane technology, is it?”

“I wouldn’t think so, but who can tell for certain *what* the Big Uglies would do? Maybe it’s having so many different empires on so little land that makes them the way they are.” The scrambled, convoluted way the Tosevites played the game of politics made even the maneuvers of the imperial court tame by comparison. Dealing with any one Tosevite official made Atvar feel out of his league. As for playing them off against one another, as the manuals suggested, he counted himself lucky that they weren’t exploiting him.

But Kirel was still worrying over the jets: “Exalted Fleetlord, if they don’t share technology, that means they can only have each developed it independently. They are like a bad virus, Fleetlord; they mutate—not physically, but technically, which is worse—too fast, maybe faster than we can handle. Perhaps we should sterilize the planet of

them.”

The fleetlord turned both eye sockets to bear on his subordinate. This, from the male who had urged giving the Big Ugliers a chance to surrender before the Race choked off their communications?—or rather, failed to choke off their communications? “You think they represent so great a danger to us, Shiplord?”

“I do, Exalted Fleetlord. We are at a high level, and have been steady there for ages. They are lower, but rising quickly. We must smash them down while we still can.”

“If only the filthy creatures hadn’t hit the *56th Emperor Jossano*,” Atvar said mournfully. *If only we hadn’t kept so many of our bombs aboard one ship*, he added mentally. But no, he was not to blame for that; ancient doctrine ordained entrusting large stores of nuclear weapons only to the most reliable shiplords. As an officer of the Race should, he’d followed that ancient doctrine. No one could possibly think less of him for that—except that in so doing, he’d suffered a disaster. The way ancient doctrine corroded whenever it touched matters Tosevite worried him even more than the fighting down on the surface of Tosev 3.

“We still have some of the devices left,” Kirel persisted. “Maybe the Big Ugliers will be more willing to submit if they see what we can do to their cities.”

Atvar threw back his head in disagreement. “We do not destroy the world toward which a settler fleet is already traveling.” That was what ancient doctrine said, doctrine based on the conquests of Rabotevs and Hallessi.

“Exalted Fleetlord, Tosev 3 appears to me to be dissimilar to our previous campaigns,” Kirel said, pressing his superior up to the edge of politeness. “The Tosevites have a greater capacity to resist than did the other subject races, and so seem to require harsher measures. The Deutsche in particular, Exalted Fleetlord—the cannon that wrecked the *56th Emperor Jossano* was theirs, even if it was on the land of the SSSR, and the missile the Big Ugliers tried to launch, and now, you tell me, they fly jet planes as well.”

“No,” Atvar said. Ancient doctrine declared that new planets were not to be spoiled by radioactivity, which was apt to linger long after the war of subjugation ended. After all, the Race would be living here in perpetuity, integrating Tosev into the fabric of the Empire...and Tosev 3 didn’t have that much land to begin with.

But it did have hideously troublesome natives. Just moments before, the fleetlord had thought how poorly ancient doctrine worked when dealing with the Big Ugliers. Moving away from it frightened him as he’d never been frightened before, as if he were cut off from the Emperor’s favor, adrift and alone. Yet would he deserve the Emperor’s favor if he led the Race to more disasters?

“Wait, Shiplord—I have changed my mind,” he told Kirel, who had begun to turn away. “Go ahead and use one on—what is the name of the place?”

“Berlin, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel answered. “It shall be done.”

“Paris,” George Bagnall said wearily. “I was here on holiday a couple of years before the war started. It’s not the same.”

“Nothing’s the same as it was before the war started,” Ken Embry said. “Hell, nothing’s the same as it was before the Lizards came, and that was bare weeks ago.”

“A good thing, too, else we’d all be kriegies by now, sitting behind, barbed wire and waiting for our next Red Cross packages,” Alf Whyte said. The navigator lifted a leg and shook his tired foot, then laughed wryly. “If we were kriegies with Red Cross packages, we’d likely see better grub than we’ve had on the way up here.”

“Right on both counts,” Bagnall said. The German occupiers of northern and central France could have swept up the English fliers a dozen times over on their hike to Paris, but hadn’t bothered. Some, in fact, cheered the men they might have shot under other circumstances. French peasants shared what they had with the Englishmen, but what they had was mostly potatoes and greens. Their rations made the ones back home sybaritic by comparison, a true testimonial to how meager they were.

Ken Embry said, “Talk about the Lizards, who’d’ve dreamt he’d be sorry to hear Berlin was smashed to flinders?”

The French papers, still German-dominated, had screamed of nothing else the past few days, shrieked about the fireball that consumed the city, wailed over unbelievable devastation, wept at the hundreds of thousands reported dead. Bagnall understood most of what the sheets proclaimed; his French was better than he’d giddily claimed in the moment of relief after the Lanc got down safe. Now he said, “I’d not have shed a tear if they’d managed to toast Hitler along with everyone else.”

“Nor I,” Embry agreed. “I’d not have minded carrying one of those bloody big bombs when we flew over Cologne, either. So long as it was us or the Nazis—but the Lizards complicate everything.”

“Too right they do.” Bagnall cast a wary eye to the sky, as if to watch for a Lizard plane. Not that seeing one would do any good, if it had on board a superbomb like the one that hit Berlin. If the papers were to be believed—always a risky business in France, and all the more so after 1940—one single bomb had leveled an area miles across. You couldn’t even run from a bomb like that, let alone hide. What point in watching the skies, then?

As Bagnall brought his gaze back to earth, it settled on a faded, tattered propaganda poster from the Vichy government; though it had never held sway in the German-occupied parts of France, this was not the first such poster he’d seen. In big, tri-color letters, it proclaimed, *LABOURAGE ET PÂTURAGE SONT LES DEUX MAMELLES DE LA FRANCE*. Underneath,



someone had neatly chalked a comment: *Merde*.

The flight engineer ignored the editorial remark. He stared in wonder and fascination at the slogan, marveling that anyone could have written it in the first place, let alone committed it to print and spread it broadcast. But there it was, in letters four inches high, all tricked out and made to look patriotic. Quite unable to help himself, he broke out in great, braying guffaws.

“What’s so bleeding funny?” asked Joe Simpkin, the Lanc’s rear gunner.

Bagnall still could not speak. He simply pointed at the Vichy poster. Their attention drawn to it, Embry and All Whyte started laughing, too.

Simpkin didn’t. He really had no French, though he’d picked up a few words, not all of them printable, since the bomber had to land. The edifying sentiment of the poster still remained beyond him, however. He scowled and asked, “What’s it say?”

Something like Work and farming are France s two tits Bagnall answered between wheezes Translating it into English set him off again, and everyone else with him. A thin Frenchman in a ragged jacket and a black beret frowned at the spectacle of seven obvious foreigners falling to pieces in the middle of the street. Because there were seven of them, he didn’t do anything more than frown.

“Tits, is it?” Simpkin said. He was from Gloucester, and spoke with a western accent. “France has better tits’n those, and legs, too.”

As if to prove him right, a pretty girl rode by on a rattling bicycle that was probably older than she was. Her skirt showed a lot of tanned leg. Bagnall could hear every click of the bicycle chain as it traveled over the sprocket. He could hear other bicycles, around the corner and out of sight. He could hear horses’ hooves, and the rattle of iron tyres on cobblestones as a horsedrawn wagon made its slow way along the street. He could hear someone working a hand-powered sewing machine, and an old woman calling her cat, whose name was Claude and who was, she said, a very naughty fellow. He felt as though he could hear the whole city.

“Paris isn’t Paris without a horde of motorcars, all trying to run you down at once,” he said.

“No, but it’s cleaner than it used to be because the cars are gone,” Embry said. “Smell how fresh the air is. We might as well still be out in the country. Last time I was here, the petrol fumes were bad as London.”

“No petrol fumes to worry about now,” Bagnall agreed. “No petrol to worry about, either—the Jerries have taken it all for their planes and tanks.”

Footsteps from around the corner told of someone approaching. The footsteps rang, as if even the fellow’s shoes were imbued with a sense of his importance. When he appeared a few seconds later, he proved better fed and much better dressed than most of the Frenchmen Bagnall had seen. Something gleamed silver on his lapel. As he drew near, Bagnall saw what it was: a little pin in the shape of a double-headed ax—the *francisque*, symbol of Vichy and collaboration.

The man started to walk on by, but the sight of men in unfamiliar uniforms, even ones as dirty and ragged as those of the Lanc's crew had become, roused his curiosity. "*Pardonnez-moi, messieurs, mais—êtes-vous allemands?*" he asked, then switched languages: "*Sind Sie deutsche?*"

"*Non, monsieur nous sommes anglais,*" Bagnall answered.

The Frenchman's eyes opened wide. Of itself, his left hand twitched toward that lapel pin, as if to hide the *francisque*. Bagnall wondered what was going through his head, how he felt, having accommodated himself to the German yoke, on meeting men from a country which refused to wear it.

He spoke English, too. "All the world today is a part of humanity." With a nod, he edged past the Englishmen and hurried away, looking back once over his shoulder.

"Slimy beggar," All Whyte muttered. "All the world, my left one. I'd like to give him my boot up his backside."

"So would I," Bagnall said. "But the devil of it is, he's right, or how long d'you think we'd last here traipsing about in RAF blue? It'd be a *Stalag* for us faster than you can say, 'Hands up!'"

"Maybe so, but I don't much care to count blighters like that as part of humanity," Whyte said. "If it was Lizards in Paris, he'd be sucking up to them instead of the Germans."

The navigator didn't bother keeping his voice down. The Frenchman jerked as if stung by a bee and walked even faster. Now his footfalls sounded like those of a mere mortal, not of one who was lord of all he surveyed.

Ken Embry clicked his tongue between his teeth. "We should count our blessings. We haven't had to live under Jerry's thumb the last two years. I daresay if Hitler had invaded and won, he'd have found his share of English collaborators, and plenty more who'd, do what they had to to stay alive."

"I don't mind the second sort," Bagnall said. "You have to live and that means you have to get on about your job and all But I'm damned if I can see any of us sporting a silver jackboot or whatever the Mosley maniacs use. There's a difference between getting along and sucking up. Nobody *makes* you wear the *francisque* you do it because you want to."

The rest of the aircrew nodded. They walked deeper into Paris. The nearly empty streets were not all that made it feel strange to Bagnall. When he'd been here before, the Depression still held sway; one of the things he'd never forgotten was the spectacle of men, many of them well dressed, suddenly stooping to pluck a cigarette butt out of the gutter. But well-dressed men in London were doing the same thing then. Somehow the Frenchmen managed to invest even scrounging with panache.

"That's what's gone," Bagnall exclaimed, as pleased at his discovery as if he were a physicist playing with radium. His comrades turned to look at him. He went on, "What did we always used to think of when we thought of Paris?"

“The Folies-Bergère,” Embry answered at once. “What’s her name, the Negro wench—Josephine Baker—prancing about wearing a few bananas and damn all else. All the girls behind her wearing even less. The orchestra sawing away down in the pit and no one paying it any mind.”

“Sounds good to me,” Joe Simpkin said. “How do we get there from here?”

Not without effort, Bagnall ignored the gunner’s interruption. “Not quite what I meant, Ken, but close enough. Paris stood for good times—Gay Paree and all that. You always had the feeling everybody who lived here knew how to enjoy himself better than you did. Lord knows whether it was really true, but you always thought so. You don’t, now.”

“Hard to be gay when you’re hungry and occupied,” Alf Whyte said.

“Occupied, yes,” Ken Embry said softly. “Straighten up, lads, here comes Jerry himself. Let’s look like soldiers for him, shall we?”

The German infantry of propaganda photographs looked more machined than born of man and woman: all lines and angles; all motions completely identical; hard, expressionless faces under coalscuttle helmets that added a final intimidating touch. The squad ambling up the street toward the aircrew fell a good ways short of Herr Goebbels’ ideal. A couple of them were fat; one wore a mustache that had more gray than brown in it. Several had the top, buttons of their tunics undone, something a Goebbels soldier would sooner have been shot than imagine. Some were missing buttons altogether; most had boots that wanted polishing.

*Third-line troops*, Bagnall realized, *maybe fourth-*. The real German army, the past year, was locked in battle with the Russians or grinding now forward, now back across the Sahara. Beaten France got the dregs of German manpower. Bagnall wondered how happy these Occupation warriors were at the prospect of holding back the Lizards, a worse enemy than the Red Army ever dreamed of being.

He also wondered, rather more to the point, if the tacit Anglo-German truce held on the ground as well as in the air. The Germans up ahead might be overage and overweight, but they all carried Mauser rifles, which made the aircrew’s pistols seem like toys by comparison.

The *Feldwebel* in charge of the German squad owned a belly that made him look as if he were in a family way. He held up a hand to rein in his men, then approached the British fliers alone. He had three chins and his eyes were pouchy, but they were also very shrewd; Bagnall would not have wanted to sit down at a card table with him.

“*Sprechen Sie deutsch?*” the sergeant asked.

The Englishmen looked at one another. They all shook their heads. Ken Embry asked, “Do any of your men speak English? Or *parlez-vous français?*”

The *Felwebel* shook his head; his flabby flesh wobbled. But, as Bagnall had suspected, he was a resourceful fellow. He went back to his squad, growled at his men. They hurried into shops on the boulevard. In less than a minute, one of the soldiers emerged

with a thin, frightened-looking Frenchman whose enormous ears looked ready to sail him away on the slightest breeze.

That, however, was not why the soldier had grabbed him. He proved to speak not only French but also fluent German. The *Feldwebel* spoke through him: "There is a *Soldatenheim*, a military canteen, at the Café Wepler, Place Clichy. That is where English fliers are being dealt with. You will please come with us."

"Are we prisoners?" Bagnall asked.

The Frenchman relayed the question to the German sergeant. He was more at ease now that he saw he was to serve as interpreter rather than, say, hostage. The sergeant answered, "No, you are not prisoners. You are guests. But this is not your country, and you will come with us."

It did not sound like a request. In English, Embry said, "Shall I point out it's not his bloody country, either?" With the rest of the aircrew, Bagnall considered that the Germans had his comrades outnumbered and outgunned. No one said anything. The pilot sighed and returned to French: "Tell the sergeant we will go with him."

"*Gut, gut,*" the *Feldwebel* said expansively, cradling that vast belly of his as if it were indeed a child. He also ordered the Frenchman to come along so he could keep on interpreting. The fellow cast a longing glance back at his little luggage store, but had no choice save to obey.

It was a long walk the *Soldatenheim* lay on the right bank of the Seine, north and east of the Arc de Triomphe. The Germans and the English had both respected the monuments of Paris. The Lizards knew no such compunctions; a chunk had been torn out of the Arc, like a cavity in a rotting tooth. The Eiffel Tower still stood, but Bagnall wondered how many days more it would dominate the Paris skyline.

In the end, though, what lay longest in the flight engineer's memory about the journey to the canteen was a small thing: an old man with a bushy white mustache walking slowly along the street. At first glance, he looked like Marshal Pétain, or anyone's favorite grandfather. He carried a stick, and wore a homburg and an elegant, double-breasted pinstripe suit with knife-sharp creases. On the left breast pocket of that suit was sewn a yellow six-pointed star with one word: *Juif*

Bagnall looked from the old Jew with his badge of shame to the fat *Feldwebel* to the French interpreter. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. What could he possibly say that would not make matters worse both for himself and, all too likely, for the Jew as well? He found nothing, but silence was bitter as wormwood to him.

German military signs, white wooden arrows with angular black letters, had sprouted like mushrooms on every Paris streetcorner. The British aircrew probably could have found the military canteen through them without an escort, but Bagnall supposed he could not blame the sergeant for taking charge of them. If not exactly enemies, they were not exactly friends, either.

The canteen had a big sign, again white on black, that announced what it was:

*Soldatenheim Kommandantur Gross-Paris*. On another panel of the sign was a black cross in a circle. Men in field gray came in and out below. Those who recognized the fliers' RAF uniforms stopped to stare. No one did anything more than stare, for which Bagnall was duly grateful.

The *Feldwebel* turned the interpreter loose just outside the doorway without even a tip. The fellow hadn't translated more than half a dozen sentences, most of them banal, in the hour and a half it had taken to get here. Now he faced an equally long walk back. But he left without a backward glance or a word of complaint, as if escaping without trouble was payment enough. For a man in his shoes, perhaps it was.

Not far inside the entrance, a table with a sign lettered in both German and English had been set up. The English section read, FOR BRITISH MILITARY SEEKING REPATRIATION FROM FRANCE. Behind the table sat an officer with steel-rimmed spectacles; the single gold pip on his embroidered shoulder straps proclaimed him a lieutenant colonel.

The German sergeant saluted, spoke for a couple of minutes in his own language. The officer nodded, asked a few questions, nodded again, dismissed the *Feldwebel* with a few offhand words. Then he turned to the Englishmen. "Tell me how you came to Paris, gentlemen." His English was precise and almost accent-free. "I am Lieutenant Colonel Maximilian Höcker, if knowing my name puts you more at ease."

As pilot, Ken Embry spoke for the aircrew. He told the tale of the attack on the Lizard installation in considerable detail, though Bagnall noted that he did not name the base from which the Lancaster had set out. If Höcker also noted that—and he probably did; he looked sharp as all get-out—he let it pass.

His gray eyes widened slightly when Embry described the forced landing on the French road. "You were very fortunate, Flight Lieutenant, and no doubt very skillful as well."

"Thank you, sir." Embry took up the tale again, omitting the names of the Frenchmen who had helped the aircrew along the way. They'd learned only a couple of those, and then just Christian names. Even so, Embry did not mention them. Again, Höcker declined to press him. The pilot finished, "Then your sergeant found us, sir, and brought us here. By the sign in front of you, you don't intend to hold us prisoner, so I hope you'll not take it amiss if I ask you how we go about getting home."

"By no means." The German officer's smile did not quite reach his eyes—or maybe it was a trick of the light reflecting off his spectacle lenses. He sounded affable enough as he continued: "We can put you on a train for Calais this evening. God and the Lizards permitting, you will be on British soil tomorrow."

"It can't be as simple as that," Bagnall blurted. After going on three years of war with the Nazis—and after seeing the old Jew wearing the yellow star—he was not inclined to take anything German on trust.

"Very nearly." Höcker plucked seven copies of a form off the table in front of him, gave them to Embry to pass out to his crew. "You have but to sign this and we shall send

you on your way.”

The form, hastily printed on the cheapest of paper, was headed PAROLE. It had parallel columns of text, one German, the other English, The English version was florid legalese made worse by some remaining Germanic word order, but what it boiled down to was a promise not to fight Germany so long as either London or—no, not Berlin, but the country of which it had been the capital—remained at war with the Lizards.

“What happens if we don’t sign it?” Bagnall asked.

If the smile had got to Lieutenant Colonel Höcker’s eyes, it vanished from them now. “Then you will also go on a train this evening, but not one bound for Calais.”

Embry said, “What happens if we do sign and then end up flying against you anyhow?”

“Under those circumstances, you would be well-advised to avoid capture.” Höcker’s face was too round and mild to make him fit the film cliché of a German officer; he seemed more Bavarian peasant than Prussian aristocrat. But he packed enough menace into his voice for any three cinematic Huns.

“Have you received any communication from the RAF or His Majesty’s government permitting us to sign such a document?” Embry asked.

“I have not,” Höcker’s said. “Formally, we are still at war. I give you my word of honor, however, that I have learned of no punishment given to any who have so signed.”

“Please be so good as to put that assurance in writing, for us to present to our superiors. If it should prove false, we shall consider ourselves at liberty to deem our paroles null and void, nor should sanctions be applied against us in the event we are captured in arms against your country.”

“Jolly good, Ken,” Bagnall whispered admiringly.

Hacker inked a pen, wrote rapidly on the back of another parole form. He handed it to the pilot. “I trust this meets with your approval, Flight Lieutenant?” He pronounced it *leftenant*, as a native Englishman would have.

Embry read what he had written. Before he replied, he passed it to Bagnall. Höcker’s script, unlike his speech, was distinctly Germanic; the flight engineer had to puzzle it out word by word. But it seemed to set forth what Embry had demanded. Bagnall gave it to Alf Whyte.

The German lieutenant colonel waited patiently until the whole Lancaster crew had read it. “Well, gentlemen?” he asked when Embry had it back.

The pilot glanced from one flier to the next. No one said anything. Embry sighed, turned back to Höcker. “Give me the bloody pen.” He signed his parole with a few slashing strokes. “Here.”

Höcker raised an eyebrow. “You are not pleased with this arrangement?”

“No, I’m not pleased,” Embry said. “If it weren’t for the Lizards, we’d be fighting each

other. But they're here, so what can I do?"

"Believe me, Flight Lieutenant, my feelings are the same in every particular," the German answered. "I had a sister in Berlin, however, and two nieces. So I shall adjourn my quarrel with you for the time being. Perhaps we shall take it up again at a more auspicious moment."

"Coventry," Embry said.

The lieutenant colonel answered, "Beside Berlin, *Englander*, Coventry is as a toddler's scraped knee." Höcker and Embry locked eyes with each other for most of a minute.

Bagnall took the pen, wrote his name on his parole form. "One enemy at a time," he said. The rest of the aircrew also signed theirs. But even as Höcker called for an escort to take the Englishmen to the train station, Bagnall wondered how many nieces the old Jew with the yellow star had, and how they were faring.

A squadron of devils tramped down the main street of the prison camp. Like everyone else who saw them, Liu Han bowed low. No one knew what would happen if the little scaled devils were denied all the outward trappings of respect their captives could give. No one, least of all Liu Han, wanted to find out.

When the devils were gone, a man came up to Liu Han and said something. She shook her head. "I am sorry, but I do not understand your dialect," she said. He must not have been able to follow hers, either, for he grinned, spread his hands, and walked away.

She sighed. Hardly anyone here spoke her dialect, save the few villagers taken with her. The scaly devils threw people from all over China together in their camps; they either did not know or did not care about the differences among them. For the educated few, those who could read and write, the lack of a common dialect mattered little. They spoke together with brush and paper, since they all used the same characters.

Such was the ignorance of the demons that they had even put Japanese in the camp. No Japanese were left any more. Some had slain themselves in despair at being captured. Those whose despair was less deep died anyhow, one by one. Liu Han did not know just how they'd met their ends. So long as they were dead, and the little devils none the wiser, she was satisfied.

Two streets over from the one the devils most regularly patrolled, a market had sprung up. People landed in camp with no more than what they had on their backs, but they soon started trading that—no reason for a man with a gold ring or a woman whose purse had been full of coins to do without. Inside days, too, chickens and even piglets had made their appearance, to supplement the rice the devils doled out.

A bald man with a wispy mustache sat on the ground, his straw hat upside down in front of him. In it nestled three fine eggs. Seeing Liu Han looking at them, he nodded and spoke to her. When he saw she did not follow him, he tried another dialect, then another. Finally he reached one she could also grasp: "What you give for these?"

Sometimes even understanding did not help. “I am sorry,” she said. “I have nothing to give.”

Back in her own village, it would have been the start of a haggale with which to while away most of a morning. Here, she thought, it was nothing but truth. Her husband, her child, dead at the hands of the Japanese. Her village, devastated first by the eastern barbarians and then by the devils in their dragonfly planes—and now gone forever.

The man with the eggs cocked his head to one side, smiled a bland merchant’s smile up at her. He said, “Pretty woman never have *nothing* to give. You want eggs, maybe you let me see your body for them?”

“No,” Liu Han said shortly, and walked away. The bald man laughed as she turned her back. He was not the first in the market who had asked her for that kind of payment.

She went back to the tent she shared with Yi Min. The apothecary was becoming an important man in the prison camp. Little scaly devils often visited him, to learn written Chinese and the dialects he spoke. Sometimes he made suggestions to them about the proper way to do things. They very often listened—that was what made him important. If he wanted eggs, he had influence to trade for them.

All the same, Liu Han sometimes wished she had moved in with the other prisoners from her village, or with people she’d never seen before. But she and he had come here in the belly of the same dragon plane, he had been a speck of the familiar in a vast strange ocean—and so she had agreed. He’d been diffident when he asked her. He wasn’t diffident anymore.

She lifted the tent flap. A startled hiss greeted her. She bowed almost double. “I am very sorry, lord devil, sir. I did not mean to disturb you,” she said rapidly.

Too rapidly. The demon turned back to Yi Min, from whose words she had distracted it. “She say—what?” it asked in abominably accented Chinese.

“She apologizes—says she is sorry—for bothering you.” Yi Min had to repeat it a couple of times before the little devil understood. Then he made a noise like a boiling pot. “Is that how to say the same thing in your language?” he asked, switching back to Chinese once more.

The scaly devil hissed back at him. The language lesson went on for some time, with both Yi Min and the devil ignoring Liu Han as completely as if she’d been the sleeping mat on which they squatted. Finally the little demon bubbled out, what must have been a farewell, for it got to its clawed feet and scurried out of the tent. Even in going, it brushed past Liu Han without a word in either Chinese or devil talk.

Yi Min patted the mat. With some reluctance, Liu Han sat down beside him in the place the little scaled demon had just occupied. The mat was still warm, almost hot; devils, fittingly enough, were more fiery creatures than human beings.

Yi Min was in an expansive mood. “I shall be rich,” he chortled. “The Race—”

“The what?” Liu Han asked.



“The, Race. It is what the devils call themselves. They will need men to serve them, to be their viceroys, men who can teach them the way real people talk and also learn their ugly language. It is difficult, but Ssofeg—the devil who was just here—says I pick it up more quickly than anyone else in this whole camp. I will learn, and help the devils, and become a great man. You were wise to stick by me, Liu Han, truly wise.”

He turned to her and kissed her. She did not respond, but he hardly noticed; his tongue pushed its way into her mouth. She tried to fend him off. His greater weight overbore her, pressed her down to the mat. Already he was tugging at her tunic. She sighed and submitted, staring up at the gray fabric of the tent ceiling and hoping he would finish soon.

He thought he was a good lover. He did everything a good lover should, caressing her, putting his face between her legs. But Liu Han did not want either him or his attentions, and so they failed to stir her. Again, Yi Min was so full of himself that her response, or rather lack of it, did not even reach him. Had she not been there at a convenient moment, she was sure he would simply have taken himself in hand. But she was there, so he took her instead.

“Let us try the hovering butterflies today,” he said, by which he meant that he wanted her on top. She sighed again. He would not even give her the chance just to lie there limply. Once more she wished the scaly devils had herded someone else into the dragonfly plane with her. She did not know why she’d yielded the first time he forced himself on her, save that he was the last link she had to the vanished life she was used to. Having yielded once, saying no became more nearly impossible every time afterward.

Looking in every direction but at his flushed, rather greasy face, she straddled him, lowered herself. He filled her, but that was all she felt: none of the delight she had known from her husband. She moved vigorously just the same—that was the way to make it over soonest.

He was thrashing beneath her like a gaffed carp when the tent flap opened. She gasped and grabbed for her cotton trousers at the same moment that Yi Min, oblivious as usual to everything not himself, groaned with his final pleasure.

Liu Han wanted to die. How could she show her face anywhere in camp now that her body had been seen in truth? She felt like killing Yi Min for piling such humiliation on her shoulders. Maybe tonight, after he fell asleep—

The hiss from the entranceway brought her out of her dark fantasy and back to the present. That wasn’t a person there seeing her shame, it was a little scaly devil. As she rolled off Yi Min and away, as she scrambled into trousers and tunic, she wondered if that was better or worse. Better, she supposed—a person would surely gossip about her, while a scaly devil might not.

The devil hissed and sputtered in his own devils’ language, then tried to speak Chinese: “What you do?”

“We were enjoying the moment of Clouds and Rain, mighty lord devil Ssofeg,” Yi Min answered, as coolly as if he’d said, *We were having a cup of green tea*. “I did not expect you back so soon.” Much more slowly than Liu Han had, he began to put his clothes back on.

“Clouds and Rain? Not understand,” the little devil named Ssofeg said. Liu Han could scarcely understand it.

“As well expect to trap the moon in a mirror as poetry from a little devil, it would seem,” Yi Min said in a low, rapid aside to Liu Han. He turned back to Ssofeg. “I am very sorry, mighty lord devil. I shall speak plain words for you: we were making love, doing what makes a baby, mating, balling, screwing, flicking. Do any of those make sense to you?”

Wanting as she did to find all things about Yi Min odious, Liu Han had to notice he was good at using simple words, and at using a whole cluster of them in the hope that the devil might grasp at least one.

Ssofeg did, too. “Make baby?” he echoed.

“Yes, that’s right,” Yi Min said enthusiastically. He smiled abroad, artificial smile and made extravagant gestures to show how pleased he was.

The little scaly devil tried to speak more Chinese, but words failed it. It switched to its own language. Now Yi Min was the one who had to grope for meanings. Ssofeg had patience, too, speaking slowly and simply as the apothecary had before. At one point, it aimed a clawed finger at Liu Han. She flinched back in alarm, but the scaly devil seemed just to be asking a question.

After a while, Yi Min asked a question or two in return. Ssofeg answered with a couple of short words. Without warning, Yi Min brayed laughter. “Do you know what this stupid turtle thinks?” he managed to wheeze out between guffaws. “Can you guess? You would never guess, not in a thousand years.”

“Tell me, then,” Liu Han said, afraid the joke would turn on her.

But it did not. Yi Min said, “The little scaly devil wanted to know if it was your breeding season, if you came into heat at a certain time of the year like a vixen or a ewe. If I understand him rightly, that is how his kind’s females are made, and when they are not in season, he can feel no desire himself.” The apothecary laughed again, harder than ever. “Poor, poor devil!”

“That is strange,” Liu Han admitted. She had never given any thought to the little scaly devils’ love lives; they were so ugly, she hadn’t thought of their having any. Now, almost against her will, she found herself smiling. “Poor devils.”

Yi Min gave his attention back to Ssofeg. He mixed Chinese and the devils’ language to get across the idea that women could be receptive at any time. Ssofeg hissed and squeaked. So did Yi Min. Then, in Chinese, he said, “I give you oath, master devil, that I tell you the truth here.”

Ssofeg squeaked again before it—no, *he*, Liu Han thought—tried Chinese again, too:

“True all woman? Not just”—he pointed at Liu Han—“woman here?”

“True for all women,” Yi Min agreed solemnly, though Liu Han saw the glint of laughter still in his eye. To make sure, his own sex was not demeaned, he added, “It is also true that men—human men—have no fixed mating season, but can mate with women at any time of the year.”

That started Ssofeg making cooking noises again. Instead of asking more foolish questions, the little scaly devil whirled and scampered out of the tent. Liu Han heard his clawed feet pattering away at a dead run. She said, “I’m glad he’s gone.”

“So am I,” Yi Min said. “It lets me think—how can I best turn to my advantage this strange and sorrowful weakness of the scaly devils? If they were proper men, I could sell them proper medicine to strengthen their peerless pillars. But if I correctly follow Ssofeg, without devil females he and his brethren might as well be so many eunuchs—though even eunuchs have desires, they say. Hmm ...”

Not five minutes after his *yang* essence had mingled with Liu Han’s *yin*, he might as well have forgotten she remained in the tent. To Yi Min, Yi Min was all that truly mattered, with everyone and everything else to be rearranged at his whim for his convenience. Now he sat cross-legged on the mat, his eyes almost closed, feverishly planning how to turn the devils’ debility into money or influence for him.

All at once, he let out a cry nearly as intense as the one he’d made when he spent himself inside her. “I have it!” he exclaimed. “I will—”

Liu Han never found out what Yi Min’s latest scheme was. Before he could announce it, Ssofeg burst back into the tent. Three more little scaly devils were right behind him, all of them carrying guns. Liu Han’s bowels turned to water. Now Yi Min bleated like a sheep facing the butcher’s cleaver. “Mercy, kind devil!” he wailed.

Ssofeg pointed outside, then to Yi Min. “You come,” he said in Chinese. Yi Min was so frightened, he had trouble getting to his feet. He stumbled out of the tent on stiff, numb legs. Two of the armed devils flanked him as he went.

Liu Han gaped at Ssofeg. At a stroke, the little devil had given her what she wanted most—freedom from Yi Min. And if he was gone, then she’d have this fine tent to herself. She felt like kissing Ssofeg. If he hadn’t had a mouthful of sharp teeth and one armed retainer still standing by him, she might have done it.

Then the devil pointed at her. “Too come you,” he said.

“Me?” Her sudden hopes crashed down. “Oh, no, kind devil, you don’t want me, you don’t need me, I am just a poor woman who knows not a thing in all the world.” She knew she was talking too fast for the ignorant little devil to understand, but the words poured out of her like the sweat that all at once began to pour from her armpits.

Ssofeg paid no more attention to what she wanted than Yi Min had when he undressed her and satisfied his own urges. “Too come you, woman,” he said. The scaly devil behind him moved his gun so it bore on her. The devils were not in the habit of taking no for an answer. Moaning, she followed Yi Min out into the street.

People stared and pointed and exclaimed as the little devils marched her along behind the apothecary. She understood a couple of their remarks: "Ee, that doesn't look good!" "I wonder what they did?" Liu Han wondered what she'd done, too, aside from being foolish enough to let, Yi Min take advantage of her. And why should the scaly devils care about that?

No one did anything more than stare and exclaim. The devils were little, but they were powerful. The three with guns could kill many Chinese by themselves, and even if they were somehow overwhelmed, the rest of the scaly devils would flay the prison camp with fire from their dragonfly planes. Liu Han had seen what such fire did to the Japanese in her village, and they had had arms to fight back. The people in the camp were utterly defenseless against assault from the air.

Yi Min yelled, "Help me, someone! I haven't done a thing. Save me from the terrible devils!" Liu Han snorted angrily and glowered at his back. He didn't care what happened to anyone else, so long as he saved his own worthless skin. She snorted again. It wasn't as if she didn't already know that.

Despite his bawling like a pig with a cut hock, no one did anything foolish, for which Liu Han was heartily glad. But she felt very lonely as the armed escort of devils led her out of the prison camp, away from her own people, and toward a dragonfly plane. "In!" Ssofeg said. Having no choice, first Yi Min and then Liu Han obeyed.

A few minutes later, the dragonfly plane scrambled noisily into the air. Even though her stomach lurched every time the plane changed direction, she wasn't as completely petrified as she had been the first time the little scaly devils forced her aboard one of their flying machines. After all, several of them were in here, too, and no matter how little they cared about her, she'd seen that they valued their own painted hides.

"This is all your fault!" Yi Min shouted at her. "If you weren't flaunting yourself there in my tent, I never would have gotten into this predicament."

The unfairness of that took her breath away. Before she could answer, one of the devils let out an ominous hiss. It punctured the apothecary's bluster like a pin popping an inflated sow's bladder. He shut up, though he didn't stop glaring at her. She glared right back.

After about half an hour's flight, the dragonfly plane set down not far from some much bigger machines of the scaly devils. The devils, with guns urged her and Yi Min out, marched them along to one of those big machines, and up a ladder into its belly. Unlike the ones on the dragonfly plane, the seats in there were padded, though still not big enough even for her.

These seats had straps, too. A little devil waiting for them fastened those straps so Liu Han could not reach the buckles no matter how she squirmed. Her fear came back. Yi Min writhed even more violently than he had under her. Here, though, his thrashing won no release.

The door to the outside world slammed shut. The devil twisted a handle to make sure

it stayed that way. Then he scrambled up an interior ladder into a higher room, leaving the two people alone and helpless.

“Your fault,” Yi Min insisted. He went on in that vein for some time. Liu Han stopped listening to him. Nothing, obviously, had ever been his fault in all his born days, and if you didn’t believe it, you had but to ask him.

Without warning, the machine shuddered beneath them. “Earthquake,” Liu Han squalled. “We’ll be crushed, we’ll be killed—” She’d never heard anything like the roar that went with the terrible, unending shaking.

Without warning, she felt as if two or three people—or maybe a brick wall, knocked down by the earthquake—had fallen on top of her. She tried to scream, but produced no more than a gurgle; the dreadful, unending weight made it hard to breathe at all, let alone drag in enough air for a shriek. After a little while, much of the racket went away, though a more muted rumble and several medium-loud mechanical noises persisted.

“What’s happening to us, Yi Min?” Liu Han gasped out. However much she disliked him, he was the only other human being caught in this devilish trap. Besides, with his education, he might even have known the answer.

“I have ridden on the railroad,” he replied, his voice also coming forth in effortful grunts. “When a train starts to move, it presses you back into your seat. But—never like this.”

“No, never like this. This is no train,” Liu Han said scornfully. His words satisfied her no better than his body had.

The rumble from beneath them abruptly cut off. At the same instant, the crushing pressure on Liu Han’s chest also went away. Her own weight somehow seemed to disappear, too. Were it not for the prisoning straps that grasped her, she felt as if she could have floated away from her seat, perhaps even flown like a magpie. Exhilaration she’d never known flooded through her. “It’s wonderful,” she exclaimed.

The only answer Yi Min gave was a sick, gulping noise that reminded her of a fish trying to breathe after it was hauled out of its pond. She twisted her neck so she could look over at him. His face was pale as whey. “I will not vomit,” he whispered fiercely, as if trying to make himself believe it. “I will not vomit.”

Big drops of sweat grew on his cheeks and forehead. He shuddered, still fighting to control his rebellious stomach. Liu Han watched, fascinated, as one of the drops broke free. It didn’t fall. It just hung almost motionless in midair, as if hooked to the ceiling with an invisible line of spider silk. But no, no silk here.

Yi Min let out another gulp, this one louder than the last. All at once, Liu Han hoped he would not be sick. If his vomit hung as the drop of sweat had, it was liable to smother him—and if it drifted through the air, it was liable to smother her.

Then the apothecary quavered, “L-look at the devil, Liu Han.”

Liu Han turned back toward the ladder up which the little scaly devil had climbed. He was there in the hatchway again, peering down at the two humans with his unnerving,

independently mobile eyes. But those eyes, at the moment, were the least unnerving thing about him. He floated head-down, a couple of yards above Liu Han, with neither hands nor feet holding onto anything. He did not fall, any more than the drop of Yi Min's sweat had.

When he saw that the people could not escape, he twisted in midair so his legs were toward them. The practiced maneuver might have been part of a dance in three dimensions; for the first time, Liu Han found a devil graceful. He reached out, grabbed a rung of the ladder, pushed. Sure enough, just as Liu Han had imagined, he flew upward into his own cabin.

"Isn't that the most amazing thing you ever saw?" she said.

"It's impossible," Yi Min declared.

"Who knows what's impossible for devils?" Liu Han asked. Through his sickness, Yi Min stared at her. She needed a moment to read the expression on his face. Then she realized that without thinking about it, she had spoken to him as to an equal. That was not proper, but it was the truth; here, caught by the devils' cords, they were equals, equal, nothings. And of the two of them, she was having the better time of coping with this strange (*she* would not say impossible) place.

If Yi Min had reprimanded her, shoved her, back down into the subservient role she'd taken all her life, likely she would have accepted it without a murmur. But he didn't; he was too filled with his own nausea, too filled with his own fear. Because of that, some things—not everything, but some things—changed forever between them in the next few silent minutes.

She didn't know how long they traveled with their weight left behind. She enjoyed every second of it, and wished only that she were free to float about and try the twisting move the little scaly devil had used. Yi Min lay huddled on his seat. Every so often, he made another sick gulping noise. Liu Han did her best not to laugh at him.

The plane in which they were flying made noises of its own. The pops and hisses meant nothing to Liu Han, so she hardly noticed them. But the metallic bangs and the grating sound that came from the front end after a while were impossible to ignore. She said, "Are we going to crash?"

"How should I know?" Yi Min answered peevishly, diminishing himself in her sight yet again.

They did not crash. More strange noises came from the front end of the plane, then the harsh sounds of the little scaly devils' speech. Three devils came floating back into the compartment where Liu Han was strapped down, though she had not known the plane held more than one. Her fear came back with them, for two of the devils bore long knives that were almost swords. She'd imagined Yi Min's vomit drifting through the air like stinking fog. Now in her mind's eye she saw a red mist of her own blood filling the room. She shuddered and tried to make herself as small as she could.

The devil with a sword-knife glided down to the seat on which she lay, reached out.

She shuddered again. A thousand times better Yi Min's caresses than the touch of the scaly devil. But all he did was unfasten the straps that held her in place, then those confining the apothecary. When they were both free, the devil pointed upward, in the direction from which he and his companions had come.

All at once, in an almost blinding flash of enlightenment, Liu Han saw that the armed devils were there to protect the other one from her and from Yi Min. Just as it hadn't occurred to her that she could talk back to Yi Min, so she hadn't imagined mere humans might be dangerous to devils. Again something changed for good in the way she looked at the world.

Yi Min spoke hesitantly in the devils' language. The one who had released him answered. "What does he say?" Liu Han asked; her tone said she had a right to know.

"He's telling us to go that way," Yi Min replied, pointing in the same direction the little devil had. "He says they will not hurt us if we do as they say."

Liu Han pushed against the arms of her seat. She floated up, lighter than a feather. The scaly devil did grab her, but only to straighten her course. Yi Min followed, still making queasy noises in the back of his throat.

The room from which the devils had come was smaller than the one in which they'd confined the humans. One wall was nothing but dials and buttons and screens. A scaly devil with a short sword floated in front of it. He hissed at Liu Han, as if warning her to come no closer. She wanted to laugh at him—she had no intention of doing that.

The devil's small, skinny body did not cover all the screens. One showed cloud-covered blue and brown slowly moving past, as if seen from far above. The pretty colors had a sharp, curved edge; above was only black: "Look, Yi Min," Liu Han said. "They can make pretty pictures. I wonder what it is."

Yi Min looked at the screen, pointed to it, tried out his small command of the devils' tongue on the one guarding it. That one answered at some length, Yi Min interrupting a couple of times with new questions. The apothecary said, "That's our world going round many miles below us, Liu Han, our whole world. The Western devils with whom I studied were right, it seems—the world really is round like a ball."

Liu Han kept her own opinion of that to herself. The world had always looked flat to her. But it certainly did seem to have a round edge now. Now was not the time to worry about it, not with so many more urgent concerns closer to hand.

The scaly devil hissed and pointed with his blade, urging her forward. She grabbed what had to be a handhold and went through another opening. Two more armed devils waited in the much bigger space out there. They pointed to an open circular doorway in the curved wall of that space. Liu Han obediently propelled herself toward it. It had handholds all around, for those whose aim was poor.

Hers wasn't. She almost collided with the devil waiting inside that tunnel. Yi Min missed the doorway and had to scabble in with the handholds. He was nursing a sprained wrist and cursing under his breath when he appeared. The two floating devils

followed him.

The trip along that corridor was the strangest journey Liu Han had ever known, even surpassing the weightless flight in the roaring plane. With every foot she traveled away from the door way, she grew heavier. From floating, she went to bounding, then to walking with long strides, then to ordinary steps with what felt like about her proper weight.

“How do they do that?” she asked Yi Min; he was, after all, the only other person available, and could also talk with the devils, which she could not—although, now that she thought about it, what held her back from learning their words for herself?

He spoke, listened, spoke, listened, finally gave up. “I do not understand. It has something to do with spinning round and round, but how could that make us heavier or lighter?” He wiped his sweaty forehead with a sleeve. “It’s too hot in here, too.”

“It certainly is,” Liu Han said. It was as bad as any midsummer day, though less humid than usual in her village in summer. That helped, but not enough. The devils seemed perfectly happy in the heat. She remembered how warm the mat on which the devil was sitting had felt, just a few hours before. And the Christian priest, she recalled, had said devils lived in a hot place. She hadn’t taken him seriously, but he must have known what he was talking about. Maybe, being a Western devil himself, he’d had more intimate acquaintance with other sorts of devils than was possible for a Chinese.

The armed devils took the two humans out of the corridor and into another one. Other devils bustled past on errands of their own. Some of them turned one turreted eye toward Liu Han and Yi Min. Most just ignored the two people.

The escort led Liu Han and Yi Min into a large room. Already inside were several devils with fancier body paint than any Liu Han had yet seen and a mat covered not with cotton cloth but with some smooth shiny stuff, obviously of devilish manufacture. One of the waiting devils surprised Liu Han by speaking Chinese. What he said surprised her even more: “You two go screw now.”

She gaped at him, wondering if she’d heard correctly (his accent was dreadful) and whether he knew what he was saying. She knew a certain amount of relief to see that Yi Min looked as befuddled and as dismayed as she felt. To have endured both terror and wonder to get here, only to receive a blunt order to fornicate...She wondered about the little scaly devils in ways that had never occurred to her before.

“You go screw now,” the devil repeated.

“No,” she said, the word out of her mouth before she had time to wonder about its consequences.

And, “No,” Yi Min echoed, which surprised her very little. It was soon after he had taken her before, and he’d been through quite a lot since. Few men wanted to try when they weren’t likely to succeed.

“Not go screw, not leave,” the scaly devil said.

Liu Han and Yi Min stared at each other, appalled. No matter how interesting the



journey hither had been, Liu Han did not want to spend the rest of her days in the company of devils and Yi Min. But she had no desire to exhibit herself to the devils either. "You are perverts if you think we will perform for you," she burst out. "Go away and leave us alone; then we will see."

"You can't talk to them that way," Yi Min said fearfully. But the devil who spoke Chinese hissed at the others. They filed out of the chamber, one by one. The last one closed the door. What sounded like a lock clicked. The devils might have left (and even that surprised her), but they hadn't changed their minds.

Liu Han looked around. Without the scaly devils, the chamber was dreadfully bare: no food, no water, not even a pot for night soil. Just that cursed shiny mat. She looked from it to Yi Min, back again. She wished she could persuade herself otherwise, but she was convinced that door wouldn't open again until she and the apothecary did what the devils wanted.

Resignedly, she started taking off her clothes. "What are you doing?" Yi Min said.

"What do you think I'm doing? I'm getting this over with," she retorted. "If the choice is between having you and staying locked up here among the devils, I'd sooner have you. But once we're back in camp, Yi Min, you'll never touch me again."

That warning was nothing but a bluff, and she knew it, she had no family in the camp to protect her from the apothecary, and he was bigger and stronger than she. But he did not argue. Muttering "Whatever you say," he undid the waistband of his trousers, let them fall to the metal floor of the chamber.

He did not have an easy time of it. She had to help him with her hand and then her mouth before he would rise at all. He moved slowly and carefully within her, shepherding his strength, and went on almost endlessly before at last he managed to spend.

Maybe that long, slow passage was what helped Liu Han startle herself by also ascending to the Clouds and Rain. More probably, though, she decided later, she'd let herself go because for the first time the coupling was of her choosing, not forced upon her. True, the choice—Yi Min or the devils—had not been a good one, but it was her own. That made a lot of difference.

The apothecary was still puffing as he rolled off her. "I wonder what the little blinking orange light over there in the corner of the ceiling was," he said, pointing.

"I didn't notice it," she confessed. That annoyed her; every time till now, she'd been more interested in where she was than in what Yi Min was doing to her. Now when they were finally in new and fascinating surroundings, her foolish body kept her from seeing everything there was to see. She glanced toward the ceiling. "It's not there now."

"It was," Yi Min said.

Liu Han dressed, then walked over to the door and knocked on it, again and again. "We kept our part of the bargain," she said. "Now you devils keep yours."

Whether thanks to the racket she was making or not, the door slid open a couple of

minutes later. The devil who opened it was the one who spoke Chinese. “You come,” he said, pointing to her and Yi Min.

She followed without fuss; every other choice looked worse. Yi Min walked right behind her. She gave a long, slow nod when she noticed that. She’d taken the lead here, as in their just-completed joining, simply by acting as if she had the right to do so. She wondered if it was always that simple.

Certainly it was not while facing the little scaly devils, especially here in their lair. Here she was only too aware she was in their power. She ducked to get through the entrance of the chamber to which the devil led her. So did Yi Min; being taller, he had to bend farther. If they had to stay in this strange place any length of time, she was sure they would both end up smashing their foreheads in doorways every so often.

The devils who had been in the original chamber (or at least the same number of devils; Liu Han was still shaky about telling them apart) now gathered around what looked like a tall pedestal with no statue on top of it. Their heads turned when the two people came in. Their mouths dropped open, almost in unison.

Liu Han did not like the look of all those pointed teeth. The scaly devil who spoke Chinese said, “You watch you go screw.”

That made no sense to Liu Han. She turned to Yi Min. “What is the little devil trying to say? Try and find out, since you speak his language.”

Yi Min made hissing and bubbling noises. Liu Han listened, bemused. Getting him to do what she wanted had been easy—all she needed to do was tell him in a firm way. In this weird place, his man’s arrogance had dried up and blown away: he was no master here, and he knew it.

“The devil says we’re going to watch ourselves couple,” Yi Min reported after a couple of minutes’ back-and-forth. “It’s the same in his speech as it is in Chinese. He seems very sure. He—”

The apothecary shut up. One of the other little scaly devils, impatient with all the chatter, had stuck a clawed finger into a recess near the top of the pedestal. An image sprang into being above it—an image of the two people making love on the shiny mat in the other chamber.

Liu Han stared and stared. She had spent, coppers to see moving pictures two or three times, but this was no ordinary moving picture. For one thing, it was not in shades of gray, but perfectly reproduced the tans and golds and pinks of flesh. For another, the image looked solid, not flat, and, as she discovered when she took a step, her view of it shifted whenever she moved. She walked all the way around the pedestal and saw herself and Yi Min from every side.

The devils watched her, not the image. Their mouths fell open again. All at once, she was sure they were laughing at her. And no wonder—there she lay in miniature, doing publicly what she’d thought private. Watching herself made a third difference from seeing an ordinary moving picture, and made her hate the little devils for tricking her

so.

“You people, you screw any time, no season?” the Chinese-speaking devil demanded. “This true for all peoples?”

“Of course it is,” Liu Han snapped. Yi Min didn’t say anything. He was watching his rather beefy buttocks move up and down, twisting his head to get the best possible view of things. As far as he was concerned, being in a moving picture was just fine.

The devil said, “Any man screw any woman any time?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Liu Han felt like screaming at the nasty little creature. Had it no decency? But then, who could say what was decent for a devil?

The devils talked back and forth among themselves. Every so often, one or another of them would point at the two people, which made Liu Han nervous. The devils’ voices rose. Yi Min said, “They’re arguing. Some of them don’t believe it.”

“What could it matter to them, anyhow?” Liu Han said.

The apothecary shook his head; he had no idea, either. But the Chinese-speaking scaly devil answered the question a little later: “Maybe this screw so what do you Big Ugliers so different than Race. Maybe screw any man, woman all time make you so—” He needed a brief colloquy with Yi Min before he found the word he wanted: “So progressive. Yes. Progressive.”

The words, the sentences, made sense to Liu Han, but she did not really take hold of the concepts behind them. *Progressive*, to her, was a word from Communist propaganda that meant “our way.” As far as she could see, people and the little scaly devils had no way in common. In fact, they seemed to use *progressive* to mean “The opposite of our way.”

She could not ask them to explain, either, for they were arguing among themselves again. Then the one who spoke Chinese said, “We find out if you speak true. We make test. Make—” He went word hunting with Yi Min again. “Make *experiment*. Bring for man many womans here, for woman many mans. See if screw all time like you say.”

When he heard that, when he understood it through bad grammar and twisted syntax, Yi Min smiled beatifically. Liu Han stared in disbelieving horror at the little devil, who seemed pleased at his own cleverness. She’d wondered what could be worse than coming to this strange, unpleasant place. Now she knew.

Bobby Fiore picked up a rock, chucked it at a crumpled piece of paper forty or fifty feet away. He didn’t miss by more than a couple of inches. His chuckle was sour. Chucking rocks was as close as he’d come to taking infield since the Lizards grabbed him. He didn’t even dare do that near the perimeter of the camp. The last time anybody’d thrown a stone at a Lizard, five people were shot immediately afterward. That stopped that.

One of the Lizards’ whirligig planes racketed in from the northwest. It landed at their

encampment, right outside the fence that cut off the peninsula on which sat Cairo, Illinois. Fiore found another rock, chucked it too, let out a new chuckle more sour than the old. He'd never expected to come back to—to come down to—Cairo again. He'd played there in the Class D Kitty League in—was it 1931 or 1932? He didn't remember any more. He did remember it had been a funny kind of town. It still was.

A levee surrounded the place to protect it from floods on the Mississippi and the Ohio, at whose confluence Cairo sat. Over the top of the eastern barrier, Fiore could see magnolias and gingkos. They gave the town a Southern atmosphere that seemed out of place for Illinois. Also Southern was the feel of good times now long gone. Cairo had thought it would end up as the steamboat capital of the Mississippi. That didn't happen. Now it was just a Lizard prison camp.

He supposed it made a good one. Because it had water on three sides, the Lizards had just wrecked the Mississippi highway bridge and run up their fast fences across the neck of Cairo Point. They didn't have gunboats in the river, but they did have soldiers, with machine guns and rockets on the levee and on the far shores. A couple of boats were supposed to have snuck across at night, but a lot more than a couple got sunk.

Fiore mooched along till he came to the Lizards' fence. It wasn't exactly barbed wire; it was more like long strips of narrow, double-edged razor blade. It did the same job as barbed wire, though, and did it just as well.

On the far side—on the free side—of the fence, the Lizards had run up guard towers. They looked the same way, say, Nazi prison-camp guard towers would have looked. A soldier in the nearest one swung the muzzle of his machine gun toward Fiore.

“Go, go, go!” he said. It might have been the only word of English he knew. As long as he had that machine gun, it was certainly the only one he needed.

Bobby went, went, went. You didn't disobey a prison guard, not more than once. Fiore's shoulders sagged as he walked slowly down Highway 51, back toward town. The United States had been going to kick Japan's and Germany's asses. Everybody knew it. Everybody felt good about it. And then, suddenly, without the least warning in the world or out of it, a prison camp—probably a lot of prison camps—right in the middle of the U.S.A.

It wasn't so much that it didn't seem right. It was more as if it didn't seem possible. From the top of the world to sitting in a prison camp like a Pole or an Italian or a Russian or a poor damned Filipino. Americans weren't supposed to have to go through this kind of nonsense. His parents had left the, old country to make sure they never went through this kind of nonsense. And here it came to them.

He tramped down the middle of the highway, wondering how, his parents were; he hadn't heard word one about Pittsburgh since the Lizards came. When he got into Cairo, Highway 51 changed its name to Sycamore Street. Fiore kept walking on the white, dashes of the center line. No cars were running, though a couple of burned-out shells remained of ones that had tried. Only a handful of men in their nineties remembered the last time war visited the United States at home. It was here again, all uninvited.

A colored man came up Sycamore toward Fiore. The fellow was pushing a cart that looked as if it had started life as a baby buggy. An old cowbell held on with a bent coat hanger clanked to announce his presence. As if that wasn't enough, he sang out every few steps: "Tamales! Git yo' hot tamales!"

"What are you charging today?" Fiore asked as the hot-tamale man drew near.

The Negro pursed his lips. "Reckon a dollar apiece'll do."

"Jesus. You're a goddamn thief, you know that?" Fiore said. The hottamale man gave him a look that in other times he never would have taken from a Negro. His voice was cool and distant as he answered, "You don't want none, friend, there's plenty what does."

"Shit." Fiore unbuttoned the flap on his hip pocket, dug out his wallet. "Give me two."

"Okay, boss," the colored man said, but not until the dollar bills were in his hand. He flipped open the cart's steel lid, used a pair of tongs to dig out the greasy tamales. He blew on them to cool them off before he gave them to Fiore, something for which, in other times, the Board of Health would have come down on him like a ton of bricks.

Bobby didn't much care for a Negro's breath on his hot tamales, either, but kept his mouth shut. He was glad enough to have the money to buy them. When the Lizards pushed him off their whirligig flying machine, he'd had \$2.27 in his pockets, and that was counting his lucky quarter. But it was enough to get him into a poker game, and endless hours on endless train and bus rides from one minor league town to the next had honed his skills sharper than those of the local boys he sat down with. More than two bills rubbed against each other in his wallet now.

He bit through corn husks into spicy tomato sauce, onions, and meat. He chewed slowly, trying to identify it a little closer than that. It wasn't beef and it wasn't chicken; the last tamales he'd bought, a couple of days before, had had chicken in them. These tasted different, stronger somehow, almost like kidney but not that either.

Something his father used to say, a phrase he hadn't thought of in years, floated through his mind: *times so tough, we had to eat roof rabbit*. In an instant, suspicion hardened to certainty: "You son of a bitch!" he shouted, half choking because he couldn't decide whether to swallow or spit. "That's cat meat in there!"

The hot-tamale man didn't waste time denying it. "What if it is?" he said. "It's the onliest meat I got. Case you didn't notice, mister, ain't nobody bringin' no food into Cairo these days."

"I oughta beat the crap outta you, givin' a white man cat meat," Fiore snarled, if he hadn't still held a tamale in each hand, he might have done it.

The threat alone should have made the Negro cringe. Cairo not only looked like a Southern town, it acted like one. Jim Crow was alive and well here. Colored children went to their own school. Their mothers were domestics, their fathers mostly longshoremen or factory hands or sharecroppers. They knew better than to disturb the powers that be.

But the hot-tamale man just stared steadily back at Bobby Fiore. “Mister, I can’t sell you what I don’ got. An’ if you beat on me, maybe I won’t hit back, though you ain’t such a real big man as that. What I do, mister, I tell the Lizards. Y’all may be white, but them Lizards, they treats all kinds o’ folks like they was niggers. White, black, don’t make no never mind to them. We ain’t free no more, but we is equal.”

Fiore gaped at him. He looked back, steady still. Then he nodded, as peaceably as if they’d been talking about the weather, and started pushing his cart up Sycamore Street. The cowbell clanked. “Hot tamales! Git yo’ hot tamales!”

Fiore looked down at the two he’d bought. His father had known hard times. He thought he had, too, but till now he’d been wrong. Hard times were when, you ate cat and were happy you had it to eat. He ate both tamales, then deliberately licked his fingers clean.

He walked farther into town. Then he heard behind him the click of Lizards’ nails on asphalt. He turned around to look. That was a mistake. The Lizards all pointed their guns at him. One made an unmistakable gesture—*come here*. Gulping, he came. The Lizards surrounded him. None of them came up past his shoulder, but with their weapons, that didn’t matter.

They marched him back toward their razor-blade fence. When he passed the slow-moving tamale man, the fellow just grinned. “I’ll get you if it’s the last thing I do!” Fiore shouted. The hot-tamale man laughed out loud.

Warsaw knew naked war again, the crack of rifles, the harsh, abrupt roar of howitzers, the screech and whine of incoming shells, the crash when they struck and the slow rumbling crumple of collapsing masonry afterward. Almost, Moishe Russie longed for the days of the sealed-off ghetto, when dying came slow rather than of a sudden. Almost.

Ironic that Jews could come and go in the whole city now, just when the whole city became a battlefield. As the Poles had fought to the last in Warsaw against vastly superior Nazi forces, so now the Germans, embattled in turn, were making Warsaw a fortress against the overwhelming might of the Lizards.

A Lizard plane screamed overhead, almost low enough to touch but too fast for anti-aircraft guns to hit. Bombs fell, one after another. The explosions that followed were bigger than those the usual run of Lizard bombs produced unaided (like everyone else in Warsaw—German, Pole, or Jew—Russie had become a connoisseur of explosions); the Lizards must have set off some German ammunition.

“What shall we do, *Reb* Moishe?” wailed a man in the shelter (actually, it was only a room in the ground floor of a reasonably stout building, but calling it safety might make it so—names, as any kabbalist knew, had power).

“Pray,” Russie answered. He’d begun to grow used to the title with which the Jews of Warsaw insisted on adorning him.

More explosions. Through them, the man cried, “Pray for whom? For the Germans who would kill us in particular or for the Lizards who would kill everyone who stands in their way, which is to say, all of mankind?”

“Such a question, Yitzkhak,” another man chided. “How is the *reb* to answer a question like that?”

With the Jewish love of disputation even in the face of death, Yitzkhak retorted, “What is a *reb* for, but to answer questions like that?”

It was indeed the question of the moment. Russie knew that, only too well. Finding an answer that satisfied was hard, hard. Through the different-toned roars and crashes of aircraft, shells, bullets, and bombs, the people huddled against one another and passed the terrifying time by arguing. “Why should we do anything for the *ferkakte* Nazis? They murder us for no better reason than that we’re Jews.”

“This makes them better than the Lizards, who would murder us for no better reason than that we’re people? Remember Berlin. In an instant, as much suffering as the Germans took three years to give us.”

“They deserve it. God made the Germans as a scourge for us, and God made the Lizards as a scourge for the Germans.” A near miss from a bomb sent chunks of plaster raining down from the ceiling onto the heads and shoulders of the people in the shelter. If the Lizards were God’s scourge on the Germans, they also chastised the Jews, Russie thought. But then, scourges were not brooms, and did not sweep clean.

Someone twisted the argument in a new direction: “God made the Lizards? I can’t believe that.”

“If God didn’t, Who did?” someone else countered.

Russie knew the answer the Poles outside the ghetto’s shattered walls gave to that. But no matter what the *goyim* thought, Jews put no great stock in the Devil. God was God; how could He have a rival?

But fitting the Lizards into God’s scheme of things wasn’t easy, either, even as scourges. The Germans had plastered Warsaw with posters of a *Wehrmacht* soldier superimposed over a photograph of naked burnt corpses in the ruins of Berlin. In German, Polish, and even Yiddish, the legend below read, HE STANDS BETWEEN YOU—AND THIS.

It was a good, effective poster. Russie would have reckoned it more effective still had he not seen so many naked Jewish corpses in Warsaw, corpses dead on account of the Germans. Still, he said, “I will pray for the Germans, as I would pray for any men who sin greatly.”

Hisses and jeers met his words. Someone—he thought it was Yitzkhak—shouted, “I’ll pray for the Germans, too—to catch the cholera.” Cries of agreement rang loud and often profane—*no way to speak of prayer*, Russie thought disapprovingly.

“Let me finish,” he said, and won a measure, if not of quiet, then of lowered voices: the advantage of being thought a *reb*, someone whose words were reckoned worth hearing. He went on, “I will pray for the Germans, but I shall not aid them. They want to wipe us from the face of the earth. However badly these Lizards treat all mankind, they will treat us no worse than any other part of it. Thus I see in them God’s judgment, which may be harsh but is never unjust.”

The Jews in the shelter listened to Russie, but not all followed his way of thinking. Punctuated by blasts outside, the dispute went on. Someone tapped Russie on the arm: a clean-shaven young man (Russie was almost sure the fellow had fewer years than his own twenty-six, though his beardless cheeks also accented his youth) in a cloth cap and shabby tweed jacket. He said, “Will you do more than simply stand aside while Lizards and Germans fight, *Reb Moische*?” From under the stained brim of the cap, his eyes bored into Russie while he awaited his reply.

“What more can I do?” Russie asked cautiously. He wanted to shift his feet. He’d not been under such intense scrutiny since his last oral examination before the war, and maybe not then; this young, secular-looking Jew had eyes sharp and piercing as slivers of glass. “And who are you?”

“I’m Mordechai Anielewicz,” the smooth-faced young man answered, his offhand tone



making his name seem small and unimportant. “As for what you can do...” He put his head close to Moishe’s—not, Russie thought, that there was much danger of anyone overhearing them in the noisy chaos of the makeshift shelter. “As for what you can do—you can help us when we hit the Germans.”

“When you what?” Russie stared at him.

“When we hit the Germans,” Anielewicz repeated. “We have grenades, pistols, a few rifles, even one machine gun. The *Armja Krajowa*”—the Home Army, the Polish resistance forces—“has many more. If we rise, the Nazis won’t be able to fight us and the Lizards both, and Warsaw will fall. And we will have our vengeance.” His whole face, thin and pale like everyone else’s, blazed with anticipation.

“I—I don’t know,” Russie stammered. “What makes you think the Lizards will make better masters than the Germans?”

“How could they be worse?” Every line of Anielewicz’s body was a shout of contempt.

“This I do not know, but after we have seen so much suffering, who knows what may be possible?” Russie said. “And the Poles—will they really rise with you, or sit on their hands and let the Nazis slaughter you? For every *Armja Krajowa* man, there’s another in the dark blue police.” The German-led Order Police wore uniforms of a shade nearly navy. Russie added, “Sometimes the *Armja Krajowa* man is in the dark blue police. There are traitors everywhere.”

Anielewicz shrugged, as if hearing nothing he didn’t already know. “Most of them hate Germans worse than Jews. As for those who don’t, well, we’ll have more guns after the rising than we do now. If we fight Germans, we can fight Poles, too. Come on, *Reb* Moishe—you’ve said all along the Lizards were God’s means of delivering us from the Nazis. Say it again when we rise, to hearten us and bring new fighters to our cause.”

“But the Lizards are not even human beings,” Russie said.

Anielewicz impaled him on another stare. “Are the Nazis?”

“Yes,” he answered at once. “Evil human beings, but human beings all the same. I don’t know what to tell you. I—” Russie stopped, shaking his head in bewilderment. Ever since God granted him a sign—ever since the Lizards came to Earth—he’d been treated as someone important, as someone whose opinion mattered. *Reb* Moishe: even Anielewicz called him that. Now, he discovered that with importance came responsibility; hundreds, more like thousands, of lives would turn on what he decided. All at once, he wished he were simply a starving onetime medical student once more.

But that was not the sort of wish God was in the habit of granting. Russie temporized: “By when must I decide?”

“We strike tomorrow night,” Anielewicz answered. Then, with a couple of quick wriggles, he slid away from Russie and lost himself in the packed shelter.

After a while, Lizard bombs stopped raining down. No sirens wailed to announce the all clear, but that proved nothing. Power was erratic in Warsaw these days. For that matter, power had always been erratic in the ghetto. People took advantage of the lull

to make their escape, to try to rejoin their loved ones.

As he made his way to the door with the rest, Russie looked for Mordechai Anielewicz. He did not find him; one shabby Jew looked all too much like another, especially from behind. Russie came out onto Gliniana Street, a couple of blocks east of the overflowingly full Jewish cemetery.

He glanced toward the graveyard. The Germans had positioned a couple of 8.8-centimeter antiaircraft guns in it; their long barrels stuck up from among the tumbled headstones like monster elephant trunks. Russie could see the gun crews moving around now that the bombardment had eased up.

The sun sparked dully off the matte finish of their helmets. *Nazis*, Russie thought, *the source of endless misery and death and ruin*. A plume of cigarette smoke floated up from one of them. They were Nazis, but they were also human beings. Would life be better under things called Lizards?

“Send me a sign, God,” he begged silently, as he had on the night when the Lizards came. One of the gunners assumed a spraddle-legged stance Russie recognized: the fellow was urinating. Hoarse German laughter floated to Russie’s ears. It filled him with rage—how like the Nazis to piss on dead Jews and then laugh about it.

All at once, he realized he had his sign.

An intelligence officer set a new stack of documents in front of Atvar. As was his habit, he skimmed through the summaries till he found one that engaged his full attention. It didn’t take long this time. He read every word of the second report in the stack, then turned one eye toward the intelligence male. “This report is confirmed as accurate?”

“Which one do you have there, Exalted Fleetlord?” The officer peered down to see where Atvar had paused. “Oh, that one. Yes, Exalted Fleetlord, no possible mistake there. The Big Ugliers in the town in the empire of Deutschland are fighting amongst themselves—quite ferociously, too.”

“And the radio intercepts? Those are reliable as well?”

The intelligence male nervously twitched his tailstump. “There we are less certain, Exalted Fleetlord. One of the languages seems close to Deutsch, the other rather further from Russki—these cursed Tosevites have altogether too many languages. But if we correctly understand the import of these signals, one faction in the city appears to be seeking our aid against the other.”

“It’s not the Deutsche themselves calling for our assistance, surely?”

“By the Emperor, no, Exalted Fleetlord,” the intelligence officer said. “It’s the others, the ones fighting against them. Our estimates are that the empire of Deutschland as it now stands is a jerry-built structure, most of its territory having been added in the course of the inter-Tosevite war in progress when our fleet arrived. Some of the

inhabitants of that empire remain restive under Deutsche control.”

“I see,” Atvar said, though he didn’t, not altogether. Product of an empire—of *the* Empire—which had been itself for tens of millennia, he felt himself failing to grasp what it was like to try to build one in a couple of years (without even the symbol of an emperor to bind it together, in most cases), or, for that matter, to pass suddenly out of the control of one empire and into that of another.

The intelligence officer said, “The groups involved in the fighting against the Deutsche appear to be prominently represented in the camp our forces overran east of the town now involved in strife.”

“Which camp do you mean?” Atvar asked; a fleetlord’s life is full of minutiae. Then he let out a hiss. “Yes, I remember. *That* camp. What was its name?”

The intelligence officer had to check the computer before he answered. “It is called Treblinka, Exalted Fleetlord.” Even spoken by a male of the Race, the Tosevite word sounded harsh and ugly. “Do you wish me to call up the images our combat teams recorded when they captured the place?”

“By the Emperor, no,” Atvar said quickly. “Once was sufficient.”

Once, as a matter of fact, had been excessive. Atvar thought he’d hardened himself to the horrors of war. Even such hardening as he’d gained had not come easy; his own forces were taking far more casualties than the grimmest estimates had predicted before the fleet left Home. But then, no one had expected the Tosevites to be able to fight an industrialized war.

What the Race’s advancing armor discovered at Treblinka wasn’t industrialized war, though. It wasn’t even industrialized exploitation of criminals and captives. The Race had camps of that sort on all its planets, and had overrun more on Tosev 3; the SSSR, especially, seemed full of them, all far more brutal than anything the Emperor, in his mercy, would have permitted.

But Treblinka...the fleetlord did not need the computer screen to replay images of Treblinka. Once reminded of the place, his mind called up the pictures, and he could not turn his eyes away from what his mind saw. Treblinka wasn’t industrialized war or industrialized exploitation. Treblinka was industrialized murder—mass graves full of Tosevites shot in the head, trucks designed so the waste products of their inefficient, dirty engines were vented into a sealed compartment to kill those inside, and, just installed before the Race seized Treblinka, chambers to slaughter large numbers of Big Ugliers at once with poisonous gas. It was as if the Deutsche had kept working to find the most effective way to get rid of as many other Big Ugliers at a batch as they could.

Even if Treblinka represented no more than one set of barbarians tormenting another, it was plenty to sicken Atvar. It also set him thinking. “You say the groups now opposing the Deutsche in this town are the same ones the Deutsche have been massacring?”

“Linguistic evidence and preliminary interrogations suggest this is so, yes, Exalted

Fleetlord,” the intelligence officer answered.

“We shall promise, them help, then, and deliver it,” Atvar said.

“As the exalted fleetlord wishes.” The intelligence officer deserved higher rank, Atvar thought. He kept any trace of what he thought about the fleetlord’s order from his voice. Whether he agreed with it or thought it demented, he would obey it, as males of the Race were trained to obey from their hatchling days.

Atvar said, “We have here at last an opportunity to use some Big Ugliers as gloves, with our hands inside. Despite their losses, the leading empires refuse to yield to us. Italia is wavering, but—”

“But Italia has too many Deutsch soldiers in it to be fully a free agent. Yes,” the male said.

He was not only submissive but keen, Atvar thought happily, forgiving him the interruption because he had been right. “Exactly so. Perhaps we shall presently help them as we shall go to the aid of the, the—”

“The Polska and the Yehudim,” the male supplied.

“Thank you, those are the kinds of Big Ugliers I had in mind, yes,” Atvar said. “And our assistance to them should not be grudging, either. If they give us a secure zone from which we may with impunity assail both Deutschland and the SSSR, we shall derive great benefits therefrom. We can promise them whatever they want. Once Tosev 3 is fully under our control...well, it’s not as if they belong to the Race.”

“Or even the Rabotevs or Hallessi,” the intelligence officer said.

“Quite so. They remain wild, and thus we have no obligations toward them save those which we choose to assume.” Atvar studied the male. “You are perceptive. Remind me of your name, that I may record your diligence.”

“I am Drefsab, Exalted Fleetlord,” the officer said. “Drefsab. I shall not forget.”

Georg Schultz raised up on his elbows to peer at the ripening fields of wheat and oats and barley, made a sour face. “The crop at this *kolkhoz* is going to be shitty this year,” he said with the certainty of a man who had grown up on a farm.

“That, at the moment, is the least of our worries,” Heinrich Jager answered. He hefted the Schmeisser that had belonged to Dieter Schmidt. Schmidt himself had lain under the black soil of the Ukraine for the past two days. Jäger hoped he and Schultz had heaped on enough to keep the wild dogs from tearing up the body, but he wasn’t sure. He and his gunner had been in a hurry.

Schultz’s chuckle had a bitter edge to it. “*Ja*, we’re a pair out of a jumble sale, aren’t we?”

“You can say that again,” Jäger answered. Both men wore scavenged infantry helmets and infantry tunics of field gray rather than tanker’s black; Schultz, carried an infantry rifle as well. Jager’s new, bristly beard itched all the time. Schultz complained about his,

too. It was coming in carrot red, though his hair was light brown. Any inspector who saw them would have locked them in the guardhouse and thrown away the key.

Tankmen are usually neat to the point of fussiness. A tank without things stowed just so, and with working parts dirty and poorly maintained, is a tank waiting for breakdown or blowup. But Jager had jettisoned spit and polish when he bailed out of his killed Panzer III. His Schmeisser was clean. So was his pistol. Past that, he'd stopped worrying. He was alive, and for a German on the south Russian steppe, that remained no small achievement.

As if to remind him he was still alive, his stomach growled. The last time he'd been full was the night he got a bellyful of kasha, the night before the Lizards came. He knew what he had in the way of rations: nothing. He knew what Schultz had: the same.

"We have to get something from that collective farm," he said. "Take it by force, sneak, up in the night, or go up and beg—I don't much care which any more. But we have to eat."

"I'm damned if I want to be a chicken thief," Schultz said. Then, more pragmatically, he added, "Shouldn't be too hard, just going on in. Most of the men, they'll be off at the front."

"That's true," Jäger said; almost all the figures he saw working in the field wore babushkas. "But this is Russia, remember. Even the women carry rifles. I'd sooner get something peaceably than by robbery. With the Lizards all around, we may need help from the Ivans."

"You're the officer," Schultz said, shrugging.

Jäger knew what he meant: *you're the one who gets paid to think*. Trouble was, he didn't know what to think. The Lizards were at war with Russia no less than with the Reich, which meant he and these *kolkhozniks* shared a common foe. On the other hand, he hadn't heard anything to let him know Germany and the Soviet Union weren't still fighting each other (for that matter, he hadn't heard anything at all since his panzer died).

He got to his feet. The south Russian steppe had seemed overpoweringly vast when he traversed it in a tank. Now that he was on foot, he felt he could tramp the gently rolling country forever without coming to its end.

Georg Schultz stood up beside him, though the gunner muttered, "Might as well be a bug walking across a plate." That was the other side of Russia's immensity: if one could see a long way, one could be seen just as far.

The peasants spotted the two Germans almost instantly; Jager saw their movements turn jerky even before they swung his way. He kept his submachine gun lowered as he strode toward the cluster of thatch-roofed wooden buildings that formed the heart of the *kolkhoz*. "Let's keep this peaceful, if we can."

"Yes, sir," Schultz said. "If we can't, no matter what we take from the Ivans now, they're liable to stalk us through the grass and kill us."

“Just what I’m thinking,” Jager agreed.

The workers in the fields converged on the Germans. None of them put down their hoes and spades and other tools. Several, young women and old men, carried firearms—pistols stuck in belts, a couple of rifles slung over shoulders. Some of the men would have seen action in the previous war. Jager thought he and Schultz could have taken the lot of them even so, but he didn’t want to find out the hard way.

He turned to the gunner. “Do you speak any Russian?”

“*Ruki verkh!*—hands up! That’s about it. How about you, sir?”

“A little more. Not much.”

A short, swag-bellied fellow marched importantly up to Jager. It really was a march, with head thrown back, arms pumping, legs snapping forward one after the other. The *kolkhoz* chairman, Jager realized. He rattled off a couple of sentences that might have been in Tibetan for all the good they did the major.

Jäger did know one word that might come in handy here. He used it: “*Khleb*—bread.” He rubbed his belly with the hand that, wasn’t holding the Schmeisser.

All the *kolkhozniks* started talking at once. The word “Fritz” came up in the gabble, again and again; it was almost the only word Jäger understood. It made him smile—the exact Russian equivalent of the German slang “Ivan.”

“*Khleb, da,*” the chairman said, a broad grin of relief on his wide, sweaty face. He spoke another word of Russian, one Jager didn’t know. The German shrugged, kept his features blank. The chairman tried again, this time in halting German: “Milk?”

“*Spasebo,*” Jäger said. “Thank you. *Da.*”

“Milk?” Schultz made a face. “Me, I’d rather drink vodka—there, that’s another Russian word I know.”

“Vodka?” The *kolkhoz* chief grinned and pointed back toward one of the buildings behind him. He said something too rapid and complicated for Jäger to follow, but his gestures left no doubt that if the Germans wanted vodka, the collective farm could supply it.

Jäger shook his head. “*Nyet, nyet,*” he said. “Milk.” To his gunner, he added, “I don’t want us getting drunk here, not even a little bit. They’re liable to wait until we go to sleep and then cut our throats.”

“Likely you’re right, sir,” Schultz said. “But still—milk? I’ll feel like I’m six years old again.”

“Stick to water, then. We’ve been drinking it for a while now, and we haven’t come down with a flux yet.” Jäger was thankful for that. He’d been cut off from the medical service ever since the battle—skirmish, he supposed, was really a better word for it—that cost his company its last panzers. If he and Schultz hadn’t stayed healthy, their only chance was to lie down and hope they got better.

Another old woman—a *babushka* in the grandmotherly sense of the word—hobbled

toward the Germans. In her apron she carried several rings of dark, chewy-looking bread. Jäger stomach growled the second he saw it.

He took two rings. Schultz took three. It was food fit for peasants, he knew; back in Münster, before the war, he would have turned up his nose at black bread. But compared to some of the things he'd eaten in Russia—and especially compared to nothing at all, of which he'd had far too much lately—it was manna from heaven.

Georg Schultz somehow managed to cram a whole ring of bread into his mouth at once. His cheeks bulged until he looked like a snake trying to swallow a fat toad. The *kolkhozniks* giggled and nudged one another. The gunner, his face beatific, ignored them. His jaws worked and worked. Every so often, he swallowed. His enormous cud of bread began to shrink.

“That’s not the best way to do it, Sergeant,” Jäger said. “See, I’ve almost managed to finish both of mine while you were eating that one.”

“I was too hungry to wait,” Schultz answered blurrily—his mouth was still pretty full.

The *babushka* went away, came back with a couple of carved wooden mugs of milk. It was so fresh, it warmed Jäger’s cup. Its creamy richness went well with the earthy, mouth-fifing taste of the bread. Peasants’ food, yes, but a peasant who ate it every day was likely to be a contented man.

For politeness’ sake, Jäger declined more, though he could have eaten another two dozen rings—or so he thought—without filling himself up. He drained the mug of milk, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, asked the *kolkhoz* chief the most important question he could think of: “*Eidechsen?*” He necessarily used the German word for Lizards; he did not know how to say it in Russian. He waved his hand along the horizon to show he wanted to find out where the aliens were.

The *kolkhozniks* didn’t get it. Jäger pantomimed short creatures, imitated the unmistakable screech of their airplanes as best he could. The *kolkhoz* chief’s eyes lit up. “*Ah—yasheritsi,*” he said. The peasants clustered round him exclaimed. Jäger memorized the word; he had the feeling he would need it again.

The chief pointed south. Jäger knew there were Lizards in that direction; that was the way he’d come. Then the chief pointed east, but made pushing motions with his hands, as if to say the Lizards over there weren’t close. Jäger nodded to show he understood. And then the *kolkhoz* chief pointed west. He didn’t do any dumb show to indicate the Lizards thereabouts were far away, either.

Jäger looked at Georg Schultz. Schultz was looking at him, too. He suspected he looked as unhappy as the gunner did. If there were Lizards between them and the bulk of the *Wehrmacht* ... Jäger didn’t care to follow that thought to its logical conclusion. For that matter, if there were Lizards over that way, the *Wehrmacht* might not have much left in the way of bulk.

The *kolkhoz* chief gave him another piece of bad news: “*Berlin kaput, Germanski. Yasheritsi.*” He used those expressive hands of his to show the city going up in a single

huge explosion.

Schultz grunted as if he'd been kicked in the belly. Jäger felt hollow and empty inside, himself. He couldn't imagine Berlin gone, or Germany with Berlin gone. He tried not to believe it. "Maybe they're lying," Schultz said hoarsely. "Maybe it's just the God-damned Russian radio."

"Maybe." But the more Jäger studied the *kolkhozniks*, the less he believed that. If they'd gloated at his reaction to the news, he would have doubted them more, have thought they were trying to fool him. But while a few looked pleased at his discomfiture (as was only natural, when his country and theirs had spent a year locked in a huge, vicious embrace), most looked at him and his companion with sympathetic eyes and somber faces. That convinced him he needed to worry.

He found a useful Russian word: "*Nichevo*." He knew he pronounced it badly; German had to use the clumsy letter-group *tsch* even to approximate the sound that lay at its heart.

But the *kolkhozniks* understood. "*Tovarisch, nichevo*," one of them said: Comrade, it can't be helped, there's nothing to be done about it. It was a very Russian word indeed: the Russians were—and needed to be—long on resignation.

He hadn't quite meant it that way. He explained what he had meant: "Berlin *da, yasheritsi*—" He ground the heel of his boot into the dirt. "Berlin *nyet, yasheritsi*—" He ground his heel into the dirt again.

Some of the Russians clapped their hands, admiring his determination. Some looked at him as if he was crazy. *Maybe I am*, Jäger thought. He hadn't imagined anyone could hurt Germany as the Lizards had hurt it. Poland, France, and the Low Countries had gone down like ninepins. England fought on, but was walled away from Europe. And though the Soviet Union remained on its feet, Jäger was sure the Germans would have finished it by the end of 1942. The fighting south of Kharkov showed the Ivans hadn't learned much, no matter how many of them there were.

But the Lizards—the Lizards were an imponderable. They weren't the soldiers they might have been, but their gear was so good it didn't always matter. He'd found that out for himself, the hard way.

A faint buzz in the sky, far off to northward. Jäger's head whipped around. Any sky noise was alarming these days, doubly so when it might come from an almost invulnerable Lizard aircraft. This, though, was no Lizard plane. "Just one of the Ivans' flying sewing machines, Major—not worth jumping out of your skin for."

"Anything that's up there without a swastika on it makes me nervous."

"Can't blame you for that, I guess. But if we aren't safe from the Red Air Force here in the middle of a *kolkhoz*, we aren't safe anywhere." The tank gunner ran a hand along his gingery whiskers. "Of course, these days we really *aren't* safe anywhere."

The Soviet biplane didn't go into a strafing run, although Jäger saw it carried machine guns. It skimmed over the collective farm, a couple of hundred meters off the ground. Its



little engine did indeed make a noise like a sewing machine running flat out.

The plane banked, turned in what looked like an impossibly tight circle, came back over the knot of people gathered around the two Germans. This time it flew lower. Several *kolkhozniks* waved up at the pilot, who was clearly visible in the open cockpit, goggles, leather flying helmet, and all.

The biplane banked once more, now north of the collective farm again. When it turned once more, it was plainly on a landing run. Dust spurted up as its wheels touched the ground. It bounced along, slowed to a stop.

“Don’t know as how I like this, sir,” Schultz said. “Dealing with the Russians here is one thing, but that plane, that’s part of the Red Air Force. We shouldn’t have anything to do with something connected to the Bolshevik government like that.”

“I know we shouldn’t, Sergeant, but everything’s gone to hell since the Lizards got here,” Jäger answered. “Besides, what choice have we?” Too many *kolkhozniks* carried guns to let him think about hijacking the toy plane with the red star on its flank, even assuming he knew how to fly it—which he didn’t.

The pilot was climbing out of the plane, putting his booted foot in the stirrup on the side of the dusty fuselage below his seat. *His* boot, *his* seat? No, Jäger saw: a blond braid stuck out under the back of the flying helmet, and the cheeks under those goggles (now shoved up onto the top of the flying helmet) had never known—or needed—a razor. Even baggy flying clothes could not long conceal a distinctly unmasculine shape.

Schultz saw the same thing at the same time. His long jaw worked as if he were about to spit, but he had sense enough to remember where he was and think better of it. Disgust showed in his voice instead: “One of their damned girl fliers, sir”

“So she is.” The pilot was coming their way. Jäger made the best of a situation worse than he really cared for: “Rather a pretty one, too.”

Ludmila Gorbunova skimmed over the steppe, looking for Lizards or anything else interesting. No matter what she found, she wouldn’t be able to report back to her base unless the emergency was great enough to make passing along her knowledge more important than coming home. Planes that used radios in flight all too often stopped flying immediately thereafter.

She was far enough south to start getting alert—and worried—when she spotted a crowd around a collective farm’s core buildings at a time when most of the *kolkhozniks* should have been in the fields. That in itself wasn’t so unusual, but then she caught a glint of light reflecting up from a couple of helmets. As the angle at which she viewed them shifted, she saw they were blackish gray, not the dun color she had expected.

Germans. Her lip twisted. What the Soviet government had to say about Germans had flip-flopped several times over the past few years. They’d gone from being bloodthirsty fascist beasts to peace-loving partners in the struggle against imperialism and then, on June 22, 1941, back to being beasts again, this time with a vengeance.

Ludmila heard the endless droning propaganda, noted when it changed, and changed her thinking accordingly. People who couldn't do that had a way of disappearing. Of course, for the past year the Germans themselves had been worse than any propaganda about them.

She wished that meant no one in the Soviet Union had anything good to think about the Nazis. The measure of Hitler's damnation was that imperialist England and the United States joined the Soviets in the struggle against him. The measure of the Soviet Union's damnation (though Ludmila did not think of it in those terms) was that so many Soviet citizens—Ukrainians, Baltic peoples, Byelorussian, Tatars, Cossacks, even Great Russians—collaborated with Hitler against Moscow.

Were these *kolkhozniks* collaborators, then? If they were, a quick pass with her machine guns would rid the world of a fair number of them. But the line from Radio Moscow on Germany had changed yet again since the Lizards came. They were not forgiven their crimes (no one who had fled from them would ever forgive their crimes), but they were at least human. If they cooperated with Soviet forces against the invaders from beyond the moon, they were not to be harmed.

So Ludmila's forefinger came off the firing button. She swung the *Kukuruznik* back toward the collective farm for a closer look. Sure enough, those were Germans down there. She decided to land and try to find out what they were up to.

Only when the U-2 was bumping along the ground to a stop did it occur to her that, if the *kolkhozniks* were collaborators, they would not want a report going back toward Moscow for eventual vengeance. She almost took off again, but chose to stay and see what she could.

The farmers and the Germans came toward her peacefully enough. She saw several weapons in the little crowd, but none pointed at her. The Germans kept their rifle and submachine guns slung.

"Who is the chief here?" she asked.

"I am, Comrade Pilot," said a fat little fellow who stood with his back very straight, as if to emphasize how important he was. "Kliment Yegorevich Pavlyuchenko, at your service."

She gave her own name and patronymic, watching this Pavlyuchenko with a wary eye. He'd spoken her fair and called her "comrade," but that did not mean he was to be trusted, not with two Germans at his elbow. She pointed at them. "How did they come to your collective farm, comrade? Do they speak any Russian?"

"The older one does, a word here and there, anyhow. The one with the red whiskers knows only how to eat. They must have been straggling a good while—they hadn't even heard about Berlin."

Both Germans looked at Pavlyuchenko when they heard the name of their capital. Ludmila studied them as if they really were a couple of dangerous beasts; she'd never before been close enough to see Hitlerites as individuals.

Rather to her surprise, they looked like neither the inhumanseeming killing machines that had swept the Soviet armies east across a thousand kilometers of Russia and the Ukraine nor like Winter Fritz of recent propaganda, with a woman's shawl round his shoulders and an icicle dangling from his nose. They were just men, a little taller, a little skinnier, a little longer-faced than Russian norms, but just men all the same. She wrinkled her nose. They smelled like men, too, men who hadn't bathed any time lately.

The younger one, the bigger one, had a peasant look to him despite his foreign cast of feature. She could easily imagine him on a stool milking a cow or, on his knees plucking weeds from a vegetable plot. The unabashed way he leered at her was peasantlike, too.

The other German was harder to fathom. He looked tired and clever at the same time, with pinched features that did not match the lined and sundarkened skin of an outdoorsman. Like the red-whiskered one, he wore a helmet and an infantryman's blouse over the black trousers of panzer troops. The blouse had a private's plain shoulder straps, but she did not think it was part of the gear he'd started out with. He was too old and too sharp to make a proper private.

In secondary school, a million years before, she'd had a little German. This past year, she'd done her best to forget it, and hoped her transcript had perished when Kiev was lost: knowing the enemy's language could easily make one an object of suspicion. If these soldiers had little or no Russian, though, it would prove useful. She dredged a phrase out of her memory: "*Wie heissen Sie?*"

The Germans' worn, filthy faces lit up. Till now, they'd been nearly mute, tongue-tied among the Russians (which was also the root meaning of *Nemtsi*, the old Russian word for Germans—those who could make no intelligible sounds). The ginger-whiskered one grinned and said, "*Ich heisse Feldwebel Georg Schultz, Fräulein,*" and rattled off his pay number too fast for her to follow.

The older one said, "*Ich heisse Heinrich Jäger Major*" and also gave his number. She ignored it; it wasn't something she needed to know right now. The *kolkhozniks* murmured among themselves, either impressed she could speak to the *Wehrmacht* men in their own tongue or mistrustful of her for the same reason.

She wished she recalled more. She had to ask their unit, by clumsy circumlocution: "From which group of men do you come?"

The sergeant started to answer; the major (his name meant "hunter," Ludmila thought; he certainly had a hunter's eyes) cleared his throat, which sufficed to make the younger man shut up. *Jäger* said, "Are we prisoners of war, Russian pilot? You may ask only certain things of prisoners of war." He spoke slowly, clearly, and simply; perhaps he recognized Ludmila's hesitancy with his language.

"*Nyet,*" she answered, and then, "*Nein,*" in case he hadn't understood the Russian. He was nodding as she spoke, so evidently he had. She went on, "You are not prisoners of war. We fight the"—she perforce had to say *yasheritsi*, not knowing the German word for "Lizards"—"first. We fight Germans now only if Germans fight us. Not forget war against Germany, but put it to one side for now."

“Ah,” the major said. “Yes, that is good. We fight the Lizards first also.” (*Eidechsen* was what the German said. Ludmila made a mental note of it.) Jäger went on, “Since we have this common foe, I will tell you that we are from Sixteenth Panzer. I will also tell you that Schultz and I have together killed a Lizard panzer.”

She stared at him. “This is true?” Radio Moscow made all sorts of claims of Lizard armor destroyed, but she had flown over too many battlefields to take them seriously any more. She’d seen what was left of German panzer units that tried to take on the Lizards, too: not much. Were these tankmen lying to impress her with how masterful the Germans remained?

No, she decided after a moment of watching and listening to them. They described the action in too much vivid detail for her to doubt them: if they hadn’t been through what they were talking about, they belonged on the stage, not in the middle of a collective farm. Most convincing of all was Jäger’s mournful summary at the end: “We hurt them, but they wrecked us. All my company’s tanks are gone.”

“What are they saying, Comrade Pilot?” Pavlyuchenko demanded.

She quickly translated. The *kolkhozniks* gaped at the Germans as if they were indeed the superior beings they claimed to be. Their wide eyes made Ludmila want to kick them. Russians always looked on Germans with a peculiar mixture of envy and fear. Ever since the days of the Vikings, the Russian people had learned from more sophisticated Germanic folk to the west. And ever since the days of the Vikings, the Germanic peoples had looked to seize what they could from their Slavic neighbors. Teutonic Knights, Swedes, Prussians, Germans—the labels changed, but the Germanic push to the east seemed to go on forever. Though latest and worst, Hitler was but one of many.

Still, these particular Germans could be useful. They hadn’t beaten the Lizards, far from it, but they’d evidently made them sit up and take notice. Soviet authorities needed to learn what they knew. Ludmila returned to their language: “I will take you with me when I fly back to my base, and send you on from there. I promise nothing bad will happen to you.”

“What, if we don’t care to go?” asked the major—*Jäger* she reminded herself.

She did her best to put authority in her gaze. “If you do not go, you will at best wander on foot and alone. Maybe you will find Lizards. Maybe you will find Russians who think you are worse than Lizards. Maybe these *kolkhozniks* are only waiting for you to fall asleep ...”

The panzer major was a cool customer. He did not turn to give Kliment Pavlyuchenko a once-over, which meant he’d already formed his judgment of the chief. He did say, “Why should I trust your promises? I’ve seen the bodies of Germans you Russians caught. They ended up with their noses and ears cut off, or worse. How do I know Sergeant Schultz and I won’t wind up the same way?”

The injustice of that almost choked Ludmila. “If you Nazi swine hadn’t invaded our

country, we never would have harmed a one of you. I've seen with my own eyes what you do to the part of the Soviet Union you took. You should have everything you get."

She glared at Jäger. He glared back. Then Georg Schultz surprised her—and, by his expression, the major as well—by saying, "*Krieg ist Scheisse—war is shit.*" He surprised her again when he came up with two Russian words, "*Voina—gavno,*" which meant the same thing

"Da!" the *kolkhozniks* roared as one. They crowded round the sergeant slapping his back pressing cigarettes and coarse *ma khorka* tobacco into his hands and tunic pockets. All at once he was not an enemy to them, but a human being

Turning back to Jäger Ludmila pointed at the *kolkhozniks* and the gunner. "This is why we have stopped fighting Germans who do not fight us, and why I can say no harm will come to you. Germany and Soviet Union are enemies, *da*. People and Lizards are worse enemies."

"You speak well, and as you say, we have little choice." Jäger pointed to her faithful *Kukuruznik*. "Will that ugly little thing carry three?"

"Not with comfort, but yes," she answered, stifling her anger at the adjective he'd chosen.

One corner of his mouth tugged upward in an expression she had trouble interpreting: a smile, she supposed, but not like any she'd seen on a Russian face, more like a dry white wine than a simple vodka. He said, "How do you know that, once we get into the air, we will not make you fly us toward German lines?"

"I do not have the petrol to reach the nearest I know of," she said. "Also, the most you can make me do is fly into the ground and kill us. I will not fly west."

He studied her for perhaps half a minute, that curious, ironic smile still on his face. Slowly, he nodded. "You are a soldier."

"Yes," she said, and found she had to return the compliment. "And you. So you must understand why we need to learn how you killed a Lizard panzer."

"Wasn't hard," Schultz put in. "They have wonderful panzers to ride around in, *ja*, but they're even worse tankmen than you Ivans."

Had he said that in Russian, he would have forfeited the goodwill he'd won from the *kolkhoz's* farmers. As it was, Ludmila gave him a dirty look. So did Kliment Pavlyuchenko, who seemed to have a smattering of German.

"He is right," Jäger said, which distressed Ludmila more, for she was convinced the major's judgment needed to be taken seriously. "You cannot deny our panzer troops have more skills than yours, Pilot"—he gave the word a feminine ending—"or we could never have advanced in our Panzer IIIs against your KVs and T-34s. The Lizards have even less skill than you Russians, but their tanks are so good, they do not need much. If we had comparable equipment, we would slaughter them."

*So here is German arrogance at first hand* Ludmila thought. Having admitted the Lizards

had smashed his unit to bits, all the panzer major cared to talk about was the foe's shortcomings. Ludmila said, "Since our equipment is unfortunately not a match for theirs, how do we go about fighting them?"

"*Das ist die Frage,*" Sergeant Schultz said solemnly, for all the world like a Nazi Hamlet.

Jäger's mouth quirked up once more. This time, he raised an eyebrow, too. Ludmila found herself smiling back, if only to show that she'd noticed the allusion and was no uncultured peasant. The German turned serious: "We must find places and situations where they cannot use to best advantage all they have."

"As the partisans fight behind your lines?" Ludmila asked, hoping to flick him on a raw spot.

But he only nodded. "Exactly so. We are all partisans now, when set against the forces we aim to oppose."

Somehow, his refusal to take offense irritated her. Brusquely, she pointed back toward her airplane. "The two of you will have to go into the front cabin side by side. Keep your machine pistols if you like; I do not try to take your arms away. But, Sergeant, I hope you will leave your rifle behind here. It will not"—she had to pantomime the word "fit"—"in a small space, and may help the *kolkhozniks* against the Lizards."

Schultz glanced to Jäger. Ludmila eased fractionally when she saw the major give an almost invisible nod. Schultz presented the Mauser to Kliment Pavlyuchenko with a flourish. Startled at first, the collective farm chief folded him into a bear hug. When the sergeant broke free, he went through his pockets for every round of rifle ammunition he could find. Then he set a foot in the stirrup and climbed up into the U-2.

Jäger followed him a moment later. The space into which they were crammed was so tight that they ended up sitting half facing each other, each with an arm around the other's back. "Would you care to kiss me, sir?" Schultz asked. Jäger snorted.

Ludmila had the back cabin, the one with working controls, to herself. At her shouted direction, a *kolkhoznik* spun the little biplane's prop. The sturdy radial engine buzzed to life. The two Germans set their jaws against the noise but otherwise ignored it. She remembered they had their own intimate acquaintance with engine noise.

When she saw all the peasants were clear of her takeoff path, she released the brakes, eased the stick forward. The *Kukuruznik* needed a longer run than she'd expected before it labored into the air. A sedate performer under the best of conditions, it was positively sluggish—or, better, sluglike—with more than three times the usual crew weight aboard. But it flew. The collective farm receded behind it as it made its slow way north.

Be alert for Big Ugliers, both of you," Krentel warned from the cupola of the landcruiser.

"It shall be done, commander," Ussmak agreed. The driver wished the male newly in

charge of the landcruiser would shut up and let the crew do their jobs.

“It shall be done,” Telerep echoed. Ussmak envied the way Jäger the gunner could keep the faintest hint of scorn from his voice. What Telerep had to say privately about Krentel would addle an egg, but he was all respect when the landcruiser commander was around.

Males of the Race learned to show respect from their smallest days, but Telerep was unusually smooth even by that high standard. Maybe, Ussmak thought, his low-voiced gibes about Krentel were a reaction to the need for public deference. Or maybe not. Telerep had never talked that way about Votal when the previous commander was alive.

Thinking about Votal made Ussmak think about the Big Ugliers who had killed him, and did more to make him alert than all of Krentel’s warnings. The natives of Tosev 3 had learned in a hurry that they could not oppose the Race landcruiser against landcruiser, aircraft against aircraft. That lesson should have marked the end of conquest and the beginning of consolidation. So officers had promised the males of the invasion force when battle commenced.

The promises had not come true. The Big Ugliers stopped throwing hordes of males and landcruisers and planes into the grinder to be minced up, but they hadn’t stopped fighting. Thus this landcruiser squadron kept rolling over the broad, cool steppeland of the SSSR, seeking to flush out a band of Tosevite raiders and bushwhackers who had shown up on a reconnaissance photo the day before.

A wail from the sky—“Rockets!” Telerep shrieked. Ussmak had already slammed the hatch shut over his head. A moment later, a metallic clang in the button taped to his hearing diaphragm announced that Krentel had done the same. Ussmak twiddled his fingers in approval: previous appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the new commander, wasn’t a complete idiot.

The salvo of rockets slammed down all around the land-cruisers. Their warheads kicked up great gouts of earth, blinding one of Ussmak’s vision slits. Closed in as he suddenly was, he couldn’t hear very much, but he knew he would have heard a landcruiser going up. When he didn’t, he took it for a good sign.

Krentel, meanwhile, had been on the command circuit with base. “The range of the launcher is 2,200, bearing 42,” he reported. “Gunner, send the Big Ugliers back there two rounds of high explosive. That will make them think twice about harassing the Race again.”

“Two rounds of high explosive. It shall be done,” Telerep said tonelessly. The turret spun in its ring until it faced more nearly south than west. The big gun barked twice. Two or three of the other landcruisers in the squadron also fired, though none more than once.

Ussmak thought all those commanders fools, and Krentel a double fool. He doubted the Big Ugliers who had fired the salvo were anywhere near their launcher any more; if

they had any sense, they'd have touched it off with a long electric wire. That's what he would have done in their place, certainly. And they made better guerrillas than stand-up soldiers.

Krentel told him, "Shift to bearing 42, driver. I want to finish off that clutch of bandits. They shall not flourish within the bounds of territory controlled by the Race."

"Bearing 42. It shall be done," Ussmak said. He swung the landcruiser almost in a half circle, drove back in a direction close to the one from which the squadron had advanced. This time, he admitted to himself, Krentel had a point.

"Watch the ground carefully," the commander added. "We must not risk driving over a mine. Our landcruiser, like every other, is precious to the Race and its expansion. Exert unusual caution."

"It shall be done," Ussmak repeated. He wished Krentel would stop jumping around like a female waiting for her first pair of eggs. How was he supposed to get a good look at the ground while driving buttoned up? He didn't want to open his hatch, not yet. The Big Ugliers had a habit of lobbing a second rocket salvo just about when males were taking a deep breath after the first one.

Even if his head was out in the open, he didn't think he'd spot a buried mine. The Tosevites were extraordinarily good at concealing them under leaves or stones or chunks of the rubble that littered the area from previous battles. He took comfort in remembering the Tosevite mines were designed to disable the weak and clumsy landcruisers the Big Ugliers built. Even if one exploded right under his own machine, it might not wreck it. Looking at it with the other eye turret, though, it might.

Sure enough, more rockets rained down on the squadron. Krentel must have reopened the hatch at the top of his cupola, for Ussmak heard him slam it again in a hurry. The driver opened his jaws in amusement. No, the new commander wasn't as smart as he thought he was. With luck, he'd learn.

A clump of low Tosevite trees, their colors duller than the ones of Home, stood by the landcruisers' path about halfway to the place from which the natives had touched off their rockets. Ussmak thought about warning Telerep to fix his machine gun on those trees, but decided not to. Telerep knew his business perfectly well. And besides—

"Watch those trees, gunner." Before Ussmak could finish thinking Krentel would give the unnecessary order, Krentel gave it.

"It shall be done, commander." Again Telerep's subordination was perfect.

Ussmak watched the trees, too. Just because the order was unnecessary didn't make it stupid. If he were a Big Ugly bandit, he'd post males in those trees to see what he could do about the Race's landcruisers. In fact ...

If Krentel had been reading his mind before, now Telerep was. The gunner fired a burst into the little stretch of wood. With luck, he'd kill a Big Ugly or two and flush out some more. Ussmak wouldn't have wanted to crouch in hiding while bullets snarled through the trees searching for him.



And sure enough, he spied motion at the edge of the trees. So did Telerep. Tracers walked the machine gun toward it. Then Ussmak shouted, "Hold fire!" The stream of bullets had already stopped: Telerep did know his business.

Krentel didn't. "Why are you holding?" he demanded angrily.

"It's not a Big Ugly, commander, just one of the animals they keep for pets," the gunner answered in soothing tones. "Be a waste of ammunition to kill it. Besides, for a creature covered with fuzz, it's not even that homely."

"Yes it is," Krentel said. Ussmak sided with Telerep. He'd seen several of these animals now, and thought them far more handsome than their masters. They were lean and graceful, obviously descended from hunting beasts. They were also friendly; he'd heard that a couple of males from another squadron had used raw meat to tame one and get a pet of their own.

"I still think we ought to kill it," Krentel said.

"Oh, please, no, commander," Ussmak and Telerep said in the same breath. The gunner added, "See how nice a creature it is? It's coming straight toward us, even though we're in a big noisy landcruiser."

"That doesn't make it nice," Krentel said. "That makes it stupid, if you ask me." But he did not order Telerep to kill the Tosevite animal.

Taking the commander's silence as consent, Ussmak slowed the landcruiser to let the animal approach. That seemed to please it; it opened its mouth, almost as if it were a male of the Race, laughing. Ussmak knew it was making sharp yelping noises, even if he couldn't hear them through the landcruiser's armor. The animal ran right for the machine.

That gave Ussmak pause; maybe it really was stupid, as Krentel had said. Then the driver noticed it had a square package strapped onto its back, a package with a cylindrical rod sticking straight up from it. He'd never seen one of these beasts so accoutered before, and didn't trust it. "Telerep!" he said sharply, "I think you'd better shoot it after all."

"What? Why?" the gunner said. "It—" He must have spotted the package the Tosevite animal was carrying, for the machine gun started to chatter in the middle of his sentence.

Too late. By then the animal was very close to, the landcruiser. With a sudden burst of speed, it ran under the right track, even though Ussmak tried to swerve away at the last instant. The strapped-on mine exploded even as the animal was crushed to red pulp.

Ussmak felt as if he'd been kicked in the base of the tail by a Big Ugly wearing solid-iron foot coverings. The landcruiser's right corner lifted up, then slammed back to the ground. Hot fragments of metal flew all around the driver; one buried itself in his arm. He screeched, then started to choke as fire-fighting foam gushed into the compartment.

He opened and closed his hand. That hurt, but he could still use it. He tried the landcruiser's controls. The tiller jerked; a horrible grinding noise came from the right

side of the machine. He snapped his jaws in fury, swore as foully as he knew how. Then he realized Krentel and Telerep were both screaming into his audio button: “What happened? Are you all right? Is the landcruiser all right?”

“We had a track blown off, may the spirits of the, Emperors of blessed memory curse the Tosevites forevermore,” Ussmak answered. He sucked in another breath that stank of foam, then spoke more formally: “Commander, this landcruiser is disabled. I suggest that we have no choice but to abandon it.” He flipped up the hatch over his head.

“Let it be done,” Krentel agreed. His voice turned vicious. “I told you to slaughter that Tosevite beast.” That he’d been right made the rebuke sting worse. As far as Ussmak was concerned, it didn’t make him a better landcruiser commander.

The driver pulled himself up and out of the compartment. It wasn’t easy; his bleeding right arm didn’t want to bear its share of his weight. He scrambled down behind the left side of the landcruiser. He would have liked to find out just what the mine had done to the other track and sprocket, but not enough to go around to the side exposed to the trees. That animal hadn’t been a wandering stray, not with a mine strapped to its back. Somewhere in the copse lay Big Ugliers with guns. He was as sure of it as he was of his own name, or the Emperor’s.

Sure enough, bullets began snapping by, pinging off the armor of the landcruiser. Krentel let out a hiss of pain. “Are you all right, Commander?” Ussmak said. He still didn’t think Krentel was fit to carry Votal’s equipment bag, but the new landcruiser commander remained a male of the Race.

“No, I’m not all right,” Krentel snapped. “How can I be all right with a hole in my arm and two crewmales who are mental defectives?”

“I regret your arm is wounded,” Ussmak said. He wished the commander had been hit in the head instead. Those of lower rank gave unswerving deference to their superiors; that was the way of the Race. But the way of the Race defined obligations that ran in the other direction, too. Superiors gave underlings respect in exchange for their loyalty. Those who didn’t often brought misfortune on themselves.

Along with Ussmak and Krentel, Telerep also huddled behind the protective flank of the landcruiser. He wagged his left eye, the one that faced Ussmak, back and forth to show he was thinking along with the driver. Krentel remained oblivious to the dismay he caused his crew.

A couple of the other landcruisers in the squadron slowed down, poured suppressive fire into the trees. The hail of bullets and high-explosive shells was so intense that the wood caught fire. But when Ussmak dashed away to scramble into the landcruiser that had pulled up behind his own wounded machine, Tosevite bullets flew all around him.

He heard one of those bullets strike home with a dull, horribly final-sounding smack. He couldn’t look back; he was scrambling through the front hull hatch, almost falling down on top of the other landcruiser’s driver. That male swore. “One of your crewmales just got hit. He won’t get up, either.”

“Was it—?” But it wasn’t, Ussmak knew, for there was Krentel, nattering away over nothing in particular up in the turret. *Telerep*, the driver thought with a surge of pain. They’d been together all through training; they’d awakened from cold sleep side by side, within moments of each other; with Votal they’d fought their landcruiser across this seemingly endless plain. Now Votal was dead, and the landcruiser, and *Telerep*. And there was Krentel, nattering.

“The Big Ugliers are getting too stinking good at this ambush business,” the driver of the other landcruiser said.

Ussmak didn’t answer. He’d never felt so completely alone. Among the Race, one always knew one’s place in the mosaic, and the places of those all around one. Now all those around Ussmak were gone like fallen tesserae, and he felt himself rattling around in the middle of a void.

The landcruiser grunted into motion once more, and sensibly so. No point to staying still an instant longer than needed; the Tosevites didn’t need more than a moment to work the most appalling mischief. As the armored fighting vehicle built up speed, Ussmak began to rattle around literally as well as in the bitter corners of his mind.

Here, though, he was not in the middle of a void. The driver’s compartment barely had room to hold an extra male. Worse, everything from foam spray nozzle to the bracket that held the driver’s personal weapon on the wall was hard and had sharp edges. He’d never noticed that while he was in the driver’s chair. The chair, of course, had padding and safety belts to hold him where he belonged. Now he was just jetsam, tossed in here at random.

“Too bad about your other crewmale,” the other driver said as he shoved the landcruiser up into the next higher gear. “How did your machine get hit?”

So Ussmak had to tell him about the Tosevite animal with the mine on its back, and how a moment’s kindness had cost so much. He felt halfstrangled as he spoke; he couldn’t begin to say what he thought about either Krentel or *Telerep*, not even to a male who was a squadronmate. He hissed helplessly. That void around him again ...

The driver hissed, too. “*Yes, I know the beasts you mean.* We haven’t bothered them, either. Now I suppose we’ll have to shoot them on sight, if the eggless Big Ugliers have taken to strapping mines on their backs. Too bad.”

“Yes,” Ussmak said, and fell silent again. Rattle, rattle, rattle ...

A little later, the driver of the other landcruiser made a sharp, disgusted noise. “They’re gone,” he said.

Recalled to himself, Ussmak asked, “Who’s gone?” He had no vision slits, not in his present awkward perch, and no way of seeing outside.

“The Big Ugliers. All that’s here is a couple of wrecked launcher boxes for their stinking rockets. Not, even any dead ones lying around. They must have touched them off at long range, then run away.” The driver clicked off the intercom switch that connected him to the turret before he added one quiet sentence more: “This whole trip back here was for

nothing.”

*For nothing.* The words reverberated inside Ussmak’s head. For nothing Krentel had ordered them to turn around. For nothing his landcruiser had been wrecked. For nothing Telerep had caught a bullet. For nothing Ussmak huddled here on a steel and ceramic floor, about as useful to the Race as the sack of dried meat he felt like. For nothing.

The other driver, still secure in his web, of duties rather than all alone and falling, let out a sigh of both annoyance and—infruating to Ussmak—resignation. “So it goes,” he said.

Two or three times, in his travels through the bush leagues, Sam Yeager had had to dig in at the plate against every hitter's nightmare: a fireballing kid who couldn't find the plate if you lit it up like Times Square. Whenever he did it, he faced a deadly weapon. At the time, he hadn't thought about it in quite those terms, but it was true. The worst sound in baseball was the mushy *splat* of a ball getting somebody in the head. He'd seen friends lose careers in an instant of inattention and bad lights. He knew it was only luck he hadn't lost his the, same way.

All that helped now, against weapons more overtly deadly. When bombs and bullets flew, a tin hat seemed small protection. For that matter, a tin hat *was* small protection. Yeager had seen more than one man gruesomely dead, helmet holed or smashed in or simply blown right off. But he wore his gladly, as better than nothing. Come to that, he wouldn't have minded wearing it, or even something that covered rather more, whenever he went to bat against a hard-throwing righthander.

He peeked up from behind the blackened pile of bricks which until recently had been the back wall of a dry-cleaning establishment; its sign lay fallen in the middle of Main Street. He ducked down again in a hurry. A Lizard autogiro was growling through the air toward him. The Invaders from Space (he thought of them that way, with the capital letters) were trying to push the ragtag American force of which he was a part out of Amboy and trap them against the Green River, where there'd be easy prey.

When he said that out loud, Mutt Daniels grunted and answered, "Reckon you're right, boy, but we're gonna have the devil's own time stoppin' 'em."

A roar in the sky—Yeager automatically threw himself flat. He'd learned that even before he took the soldier's oath, and had it reinforced when a fellow a few feet from him got smashed to a red smear for being a split second too slow to hit the dirt.

But the roar came from two piston-engined fighters that streaked west toward the autogiro. The machine guns of the P-40 Warhawks hammered. Yeager stuck his head up again. The autogiro was firing back, and turning in midair to try to flee. The Lizards' jets far outclassed anything humanity could make, but their flying troop carriers were vulnerable.

The Warhawks whizzed past the autogiro, one to the right, the other to the left. They banked into tight turns for another firing pass, but no need. The Lizard machine, spurting smoke from just below the rotor, settled to the ground in what was half landing, half crash. The fighters darted away before anything more dangerous appeared over the horizon.

Yeager scowled to see live Lizards scuttling out of the autogiro. "They left too soon,"

he growled. "It wasn't a clean kill."

Mutt Daniels worked the bolt on his Springfield to chamber a new round. "Means it's up to us, don't it?" Moving with a grace that belied his fleshy form, he scuffled forward.

Yeager followed. He also had a rifle now, taken from a man who would never need one again. Back on the farm where he'd grown up, he'd shot at tin cans and gophers and the occasional crow with his father's.22. The military weapon he carried now was heavier and kicked harder, but that wasn't the main difference from those vanished days. When he shot at tin cans or gophers or crows, they didn't shoot back.

A heavy machine gun began to bark, up near the intersection of Main Street and Highway 52. Pieces flew off the Lizards' autogiro and sparkled in the sunlight as they twirled through the air. As for the Lizards themselves, they took cover with the speed and alacrity of their small reptilian namesakes. One by one, they opened fire. Their weapons chewed out short bursts, not the endless racket of a belt-fed machine gun, but not single shots, either.

Was that a flicker of motion, over there behind the ornamental hedge? Yeager didn't care to find out the hard way. He threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He scurried away to a new position before he looked toward the hedge again. Nothing moved there now.

Another rumble in the air, this one from the southwest...Yeager fired at the incoming autogiro, but it stayed out of rifle range. Flame shot from under its stubby wings. With a cry of fear, Yeager buried his face in grass and mud.

The rockets burst all around him, lances of fire that lashed the American position. The heavy machine gun fell silent. Through stunned ears, Yeager heard the Lizards on the ground moving forward.

Then another roar announced that the Warhawks had returned. Their guns tore at the new autogiro. This time they did the job right. The aircraft slammed the ground sideways and became a fireball. Smoke rose into the blue sky. It was less, smoke than would have come from a human-built plane; the Lizards used cleaner fuel. But fuel wasn't all that burned in there. Seats, paint, ammunition, the bodies of the crew...they all went up.

Cheering, the Americans moved forward against the Lizards. "Careful there, you God-damned fools!" Sergeant Schneider bellowed, trying to shout over battlefield din. "You want to stay low." As if to underscore the advice, someone who hadn't stayed low enough suddenly pitched forward onto his face.

The Warhawks came back to strafe the Lizards on the ground. Something rose on a pillar of fire from behind a boulder in the middle of a Main Street lawn that marked a spot where Lincoln had spoken. The P-40 fled, twisting with all the skill the pilot had. It was not enough. The rocket tumbled it from the sky.

"Damn if it didn't look like a Fourth of July skyrocket, right down to the big boom at the end," Daniels said.

“It flew like it had eyes,” Yeager said, thinking of the turning path the rocket had scrawled across the sky. “I wonder how they make it do that.”

“Right now I got more important things to wonder about, like if I’m gonna be alive this time tomorrow,” Mutt said.

Yeager nodded, but his bump of curiosity still itched. Writers in *Astounding* and the other pulps had talked about detection devices for as long as he’d been reading them, and likely longer than that. He’d discovered on the night the Invaders from Space descended on the world that living through science fiction was a lot stranger—and a lot more deadly—than just reading it.

A hiss in the sky, a whistle, a noise like a train pulling into a station—an artillery shell burst among the embattled Lizards, then another and another. Dirt fountained skyward. The enemy’s fire slackened. Yeager didn’t know whether the Lizards were killed or hurt or just playing possum, but he used the lull to slide closer to them...and also closer to where the shells were landing. He wished he hadn’t thought of that, but kept crawling ahead.

A Lizard plane shot past, heading east. Yeager cringed, but the pilot wasted no time on a target as trivial as infantry. No doubt he wanted that battery of field guns. The shells kept coming for about another minute, maybe two, then abruptly stopped.

By that time, though, Yeager and the other Americans were on top of the Lizard position. “Surrender!” Sergeant Schneider shouted. Yeager was sure he was wasting his breath; where would the Lizards have learned English? And even if they had, would they quit? They seemed more like Japs than any other people Yeager knew of—at least, they were small and liked sneak attacks. Japs didn’t surrender for hell, so would the Lizards?

One of them had got some English, God knew where. “No—ssrenda,” came the reply, a dry hiss that made the hair stand up on Yeager’s arms. A burst of machine-rifle fire added an exclamation point.

The burst was close, close. Yeager grabbed a grenade, pulled the pin, lobbed it as if he were aiming for a cutoff man. It flew toward the concrete block fence behind which he thought the Lizard who didn’t want to surrender was hiding. He didn’t see it go over. By the time it did, he was behind his own cover once more. He hadn’t needed more than one or two bullets snapping past his head to learn that lesson forever.

The grenade went off with a crash. Before the echoes died, Yeager sprinted up to the gray fence. He fired over it, once, twice, blindly. If the Lizard wasn’t badly hurt, he wanted to rattle it as much as he could. Then, gulping, he vaulted over the fence into the alleyway on the other side.

The Lizard was down and thrashing and horribly wounded; its red, red blood stained the gravel of the alley. Yeager’s stomach did a slow, lazy loop. He’d never expected the agony of a creature from another world to reach him, but it did. The Lizard yammered something in its own incomprehensible language. Yeager had no idea whether it was defiance or a plea for mercy. All he wanted to do was put the alien out of its misery and

make it be quiet. He raised his rifle, shot it through the head.

It twitched once or twice, then lay still. Yeager let out a whistling sigh of relief; he'd thought too late that it didn't necessarily have to store its brains in its head. He wondered if that would have occurred to any of the men fighting around him. Probably not; science-fiction readers were thin on the ground. As things worked out, it hadn't mattered anyway.

He bent over the scaly corpse, scooped up the machine rifle the Lizard had carded. He was amazed at how light it was. Somebody, he thought, would have to take it apart and figure out how it worked.

Sergeant Schneider yelled again: "Surrender, you Lizards! Throw down your guns! Give up and we won't hurt you."

Yeager thought he was wasting his breath, but the bursts of enemy fire quickly ceased. Schneider came out in the open with something white—it was a by-God pillowcase, Yeager saw—tied to his rifle. He waved toward the houses and stores in which the last few Lizards were holed up, then made a peremptory gesture no human could have misunderstood: *come out*.

From behind Yeager, Mutt Daniels said, "He oughta get the Medal of Honor for that." Yeager nodded, trying not to show how shaken he was; he hadn't heard his manager—no, his ex-manager now, he supposed—come up at all.

Sergeant Schneider simply stood and waited, his big feet splayed apart, his belly hanging over his belt. He looked as though he would have made three of the dead Lizard sprawled by Yeager; he looked hard and tough and quintessentially human. Seeing him defy the Lizards' machine rifles, Yeager felt tears sting under the lids of his eyes. He was proud to belong to a people that could produce such a man.

After the hammering racket of baffle, silence seemed strange, wrong, almost frightening. The eerie pause hung in the balance for almost half a minute. Then a door opened in one of the houses from which the Lizards had been fighting. Without conscious thought on Yeager's part his rifle snapped toward it. Schneider held up a hand, ordering the Americans not to shoot.

A Lizard came slowly through the doorway. He hadn't dropped his weapon, but held it reversed, by the barrel. Like Sergeant Schneider, he'd fastened something white to the other end. The shape was familiar to Yeager, but he needed a moment to place it. All at once he bent double in a guffaw.

"What is it?" Mutt Daniels asked.

Between chuckles, Yeager wheezed, "First time I ever saw anybody make a flag of truce out of a pair of women's panties."

"Huh?" Mutt stared, then started laughing, too.

If the improvised white flag amused Sergeant Schneider he didn't let on. He gestured again: *come here*. The Lizard came moving with careful deliberation rather than his kind's usual quick skitter. When he got within about twenty feet of Schneider, the



sergeant pointed to his machine rifle, then to the ground. He did it two or three times before the Lizard, even more hesitantly than before, set the weapon down.

Schneider made another *come here* gesture. The Lizard came. It flinched when he put an arm around it, but it did not flee. It came up to only the middle of his chest. Schneider turned to where the rest of the Lizards were holed up. “You see? No harm will come to you. Surrender!”

“Jesus, they’re really doing it,” Yeager whispered.

“Looks that way, don’t it?” Mutt Daniels whispered back.

The Lizards emerged from their hiding places. There were only five more of them, Yeager saw, and two of those were wounded, leaning on their fellows. The Lizard who had surrendered first called something to them all. The three with machine rifles set them down.

“What are we going to do with hurt Lizards?” Yeager asked. “If they’re proper prisoners of war, we have to try and take care of them, but do we yell for a medic or a vet? Hell, I don’t even know if they can eat our food.”

“I don’t know either, and frankly, I don’t give a damn.” Round and pudgy and filthy, Mutt made a most unlikely Rhett Butler. He shifted the plug in his cheek, spat, and went on, “It’s right nice, though, havin’ prisoners of their’n, not so much on account of what they can tell us but to keep ’em honest with all of our people they got.”

“Something to that.” Yeager wondered what had happened to the rest of the Decatur Commodores. Nothing good, he feared, remembering how the Lizards had strafed their train. The invaders could do whatever they pleased throughout big stretches of the United States. If holding prisoners—hostages—would help restrain them, Yeager was all for it.

Along with the rest of the Americans, he hurried forward at Sergeant Schneider’s waved command to take charge of the alien POWs. Having surrendered, the Lizards seemed abjectly submissive, hurrying to obey the soldiers’ gestures as best they could. Even to Invaders from Space, *come along* and *this way* were easy enough to put across.

Schneider seemed convinced the band he led—with everything from officers to weapons to organization in short supply, slapping a more formally military name than that on it was optimistic—had done something important. “We want to get these scaly sons of bitches out of here and back up to Ashton just as fast as we can, before more of ’em come along.” He told off half a dozen men: “You, you, you, you, you, and you.” Yeager was the fourth “you,” Mutt Daniels the fifth. “Get back to the bus that brought us here and take ’em away on it. The rest of us’ll dig in and hope we see more men before the Lizards decide to push harder. Good Lord willing, you can drop ’em off and head down this way again inside a couple of hours. Now get your butts in gear”

Flanked by men with loaded, bayonet-tipped rifles, the Lizards picked their way through and over debris toward the yellow school bus that had been pressed into service as a troop hauler. Yeager would have preferred the dignity of a proper khaki Army

truck, but up at Ashton, a school bus was what they had.

The key was still in the bus ignition. Otto Chase looked at it with a certain amount of apprehension. “Anybody here able to drive this big honking thing?” the onetime cement-plant worker asked.

“I reckon Sam and I just might be able to handle it,” Mutt Daniels said with a sidelong glance at Yeager. The ballplayer puffed up his cheeks like a chipmunk to hold in his laughter. After half a lifetime bouncing around in buses, helping to repair them by the side of the road, pushing them when they broke down, there wasn’t a whole lot about them he didn’t know.

Mutt, moreover, had been bouncing around in buses essentially ever since there were buses. If there was anything about them he didn’t know, Yeager had no idea what it was. Daniels waited for the rest of the men to herd the Lizards to the wide rear seat, then started the engine, turned the bus around in a street most people would have thought too narrow for turning around a bus, and headed back to Ashton.

He stayed off Highway 52 and Highway 30, preferring the back-country roads less likely to draw attention from the air. Raising his voice to be heard over the noise of the motor, he said, “Reminds me of the country just back of the front line in France in 1918, right where the Boches got farthest. Parts of it are all tore, up, but you go fifty yards on and you’d swear nobody ever heard o’ war.”

The description was apt, Yeager thought. Most of the farms that sprawled among belts of forest between Amboy and Ashton were untouched. Men wearing wide-brimmed hats and overalls worked in several fields; cows grazed here and there, black and white splotches vivid against the cheerful green of grass and growing crops. By the calm way life went on, the nearest Lizard might have been ten billion light-years off.

But every so often, the bus would rattle past a bomb or shell crater, an ugly brown scar on the land’s smooth green skin. There were cattle by those craters, too, cattle on their sides bloating under the warm summer sun. And a couple of the neat frame farm buildings were neither neat nor buildings any longer, but more like a giant’s game of pick-up-sticks. Fat crows, startled by the bus’ racket, flapped into the air, cawing resentment at having their feasting interrupted.

Still, as Mutt had said, the eye could mostly forget the war whose border the bus had just left behind. The nose had a harder time. Yeager wondered if the faint reek of smoke and corruption simply clung to him, the other Americans, and the Lizards; if it came in through the open windows of the bus from the lightly damaged countryside through which they were driving; or if the breeze, which was out of the west, swept it along the front line.

The four unwounded Lizards did what they could for the two who were hurt. It wasn’t much; the humans had stripped them of the belts that along with their helmets were all they wore—no telling what deadly marvels they might have concealed inside.

Yeager had never thought about how Invaders from Space might feel if they were

wounded and captured by humans who were as alien to them as they were to people. They didn't look all-powerful or supremely evil. They just looked worried. In their shoes (if they'd worn shoes), he would have been worried, too.

He picked up one of the belts, started opening pouches. Before long, he found what looked like a bandage, wrapped in some clear stuff smoother and more pliable than cellophane. If it concealed a deadly marvel, he decided, he'd eat his helmet. He pushed past the rest of the Americans—who still had their rifles leveled at the Lizards—and held out the bandage pack.

“What the hell you doing?” Otto Chase growled. “Who cares whether them damn things live or die?”

“If they're prisoners of war, we're supposed to treat 'em decent,” Yeager answered. “Besides, they hold a lot more of our kind than we do of theirs. Tormenting 'em might not be what you call smart.”

Chase grunted and subsided. The Lizards' eyes swiveled from Yeager's face to the bandage and back again. They reminded him of the chameleon he'd seen at the zoo in—was it Salt Lake? Maybe Spokane. Whichever, it was a long time ago now.

One of the Lizards took the bandage pack in its small hand. As it used its claws to tear open the wrapping, it hissed something at Yeager. It and all its companions, even the two injured ones, lowered their turreted eyes to the floor of the bus for a second or two. Then it deftly began to bandage a gash in a wounded Lizard's flank.

“Paw through those belts,” Yeager said over his shoulder. “See if you can find some more bandages.” He was afraid the others would argue more, but they didn't. He heard their feet shift. Somebody—he didn't look back to see who—handed him another pack and then another. He passed them on to the Lizards.

By the time the bus pulled up in front of the Mills and Petrie Memorial Center in Ashton, the injured Lizards were swathed in enough gauze to make them look like something halfway between real wounded soldiers and Boris Karloff as the Mummy. Men in Army khaki, civilian denim and plaid flannel, and every possible combination thereof milled around in front of the stone and yellow brick building.

Through the open driver's window, Mutt Daniels yelled, “We got Lizard prisoners in here. What the devil we supposed to do with 'em?”

That drew all the attention he wanted and then some. People converged on the school bus at a dead run. Some pushing and elbowing followed, as men of higher rank made those below them give way. The first officer who actually got into the bus was a full colonel, the highest-ranking fellow Yeager had seen in Ashton (when he'd joined up a couple of weeks before, Sergeant Schneider had been the highest-ranking soldier in Ashton).

“Tell me how you took them, soldier,” he said in a drawl almost as thick as Mutt's. “They're some of the very first Lizard captives we've managed to get our hands on.”

“Yes, sir, Colonel Collins,” Daniels answered, reading the name badge on the officer's

right breast pocket. He ended up telling only part of the story, though, for the rest of the men, Yeager among them, kept interrupting with details of their *own*. Sam knew that wasn't showing proper military discipline, but he didn't care. If this Colonel Collins, whoever he was, didn't want to listen to Americans speaking their minds, to hell with him.

Collins listened without complaint. When the story was done, he said, "You boys had the luck of the devil—I hope you know that. Hadn't been for those Warhawks takin' out the enemy helicopters" (*So that's the right name for them*, Yeager thought), "you could've had a mighty thin time of it."

The colonel strode down the center aisle of the bus to get a closer look at the Lizards; like almost everyone else in the still free part of the United States, he hadn't yet really seen any of them. He brushed past Yeager, studied the prisoners for a couple of minutes, then turned back to their captors. "Don't look like so much, do they?"

"No, sir," Yeager said, in chorus with the other Americans. Collins, he thought, looked like quite a lot. The colonel was about Mutt's age, but with that and their accents the resemblance between them ceased. Collins was tall, still slim, handsome, with a full head of silver hair. He didn't keep a chew in his cheek. Without the uniform, Yeager would have guessed him a politician, say, the mayor of a medium-sized and prosperous city.

He said, "You boys did somethin' special here; I'll see you're all promoted for it."

All the men grinned. Mutt said, "Sergeant Schneider, back there in Amboy, he deserves a big part o' the credit, sir." Yeager nodded vigorously.

"I'll see that he gets it, then," Collins promised. "Any time privates speak well of a sergeant when he's not around to hear it, I reckon he's some sort of special man." As the soldiers chuckled, Collins went on, "Now the thing we have to do is get these Lizards someplace where they can be studied by people who have a chance of figuring out what they're all about and what they're up to."

Yeager spoke up. "I'll help get 'em there, sir."

Colonel Collins fixed him with a cold gray stare. "You so eager to get out of the front line, eh, soldier?"

"No, sir, that doesn't have a thing to do with it," Yeager said, first flustered and then angry. He wondered if Collins had ever been *in* the front line. Maybe during the First World War, he admitted to himself. He didn't know how to read the fruit salad of service ribbons on the colonel's left breast.

"Why should I pick you in particular, then?" Collins demanded.

"Best reason I can think of, sir, is that I've been reading science fiction for a long time. I've been thinking about men from Mars and invaders from space a lot longer and harder than anybody else you're likely to find, sir."

Collins was still staring at him, but not in the same way. "Damned if I know what kind of answer I expected, but that's not it. You're saying you're more likely to be

mentally flexible around these—things—than someone chosen at random, are you?”

“Yes, sir.” Yeager hadn’t been in the Army long, but he’d learned in a hurry not to promise too much, so he hedged: “I hope so, sir, anyhow.”

Like managers, officers earn their pay by making up their minds in a hurry and then following through. After what couldn’t have been more than a ten-second pause, Collins said, “Okay, soldier, you want it so bad, you’ve got it. Your name is—?”

“Samuel Yeager, sir,” Yeager said, saluting. He could hardly keep the grin off his face as he spelled Yeager.

The colonel pulled out a little notebook and a gold-plated mechanical pencil. He was, Yeager saw, a southpaw. He put the notebook away as soon as he’d jotted down Sam’s name. “All right, Private. Yeager—”

Mutt Daniels spoke up: “Ought to be Co’poral Yeager, sir, or at least PFC.” When Collins turned to frown at him, he went on blandly, “You did say you were promotin’ us.”

Yeager wished Mutt had kept his mouth shut, and waited for Colonel Collins to get angry. Instead, the colonel burst out laughing. “I know an old soldier when I hear one. Tell me you weren’t in France and I’ll call you a liar.”

“Can’t do it, sir,” Mutt said with a wide, ingratiating smile that kept a lot of umpires from throwing him out of the game no matter how outrageously he carried on.

“You better not try.” Collins gave his attention back to Sam. “All right, *PFC* Yeager, you will serve as liaison to these Lizard prisoners until they are delivered to competent authorities in Chicago.” He took out his notebook again, wrote rapidly. As he tore out a couple of sheets, he added, “These orders give discretion to your superiors in Chicago. They may send you back here, or they may let you stay on with the Lizards if you show you’re more valuable in that role.”

“Thank you, sir,” Yeager exclaimed, pocketing the orders Collins gave him. They reminded him of Bobby Fiore’s brief tryout with Albany—if he didn’t perform right away, they’d ship him out and never give him another chance to show he could do the job. But he wouldn’t even get as long as Bobby’d had; they’d likely be in Chicago tonight, though God only knew who competent authorities were or how long it would take to find them. Still, he had to get on the Lizards’ good side in a hurry. One way to do that seemed obvious: “Sir, if there’s a doctor or medic out there, to see to the wounds on these two ...”

Collins nodded crisply. He strode back to the door of the bus. As if that were a signal, all the lower-ranking officers waiting outside swarmed toward it Collins’ upraised hand did what King Canute only dreamed of: it held back the tide. The colonel stuck his head out of the bus and shouted, “Finkelstein!”

“Sir!” A skinny fellow with glasses and a thick head of uncombed curly black hair pushed his way through the crowd.

“He’s a Jew,” Coffins remarked, “but he’s a damned fine doctor.”

Yeager would not have cared—much—if Finkelstein were a Negro. It didn't matter one way or the other to the Lizards, that was for sure. Black bag in hand, the doctor scrambled up into the bus. "Who's hurt?" he asked in a thick New York accent. Then his eyes went wide. "Oh."

"Come on," Yeager said; if he was going to be Lizard liaison, he had to get on with the job. He led Finkelstein back to the Lizards, who had sat quietly through the colloquy with Collins. He hoped the creatures from another planet recognized him as the man who had let them have the bandages to bind up their wounds. Maybe they did; they showed no agitation when he brought the doctor right up to them.

But when Finkelstein made as if to tug at one of those bandages, the unhurt Lizards let out a volley of evil-sounding hisses. One of them stood up from his seat, clawed hands outstretched. "How can you let them know I'm not going to do anything bad to them?"

Sam thought, *How the devil do I know?* But if he couldn't invent an answer, somebody else would end up trying. He hoped for inspiration, and for once it came. He handed his rifle to Otto Chase, rolled up a sleeve. "Make like you're putting a bandage on my arm, then take it off again. Maybe they'll get the idea that that's what you're supposed to do."

"Yeah, that might work," Finkelstein said enthusiastically. He opened his medical bag, took out a paper-wrapped bandage. "Hate to waste anything sterile," he muttered as he opened it. He wrapped it around Yeager's arm. His hands were deft and quick and gentle. The Lizards watched him intently.

Yeager sighed and did his best to pantomime relief. He had no idea whether he got the idea across to the Lizards. Finkelstein undid the bandage. Then he tried moving toward one of the wounded prisoners again. This time, their uninjured companions, though they hissed among themselves, made no move to stop him.

The edge of a bandage came up easily. "It's not tape," the doctor said, as much to himself as to Yeager. "I wonder how it stays on." He peeled it back farther, looked at the wound in the Lizard's side. He let out a hiss of his own. "Shell fragment, I'd guess. Give me my bag, soldier." He grabbed a probe. "Warn him this may hurt."

*Who, me?* But this was what Yeager had asked for. He got the Lizards' attention, pinched himself, did his best to imitate the noises the wounded captives had made. Then he pointed to Finkelstein, the probe, and the injury. He looked at that as briefly as he could; he found torn flesh to be torn flesh, whether it belonged to man or Lizard.

Finkelstein slowly inserted the probe. The wounded Lizard sat very still, then hissed and quivered at the same moment as the doctor exclaimed, "Found it! Not too big and not too deep." He withdrew the probe, took out a pair of long, thin grasping tongs. "Almost there, almost there...got it!" His hands drew back; the tongs came out of the wound clenched on a half-inch sliver of metal. A drop of the Lizard's blood fell from it to the floor of the bus.

All the alien prisoners, even the wounded one, spoke excitedly in their own language. The one who had threatened the doctor with claws lowered his weird eyes toward the ground and stood very still. Yeager had seen the captives do that before. It had to be a kind of salute, he thought.

The doctor started to replace the bandage, then paused and glanced toward Yeager. “Think I ought to dust the wound with sulfa? Can Earth germs live on a thing from God knows where? Or would I be running a bigger risk of poisoning the Lizard?”

Again, Yeager’s first thought was, *How should I know?* Why was a doctor asking medical questions of a minor league outfielder without a high school diploma? Then he realized that when it came to Lizards, he might not know a whole lot less than Finkelstein. After a few seconds’ thought, he answered, “Seems to me they must come from a planet that isn’t too different than ours, or they wouldn’t want Earth in the first place. So maybe our germs would like them.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, I’ll do it.” The doctor poured the yellow powder into the wound, patted the bandage down. It clung as well as it had before.

Colonel Collins walked to the back of the bus. “How are you doing, Doctor?”

“Well enough, sir, thank you.” Finkelstein nodded at Yeager. “This is one sharp man you have here.”

“Is he? Good.” Collins headed up to the bus door again.

“I’m sorry, soldier,” the doctor said. “I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m Sam Yeager. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“There’s a kick in the head for you—I’m Sam Finkelstein. Well, Sam, shall we see what we can do for this other Lizard here?”

“Okay by me, Sam,” Yeager said.

Of all the places Jens Larssen had ever expected to end up when he set out from Chicago to warn the government how important the Metallurgical Laboratory’s work was, White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, might have been the last. Staying at the same hotel as the German chargé d’affaires hadn’t been high on his list of things to anticipate, either.

But here he was at the Greenbrier Hotel by the famous springs, and here—again—was Hans Thomsen. The German had been interned here, along with diplomats from Italy, Hungary, Romania, and Japan, when the United States entered the war. Thomsen had sailed back to Germany on a Swedish ship, lit up to keep it safe from U-boats, in exchange for Americans interned in Germany.

Now Thomsen was back again. In fact, he had a room right across the hall from Larssen’s. Down in the hotel dining room, he’d boomed, in excellent English, “I was worried going home, yes. But coming back here once more, on a dreadful little scow too small and ugly, God be thanked, for the Lizards to notice, then I was not worried. I was

far too seasick to think for a moment of being worried.”

Everyone who heard him laughed uproariously, Jens included. Having Thomsen back in the United States was a forcible reminder that humanity had more important things to do than slaughtering itself. It still made Larssen nervous. As far as he was concerned, Germany remained an enemy even if it happened to be forced into the same camp as the United States. It was the same feeling he'd had about allying with the Russians against Hitler, but even stronger here.

Not everybody in White Sulphur Springs agreed with him, not by a long shot. A lot of important people were here, fled from Washington when the government dispersed in the face of Lizard air raids. Larssen had heard that Roosevelt was here. He didn't know whether it was true. Every new rumor put the President somewhere else: back in Washington, in New York, in Philadelphia (W. C. Fields would not have approved), even in San Francisco (though how he was supposed to travel cross-country with the Lizards running loose was beyond Jens).

Larssen sighed, walked over to the sink in his room to see if he'd get any hot water. He waited and waited, but the stream stayed cold. Sighing, he scraped whiskers off his face with that cold water, lather from a hotel-sized bar of Lifebuoy soap, and a razor blade that had definitely seen better days. The resulting nicks tempted him to cultivate a beard.

His suits were wrinkled. Even his ties were wrinkled. He'd spent a long time getting here, and service at the hotel ranged from lousy on down. At that, he knew damned well he was lucky. No one in Washington or White Sulphur Springs had heard from Gerald Sebring, who'd headed east from Chicago by train instead of by car.

Larssen stooped to tie his shoelaces. One of them broke when he pulled at it. Swearing under his breath, he got down on one knee and tied the lace back together, then made his bow. It was ugly; but he'd already found out how badly picked over the Greenbrier's little sundries store was: it had been plundered first by Axis diplomats and then by invading American bureaucrats. He knew the place didn't have shoelaces. Maybe somebody in town did.

His nose wrinkled when he went out into the hail. Along with the brimstone odor of the springs, it still smelled of the dogs and cats the interned diplomats had brought with them from Washington. *Really gives me an appetite for breakfast*, he thought as he headed downstairs to the dining room.

Breakfast didn't rate much of an appetite. His choice was between stale toast with jam and corn flakes floating in reconstituted powdered milk. Either one cost \$3.75. Jens suspected he might have to declare bankruptcy before he got out of White Sulphur Springs. He'd been making good money by wartime standards—great money by the lean standards of the 1930s—but inflation headed straight for the roof when the Lizards landed. Demand stayed high, and they played merry hell with supply.

He ended up eating toast; one taste of the powdered milk had been enough to last him a lifetime. He left a niggardly tip, and begrudged even that. Escaping quickly, before



the waiter could see how he'd been stiffed, Larssen got his car and drove five miles into town, to the Methodist church to which he'd been directed to report.

White Sulphur Springs was a beautiful little town. It had probably been even more beautiful before herds of olive-drab trucks fouled the air with their exhaust and honked at each other like bellowing bulls disputing the right of way. The anti-aircraft guns which blossomed on every streetcorner also did little for the decor.

But even so, the rolling, green-clad slopes of the Alleghenies, the clear water of nearby Sherwood Lake, and the fuming springs that gave the place its name made it easy for Jens to understand why White Sulphur Springs had been a presidential resort in the days before the Civil War, when it was part of Virginia and no one had ever imagined West Virginia would become a separate state.

On the outside, the white-painted church with its tall steeple maintained the serenity the town sought to project. One step through the door told Larssen he had entered another world. The pastor retained half his office, but that was all. From everywhere else came the clatter of typewriters, the raucous chatter of people with too much to do and not enough time to do it, and the purposeful clomp of government-issue footgear on a hardwood floor.

A harassed corporal looked up from whatever he was typing. Seeing a veritable civilian before him, he dispensed with even military politeness: "Watcha want, mac? Make it snappy."

"I have a nine o'clock appointment to see Colonel Groves." Larssen looked down at his watch. He was five minutes early.

"Oh." The corporal visibly shifted gears as he reassessed this civilian's likely importance. A good piece of his big-city tough-guy accent disappeared when he spoke again: "You want to come along with me, sir?"

"Thank you." Larssen followed the noncom through the pews on which more enlisted men were awkwardly working rather than praying, crabwise down a hallway pinched by mountains of file boxes that clung like clots to either wall, and into what had been the pastor's sanctum. New plywood partitions restricted that worthy to a fraction of his former domain—the fraction thereof that lacked a telephone.

Colonel Leslie Groves sat behind a desk that held said telephone. He employed the instrument with vim and gusto: "What the hell do you mean, you can't ship those tracks up to Detroit?...So the bridge is out and the road has a hole in it? So what? Get 'em on a barge. The Lizards aren't blasting half the shipping they might, the stupid bastards. We have to get those tanks made, or we can kiss everything good-bye...I'll call you tonight, so I can keep up with what you're doing. Get it done, Fred, I don't care how."

He hung up with no more of a good-bye than that, fixed Larssen with an intense blue stare. "You're from that Chicago project." It was not a question. A flick of the colonel's left hand dismissed the corporal.

"That's right." Larssen wondered how much Groves knew about it, and how much he

ought to tell him. More than he wanted to; he was already sure of that. “After Berlin, sir, you have to know how important that project is. And the Lizards are advancing on Chicago.”

“Son, we all got troubles,” Groves rumbled. He was a big man with auburn hair cut short, a thin mustache, and blunt, competent features. He filled the pastor’s chair to overflowing and sat well back from the desk; a hefty belly kept him from getting any closer.

“I know it,” Jens said. “I mean, I drove here from Chicago, after all.”

“Sit down; tell me about that,” Groves urged. “I’ve been holed up here almost since the Lizards came. I ought to know more about the world outside than what I can find out over a phone line.” As if on cue, the telephone jangled. “Excuse me.”

While the colonel barked instructions to someone on the other end of the line, Larssen perched on the uncomfortable chair in front of the desk and tried to marshal his thoughts. Groves gave him the impression of a man who worked hard every waking moment, so he was ready when the handset went back into its cradle: “It’s not a trip I’m looking forward to reversing. Lizard planes are everywhere, and I had to take the side roads up into upstate New York to get around the Lizard pocket east of Pittsburgh.”

“They’re in Pittsburgh now,” Groves said.

Jens *grunted*. The news didn’t surprise *him*, but it was *like* a kick in the belly just the same. He made himself go on: “Gas is hard as the devil to get. I drove a few miles on a half gallon of grain alcohol I bought from a little old man I think was a moonshiner. My engine hasn’t been the same since, either.”

“You kept going, which is what counts,” Groves said. “The alcohol was a good dodge. One of the things we’re looking at is adapting engines to burn it, in case the Lizards hurt our refining capacity even worse than they have already. If the revenuers haven’t been able to put a stop to stills, damned if I see the Lizards doing it.”

“I suppose not,” Larssen agreed. But the colonel’s words brought home to him how bad things were. Somehow all the terror and trouble that had befallen him on the way from Chicago, all the horrors he’d edited out of his brief account to Groves, seemed to have happened to him in isolation; he could imagine other parts of the United States going on about their usual business while hell didn’t seem half a mile off for him. He could imagine it, yes, but Groves was warning him it wasn’t true. He said, “As bad as that?”

“Some places worse,” Colonel Groves said somberly. “The Lizards are like a cancer on the country. They don’t just hurt the places where they are—they hurt other places, too, because supplies can’t go through the territory they hold.” The phone rang again. Groves delivered a crisp series of orders, then returned to his conversation with Jens without missing a beat: “They cut off our circulation, you might say, so we die inch by inch.”

“That’s why the Metallurgical Laboratory is so important,” Larssen said. “It’s our best

chance at a weapon that will let us fight them on something like equal terms.” He decided to push a little. “Washington could go the same way as Berlin, you know.”

Groves started to say something, but was interrupted by the phone once more. When he hung up, he did say it: “You really think your people will be able to make an atomic bomb in time for us to get some use out of it?”

“We’re close to starting up a sustained reaction,” Larssen said. Then he shut up; even saying that much trampled on the security he’d lived with ever since he became a part of the project. The times, though, were not what they had been before the Lizards proved atomic weapons didn’t belong just on the pages of pulp magazines. He added, “Speaking of Berlin, nobody here knows how far along the Germans are on their own special project” No matter how things had changed, he couldn’t bring himself to say *uranium* to someone not in the know.

“The Germans.” Groves scowled. “I hadn’t thought of that. Nothing’s ever simple, is it? After Berlin, they have some kind of incentive to push ahead, too. Heisenberg wasn’t in the city when the bomb hit, I hear.”

“If you know about Heisenberg, you know quite a bit about this,” Larssen said, surprised and impressed. He’d taken Groves for just another man in a uniform, if one more overstuffed than most.

The colonel’s gruff laugh said he understood what Larssen was thinking. “I do try to remind myself I’m living in the twentieth century,” he noted dryly. “I spent a couple of years at MIT before I got my West Point ring, and took an engineering doctorate afterward. All of which and a nickel will buy me a cup of coffee—or would have, before the Lizards came. Costs more now. So you really think this gang of yours is on to something, do you?”

“Yes, I do, Colonel. We’re too far along to make it easy for us to move, too. The Lizards are advancing on Chicago from the west, and after my adventures coming east, moving that way looks just about as risky. If we’re going to go on doing our research, the United States has to hold on to Chicago.”

Groves rubbed his chin. “What we have to do and what we can do too often aren’t nearly the same thing these days, worse luck. Anyway”—he tapped the eagle that perched on one shoulder—“I don’t have the authority to order us to hold Chicago no matter what and forget about the other rune million emergencies all over the country.”

“I know that.” Jens’ heart sank. “But’ you’re the best contact I’ve made. I was hoping you would—”

“Oh, I will, son, I will.” Groves heaved his bulk out of the chair. The phone rang again. Swearing, Groves flopped down again, so hard Larssen half expected the seat to break under him. It held, and Groves, as he had several times already, crisply and authoritatively dealt with a new string of problems. Then he got up once more, and went on talking as if he’d never been interrupted: “I’ll run interference for you, best I can. But you’re the one who’s carrying the ball.” He stuck a fore-and-aft cap on his head.

“Let’s go.”

Larssen had played football in high school. If he’d run the ball behind a lineman as huge as Groves, he’d have put so many touchdowns on the board that people would have thought *him* the second coming of Red Grange. The image made him smile. “Where are we going?” he asked as Groves pushed past him.

“To see General Marshall,” the colonel said over his shoulder. “He has the power to bind and to loose. I’ll get you in to talk to him—today, I. hope. After that, it’s up to you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Larssen said. George Marshall was Army Chief of Staff. If anyone could order Chicago defended at all cost, he was the man (although, against the Lizards, ordering something and having it come to pass were not the same thing). Hope rose in Jens. As he followed Groves out into the street, he drew in a lungful of air ripe not only with exhaust but also with the sulfurous reek of the springs.

Groves took a deep breath, too. A grin made him look years younger. “That smell always reminds me of walking into a freshman chemistry lab.”

“It does, by God!” Jens hadn’t made the connection, but the colonel was absolutely right. The very next breath brought with it memories of Bunsen burners and reagent bottles with frosted glass stoppers.

Colonel Groves literally ran interference for Larssen on the streets of White Sulphur Springs, using his blocky body to bull ahead where a thinner or less confident man might have hesitated. He had a good deal of muscle beneath the fat, and also a driving energy that made him walk with a forward lean, as if into a headwind.

Getting in to see the Chief of Staff wasn’t as simple as Groves had made it sound back in his office. The lawn of the house in which Marshall stayed was clogged with officers. Jens had never seen so many sparkling silver stars in his life. To generals, a colonel like Groves might as well have been invisible.

He did not stay invisible long. Sheer physical bulk got him near enough to the doorway to catch the eye of a harried-looking major inside. In a ringing voice that cut through the hubbub, Groves announced his name and declared, “Tell the general I have a fellow here from the Metallurgical Laboratory in Chicago. It’s urgent.”

“What isn’t?” the major answered, but he ducked back inside. Groves peacefully yielded up his place to a major general.

“Now what?” Larssen asked. He could feel the sun pounding his head and his arms—he wore a short-sleeved shirt. He was so fair he didn’t tan worth a damn; he just burned layer by layer.

“Now we wait.” Groves folded his own arms across his broad, khaki-clad chest.

“But you said it was urgent—”

The colonel’s booming laugh made heads swing toward him. “If it weren’t urgent, I wouldn’t be here at all. Same with everybody else, son. As that major said, everything is

urgent nowadays. But if he delivers that message, well, I expect we're urgent *enough*, if you know what I mean."

As seconds crawled by on hands and knees, Jens began to wonder. He also wondered where in White Sulphur Springs he'd be able to find calamine lotion to slather on his poor toasting arms and nose. As inconspicuously as he could, he moved into Groves' massive shadow. He felt a stab of jealousy when the major returned to call out the name of a brigadier general. Groves only shrugged.

The major came out again. "Colonel, uh, Graves?"

"That's me," Groves declared; since no Colonel Graves rose up in righteous anger to dispute his claim, Larseti supposed he was right. More officers' heads turned toward him as he surged forward with Jens in his wake. Envy and anger were the main expressions Jens saw—who was this mere colonel to take precedence over men with stars on their shoulders?

"This way, sir," the major said. This way led to a closed door, in front of which Groves and Larssen spent the next several minutes cooling their heels. Larssen didn't care; the hall was hot and airless, but at least he'd got out of the sun.

The door opened. The brigadier general came out, looking grimly satisfied. He returned Groves' salute, gave Larssen a brusque nod, and strode away.

"Come in, Colonel Groves, and bring your companion," General Marshall called from behind his desk. Jens noticed that he got the name straight.

"Thank you, sir," Groves said, obeying. "Sir, let me present Dr. Jens. Larssen; as I told your adjutant, he's reached us from the project at the University of Chicago."

"Sir." As a civilian, Larssen reached across the desk to shake hands with the Army Chief of Staff. The general's grip was firm and precise. Jens's first impression was that despite the uniform, despite the three rows of campaign ribbons, Marshall looked more like a senior research scientist than a soldier. He was in his early sixties, spare and trim, with hair *going* from iron gray toward white. Under a wide forehead, his face was rather narrow. He looked as though he seldom smiled. His eyes were arresting; they said he'd seen a lot and thought hard about every bit of it.

If not warm, he was gracious enough, waving Larssen and Groves to chairs and listening closely to Jens' brief retelling of his trip across the eastern half of the United States. Then he put his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "Tell me the status of the Metallurgical Laboratory as you know it, Dr. Larssen. You may speak freely; I am cleared for this information."

"If you'd like me to step outside, sir—" Groves started to get up again.

Marshall raised a hand to stop him. "That will not be necessary, Colonel. Security requirements have changed considerably since the end of May. The Lizards already know the secrets we are trying to extract from nature."

"Do the Germans?" Larssen asked. Being a civilian had advantages; he could question the Army Chief of Staff where military discipline held Groves silent "Do we want the

Germans to learn them from us? I'd better know the answer to that, sir, not least because Hans Thomsen has the room across the hall from mine at the Greenbrier."

"The Germans have an atomic research program of their own," Marshall said. "It is in our interest to keep them fighting the Lizards, not least because, to speak frankly, they are doing a better job of it than anyone else at the moment. They have their army and their economy already geared to war on a large scale, while we were still readying our resources when the Lizards came."

Larssen nodded before he realized General Marshall hadn't really answered his question. Being able to talk like a politician, he supposed, was one of the job qualifications for Army Chief of Staff.

As if thinking along with him, Marshall said, "Before I tell you what you may say to the German chargé, Dr. Larssen—and you may say nothing without direct authorization from me or someone at a higher level—I do need to know where the Metallurgical Laboratory presently stands in its researches."

"Of course, sir." But Larssen remained bemused as he mustered his thoughts. Who was at a higher level than General Marshall? Only two men he could think of—the secretary of war and President Roosevelt. Was Marshall implying he might meet them? Jens shook his head. It didn't matter now. He said, "When I left Chicago, sir, we were assembling an atomic pile which, we hoped, would have a *k*-factor greater than one."

"You'll have to explain a bit further than that, I'm afraid," Marshall said. "While I have studied your group's report with great attention, I do not pretend to be a nuclear physicist"

"It means arranging the uranium so that, as atomic nuclei are split—*fission*, the term is—the neutrons they release will split more atoms, and so on. Think of it as a positive feedback cycle, sir. In a bomb like the ones the Lizards have, it happens in a split second and releases enormous energy."

"What you are working toward is not a bomb in and of itself, then," Marshall said.

"That's right" Larssen eyed the older man with respect. As Marshall had said, he was no nuclear physicist, but he had no trouble drawing implications from data. Jens continued, "It is an essential first step, though. We'll control the nuclear reaction with cadmium rods that capture excess neutrons before they strike uranium atoms. That will keep it from getting out of hand. We have to walk before we can run, sir, and we need to understand how to produce a controlled chain reaction before we can think about making a bomb."

"And Chicago is the place where this research is going on?" Marshall said musingly.

"In the United States, yes," Larssen said.

He'd hoped Marshall might tell him what, if anything, was happening elsewhere. The Chief of Staff, however, had taken security for granted longer than Jens had been alive. He did not even change expression to acknowledge he'd noticed the hint. He said, "We intended to fight for Chicago for other reasons. This gives us one more. Thank you for

your courage in coming here to report on the Metallurgical Laboratory's progress."

"Yes, sir." Larssen wanted to ask more questions, but General Marshall did not strike him as a man given to loose talk even in private circumstances, which these emphatically were not. Nevertheless, he blurted what was uppermost in his mind: "General, *can* we beat the damned Lizards?"

Colonel Groves shifted weight in his chair, making it squeak; Jens abruptly realized that wasn't the way you were supposed to talk to the Army Chief of Staff. He felt himself flushing. He was so fair, he knew the flush would show. That only embarrassed him more.

But Marshall did not seem angry. Maybe the perfectly unmilitary question touched a responsive chord in him, for he said, "Dr. Larssen, if you find anybody who *knows* the answer to that one, he wins the prize. We're doing everything we can, and we'll go on doing everything we can. The alternative is to surrender and live in slavery. Americans won't accept that—maybe your grandfather was one who helped prove it."

"Sir, if you mean the Civil War, my grandfather was still back in Oslo then, trying to make a living as a cobbler. He came to the United States in the 1880s."

"Looking for something better than he had over there, no doubt," Marshall said, nodding. "That's a very human thing to do. I'll be frank with you, Dr. Larssen: in purely military terms, the Lizards have us outclassed. Up to now, no one—not us, not the Germans, not the Russians, not the Japs—has been able to stop them. But no one has stopped trying, and we've put most of our own conflicts on the back shelf for the time being, as witness Mr. Thomsen's presence here—across the hail from you, didn't you say?"

"That's right." Cooperating with the Third Reich still left a bad taste in Larssen's mouth. "Didn't I hear that Warsaw fell when the people there rose against the Nazis and for the Lizards?"

"Yes, that's true," Marshall said soberly. "From the intelligence we have of what those people were suffering, I can see how the Lizards might have seemed the better bargain to them." His voice went flat, emotionless. The very blankness of his face convinced Jens he wasn't telling all he knew there. After a moment, that blankness lifted. "On a global scale, however, it is a small matter, as are the Chinese uprisings against the Japs and in favor of the Lizards. But the Lizards have weaknesses of their own."

Colonel Groves leaned forward. His chair squeaked again. "May I ask what some of those weaknesses are, sir? Knowing them may help me assign priorities in allocating matériel."

"The chief one, Colonel, is their rigid adherence to doctrine. They are methodical to a fault, and slow to adapt tactics to fit circumstances. Some of our nearest approaches to success have come from creating situations where we used their patterns to lure units into untenable situations and then exploited the advantages we gained in so doing. And now, if you will excuse me ..."

The dismissal was polite, but a dismissal nonetheless. Groves rose and saluted. Jens got up, too. He decided not to shake hands again; General Marshall's attention had already returned to the papers that clogged his desk. The general's aide took charge of them as they came out of the office, led them back to the door by which they'd entered.

"I think you did pretty well there, Dr. Larssen," Groves said, making slow headway against the tide of officers that flowed toward the entrance.

"Call me Jens," Larssen said.

"Then I'm Leslie." The heavysset colonel made an extravagant gesture. "Where now? The world lies at your feet."

Larssen laughed. Till now, he hadn't known any senior military men. They were different from what he'd thought they'd be—Marshall scholarly and precise, plainly a first-class mind (a judgment Jens did not make lightly, not after working with several Nobel laureates); Groves without the Chief of Staff's unbounded mental horizons, but full of bulldog competence and just enough whimsy to leaven the mix. Neither was the singleminded fighting man evoked by the label "general" or "colonel"

After a little thought, Larssen decided that made sense. The group, at the Met Lab weren't the effete eggheads layfolk thought of when they imagined what nuclear physicists were like, either. People were more complicated than any subatomic particles.

He wondered what the Lizards made of people. If the invaders were as compulsively orderly as Marshall had said, mankind's aggressive randomness likely confused them no end. He hoped so—every weakness of theirs, no matter how tiny, was a corresponding strength for humanity.

He also wondered what it would be like in one of their spaceships, cruising along far above the surface of the Earth, flying between planets, perhaps even between stars. They were the ones who could literally have the world under their feet. Cold, clear envy pierced him.

Despite his musings, he was only a beat slow in answering Groves: "Unless you've got FDR up your sleeve there, Leslie, I think you've done as much as any man could. Thanks more than I can say for all your help."

"My pleasure." Groves stuck out a hand. He had a grip like a hydraulic press. "You convinced me you and your group are on to something important, and my superiors need to understand that, too, so they can factor it into their calculations. As for Roosevelt, hmm ..." He *actually did look up his sleeve*. "Sorry, no. He seems to have stepped out"

"Too bad. If you do happen to see him"—Larssen had no idea how probable that was, but believed in covering his bets—"mention the project if you get the chance."

"I'll do that, Jens." Groves glanced at his wrist again, this time just to check his watch. "I'd best get back to it. I've been away too long already. God only knows what's stacking up on my desk. No rest for the weary, as they say." With a last nod, he turned and headed back toward the Methodist church. Larssen hadn't been able to park any



closer than several blocks away. Watching Groves' broad back recede, he concluded the colonel got results from those around him by working twice as hard as any of them. In that, he would have fit in well at the Metallurgical Lab.

The physicist looked at his own watch. Nearly noon—no wonder his stomach was sounding reveille. He wondered what epicurean delight the Greenbrier was offering for lunch. Yesterday it had been canned pork and beans, canned corn, and canned fruit cocktail. Wryly shaking his head, he wondered about the consequences of excessive tin in the diet.

Today's menu, he discovered when he got to the hotel restaurant, was extravagant by current standards: Spam and canned peas. The peas were more nearly olive drab than green, but he ate them all the same, hoping they retained at least some of their vitamins. He also put down an extra buck and a half for a nickel bottle of Coke—that, nobody could snafu. The bottle, he noted, was closer to the color peas ought to be than the peas themselves were.

As he was chasing the last sad, soft, overcooked peas with his fork, there was a stir at the entrance to the dining room. A couple of people started to clap. Larssen looked up, saw a short, pale, bullet-headed man wearing a homburg, steel-rimmed spectacles, and a suit of European cut. That face had looked out at him from countless newsreels, but he'd never thought to encounter Vyacheslav Molotov in the flesh.

Something else occurred to him. His gaze flicked from table to table. Sure enough, there sat Hans Thomsen, also with a plate of Spam. The German chargé d'affaires was affable, genial, a fluent English-speaker who'd worked hard to put the best face on the activities of the Nazi government until Hitler declared war on the United States. Larssen wondered how he felt to be in the presence of the Soviet foreign minister after Germany's unprovoked invasion of Russia. He also wondered how Molotov would react to finding a Nazi representative here in the heart of the American government in refuge.

Nor was his the only such curiosity. The dining room grew silent for a few seconds as people stopped talking and suspended forks in midair to see what would happen next. Thomsen, Jens thought, recognized Molotov before the latter saw him. Maybe Molotov would not have noticed him at all but for the Nazi party badge he wore on his left lapel.

The Russian had a face as impassive as any Larssen had ever seen. He did not change expression now, but he did hesitate before proceeding into the dining room. Then he turned to the man beside him, a squarely built fellow whose suit was similar in cut to his own but much more poorly fitted. He spoke a single sentence of Russian.

From the explosive coughs that went up, a few people understood what he had to say in the original. The squarely built man's function was then revealed; he translated Molotov's words into elegant, Oxford-accented English: "The foreign commissar of the USSR observes that, having already entered into diplomatic discussions with the Lizards, he has no objection to speaking to serpents as well."

More coughs rose, Larssen's among them. His eyes swung back to Hans Thomsen. He doubted he could have been as politely insulting as Molotov, given what the Nazis had

done to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, all of humanity was supposed to be joining together to resist the invaders from another planet. If everyone kept remembering what was going on before the Lizards came, the united front would come crashing down. And if it did, that literally handed the Lizards the world.

Thomsen was a trained diplomat. If he noticed Molotov had given him the glove, he never let on. He was smiling as he replied, "There is in English an old saying about the enemy of one's enemy."

The interpreter murmured to Molotov. Now the Communist official looked straight back at the German. "It was on this basis, no doubt, that the imperialist powers of Great Britain and the United States allied with the peace-loving people of the USSR against the Hitlerite regime."

*Watch out for this guy, Jens thought. He's dangerous.* Thomsen kept his smile, but it looked held in place by force of will. Still, he had a counterthrust ready: "No doubt it was also on this basis that Finland allied with Germany after being invaded by the peace-loving people of the USSR."

As if at a tennis match, Larssen turned his head to look at Molotov. The match here, though, he thought, used a live hand grenade for a ball. Molotov's lips might have drawn back from his teeth a millimeter or two. Through his interpreter, the Soviet foreign minister replied, "As we have both noted, the principle admits of broad application. Thus I am willing to discuss our own differences at another time."

The sigh of relief that filled the dining room was quite audible. Larssen didn't consciously notice; he was too busy adding to it.

The hologram of Tosev 3 hung in space above its projector, just as it had before the Race began to add a fourth world to the Empire. Today, though, Atvar did not urge Kirel to project the image of the ferocious Tosevite warrior with his sword and chain mail that the Race's probes had brought Home. Like everyone else in the fleet, Atvar had found out more about Tosevite warriors than he'd ever wanted to learn.

The fleetlord turned to the assembled shiplords. "We are met here, today, valiant males, to evaluate the results of the first half-year's fighting"—he used the Race's chronology, of course; sluggish Tosev 3 had completed only a fourth of its orbit—"and to discuss our plans for the combat yet to come."

The shiplords accepted the introduction better than he'd dared hope. When the schedule for the conquest of Tosev 3 was drawn up back on Home, the half-year meeting was the last one included. After half a year, everyone was certain, Tosev 3 would be firmly attached to the Empire. The Race lived by schedules and plans drawn up long before they were carried out. That Atvar's chief underlings recognized the need for much more work was *a measure of how much the Tosevites had shaken* them.

"We make progress," Atvar insisted. "Large parts of Tosev 3 are under our virtually complete control." On the hologram, portions of the planet's land area changed color from their natural greens and browns to a bright golden hue: the southern half of the smaller continental mass, much of the southwestern part of the main continental mass. "The natives in these areas, while not as primitive as previously available data led us to believe, have been unable to offer resistance much above the nuisance level."

"May it please the exalted fleetlord," Shiplord Straha of the *206th Emperor Yower* said, "but much of this territory strikes me as being that on Tosev 3 least worth the having. True, it's warm enough to suit our kind, but much of it is so beastly wet that our fighting males break out in molds and rots."

"Molds and rots are a small price to pay for victory," Atvar answered. More of the hologram turned gold, so that Tosev 3 itself looked blotched and diseased. "Here are our holdings in the regions where the Big Ugliers are most technologically advanced. As you can see for yourselves, valiant males, these have expanded considerably since last we gathered together." The hologram rotated to give the shiplords a view of the entire planet.

Brash as usual, Straha said, "Certainly we have made great gains. How could it be otherwise, when we are the Race? The question that arises, however, Exalted Fleetlord, is why our gains have not been greater still, why Tosevite forces yet remain in arms against us."

“May I speak, Exalted Fleetlord?” Kirel asked. At Atvar’s assent, the shiplord of the *127th Emperor Hetto* went on, “The principal reason for our delays, Shiplord Straha, strikes me as obvious to a hatchling still wet from the egg: the Big Ugliers’ capabilities are far greater than we imagined while readying the expeditionary force.”

“Oh, indeed, as we have discovered to our sorrow,” Straha said sarcastically, eager to score points off his rival. “But why is this so? How did our probes fail us so badly? How did the Tosevites become a technological species while the Race turned its eye turrets in the other direction?”

Kirel turned to Atvar in protest. “Exalted Fleetlord, the blame for that must surely rest with the Big Ugliers themselves, not on the Race. We merely applied procedures which had proved themselves eminently successful on our two previous conquests. We could not know in advance that they would be less effective here.”

“That is so.” Atvar glanced down to check some data on a computer screen. Before Kirel could look too smug at having his commander’s support, the fleetlord added, “Nevertheless, Straha poses a legitimate question, even if impolitely: why *are* the Tosevites so different from us and our two previous subject races?”

Now Straha brightened up. Atvar needed to keep his rivalry with Kirel active; that way both powerful shiplords, and the lesser leaders who inclined to one of them or the other, would continue to labor zealously to seek the fleetlord’s support.

After reviewing his electronic notes once more, Atvar said, “Our savants have isolated several factors which, they feel, cause the Tosevites to be as they are.” A muffled hiss ran through the shiplords as they gave their commander full attention. Some of these speculations had already gone out in bulletins and announcements, but bulletins and announcements flowed from the fleetlord’s ship in such an unending stream that no one, no matter how diligent, could pay attention to them all. Words straight from the fleetlord’s jaws, though, were something else again.

He said, “One element contributing to the Tosevites’ anomalous nature is surely the anomalous nature of Tosev 3.” Now all at once the planet’s immense, innumerable oceans and seas and lakes and rivers glowed bright blue. “The excessive amount of free water serves, along with mountains and deserts, to wall off groups of Big Ugliers from one another and allow them to go their own separate ways. This is obvious from one eye’s glance at the globe, and is not too different from our own most ancient days back on Home.”

“But, Exalted Fleetlord—” Kirel began. Not only had he read all the bulletins and announcements, he’d discussed them with Atvar—the advantage of being shiplord to the bannership of the fleet

“But indeed.” Atvar wanted to lay out this exposition himself, without interruptions. “What follows is more subtle. Because land dominates water on the worlds of the Empire, we have little experience with boats and other aquatic conveyances. That is not the case among the Tosevites, who lavish endless ingenuity upon them. When some Big Ugliers stumbled upon technology, they were quickly able to spread its influence—and

theirs—by sea to most of the planet.”

“Then why do we not face one unified Tosevite empire, Exalted Fleetlord?” asked Feneress, a shiplord of Straha’s faction.

“Because the Tosevites in the area where the breakthrough took place were already divided among several competing groups,” Atvar answered “Travel by sea let them all expand their influence outward without consolidating into a single empire.”

The assembled shiplords hissed again, more quietly this time, as implications began to sink in. Back on Home, the ancestral Empire had grown step by small step. That was the only way it could grow, on a normal world where there were no great oceans to let its influence suddenly metastasize in a hundred directions at once. Atvar hissed himself as that word crossed his mind; it seemed the perfect metaphor for the Tosevites’ malignantly rapid technological growth.

“You must also bear in mind the constantly competitive nature of the Big Ugliers themselves,” he went on. “As we have recently discovered, they are sexually competitive throughout the year, and remain, in a state permitting sexual excitement even in the long-term absence of any breeding partner.”

Atvar knew he sounded faintly disgusted. Without pheromones from females in heat, his own sexual urge remained latent. He didn’t miss it. On a mission like this, it would have been a distraction. The Rabotevs and Hallessi were like the Race in that regard, which had led its savants to believe all intelligent species followed the same pattern. There as elsewhere, Tosev 3 was proving a theorist’s crematorium.

Straha said, “Exalted Fleetlord, I recently received a shiplord’s-eyes-only report noting that the Tosevite empires opposing us are in fact not empires at all. I find this a contradiction. Granted that the scale of area ruled may vary, but how can there be government without empire?”

“Before I came here, Shiplord, I assure you I found that concept as unimaginable as you do now,” Atvar answered. “Tosev 3, unfortunately, has taught us all a variety of unpleasant new ideas. Of the lot, government without empire may be the most repugnant, but it does exist and must be dealt with.”

The shiplords stirred uncomfortably. Talking about government without empire was worse than talking about sexual interest in the absence of females in heat. For the Race, the latter was just an intellectual exercise, a study in abstraction. Government without empire, though, tore at the underpinnings of a thousand millennia of civilized life.

Feneress said, “Without emperors, Exalted Fleetlord, how can the Big Ugliers administer their affairs? I too saw the report to which the senior shiplord Straha refers, but I confess I dismissed it as just another flight of fancy from savants drawing broad conclusions without enough data. You are saying this is not the case?”

“It is not, Shiplord. For my own peace of mind, I wish it were, but the data are irrefutable,” Atvar replied. “Moreover, revolting as it surely seems to us, the Big Ugliers in many cases seem proud of their success at ruling themselves without emperors.” The

Big Ugly named Molotov had seemed proud of belonging to a band that had slaughtered his empire's emperor. The very idea still gave Atvar the horrors.

"But how do they administer their affairs?" Feneress persisted. Several other shiplords, males from both Straha's faction and Kirel's, made gestures of agreement. Here the whole Race united in finding the Tosevites baffling.

Atvar found them baffling, too, but he had been working hard to understand. He said, "I will summarize as best I can. In some Tosevite, uh, nonempires—the two most powerful examples are Deutschland and the SSSR—the ruler has full imperial power but draws on no hereditary loyalty and affection from his subjects. This may be one reason these two Tosevite areas are ruled with more brutality than most: obedience out of affection being unavailable to them, they force obedience out of fear."

That made a certain amount of logical sense, anyway, no matter how much it appalled the fleetlord. Since logical sense was hard enough to come by on Tosev 3, he cherished it when he found it Deutschland and the SSSR were models of comprehensibility when set beside some of the other—maybe *lands* was a good word for them, Atvar thought—on Tosev 3.

He went on, "Italia, Nippon, and Britain *are* empires in our sense of the word. Or so they claim, at any rate; nothing the Big Ugliers do can be trusted to be what it appears. In the first two empires I mentioned, the emperor serves as a false front for other Tosevites who hold the actual power in their regimes."

"This phenomenon was also known among the Rabotevs before we integrated them into the Empire," Kirel noted. "In fact, some of our own ancient records may be interpreted to imply that it occurred among the Race as well, in the long-ago days when the Empire was limited, not merely to one planet, but to a portion of that planet."

The shiplords muttered among themselves. Atvar did not blame them. Anything that cast doubt on the sovereignty of the Emperor had to be intensely disturbing. The Emperor was the rock to which their souls were tethered, the central focus of all their lives. Without him, they could only wander through existence alone and afraid, no better than the Big Ugliers or any other beasts of the field.

Yet this briefing held more that would disquiet them. As the mutters died away, Atvar spoke again: "The case of Britain is more obscure. Again, though it is an empire, its emperor holds no real power. Some of you will have noticed the name of the male, uh, Churchill, as appearing repeatedly among those who urge the Tosevites to continue their futile and foredoomed resistance to the Race. This Churchill, it seems (admittedly from the limited data we have and our own imperfect—the Emperor be praised!—understanding of Tosevite customs), is but the leader of the Britainish faction which currently musters more support than any other. If the factions shift, their leaders meeting together may at any time choose for themselves a different chief."

Straha's jaws gaped in amusement. "And when they do, Exalted Fleetlord, how will this war leader, this—Churchill, did you say?—respond? By abandoning the power he has seized? Isn't he more likely to set soldiers on them to cure their presumption? Isn't

that what you or I or any sane male would do?”

“We have reason to believe he would abandon power,” Atvar answered, and had the satisfaction of seeing Straha’s mouth close with a snap. “Intercepted radio signals indicated such—how best to put it?—resignation to factional shifts is a commonplace of government (or lack of government) among the Britainish.”

“Madness,” Straha said.

“What else would you expect from the Big Uglies?” Atvar said. “And if you think the Britainish mad, how do you account for the Tosevite land called the United States?”

Straha did not answer. Atvar had not expected him to answer. The rest of the shiplords also fell silent. Without a doubt the most prosperous land on Tosev 3, the United States was by any rational standard an anarchy. It had no emperor; as far as any of the Race’s savants could tell, it had never had an emperor. But it also had few of the trappings of a land ruled by force like the SSSR or Deutschland.

Atvar summed up the Race’s view of the United States in one scornful word: “Snoutcounters! How do they have the hubris to imagine they can build a land that amounts to anything by counting one another’s snouts?”

“And yet they have,” Kirel said, as usual soberly sticking to observable truth. “Analysis suggests they acquired the snout-counting habit from the Britainish, with whom they share a language, and then extended it further than even the Britainish countenance.”

“They even count snouts in the prison camps we have established on their soil,” Atvar said. “When we needed Big Ugly representatives through whom to deal with their kind, that’s how they chose them—instead of picking ones known to be wise or brave, they let several vie for the jobs and counted snouts to see which had the most in favor.”

“How are these representatives working out?” asked Hassov, who was rather a cautious male and thus inclined to Kirel’s faction. “How much worse are they than those selected by some rational means?”

“Our officers have noted no great differences between them and similar representatives elsewhere on Tosev 3,” Atvar said. “Some are better and more obedient than others, but that is the case all around the planet”

The admission bothered him. It was as if he were confessing that the manifest anarchy of the United States worked as well as a system that made sense. As a matter of fact, it did seem to work well, by Tosevite standards anyhow. And the American Big Uglies (he did not understand how they derived *American* from *United States*, but he did not pretend to be a linguist, either) fought as hard for the sake of their anarchy as other Big Uglies battled for their emperors or non-imperial rulers.

Straha said, “Very well, Exalted Fleetlord, the Tosevites rule themselves in ways we find incomprehensible or revolting or both. How does this affect our campaign against them?”

“A relevant question,” Atvar said approvingly. He did not trust Straha; the male had enough ambition to be—why, he had almost enough ambition to be one of those

freewheeling American Big Ugliers himself, Atvar thought with the new perspective he'd gained from half a year on Tosev 3. But no denying his ability.

The fleetlord resumed: "The Tosevites, with these ramshackle, temporary governments of theirs, have shown themselves to be more versatile, more flexible, than we are. No doubt those back on Home would be shocked at the improvisations we have been forced to make in the course of our conquest here."

*No doubt a good many of you are, too*, Atvar added silently to himself. From lack of practice or need, the Race did not improvise well. When change came in the Empire (which was' seldom), it came in slow, carefully planned steps, with likely results and plans to meet them mapped out beforehand. The Emperor and his servants thought in terms of millennia. That was good for the Race as a whole, but did not promote quick reflexes. Here on Tosev 3, situations had a way of changing even as you looked at them; yesterday's perfect plan, if applied day after tomorrow, was as apt to yield fiasco as triumph.

"Improvising, though, seems a way of life for the Big Ugliers," Atvar said. "Witness the antilandcruiser mines they mounted on animals' backs. Would any of us have imagined such a ploy? Bizarre as it is, though, it has hurt us more than once. And the supply of munitions available to us, as compared to that which the Tosevites continue to produce, remains a source of some concern."

"By the Emperor, we rule the skies on this world," Straha said angrily. "How is it that we've failed to smash the factories down below?" Just too late, he added, "Exalted Fleetlord." Several shiplords stirred uneasily at the implied criticism of Atvar.

The fleetlord did not let his own anger show. "The answer to your question, Shiplord Straha, has two parts. First, Tosev 3 has a great many factories, scattered through several areas of the planet's surface. Destroying them all, or even most of them, is no easy task. Besides which, the Tosevites are adept at quickly repairing damage. This, I suppose, is another result of their having been at war among themselves when we arrived. They cannot match our technology, but are extremely effective within the limits of their own."

"We should have had more resources before we undertook the conquest of an industrialized planet," Feneress complained.

Now Atvar did project the image of the mail-clad Tosevite warrior captured by the earlier probe from Home. "Shiplord, let me remind you that this is the opposition we expected to face. Do you think our forces adequate to defeat such foes?" Feneress sensibly stood silent—what reply could he hope to make? Against sword-swinging primitives, the fight would have been over in days, probably without the loss of a single male of the Race.

Atvar touched the controls again. New images replaced the familiar one of the Tosevite fighting male: a gun-camera hologram of a swept-wing fighter with two jet engines and the hooked-cross emblem of Deutschland; a landcruiser from the SSSR, underpowered and undergunned by the standards of the Race, certainly, but needing



only scaling up to become a truly formidable weapon; a bombed-out factory complex in the United States that had been turning out several bombing planes every day; and, finally, the satellite picture of the unsuccessful Deutsch missile launch.

Into the shiplords' sudden silence, Atvar said, "Considering the unexpectedly strong struggle the Big Ugliers have been able to maintain, we can be proud of our successes thus far. As we gradually continue to cripple their industrial base, we may find future victories coming more easily."

"Simply because we did not have the walkover we expected, we need not twitch our tailstumps and yield to despair or pessimism," Kirel added. "Instead, we should give thanks that the Emperor in his wisdom sent us forth with force overwhelming for our anticipated task, thus allowing us to accomplish the far more difficult one that awaited us here."

The fleetlord sent him a grateful look. He could not imagine a more encouraging note on which to close the gathering. But before he had the chance to dismiss the shiplords, Straha asked, "Exalted Fleetlord, in view of the technological base the Tosevites do have, could they be working toward nuclear weapons of their own and, if so, how can we prevent this development short of sterilizing the planet's surface?"

Some of the lesser shiplords, and those less given to paying attention to their briefings, twitched in alarm. In a way, Atvar did not blame them; he had trouble thinking of anything more horrid than Tosevites armed with fission bombs. But they also annoyed him, for they should have been able to envision the potential problem for themselves, without Straha's prodding. The more Atvar had to deal with Tosevites, the more he thought his own people lacked imagination.

"We have no evidence that they are," he said. "How much this. extrapolation from a negative means, however, is uncertain. If one of their warring empires were involved in such research, I doubt it would trumpet the fact over the radio, lest it encourage its enemies to do the same."

"You have spoken truth, Exalted Fleetlord," Straha agreed. "Let me ask the question another way: do the Big Ugliers know enough about the inner workings of the atom to envision nuclear weapons?"

"After our initial bombardment to disrupt their communications, and especially after we smashed the capital of Deutschland, they need not envision nuclear weapons," Kirel said. "They have seen them."

"They have seen them, yes." Straha would not let his rival distract him from the point he was trying to make. "But can they understand what they have seen?"

Atvar hadn't thought of the question in quite those terms. Finding out just what the Tosevites knew wasn't easy. Even if they were reticent on the radio, their books surely revealed a great deal. But in only half a year (half of half a year, by Tosevite reckoning), who among the Race had had the chance to find and translate the relevant texts? The fleetlord knew the answer perfectly well: no one. The war of conquest left no

leisure for such fripperies as translation.

Except that now it was not a frippery. Straha had a point: finding out exactly what the Big Uglies knew about the inner workings of the atom could prove as important as anything else in this campaign. With hope, but without too much, Atvar put a hushmike to his mouth and asked the bannership's computer what it knew.

He'd expected it to report back that it had no information. Instead, though, it gave him a translated radio intercept of a news item from the United States. "X-rays reveal the Cincinnati Reds outfielder Mike McCormick suffered a fractured leg in yesterday's contest. He is expected to be out for the season."

Like a lot of translated intercepts, this one didn't tell Atvar everything he might have wanted to know. He wondered what sort of contest an outfielder (whatever an outfielder was) took part in, and for what season he was lost. Spring? Summer? Harvest? The fleetlord also wondered whether Cincinnati (whose name he did recognize) had Greens and Blues and Yellows to go with its Reds.

But all that was by the bye. The important thing about the intercept was that it showed this Mike McCormick's leg fracture had been diagnosed by X-rays. Atvar presumed that meant X-rays were in common use down on Tosev 3: if they weren't, then the Big Uglies wouldn't have freely talked about them on the radio during wartime. And if X-rays were in common use ...

"They know something about the inner workings of the atom," he said, and explained his reasoning. Dismay spread through the ranks of the shiplords.

Straha spelled out the reason for that dismay: "Then they may indeed be covertly seeking a means of producing nuclear weapons."

"So they may," Atvar admitted. Oddly, the notion appalled him less than he would have guessed. He'd been appalled so many times already by the Tosevites and the unexpected things they did that he was getting hard to shock. He just let out a long, hissing sigh and said, "One more thing to worry about."

The White Horse Inn smelled of beer and sweat and the tobacco smoke that made the air nearly as thick as a London peasoup fog. The barmaid named Daphne set pints of what was misleadingly called best bitter in front of David Goldfarb and Jerome Jones. She scooped up the shillings they'd laid on the bar, slapped Jones's wrist when he tried to slip an arm around her waist, and spun away, laughing. Her skirt swirled high on her shapely legs.

Sighing, Jones followed her with his eyes. "It's no use, old man," Goldfarb said. "I told you that weeks ago—she only goes with fliers."

"Can't shoot a man for trying," Jones answered. He tried every time they came to the White Horse Inn, and as consistently crashed in flames. He took a moody pull at his beer. "I do wish she wouldn't giggle that way, though. Under other circumstances, it might discourage me."

Goldfarb drank, too, then made a face. “This beer discourages me. Bloody war.” Thin and sour, the yellow liquid in his glass bore only the faintest resemblance to what he fondly recalled from the days before rationing. He sipped again. “Pah! I wonder if it’s saltpeter they’re putting in it, the way they do in schools to keep the boys from getting randy.”

“No, I know that taste, by God.”

“That’s right, you went to a public school.”

“So what? Back before the Lizards smashed our radar, you were better with it than I ever was.”

To cover his thoughts, Goldfarb drained his glass, raised a finger for another. Eventually, even bad beer numbed the tongue. Jerome could say *So what?* sincerely enough, but after the war was done—if it ever ended—he’d go back to Cambridge and end up a barrister or a professor or a business executive. Goldfarb would go back, too, back to repairing ireless sets behind the counter of a dingy little store on a dingy little street. To him, his friend’s egalitarianism rang hollow.

Blithely oblivious, Jones went on, “Besides, if there is saltpeter in this bitter, it’s not working worth a damn. I’d really fancy a go right now—but it’s the sods with wings on their shirtfronts who’ll get one. Look at that, will you?” He pointed. “Disgraceful, I call it”

*Now you know what it’s like, down in the lower classes,* Goldfarb thought But Jerome didn’t, not really. Just seeing Daphne perched on a flight engineer’s knee over by the electric fire wasn’t enough to take away his ingrained advantages in society. All it did was make him jealous.

It made Goldfarb jealous, too, especially when Sylvia, the other barmaid, also went over to the table full of aircrew. She quickly ended up in the bomb-aimer’s lap. It wasn’t fair. Goldfarb tried to remember the pithy phrase he’d heard in an American film not long before. *Them as has, gits*, that was it. No grammar there, but a lot of truth.

As for himself, he didn’t even seem able to git his pint refilled. That struck him as excessive. He got up, started over to the table where the fliers were monopolizing the barmaids. Jerome Jones put a hand on his arm. “Are you bloody daft, David? There’s seven of them there; they’ll wipe the floor with you.”

“What?” Goldfarb stared, then realized what Jones was talking about. “Oh. I don’t want a fight, I just want a fresh pint. Maybe they’ll stop feeling up the girls long enough to let one of them draw me another.”

“Maybe they won’t, too,” Jerome said. But Goldfarb ignored him and walked across the pub to the aircrew and the barmaids.

Nobody there took any notice of him for a few seconds. The fellow who had Daphne on his knee was saying, “... worst thing I saw there, or at least the nastiest, was that old fellow walking down the street with a yellow Star of David on his chest” He looked up from his comrades, saw Goldfarb standing there. “You want something, friend?” His

tone was neither hostile nor the reverse; he waited to hear what Goldfarb had to say.

“I came over to see if I could borrow Daphne just for a moment.” Goldfarb held up his empty pint glass. “But what you were just talking about—I hope I’m not prying, but you’re newly back from France?”

“That’s right. Who wants to know?” The flight engineer was a pint or two ahead of Goldfarb, but still alert enough. One of his eyebrows rose. “I hope I’m not prying in turn, radarman, but are you by any chance of the Jewish faith?”

“Yes, I am.” Goldfarb knew he didn’t look quite English; his hair was too wavy, and the wrong color brown, while no AngloSaxon—or even Celt—wore a nose like his. “I have relatives in Warsaw, you see, and I thought I’d ask someone who’d seen with his own eyes how Jews are faring under the Germans. If I’m interrupting your party, I do apologize. Perhaps if I gave you my name, you could look me up at the station when it’s convenient for you.”

“No, that’s all right. Pull up a chair,” the flight engineer said after a quick eyecheck of the rest of the aircrew. He straightened his leg, so Daphne started to slide down it. She squeaked indignantly as she sprang to her feet. The flight engineer said, “Hush, love. Bring this lad his new pint, will you?”

Pert nose in the air, Daphne snatched Goldfarb’s glass out of his hand and marched behind the bar. “That’s very kind of you,” Goldfarb said. He pointed back at Jerome Jones. “May my friend join you as well?” On receiving a nod, he waved Jones over.

“I suppose *he’ll* want another pint, too,” Daphne said darkly as she returned with the filled glass. “The one he has is empty now, that’s bloody sure.” Without waiting for an answer, she carried Jones’ dead soldier away to be revived.

The newly enlarged group exchanged names. The pilot of the aircrew, Ken Embry, said, “You have to remember two things, Goldfarb: Warsaw isn’t likely to ‘be just like Paris by any means, and it isn’t under the Germans any more.”

“I understand all that,” Goldfarb said. “But anything I can find out will be of value to me.”

“Fair enough,” said the flight engineer, whose name was George Bagnall. “Aside from the six-pointed stars, I saw shops and even telephone booths with signs saying things like ‘No Jews allowed’ and ‘Patronage by Jews prohibited.’ Other shops had special late-afternoon hours for Jews, so they could only pick over what other people had left.”

“Bastards,” Goldfarb muttered.

“Who, the Jerries? Too right they are,” Embry said. “We didn’t see anything, though, like the photos the Lizards have released from Warsaw, or like what the people who live there talk about on the Lizards’ wireless programs. If even a tenth part of that’s true, by God, I’m damned if I blame those poor devils for rising up against the Nazis, not a bit of it.”

The rest of the aircrew spoke up in agreement, all save Douglas Bell; the bomb-aimer and Sylvia were so wrapped up in each other that Goldfarb half expected them to

consummate their friendship on the table or the floor. If Bell aimed his bombs as well as he did his hands, he'd done some useful work.

Embry said, "Even with pictures, I have trouble believing the Jerries built a slaughterhouse for people at whatever the name of that place was."

"Treblinka," Goldfarb said. He had trouble believing it, too, but less trouble, he guessed, than Embry. To a young Englishman whose accent said he came from the comfortable classes, organized murder like that might really be unthinkable. To Goldfarb, whose father had fled less organized but no less sincere persecution, the notion of a place like Treblinka was merely dreadful. Where Embry couldn't imagine it, Goldfarb could, and had to hope he was wrong.

"How has it been back here, day by day?" Bagnall asked. "Until Jerry shipped us home from Calais, we've been in the air so much all we did on the ground was sleep and eat."

Goldfarb and Jones looked at each other. "It's not been the push-button war we had during the Blitz," Goldfarb said at last. "The Lizards are smarter than Jerry; they took out our radar straightaway and send more rockets after it whenever we try to light it up again. So we've been reduced to field glasses and telephones, like in the old days."

Daphne came back with Jerome Jones' new pint. He leered at her. "David's been using his field glasses to peer in your window."

"Really?" she said coolly, setting the pint down. "And all the time I thought it was you."

Jones' fair English skin made his flush visible even by the light of the, fireplace. Goldfarb and the aircrew howled laughter. Even Douglas Bell untangled himself from Sylvia long enough to say, "There's a fair hit, by God!" Jones buried his nose in the pint.

"Do you know what I hear has worked well, though?" Goldfarb valiantly tried to get back to George Bagnall's question. "Barrage balloons have cost the Lizards some of their aircraft. They fly so low and so fast they haven't a prayer of evading if the balloon's wire happens to lie in their path."

"Nice to know something does a bit of good," Bagnall said. "But that wasn't quite what I meant—not the war, I mean. Just—life."

"Radarmen don't have lives," Jones said. "It's against His Majesty's articles of war, or something like that." He shoved his reempted pint toward Daphne. "Try not to put so much arsenic in this one, my darling."

"Why? You'd likely thrive on it." But the barmaid went to fill the pint again.

"She's sweet, Daphne is. I can tell that already," Bagnall said.

"Ah, but you got her on your knee," Goldfarb said morosely. "Do you know how many months Jerome and I have been trying to do that?"

"Quite a few, by your long face. Aren't there any other women in Dover?"

"I expect there may be. Have we looked, Jerome?"

“Under every flat stone we could find,” Jones answered. He was watching Douglas Bell and Sylvia. If he’d had a pad in front of him, he’d have taken notes, too.

“I’m going to pour this over your head, dearie,” Daphne told him.

“They say it makes a good hair-set,” he said, adding, “Not that I’d know,” just in time to keep the barmaid from making good on her threat.

Goldfarb finished his second pint, but wasn’t quite in his friend’s hurry to get another one. Everything the Lancaster aircrew had told him about life for the Jews in France made him worry more about what had been happening to them in Warsaw, where traditions of persecution ran, back centuries and where the Nazis had no one within hundreds of miles to keep an eye on what they did. German radio could scream all it liked about “traitors to mankind”; he feared the Jews in Warsaw had been so desperate that even alien invaders looked better to them than the benign and humane rule of Hans Frank.

He wondered how his uncles and aunts and cousins were doing in Poland. Thinking about the broadcasts in Yiddish and German over the Warsaw shortwave station the Lizards had set up, he wondered how many—or how few—of his uncles and aunts and cousins were still alive.

He stared down at his empty pint. Would another help him forget his fears or bring them more strongly to the surface? The latter, he suspected. He held out the glass to Daphne anyhow. “Since you’re still on your feet, dear, would you bring me one more?” Enough bitter and he’d stop caring about anything at all—if not this pint, then the next one or the one after that.

Then Jerome asked the aircrew, “And what happens to you lads next?”

Ken Embry said, “I expect we’ll be going up again in another day or two. By all they’ve said, experienced aircrew are getting rather thin on the ground, if you’ll forgive something of a mixed metaphor.”

“How can you be so bloody calm about it?” Jones burst out. “Flying against the Jerries was one thing, but against the Lizards ...”

Embry shrugged. “It’s what we do. It’s what we have to do. What else is there for anyone to do, but do what he has to do the best he can for as long as he can do it?”

Goldfarb studied the pilot and the rest of the aircrew. While he worried about his relatives—and from all he’d heard, with reason—they carried on in the face of their own nearly certain deaths. He looked at Sylvia, who might have been trying to squeeze Douglas Bell to death, and suddenly understood, on a level deeper than words, why she and Daphne would sleep with fliers but not with men who stayed on the ground. He remained rueful about that, but his jealousy disappeared.

When Daphne came back with his bitter, he stood up, dug in his pocket, came out with a handful of silver. “Fetch these lads a round, would you?”

Jerome Jones stared at him. “Such largess! Did your rich grandfather just cork off, or have you forgotten you’re a Jew?”

He would have gone for anyone else's throat, especially with a couple of pints in him. Bagnall and a couple of the other members of the aircrew shifted in their seats to get ready to grab him if he tried. Instead, he started to laugh. "Bloody hell, Daphne, I'll buy one for this big-mouthed sod, too."

The aircrew relaxed. Jones' eyes got even bigger than they had been. "If I'd known calling you names was the way to pry beer out of you, I'd've tried it long ago."

"Geh *kak afen yam*," Goldfarb said, and then disgusted everybody by refusing to translate.

Moishe Russie felt his heart pound in his chest Meeting the Lizard governor whose forces had driven the Nazis out of Warsaw always frightened him, though Zolraag had treated him well enough—certainly better than he would have fared had he fallen under the eye of Hans Frank. He did not know whether Frank was dead or fled. Hoping him dead was sinful. Russie knew that He was willing to make the wish even so.

Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, the leader of the Home Army, came out of Zolraag's office. He did not look happy. He looked even less happy on seeing Russie. "What are you going to pry out of him now, Jew?" he growled. "They will give you anything you like, it seems."

"That is not so," Russie said. Bor-Komorowski frightened him, too. He hated Germans, yes, but he also hated Jews. The Germans were gone now. That left him only one target.

Scowling still, Bor-Komorowski stamped out, his boot heels ringing on the marble floor. Russie hurried into Zolraag's office; keeping his people's protector waiting would not do.

"Your Excellency," he said in German. He could speak to a Lizard easily enough now. A couple of weeks before, when the Nazis fled, beset from within and attacked from without at the same time, the first of the little, scampering creatures had seemed like demons to him. Though they were allies, they were weird almost beyond his power to take in. There the German propaganda had not lied.

But dealing with Zolraag day by day had begun to make strangeness familiar—and also brought the suspicion that the Lizard found him in particular and humanity in general at least as peculiar as he thought the governor.

"Herr Russie." Zolraag spoke slowly and with an accent that almost swallowed *r*'s and turned the middle sound in Russie's name into a long hiss. "You are well, I hope?"

"Yes, Your Excellency, thank you." Russie hissed himself, and made a gargling sound: he'd learned how to say "thank you" in Zolraag's language. He was doing his best to pick up words of the Lizards' speech; as he was already fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Polish, acquiring a new tongue held no terror for him. He got the idea that Zolraag found the idea of there being many languages as alien as anything else about the Earth.

The Lizard was working hard with German, though. While his accent remained (Russie thought part of it due to the shape of his mouth), he'd picked up new words every time he spoke with the Jew, and his grammar, if less than good, was better than it had been. Now he said, "The German prisoners, Herr Russie, what do you think we do with them?"

"They are prisoners, Your Excellency; they ought to be treated like any other prisoners of war." Russie had walked out to the camp in the ruins of the Rakowiec district, just to see Germans behind the razor strips the Lizards used in place of barbed wire. He wished he hadn't. Looking at the crowds of dirty, battered, hungry men milling around reminded him overpoweringly of looking down any street when the ghetto was packed tight.

"Not all your people so think, Herr Russie. Who is your emperor here?"

"Our ruler, you mean?"

"Your emperor—he who decides for you," Zolraag said. He seemed to think it was very simple. Maybe it was, among the Lizards. Russie gathered that their supreme commander—the fleetlord, Zolraag called him—had chosen Zolraag governor of Warsaw, and that was that.

Things in human Warsaw, and especially inside the Jewish quarter, were less simple. The old German-backed ghetto administration still functioned after a fashion, doling out rations from the Lizards now rather than from the Nazis. Russie himself held moral authority because of the night the Lizards came. How that translated varied from day to day, sometimes from minute to minute.

And there was Mordechai Anielewicz. He'd taken a bullet through the left hand during the attack on the Germans, but it hadn't slowed him down. If anything, the fat white bandage seemed to mark him as a hero. His men swaggered through the streets of the Jewish quarter with captured German rifles on their shoulders. They walked boldly when they went into the rest of Warsaw, too: they were men whose comrades could avenge slights, and they knew it. For Jews, the feeling was rich and heady, like a fine new brandy.

The *Armja Krajowa* hated them. Many of the Mausers they bore had come to them from the Lizards: more arms than the new conquerors gave the Polish Home Army. Of course, the Poles had had far more guns at the start of the Warsaw rebellion than the Jews. Maybe the Lizards were working to balance the two groups in the newly conquered territory.

Maybe too, Russie admitted to himself, Zolraag and the rest of the Lizards were using the Jews and their plight under the Nazi regime as a tool against the rest of mankind. He listened to shortwave radio, just as he'd spoken on it from a studio for the Lizards. Though he'd told no more than the truth—and much less than all the truth—human broadcasters dismissed his reports as obvious propaganda. Even the dreadful pictures that came out of the ghetto brought little belief.

Because of that, Russie said, "Your Excellency, you will hurt yourself if you treat these



captured Germans different from any other prisoners of war. People will only say you are cruel and ruthless.”

“This you say, Herr Russie?” Unnervingly, Zolraag looked at Moishe with one eye and down at the papers on his desk with the other. “You, a Jew, a—how do you say it?—a sufferer, no, a victim of these Germans? Not treat them as killers? Why? Killers they are.”

“You asked what I wanted done, Your Excellency,” Russie answered. “Now I’ve told you. Revenge is a meal better eaten hot than cold.” He spent the next few minutes explaining that, and reminded himself not to use figurative language with the Lizard governor again any time soon.

Zolraag turned both eyes on him. That was almost as unnerving as being examined with just one, for his stare was steadier than any man’s could be. “You are emperor for your people when you so say? You—decide?”

“This is what I say for myself,” Russie answered. He knew that if he lied, Zolraag’s backing of his policy would transmute the lie to truth. But if he started lying, where would he stop? He didn’t want to find out; he’d discovered too many horrors, in both himself and the world around him, over the past few years. After a moment, he added, “I am fairly sure I can bring my people with me.” That wasn’t a lie: more in the way of an exaggeration.

The governor studied him a while longer, then looked away in two directions at once. “Maybe you do this, Herr Russie; maybe you bring people with you. Maybe this end up by being good. Maybe we say, look at Jews, see how Germans do to them, see how Jews not want—what was word you use?—revenge, yes, revenge. Kind Jews, gentle Jews, better than Germans, yes?”

“Yes,” Russie said in a hollow voice. More clearly than ever, he saw that Zolraag cared nothing for the Jews as Jews, and little for them as victims of the Nazis. He himself remained as much a *thing* to the Lizards as he had been to Hans Frank. The only difference was, to Zolraag he was a useful rather than an abhorrent thing. That marked an improvement, surely; a little while longer under the German *Generalgouvernement* and he would have been a dead thing. All the same, the realization tasted bitter as the bitter, herbs of the Seder.

Zolraag said, “Maybe we make picture, Jew give German prisoner food. Maybe we do that, Herr Russie, yes? Make picture make men think.”

“Any Jew who let himself be used for that sort of picture would find himself hated by other Jews,” Russie answered. Despair tinged his thoughts: *propaganda, that’s all they want us for. They rescued us for their own purposes, not out of any special kindness.*

A moment later, the Lizard echoed his worries. “We help you then, Herr Russie. You help us now. You owe us—what is word?—debt, yes. You owe us.”

“I know, but after what we went through, this is a hard way to repay the debt.”

“What else you Jews good for, Herr Russie, now to us?”

Russie flinched, as from a blow. Never before had Zolraag been so brutally frank with him. *Change the subject a little, before you get in deeper*, he thought. The ploy had served him well in medical school, letting him use his strengths and minimize weakness. He said, “Your Excellency, how can Jews think of giving Germans food when we still haven’t enough for ourselves?”

“Have as much as anyone else now,” Zolraag said.

“Yes, but we were starving before. Even what we have now is none too good.” The Poles resented having their rations cut to help feed the Jews, and the Jews were angry at the Poles for not understanding—or for approving of—their plight under the Nazis. Fair rations meant everyone ate too little. Russie said, “With all your power, Your Excellency, can’t you bring in more food for everyone in Warsaw? Then we would worry less about sharing it with the Germans.”

“Where we get food, Herr Russie? No food here, not by Warsaw, no. This place where fight happen, not farming. Fight ruin farming. You tell me where food is, I get. Otherwise ...” Zolraag spread clawed hands in a very human seeming gesture of frustration.

“But—” Russie stared at the Lizard in dismay. He knew only God was omnipotent, but the Lizards, aside from seeming like manifestations of His will when they drove the Germans out of Warsaw and saved the Jews from certain destruction, were able to do so many other things with so little effort that Moishe had assumed their abilities were for all practical purposes unlimited. Discovering that was not so rocked him. He faltered. “Could you not, uh, bring food in from other parts of the world where you are not fighting hard?”

Zolraag let his mouth hang open. Russie glowered at rows of little, sharp-pointed teeth and the unnerving snakelike tongue; he knew the governor was laughing at him. Zolraag said, “Can do that, when you people give up stupid fight, join Empire. Now, no. Need all we have in fight. Tosev 3—this world—big place. Need all we have.”

“I see,” Russie said slowly. Here was news he would have to pass on to Anielewicz. Maybe the combat leader would have a better feel for what it meant than he did. What it sounded like was that the Lizards were stretched thinner than they wanted to be.

A world was indeed a big place. Till the war started, Russie hadn’t really worried about anything outside Poland. The Germans’ crushing triumph taught him the folly of that. Afterward, his hope against the Germans rested first on England and then on the even more distant United States.

But when Zolraag spoke of this world, he implied the presence of others. That should have been obvious; the Lizards plainly were from nowhere on Earth. Till now, though, what all that meant hadn’t got through to Russie. He wondered how many worlds the aliens knew, and if any besides Earth and their own home held thinking beings.

Having gained a secular education—indispensable in medicine—Russie believed in Darwin alongside of Genesis. They coexisted uneasily in his mind, one dominant when

he thought, the other when he felt. In the ghetto, God gained the upper hand, for prayer seemed likelier to do some good than anything merely rational. And when the Lizards came, prayer was answered.

But Russie suddenly wondered what part God had had in creating the Lizards and whatever other thinking races there might be. If He had shaped them all, what was man that He should notice him especially? If Lizards and any others were not His creatures, what was His place in the universe? Had He any place in the universe? Posing the question in those terms was even more frightening than coming to meet with Zolraag.

The governor said, “We have more food, we give you more. Maybe soon.” Russie nodded. That meant he wasn’t supposed to hold his breath. Zolraag went on, “You find out who is emperor of Jews about German prisoners, Herr Russie, tell what you think to do. Not wait—must know.”

“Your Excellency, it shall be done.” Russie repeated the phrase in the Lizards’ language. To them, it was one to conjure with, one almost as important as the *Sh’mayisroayl* for an observant Jew. They built their lives around elaborate patterns of obedience, in the same way people did around families. *It shall be done* was the most potent promise they had.

When Zolraag seemed to have nothing further to say, Russie got to his feet, bowed to the Lizard governor, and started to leave. Then the Lizard said, “A moment, please.” Moishe obediently turned back. Zolraag continued, “Is always so...not cold—how do you say, a little cold?—in Warsaw?”

“Cool?” Russie asked.

“Cool, yes that is word, thank you. Is always so cool in Warsaw?”

“It will be cooler yet later in the year, Your Excellency,” Russie answered, puzzled. It was still summer in Warsaw, not a hot summer, but summer nonetheless. He remembered the winter before, when heat of any sort—electricity, coal, even wood—had been next to impossible to come by. He remembered huddling with his whole family under all the bedclothes they had, and his teeth chattering like castanets even so. He remembered the endless sound of coughing that had filled the ghetto, and picking out by ear the soft tubercular coughs from those brought on by pneumonia or influenza. He remembered scrawny corpses lying in the snow, and his relief that they might not start to stink until they were picked up.

If Zolraag thought this August day cool, how could he explain to the Lizard what winter really meant? He saw no way: as well explain the Talmud to a five-year-old, and a *goyishe* five-year-old at that. What he’d already said would have to do.

Zolraag hissed something in his own language. Russie caught a word or two: “—inside a refrigerator.” Then the governor switched back to German. “Thank you, Herr Russie, for saying beforehand what may be bad about what comes, for, ah ...”

“For warning you?” Russie said.

“Warning, yes, that is word. Thank you. Good day, Herr Russie.”

“Good day, Your Excellency.” Russie bowed again; this time Zolraag did not detain him with more questions. In the waiting room outside the governor’s office sat a handsome, strikingly masculine-looking young Catholic priest. His pale eyes went icy for a moment when they met the Jew’s, but he managed a civil nod.

Russie nodded back; civility was not to be despised. Asking Poles to love Jews was asking for a miracle. Having asked for one miracle and received it, Moishe did not aim to push his luck with God. But asking for civility—that was within the realm of the possible.

Zolraag’s headquarters lay in a block of two and three-story office buildings on Grójecka Street in southwestern Warsaw. A couple of the buildings had taken shell hits, but most were intact save for such details as bullet holes and broken-out windows. That made the block close to unique in the city, Russie thought as he scrunched through shards of glass.

Nazi artillery and unending, unchallenged streams of *Luftwaffe* bombers had torn gaping holes in Warsaw when the city stood siege after the Germans invaded Poland. Most of that rubble still remained: the Germans did not seem to care what sort of Warsaw they ruled, so long as it was theirs. The buildings smashed in 1939 now had a weathered look to them, as if they’d always been part of the landscape.

More ruins, though, were fresh, sharp-edged. The Germans had fought like men possessed to hold the Lizards out of Warsaw. Russie walked by the burnt shell of a Nazi panzer. It still exhaled the dead-meat stench of man’s final corruption. Shaking his head, Russie marveled that so many Germans, here as elsewhere, had expended so much courage for so bad a cause. God had given mankind that particular lesson at least since the days of the Assyrians, but its meaning remained obscure.

A Lizard fighting vehicle purred past the wrecked German tank. When the Nazis entered Warsaw, their roaming, smoke-belching panzers, all hard lines and angles as if the faces of SS men were somehow turned to armor plate, seemed dropped into 1939 straight from a malign future. The Lizards’ smoother, faster, nearly silent machines showed that the Germans were not quite the masters of creation they fancied themselves to be.

It was a couple of kilometers back to the edge of the, Jewish quarter Russie wore his long black coat unbuttoned, but he’d started to sweat by the time he drew near the ruined walls that marked off the former (God be praised!) ghetto. *If Zolraag thinks this is cool weather, let him wait until January*, he thought

“Reb Moishe!” A peddler pushing a cart full of turnips paused to doff his cloth cap.

“Reb Moishe!” A very pretty girl, no more than thirteen or fourteen, smiled. She was gaunt, but not visibly starving.

“Reb Moishe!” One of Anielewicz’s fighters came to a fair approximation of attention. He wore an old Polish helmet, a peasant blouse, and baggy trousers tucked into German army boots. Twin bandoliers full of gleaming brass cartridges crisscrossed his chest

The salutes pleased Russie, and reminded him he'd become an important man here. He gravely gave back each in turn. But as he did so, he wondered whether any of the people he'd greeted would still have been alive had the Lizards not come and, if so, how much longer they would have survived. He wondered how much longer he would have survived himself.

*And so I decided to help the Lizards, in the hope that they would then help my people, he thought. And they did, and we were saved. And what have I gained from this? Only to be branded a liar and a traitor and a renegade by those who will not believe their fellow men capable of what the Germans did here.*

He tried to tell himself he did not care, that the recognition of those inside Warsaw, those who knew the truth, counted for more than anything anyone else could say. That was true and not true at the same time. Given a choice, he would sooner have worked with any human beings—save only the Germans—against the invaders from another world.

But what choice had he had? When the Lizards came the Russians were far away and themselves reeling under German attack. The British were beleaguered, the Americans so distant they might as well have been on the dark side of the moon. Set beside the Nazis, the Lizards looked like a good bargain. No, they *were* a good bargain.

All the same, he sometimes wished he'd not had to make it. Such thoughts flew away when he turned a corner and saw Mordechai Anielewicz coming toward him. The young leader of the Jewish fighters was surrounded by several of his men, all of them heavily armed, all in the ragged mishmash of military gear and ordinary clothes Russie had seen on the other warrior.

Anielewicz himself carried no weapons. Though he dressed as shabbily as his followers, his firm stride and the space the others kept clear around him proclaimed him to be cock o' the walk here.

He nodded, cautiously, to Russie. Allies and rivals at the same time, they drew their power from different sources: Anielewicz straight from the barrels of his fighters' guns, Russie from the confidence the Jews of Warsaw placed in him. Because of that, neither was as confident with the other as he would have been with one of his own kind.

Anielewicz spoke first: "Good day to you, *Reb* Moishe. How did your meeting with the Lizard governor go?"

"Well enough," Russie answered. "He complained the weather was too cool to suit him, though."

"Did he?" Anielewicz said. A couple of the Jewish fighters laughed. Anielewicz's smile was broad, but never quite reached his eyes. "He'll complain more in a few months, and that's a fact. What else did he have to say?"

"It doesn't sound as though there's much hope for more rations any time soon." Russie explained Zolraag's supply problems. They were something the Jews' military leader needed to know.

“Too bad.” Anielewicz scowled. “We really need more than the Poles, because we had so much less for so long. But if he can’t, he can’t I don’t want to start a war with the *Armja Krajowa* over this; they outnumber us too badly.”

“Bor-Komorowski was in to see Zolraag just before me. He isn’t too happy about how much we’re getting now.”

“Too bad,” Anielewicz said again. “Still, it’s worth finding out, and it’s not what you’d call a surprise.” His gaze sharpened; he peered at Russie as if over a gunsight. “And what did His Lizardy Excellency have to say about the Nazi bastards and SS swine who couldn’t run fast enough when they got thrown out, of here? Has he figured out what he’s going to do with them yet?”

“He asked me what I thought, as a matter of fact,” Russie said.

“And what was your answer?” Anielewicz asked softly.

Russie took a deep breath before he answered: “I told him that, if it were up to me, I would treat them as prisoners of war.” Almost all the fighters growled at that. Ignoring them, Moishe went on: “Doing so would pull the teeth from the propaganda the Germans are putting out against us And besides if we treat them as they treated us, how are we any better than they?”

“They did it to us for sport. When we do it to them, it’s for vengeance Anielewicz said with the same exaggerated patience he would have used in explaining to a child of four. “Do you *want* to be the perfect ghetto Jew, *Reb* Moishe, the one who never hits back no matter what the *goyim* do to you? We’ve come too far for that.” He slapped one of his men on the shoulder. The fellow’s slung Mauser bounced up and down.

Standing up to armed ruffians, Russie discovered, was hardly easier when they were Jews than it had been when they were Germans. He said, “You know what I am. Was I not with you when we rose? But if murder in cold blood was wrong for the Germans, I tell you again that it does not magically become right for us.”

“What did Zolraag think when you said this to him?”

“If I understand him rightly, he thought I was out of my mind,” Russie admitted, which jerked a few startled laughs from the fighters around Anielewicz.

“He may well have a point” The smile Anielewicz gave Russie was far from pleasant; it reminded him of a wolf curling back its lip to show its teeth. He studied the young Jewish fighting leader. Anielewicz was different from the Germans who had until lately been his models in matters military. Most of them were professionals, going about their business no matter how horrific that business might be. Anielewicz, by contrast, gave the impression that he loved what he was doing.

Did that make him better or worse? Russie couldn’t decide. He said, “As may be. He wants some sort of consensus from us before he acts—you’ll have noticed that the Lizards think we must have someone who can make binding decisions for our whole community.”

Now Mordechai Anielewicz let out a snort of genuine amusement. “Has he ever

watched anyone trying to get three Jews to agree about anything?”

“I would say not. But I would also say something else: we used the Lizards to save our own lives, because nothing they did to us could be worse than what the Nazis were already doing. Well and good thus far, Mordechai. No one who knows the truth of what we suffered could blame us for that—a drowning man grabs any plank in the sea.”

One of the fighters growled, “What about the ones who won’t believe the truth even, when it’s shoved in their fat faces?”

“If you’d believed the Nazis would do all they said they’d do, would you have stayed in Poland?” Russie asked. Like a lot of Polish Jews, Russie had relatives in England and more distant ones in the United States. His parents had got letters after Hitler came to power, urging them to get out while they could. They hadn’t listened—and they were dead now.

The fighter grunted. He was in his late thirties; maybe he’d made the choice to stay himself instead of having his parents do it for him.

Anielewicz put the conversation back on track. “Were you coming to some sort of point about the Lizards, *Reb* Moishe? I do hope so, for you’ve said nothing to convince me thus far.”

“Think about this, then: we did what we had to do with the Lizards, I grant you that. But are we wise to do any more than we have to do? Telling them to shoot their German prisoners for us plays into their hands, and into the hands of the rest of the Germans as well. If you do not think well of mercy for mercy’s sake, look at that before you urge a slaughter.”

“Are you sure you intended to be a doctor? You argue like a *reb*, that’s certain.” But Anielewicz really did think about what Russie’d said; Russie could see it in his face. Slowly, the fighting leader said, “You’re telling me you don’t want us to be the Lizards’ cat’s-paws.”

“That’s it exactly.” Maybe Russie had found the key to reaching the fighting leader after all. “We have to be, to some extent, because we’re so much weaker than they are. But when we let them put our name on their wickedness, it becomes ours as well in the eyes of the world.”

The fighter who’d spoken before said, “He may have something there, boss.” He sounded reluctant to admit it; Moishe admired him the more for speaking.

“Yes, he just may.” The glance Anielewicz shot Russie was no more friendly for that. “By God, *Reb* Moishe, I want vengeance on those Nazi bastards. When the Lizards bombed Berlin, I cheered, do you know that? I cheered.”

“I would be lying if I said I was as sorry as I should have been,” Russie said.

“Well, there you are,” Anielewicz said, as if he’d proven something. Maybe he had.

If so, Russie did not care to concede it. “Cheering, though, was wrong, don’t you see? Most of those Germans had done nothing more to the Lizards than we’d done to the

Germans. They just happened to be in Berlin when the Lizards dropped their bomb. The Lizards didn't care that they weren't soldiers; they went ahead and killed them anyhow. They aren't angels, Mordechai."

"This I know," Anielewicz answered. "But better our devils than the devils on the other side."

"No, that's not the lesson." Moishe stubbornly shook his head. "The lesson is, better that we not become devils ourselves."

Anielewicz's scowl was fearsome. Russie felt the fear. If the leader of the Jewish fighting forces chose to ignore him, what could he do about it? But before Anielewicz replied, he glanced at the fighters who accompanied him. A couple of them were nodding at Russie's words. That seemed only to make Anielewicz angrier.

"All right!" He spat on the filthy cobblestones. "We'll keep the stinking Germans alive, then, if you love them so well."

"Love them? You must be out of your mind. But I hope I still know what justice is. And," Russie added, "I hope I still know that what mankind thinks of me is more important than any Lizard's good opinion—and that includes Zolraag's." His own vehemence surprised him, the more so because he got on well with the aliens' governor.

Anielewicz also surprised him. "There for once we agree, *Reb* Moishe. There, in fact, we might even find common ground with General BorKomorowski, should the need ever arise."

"Really?" Russie was not sure he wanted to find common ground with BorKomorowski on anything save the desirability of getting rid of the Germans. BorKomorowski was a good Polish patriot, which made him only a little less fascist—or perhaps just less efficiently fascist—than Heinrich Himmler. Still... "That may be useful, one of these days."



Moscow! The winter before, German troops had seen the spires of the Kremlin from the Russian capital's suburbs. None came any closer than that, and then they'd been thrown back in bitter fighting. Yet now Heinrich walked freely through the streets the *Wehrmacht* had been unable to reach.

Beside him, Georg Schultz looked this way and that, as he did every day going to and from the Kremlin. Schultz said, "I still have trouble believing how much of Moscow is still in one piece. We bombed it, the Lizards bombed it—and here it is still."

"It's a big city," Jäger answered. "It can take a lot of punishment and not show much. Big cities are hard to destroy, unless ..." His voice trailed away. He'd seen pictures of Berlin now, and wished he hadn't.

He and Schultz both wore ill-fitting civilian suits of cheap fabric and outdated cut. He would have been ashamed to put his on back in Germany. Here, though, it helped him fit in, for which he was just as glad. He would not have been safe in his tankman's uniform. In the Ukraine, the panzer troops had sometimes been welcomed as liberators. Germans remained enemies in Moscow, even after the coming of the Lizards.

Schultz pointed to a poster on a brick wall. "Can you read what that says, sir?"

Jäger's Russian was better than it had been, but still far from good. Letter by unfamiliar Cyrillic letter, he sounded out the poster's message. "*Smert* means 'death,'" he said. "I don't know what the second word is. Something to do with us."

"Something nasty," Schultz agreed. The poster showed a pigtailed little girl lying dead on the floor, a doll beside her. A footprint in blood led the eye to a departing soldier's marching boot, on the heel of which was a German swastika.

Before he got to Moscow, Jäger had been certain down to the very core of him that the *Wehrmacht* would have beaten the Red Army for good this year had the Lizards not intervened. Now he wondered, though he'd never said so out loud. It wasn't just that Russia was so much bigger than Germany; he had known that all along. But despite the stubbornness of Soviet resistance, he hadn't believed the Russian people were as firmly behind Stalin as the Germans were behind Hitler. Now he did, and it was a disturbing thought.

His shoes scuffed on the paving of Red Square. The Germans had planned a victory parade there, timed for the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. It hadn't happened. Russian sentries still paced back and forth in front of the Kremlin wall in their own stiff version of the goose step.

Jäger and Schultz came up to the gateway by which they entered the Kremlin compound. Jäger nodded to the guards there, a group of men he saw every third day.

None of the Russians nodded back. They never did. Their leader, who wore a sergeant's three red triangles on his collar patches, held out his hand. "Papers," he said in Russian.

As usual, he carefully examined the documents the Germans produced, compared photographs to faces. Jäger was certain that if he ever forgot his papers, the sergeant would not pass him through even though he recognized him. Breaking routine was not something the Russians did well.

Today, though, he and Schultz had everything in order. The sergeant started to stand aside to pass them through when someone else came trotting across Red Square toward the checkpoint. Jäger turned to see who was in such a tearing hurry. As he did, his mouth fell open. "I'll be Goddamned," Schultz said, which about summed things up.

Unlike the tankmen, the fellow approaching wore a German uniform—an SS uniform at that—and wore it with panache. His every aggressive stride seemed to warn that anyone who gave him trouble would have a thin time of it. He was tall and broadshouldered and would have been handsome had a scar not seamed his left cheek. Actually, he was handsome anyhow, in a piratical sort of way.

Instead of bristling at him as Jäger had expected, the Russian guards grinned and nudged each other. The sergeant said, "Papers?"

The SS man drew himself up to his full impressive height. "Stuff your papers, and stuff you, too!" he said in a deep, booming voice. His German held an Austrian accent. The sentries practically hugged themselves with glee. The sergeant came to an attention stiffer than he might have granted Marshal Zhukov, waved the big bruiser into the Kremlin.

"Why didn't we ever try that?" Schultz said admiringly.

"I don't have the balls for it," Jäger admitted.

The SS man spun toward them. For all his size, he was light on his feet "So you are Germans after all," he said. "I thought you might be, but what with those rag-pickers' getups, I couldn't be sure till you opened your mouths. Who the devil are you, anyway?"

"Major Heinrich Jäger, Sixteenth Panzer," Jäger answered crisply. "Here is my tank gunner, Sergeant Georg Schultz. And now, *Herr Hauptsturmführer*, I might ask you the same question." The SS rank was the equivalent of captain; however much brass this fellow had, Jäger was his superior.

The SS man's brace was almost as rigid—and as full of parody—as the Soviet sergeant's had been. Clicking his heels, he declared in falsetto, "*SS Hauptsturmführer Otto Skorzeny begs leave to report his presence, sir!*"

Jäger snorted. The scar on Skorzeny's cheek partly froze the left corner of his mouth and turned his smile into something twisted. Jäger asked him, "What are you doing here, especially in that suit? You're lucky the Ivans haven't decided to take your nose and ears."

"Nonsense," Skorzeny said. If he ever had doubts about anything, he didn't show them in public. "Russians only know how to be one of two things: masters or slaves, if you

convince them you're the master, what does that leave them?"

"If," Georg Schultz murmured, too softly for the SS man to hear.

"You still haven't said why you're here," Jäger persisted.

"I am acting under orders from—" Skorzeny hesitated; Jäger guessed he'd been about to say *from Berlin*. He resumed: "from my superiors. Can you say the same?" He gave Jäger's Russian suit a fishy stare.

Beside Jäger, Schultz stirred angrily. Jäger wondered if this arrogant *Hauptsturmführer* had ever seen action that required him to get those polished boots dirty. But that question answered itself: Skorzeny wore the ribbon for a wound badge between the first and second buttons of his tunic. All right, he had some idea of what was real, then. And his counterquestion made Jäger think—what *would* the authorities have to say about how he was working with the Red Army?

He briefly summarized how he had come to be in Moscow. Maybe Skorzeny had done some fighting, but could he say he'd taken out a Lizard panzer? Not many had, and not many of those who had still lived.

When he was through, the SS man nodded. Now he blustered less. "You might say we're both in Moscow for the same reason, then, Major, whether with official approval or without. We have a common interest in showing the Ivans how to make themselves more effective foes for the Lizards."

"Ah," Jäger said. Just as the Soviets no longer treated Germans caught on Russian soil as prisoners of war (or worse), the surviving pieces of the government of the *Reich* must have decided to do their best to keep the Russians in the fight now and worry about their being Bolshevik Slavic *Untermenschen* later.

The three Germans walked together toward the Kremlin. The heart of Soviet Russia still wore the camouflage it had donned after the Russo-German war began. Its bulging onion domes, an architecture alien and oriental to Jäger's eyes, had their gilding covered over with battleship gray paint. Walls were mottled with patches of black and orange, yellow and brown, rather like the hide of a leprous giraffe, to confuse attackers from the air.

Such tricks had not entirely spared it from damage. Stolid, wide-shouldered women in shawls and drab dresses carried bricks and chunks of wood away from a recent bomb hit. The sick-sweet stink of day before yesterday's battlefield hung over the place. That smell always made Jäger's heart beat faster in remembered fear.

Skorzeny grunted and put a hand over the right side of his belly. Jäger thought the SS man's reaction similar to his own until he realized Skorzeny's face held real pain. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"My fucking gall bladder," the *Hauptsturmführer* answered. "It had me in the hospital for a while earlier this year. But the doctors say it isn't going to kill me, and lying around on my backside is a bloody bore, so here I am up and doing again. A good thing, too."

“You were here on the Eastern Front before, sir?” Georg Schultz asked.

“Yes, with *Das Reich*,” Skorzeny said.

Schultz nodded and said nothing more. Jäger could guess what he was thinking. A lot of people who saw action on the Eastern Front would fall down on their knees and thank God for an illness that got them sent back to Germany and safety. Skorzeny, by the way he talked, would sooner have stayed and fought. He didn't sound as though he were bluffing, either. Jäger's respect for him went up a notch.

In spite of the Lizards' air raids, the Kremlin still swarmed with life. Occasional holes merely showed Jäger the soldiers and bureaucrats bustling about within, in the same way as he could have seen the humming life inside an anthill with its top kicked off.

He was not surprised to find Skorzeny heading for the same doorway as he and Jäger used: naturally, the SS man would also be meeting with officers from the Defense Commissariat. The doorway into the Kremlin itself, like the one into the compound around it, was guarded. The lieutenant who headed this detachment put out his hand without a word. Without a word, Jäger and Schultz gave him their documents. Without a word, he studied and returned them.

Then he turned to Skorzeny, his hand still outstretched. An impish grin lit the big man's face. He seized the Russian lieutenant's hand, vigorously pumped it up and down. The guards stared in disbelief. The lieutenant managed to return a sickly smile. A couple of his men had raised their submachine guns. When he smiled, they lowered them again.

“Talk about balls, one of these days he's going to get his blown off, playing games like that,” Schultz said out of the side of his mouth.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Jäger answered. He'd known a few people who simply bulldozed their way through life, charging at the world with such headlong aggression that it gave way before them. Skorzeny seemed to be of that stripe. On a larger scale, so did Adolf Hitler...and Stalin.

It was easier to think of the Soviet leader than of Hitler as Jäger let the immensity of the Kremlin swallow him and Schultz. Skorzeny followed. Just inside the doorway stood a pair of Russian lieutenant colonels: no Germans would go wandering unescorted through the Red Army's holy of holies.

One of the Russian officers wore a tankman's black collar patches. “Good morning, Major Jäger, Sergeant Schultz,” he said in excellent German.

“Lieutenant Colonel Kraminov,” Jäger said, nodding back politely. Viktor Kraminov had been assigned to Schultz and him since they came to Moscow. They might have traded shots with each other the year before, for Kraminov had been part of Marshal Budenny's southern Soviet army before being transferred to staff duty in Moscow. He had an old man's wise eyes set in a face of childlike innocence, and knew more about handling panzers than Jäger would have expected from the Russians' battle performance.

The other lieutenant colonel, a fellow Jäger had not seen before, wore green collar

patches. Georg Schultz frowned. "What's green stand for?" he whispered.

Jäger needed a minute to think. Russian infantry patches were maroon; tanks, artillery, and engineers black; cavalry dark blue; air force light blue. But what Soviet service wore green as its *Waffenfarbe*? Jäger stiffened. "He's NKVD," he whispered back.

Schultz flinched. Jäger didn't blame him. Just as no Russian soldier would want to run across the *Gestapo*, so the Germans naturally grew nervous at the sight of an officer of the People's Commissariat for the Interior, if he'd come across the NKVD man a year ago, he would have shot him at once; German orders were to take no secret policemen or political commissars alive, regardless of the laws of war.

After one brief glance, the NKVD lieutenant colonel ignored the two Germans in civilian clothes; he'd been waiting for Otto Skorzeny. "A very good day to you, *Herr Hauptsturmführer*," he said. His German was even better than Kraminov's. He sounded fussily precise, like about half of Jäger's old *Gymnasium* teachers.

"Hello, Boris, you skinny old prune-faced bastard," Skorzeny boomed back. Jäger waited for the heavens to fall. The NKVD man, who really was a skinny old prune-faced bastard, just gave a tight little nod, from which Jäger inferred he'd been working with Skorzeny for a while and had decided he'd better make allowances.

The NKVD man—Boris—turned toward Lieutenant Colonel Kraminov. "Perhaps all five of us will work together today," he said. "In chatting before you gentlemen arrived, Viktor Danielovich and I discovered that we all may be able to contribute to an operation which will benefit both our nations."

"It is as Lieutenant Colonel Lidov says," Kraminov agreed. "Cooperation here will aid both the Soviet Union and the *Reich* against the Lizards."

"You mean you want German help for something you don't think you can do on your own," Skorzeny said. "Why do you need us for an operation which I presume will be on Soviet soil?" His gaze came to a sudden, sharp focus. "Wait! It's on territory we took from you last year, isn't it?"

"That may be," Lidov said. The noncommittal reply convinced Jäger that Skorzeny was right. He made a mental note: the SS man might bluster, but he was anything but stupid. Lieutenant Colonel Kraminov evidently saw dissimulation was useless, too. He sighed, perhaps regretting it "Come, all of you."

The Germans followed the two Russian officers down the long, highceilinged halls of the Kremlin. Other Russian soldiers sometimes paused in their own duties to stare at Skorzeny's SS uniform, but no one said anything: they seemed to accept that the world had grown stranger these past few months.

The office Jäger and Schultz entered was not the one Kraminov used. Like Kraminov's, though, it was surprisingly light and airy, with a large window that gave a view of the grounds of the Kremlin compound. Jäger had looked for nothing but dank gloom at the heart of Soviet Russia, but a moment's reflection after finding the opposite told him that was silly. Even Communists needed light by which to work. And the Kremlin was

far older than either Communism or electricity; when it was raised, the only light worth having came from the sun. So, large windows.

Lieutenant Colonel Lidov pointed to a samovar. “Tea, *tovarishchii?*” he asked. Jäger frowned; Kraminov didn’t call Schultz and him “comrades,” as if they were Reds themselves. But then, Kraminov was a tankman, a warrior, not NKVD. At home, Jäger drank coffee thick with cream. But he hadn’t been at home for a long time. He nodded.

Lidov poured for all of them. At home, Jäger didn’t drink tea from a glass, either. He had done that before, though, with captured samovar sets in steppe towns and collective farms overrun by *the Wehrmacht*. Lidov brewed better tea than he’d had there.

The NKVD man set down his glass. “To business,” he said. Jäger leaned forward and looked attentive. Georg Schultz just sat where he was. Skorzeny slouched down in his chair and looked bored. If that disconcerted Lidov, he didn’t let it show.

“To business,” he repeated. “As the *Hauptsturmführer* has suggested, the proposed action will take place in an area where the, fascist invaders had established themselves prior to the arrival of the alien imperialist aggressors commonly known as Lizards.”

Jäger wondered if Lidov talked that way all the time. Skorzeny yawned. “By fascist invaders, I presume you mean us Germans.” He sounded as bored as he looked.

“You and your lackeys and running dogs, yes.” Maybe Lidov did talk that way all the time. However he talked, he didn’t retreat a centimeter, though Skorzeny could have broken him over his knee like a stick. “To resume, then: along with bands of gallant Soviet partisans, German remnant groups remain in the area under discussion. Thus the apparent expedience of a joint Soviet-German operation.”

“Where is the area in question?” Jäger asked.

“Ah,” Lidov said. “Attend the map here, if you please.” He stood up, pointed to one of the charts tacked onto the wall. The lettering, of course, was Cyrillic, but Jäger recognized the Ukraine anyhow. Red pins showed Soviet positions, blue ones surviving German units, and yellow the Lizards. The map had more yellow measles than Jäger liked.

Lidov went on, “We are particularly concerned with this area north and west of Kiev, near the town of Komarin. There, early in the struggle against the Lizards, you Germans succeeded in wrecking with heavy artillery two major ships of the common enemy.”

That made Georg Schultz sit up straighter. So did Jäger—it was news to him, too. Skorzeny said, “And so? This is no doubt excellent, but how does it concern us here?”

“In and around the wreckage of one of these ships, the Lizards appear to be making no more than an ordinary effort at salvage. This is emphatically not the case at the other.”

“Tell us about the second one, then,” Jäger urged.

“Yes, that is what I was getting to, Major,” the NKVD man said. “We have reports from witnesses that the Lizards are operating as if in an area of poison gas, although no

gas seems to be present. Not only do they wear masks, in fact, but also bulky full-body protective suits. You see the significance of this, I trust?"

"Ja," Jäger said absently. Except for helmets and sometimes body armor, Lizards didn't wear clothes, if they felt they needed to be protected from something, whatever it was had to be pretty fierce. As for gas—he shivered a little as he remembered his own days in the trenches back in the first war. A gas mask was torment, made worth wearing only because it warded against worse.

"It is not gas, you say?" Skorzeny put in.

"No, definitely not," Lidov answered. "There has been no problem due to wind or anything of that sort. The Lizards appear to be engaged in recovering certain chunks of metal strewn about over a wide area when their ship exploded. These are loaded into lorries which seem to be very heavy for their size, judging by the tracks they leave in dirt."

"Armor-plated?" Jäger asked.

"Possibly," Lidov said. "Or possibly lead."

Jäger thought about that. Lead was good for plumbing, but for shielding? The only time he'd ever seen anyone use lead for shielding was when the fellow who'd X-rayed him after he was wounded put on a lead waistcoat before he took his pictures. He made a sudden connection—he'd heard inside these very Kremlin walls that the weapon which destroyed Berlin had had some sort of effect (not being a physicist, he didn't know quite what) related to X rays.

He said, "Is this salvage related to these dreadful bombs the Lizards have?"

Skorzeny's dark eyes widened. Lidov's rather narrow ones, already constricted by a Tatar fold at their inner corners, now thinned further. In a voice silky with danger, he said, "Were you one of ours, Major Jäger, I doubt you would long survive. You speak your thoughts too openly."

Georg Schultz surged halfway out of his chair "You watch your mouth, you damned Red!"

Jäger set a hand on the gunner's shoulder, pushed him back into the seat. "Do remember where we are, Sergeant," he said dryly.

"That is an excellent suggestion, Sergeant Schultz," the NKVD man agreed. "Your loyalty does you credit, but it is foolish here." He turned back to Jäger. "You, Major, may be too clever for your own good."

"Not necessarily." Otto Skorzeny spoke up for the panzer officer. "That we are here, Lieutenant Colonel Lidov, *that you have* said even so much on this sensitive matter, argues that you need German assistance for whatever you have in mind. You shall not get it unless Major Jäger here remains unharmed. You do need us, do you not?" In other circumstances, his smile would have been sweet. Now it mocked.

Lidov glared at him. Lieutenant Colonel Kraminov, who had let the other man do the

talking till now, said, “You are right, worse luck, *Herr Hauptsturmführer*. This area has only Russian partisans, no regular Red Army forces, as you Germans drove these out last fall. While brave enough, the partisans lack the heavy armament required to attack a Lizard lorry convoy. There are, however, also fragmentary *Wehrmacht* units in the area —”

“In regard to the Lizards, these are hardly more than partisan forces themselves,” Lidov interrupted. “But they do retain more arms than our own glorious and heroic partisans, that is true.” By his expression, the truth tasted bad in his mouth.

“Thus we suggest a joint undertaking,” Kraminov said. “You three will serve as our liaison with whatever German units remain north of Kiev. In the event we succeed in despoiling the convoy, our two governments will share equally in what we capture. Is it agreed?”

“How do we know you won’t keep everything for yourselves?” Schultz asked.

“You fascist aggressors were the ones who brutally violated the nonaggression pact the great Stalin generously granted to Hitler,” Lidov snapped. “We are the ones who tremble at the thought of trusting you.”

“You would’ve jumped us if we hadn’t,” Schultz said angrily. “Comrades,” Lieutenant Colonel Kraminov said—in German, which gave the word a different feel from the harsh Russian Lidov had used. “Please, comrades. If we are to be comrades, we shall need to work together. If we go at each other’s throats, only the Lizards will benefit”

“He’s right, Georg,” Jäger said. “If we start arguing, we’ll never get anything done.” He hadn’t forgotten his own dislike and contempt for nearly everything he’d seen in the Soviet Union, but could not deny the Russians fought hard—nor that they were masters of partisan warfare. “For now, let ideology wait.”

“Can you get me a telegraph line to Germany?” Otto Skorzeny asked. “I must have authorization before proceeding with this scheme.”

“Provided the latest Lizard advances have not cut it, yes,” Lidov said. “I can also let you transmit on the frequency arranged with your government. You must talk around what you truly wish to say there, however, to keep the Lizards from following if they intercept the signal, as they very likely will.”

“The telegraph first, then,” Skorzeny said. “That failing, the radio. The mission strikes me as worth accomplishing. Other concerns can wait” He studied the NKVD lieutenant colonel as if through the eyepiece of a panzer cannon sight. Lidov scowled right back at him. Without words, both men said that, while other concerns could wait, they were not forgotten.

Liu Han sat naked on the shiny mat in her room in the giant airplane that somehow never fell down from the sky. She made herself into the smallest bundle she could, legs drawn up tight, hands clasped on her shins, head pressed down till it touched her knees. With her eyes closed, she could imagine the entire universe around her had disappeared.



Her world view did not include the concept *experimental animal*, but that was what she had become. The little scaly devils who held her here wanted to discover certain things about the way people functioned, and were using her to help them learn. They cared not at all what she thought of the process.

The door to the chamber slid open. Before she could will herself to stillness, she looked up. Two Lizards marched in, with a man—a foreign devil, not even decently Chinese—between them. The man wore no more clothes than she did. “Another one here,” one of the scaly devils said in his hissing Chinese.

She lowered her head again, refused to answer. *Another one*, she thought. When would they be satisfied that she could indeed fit the prongs of however many men they brought her? This was—the fifth? The sixth? She couldn’t remember. Maybe, after a while, it ceased to matter. How could her defilement grow any greater?

She tried to recapture the feeling of power, the feeling of being her own person, she’d known for that little while when Yi Min was helpless and afraid. Then her own will had mattered, if only for a short time. Before then, she’d been held in her place by the customs of her village, and her people, afterward by the terrifying might of the Lizards. Just for a moment, though, she’d almost been free.

“You two show what you do, you eat You not, no food for you,” the devil said. Liu Han knew he meant it. After the first couple of men in this grim series, she’d tried to starve herself to death, but her body refused to obey her. *Her belly cried louder* than her spirit. Eventually, she did what she had to do to eat.

The other Lizard spoke to the foreign devil in a language that was neither Chinese nor the Lizards’ own speech—Liu Han still tried to pick up words of that whenever she could. Then the scaly devils went out of the chamber. They were probably (no, certainly) taking pictures, but that was not the same as having them in the room. She still drew the line there.

Reluctantly, she looked up at the foreign devil. He was very hairy, and had grown a short thick beard that reached to within a couple of fingers’ breadth of his eyes. His nose seemed nearer a hawk’s beak than what a proper person should grow. His skin was not too different in color from hers.

At least he did not simply ravage her, as one man had the second the door closed behind him. He stood quietly, watching her, letting her look him over. Sighing, she stretched herself out flat on the mat. “Come ahead; let’s get it over with,” she said in Chinese, her weary voice full of infinite bitterness.

He stooped beside her. She tried not to cringe. He said something in his own language. She shook her head. He tried what sounded like a different tongue, but she understood no better. She expected him to get on top of her then, but instead he let out hisses and grunts which, she realized after a moment, were words in the Lizards’ speech: “Name—is.” He ended with the cough that showed the sentence was a question.

Her eyes filled with tears. None of the others had even bothered to ask. “Name is Liu

Han,” she answered, sitting up. She had to repeat herself; the accents she and he gave the Lizards’ words were so different that they had trouble following each other. Once she’d given her name, she saw she ought to treat him as a human being, too. “You—name—is?”

He pointed to his furry chest. “Bobby Fiore.” He turned toward the doorway by which the little scaly devils had departed, spoke their name for themselves. “Race—” Then he delivered an extraordinary series of gestures, most of which she’d never seen before but all obviously a long way from compliments. Either he didn’t know his picture was being taken or he didn’t care. Some of his antics were so spirited, almost like those of a traveling actor in a skit, that she found herself smiling for the first time in a long while.

“Race bad,” she said when he was done, and gave the different cough that put extra stress on what she said.

Instead of answering with words, he just repeated the emphatic cough. She’d never heard a little scaly devil do that, but she followed him well enough.

No matter how they despised their captors, though, they remained captive. If they were going to eat, they had to do what the scaly devils wanted. Liu Han still didn’t understand why the Lizards thought it important to prove that men and women didn’t go into heat and could lie with each other any time, but they did. She lay back again. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad this time.

As far as skill went, Yi Min was three times the lover the foreign devil with the unpronounceable second name proved to be. But if he was rather clumsy, he treated her as though it were their wedding night, not as if she was a handy convenience. She hadn’t imagined foreign devils had so much kindness in them; few enough Chinese did. She hadn’t known any kindness since her husband died in the Japanese attack on her village.

To thank him, she did her best to respond to his caresses. She’d been through too much, though; her body would not answer. Still, when he closed his eyes and groaned atop her, she was moved to reach up and stroke his cheek. The beard there was almost as rough as a bristle brush. She wondered if it itched.

He slid out of her, sat back on his knees. She drew up one leg to hide her secret place—foolish, when he’d just been inside her. He pantomimed smoking a cigarette with such nimble gestures that she started to laugh before she could catch herself. He raised a bushy eyebrow, took another drag on the imaginary smoke, then made as if to crush it out on his chest

He’d so convinced her the nothing between his two fingers was real, she exclaimed in Chinese: “Don’t get burned!” That set her laughing again. She groped for words in the Lizards’ tongue, the only one they had in common: “You—not bad.”

“You, Liu Han”—he said her name so strangely, she needed a moment to recognize it—“you—not bad also.”

She looked away from him. She didn’t know she was crying till the first scalding tears

ran down her cheeks. Once she started, she discovered she could not stop. She wailed and keened for all she'd lost and suffered and endured, for her husband and her village, for her very world and her own violation. She'd never imagined she had so many tears inside her.

After a little while, she felt Bobby Fiore's hand on her shoulder. "Hey," he said. "Hey." She didn't know what it meant in his language. She didn't know if it meant anything or was just a sound. She did know his voice held sympathy, and that he was the only human being who'd shown her any since her nightmare began. She twisted around and clung to him till she'd cried herself out.

He didn't do much but let her hold him. He ran a hand through her hair once or twice and quietly said "Hey" a few more times. She hardly noticed, so consumed was she by her own grief.

As her sobs at last slowed to gasps and hiccups, she felt his erection pressed against her belly, hot as the tears she'd shed. She wondered how long he'd had it. It didn't surprise her; she would have been surprised if a naked man in the arms of a naked woman failed to rise. What surprised her was that he'd been content to ignore it. What could she possibly have done to stop him if he'd decided to take her again?

His restraint made her want to cry again. She realized how desperate she'd grown when simply not being raped became a kindness worth tears.

He asked her something in his own language. She shook her head. He shook his, too, maybe angry at himself for forgetting she couldn't understand. His eyebrows came together as he looked thoughtfully past her shoulder toward the blank metal wall of the chamber. He tried the scaly devils' speech: "You, Liu Han, not bad now?"

"Not so bad, Bobby Fiore." When she tried to say his name, she botched it at least as badly as he had hers.

"Okay," he said. She did understand that; a city person in one of the films she'd seen had said it. People in the city picked up foreign devils' slang along with their machines and funny clothes.

He let go of her. She looked down at herself. She'd held him so tight, the smooth skin of her chest had the marks of his hair pressed into it. His erection started to droop now that she no longer lay against him. She reached out and closed her hand around him. The Lizards had taken everything she'd ever had, leaving her with only her body with which to thank him.

That eyebrow of his went up again. So did what she was holding. Somehow, the heat of it against the palm of her hand brought comfort. If it was good this time, if she lost herself in her body, sheer sensation might let her forget for a little while the metal room in which she was trapped and the scaly devils who kept her here to satisfy their own perverse curiosity.

She moaned softly as she lay back on the mat once more. She wanted it to be good, hoped it would be. Bobby Fiore moved beside her. His lips came down on hers; his hand

roamed her body. A bit sooner than she would have liked, his fingers found their way between her legs. They didn't go quite to the right place. After a few seconds of frustration, she reached down and moved them to where they belonged.

He frowned for a moment. She hoped she hadn't angered him. Who could say what might anger a foreign devil? He didn't put his hand back where it had been, though. And now it was better, now her eyes closed and her buttocks clenched and her back began to arch. As if from far away, she heard him laugh, deep in his throat.

She was at the edge of the Clouds and Rain when he took his hand away. Her eyes opened. It was her turn to start to frown. But his weight pressed her against the slick surface of the mat. His tongue teased her left nipple as he guided himself into her. Her legs rose, clenched around him. With her inner muscles, she squeezed him as hard as she could. "Ah," he said, in surprise or delight or both at once. Then she stopped listening to anything but what her body told her.

Afterward, they were both sweaty and breathing hard. The only thing wrong with making love, Liu Han thought as the afterglow faded, was that it didn't really help. All the troubles pleasure had let her ignore were still here. None had got any better. Ignoring troubles was not meeting them. She knew that, but what else, here, could she do?

She wondered if foreign devils had the wit to be disturbed by such worries. She glanced over at Bobby Fiore. His hairy face had turned serious, his own gaze distant and inward. Surely thoughts much like her own were passing through his head.

But when he noticed her looking at him, he smiled and sat up in one smooth motion. He might have been imperfectly skilled in matters of the mattress, but he had a well-muscled body which he handled well otherwise. He also had a sense of foolishness—this time he pretended to smoke two cigarettes at once, one in each hand.

Liu Han laughed. A few seconds later, she rolled over and gave the foreign devil with the funny name a long, grateful hug. Whatever private fears or worries he'd been brooding about, he'd set them aside to make her feel better. That was something else that hadn't happened since the scaly devils came (and not often before then; she was, after all, only a woman).

As if thinking of the little devils was enough to make them appear, the door to the hallway outside her chamber slid open. The devils who had brought Bobby Fiore in now returned to take him away again. That was how it went: they forced a man on her, then took him away so she never saw him again. Up till now, that had been only a relief. Now it wasn't, or not so much. But the devils didn't care one way or the other.

Or so she thought, until the scaly devil who spoke Chinese after a fashion said, "You do mating two times. Why two times? Never two times before." Absurdly, he sounded suspicious, as if he'd caught her enjoying herself at what was supposed to be hard work. Well, in a way, he had.

She'd learned honest answers worked best with the little devils. "We did it twice

because I liked him much more than I liked any of the others. I just wanted to be rid of them. But he is not a bad man; if he were Chinese, he might be a very good man.”

The other devil was talking with Bobby Fiore. He answered in his own language. It wasn't Chinese, so Liu Han could make nothing out of it. Because it had no tones, it sounded to her more like animals grunting than speech. She wondered how—and if—foreign devils managed to understand one another. But compared to the hisses and coughs the scaly devils used, Bobby Fiore's foreign devil language was as lovely as a beautiful song.

The little scaly devil who had been talking with her turned and spoke to the one who'd been talking with Bobby Fiore. They made their snaky noises back and forth. Liu Han tried to follow what they were saying, but couldn't: they talked too fast. She worried. The last time she'd had a moment of feeling partway safe and secure, the scaly devils had turned her into a whore. What new horror were they plotting now?

The one who spoke Bobby Fiore's language said something to him. He nodded as he answered. That seemed to mean the same thing to him as it did to her, so he'd probably just said yes. But yes to what?

The Lizard who knew a little Chinese turned both his eyes back to her. “You want come back again this man?”

The question took her by surprise. Again she gave an honest answer. “What I really want is to go back to the camp you took me from. If you will not do that, I wish you would just leave me alone here and not make me give my body for food.”

“This one choice not for you,” the scaly devil said. “This other choice not for you, either.”

“What choices do you give me?” Liu Han asked bleakly. Then she realized this was the first time the little scaly devils had offered her any choices at all. Up till now, they'd simply done with her as they pleased. Maybe she had reason to hope.

“Come back again this man one choice,” the little devil said. “Other choice come in here new man. You pick choice now.”

Liu Han felt like screaming at him. He would not free her, he just let her choose between two kinds of degradation. But any choice was better than none. Bobby Fiore had not hit her; though he'd gone into her, he hadn't forced her; he'd let her clutch at him when she cried; he'd even made her laugh with his silly imaginary cigarettes. And he hated the little scaly devils, maybe nearly as much as she did.

“I would rather have this man come back again,” she said as fast as she could, not wanting to give the little devil a chance to change his mind.

He turned to the other devil. They talked back and forth once more. The one who spoke Chinese said, “Big Ugly male say he want come again, too. We do that, see what happen, you him. We learn plenty, maybe.”

She couldn't have cared less what the scaly devils learned, except insofar as she hoped they learned nothing whatever. But she smiled her thanks to Bobby Fiore. If he hadn't

been willing to come back to her, then whatever she wanted probably wouldn't have mattered. He smiled back. "Liu Han—not bad," he said, and gave the emphatic cough.

The two scaly devils both made noises like kettles bubbling over. The one who spoke Chinese asked, "Why use our tongue, talk you, him?"

"We don't know each other's languages," Liu Han answered, shrugging. The scaly devils could do all sorts of things she'd never imagined possible, but sometimes they were genuinely stupid.

"Ah," this one said. "We learn again." He and his companion led Bobby Fiore out of the chamber. Just before the door slid shut and hid him, he raised yet another pretended cigarette to his lips.

Liu Han stood for a while, staring at the closed door panel. Then she noticed, or rather paid heed to, being messy and dripping. The cubicle had a faucet that released a few seconds' worth of water when she pushed a button by it. She went over and cleaned herself as best she could. When she was done, she didn't feel the need to wash again and again and again, as she had several times before. Once was enough. That, to her, meant progress.

Flight Leader Teerts felt like a longball. Back on Home, two males would toss a ball back and forth, starting out at arm's length from each other. Every time one of them caught it, he'd take a step backward. Good longball players could keep the game going until they were a city block apart. Championship players could go almost twice that far.

The shiplords of the invasion fleet had them all beat. They'd thrown Teerts and his flight of killerplanes back and forth across the whole length of Tosev 3's main continental mass. He'd begun the campaign by swatting British bombardment aircraft out of the sky. Now he was attacking Nipponese ground positions almost halfway around this cold, wet world.

"There they are." Gefron's voice came through the flight leader's headphones. "I have them on my terrain mapper."

Teerts checked the display. Yes, those were the Race's landcruisers and other fighting vehicles up ahead, their IFF transponders all glowing cheerily orange. Ahead of them lay the Nipponese trench lines in front of—what was the name of the town? Harbin, that was it—which the killerplanes were supposed to soften up.

"That is affirmative, Gefron," Teerts said. "I say again, affirmative. Pilot Rolvar, have you also acquired the target?"

"I have, Flight Leader," Rolvar answered formally, Then his voice changed: "Now let's go smash it!"

Teerts would not have wanted to be one of the Big Ugly soldiers down there. The peaceful night was about to turn hideous for them. At the precise programmed instant, rockets leapt away from his killercraft to slice into the gashed earth in which the

Nipponese huddled. The flames from their motors reminded him of knives of fire.

Since he was flight leader, he had a display Rolvar and Gefron lacked, one that showed they'd also launched their rocket packs. A moment later, ground explosions confirmed that: there were far more of them than his own munitions load could have accounted for by itself.

“Let's see how they like that!” Gefron shouted jubilantly. “We should have given it to them a long time ago, by the Emperor.”

Pilots got special training so their eyes did not leave their instruments when they heard the Emperor's sacred name. Teerts kept on paying attention to his cabin displays. He felt the same excitement Gefron had shown; it was as close to arousal as a male could know in the absence of females.

He also wished his flight had been able to attack the Nipponese sooner. But there were only so many killerplanes, and *so many* Tosevite positions to smash. This one had had to wait its turn. It would have waited longer still had the shiplords not thrown his flight east against it.

His aircraft roared low over the shattered trench line. Little dots of flame sprang into being on the ground as the surviving Big Ugliers fired blindly at him. The Nipponese were not the only Tosevite army to do that. Teerts had listened to the briefings. He supposed shooting back made the Big Ugly soldiers feel less like the helpless victims they really were. Its probability of doing anything more than that was very small.

Teerts didn't gamble. Gambling was a vice of support for males who had time to kill, which was not one of his problems. He'd been in action from the start. But if he'd sat down with the little plastic dodecahedrons a few-times, he would have understood with his gut rather than just with his brain the difference between a small probability and zero probability.

The left engine made a horrible noise, then died. His killercraft lurched in midair. A small town's worth of warning lights came on all over his instrument panel. At the same time, he keyed his radio: “Flight Leader Teerts, aborting mission and attempting to return to base. I must have sucked a bullet or something right into one turbofan.”

“May the spirits of departed Emperors take you safely home,” Rolvar and Gefron said in the same breath. Rolvar added, “We will finish the attack run on the Tosevites, Flight Leader.”

“I'm sure you will,” Teerts said. Rolvar was a good, reliable male. So was Gefron, in a different, more primitive way. Between the two of them, they'd make the Nipponese wish they'd never been hatched. Teerts swung his killercraft westward, back toward the base from which he'd set out. He could fly on one engine, though he wouldn't be very fast or maneuverable. Get repairs made and he'd be good as new tomorrow—

The right engine made a horrible noise, then died.

All at once, Teerts' instrument panel was nothing *but* warning lights. *This isn't fair* the flight leader thought. His hard-won altitude began to slip as the aircraft became nothing

more than an aerodynamic stone in the sky.

“Ejecting! I say again, ejecting!” he yelled. His thumbclaw hit a button he’d never expected to have to use. Something about the size of the invasion fleet’s bannership booted him in the base of the tail as hard as it could. His eyes stayed open, but he briefly saw only gray mist.

Pain soon brought him back to his senses. One of the three bones in his left wrist had surely broken. At the moment, though, that was the least of his worries. Still strapped into his seat, he floated above the Nipponese lines like the biggest, most tempting target in the whole Empire.

The Big Ugliers blazed away at him for all they were worth. He watched in fearful fascination as holes appeared in the ripstop fabric of his parachute. Too many holes, or three or four too close together, and ripstopping wouldn’t matter much. Then a bullet smacked the armored bottom of the seat. He hissed in fright and tried to draw up his legs.

*Not fair* he thought again. The whole killercraft was armored, not just the bottom of the seat. Bullets that hit were nearly harmless. But turbofan blades, immensely strong though they were, couldn’t chew up lead. If you were colossally unlucky enough to lose both engines that way ...

If you were that unlucky, you had to hope the Big Ugliers wouldn’t catch you and do the frightful things rumor said they did to prisoners. You had to hope you landed a little ways away from them, so you could unstrap (onehanded, it wouldn’t be easy or fast) and try to evade until the rescue helicopter got there to pick you up.

But if you were that unlucky, who cared what you hoped? Teerts had spilled wind from his canopy, trying to float as far back toward the Race’s lines as he could. That would have made rescuing him a lot easier...if he hadn’t come down right in the middle of a Nipponese trench.

He was sure he was dead. The Big Ugliers swarmed around him, shouting at one another and brandishing rifles with knives stuck onto the end of their barrels. He waited for them to shoot him or stick him. A little more pain, he told himself, and everything would be over. His spirit would join those of the Emperors now departed, to serve them in death as he had served the Race in life.

One of the Nipponese outshouted the rest. By the way they cleared a path for him, he must have been an officer. He stood in front of Teerts, hands on hips, staring at him with the small, immobile eyes that characterized the Big Ugliers. Instead of a rifle, he carried a sword not too different from the one borne by the Tosevite warrior in the picture the Race’s probe had sent Home.

Teerts wondered why he didn’t draw it and use it. Why else had the others drawn back, but to give their commander the privilege of the kill? But the officer did not strike. Instead, he gestured for Teerts to free himself from the straps that held him in his seat.

The flight leader obeyed, awkwardly because his left hand wouldn’t work. As soon as



he'd moved a couple of paces away from the seat, the Nipponese did take his sword from its sheath. He slashed two-handed at the lines that held Teerts' parachute to the ejection seat. The sword must have had good metal in it, for the tough lines parted almost at once. The parachute canopy blew away.

The officer said something to his males. Several of them raised their rifles and fired repeatedly into the seat. The blasts almost deafened Teerts. They also dismayed him right down to the claws on his toes. Those bullets were certain to smash the homing beacon buried in the padding.

Baring his small, flat teeth, the Nipponese pointed east with his sword. He barked out a phrase that probably meant something like *get moving*. Teerts got moving. The officer and several of his males followed, to make sure the flight leader didn't try to run.

Teerts had no intention of running. Since he hadn't been killed out of hand, he expected to be treated fairly well. The Race held far more Tosevite captives than the other way round, and mistreatment of prisoners, could be avenged ten-thousandfold. Not only that, the Big Ugliers, barbarous though they were, fought among themselves so often that they'd developed protocols for dealing with captured enemies. Teerts couldn't remember offhand whether Nippon adhered to those protocols, but most Tosevite empires did.

Jets screamed overhead, back where the ejection seat had landed. That would be Gefron and Rolvar, trying to keep him from being captured. Too late, unfortunately; not only had he landed among the Big Ugliers, but this officer was alert enough to have wrecked the beacon and got him away from it in a hurry.

Still, he didn't think things would be too bad. The officer first took him to a medical station. A Nipponese doctor with corrective lenses held in front of his eyes by a weird contraption of bent wires bandaged his wrist and poured a stinging disinfectant over the cuts and scrapes he'd got in his ejection and landing. By the time the doctor was done, Teerts felt halfway decent

Then the Nipponese officer started hustling him away from the front line again. The jets' wail vanished; the other two pilots in the flight must have expended their munitions and had to head home. Artillery shells whistled overhead every so often. Most came from the west and landed on Tosevite positions. The Big Ugliers kept firing back, though. They seemed too stubborn to know when to give up.

Teerts walked toward the dawn that was breaking in the east. As light grew, Nipponese artillery fire also picked up. Lacking night-vision gear, the Tosevites were limited to targets they could actually see. Each salvo of theirs drew quick counterbattery fire from the gunners of the Race.

Back at the rear edge of the Nipponese trench system, a new party of Big Ugliers took charge of Teerts. By the way the officer who had captured him acted toward the one who now received him, the latter was far more prominent. They bowed to each other one last time before the junior officer and the males who had accompanied him headed back to their position.

Teerts' new keeper surprised him by speaking the language of the Race. "You come this way," he said. His accent was mushy and he barked out his words, but the flight leader followed him well enough.

"Where are you taking me?" Teerts asked, glad for the chance to communicate with something more expressive than gestures.

The Nipponese officer whirled and struck him. He staggered and almost fell; the blow had been cleverly aimed. "Not talk unless I say you can talk!" the Big Ugly shouted. "You prisoner now, not master. You obey!"

Obedience had been drilled into Teerts his whole life long. His captor might be a savage, but he spoke as one who had the right to command. Almost instinctively, the flight leader responded to his tone. "May I speak?" he asked, as humbly as if he were addressing a shiplord.

"*Hai*," the Nipponese said, a word Teerts did not understand. As if realizing that, the Tosevite abandoned his own jargon. "Speak, speak."

"Thank you, exalted male." With no notion of the officer's rank, Teerts laid the honorifics on with a trowel. "Without asking where, exalted male, do you have places in which you keep your captives from the Race?"

The Nipponese showed his teeth. Among the Big Ugliers, Teerts knew, that was a gesture of amiability, not amusement. The officer, however, looked not the least bit amiable. He said, "You prisoner now. No one care what happen to you."

"Forgive me, exalted male, but I do not understand. You Tosevites"—Teerts carefully did not say *Big Ugliers*—"take prisoners in your own wars and mostly treat them well. Is it just to use us so differently from your own?"

"Not do so," the Nipponese officer answered. "Be prisoner go against *bushido*." The word was in Nipponese. The officer explained it: "Against way of fighting male Proper fighting male die before become prisoner. Become prisoner, not deserve to live. Become—how you say?—sport for those who catch."

"That's—" Teerts caught himself before he blurted out *insane*. "That's not the way most other Tosevites act."

"They fools, idiots. We Nipponese, we—how you say?—people of the emperor. Our way right, proper. Same family rule us two thousand five hundred year." He drew himself up as if that paltry figure were a matter for pride. Teerts didn't think it wise to point out that *the* Emperors' family had ruled the Race for fifty thousand years, which was twenty-five thousand revolutions of Tosev 3. A small pride, he reasoned, might be more easily hurt by a large truth.

He said, "What will you do with me, then?"

"What we want," the officer answered. "You *ours* now."

"If you mistreat me, the Race will avenge itself on your people," Teerts warned.

The Nipponese officer made a peculiar barking noise. After a bit, Teerts realized it

had to be what the Big Ugliers used for laughter. The officer said, “Your Race already hurt Nippon so bad, how you do worse on account of prisoners, eh? You try make me afraid? I show you. I not afraid to do this—”

He kicked Teerts, hard. The flight leader hissed in surprise and pain. When the Big Ugly kicked him again, he whirled round and tried to fight back—even, if he was smaller than a Tosevite, he had teeth and claws. They did him no good. The officer did not even bother reaching for the sword or the small firearm he carried on his belt. He’d somehow learned to use his legs and arms as deadly weapons. Teerts couldn’t so much as tear his tunic.

The beating and stomping went on for some time. Finally the Nipponese officer kicked the flight leader’s broken wrist. Teerts’ vision blurred and threatened to go out, just as it had when *the ejection seat hurled him away from his killercraft*. As if from very far away, he heard someone screaming, “Enough! Enough!” He needed a while before he recognized the voice as his own.

“You talk stupid again?” the Big Ugly asked. He stood balanced on one leg, ready to kick Teerts some more. If the flight leader said no, the Tosevite might stop; if he said yes, he was sure he’d get kicked to death. He got the feeling the officer didn’t much care one way or the other what he answered. In a way, that indifference was even more frightening than the beating itself.

“No, I won’t talk stupidly again, or I’ll try not to, anyway,” Teerts gasped. The tiny qualification held all the defiance left in him.

“You get up, then.”

Teerts didn’t think he could. But if he failed, the Big Ugly would have another excuse to hurt him. He struggled to his feet, did his best to wipe the mud off his scales one-handed.

“What you learn from this?” the Nipponese officer asked.

The flight leader could hear the danger in that question. It wasn’t just rhetoric; he’d better answer it in a way that satisfied the Tosevite. Slowly, he said, “I learned that I am your prisoner, that I am in your power, that you can do whatever you want with me.”

The Big Ugly moved his head up and down. “You keep this in your mind, eh?”

“Yes.” Teerts didn’t think he was likely to forget.

The Nipponese officer gave him a light shove. “You come on, then.”

Moving hurt, but Teerts managed. He didn’t dare fail; maybe the Big Ugly really had taught him a lesson after all. Dawn was breaking when they came to a transport center. The Race had worked it over at least once: truck carcasses lay here and there, some flipped over, others burnt out, still others both.

But the center still functioned. Nipponese soldiers, chanting as they worked, unloaded cloth sacks from a few intact motor vehicles and from a great many animal-drawn

wagons. The officer shouted to the males there. A couple of them came rushing over. They exchanged bows with the flight leader's captor, spoke rapidly back and forth.

The officer shoved Teerts again, pointed toward a wagon. "You go on that one."

Teerts awkwardly climbed into the wagon. The Nipponese officer gestured for him to sit in one corner. He obeyed. The wooden bottom and sides scratched against his sore hide. The officer and a Big Ugly soldier got into the wagon with him. Now the officer took out his small firearm. The soldier kept his rifle aimed at Teerts, too. The flight leader's mouth wanted to fall open. The Tosevites had to be crazy if they thought he was in any shape to try something.

Crazy they might have been, but they weren't stupid. The officer spoke again in his own language. The males around the wagon obeyed with an alacrity that would not have shamed members of the Race. They snatched up a heavy, dirty tarpaulin and draped it over Teerts and his guards.

"No one see you now," the officer said, and laughed his noisy, barking laugh once more.

Teerts was afraid he was right. From the air, the wagon would look like any other, hardly worth shooting up and certainly not worth investigating. Oh, in an infrared scan the wagon bed might show up warmer than it would have were it just carrying supplies, but no one was likely to bother scanning it.

Somebody with heavy, booted feet got up onto the front of the wagon, the part the tarpaulin didn't cover. The wagon shifted under his weight. The newcomer said something, though not to Teerts or the Big Ugliers. The only answer he got was a soft snort from one of the two animals tethered to the front end of the wagon.

The animals started to walk. In that instant, Teerts discovered the wagon had no springs. He also discovered the road over which it traveled did not deserve the name. The first two jounces made him bite his tongue. After that, with the iron taste of blood in his mouth, he deliberately clamped his jaws shut and endured the rattling as best he could. He was jolted worse here at a walking pace than he'd ever been inside his killercraft.

After a while, daylight began to seep through the space between the tarpaulin and the top of the wagon. The two Tosevites did not seem to have so much as twitched since they sat down. Their weapons remained pointed straight at Teerts. He wished he were as dangerous as they thought he was.

"May I speak?" he asked. The Nipponese officer's head moved up and down. Hoping that meant yes, the flight leader said, "May I please have some water?"

"*Hai*," the officer said. He turned to the other male, spoke briefly. The soldier shifted his weight—he could move after all. *He* carried a *water bottle* slung on his right hip. He undid it with one hand (the other kept his rifle aimed at Teerts), passed it to his commander. The officer in turn gave it to Teerts, making sure all the while that the flight leader could not grab his small firearm.

Teerts found the water bottle hard to use. The Tosevites could wrap their flexible lips around its opening to keep from spilling it. His own mouthparts were less mobile. He had to hold the bottle above his head, pour the water down into his mouth. Even so, some of it dribbled out the corners of his jaws and made a couple of small puddles on the floor of the wagon.

Refreshed, he dared ask, “May I also have some food?” Saying the word told him how empty his belly was.

“You eat food like us?” The officer paused, tried to make himself clearer: “You eat food from this world?”

“Of course I do,” Teerts answered, surprised the Big Ugly could doubt it “Why would we conquer this world if we could not support ourselves upon it afterwards?”

The officer grunted, then spoke to the other soldier again. This time, the junior male moved slowly, grudgingly. He had to put down his rifle to reach into the pack on his back. From it he took out a cloth wrapped around a couple of flat, whitish grainy cakes. He handed one of them to Teerts, carefully refolded the cloth, and put the other cake back into the pack. Then he picked up the rifle again. By the way he held it, he wouldn't have been sorry to shoot the flight leader.

Teerts stared down at the cake he held in his good hand. It didn't look particularly appetizing—why was the male so unhappy to give it up? The flight leader took a while to realize the two cakes might have been the only food the soldier had. *They're barbarians, after all, he reminded himself. They still have things like hunger—and we've been hitting their supply lines as hard as we can.*

He knew about hunger himself now. He bit into the cake. It tasted bland and starchy—given a better choice, it wasn't anything he would have eaten. Of itself, though, his tongue flicked out to clean the last couple of crumbs off his claw. He wished he had another cake just like it—or maybe another three.

Maybe, he thought too, late, he shouldn't have shown just how hungry he was. He didn't like the way the Nipponese officer stretched out his lips and showed his teeth.

Vyacheslav Molotov glanced around the room. Here was a sight that would have been impossible to imagine a few months before: diplomats from Allies and Axis, imperialists and progressives, fascists and Communists and capitalists, all gathered together to seek a common strategy against a common foe.

Had Molotov been a different man, he might have smiled. As it was, his expression never wavered. He had been in a place more unimaginable than this when he floated feather-light in the Lizard leader's bake-oven of a chamber hundreds of kilometers above the Earth. But this London room was remarkable enough.

The room might have been anywhere in the world. It was in London because Great Britain lay relatively close to all the powers here save only Japan because the Lizards hadn't invaded the islands, and because their attacks on shipping were haphazard enough to have given everyone a reasonable chance of arriving safely. And, indeed, everyone *had* arrived safely, though the conference was starting late because the Japanese foreign minister had been delayed zigzagging around the Lizard-held areas of North America.

The only disadvantage Molotov could see to meeting in London was that it gave Winston Churchill the right to preside. Molotov had nothing personal against Churchill—though imperialist, he was a staunch anti-fascist, and without him Britain might well have folded up and come to terms with the Hitlerites in 1940. That would have left the Soviet Union in a bad way when the Nazis turned east the next year.

No, it wasn't personal animosity. But Churchill did have a habit of going on and on. He was by all accounts a master orator in English. Molotov, unfortunately, spoke no English; even masterful oratory, when understood only through the murmurs of an interpreter, soon palled.

That didn't bother Churchill. Round and plump and ruddy-faced, waving a long cigar, he looked the very picture of a capitalist oppressor. But his words were defiant: "We cannot yield another inch of ground to these creatures. It would mean slavery for the human race forevermore."

"If we didn't all agree in this, we would not be here today," Cordell Hull said. The U.S. secretary of state raised a wry eyebrow. "Count Ciano isn't, for instance."

Molotov appreciated the dig at the Italians, who had given up even pretending to fight the Lizards a couple of weeks before. The Italians had named fascism, and now they showed its bankruptcy by yielding essentially at the first blow. The Germans at least had the courage of their convictions; Mussolini seemed to lack, both.

Translators murmured to their principals. Joachim von Ribbentrop spoke fluent

English, so the five leaders got along with three languages and thus only two interpreters per man. That made the talks cumbersome, but not unmanageably so.

Shigenori Togo said, "I feel our primary goal here is not so much to affirm the fight against the Lizards, with which we all agree, but to ensure that we do not allow the hostilities previously existing among ourselves adversely to affect our struggle."

"That is a good point," Molotov said. The Soviet Union and Japan had been neutral, which allowed each of them to devote its full energies to foes it reckoned more important (though Japan's foes were the USSR's allies in its battle against Germany, Japan's Axis partner—diplomacy could be a strange business).

"Yes, it is," Cordell Hull said. "We have come a long way in that direction, Mr. Togo—a short while ago, you'd not have been welcome in London, and even less welcome traveling across the United States to get here." Togo bowed in his seat, politely acknowledging the American's reply.

Churchill said, "Another point we must address is the trouble we have rendering aid to one another. As matters now stand, we must sneak about on our own world like so many mice fearing the cat. It is intolerable; it shall not stand."

"Bravely spoken as usual, Comrade Prime Minister," Molotov said. "You set forth an important and inspiring principle, but unfortunately offer no means of putting it into effect."

"To find such a means is the reason we have agreed to meet in spite of past differences," Ribbentrop said.

Molotov did not dignify that with a reply. If Churchill's gift was for inspiration, the Nazi foreign minister's was for stating the obvious. Molotov wondered why the pompous, posturing fool couldn't have been in Berlin, when it disappeared from the face of the earth. Hitler might have had to replace him with a capable diplomat.

Air-raid sirens began to wail. Lizard jets shrieked by on low-level attack runs. Antiaircraft guns pounded—not as many as warded Moscow, Molotov thought, but a goodly number. None of the diplomats at the table moved. Everyone looked at everyone, else for signs of fear and tried not to give any of his own. They had all come under air attack before.

"Times like these make me wish I were back in the wine business," Ribbentrop said, lightly. He had animal courage, if nothing else; he'd been decorated for bravery during the First World War.

"I want those God-damned planes shot down," Churchill said, as if giving someone unseen an order. *If only it were that easy*, Molotov thought. *If Stalin could have done it by giving-an order, the Lizards would long since have ceased to trouble us—as would the Hitlerites* Some things unfortunately yielded to no man's orders. Maybe that was why foolish people imagined gods into being: to have someone whose orders were sure to be obeyed.

A stick of bombs crashed down not far from the Foreign Office building. The noise was

cataclysmic. Windows rattled. One broke and fell in tinkling shards to the floor. The interpreters were less obliged to show sangfroid than the men they served. Several of them muttered; one of Ribbentrop's aides crossed himself and began fingering a rosary.

More bombs fell. Another window broke, or rather blew inward. A fragment of glass flew past Molotov's head and shattered against the wall. The translator who'd been praying cried out and clapped a hand to his cheek. Blood leaked between his fingers. *So much for your imaginary God*, Molotov thought. As usual, though, his face revealed nothing of what went on in his mind.

"If you like, gentlemen, we can adjourn to the shelter in the basement," Churchill said.

Interpreters looked hopefully at foreign ministers. Molotov checked his confreres. None of them said anything, in spite of the suggestion's obvious good sense. Molotov took the bull by the horns. "Yes, let us do that, Comrade Prime Minister. In all candor, our lives are valuable to the nations we serve. Foolish displays of bravado gain us nothing, if we can keep safe, we should do so."

Almost as one, the diplomats and interpreters rose from their seats and moved toward the door. No one thanked Molotov for cutting through the façade of bourgeois manners, but he'd expected no thanks from class enemies. As the Soviet foreign minister set foot on the stairs leading down, another irony struck him. For all their advanced technology, the Lizards appeared in Marxist-Leninist terms still to be in the ancient economic organizational system, using slave labor and plunder from captive races to maintain their imperial superstructure. Next to them, even Churchill—even Ribbentrop!—was progressive. The thought amused and appalled Molotov at the same time.

Another stick of bombs shook the Foreign Office as the diplomats descended to the cellar. Cordell Hull slipped and almost fell, catching himself at the last instant by grabbing the shoulder of the Japanese interpreter in front of him.

"Jesus Christ!" the secretary of state exclaimed. Molotov understood that without translation, though the American pronounced *Christ* as if it were *Chwist*. Hull followed it with several more sharp-sounding remarks.

"What is he saying?" Molotov asked his English-speaking translator.

"Oaths," the man answered. "Forgive me, Comrade Foreign Commissar, but I do not follow them easily. The American's accent is different from Churchill's, with which I am more familiar. When he speaks deliberately, I have no trouble understanding him, but the twang he gives his words when he is excited makes them difficult for me."

"Do your utmost," Molotov said. He hadn't thought about there being more than one dialect of English; to him it was all equally incomprehensible. Stalin and Mikoyan spoke Russian with an accent, of course, but that was because the one came from Georgia and the other from Armenia. The interpreter seemed to imply something else, more like the differences between the Russian of a *kolkhoznik* near the Polish border (*the former Polish border* Molotov thought) and that of a Moscow factory worker.



The shelter proved low-roofed, crowded, and smelly. Molotov looked around scornfully: was this the best the British could protect their essential personnel? Corresponding quarters in Moscow were farther underground, surely better armored, and much more spacious.

Clerks and officials gave the diplomats as much room as they could, which was not a great deal. Churchill said, “Shall we continue, gentlemen?”

Molotov wondered if he had lost his mind. Resume, in front of all these people? Then he reflected that what happened here was not likely to be reported back to the Lizards; unlike the powers negotiating today, the invaders had no long-established spy network to pick up their rivals’ every word.

But then he realized that might not matter. He said, “I make no secret”—which meant Stalin had told him to make no secret—“of the fact that I have met the enemy’s commanding officer in his ship above the Earth. As I expected, those negotiations proved fruitless, the Lizards demanding nothing less than the unconditional surrender we all find unacceptable. In the course of the meeting, however, I also learned the German foreign minister had held talks with this Atvar creature. I desire to know now whether this also holds true for Great Britain, the United States, and Japan. If so, I desire to know the status of their conversations with the Lizards. In short, are we in danger of betrayal from within?”

Joachim von Ribbentrop spluttered something indignant in German, then switched to English. The translator murmured into Molotov’s ear: “Yes, I discussed certain matters with the Lizards. After the fire that fell on Berlin, this is surely understandable, not so? I betrayed nothing, however, and resent the imputation. As proof I offer the *Reich’s* continuing struggle against the invading forces.”

“No imputation was intended,” Molotov said, though he remembered Atvar had implied Ribbentrop was more pliable than the German painted himself. Of course, it was as likely the Lizard lied for his own advantage as that Ribbentrop did so. More likely still, they both lied. Molotov resumed: “What of the rest of you?”

Cordell Hull said, “I haven’t done any of this Buck Rogers stuff.” (“By which he means he has not traveled into space,” the interpreter glossed.) “No one from the government of the United States has. We have held lower-level talks with the Lizards on our soil regarding such matters as transportation of food and other noncombat supplies to areas they control, and we are also attempting to arrange exchanges of prisoners of war.”

*Soft*, Molotov thought. The handful of prisoners the Soviets had taken from the invaders were interrogated until no longer useful and then disposed of, just as if they were Germans or *kulaks* with important information. As for supplying food to Lizard-held areas, Moscow had enough trouble feeding the people it still ruled. Those the Lizards had overrun made useful partisans and spies, but that was all.

Shigenori Togo spoke in German; Molotov remembered he had a German wife. The Soviet foreign minister’s English-speaking interpreter also knew German. He translated for Molotov: “He says there is no excuse for treating with this enemy.”

Ribbentrop scowled at the Japanese representative. Ignoring the glare, Togo switched to his own language and went on for some time. Molotov's other translator took over: "The Emperor Hirohito's government has consistently refused to deal with the Lizards except on the battlefield. We see no reason to discontinue this policy. We shall continue to fight until events prove favorable for us. We understand this fight will be difficult; that is why I am here today. But Japan will fight on regardless of the course any other nation may take."

"The same holds true for Britain," Churchill declared. "We may talk with the foe, consistent with the usages of war, but we shall not surrender to him. Resistance is our sacred duty to our children."

"You say this now," Ribbentrop said. "But what will you say when the Lizards strike London or Washington or Tokyo or Moscow with the same dreadful weapon that destroyed Berlin?"

Silence reigned for the next several seconds. It was a better question than Molotov had expected from the plump, prosperous, foolish Ribbentrop. He did notice the Nazi foreign minister had put the Soviet capital last on his list. Annoyed by that, he said, "Comrade Stalin has pledged a fight to the finish, and the Soviet workers and people shall hold to the pledge, come what may. In any case, if I may use a bourgeois analogy, having continued to resist despite wholesale murder at the hands of Germany, we shall not quail at the prospect of retail murder from the Lizards."

Ribbentrop's protuberant blue eyes glared balefully. Shigenori Togo, whose nation had been at war with neither the Soviet Union nor Germany when the Lizards came, was in the best position to address both their representatives: "Such talk as this, gentlemen, aids no one but the invaders. Of course we remember our own quarrels, but to use them to interfere with the struggle against the Lizards is shortsighted."

He could not have picked a better word to gain Molotov's attention. The ineluctable nature of the historical dialectic made Marxist-Leninists longterm planners almost by instinct. The Five-Year Plans that had made the Soviet Union an industrial match for Germany were a case in point.

Molotov said, "I merely used the analogy to demonstrate that we shall not be intimidated by brute force. In fact, the Soviet Union and Germany are even now cooperating in areas where our two states can effectively bring combined resources to bear against the common enemy." He stopped there. Another word would have been too much.

Ribbentrop nodded. "We will do what we must do to secure final victory."

Glee danced behind Molotov's unchanging visage. He would have bet a prewar Crimean *dacha* against a trip to the *gulag* that Ribbentrop had no idea what sort of cooperation he'd meant. He knew perfectly well that he would never have told the pompous ass anything important.

"Instead of bemoaning the dreadful weapons the Lizards have, one of the things we

should be doing is discovering how to make them for ourselves,” Cordell Hull said. “I am authorized by President Roosevelt to tell you all that the United States has such a program in progress, and that we will share resources with our allies in the struggle.”

“The United States and Britain are already operating under such an arrangement,” Churchill said, adding with a touch of smugness, “nor is the sharing to which Secretary Hull referred by any means a one-way street.”

Now Molotov’s stony façade trapped amazement. Had he been as indiscreet as Hull, he’d have earned—and deserved—a bullet in the back of the head. Yet the American secretary of state spoke at his president’s orders. Astonishing! Molotov more easily understood the Lizards than the United States. Combining the technical expertise implicit in Hull’s words with such unbelievable naïveté...Incredible—and dangerous.

Ribbentrop said, “We are prepared to cooperate with any nation against the Lizards.”

“As are we,” Togo said.

Everyone looked at Molotov. Seeing silence would not serve here, he said, “I have already stated that the Soviet Union is currently working with Germany on projects of benefit to both nations. We have no objection in principle to pursuing similar collaborative efforts with other states actively resisting the Lizards.”

He glanced round the tight circle of diplomats. Ribbentrop actually smiled at him. Churchill, Hull, and Togo remained expressionless, save that one of Churchill’s eyebrows rose a little. Unlike the Nazi buffoon, they’d noticed he hadn’t really promised anything. A wide gap lay between “no objection in principle” and genuine cooperation. Well, too bad. If they wanted to keep fighting the Lizards, they were in no position to call him on it.

Cordell Hull said, “Another area of concern for all of us is dealing with nations which have, for whatever reasons, made devil’s bargains with the Lizards.” He ran a hand through the strands of gray hair he’d combed over the top of a mostly bald skull. The Americas had a lot of nations like that.

“Many of them will have done so only under compulsion, and may well remain willing to carry on the fight and to work with us even while nominally under the invaders’ yoke,” Churchill said.

“That may be true in some cases,” Molotov agreed. His own judgment was that Churchill kept the cockeyed optimism which he’d demonstrated in defying Hitler after British forces were booted out of Europe in 1940. That kind of optimism often led to disaster, but sometimes it saved nations. Bourgeois military “experts” hadn’t given the Red Army six weeks of life against the *Wehrmacht*—but the Soviets were still fighting almost a year later when the Lizards came to complicate the situation yet again.

Molotov went on, “Partisan movements against both the invaders and the governments collaborating with them should also be organized and armed as expeditiously as possible. Leaders who favor submission must be removed by whatever means prove necessary.” He said the last with a hard look at Joachim von Ribbentrop.

The German foreign minister was dense, but not too dense to miss that message. “The *Führer* still feels a personal fondness for Mussolini,” he said, sounding more than a little embarrassed.

“No accounting for taste,” Churchill rumbled. “Still, Minister Molotov is correct: we are past the stage where personal likes and dislikes ought to influence policy. The sooner Mussolini is dead and buried, the better for all of us. Some German forces remain in Italy. They might well be the ones to give him the boot, or rather take him from it for good.”

The interpreter stumbled over the idioms in the last sentence, but Molotov got the gist. He added, “Having the Pope join Mussolini in the grave would also be a progressive development. Since the Lizards do not interfere with his bleating preachments, he fawns on them like a cur.”

“But would a successor prove any better?” Shigenori Togo asked. “Along with this, we must also ask ourselves whether making the Pope into a martyr would in the long run prove harmful by generating hatred for our cause among Catholics all over the world.”

“This may perhaps need to be considered,” Molotov admitted at last. His own instinct was to strike at organized religion wherever and however he could. But the Japanese foreign minister had a point—the political repercussions might be severe. The Pope had no divisions, but many more followed him than had backed Leon Trotsky, now dead with an ice ax in his brain. Not one to yield ground lightly, Molotov added, “Perhaps the Pope could be eliminated in a way which makes the Lizards appear responsible.”

Cordell Hull screwed up his face. “This talk of assassination is repugnant to me.”

*Soft*, Molotov thought again. The United States, large, rich, powerful, and shielded by broad oceans east and west, had long enjoyed the historical luxury of softness. Not even two world wars had made Americans feel in their guts how dangerous a place the world was. But if they could not awake to reality with the Lizards in their own back yard, they would never have another chance.

“In war, one does what one must,” Churchill said, as if gently reproving the secretary of state. The British prime minister could see past his button of a nose.

The all-clear sirens began to wail. Molotov listened to the long sigh of relief that came from the Foreign Office workers all around. They’d got through to the far side of another raid. None of them thought that only meant they’d have the dubious privilege of facing another soon.

The office staff formed a neat queue to leave the shelter and get back to work. Molotov had seen endless queues in the Soviet Union, but this one seemed somehow different. He needed a few seconds to put his finger on why Soviet citizens queued up with a mixture of anger and resignation, because they had no other way to get what they needed. (and because they suspected even queuing up often did no good). The English were more polite about it, as if they’d silently decided it was the one proper thing to do.

*Their revolution is coming, too,* Molotov thought, *to sweep away such bourgeois affectations.* Meanwhile, affected bourgeois though they were, they seemed likely to stay in the fight against the Lizards. So did the other three powers, though Molotov still had his doubts about Germany: any nation that let a nonentity like Ribbentrop become foreign minister had something inherently wrong with it. But the chief capitalist states were not giving up yet, even if Italy had stabbed them in the back. That was what he'd needed to learn, and that was the word he would take back to Stalin.

Sam Yeager shepherded two Lizards down the corridor of the Zoology Building of the Hull Biological Laboratories. He still carried his rifle and wore a tin hat, but that was more because he'd grown used to them than because he thought he'd need them. The Lizards made docile prisoners—more docile than he'd have been if they'd caught him, he thought.

He stopped in front of room 227A. The Lizards stopped, too. "In here, Samyeager?" one of them asked in hissing English. All the Lizard POWs pronounced his own name as if it were one word; what their mouths did to *Sam Finkelstein* was purely a caution.

Yeager got the idea his command of their tongue was as villainous as their English. He was doing his best with it, though, and answered, "Yes, in here, Ullhass, Ristin, brave males." He opened the door with the frostedglass window, gestured with the barrel of the rifle for them to precede him.

In the outer office, a girl was clattering away on a noisy old Underwood. She stopped when the door opened. Her smile of greeting froze when she saw the two Lizards. "It's all right, ma'm," Yeager said quickly. "They're here to see Dr. Burkett. You must be new, or else you'd know about them."

"Yes, it's my first day on the job," answered the girl—actually, Yeager saw with a second look, she was probably in her late twenties, maybe even early thirties. His eyes flicked automatically to the third finger of her left hand. It had a ring. Too bad.

Dr. Burkett came out of his sanctum. He greeted Ullhass and Ristin in their own language; he was more fluent than Yeager, though he hadn't been learning for nearly as long. *That's why he's a fancy-pants professor and I'm a bush-league outfielder,* Yeager thought without much resentment. Besides, the Lizards liked him better than they did Burkett; they said so every time they went back to their own quarters.

Now, though, Burkett waved them into his office, shut the door behind them. "Isn't that dangerous?" the girl asked nervously.

"Shouldn't be," Yeager answered. "The Lizards aren't troublemakers. Besides, Burkett's window, is barred, so they can't get away. And besides one more time"—he pulled out a chair—"I sit here until they come out, and I go in and get 'em if they don't come out inside of a couple of hours." He reached into his shirt pocket, drew out a pack of Chesterfields (not his brand, but you took what you could get these days) and a Zippo. "Would you like a cigarette, uh—?"

“I’m sorry. I’m Barbara Larssen. Yes, I’d love one, thanks.” She tapped it against the desk, put it in her mouth, leaned forward to let him light it. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked in smoke. She held it, then blew a long plume at the ceiling. “Oh, that’s nice. I haven’t had one in a couple of days.” She took another long drag.

Yeager introduced himself before he lit his own smoke. “Don’t let me get in your way if you’re busy,” he said. “Just pretend I’m part of the furniture.”

“I’ve been typing nonstop since half past seven this morning, so I could use a break,” Barbara said, smiling again.

“Okay,” Yeager said agreeably. He leaned back in his chair, watched her. She was worth watching: not a movie-star beauty or anything like that, but pretty all the same, with a round, smiling face, green eyes, and dark blond hair that was growing out straight though its ends still showed permanent waves. To make conversation, he said, “Your husband off fighting?”

“No.” That should have been good news, but her smile faded anyhow. She went on: “He was working here at the university—at the Metallurgical Laboratory, as a matter of fact. But he drove to Washington a few weeks ago. He should have been back long since, but—” She finished the cigarette with three quick savage puffs, ground it out in a square glass ashtray that sat by her typewriter.

“I hope he’s all right.” Yeager meant it. If the fellow needed to travel bad enough to do it with the Lizards on the loose, he was up to something important. For that matter, Yeager wasn’t the sort to wish bad luck on anybody.

“So do I.” Barbara Larssen did a game best to hold fear out of her voice, but he heard it all the same. She pointed to the pack of Chesterfields. “I hope you won’t think I’m just scrounging off you, but could I have another one of those?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.” She nodded to herself as she started to smoke the second cigarette. “That is good.” She tapped ash into the ashtray. When she saw Yeager’s eyes follow the motion of her hand, she let out a rueful laugh. “Typing is hell on my nails; I’ve already broken one and chipped the polish on three others. But after a while I got to the point where I couldn’t stand just sitting around cooped up in my apartment any more, so I thought I’d try to do something useful instead.”

“Makes sense to me.” Yeager got up, stubbed out his own smoke. He didn’t light another for himself; he wasn’t sure where his next pack was coming from. He said, “I suppose keeping busy helps take your mind off things, too.”

“It does, some, but not as much as I hoped it would.” Barbara pointed to the door behind which Dr. Burkett was studying the Lizards. “How did you end up standing guard over those—things?”

“I was part of the unit that captured them, out west of here,” he answered.

“Good for you. But how did you get picked to stay with them, I mean? Did you draw the short straw, or what?”

Yeager chuckled. “Nope. Matter of fact, I broke an old Army rule—I volunteered.”

“You did?” Her eyebrows shot upward. “Why, for heaven’s sake?”

Rather sheepishly, he explained about his fondness for science fiction. Her eyebrows moved again; this time, their inner ends came together in a tight little knot above her nose. He’d seen that expression before, more times than he could easily count. “You don’t care for the stuff,” he said.

“No, not really,” Barbara said. “I was doing graduate work in medieval English literature before Jens had to, move here from Berkeley, so it’s not my cup of tea.” But then she paused and looked thoughtful. “Still, I suppose it’s done a better job of preparing you for what’s happening here than Chaucer has for me.”

“Mmm—maybe so.” Sam had been ready with his usual hot defense of what he read for pleasure; finding out he didn’t need it left him feeling like a portable phonograph that had been wound up and forgotten without a record on its turntable.

Barbara said, “As for me, if I couldn’t type, I’d still be stuck in that Bronzeville flat.”

“Bronzeville?” Now Yeager’s eyebrows went up. “I don’t know a lot about Chicago”—*If I’d ever played here, I would* (the thought was there and gone fast as a Lizard jet)—“but I do know that’s not the real good part of town.”

“Nobody’s ever bothered me,” Barbara said. “With the Lizards here, the differences between whites and Negroes look pretty small all of a sudden, don’t they?”

“I suppose so,” Yeager said, though he didn’t sound convinced even to himself. “But whatever color they are, you’ll find more than its share of crooks in Bronzeville. Hmm—tell you what. What time do you get off here?”

“Whenever Dr. Burkett feels like turning me loose, it sounds like,” she answered. “I already told you, I’m new on the job. Why?”

“I’d walk you home, if you like...Hey, what’s so darn funny?”

Laughing still, Barbara Larssen threw back her head and made a noise that might have been a wolf’s howl. Yeager’s cheeks turned hot. Barbara said, “I think my husband might approve of that idea in the abstract, but not walking along the concrete, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s not what I had in mind at all,” Yeager protested. Not until the words were out of his mouth did he realize he wasn’t telling the whole truth. The front of his mind had made the offer innocently enough, but some deeper part knew he might have kept quiet if he hadn’t found her attractive. He was embarrassed that she’d seen through him faster than he saw through himself.

“No harm in your asking, and I’m sure it was kindly meant,” she said, giving him the benefit of the doubt. “Men only turn really annoying when they can’t hear ‘no thank you’ or don’t believe it, and *I* see you’re not like that.”

“Okay,” he said, as noncommittal a noise as he could come up with.

Barbara put out her second cigarette, looked at her wristwatch (the electric clock on

the wall wasn't running), and said, "I'd better get back to work." She bent over the typewriter. Her fingers flew; the keys made machine-gun bursts of noise. Yeager had known a few reporters who could crank more words a minute than Barbara was putting out now, but not many.

He leaned back in his chair. He couldn't imagine an easier duty: unless something went wrong inside Dr. Burkett's office, or unless Burkett needed to ask him something (not likely, since the scientist seemed convinced he already knew everything himself), he had nothing to do but sit around and wait.

A lot of people would have got bored in a hurry. Being a veteran of long hours on trains and buses, Yeager was made of tougher stuff than that. He thought about baseball, about the science fiction he read to kill time between one town and the next, about the Lizards, about his small taste of combat (plenty to last him a lifetime if he got his way, which he probably wouldn't).

And he thought about Barbara Larssen. There she sat in front of him, after all. She wasn't ignoring him, either; every so often, she'd look up from her work and smile. Some of his thoughts were the pleasant but meaningless ones with which any man will while away the time in the presence of a pretty girl. Others had a bitter edge to them: he wished his former wife had cared about him while he was traveling the way Barbara obviously cared about her husband. What was his name? Jens, that was it. Whether he knew it or not, Jens Larssen was one lucky fellow.

After a while, the door to Dr. Burkett's office opened. Out came Burkett, looking plump and pleased with himself. Out came Ristin and Ullhass. Yeager wasn't so good at figuring out what their expressions meant, but they weren't in any obvious distress. Burkett said, "I'll want to see them again same time tomorrow, soldier."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Yeager, who was not sorry at all, "but they're scheduled to spend all day tomorrow with a Doctor, uh, Fermi. You'll have to try another time."

"I know Dr. Fermi!" Barbara Larssen exclaimed. "Jens works with him."

"This is most inconvenient," Dr. Burkett said. "I shall complain to the appropriate military authorities. How is one to conduct a proper experimental program when one's subjects are snatched away at inconvenient and arbitrary times?"

What that meant, Sam thought, was that Burkett hadn't bothered to check the schedule before he made his list of experiments. Too bad for him. Aloud, Yeager said, "I'm sorry, sir, but since we have a lot more experts than we do Lizards, we have to spread the Lizards around as best we can."

"Bah!" Burkett said. "Fermi is just a physicist. What can they possibly have to teach him?"

He plainly meant it as a rhetorical question, but Yeager answered it anyhow: "Don't you think he might be a little interested in how they came to Earth in the first place, sir?" Burkett stared at him; maybe he'd assumed joining the Army precluded a man from having a mind of his own.



Barbara said, "Shall I schedule you for another session with the Lizards as soon as they're available, Dr. Burkett?"

"Yes, do that," he answered, as if she were part of the furniture. He stamped back into his private chamber, slamming the door behind him. Barbara Larssen and Yeager looked at each other. He grinned; she started to giggle.

"I hope your husband comes home safe, Barbara," he said quietly.

Her laughter stopped as abruptly as if cut by a knife. "So do I," she answered. "I'm worried. He's been gone longer than he said he would." Her gaze settled on the two Lizards, who stood waiting for Yeager to tell them what to do next. He nodded. Everyone's life would have been simpler without the Lizards.

"Anybody gives you a bad time because he's not around, you let me know," he said. He'd never had a reputation for being a hard case while he was playing ball, but he hadn't carried around a bayonet-tipped rifle then, either.

"Thanks, Sam; I may do that," she said. Her tone was just cool enough to let him know again that he shouldn't be the one who gave her a bad time. He answered with a sober expression that let her know he got the message.

He turned to the Lizards, gestured with his gun. "Come on, you lugs." He stood aside to let them precede him out of the office. Barbara Larssen picked up the telephone on her desk, made a face, put it down. No dial tone, Yeager guessed—everything was erratic these days. Burkett's next go-round with the Lizards would have to wait a while.

The Plymouth's engine made a sudden, dreadful racket, as if it had just been hit by machine-gun fire. Jens Larssen knew a mechanical death rattle when he heard one. On the dashboard panel in front of him, the battery and temperature lights both glowed red. He wasn't overheated and he knew he still had juice. What he didn't have any more was a car. It rolled forward another couple of hundred yards, until he pulled off onto the shoulder to keep from blocking Highway 250 for anyone else.

"Shit," he said as he sat and stared at the dashboard lights. If he hadn't had to use garbage for fuel so much of the time, if he hadn't had to try to make his way over bombed-out roads or sometimes over no roads at all, if the damned Lizards had never come...he wouldn't have been stuck here somewhere in eastern Ohio, two whole states away from where he was supposed to be.

He raised his eyes and looked out through the dusty, bug-splashed windshield. Up ahead, the buildings of a small town dented the skyline. Smalltown mechanics had helped keep the car going more than once before. Maybe they could do it again. He had his doubts—the, Plymouth had never made a noise like this one before—but it was something he had to try.

He left the key in the ignition when he got out—good luck to anybody who tried to drive the car away. Slamming the driver's side door relieved his anger a little. He took off his jacket, slung it over his shoulder, and started up the road toward the town.

There wasn't much traffic. In fact, there wasn't any traffic. He tramped past a couple of cars that looked as if they'd been sitting on the shoulder a lot longer than his, and past a burnt-out wreck that must have been strafed from the air and then shoved over to the roadside, but no cars passed him. All he could hear was his own footfalls on asphalt.

Just outside the outskirts of town, he came to a signboard: WELCOME TO STRASBURG, HOME OF GARVER BROTHERS-WORLD'S BIGGEST LITTLE STORE. Below that, in smaller letters, it said POPULATION (1930), 1,305.

Jens blew air out between his lips to make a snuffling noise. Here was Smalltown U.S.A., all right: even though the "new" census was already two years old, the mayor or whoever hadn't got around to fixing the numbers yet. Why bother, when they probably hadn't changed by more than a couple of dozen?

He walked on. The first gas station he came to was closed and locked. A big fat spider was sitting in a web spun between two of the gas pumps, so it had likely been closed for a while. That didn't look encouraging.

The drugstore half a block farther on had its door open. He decided to go in and see what they had at their soda fountain. At the moment, he wouldn't have turned down anything cold and wet, or even warm and wet. He still had some money in his pocket; Colonel Groves had been generous down in White Sulphur Springs. Being treated as a national resource was something he'd have no trouble getting used to.

Gloom filled the inside of the drugstore; the electricity was out. "Anybody in here?" Larssen called, peering, down the aisles.

"Back here," a woman answered. But that wasn't the only answer he got. From much closer came startled hisses. Two Lizards walked around a display of Wildroot Creme Oil that was taller than they were. One carried a gun; the other had his arms full of flashlights and batteries.

Larssen's first impulse was to turn around and run like hell. He hadn't known he'd blundered into enemy-held territory. He felt as if he were carrying a sign that said DANGEROUS HUMAN-NUCLEAR PHYSICIST in letters three feet high. Fortunately, he didn't give in to the impulse. As he realized after a moment, to the Lizards he was just another person: for all they knew, he might have lived in Strasburg.

The Lizards skittered out of the drugstore with their loot. "They didn't pay for it!" Jens exclaimed. It was, on reflection, the stupidest thing he'd ever said in his life.

The woman back near the pharmacy had too much sense even to notice idiocy. "They didn't shoot me, either, so I guess it's square," she said. "Now what can I do for *you*?"

Confronted by such unshakable matter-of-factness, Larssen responded in kind: "My car broke down outside of town. I'm looking for somebody to fix it. And if you have a Coca-Cola or something like that, I'll buy it from you."

"I have Pepsi-Cola," the woman said. "Five dollars."

That was robbery worse than back at White Sulphur Springs, but Larssen paid without

a whimper. The Pepsi-Cola, unrefrigerated and fizzy, went down like nectar of the gods. It tried to come up again, too; Jens wondered if you could explode from containing carbonation. When his eyes stopped watering, he said, "Now, about my car ..."

"Charlie Tompkins runs a garage up on North Wooster, just past Garver Brothers." The woman pointed to show him where North Wooster was. "If anybody can help you, he's probably the one. Thank you for shopping at Walgreen's, sir."

He wondered if she'd have said that to the Lizards had he not come in and interrupted her. Very likely, he thought; nothing seemed to faze her. *When he handed her the empty soda bottle*, she rang up-NO SALE on the cash register, reached in, and took out a penny, which she handed to him. "Your deposit, sir."

Bemused, he pocketed the coin. Deposits hadn't gone up with prices. *Of course not*, he thought—*shopkeepers have to pay out deposits*.

Strasburg wasn't big enough to get lost in; he found North Wooster without difficulty. An enormous sign proclaimed the presence of the Garver Brothers store. The signboard outside of town, unlike a lot of smalltown signboards, hadn't exaggerated: the store sprawled over a couple of acres. The parking lot off to one side had room for hundreds of cars. At the moment, it held none.

That did not mean it was empty. Trucks ignored the white lines painted on concrete. They were not trucks of a sort Jens had seen before: they were bigger, somehow smoother of outline, quieter. When one of them rolled away, it didn't rattle or rumble or roar. No smoke belched from its exhaust.

The Lizards were plundering Garver Brothers.

A couple of them stood in front of the store, guns at the ready, in case the small crowd of people across the street got boisterous. In the face of that firepower, and of everything the Lizards had behind it, nobody seemed inclined toward boisterousness.

Jens joined the crowd. Two or three people gave him sidelong looks: he was a Stranger, with a capital S. He'd grown up in a small town before he went off to college; he knew he could live here for twenty years and still be thought a stranger, though perhaps by then a lower-case one.

"Damn shame," somebody said. Somebody else nodded. Larssen didn't. As someone from out of town, his opinion was, automatically less than worthless. He just stood and watched.

The Lizards knew the kinds of goods they wanted. They came out of Garver Brothers with coils of copper wire slung over their scaly shoulders, with hand tools of all sorts, with an electric generator trundled along on a wheeled cart, with a lathe on another cart.

Jens tried to find a pattern to their depredations. At first he saw none. Then he realized most of what the Lizards were taking was tools that would help them make things of their own rather than already finished products of Earthly manufacture.

He scratched his head, not quite knowing what to make of that. It might have been a

sign the invaders were settling in for a long stay. On the other hand, it might also have meant their own resources were short and they were having to eke them out with whatever they could steal. If that was so, it was encouraging.

“They’re just a bunch of damn chicken thieves, that’s what they are,” someone in the crowd said as another truck rolled away. Most of the rest of the people murmured agreement. This time, Larssen did let himself nod. Whatever their reasons for cleaning out Garver Brothers, the Lizards were doing a good, workmanlike job of it.

A vehicle came up Wooster Street toward the store. It was about as far removed as possible from the smooth, silent trucks the Lizards ran: it was a horse-drawn buggy, driven by a bearded man with a broad-brimmed black hat. He pulled into the parking lot as casually as if it had been filled with Fords and De Sotos, put a feed bag on his horse’s nose, and strode toward the guarded front door.

“The Amish have been coming to Garver Brothers for years,” someone observed.

“I wish I had me a buggy like that,” somebody else said. “A horse’ll run on grass, but my car sure as hell won’t.”

The Lizards with guns blocked the Amish farmer’s path into the store. He spoke to them; since he didn’t raise his voice and his back was turned, Larssen couldn’t make out what he said. He braced himself for trouble all the same.

Another Lizard came bounding up to the doorway. Maybe he spoke English, because the farmer started talking to him instead of to the guards. And then, to Jens’ surprise, the aliens stood aside and let him go in. He emerged a few minutes later with a shovel, a pickax, and a bolt of black cloth. Nodding politely to the Lizards as he passed them he returned to his wagon climbed in and rolled away

*He didn’t want anything the Lizards needed so they let him have his stuff,* Jens thought. That was smart of them. As for the farmer, he might not have seen them as being that different from anyone else who failed to share his own rigorous faith. The idea of living in a simple, orderly world with strict laws held no small appeal for Larssen: as a physicist, he thought well of order and law and predictability. But the tools he used to seek them were necessarily more complex than pick and shovel, horse and buggy.

That reminded him why he’d come this way in the first place. “Does anybody know if Charlie Tompkins’ garage is open?” he asked.

“Not right now it isn’t,” said the fellow who’d called the Lizards chicken thieves, “on account of I’m Charlie Tompkins. What can I do for you, stranger?”

“My car broke down about a mile outside of town,” Larssen answered. “Any chance you can take a look at it?”

The mechanic laughed. “Don’t see why not. I’m not what you’d call real busy these days—I expect you can tell that by lookin’. What’s your machine doin’, anyhow?” When Jens described the symptoms, Tompkins looked grave. “That doesn’t sound so good. Well, we’ll go see. Come on up to my shop so as I can get some tools.”

As the woman at the drugstore had said, the garage lay just a little past the Garver

Brothers store. Tompkins picked up his tool kit. It didn't look light, so Larssen said, "I'll carry it for you, if you like. We've got a ways to walk."

"Don't worry about it. Here, come on with me." The mechanic led Larssen over to a bicycle which had a bracket welded to the head tube. The handle of the tool kit fit neatly over the bracket. Tompkins climbed onto the saddle, gestured to Larssen. "You ride behind me. I don't use any gas this way, a bike's got fewer parts than a car, and they're easier for somebody like me to fix if they do break."

All that made perfect sense, but Jens hadn't ridden on one of those little flat racks since about the third grade. "Will it carry both of us?" he asked.

Tompkins laughed. "I've put bigger men than you back there, my friend. Sure, you're tall, but you're built like a pencil. We won't have any trouble, I promise."

They didn't have much. What there was, came because Larssen hadn't been on any bicycle at all for a good many years, and needed a little while before his body remembered how to balance. Charlie Tompkins compensated for his lurches without saying a word. In a way, that only made them more embarrassing: weren't you never supposed to forget how to stay on a bicycle? Jens sighed as he did his best not to maim himself while exploding the cliché.

"Whereabouts you from, mister?" Tompkins asked as they rolled past the sign welcoming people to Strasburg.

"Chicago," Larssen answered.

The mechanic twisted his head. That struck Larssen as foolhardy, but he kept his mouth shut. After a moment, Tompkins turned back to watch where he was going. He spoke over his shoulder: "And you were heading back there, were you, from wherever you were coming from?"

"That's right. What about it?"

"Nothing, really." Tompkins pedaled along for a few more seconds, then went on in a sad tone, "Thing is, though, you might not want to say that to just anybody around here who asks. Chicago's still free, right? Sure it is. I'm not asking whether you would or you wouldn't, mind, but I can see where you might not want the Lizards to get wind of whatever reasons you've got for going that way."

"How would the Lizards ..." Larssen's voice trailed away. "You don't mean people would tell them?" He knew the Lizards had human collaborators: the Warsaw Jews, Chinese, Italians, Brazilians. Up till this second, though, he'd never imagined there could be such a thing as an American collaborator. He supposed that was naive of him.

Evidently it was. Tompkins said, "Some people, they'll do anything to get in good with the boss, no matter who the boss is. Some other people have gotten hurt on account of it." He didn't seem to care for the subject, either. Instead of giving details, he took one hand off the handlebars and pointed. "That your car up ahead there, that Plymouth?"

"Yes, that's it."

“Okay, let’s see what we’ve got.” Tompkins stopped the bike with the soles of his shoes against the asphalt. He and Jens both got off. The mechanic unhooked the tool box, walked over to the deceased automobile, reached through the grill, and popped the hood latch. Once the long piece of sheet metal was up and out of the way, he bent over and peered into the engine compartment.

A low, mournful whistle floated up. “Mister, I hate to tell you, but you got yourself a cracked block.” Another whistle, not much later. “Your valves are shot to shit, too, pardon my French. What the hell you been burnin’ in this machine, anyhow?”

“Whatever I could get my hands on that would burn,” Larssen answered honestly.

“Well, I know how that goes, what with the way things are, but Jesus, even if times were good I couldn’t fix this poor bastard by my lonesome. What with the way things are, I don’t think I can fix her at all. Hate to have to tell you that, but I’m not gonna lie to you, either.”

“How am I supposed to get back to Chicago, then?” Larssen wasn’t really asking Tompkins; it was more a cry to the unhearing gods. When he’d come east through Ohio, the Lizards hadn’t been anywhere near this far north. When he’d come east through Ohio, his car had been in reasonably good shape, too.

“Wouldn’t take you forever to walk there,” Tompkins said. “What is it, maybe three, four hundred miles? Could be done.”

Jens stared at the mechanic in dismay. At least two weeks on shank’s mare, more likely a month? Dodging in and out of the Lizards’ territory? Dodging bandits, too, likely enough (one more thing he’d never expected in America, at least outside the vanished Wild West)? Winter was on the way, too; already the sky had lost the perfect, transparent blue of summer. Barbara would think he was dead by the time he got back—if he got back.

His eye fell on Tompkins’ bicycle. He pointed. “Tell you what—I’ll trade you my set of wheels for yours. You can use the parts that are still good to keep other cars running.” Before the Lizards came, swapping a two-year-old Plymouth for an elderly bicycle would have been insane. Before the Lizards came, of course, his car could have been fixed if it broke down. Before the Lizards came, his car wouldn’t have broken down because he wouldn’t have had to abuse it so.

Now—Now Charlie Tompkins looked from the bike to the Plymouth, slowly shook his head. “What’s the point to that, mister? You take off for Chicago, you gonna carry your car on your back? I’ll get to scavenge it whether I give you my bike or not.”

“Why, you—” Larssen wanted to murder the mechanic. The force of the feeling frightened him, left him almost sick. He wondered how many killings had sprung from the chaos the Lizards spread across the United States, across the world. Times grew ever more desperate, the risk of getting caught shrank...so why not kill, if you needed to?

To fight the temptation, he jammed his hands deep into his trouser pockets. Amidst keys and small change, the fingers of his right hand closed round his cigarette lighter.

The Zippo, unlike the Plymouth, would work forever, or at least as long as he could keep coming up with flints. It would also burn moonshine a lot better than the car had.

He yanked out the buffed steel case, flipped open the top. His thumb went to the lighter's wheel. "You don't trade me your bike, Charlie, I'll *burn* the goddamn car. Let's see how you like that."

The mechanic started to grab for a wrench from his tool kit. Larssen's mouth went dry—maybe he hadn't been the only one thinking of murder. Then Tompkins' hand stopped suddenly. His high-pitched laugh sounded unnatural, but it was a laugh. "Godawful times," he said, to which Jens could only nod. "All right, Larssen, take the bike. I expect I'll be able to come up with another one from somewheres."

Larssen relaxed, but not very far. His Zippo might torch the Plymouth, but it didn't stack up very well against a monkey wrench. He walked over to the rear end of the car, opened the trunk. He took out the smaller of the two suitcases there and a ball of twine, slammed the trunk shut. He did the best job he could of tying the suitcase to the rack on which he'd ridden, then pulled the trunk key off the ring and tossed it to Charlie Tompkins.

He swung his right leg over the bicycle saddle, as if he were mounting a horse. If he'd wobbled as a passenger, he was even more unsteady up there by himself. But he managed to stay upright and keep the bike rolling forward. After a couple of hundred yards, he took a chance and looked back over his shoulder. Tompkins was already going through the suitcase he'd had to leave behind. He scowled and kept pedaling.

The U-2 buzzed through the night, so low that an instant's inattention or simply a hillock she'd forgotten would have cost Ludmila Gorbunova her life. The *Kukuruznik* was proving the Soviet Union's ace in the hole in the war against the Lizards. Newer Red Air Force planes with greater speed and better guns, but also with more metal in their airframes and higher minimum ceilings, had all but vanished from the skies. The obsolescent little biplane trainer, too small, too slow, and too low to be noticed, soldiered on.

The slipstream blew chilly over Ludmila's goggled face. Fall was in the air. The rains would start any day now. Her lips curled upward in a mirthless smile. The *rasputitsa*, the time of mud, had hurt the fascists badly last year. She wondered how the Lizards' armored vehicles would enjoy trying to push forward through slimy porridge.

She also wondered, just for a moment, what her superiors had done with the two Germans she'd delivered to them from the Ukrainian collective farm. Having deadly foes suddenly turn into allies was disconcerting, as was the realization the Nazis were human beings like her own side. Better when they'd seemed only small field-gray shapes scurrying like lice before the bullets from her machine guns.

She glanced down at the map book balanced on her knees. The lights from her instrument panel bet her trace her assigned flight path. She flew over a rivet A quick

peek at her watch told her how long she'd been in the alt. Yes, it ought to be the Slovechna, which meant she needed to swing farther south...now.

Her breath came short and fast when she spotted lights on the horizon ahead. Some of the Lizards still kept the stupid habit of lighting up their campsites at night. Maybe they thought it made them safer from ground attack. Given the range and power of their weapons, maybe it even did; Ludmila was no Marshal of the Soviet Union, to know everything there was to know about ground tactics. She did know being able to see what she was shooting at made her own job easier.

She couldn't gain altitude and then glide silently to the attack, as she had against the Nazis. Aircraft that attacked the Lizards from anything much above ground height came down in pieces, a lesson learned from bitter experience. Stay low and you had a chance.

It wasn't always a good chance. Her air regiment was chewed to bits. She knew of only three or four other pilots from it still flying. The regiment was long since broken up, of course—large concentrations of aircraft on the ground drew the Lizards' wrath like nothing else. These days, the *Kukuruzniks* flew by ones and twos, not in formation.

The lighted area swelled ahead of her. Her finger went to the firing button for the machine guns. She spied what looked at first like bumpy ground but proved as she drew nearer to be some sort of vehicles under camouflage netting. Trucks, she thought—Lizard tanks, being almost impervious to human weapons, were seldom concealed so carefully.

She started her firing run. The machine guns hammered under her wings. The little U-2 shook like a leaf in an autumn wind. The flying sparks of tracer bullets helped guide her aim.

Almost in the same instant, the Lizards began shooting back. They owned more firepower than the Germans had been able to bring to bear; by the muzzle flashes on the ground, Ludmila thought ten thousand automatic weapons had opened up on her all at once. The fabric skin of the *Kukuruznik's* wings made cheerful popping noises as bullets pierced it.

Then one of the trucks blew up in a blue-white ball of hydrogen fire, so different from the orange flames of blazing petrol. The blast of heat seared Ludmila's cheeks as she flew past; it tried to fling her aircraft tumbling out of control. She wrestled with stick and pedals, held it steady in the air.

Touched off by the first, more trucks exploded behind her. She gave the U-2 all the meager power it had, banked away toward the friendly darkness. A few Lizards kept shooting at her, but only a few; more ran to fight the fires she'd touched off. As night drew its cloak around her, she took one hand off the stick for a moment, pounded fist against thigh. She'd hurt them this time.

Now to find her way home. Even without flying a combat mission, navigating at night was anything but easy. She straightened onto compass course 047. That would bring her somewhere close to the airstrip from which she'd been operating. She checked her watch



and her airspeed indicator, the other vital tools of night flying. After about—hmm—fifty minutes, she'd begin to circle and look for landing lights.

Just surviving a mission was enough to make her proud—and to make her remember all her friends who would never fly again. That thought quickly leached joy from her, leaving behind only weariness and the jittery residue of terror.

Either she was a better navigator than she'd thought or much luckier than usual, for she spotted the dim banding lanterns after only a couple of circles. They were hooded so as not to be visible from high overhead. The Red Air Force had learned the dangers of that from the *Luftwaffe*; the lesson was all the more vital against the Lizards.

Her approach in the dark was tentative, the makeshift airstrip anything but smooth. The landing she made would have earned only scorn from her *Osoaviakhim* instructor (she wondered if the man was still alive). She didn't care. She was down and among her own people and safe—until her next mission. She didn't even have to think about that, not yet.

As soon as she got out of the U-2, groundcrew started dragging it to cover. A woman mechanic pointed to the bullet holes. Ludmila shrugged. "Patch them as you get the chance, comrade. I'm all right and so is the aircraft."

"Good," the mechanic said. "Oh—you have a letter down in the bunker."

"A letter?" The Soviet post, erratic since the start of the war, had grown frankly chaotic once the Lizards added their ravages to those of the Nazis. Eagerly, Ludmila asked, "From whom?"

"I don't know. It's in an envelope, and it doesn't say on the outside," the mechanic answered.

"An envelope? Really?" The very occasional letters Ludmila had had from her brothers and her father and mother were all written on folded single sheets of paper, with her name and unit scrawled on the reverse. She'd had only one note since the Lizards came, three hasty lines, from her younger brother Igor, letting her know he was alive. She trotted for the shelter bunker, saying, "I'll have to see who's gotten rich."

Curtains and doglegs in the entry passage kept candlelight from leaking out. Yevdokia Kasherina looked up from the tunic she was darning. "How did it go?" she asked with a fellow pilot's concern. It was a long way from the formal debriefings of earlier missions, but the Soviet Air Force was too dispersed and battered to have much room for formalities these days.

"Well enough," Ludmila said. "I shot up some trucks that weren't hidden well enough, and I got back here alive. Now what's this I hear about a letter?"

"It's over there on your blankets," Yevdokia said, pointing. "You don't think anyone would dare do anything with it, do you?"

"Better not," Ludmila said fiercely. Both women laughed. Ludmila hurried over to where she slept. The clean, white envelope gleamed against the dark blue wool of the blankets. She snatched it up, carried it over to a candle.

She'd expected to recognize the script on the envelope at a glance, and thus know who had written to her before she started the letter itself. Hearing from any of her family would be so good...But, to her surprise and disappointment, the handwriting was unfamiliar to her. Indeed, handwriting was too good a word for it; her name and unit were printed in large copybook letters of the sort a bright eight-year-old might make.

"Who's it from?" Yevdokia asked.

"I don't know yet," Ludmila said.

The other pilot laughed. "A secret admirer, Ludmila Gorbunova?"

"Hush." Ludmila tore open the envelope, pulled out the piece of paper inside. The words on that were also printed rather than written. For a moment, they seemed utterly meaningless to her. Then she realized she had to switch languages and even alphabets: the letter was in German.

Her first reaction was fright. Before the Lizards came, a letter in German would have been delivered by a harsh-faced NKVD man certain she was guilty of treason. But censors must have seen this note and decided to let it go through. Reading it probably would not endanger her.

*To the brave flier who plucked me from the kolkhoz, it began. Flier had a feminine ending tacked on, and kolkhoz was spelled out in those copybook Cyrillic letters. I hope you are well and safe and hitting back against the Lizards. I write this as simply as I can, as I know your German is slow, though much better than my Russian. I am now in Moscow, where I work with your government to hurt the Lizards in new ways. These will—*

A few words were neatly clipped out of the letter. A censor *had* been at it, then. Some of Ludmila's fear returned: somewhere in Moscow, her name appeared in a dossier for getting mail from a German. As long as Germany and the Soviet Union kept on working together against the Lizards, that dossier would not matter. If they had a falling out ...

Ludmila read on: *I hope one day we may see each other again. This may be so, because—* The censor had excised another section. The letter finished, *Your country and mine have been enemies, allies, enemies, and now allies again. Life is strange, not so? I hope we shall not be enemies ourselves, you and I.* The signature was a scrawl that looked to her eyes nothing like *Heinrich Jäger*, but that was surely what it said. Underneath, in the clear printing that marked the rest of the note, he had appended *Major, 16th Panzer*, as if she were unlikely to remember him without being reminded.

She stared at the piece of paper for a long time, trying to sort out her own feelings. He was polite, he was well-spoken, he was not the ugliest man she had ever seen...he was a Nazi. If she answered his letter, another note would go down in the dossier. She was as certain of that as of tomorrow's sunrise.

"Well?" Yevgenia said when she did not comment.

"You were right, Yevgenia Gavrilovna—it *is* from a secret admirer."

The other pilot made a rude noise. "The Devil's nephew, no doubt."

“How did you guess?”

A shell screamed down and landed in the middle of the grove of larches south of Shabbona, Illinois. Mutt Daniels threw himself flat. Splinters of wood and more deadly splinters of metal whined past overhead. “I am getting too old for this shit,” Daniels muttered to no one in particular.

A flock of black-crowned night herons—“quawks,” the locals called them, after the noise they made—leapt into the air in panic. They were handsome birds, two feet tall or more, with long yellow legs, black or sometimes dark green heads and backs, and pearl-gray wings. Quawking for all they were worth, they flew south as fast as they could go.

Mutt listened to their receding cries, but hardly looked up to watch them go. He was too busy deepening the foxhole he’d already started in the muddy ground under the larches. In the generation that had passed since he’d got back from France, he’d forgotten how fast you could dig while you were lying on your belly.

Another shell burst, this one just east of the grove. The few quawks that hadn’t taken flight at the first explosion did at this one. From a hole a few feet away from Daniels’, Sergeant Schneider said, “They likely won’t be back this year.”

“Huh?”

“The herons,” Schneider explained. “They usually head south for the winter earlier in the year than this, anyhow. They come in in April and fly out when fall starts.”

“Just like ballplayers,” Daniels said. He flipped up more dirt with his entrenching tool. “I got a bad feeling this grove ain’t gonna be the same when they come north after spring training next year. Us and the Lizards, we’re kind of rearranging the landscape, you might say.”

He didn’t find out whether Sergeant Schneider would say that or not. A whole salvo of shells crashed down around them. Both men huddled in their holes, heads down so they tasted mud. Then, from east of the larches, American artillery opened up, pounding back at the Lizard positions along the line of Highway 51. As he had in France, Mutt wished the big guns on both sides would shoot at one another and leave the poor damned infantry alone.

Tanks, rumbled past the grove under cover of the American barrage, trying to push back the Lizard vanguard still moving on Chicago. Daniels raised his head for a moment. Some of the tanks were Lees, with a small turret and a heavy gun mounted in a sponson on the front corner of the hull. More, though, were the new Shermans; with their big main armament up in the turret, they looked like the Lizard tanks from which Daniels had been retreating since the Lizards came down from beyond the sky.

“The closer they get to Chicago, the more stuff we’re throwin’ at ’em,” he called to

Schneider.

“Yeah, and a fat lot of good it’s doing us, too,” the other veteran answered. “If they weren’t spread thin trying to conquer the whole world at once, we’d be dead meat by now. Or maybe they don’t really care whether they get into Chicago or not, and that’s why they’ve moved slower than they might have.”

“What do you mean, maybe they don’t care? Why wouldn’t they?” Mutt asked. When he thought about strategy, he thought about the hit-and-run play, when to bunt, and the right time for a pitchout. Since he got home after the Armistice, he’d done his best to forget the military meaning of the word.

Schneider, though, was a career soldier. Though only a noncom, he had a feel for the way annies functioned. He said, “What good is Chicago to us? It’s a transportation hub, right, the *place where all the roads and all the railroads and all the lake and river traffic* come together. Just by being this close, and by their air power, the Lizards have smashed that network to smithereens.”

Daniels pointed to the advancing American tanks. “Where’d those come from, then? They must’ve got into Chicago some kind of way, or they wouldn’t be here.”

“Probably by ship,” Sergeant Schneider said. “Things I’ve heard, they don’t quite understand what ships are all about and how much you can carry on one. That probably says something about wherever they come from, wouldn’t you think?”

“Damned if I know.” Mutt looked at Sergeant Schneider with some surprise. He might have expected that remark from Sam Yeager, who’d enjoyed reading about bug-eyed monsters before people knew there were any such things. The sergeant, though, seemed to have a one-track military-mind. What was he doing wondering about other planets or whatever you called them?

As if to answer the question Mutt hadn’t asked, Schneider said, “The more we know about the Lizards, the better we can fight back, right?”

“I guess so,” said Daniels, who hadn’t thought of it in quite those terms.

“And speaking of fighting back, we ought to be moving up to give those tanks some support.” Schneider scrambled out of his foxhole, shouted and waved one arm so the rest of the troops in the grove would know what he meant, and dashed out into the open.

Along with the others, Daniels followed the sergeant. He felt naked and vulnerable away from his hastily dug shelter. He’d seen more than enough shelling, both in 1918 and during the past weeks, to know a foxhole often gave only the illusion of safety, but illusions have their place, too. Without them, most likely, men would never go to war at all.

Westbound American shells tore through the air. Their note grew fainter and deeper as they flew away from Mutt. When he heard a rising scream, he threw himself into a ditch several seconds before he consciously reasoned that it had to spring from an incoming Lizard round. His body was smarter than his head. He’d seen that in baseball often enough—when you had to stop and think about what you were doing, you got

yourself in trouble.

The shell burst a few hundred yards ahead of him, among the advancing Lees and Shermans. It had an odd sound. Again, Daniels didn't stop to think, for more rounds followed the first. Cursing himself and Schneider both for breaking cover, he tried once more to dig in while flat on his belly. The barrage walked toward him. He wished he were a mole or a gopher—any sort of creature that could burrow far underground and never have to worry about coming up for air.

His breath sobbed in his ears. His heart thudded inside his chest, so hard he wondered if it would burst. "I *am* too old for this shit," he wheezed. The Lizard barrage ignored him. He remembered that the Boche artillery hadn't paid any attention when he cursed it, either.

The shells rained down for a while, then stopped. The one blessing about going through Lizard barrages was that they didn't last for days on end, the way German pounding sometimes had in 1918. Maybe the invaders didn't have the tubes or the ammunition dumps to raise that kind of hell.

Or maybe they just didn't need to do it. Their fire was more accurate and deadly than the Boches had ever dreamed of being. When Daniels ever so cautiously raised his head, he saw that the field he'd been crossing was churned into a nearly lunar landscape. Up ahead, two or three tanks were burning, As he watched, smoke and flame burst from under another one. A tread thrown, it ground itself into the—mud.

"How'd they do that?" Mutt asked the air. No new shell had struck the Lee; he was sure of that. It was almost as if the Lizards had a way to pack antitank mines inside their artillery rounds. Before the invaders came down from Mars or wherever, he would have laughed at the idea He wasn't laughing now; the Lizards were nothing to laugh about.

A couple of feet in front of his new foxhole, half hidden in yellowing grass, lay a shiny blue spheroid a little smaller than a baseball. Daniels was sure it hadn't been there before the shelling started He reached out to pick it up and see what it was then jerked back his hand as if the thing had snarled at him.

"Don't fool around with what you don't know nothin', about" he told himself, as if he were more likely to obey a real spoken order. Just because that little blue thing didn't look like a mine didn't mean it wasn't one. He was certain the Lizards hadn't shot it at him out of the goodness of their hearts, assuming they had any. "Let a sapper screw around with it. That's his job."

Mutt gave the spheroid a wide berth as he started moving forward again. He didn't go as fast as he wanted to; he kept looking down to see if any more of them had been scattered about. A flat *bang!* and a shriek *off* to his right told him his caution wasn't wasted.

Ahead and to his left, Sergeant Schneider trotted westward, steady as a machine. Daniels started to call out a warning to him, then noticed that even though the sergeant

was making better time than he (not surprising, since Schneider was both taller and trimmer), he was also carefully noting where he planted his feet. Soldiers in wartime didn't necessarily live to grow old, but Schneider was not about to die from doing something stupid.

Farther up ahead, another tank rolled over a mine. This one, a Sherman, started to burn. The five-man crew bailed out seconds before the tank's ammunition began cooking off. The rest of the American armor, fearful of meeting a like fate, slowed almost to a crawl.

"Come on!" Sergeant Schneider shouted, perhaps to the suddenly lagging tanks, perhaps to the infantrymen whose advance had also slowed. "We've got to keep moving. If we bog down in the open, they'll slaughter us."

That held enough truth to keep Mutt slogging forward after the sergeant. But he soon began looking for a good place in which to dig in. Despite Schneider's indomitable will, the advance was running out of steam. Even the sergeant recognized that after another couple of hundred yards. When he stopped and took out his entrenching tool, the rest of the men followed his example. Trench lines began to spiderweb their way across the field.

Daniels worked for half an hour extending his hole toward the one nearest to him on the right before he realized the Lizards had halted the American counterattack without ever once showing themselves. That did not strike him as encouraging.

\* \*

Atvar studied the situation map of the northern part of Tosev 3's secondary continental map. "This does not strike me as encouraging," he said. "I find it intolerable that the Big Ugliers continue to thwart us in this way. We must do a more effective job of destroying their industrial base. I have repeatedly spoken of this concern, yet nothing seems to be accomplished. Why?"

"Exalted Fleetlord, the situation is not as black as you make it," Kirel said soothingly. "True, not all the enemy's factories are wrecked as completely as we might like, but we have damaged his road and rail networks to the point where both raw materials and finished goods move with difficulty if at all."

Atvar refused to be mollified. "We ourselves are moving with difficulty if at all," he said with heavy sarcasm as he stabbed a finger toward the representation of a lakeside city. "This place should have fallen some time ago."

Kirel leaned forward to read the name of the town. "Chicago? Possibly so, Exalted Fleetlord, yet again we have rendered it essentially useless to the Big Ugliers as a transport center. The deteriorating weather has not helped our cause, either. And in spite of all obstacles, we do continue to advance on it."

"At a hatchling's crawl," Atvar sneered. "It should have fallen, I tell you, before the weather became a factor in any way."

“Possibly so, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel repeated. “Yet the Big Ugliers have defended it with unusual stubbornness, and now the weather is a factor. If I may ...” He touched a button below the video screen in front of Atvar. The fleetlord watched as rain poured down from a soggy sky, turning the ground to thick brown porridge. The Big Ugliers, evidently used to such deluges, were taking full advantage of this one. They’d destroyed a good many roads leading toward Chicago themselves, forcing the vehicles of the Race off into the muck. The vehicles didn’t like muck very well. The mechanics who tried to keep them running in it liked it even less.

“The same thing is happening in the SSSR, and against the Nipponese in—what do they call it?—in Manchukuo, that’s right,” Atvar said. “It’s even worse in those places than in the United States, because they don’t need to wreck their roads to make us go into the mud. As soon as it rains for more than two days straight, the roads themselves turn into mud. Why didn’t they pave them to begin with?”

The fleetlord knew Kirel could not possibly answer a question like that. Even if he could have answered it, responsibility still rested with Atvar. The Race’s landcruisers and troopcarriers, of course, were tracked. They managed after a fashion, even churning through sticky mud. Most supply vehicles, though, merely had wheels. Back before Atvar went into cold sleep, that had seemed sufficient, even extravagant. Against spear-carrying warriors riding on animals, it would have been.

“If this cursed planet were anything like what the stinking probes claimed it to be, we would have conquered it long since,” he growled.

“Without a doubt, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said. “Should you care to use it, we *still* have one major advantage of the Big Ugliers. A nuclear weapon exploded above Chicago would end its resistance once and for all.”

“I have considered this,” Atvar said. That he had considered it was the measure of his frustration. But he went on, “I am also obligated, however, to consider our occupation of Tosev 3 as well as our conquest of it. Chicago is a natural center of commerce for the region, and will be again when peace returns under our administration. Creating another such nexus after destroying this one would prove troublesome and expensive for those who come after us.”

“Let it be as you say, then, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel replied; he knew when to set a topic aside. In any event, he had plenty of other titbits with which to worry Atvar: “I have a report that the Deutsche launched two medium-range missiles against our forces in France last night. One was intercepted in flight; the other impacted and exploded, fortunately without damage worse than a large hole in the ground. Their guidance systems leave much to be desired.”

“What I would most desire is that they had no guidance systems,” the fleetlord said heavily. “May I at least hope we destroyed the launchers from which these missiles came?”

Kirel’s hesitation told him he could not so hope. The shiplord said, “Exalted Fleetlord, we scrambled killercraft and vectored them over the area from which the missiles were



discharged. It is heavily forested terrain, and they failed to discover the launchers. Officers speculate the Deutsche used either launchers concealed in caves, portable launchers, or both. More information will become available upon subsequent firings.”

“More damage will become available, too, unless we are more careful than we have been,” Atvar said. “We have the capability to knock these things out of the sky; I expect us to live up to that capability.”

“It shall be done,” Kirel said.

Atvar relaxed, a little; when Kirel said something would be done, he meant it. “What other news of interest have you for me, Shiplord?”

“Some intriguing data have come in from the study we began when we learned the Tosevites were sexually active at all seasons of the year,” Kirel replied.

“Tell me,” Atvar said. “Anything that will help me understand the Big Ugliers’ behavior is an asset.”

“As you say, Exalted Fleetlord. You may recall that we took a fair number of Tosevites of each gender and had them mate with one another to confirm they did indeed lack a breeding season. This they have done, as you know. Even more interesting, however, is that several more-or-less-permanently mated malefemale pairs have emerged from the randomly chosen individuals. Not all subjects in the experimental study have formed such pairs; we are currently investigating the factors which cause some to do so and others to abstain.”

“That is interesting,” the fleetlord admitted. “I remain not entirely sure of its relevance to the campaign as a whole, however.”

“Some may well exist,” Kirel said. “We have had instances all over the planet of Tosevites, some military personnel but others nominally civilians, attacking males and installations of the Race without regard for their own lives or safety. In those cases where the assailants survived for interrogation, a reason frequently cited for their actions was the death of a mate at our hands. This male-female bonding appears to be part of the glue which holds together Tosevite society.”

“Interesting,” Atvar said again. He felt faintly disgusted. When he smelled the pheromones of females in estrus, all he thought about was mating. At other seasons of the year—or indefinitely, if no females were around—not only was he not interested, he was smug about not being interested. Among the Race, the two words *arousal* and *foolishness* sprang from a common root. *Trust the Big Ugliers to build their societies based on a facet of foolishness*, he thought He asked, “Can we exploit this Tosevite aberration so it works to our advantage rather than against us?”

“Our experts are working toward this goal,” Kirel said. “They will test strategies both among our shipboard experimental specimens and, more cautiously, with select members of the populations of Big Ugliers under our control.”

“Why more cautiously?” Atvar asked. Then he answered his own question: “Oh, I see. If the experiments down on Tosev 3 produce undesirable results, that might lead to

situations where Big Ugliers will seek to harm members of the Race in the manner you previously described.”

“Exactly so, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel answered. “We have learned from painful experience that suicidal attacks are most difficult to guard against. We can much more easily protect ourselves against dangers from rational beings than from fanatics who are willing, sometimes even eager, to die with us. Not even the threat of large-scale retaliation against the captive populace has proven a reliable deterrent.”

Half of Atvar heartily wished he’d been passed over for this command; he’d be living in peaceful luxury back on Home. But he had a duty to the Race, and knew somber pride at having been chosen the male best suited to the task of fostering the Empire’s growth. He said, “I hope our experts will soon be able to suggest ways in which we can use the Big Ugliers’ perpetual randiness against them. And speaking of using things Tosevite against the Tosevites, how fare we in turning the captured portion of their industrial capacity to our benefit?”

Kirel did not let the change of subject fluster him. “Not as well as we would have liked, Exalted Fleetlord,” he replied, earning Atvar’s respect for unflinching honesty. “Part of the problem rests with the Tosevite factory workers we must necessarily employ in large numbers: many are apathetic and perform poorly, while others, actively hostile, sabotage as much of what they produce as possible. Another issue involved is the general primitiveness of their manufacturing plants.”

“By the Emperor, they’re not too primitive to keep from turning out guns and landcruisers and aircraft to use against us,” Atvar exclaimed. “Why can’t we use some of that capacity for ourselves?”

“The only way to do so, Exalted Fleetlord, is to adapt ourselves—resign ourselves might be a better way to put it—to arms and munitions at the Big Ugliers’ current technological level. If we do so, we forfeit our chief advantage over them and the contest becomes one of numbers—wherein the advantage is theirs.”

“Surely some of these facilities, at any rate, can be upgraded to our standards,” Atvar said.

Kirel made an emphatic gesture of negation. “Not for years. The gap is simply too wide. Oh, there are exceptions. A bullet is a bullet. We may be able to adapt their factories to produce small arms to our patterns, though even that will not be easy, as hardly any of their individual infantry weapons are automatic. We have had some success reboring captured artillery tubes to fire our ammunition, and could perhaps manufacture more tubes to our own specifications.”

“I have seen these reports,” Atvar agreed. “From them I inferred greater progress would also be possible.”

“I wish it were so, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said, repeating the gesture of negation. “You will notice the examples I cited were of unsophisticated weapons. As soon as electronics of any sort become involved, any hope of our using Tosevite facilities goes

straight out the window.”

“But they have electronics, some at least,” Atvar said. “They have both radar and radio, for instance. Our task would be simpler if they didn’t”

“True enough, they have electronics. But they have no computers whatever, and they know nothing of integrated circuits or even transistors. The vacuum-filled glass tubes they use in place of proper circuitry are so large and bulky and fragile and produce so much heat as to make them useless for our purposes.”

“Can we not introduce what we need into their factories?”

“Simpler to build our own, by, what the technical experts tell me,” Kirel answered. “Besides which, we run the risk of Tosevite workers learning our techniques from us and transmitting them to their unsubdued brethren. This is a risk we take with every venture that involves the Big Uglies.”

Atvar made an unhappy noise. None of the manuals from Home warned about that sort of risk. Neither the Rabotevs nor the Hallessi had been far enough along to be in a position to steal the Race’s technology and turn it against its creators. Therefore the planners, drawing on precedent as they always did, failed to envision that any race could do so.

The fleetlord should have thought of the danger for himself. But Tosev 3 presented so many unexpected difficulties, and the Race was so little used to dealing with unexpected difficulties, that not all of them became obvious at once. Precedent, organization, and long-term planning were splendid things within the Empire, where change, when it occurred, did so in tiny, closely supervised increments over the course of centuries. They did not prepare the Race to handle Tosev 3.

“We and the Big Uglies are both metals,” Atvar said to Kirel, “but we are steel and they are quicksilver.”

“An excellent comparison, Exalted Fleetlord, right down to the poisonous vapors they exude,” his subordinate answered. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Speak.”

“You are gracious, Exalted Fleetlord. I can understand the reasons for your reluctance to employ nuclear weapons against Chicago. But the natives of the United States continue to resist, if not with the skill of the Deutsche, then with equal or greater stubbornness and with far greater industrial capacity, even if their weapons are generally less sophisticated. They need to have the *potential price of such resistance brought home* to them. Their capital—Washington, I believe they call it—is merely an administrative center, with limited commercial or manufacturing significance. It is, moreover, not far from the eastern coast of the continent; prevailing winds would blow most nuclear waste products harmlessly out to sea.”

One of Atvar’s eyes swung across the map from Chicago to Washington. The situation was as Kirel described. Still...“Results in the case of Berlin were not altogether as we anticipated,” he said, a damning indictment among the Race.

But Kirel said, "It had unexpected benefits as well as shortcomings. We gained the allegiance of Warsaw and its environs shortly after employing that first device."

"Truth," Atvar admitted. It was an important truth, too; the Race too often saw only hazard in the unexpected, even if opportunity could also hatch from it.

"Not only that," Kirel continued, "but it will also create uncertainty and fear on the part of the Big Ugliers who do continue to resist. Destroying a single imperial capital might be an isolated act on our part. But if we destroy a second one, that shows them we can repeat the action anywhere on their planet at any time we choose."

"Truth," Atvar said again. Like any normal male of the Race, he distrusted uncertainty; the idea of using it as a weapon was unsettling to him. But when he thought of it as inflicting uncertainty on the foe, in the same way that his forces might inflict hunger or death, the concept became clearer—and more attractive. Moreover, Kirel was usually a cautious male; if he thought such a step necessary, he was likely to be right.

"What is your command, Exalted Fleetlord?" Kirel asked.

"Let the order be prepared for my review. I shall turn both eyes upon it the instant it appears before me. Barring unforeseen developments, I shall approve it."

"Exalted Fleetlord, it shall be done." Tailstump quivering with excitement, Kirel hurried away.

"This is Radio Deutschland." *Not Radio Berlin*, Moishe Russie thought as he moved his head closer to the speaker of the shortwave set. *Not any more*. Nor was the signal, though on the same frequency as Berlin had always used, anywhere near as strong as it had been. Instead of shouting, it was as if the Germans were whispering now, in hope of not being overheard.

"An important bulletin," the news reader went on. "The government of the *Reich* is grieved to report that Washington, D.C., capital of the United States of America, appears to have been the victim of a bomb of the type which recently made a martyr of Berlin. All radio transmissions from Washington ceased abruptly and without warning approximately twenty-five minutes ago; confused reports from Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Richmond speak of a pillar of fire mounting into the night sky. Our *Führer*, Adolf Hitler, has expressed his condolences for the American people, victims like the Germans of the insane aggression of these savage alien invaders. The *Führer's* words—"

Russie clicked off the set. He did not care what Adolf Hitler had to say; he wished with all his heart that Hitler had been in Berlin when the Lizards dropped their bomb on it. The regime there had deserved to go tip in a pillar of fire.

But Washington! If Berlin represented everything dark and bestial in the human spirit, Washington stood for just the opposite: freedom, justice, equality...yet the Lizards destroyed them both alike.

“*Yisgadal v’yiskadash shmey rabo*—” Russie murmured the memorial prayer for the dead. So many would be dead, across the ocean; he remembered the posters the Germans had plastered all over Warsaw before the city fell to the Lizards...before the Jews and the Polish Home Army rose up and helped the Lizards drive the Germans out of Warsaw.

No doubt that had been justified; without the Lizards, Russie knew he and most if not all his people would have died. That reasoning had let him support them after they entered Warsaw. Gratitude was a reasonable emotion, especially when as fully deserved as here. That the outside world thought him a traitor to mankind hurt deeply, but the outside world did not know—and refused to see—what the Nazis had done here. Better the Lizards than the SS; so he still believed.

But now—Booted feet pounded down the corridor toward his office, breaking in on his thoughts. The door flew open. The moment he saw Mordechai Anielewicz’s face, he knew the fighting leader had heard. “Washington—” they both said in the same breath.

Russie was the first to find more words. “We cannot go on comfortably working with them after this, not unless we want to deserve the hatred the rest of mankind would give us for such a deed.”

“*Reb* Moishe, you’re right,” Anielewicz said, the first time in a long while he’d given Russie such unqualified agreement. But where Russie thought in terms of right and wrong, the Jewish soldier almost automatically began considering ways and means. “We cannot simply rise up against them, either, not unless we want the bloodbath back again.”

“Heaven forbid!” Russie said. Then he remembered something he would sooner have forgotten: “I’m supposed to go on the radio this afternoon. What shall I say? God help me, what can I say?”

“Nothing,” Anielewicz answered at once. “Just the sound of your voice would make you the Lizards’ whore.” He thought for a moment, then gave two words of blunt, practical advice: “Get sick.”

“Zolraag won’t like that. He’ll think I’m faking, and he’ll be right.” But Russie had been a medical student; even as he spoke, his mind searched for ways to make false sickness seem real. He thought of some quickly enough; the punishment they’d inflict on him would also scourge him for letting the Lizards make him into their willing tool. “A purgative, a good strong one,” he said. “A purgative and a stiff dose of ipecac.”

“What’s ipecac?” Anielewicz asked. Russie made ghastly retching noises. The fighter’s eyes went big and round. He nodded and grinned. “That should do the job, all right. I’m glad they have you in front of the microphone instead of me.”

“Ha.” It wasn’t a laugh, only one syllable of resignation. But Russie thought such florid symptoms would convince Zolraag something truly was wrong with him. The epidemics in the ghetto, the endemic diseases from which all humanity suffered, seemed to horrify the Lizards, who gave no signs of being similarly afflicted. Russie would have

liked to study at one of their medical schools; no doubt he would have learned more there than any Earthly physician could teach him.

“If we want this to work, we’re going to have to do something else, you know,” Anielewicz said. At Russie’s raised eyebrow, he elaborated. “We’re going to have to talk with General Bor-Komorowski. The Poles have to be in on this with us. Otherwise the Lizards will turn them loose on us and stand back and smile while we beat each other to death.”

“Yes,” Russie said, though he both distrusted and feared the commander of the *Armja Krajowa*. But he had other, more immediate concerns. “Even if I manage not to broadcast today, I’ll still have to go back to the studio next week. The week after that at the latest, if I take to my bed and swallow more ipecac in a few days.” His stomach lurched unhappily at the prospect.

“Don’t worry past this afternoon.” Anielewicz’s eyes were cold and calculating. “Yes, I can piece together enough uniforms, and I can find enough blond fighters or fellows with light brown hair.”

“Why do you need fighters with—?” Russie stopped and stared. “You’re going to attack the transmitter, and you want the Nazis to get the blame for it.”

“Right both times,” Anielewicz said. “You should have been a soldier. I just wish I had some men who weren’t circumcised. Humans would know the difference. The Lizards might not, but I hate to take the chance. Some Poles think the only thing the Germans did wrong was to leave some of us alive. They might rat on us if they get the chance.”

Russie sighed. “Unfortunately, you’re right. Send one of your fighters out for the ipecac and another for the purgative. I don’t want to be remembered for getting either one, in case the Lizards ask questions later.” He sighed. “I have the feeling I won’t want to remember the next few hours anyway.”

“I believe that, *Reb* Moishe.” Anielewicz eyed him with amusement and no small respect. “You know, I think I’d rather be wounded in combat. At least then it comes as a surprise. But to deliberately do something like this to yourself ...” He shook his head. “Better you than me.”

“Better nobody.” Russie glanced at his watch (the former property of a German who no longer needed it). “But you’d better arrange for it quickly. The Lizards will be coming in less than three hours, and I ought to be good and sick by then.” He started going through the papers on his desk. “I want to move the ones that truly matter—”

“So you can puke all over the rest,” Anielewicz finished for him. “That’s good. If you pay attention to the small details in a plan, that helps the big pieces go well.” He touched one finger to the brim of his gray cloth cap. “I’ll take care of it.”

He was as good as his word. By the time the Lizard guards came to escort Russie to the studio, he wished Anielewicz had been less efficient. The Lizards hissed and drew back in dismay from his door. He could hardly blame them; the office would need an airing out before anyone wanted to work there again. A pair of good trousers weren’t going to be

the same any more, either.

One of the Lizards ever so cautiously poked his head back into the office. He stared at Russie, *who sprawled, limp as wet blotting paper*, over his chair and befouled desk. “What—wrong?” the Lizard asked in halting German.

“Must be something I ate,” Russie groaned feebly. The small part of him that did not actively wish he were dead noted he was even telling the truth, perhaps the most effective way to lie ever invented. Most of him, though, felt as if he’d been stretched too far, tied in knots, and then kneaded by a giant’s fingers.

A couple of more Lizards looked in at him from the hallway. So did some people. If anything, they seemed more horrified than the Lizards, who did not have to fear catching whatever horrible disease he’d come down with and simply found him most unaesthetic.

One of the Lizards spoke into a small hand-held radio. An answer came back, crisp and crackling. Regretfully, the Lizard advanced into the office. He spoke into the radio again, then held it out to Russie. Zolraag’s voice came from the speaker: “You are ill, *Reb Moishe*?” the governor asked. By now his German was fairly good. “You are too ill to broadcast for us today?”

“I’m afraid I am,” Russie croaked, most sincerely. He added his first untruth of the afternoon: “I’m sorry.”

“I also am sorry, *Reb Moishe*,” Zolraag answered. “I wanted your comments on the bombing of Washington, D.C., about which we would have given you full information. I know you would say this shows the need for your kind to give up their foolish fight against our stronger weapons.”

Russie groaned again, partly from weakness, partly because he’d expected Zolraag to tell him something like that. He said, “Excellency, I cannot speak now. When I am well, I will decide what I can truthfully say about what your people have done.”

“I am sure we will agree on what you would say,” Zolraag told him. The governor was trying to be subtle, but hadn’t really found the knack. He went on, “But for now, you must get over your sickness. I hope your doctors can cure you of it.”

He sounded unconvinced of the skills of human physicians. Russie wondered again what wonders Lizard medical experts could work. He said, “Thank you, Excellency. I hope to be better in a few days. This sort of illness is not one which is usually fatal.”

“As you say.” Again, Zolraag seemed dubious. Russie supposed he had reason. When the Lizards broke into Warsaw, thousands of starving Jews in the ghetto had suffered from one form of intestinal disease or another, and a great many had died. The governor continued, “if you want, my males will take you from your office to your home.”

“Thank you, Excellency, but no,” Russie said. “I would like to preserve as much as possible the illusion of free agency.” He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. Better if the Lizards kept on thinking of him as a willing cat’s-paw. He hoped

Zolraag wouldn't understand what he'd said.

But the Lizard did. Worse, he approved. "Yes, this illusion is worth holding to, *Reb Moishe*," he answered, confirming that, as far as he was concerned, Russie's freedom of action *was* an illusion. Even in his battered, nauseated state, he felt anger stir.

The governor spoke in his own hissing language. The Lizard who held the radiotelephone answered, then skittered out of Russie's office with every evidence of relief. He and the rest of the aliens left the Jewish headquarters; Russie listened to their claws clicking on linoleum.

A few minutes later, Mordechai Anielewicz came back in. He wrinkled his nose. "It stinks like a burst sewer pipe in here, *Reb Moishe*," he said. "Let's clean you up a little and get you home."

Russie surrendered himself to the fighting leader's blunt, practical ministrations. He let Anielewicz manhandle him down the stairs. Waiting on the street was a bicycle with a sidecar. Anielewicz poured him into it, then climbed onto the little saddle and started pedaling.

"Such personal concern," Russie said. The wind blowing in his face did a little to revive him. "I'm honored."

"If I'd brought a car for you, then you'd have some business being honored," Anielewicz said, laughing. Russie managed a wan chuckle himself. These days, gasoline was more precious than rubies in Warsaw: rubies, after all, remained rubies, but gasoline, once burned, was gone forever. Even diesel fuel for fire engines was in desperately short supply.

A few dry leaves whirled through the streets on the chilly fall breeze, but only a few; a lot of trees had been cut down for fuel. More would fall this winter, Russie thought, and buildings wrecked in two rounds of fighting would be cannibalized for wood. Warsaw would be an uglier city when the fighting ended—if it ever did.

Rain began falling from the lead-gray sky. Mordechai Anielewicz reached up, yanked down the brim of his cap so it did a better job of covering his eyes. He said, "It's set. We'll have a go at the transmitter tomorrow night. Stay sick till then."

"What happens if you don't take it out?" Russie asked.

Anielewicz's laugh had a grim edge to it. "If we don't take it out, *Reb Moishe*, two things happen. One is that some of my fighters will be dead. And the other is that you'll have to go on taking your medicines, so that by this time next week you'll likely end up envying them."

Maybe the fighting leader meant it for a joke, but Russie didn't find it funny. He felt as if the *Gestapo* had been kicking him in the belly. His mouth tasted like—on second thought, he didn't want to try to figure out what his mouth tasted like.

Many of the Jews the Nazis forced into the Warsaw ghetto had left it since the Lizards came (many more, of course, were dead). Even so, the streets remained crowded. Adroit as a footballer dodging through defensemen toward the goal, Anielewicz steered his



bicycle past pushcarts, rickshaws, hordes of other bicycles, and swarms of men and women afoot. No one seemed willing to yield a centimeter of space to anyone else, but somehow no one ran into anyone else, either.

Then, suddenly, there was space. Anielewicz stopped hard. A squad of Lizards tramped past on patrol. They looked cold and miserable. One turned his strange eyes resentfully up toward the weeping sky. Another wore a child's coat. He hadn't figured out buttons, but held the coat closed with one hand while the other clutched his weapon.

As soon as the Lizards moved on, the crowds closed in again. Anielewicz said, "If those poor creatures think it's cold now, what will they do come January?"

*Freeze*, was the answer that immediately sprang into Russie's mind. But he knew he was probably wrong. The Lizards knew more than mankind about so many things; no doubt they had some simple way to keep themselves warm out in the open. That patrol certainly had *looked* chilly, though.

Anielewicz pulled up in front of the apartment block where Russie lived. "Can you make it up to your flat?" he asked.

"Let's see." Russie unfolded himself from the sidecar. He wobbled when he took a couple of tentative steps, but stayed on his feet. "Yes, I'll manage."

"Good. If I had to walk you up, I'd worry about the bicycle being here when I got back. Now I can worry about other things instead." Anielewicz nodded to Russie and rode off.

Had Moishe felt more nearly alive, he might have laughed at the way people in the courtyard started to come up to greet him, then took a better look and retreated faster than they'd advanced. He didn't blame them; he would have sheered off from himself, too. If he didn't look horribly contagious, it wasn't from lack of effort.

He turned the key, walked into his flat; one perquisite of his position was that his family had it all to themselves. His wife whirled round in surprise. "Moishe! What are you doing here so early?" Rivka said, starting to smile. Then she got a good look at him—and maybe a good whiff of him as well—and asked a better question: "Moishe! What happened to you?"

He sighed. "The Lizards happened to me."

She stared at him, her eyes wide in a face that, while not skeletal as it had been a few months before, was still too thin. "The Lizards did—that—to you?"

"Not directly," he answered. "What the Lizards did was to treat Washington, D.C., exactly as they had Berlin, and to expect me to be exactly as happy about it."

Rivka did not much concern herself with politics; the struggle, for survival had taken all her energy. But she was no fool. "They wanted you to praise them for destroying Washington? They must be *meshugge*."

"That's what I thought, so I got sick." Moishe explained how he'd manufactured his illness on short notice.

“Oh, thank God. When I saw you, I was afraid you’d come down with something dreadful.”

“I feel pretty dreadful,” Russie said. Though drugs rather than bacteria induced his illness, his insides had still gone through a wringer. The only difference was that he would not stay sick unless it proved expedient.

His little son, Reuven, wandered out of the bedroom. The boy wrinkled his nose. “Why does Father smell funny?”

“Never mind.” Rivka Russie turned briskly practical. “We’re going to get him cleaned up right now.” She hurried into the kitchen. The water had been reliable since the Lizards took the town. She came back with a bucket and a rag. “Go into the bedroom, Moishe; hand me out your filthy clothes, clean yourself off, and put on something fresh. You’ll be better for it.”

“All right,” he said meekly. Shedding the soiled garments was nothing but relief. He discovered he’d managed to get vomit on the brim of his hat. In a horrid sort of way, that was an accomplishment. The rag and bucket seemed hardly enough for the job for which they were intended; he wondered if the Vistula would have been enough. Thoughts of the Augean stables ran through his mind as he scrubbed filth from himself. He hadn’t discovered Greek *mythology* until his university days. Sometimes the images it evoked were as telling as any in the Bible.

In clean clothes he felt a new, if hollow, man. He didn’t want to touch what he had been wearing, but finally bundled the befouled outfit so the filthiest parts were toward the middle. He brought everything out to Rivka.

She nodded. “I’ll take care of them soon.” Living in the ghetto had made stench just part of life, not something that had to be swept away on the instant. At the moment, questions were more urgent: “What will you do if the Lizards insist that you speak for them after you’re better?”

“I’ll get sick again,” he answered, though his guts twisted at the prospect. “With luck, though, I won’t have to.” He told her what Anielewicz had planned for the transmitter.

“Even if that works, it only puts off the evil day,” Rivka said. “Sooner or later, Moishe, either you will have to do what the Lizards want or else you will have to tell them no.”

“I know.” Moishe grimaced. “Maybe we never should have thrown our lot in with them in the first place. Maybe even the Nazis were a better bargain than this.”

Rivka vigorously shook her head. “You know better. When you are dead, you can’t bargain. And even if we have to disobey the Lizards, I think they will kill only the ones who disobey, and only because they disobey, rather than making a sport of it or killing us simply because we are Jews.”

“I think you are right.” The admission failed to reassure Russie. He, after all, would be one of those who disobeyed, and he wanted to live. But to praise the Lizards for using one of their great bombs on Washington...better to die with self-respect intact.

“Let me make you some soup.” Rivka eyed him as if gauging his strength. “Will you be able to hold it down?”

“I think so,” he said after making his own internal assessments. He let out a dry chuckle. “I ought to try, anyhow, so I have something in my stomach in case I, ah, have to start throwing up again. What I just went through was bad enough, but the dry heaves are worse.”

The soup was thick with cabbage and potatoes, not the watery stuff of the days when the Germans starved the ghetto Jews and every morsel had to be stretched to the utmost. Though no one who had not known those dreadful days would have thought much of it, its warmth helped ease the knots in Russie’s midsection.

He had just finished the last spoonful when somebody came pounding down the hall at a dead run. A fist slammed against his front door. The somebody shouted, “*Reb Moishe, Reb Moishe*, come quick, *Reb Moishe!*”

Russie started to get up. His wife took him by the shoulders and forced him back into his chair. “You’re sick, remember?” she hissed. She went to the door herself, opened it. “What’s wrong? My husband is ill. He cannot go anywhere.”

“But he has to!” the man in the hallway exclaimed, as if he were a twoyear-old convinced his word was law.

“He cannot,” Rivka repeated. She stepped aside to let the fellow get a look at Moishe, adding, “See for yourself if you don’t believe me,” which told Russie he had to look as bad as he felt.

“I’m sorry, *Reb Moishe*,” the man said, “but we really do need you. Some of our fighters are facing off with some *Armja Krajowa* louts up on Mickiewicz Street, and it’s getting ugly. They’re liable to start shooting at each other any minute now.”

Russie groaned. Of all the times for hotheaded Jews and prejudiced Poles to start butting heads, this was the worst Rivka was too far away to make him keep sitting down. He rose, ignoring her look of consternation. But before he could do anything more, the man in the hallway said, “The Lizards are already bringing heavy equipment up there. They’ll slaughter everyone if a fight breaks out.”

With another groan, Russie clutched his belly and sank back down. Rivka’s alarmed expression turned to real concern. But she rallied quickly. “Please go now,” she told the man. “My husband would come if he possibly could; you know that. But he really is ill.”

“Yes, I see he is. I’m sorry. God grant you health soon, *Reb Moishe*.” The fellow departed at the same breakneck pace at which he’d arrived.

Rivka shut the door, then turned on Russie. “*Are you all right?*” she demanded, hands on hips. “You were going out there, I know you were. Then all, of a sudden—”

He knew a moment’s pride that his acting had been good enough to give her doubts. He said, “If the Lizards are already there, I can’t let them see me, or they’ll know I’m not as sick as I let on.”

Her eyes widened. “Yes, that makes sense. You—”

“I’m not done,” he interrupted. “The other thing is, I don’t think our men are tangling with the *Armja Krajowa* Poles by accident. Think where the quarrel is—at the opposite end of Warsaw from the Lizard headquarters. I think they’re trying to draw troops—and maybe Zolraag’s attention, too—away from the studio and the transmitter. Mordechai said tomorrow night, but he works fast. Unless I miss my guess, this is a put-up fight.”

“I hope you’re right.” For most of the next minute, Rivka looked as intensely thoughtful as a yeshiva student following a rabbi’s exegesis of a difficult Talmudic text. A smile broke through like sunrise. “Yes, I think you are.”

“Good,” Russie said. He did feel better with the warm soup inside him. He hoped he wouldn’t have to spew it up again, but carried another vial of ipecac in a coat pocket.

He got up and walked over to the battered sofa. Springs poked through here and there and the fabric was filthy, but just owning a sofa was a mark of status among Warsaw Jews these days. The Nazis hadn’t stolen it in one of their ghetto sweeps, and the family hadn’t had to break it up and burn it to keep from freezing the winter before. As he lay down on it, Russie was conscious of how lucky that made him.

Rivka draped a threadbare blanket over him. “How can you look sick if you’re not covered up?” she asked.

“I seem to have managed,” he said, but she ignored him. He let the blanket stay.

About the time he came close to dozing off, Reuven started banging on a pot with a spoon. Rivka quickly hushed the boy, but the damage was done. A few minutes later, a new, more ominous racket filled the flat: the distant rattle of guns. “Where is it coming from?” Russie asked, turning his head this way and that. If it was from the north, the Jews and Poles might really have opened up on each other; if from the south, Anielewicz’s fighters in German uniform were hitting the radio transmitter.

“I can’t tell, either,” Rivka said. “The sound is funny inside a block of flats.”

“That’s true.” Russie settled himself to wait. The shooting and explosions lasted only a couple of minutes. He’d nearly forgotten the echoing silence that followed gunfire, though he’d heard it almost daily before the Lizards seized Warsaw from the Germans.

Half an hour later, another knock came at the apartment door. Rivka opened it. Without ceremony, a Lizard walked in. He fixed both eyes on Russie. In hissing German, he said, “I am Ssfeer, from the governor Zolraag’s staff. You know me now?”

“Yes, I recognized your body paint,” Moische answered. “How can I help you? I fear I cannot do much at the moment; I was taken ill this morning.”

“So the prominent Zolraag learned,” Ssfeer said. “He—how say you?—he gives permissions to you to get well more slow. Bandits from Deutschland just now they—how say you?—shoot up radio, maybe to keep you quiet, not let you speak. We need maybe ten days to fix.”

“Oh, what a pity,” Russie said.

The Lancaster rumbled down the runway, engines roaring. The plane bounced and shuddered as it gained speed; Lizard bomblets had cratered the runway the week before, and repairs were crude. George Bagnall knew nothing but relief that they weren't trying to take off with a full bomb load. Bombs were delicate things; once in a while, a bump would set one off...after which, the groundcrew would have another crater, a big one, to fill in.

The bomber fairly sprang into the air. In the pilot's seat next to Bagnall's, Ken Embry grinned. "Amazing what lightening the aircraft will do," Embry said. "I feel like I'm flying a Spitfire."

"I think it's all in your head," Bagnall replied. "The radar unit back there, can't be a great deal lighter than the ordnance we usually carry." The flight engineer flicked an intercom switch. "How is it doing, Radarman Goldfarb?"

"Seems all right," he heard in his earphones. "I can see a long way."

"That's the idea," Bagnall said. A radar set in an aircraft several miles above the Earth could peer farther around its curve pick up Lizard planes as they approached, and give England's defenses a few precious extra minutes to prepare. Bagnall shivered inside his flight suit and furs as the Lanc gained altitude. He switched on his oxygen, tasted the rubber of the hose as he breathed the enriched air.

Goldfarb spoke enthusiastically. "If we can keep just a few planes in the air, they'll do as much for us as all our ground stations put together. Of course," he added, "we also have a good deal farther to fall."

Bagnall tried not to think about that. The Lizards had pounded British ground radar in the opening days of their invasion, forcing the RAF and ground defenses to fight blind ever since. Now they were trying to see again. The Lizards were not likely to want to let them see.

"Coming up on angels twenty," Ken Embry announced. "Taking station at the altitude. Radioman, how is our communication with the *fighter* pack?"

"Reading them five by five," Ted Lane replied. "They report receiving us five by five as well. They are eager to begin the exercise, sir."

"Bloody maniacs," Embry said. "As far as I'm concerned, the ideal mission is one devoid of all contact with the enemy whatsoever."

Bagnall could not have agreed more. Despite machine gun turrets all over the aircraft, the Lancaster had always been at a dreadful disadvantage against enemy fighters; evasion beat the blazes out of combat. The knowledge made bomber aircrew cautious, and made them view swaggering, aggressive fighter pilots as not quite right in the head.

From back in the bomb bay, David Goldfarb said, "I ought to be able to communicate directly with the fighter aircraft rather than relaying through the radioman."

"That's a good notion, Goldfarb," Bagnall said. "Jot it down; maybe they'll be able to use it on the Mark 2." *And maybe, if we keep on being luckier than we deserve, we'll live to try out the Mark 2,* he added to himself. He didn't need to say it aloud; Goldfarb had

known what the odds were when he volunteered for this mission.

Bagnall wiped the inside of the curved Perspex window in front of him with a piece of chamois cloth. Nothing much to see out there, not even the exhaust flames from other bombers ahead, above, below, and to either side—reassuring reminders one was not going into danger all alone. Now there was only night, night and the endless throb of the four Merlins. Consciously reminded of the engines, the flight engineer flicked his eyes over the gauges in front of him. Mechanically, all was well.

“I have enemy aircraft,” Goldfarb exclaimed. Back in the bomb bay, he couldn’t see even the night, just the tracks of electrons across a phosphorcoated screen. But his machine vision reached farther than Bagnall’s eyes. “I say again, I have enemy aircraft. Heading 177, distance thirty-five miles and closing, speed 505.”

Ted Lane passed that word on to the Mosquitoes that lurked far above the radar-carrying Lancaster. The twin-engine planes not only had the highest operational ceiling of any British fighters, they were also, with their wooden skins and skeletons, harder for radar to acquire.

“Rockets away from the Lizard aircraft,” Goldfarb yelled. “Bearing—straight for us. Speed—too bloody fast for my machine here.”

“Shut it down,” Embry ordered. He threw the Lanc into a violent, corkscrewing dive that made Bagnall glad for the straps that held him in his seat. His stomach felt a couple of thousand feet behind the aircraft. He gulped, wishing he hadn’t had greasy fish and chips less than an hour before the mission started.

An excited yell from Joe Simpkin in the tail gunner’s turret echoed in his headset. The gunner added, “One of those rockets flew through where we used to be.”

“Well, by God,” Ken Embry said softly. The pilot, who made a point of never letting anything impress him, added, “Who would have thought the boffins could actually get one right?”

“I’m rather glad they did,” Bagnall said, stressing his broad “a”s to show he also took such miracles for granted. The engineers down on the ground had been confident the Lizards would attack a radar-carrying aircraft with the same radar-homing rockets they’d used to wreck the British ground stations. Turn off the radar. and what would they have to home on? Nothing, Down on the ground, it all seemed as inexorably logical as a geometric proof. The boffins, however, didn’t have to test their theories in person. That was what’ aircrews were for.

“Shall I start it up again?” Goldfarb asked over the intercom. “No, better not, not quite yet,” Embry said after a moment’s thought.

“It does us no good if it isn’t running,” the radarman said plaintively.

*It does us no bloody good if it gets us shot down, either,* Bagnall thought. But that wasn’t fair, and he knew it. For someone whose only time in the air had been practicing for this mission, Goldfarb was doing fine. And not only was it natural for him to want to play with his toy, he had a point. A radar set that had to shut down as soon as action

started to keep from being destroyed was better than no radar set at all, but not much. Along with letting Goldfarb talk directly with the fighters his radar directed, the boffins would have to come up with a way to let him keep the set operating without getting it and its aircraft blown out of the sky.

Ted Lane let out an ear-piercing Red Indian whoop. “A Mosquito just took out one of their planes. Bounced him from above, almost head-on—couldn’t very well come up on him from behind, could he, what with the Lizards’ being the faster aircraft. Says he saw the enemy break up in midair, and then he was diving for the deck for *all he was worth*.”

Everyone in the Lancaster cheered. Then Ken Embry said, “What about the rest of the Mosquitoes?”

After a moment, the radioman answered, “Er—several of them do not respond to my signal, sir.” That dashed the moment of exultation. The RAF was slowly, painfully learning how to hurt the Lizards. The Lizards already knew only too well how to hurt the RAF. Bagnall hoped the fighter pilots had managed to bail out. Trained men were harder to replace than airplanes.

From his station in front of the now-dark radar screen, Goldfarb said, “The chaps on the ground have been listening to us, too. With a bit of luck, they’ll also have hurt the Lizards: at least, they’ll have had the advantage of knowing a bit sooner from which direction they’re coming.”

“Fat bloody lot of good it’ll do them,” Embry said. Like any pilot, he pretended to disbelieve flak crews could possibly hit anything with their guns. If that attitude made flying seem safer for him, Bagnall was not about to complain. A calm pilot was a smooth pilot, and a smooth pilot was likeliest to bring his aircrew home again.

Goldfarb repeated, “May I turn the set on again, sir?”

Embry took his right hand off the stick, pounded a closed fist up and down on his thigh. Bagnall didn’t think he knew he was doing it. At last the pilot said, “Yes, go ahead; you may as well. As you’ve noted, that is the purpose of our being up here on this lovely fall evening.”

“Really?” Bagnall said. “And all the time I thought it was to see how fast the Lizards could shoot us down. The groundcrew have formed a pool on it, I understand. Did you toss in your shilling, Ken?”

“I’m afraid not,” Embry answered, imperturbable. “When they told me someone had already chosen twenty seconds after takeoff, I decided my chances for winning were about nil, so I held onto my money out of consideration for my heirs. What about you, old fellow?”

“Sorry to have spoiled your wager, but I’m afraid I’m the chap who took the twenty seconds after we left the ground.” Bagnall was not about to let the pilot outdo him in offhandedness, not this time. “I admit I did wonder how I’d go about collecting if I happened to win.”

The radar set, like any human-built piece of electronic apparatus, needed a little while

to warm up after it went on. Bagnall had heard rumors that Lizard gear taken from shot-down planes went on instantly. He wondered if they were true; from what he knew, valves (tubes, the Americans called them) by their very nature required warm-up time. Maybe the Lizards didn't use valves, though he had no idea what might take their place.

"Another flight incoming, same bearing as before," Goldfarb announced. "Range... twenty-three miles and closing too bloody fast. Shall I shut it down now?"

"No, wait until they launch their rockets at us," Embry said. Bagnall wondered if the pilot had lost his mind, and even wondered if there really was a groundcrew pool and if Embry was trying to win it. But Embry proved to have method in his madness: We've already seen we can evade the rockets that track us by our own radar. If we shut down before they fire those, they may get closer and shoot rockets of a different sort at us, ones we can't evade."

"Their tactics do tend to be stereotyped, don't they?" Bagnall agreed after a little thought. "Given a choice, they'll do the same thing over and over, regardless of whether it's the right thing. And if it's wrong, why give them the excuse to change?"

"Just what was in my—" Embry began.

Goldfarb interrupted him: "Rockets away! Shutting down—*now*."

Again the Lancaster spun through the air; again Bagnall wondered if the fish and chips would stay down. And again, the Lizards' rockets failed to bring down the British aircraft. "Maybe this isn't a suicide mission after all," Bagnall said happily. He'd had his doubts as the Lanc rolled down the runway.

Ted Lane listened to the surviving Mosquitoes as they made their runs at the attackers. "Another hit!" he said. This time, though, no one in the Lancaster shouted for joy. The aircrew had realized the price the fighter pilots were paying for every kill.

Then the radioman told Embry, "We are ordered to break off operations and return to base. The air vice marshal remarks that, having been lucky twice, he's not inclined to tempt fate by pushing for a third bit of good fortune."

"The air vice marshal is a little old woman," the pilot retorted. He added hastily, "You need not inform him of my opinion, however. We shall of course obey his instructions like the good little children we are. Navigator, if you would be so kind as to suggest a course—"

"Suggest is the proper word, all right," Alf Whyte said from his little curtained-off space behind the pilot's and flight engineer's seats. "What with some of the twists you put the aircraft through, I thought the compass was jitterbugging to a hot swing band. If we are where I think we are, a course of 078 will bring us to the general neighborhood of Dover in ten or twelve minutes."

"Oh-seven-eight it is," Embry said. "Turning to that course now." He swung the bomber through the sky as if it were an extension of himself.

George Bagnall watched the neatly ordered phalanx of gauges in front of him as



intently as if they monitored his own heartbeat and breathing. In a very real way, they did: if the Lancaster's engines or hydraulic system failed, his heart would not go on beating for very long.

"I have contact with the airfield," the radioman announced. "They read us five by five and report no damage from the Lizards this evening."

"That's good to hear," Embry said. Bagnall nodded. The landing would be rough enough as it was, what with the hasty repairs to earlier repairs from the sky. The Lanc wouldn't be coming in with combat damage or unexpended bombs, as it might have from a mission over Germany or France, but its fuel tanks were much fuller than they would have been on the return flight from such a mission. The petrol the plane burned made a more-than-satisfactory explosive when things went wrong.

Bagnall stared out through the Perspex. He tapped Embry on the arm. "Isn't that the ocean approaching?"

Embry looked, too. "Sod me if it's not. Alf, we're coming up on the bloody North Sea. Are we north or south of where we want to be? I feel like a blind man tapping down the path with his stick, all the more so with that radar set back in the bomb bay. It ought to be able to find our way home for us all by its lonesome."

"I dare say it will do precisely that one of these days," the navigator answered. "I suggest you bear in mind, though, that the Lizards doubtless monitor every sort of signal we produce. Do you really care to guide them to the runway as you set down?"

"Now that you mention it, no. Ha!" Embry pointed down into the darkness. Bagnall's eyes followed his finger. He too spied the red torch winking on and off. He flicked on the Lancaster's wing lights, just for a moment, to acknowledge the signal.

Other torches, these white along one side of the runway and green along the other, sprang to life. Embry pointed. "Looks like a bloody aircraft carrier flight deck down there. I thought this was the RAF, not the Fleet Air Arm."

"Could be worse," Bagnall remarked. "At least the runway's not pitching in a heavy sea."

"There's a cheerful thought." Embry lined up the Lancaster on the two rows of torches, went into the final landing descent. The hasty touchdown was less than smooth, but also less than disastrous: about par for a landing under war conditions, Bagnall thought. Along with the rest of the aircrew, he got out of the Lanc in a hurry and sprinted across the tarmac—now blacked out again—for the Nissen hut whose corrugated metal walls were surrounded by sandbags to protect against blast.

A tent of blackout curtains in front of the hut's doorway let people go in and out without leaking light for all the world—and for unfriendly visitors from another world—to see. The glare of the bare bulbs strung from the Nissen hut's ceiling smote Bagnall's dark-accustomed eyes like a photographer's flash.

The aircrew hurled themselves onto chairs and couches. Some, drained by the mission, fell asleep at once in spite of the glare. Others, Bagnall among them, dug out pipes and

cigarettes.

“May I have one of those?” David Goldfarb asked, pointing to the flight engineer’s packet of Players. “I’m afraid I’m all out.”

Bagnall passed him a cigarette, leaned close to give him a light off the one he already had going. As the radarman inhaled, Bagnall said, “I expect you’ll be off to the White Horse Inn after the boffins get done grilling you over how things went tonight”

“What’s the point?” Goldfarb said, more in resignation than bitterness. “Oh, I expect I’ll drink there, but the girls—as I say, what’s the point?”

Bagnall also knew about the barmaids’ preferences. Now he stuck his tongue far into his cheek. “I think staring into the radar screen must have a deleterious effect on the brain. Did it never occur to you that you’ve just returned from flying a combat mission?”

The end of Goldfarb’s cigarette suddenly glowed a fierce red.

His eyes glowed, too. “I knew it only too bleeding well when those Lizard rockets homed on us. I confess I hadn’t thought of it in other terms, though. Thank you, sit”

Bagnall waved a hand in a parody of aristocratic elegance. “Delighted to be of service.” Service it had been, too—in an instant, he’d made the radarman forget all about the fear he’d just endured. He wished he could *perform the same service for himself*.

Ussmak cursed the day the Race had first discovered Tosev 3. He cursed the day the probe the Race had sent to this miserable world returned safely. He cursed the day he'd been hatched, the day he'd gone into cold sleep, the day he'd awakened. He cursed Krentel, something he'd been doing every day since the blundering idiot replaced Votal. He cursed the Big Ugliers for killing Votal and then Telerep and leaving Krentel alive.

Most of all, he cursed the mud.

The landcruiser he drove was built to handle difficult terrain. On the whole, it did well. But Tosev 3, being a wetter place than any of the three worlds already in the Empire, had mixtures of water and dirt more thorough and more spectacularly gloppy than any of the Race's engineers had imagined.

Ussmak was in the middle of one of those mixtures. As far as he could tell, it was most of a continent wide and most of a continent long. The Russkis only made matters worse by not paving any of their stinking roads. Once the rain soaked into what was allegedly a roadbed, the mud there was most of a continent deep, too.

He pressed his foot down on the accelerator. The landcruiser lurched forward. So long as he moved every little while, he was all right. If he stayed too long in one place, the machine started to sink. Its tracks were more than wide enough to support it on any reasonable surface. This gluey, slimy stuff was a long way from reasonable.

Ussmak accelerated again. The landcruiser plowed through the bog. Its tracks flung muck in all directions. Some of the muck—dead Emperors only knew how—splashed down onto Ussmak's vision slit. He pressed a button. Detergent solution sprayed the armorglass clean. That was a relief. At least he wouldn't have to unbutton and stick his head into the refrigerator outside.

Krentel had his cupola in the turret dogged down tight, too. A landcruiser commander was supposed to look out over the top of that cupola as much as he could, but Ussnak, though he blamed Krentel for a lot of things, couldn't blame him for not wanting to freeze his snout off.

At that, the driver thought, gunning the landcruiser forward once more, things could have been worse. He could have been driving a truck instead. The wheeled vehicles the landcruiser was supposed to be protecting had a much rougher time in this accursed bog than he did. He'd already used his towing chain to pull two or three of them out of places where they'd sunk worse than axle-deep. That the trucks had to be shielded just made them heavier and the sticking problem worse.

For that matter, Ussmak could have been one of the poor wretches in radiation suits who guddled around in the freezing Tosevite slime for the bits of radioactive material

their detectors found. The radiation suits weren't heated—no one had foreseen the need (no one had foreseen that the Big Ugliers would be able to blow the *67th Emperor Sohrheb* all over the landscape, either). The males in those suits had to labor in shifts, one group going back to a warming station while the other emerged to work.

Krentel's voice rang in the intercom button taped to Ussmak's hearing diaphragm. "Maintain heightened alertness, driver. I have just received a report that Tosevite bandit groups may be operating in the area. Primary defense responsibilities fall on our glorious landcruiser forces."

"As you say, Commander," Ussmak answered. "It shall be done." How he was supposed to be especially alert for bandits when he could see only straight ahead with the landcruiser buttoned was beyond him. Maybe Krentel ought to open up the cupola and look around after all.

He thought about saying as much to the landcruiser commander, but decided not to bother. The Race did not encourage lower ranks to reprove their superiors; that way lay anarchy. In any case, Ussmak doubted that Krentel would have listened; he seemed to think the Emperor had personally granted him all the answers. And finally, Ussmak's own sense of isolation from everything going on around him had only grown worse since his two original landcruiser crewmates died. A good replacement for Votal would have taken pains to reforge the team. Krentel just treated him like a piece of machinery. Machines don't care.

Machinelike, Ussmak kept the landcruiser out of as much trouble as he could. He'd found some better ground, where the grass, now yellow and dying rather than green and shiny with life, was still thick enough under his tracks to keep the landcruiser from sinking as fast as it had on barer terrain.

Ahead lay a stand of low, scrubby trees. Their bare branches groped for the sky like thin, beseeching arms. They'd dropped their leaves when the rains started. Ussmak wondered why; it seemed wasteful to him. Certainly none of the trees back on Home behaved in such profligate fashion.

He missed Home. Although the idea of turning Tosev 3 into another version of his own world had seemed good and noble when he got into the cold-sleep capsule, everything he'd seen since he came out of it screamed that it wasn't going to be as easy as everybody had thought. Given the Big Ugliers' intractability, he wondered how the Race had succeeded so well on Rabotev 2 and Halless 1.

He also wondered why no one else seemed to have any doubts about what the Race was doing here. The males had just formed their own rather compressed version of society back Home and gone on about their business, changing original plans only because the Tosevites had more technology than anyone expected. No one worried about the rightness of what they were doing.

Even Ussmak had no real idea of what the Race's forces ought to be doing now that they'd come to Tosev 3. He supposed the doubts he did have sprang from his own feeling of apartness from everyone around him, from having been wrenched out of his

comfortable niche in the original landcruiser crew and thrust into the unwanted company not merely of strangers, but of pompous, inept strangers.

Behind him, the turret traversed with a whir of smooth machinery. The coaxial machine gun began to chatter. “We shall rout out any Big Ugliers lurking among the trees,” Krentel declared with his usual grandiloquence.

For once, though, the commander’s tone failed to grate on Ussmak. Krentel was actually doing something sensible. Ussmak cherished that when it happened. Had it happened more often, he might have been content even on this miserable, cold, wet ball of mud.

Machine-gun bullets whined less than a meter above Heinrich Jäger’s head. Had any leaves remained on the birch trees, the bullets would have shaken the last of them down. As it was, he used the fallen leaves to help conceal himself from the Lizard-panzer firing from the open country ahead.

The wet ground and wet leaves soaked Jäger’s shabby clothes. Rain beat on his back and trickled down his neck. He suppressed a sneeze by main force. A round ricocheting from a tree trunk kicked mud up into his face.

Beside him, Georg Schultz let out a ghostly chuckle. “Well, Major, aren’t you glad we never had to mess with this infantry shit before?”

“Now that you mention it, yes.” It wasn’t just the manifold discomforts of crawling around bare to the elements, either. Jäger felt naked and vulnerable without armor plate all around him. In his Panzer III, machine-gun bullets had been something to laugh at. Now they could pierce his precious, tender flesh as easily as anything else they happened to strike.

He raised his head a couple of centimeters, just enough to let him peer out at the Lizard panzer. It seemed sublimely indifferent to anything a mere foot soldier could hope to do to it. All at once, Jäger understood the despair his own tank must have induced in French and Russian infantry who’d tried and failed to stop it. The shoe was on the other foot now, sure enough.

One of the partisans who huddled with Jäger might have been reading his mind. The fellow said, “Well, there it is, Comrade Major. What the fuck do we do about it?”

“For the time being, we wait,” Jäger answered. “Unless you’re really keen on dying right now, that is.”

“After what I’ve been through the last year and a half from your fucking Nazi bastards, dying is the least of my worries,” the partisan answered.

Jäger twisted his head to glare at the ally who would have been anything but a few months before. The partisan, a skinny man with a gray-streaked beard and a big nose, glared back. Jäger said, “I find this as ironic as you do, believe me.”

“Ironic?” The partisan raised bushy eyebrows. Jäger had trouble understanding him.

He wasn't really speaking German at all, but Yiddish, and about every fourth word made the major stop and think. The Jew went on, "Fuck ironic. I asked God how things could be worse than they were with you Germans around, and He had to go and show me. Let it be a lesson to you, Comrade Nazi Major: never pray for something you don't really want, because you may get it anyhow."

"Right, Max," Jäger said, smiling a little in spite of himself. He hadn't fought side by side with any Jews since the First World War; he had no great use for them. But the Russian partisan band sprawled in the dripping woods with him was more than half Jewish. He wondered whether the Ivans back in Moscow had set it up that way on purpose, to make sure the path-sans didn't think about betraying Stalin. That made a certain amount of sense, but it was also likely to make a fighting unit less efficient than it would have been without mutual suspicion and, on the Jews' side, outright hatred.

The Lizard panzer's machine gun stopped spitting flame. It swung away from the woods; Jäger envied the turret's quick power traverse. If he'd had himself a machine like that, now, he could have accomplished something worthwhile. It was wasted on the Lizards, who, had hardly a clue about how to exploit it.

The tank wallowed forward through the mud. Jäger had made the acquaintance of Russian mud the previous fall and spring. It had done its best to glue his Panzer III in one place for good; he was not altogether disappointed to watch it give the Lizards trouble, too.

His attention shifted from the tank to the trucks and soldiers it was guarding. The trucks, like any wheeled vehicles, were having a lot of trouble in the mud. The NKVD man back in Moscow had been right; they were unusually heavy. Every so often a Lizard soldier, looking even more alien than usual in a shiny gray suit that covered him from toe claws to crown, would go over and put something—at this distance, Jäger couldn't tell what—into the back of a truck.

*I hope we don't have to hijack a vehicle*, he thought. Given the state of what the Russians, for lack of a suitably malodorous word, called roads, he wasn't sure the band *could* hijack a Lizard truck.

From a position carefully camouflaged by tall dead grass, a German machine gun began to bark. A couple of Lizards fell. Others started to run, while still others, wiser or more experienced, flattened out on the ground as human soldiers would have done. The glass blew out of a truck's windshield when a round or two struck home; Jäger couldn't see what happened to the driver.

The commander of the Lizard panzer needed longer to notice the machine gun had opened up than he should have. *TheDwmmkopf* had his cupola buttoned up, too; Jäger would have demoted a man (to say nothing of blistering his ears and maybe his backside) for a piece of stupidity—or was it cowardice?—like that.

When the Lizard finally deigned to pay some attention to the machine gun nest, he did just what Jäger had hoped he would: instead of standing off and annihilating it with a round or two from his cannon, he charged toward it, his own machine gun chattering.

The German weapon fell silent That worried Jäger; if the Lizard got lucky with his own machine gun, the partisan band might have to back off and come up with a new plan. But then the concealed machine gun started up again, now firing straight at the oncoming tank.

Save as a goad, that was useless; Jäger watched 7.92mm bullets spark off the Lizard panzer's invincible front armor and fly away uselessly. The popgun onslaught, though, was intended only as a goad, to make sure the enemy tank commander took the machine-gun nest too seriously to worry about anything else.

Georg Schultz let out a gleeful grunt "God damn me to hell if he isn't taking the bait, sir."

"*Ja*," Jäger answered absently. He watched the panzer slog through the mud until it was just past the edge of the woods. Then its main armament did speak, a bellow that made Jäger's ears ring. Mud fountained up from just behind the German machine-gun nest, but the weapon kept returning fire.

Jäger turned his head to glance over at Max. "Brave men there," he remarked.

The muzzle of the cannon lowered a centimeter or so, fired again. This time, the machine gun was put out of action—a singularly bloodless term, Jäger thought, for haying a couple of men suddenly made into mangled chunks of raw meat.

But Otto Skorzeny was already dashing forward from the birch trees toward the Lizard panzer. The enemy tank commander must have been looking straight through his forward cupola periscope, for he never saw the big SS man pounding toward him from the flank and rear. Muck flying from his boots as he ran, Skorzeny covered the couple of hundred meters out to the panzer in time an Olympic sprinter might have envied.

The big machine started to move just, as he came up on it He scrambled onto the rear deck, chucked a satchel charge under the overhang of the turret, and dove off headfirst. The charge exploded. The turret jerked as if kicked by a mule. Blue flames spurted from the engine compartment. An escape hatch in the front of the panzer popped open. A Lizard sprang out.

Jäger took no notice of the alien enemy. He was watching Skorzeny leg it back toward the shelter of the woods. Then his gaze slid to Max again. "Fuck you, Nazi," the Jewish partisan repeated. But even he saw that would not do, not by itself. Grudgingly, he added, "That SS bastard isn't just brave, he's fucking crazy."

Since Jäger had thought the same thing since he met Skorzeny in Moscow, he declined to argue. Along with everyone else in the band, he grabbed his rifle, got to his feet, and ran toward the Lizards of the salvage crew, shouting at the top of his lungs.

The heavy protective suits made the Lizards slow and awkward. They fell like ninepins. Jäger wondered how safe it was for him to be tramping about with no more protection than his helmet, but only for a moment. Getting shot was a much more pressing concern.

"Come on, come on, come on!" he shouted, pointing toward the truck the German

machine gun had shot up. It hadn't moved since. When he got up to it, he found out why: one of the rounds that shattered the windshield had also blown out the back of the driver's head. The blood and brains splashed over the inside of the cab looked no different from those of a human being similarly killed.

Having made sure the truck driver was in fact dead, Jäger hurried around to the rear of the vehicle. The latch there was very much like the one on an earthly truck. The partisans already had it open. Jäger peered into the cargo compartment, which was lit by fluorescent tubes that ran from front to back across the ceiling.

The mud-covered little misshapen chunks of metal that lay on the floor of the compartment seemed hardly worth the trouble to which the Lizards had gone to recover them. But they were what the raiders had come to steal: if the Lizards wanted them so badly, they ought to be worth having.

Along with his rifle, Max carried an entrenching tool. He scooped up several of those innocuous-looking muddy lumps, dumped them into a lead-lined wooden box a couple of the other partisans hauled between them. The instant he finished, they slammed on the lid. Three men spoke together. "Let's get out of here."

The advice was, to say the least, timely. The Lizards had another panzer off in the distance, maybe a kilometer and a half away. It started churning toward them. In the same instant, muzzle flashes sprang from the machine gun on its turret. Bullets cracked past the running men. One of them fell with a groan. Long-range machine-gun fire wasn't much good for taking out any particular individual, but it could decimate troops caught in the open. Jäger had fought on the Somme in 1916. German machine guns then had done a lot worse than decimating the oncoming British.

Unlike those brave but foolish Englishmen a generation before, the partisans were not advancing into barbed-wire entanglements but running for the cover of the woods. They were almost there when one of the men carrying the lead-lined chest threw up his hands and pitched forward onto his face. Jäger was only a few meters away. He grabbed the handle the partisan had dropped. The box was astonishingly heavy for its size, but not too heavy to lift. Jäger and the Jew on the other side ran on.

The sound of dead leaves scrunching wetly under his feet was one of the loveliest things he'd ever heard: it meant he'd made it into the woods. He and his fellow bearer dodged around tree trunks, trying to take advantage of as much cover as they could.

Behind them, the Lizard panzer kept firing, but it didn't sound as if it was getting any closer. Jäger turned to the partisan beside him. "I think the bastard bogged down." The Jew nodded. The two men grinned at each other as they hurried away from the tank.

Jäger felt surprising confidence build in him. He'd thought of this mission as suicidal ever since the NKVD man proposed it back in Moscow. That hadn't kept him from taking part; suicidal missions were part of war and, if they served the cause, were often worth attempting. But now he began to think he might actually get away with this one. Then—well, he'd worry about *then* later. He began to think he'd have a *later* in which to worry about *then*.



A whirring thutter in the air brought all his fears flooding back. Knowing it was foolish, knowing it was dangerous, he glanced over his shoulder. The helicopter swelled in the split second he watched it. Its guns started to chatter. Mud wouldn't slow it down. Left alone, it could hover over the bare-branched woods and lash the raiders with fire until they had to give up their mission.

*Wham, wham, wham!* From among the trees, a 2-centimeter anti-aircraft cannon opened up on the helicopter. With its light mount, designed for mountain warfare, it had made up twenty-seven man-portable loads; Jäger had hauled one of them himself. It was a German weapon, served by a German crew: part of the reason the Soviets had been willing to include *Wehrmacht* men along with their own partisans in this band.

The Lizard helicopter just hung in midair for a moment, as if disbelieving the guerrillas could seriously attack it. It was proof against rifle bullets, but not against the anti-aircraft gun's shells. Jäger watched them chew it to pieces, watched chunks of metal fly from it at every hit.

Too late, the helicopter swung toward its tormentor. The 2-centimeter *Flak 38* kept pounding away. Like a sinking ship, the helicopter heeled over onto one side and crashed.

The raiders' cheers filled the woods. Max pumped his fist in the air and screamed, "Take that, you—" Jäger couldn't follow the rest of the Yiddish he called it, but it sounded explosive. The panzer major yelled himself, then blinked. Fighting alongside a Jew was one thing; tactics dictated that. Finding you agreed with him, finding you might even like him as a man, was something else again. If he lived long enough, Jäger would have to think about that.

Otto Skorzeny came dodging through the trees. Even filthy, even in dappled SS camouflage gear, he managed to look dapper. He shouted, "Move, you stupid fools! If we don't get away now, we never will. You think the Lizards are going to sit there with their thumbs up their arses forever? It's your funeral, if you do."

As usual, Skorzeny galvanized everyone around him. The Red partisans undoubtedly hated him still, but who could argue with a man who'd just singlehandedly wrecked a Lizard panzer? The raiders hurried deeper into the woods.

None too soon—again Jäger heard the thuttering roar of helicopters in the air. He glanced back and saw a pair of them now. The Germans manning the anti-aircraft cannon opened up at long range this time, hoping to knock down one in a hurry so they could fight the other on more even terms—and also hoping to draw both machines' fire onto themselves and away from their fleeing comrades.

The helicopters separated, swung around to engage the anti-aircraft cannon from opposite sides. Jäger wished the gun were a big 88; it could have swatted the copters like flies. But an 88 was anything but a man-portable weapon—it had a barrel almost seven meters long and weighed more than eight tonnes. The stubby mountain anti-aircraft gun would have to do.

One of the helicopters blew up in midair, showering flaming debris over the woods. The other bored in for a firing run. Jäger watched tracers from the cannon on the ground swivel through a wild arc, then stab up at the second helicopter while tracers from its machine guns stabbed down.

The 2-centimeter *Flak 38* suddenly fell silent. But the helicopter did not go on to pursue the partisans. A rending crash moments later told him why. The gunners had done their duty as well as they were able—better than anyone dared hope when the mission was planned.

The partisan carrying the lead-lined box with Jäger was at the end of his tether, stumbling and staggering and gasping like a man breathing his last. Jäger scowled at him. “Get away from there and put somebody else on that handle before you ruin the mission and get us both killed.” Only after he’d spoken did he notice the order in which he’d put those two elements. He grunted. In case he hadn’t noticed, that would have told him he was a thoroughly trained soldier.

The raider nodded his thanks and reeled away. Georg Schultz hurried up. “Here, I’ll take some of that, sir,” he said, nodding to the burden Jäger now held alone.

“No, let me.” It was Max, the foul-mouthed Jewish partisan: He wasn’t as big, probably wasn’t as strong as Schultz, but he’d shown himself to be wiry and tough. All other things being equal, Jäger would have preferred his tank gunner beside him, but all other things were not equal. The mission might depend on cooperation between surviving Germans and Russians. Having two Germans carrying the precious whatever-it-was inside that chest might make the Reds think harder about selling them out.

All that ran through Jäger’s head in a couple of seconds. He couldn’t afford to think very long; hanging onto the chest solo was hard work. He said, “Let the Jew do it, Georg.” Schultz looked unhappy but fell back a couple of paces. Max took one of the handles from Jäger. Together, they started moving again.

Even as he trotted beside Jäger, Max glared at him. “How would you like it if I said, ‘Let the fucking Nazi do it,’ eh, Mister fucking Nazi?”

“That’s Major fucking Nazi to you, Mister Jew,” Jäger retorted. “And the next time you want to go swearing at me, kindly remember those flak men back there who stayed at their gun and got shot up to help you make your getaway.”

“They did their jobs,” Max snapped. But after he spat into a clump of brown leaves, he added, “Yeah, all right, I’ll remember them in the *kaddish*.”

“I don’t know that word,” Jäger said.

“Prayer for the dead,” Max said shortly. He glanced toward Jäger again. Now his gaze was measuring instead of hostile, but somehow no easier to bear. “You don’t know fucking much, do you? You don’t know Babi Yar for instance, eh?”

“No,” Jäger admitted. “What’s that?”

“Place a little outside of Kiev, not far from here, as a matter of fact. You find a big hole in the ground, then line Jews up at the edge of it. Men, women, children—doesn’t

matter. You line 'em up, you shoot 'em in the back of the neck. They fall right into their own graves. You Germans are fucking efficient, you know? Then you line up another row and shoot them, too. You keep doing it till your big hole is full. Then you find yourself another fucking hole.”

“Propaganda—” Jäger said.

Without a word, Max used his free hand to pull down the collar of his peasant's blouse and bare his neck. Jäger knew a gunshot scar when he saw one. The Jew said, “I must have jerked just as the gun went off behind me. I fell down. They had bastards down in the hole with more guns, making sure everybody really was dead. They must have missed me. I hope they don't get a fucking reprimand, you know? More people fell on me, but not too many—it was getting late. When it was dark, I managed to crawl out and get away. I've been killing fucking Germans ever since.”

Jäger didn't answer. He hadn't gone out of his way to notice what happened to Jews in Russian territory taken by the Germans. Nobody in the *Wehrmacht* went out of his way to notice that. It wasn't safe for your career; it might not be safe for you personally. He'd heard things. Everybody heard things. He hadn't worried much about it. After all, the *Führer* had declared Jews the enemies of the *Reich*.

But there were ways soldiers treated enemies. Lining them up at the edge of a pit and shooting them from behind wasn't supposed to be one of those ways. Jäger tried to imagine himself doing that. It wasn't easy. But if the *Reich* was at war and his superior gave him the order...He shook his head. He just didn't know.

From across the chest, less than a meter away, his Jewish yokemate watched him flounder. Watching Max watch him only made Jäger flounder harder. If Jews could flip-flop from enemies of the *Reich* to comrades-in-arms, that just made massacring them all the harder to stomach.

Max's voice was sly. “You maybe have a fucking conscience?”

“Of course I have a conscience,” Jäger said indignantly. Then he shut up again. If he had a conscience, as he'd automatically claimed, how was he supposed to ignore what Germany might well have been doing? (Even in his own mind, he didn't want to phrase it any more definitely than that.)

To his relief, the woods started thinning out ahead. That meant the most dangerous part of the mission—crossing open country with what they'd stolen from the Lizards—lay ahead. Beside the abyss whose edge he'd been treading with Max, physical danger suddenly seemed a welcome diversion. As long as he was putting his own life on the line, he'd be too busy to look down into the abyss and see the people piled there with neat holes in the backs of their necks.

The survivors of the raiding party gathered near the edge of the trees. Skorzeny took charge of them. From under the thick layer of dead leaves, he pulled out several chests which looked the same as the one Jäger and Max carried but were not lead-lined. “Two men to each one,” he ordered, pausing to let the Russian partisans who understood

German translate for those who didn't. "We scatter now, two by two, to make it as hard as we can for the Lizards to figure out who has the real one."

One of the partisans said, "How do we know the real one will go where it's supposed to?"

All the worn, dirty men, Russians and Germans alike, nodded at that. They still had no great trust in one another; they'd fought too hard for that. Skorzeny said, "We have one from each side holding the prize. The *panje* wagon that's waiting for them has one from each side, too. If they don't try to murder each other, we'll be all right, *ja?*"

The SS man laughed to show he'd made a joke. Jäger looked over to Max. The Jew was not laughing. He wore the expression Jäger had often seen on junior officers who faced a tough tactical problem: he was weighing his options. That meant Jäger had to weigh his, too.

Skorzeny said, "We'll go out one pair at a time. The team with the real chest will go third."

"Who told you you were God?" a partisan asked.

The SS man's scarred cheek crinkled as he gave an impudent grin. "Who told you I wasn't?" He waited a moment to see if he got any more argument. When he didn't, he swatted a man from the pair closest to him on the shoulder and shouted "Go! Go! Go!" as if they were paratroopers diving out of a Ju-52 transport plane.

The second pair followed a moment later. Then Skorzeny yelled "Go! Go! Go!" again and Jäger and Max burst out of the woods and started off toward the promised *panje* wagon. It waited several kilometers north and west, outside the Lizards' tightest security zone. Jäger wanted to sprint the whole way. Slogging through mud carrying a heavy chest, that wasn't practical.

"I'm fucking sick of rain," Max said, though he knew as well as Jäger that the snow which would follow was even harder to endure.

Jäger said, "Right now I don't mind rain at all. The Lizards will have a harder time chasing us through it than they would on dry ground. The low clouds will make us harder to spot through the air, too. If you want to get right down to it, I wouldn't mind fog, either."

"I would," Max said. "We'd get lost."

"I have a compass."

"Very efficient," Max said dryly. Jäger took it for a compliment until he remembered it was the word the Jew had used to describe the assembly-line murder at—what was the name of the place?—at Babi Yar, that was it.

Anger surged in the panzer major. The trouble was, he had trouble deciding whether to turn it on his own people for dishonoring the uniforms they wore or the Jew for telling him about it and making him notice it. He glanced over at Max. As usual, Max was watching him. *He* had no trouble finding a focus for his fury.

Jäger twisted his head, looked behind him. The driving rain had already obscured the woods. He could see one of the decoy pairs, but only one. He wouldn't have wanted to track anyone in weather like this, and wished just as much trouble on the Lizards. They wouldn't pursue in panzers, anyhow; from what he'd seen, their armor had at least as much trouble coping with Russian mud as the *Wehrmacht* did.

He must have been thinking aloud. Max grinned an unsympathetic grin and said, "You poor bogged-down bastards."

"Fuck you, too, Max." In the wrong tone of voice, that would have started the fight Skorzeny had not-quite-joked about. As it was, the Jewish partisan's expression changed shape as if he, like Jäger, had to change some of his thinking.

Then both men's faces congealed to fear. The Lizards had more helicopters in the air, and this time no *flak* cannon would stop them. Rifle shots rang out from back in the woods, but using a rifle against one of these machines was as magnificently futile as the Polish lancers' charges against German panzers back when the war—the human war—was new.

But these rifle bullets did have some effect. The whistling roar of the copter rotors grew no louder. The deadly machines hovered over the trees. Their guns snarled. When they paused, more rifle fire announced that they hadn't finished off all the raiders. The yarnmering resumed.

The sound from the helicopters changed. Jäger looked back, but could see nothing through the curtains of rain. He tried to be optimistic anyhow: "Maybe they're settling down so they can comb through the woods—if they are, they'll be looking in the wrong place."

Max was less sanguine: "Don't count on them to be so fucking stupid."

"They aren't what you'd call good soldiers, not in the tactical sense," Jäger answered seriously. "They're brave enough, and of course they have all that wonderful equipment, but ask them to do anything they haven't planned out in advance and they start floundering around." *They're even worse than Russians that way*, he thought, but he kept quiet about that.

The strafing from the helicopters hadn't slaughtered all the raiders. Rifles barked again; a Soviet submachine gun added its note to the din. Then, harsher and flatter, Lizard automatic small arms answered.

"They *have* landed troops!" Jäger exclaimed. "The longer they waste time back there, the better the chance the mission has of succeeding."

"And the likelier they'll kill off my friends," Max said. "Yours too, I suppose. Does a fucking Nazi have friends? After a tough day shooting Jews in the back of the neck, do you go out and drink some beer with your *Kameraden*?"

"I'm a soldier, not a butcher," Jäger said. He wondered whether Georg Schultz had got one of the dummy chests. If so, he was tramping through the mud, too. If not...He also wondered about Otto Skorzeny. The SS captain seemed to have a gift for creating

impossible situations and then escaping from them. He'd need all that gift now. But thinking of the SS made Jäger think of Babi Yar. That would have been their doing; *Wehrmacht* men couldn't have stomached it. He added, "You Russians have butchers, too."

"So?" Max said. "Does that make you right?" Jäger found no good answer. The Jewish partisan went on, "I wish they'd sent me to the *gulag* in Siberia years before you fucking Germans ever got to Kiev. Then I wouldn't have had to see what I saw."

Further argument cut off abruptly when Jäger fell headlong into the muck. Max helped him haul himself to his feet. They pushed on. Jäger felt as if he were a hundred years old. A kilometer through this clinging goo was worse than a day's march on hard, dry ground. He wistfully wondered whether the Soviet Union contained so much as a square centimeter of hard, dry ground at the moment.

He also wondered for what the soft, wet ground over which he was fleeing had been used. In Germany, land had a clearly defined purpose: meadow, crops, forest, park, town. This stretch met no such criteria. It was just land—raw terrain. Of that the Soviet Union had unending inefficient abundance.

Jäger abruptly cut off his disparaging thoughts about Soviet inefficiency. His head went up like a hunted animal's. The tiny, atrophied muscles in his ears tried to make them prick like a cat's. Lizard helicopters were in the air again. "We have to move faster," he said to Max.

The partisan pointed to his own trousers, which were covered in mud up to the knees. He dismissed Jäger's suggestion with three sardonic words: "Good fucking luck."

Rationally, Jäger knew Max was right. Still, as the whirring drone from the sky grew louder, he wanted to drop the heavy chest and run. He looked over his shoulder. The driving rain veiled the helicopter from sight. He could only hope it helped hide him from the Lizards.

Off to the south, from the middle of this big open field, shots cracked; Jäger recognized the deep bark of a Gewehr-98K, the standard German infantry rifle (no way to tell now, of course, whether it was borne by a standard German infantryman or a very definitely nonstandard Russian partisan). The helicopter that had been closest to him droned off to meet the fleabite challenge.

"I think some of the decoys just drew them away from us," Jäger said.

"It might be a Jew saving your neck, Nazi. How does that make you feel?" Max said. After a moment, though, he added in wondering tones, "Or it might be a fucking Nazi saving mine. How does that make *me* feel? You know the word *verkakte*, Nazi? This is a *verkakte* mess, and no mistake."

A village—maybe even a small town—loomed out of the rain ahead. In instant unspoken agreement, both men swerved wide around it. "What's the name of that place?" Jäger asked.

"Chernobyl, I think," Max said. "The Lizards drove the people out after their ship blew

up, but they might keep a little garrison there.”

“Let’s hope they don’t,” Jäger said. The Jewish partisan nodded.

If the village held a garrison, it didn’t come forth to search for the raiders...or maybe it did, and simply missed Jäger and Max in the downpour. Once past the clump of ugly wooden buildings and even uglier concrete ones, Jäger glanced down at his compass to get back onto the proper course.

Max watched him put it back in his pocket “How are we going to find the fucking *panje* wagon?”

“We keep on this heading until—”

“—we walk past them in the rain,” the Jew put in.

“If you have a better idea, I’d love to hear it,” Jäger said icily.

“I don’t. I was hoping you did.”

They pushed on, skirting another small patch of woods and then returning to the course the compass dictated. Jäger had a piece of black bread and some sausage in his pack. Getting them out one-handed was awkward, but he managed. He broke the bread, bit the sausage in half; and passed Max his share. The Jew hesitated but ate. After a while, he pulled a little tin flask from his hip pocket. He yanked out the cork, gave the flask to Jäger for the first swig. Vodka ran down his throat like fire.

“Thanks,” he said. “That’s good.” He put his thumb over the opening so the rain couldn’t get in, passed the flask back to Max.

Off to one side, somebody spoke up in Russian. Jäger started, then dropped the chest that had become like an unwelcome part of him and grabbed for the rifle slung on his back. Then a German voice added, “*Ja*, we could use something good about now.”

“You found them,” Max said to Jäger as the *panje* wagon came up through the muck. “That’s fucking amazing.” Instead of hatred, he looked at Jäger with something like respect. Jäger, who was at least as surprised as the Jewish partisan, did his best not to show it.

The horse that pulled the *panje* wagon had seen better days. The light wooden wagon itself rode on large wheels; it was low, wide, and flat-bottomed, so it could float almost boatlike across the surface of even the deepest mud. It looked as if its design hadn’t changed for centuries, which was probably true; no vehicle was better adapted to coping with Russia’s twice-yearly *rasputitsa*.

The driver and the fellow beside him both wore Red Army greatcoats, but instead of a *shelm*, a Russian cloth helmet rather like a balaclava, the man who wasn’t holding the reins had on the long-brimmed cap of a German tropical-weight uniform. The weather was anything but tropical, but the cap kept the rain out of his eyes.

He said, “You have the cabbages?”

“Yes, by God, we do,” Jäger said. Max nodded. Together, they lifted the lead-lined chest into the wagon. Jäger had grown so used to the burden that his shoulder ached

when he was relieved of it. Max handed the flask of vodka to the driver, then clambered up over the side of the wagon. Jäger followed him. Between them, they almost filled the wagon bed.

The fellow with the *shelm* spoke in Russian. Max turned it into Yiddish for Jäger. “He says we won’t bother with roads. We’ll head straight across country. The Lizards aren’t likely to find us that way.”

“And if they do?” Jäger asked.

“*Nichevo*,” the Russian answered when Max put the question to him: “It can’t be helped.” Since that was manifestly true, Jäger just nodded. The driver twitched the reins, clucked to the horse. The *panje* wagon began to roll.

“It’s true,” Yi Min declared. “I floated through the air light as a dandelion seed in the little scaly devils’ airplane, and it flew so high that I looked down on the whole world.” The apothecary conveniently forgot to mention—in fact, he’d just about made himself forget altogether—how sick he’d been while he floated light as a dandelion seed.

“And what did the world look like when you looked down on it?” one of his listeners asked.

“The foreign devils are right, believe it or not—the world is round, like a ball,” Yi Min answered. “I have seen it with my own eyes, so I know it is so.”

“Ahh,” some of the men said who sat crosslegged in front of him, either impressed at his eyewitness account or astonished that Europeans could be right about anything. Others shook their heads, disbelieving every word he said. *Foolish turtles*, he thought. He’d had a lot of lies taken for granted in his time; now that he was telling nothing but the truth, half the people in the scaly devils’ prisoner compound made him out to be a liar.

In any case, his audience hadn’t gathered to hear him talk about the shape of the world. A man in a blue cotton tunic said, “Tell us more about the women the little scaly devils gave to you.” Everyone, believers and skeptics alike, spoke up in favor of that; even if Yi Min were to lie about it, he’d still be amusing.

The best part was, he didn’t need to lie. “I had a woman whose skin was black as charcoal all over, save only the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet. And I had another who was pale as milk, even her nipples only pink, with eyes of fine jade and hair and bush the color of a fox’s fur.”

“Ahh,” the men said again, imagining it. One of them asked, “Did their strangeness make them better on the mat?”

“Neither of those two was particularly skilled,” Yi Min said, and his audience sighed with disappointment. He quickly added, “Still, their being so different to look at was piquant, like pickle after sweet. If you ask me, the gods first made the black folk, but left them in the oven too long. Then they tried again, but took the white folk—the



foreign devils most of us had seen—out too soon. Finally they made us Chinese, and cooked us to perfection.”

The men who listened to him laughed; some of them clapped their hands. Then the fellow in the blue tunic said, “From what oven did the gods take the little scaly devils?”

Nervous silence fell. Yi Min said, “To know that for certain, you would have to ask the little devils themselves. If you want to know what I think, my guess is that a whole different set of gods made them. *Why, do you know they have a mating season* like, cattle or songbirds, and are impotent all the rest of the year?”

“Poor devils,” several men chorused, the first sympathy Yi Min had heard for the Lizards.

“It’s true,” he insisted. “That’s why they took me up into their airplane that never lands in the first place: to see for themselves that real human beings could mate at any season of the year.”

His smile was very nearly a leer. “I proved it to their satisfaction—and to mine.”

He smiled again, this time happily, at the grins and laughter his words won. Being back among people with whom he could speak, back among people who appreciated his undoubted cleverness, was the greatest joy in returning to the ground after so long aloft.

Then a bald old fellow who sold eggs said, “Didn’t the little devils also kidnap that pretty girl who was living in your tent? Why didn’t she come back with you?”

“They wanted to keep her up there,” Yi Min answered, shrugging. “Why, I don’t know; they would not tell me. What does it matter? She’s only a woman.”

He was just as glad Liu Han remained with the scaly devils. She’d been a pleasant convenience to him, certainly, but no more than that. And she’d seen him sick and vulnerable while he floated without weight, a weakness he was doing his best to pretend had never happened. Now, with the prestige of his journey and the connections he retained with the little scaly devils, women both prettier and more willing than Liu Han were happy to share his mat. He sometimes wondered what the little devils were doing to her, but his curiosity remained abstract.

Bowing as he sat, he said, “I do hope I’ve held your interest, my friends, and that you’ll reward me for helping you pass an idle hour.”

The gifts the audience gave were about what he’d expected: a little cash, a pair of old sandals that wouldn’t fit him but which he could trade for something he wanted, some radishes, a smoked duck breast wrapped in paper and tied with string, a couple of tiny pots filled with ground spices. He lifted their lids, sniffed, smiled appreciatively. Yes, he’d been paid well for entertaining.

He gathered up his loot and walked back toward the hut in which he was living. Nothing was left of the tent he’d shared with Liu Han. He could not honestly say he missed it, either; with winter nearly at hand, he was glad to have wooden walls around him. Of course, the people in the camp had also stolen everything he’d accumulated before the scaly devils took him up into the sky, but so what? He was already well on

his way to getting more and better. Getting more and better of everything, as far as he could see, was what the world was all about.

From the changes in the camp while he'd been flying, he had to conclude just about everyone agreed with him. Instead of several square *li* of flapping canvas, it now boasted houses of wood and stone and sheet metal, some of them quite substantial. None of the construction materials had been here when the scaly devils' prisoners were herded into the wireenclosed compound, but they were here now. One way or another, people managed. Sharp wire wasn't enough to keep them from managing.

As he came up to his own shelter, Yi Min readied the key that he carried on a bit of string around his neck. Key and lock both had cost only a couple of pig's feet; the smith who made them out of scrap metal was too skinny to have bargained hard. Yi Min knew they weren't very good, but what did that matter? The lock on his door publicly proclaimed him a man of property, which was what he had in mind. It wasn't supposed to keep thieves away. His close connections with the little devils took care of that.

On about the fourth try, the key clicked, the lock opened, and Yi Min went inside. He started a fire in the little charcoal brazier by his sleeping mat. The feeble warmth the brazier gave made him long for his old home, where he slept on top of the low clay hearth and stayed snug even in the worst weather. He shrugged. The gods dealt the tiles in the game of life; a man's job was to arrange them into the best hand he could.

Sudden silence clamped down on chattering friends, shouting husbands, screeching wives, even squalling children. Yi Min instinctively understood what that meant: little scaly devils close by. He was already turning toward the door when the knock came.

He raised the inner bar (regardless of connections, no sense taking chances), pulled the door open. He bowed low. "An, honored Ssofeg, you do me great favor by honoring my humble dwelling with your presence," he said in Chinese, then went on in the devil's speech: "What is your will, superior of mine? Speak, and it shall be done."

"You are dutiful," Ssofeg said in his own language. It was polite formula and praise at the same time; the scaly devils were *even more punctilious than Chinese about respect for superiors* and elders. Then Ssofeg switched to Chinese, which he used with Yi Min as the apothecary used the little devils' language with him. "You have more of what I seek?"

"I have more, superior of mine," Yi Min said in the Lizards' speech. One of the little spicepots he'd received for his talk of women and other marvels was full of powdered ginger. He took out a tiny pinch, put it in the palm of his other hand, and held it out for Ssofeg.

The little devil flicked out his tongue, for all the world like a kitten lapping from a bowl—although the tongue itself so much reminded Yi Min of a serpent's that he had to steel himself to keep from jerking away. Two quick licks and the ginger was gone.

For a couple of seconds, Ssofeg simply stood where he was. Then he quivered all over and let out a long, slow hiss. It was the nearest approach to a man's ecstatic grunt at the moment of Clouds and Rain that Yi Min had ever heard from a little scaly devil. As if

he'd forgotten Chinese, Ssofeg spoke in his own language: "You can have no idea how fine that makes me feel."

"No doubt you are right, superior of mine," Yi Min said. He liked to get drunk; he enjoyed a pipe of opium every so often, too, though there he was very moderate for fear of permanently blunting his drive and ambition. As an apothecary, he'd come across and sampled a lot of other substances alleged to produce pleasure: everything from hemp leaves to powdered rhinoceros horn. Most, so far as he could tell, had no effect whatever. That didn't keep him from selling them, but it did keep him from trying them twice.

But ginger? As far as he was concerned, ginger was just a condiment. Some people claimed it had aphrodisiac powers because ginger roots sometimes looked like gnarled little men, but it had never done anything to harden Yi Min's lance. But when Ssofeg tasted it, he might have died and gone to the heaven. Christian missionaries always talked about in glowing words.

The little scaly devil said, "Give me more. Every time I taste the pleasure, I crave it again." His bifurcated tongue went out, then in.

"I will give you more, superior of mine, but what will you give me in return? Ginger is rare and expensive; I have had to pay much to get even this little amount for you." Yi Min was lying in his teeth, but Ssofeg didn't know that. Nor did the people from whom he got ginger know he was selling it to the scaly devils. They would eventually figure it out, of course, at which point competition would cut into his profits. But for now—

For now, Ssofeg let out another hiss, this one redolent of distress. "Already I have given you much, very much." His tailstump lashed in agitation. "But I must know this—this delight once more. Here." He took from around his neck something that most closely resembled the field glasses Yi Min had once seen a Japanese officer using. "These see in darkness as well as light. I will report them missing. Quick, give me another taste."

"I hope I will be able to get any kind of price for them," Yi Min said peevishly. In fact, he wondered whether the Nationalists, the Communists, or the Japanese would pay most for the new trinket. He had contacts with all three; the little scaly devils were naive if they thought mere wire cut a prison camp off from the world around it.

Such decisions could wait. By the way Ssofeg stood swaying slightly, he couldn't Yi Min gave him another pinch of ginger. He licked it off the apothecary's palm. When his pleasure-filled shiver finally stopped, he said, "If I report much more gear as missing, I shall surely be called to account. Yet I must have ginger. What shall I do."

Yi Min had been hoping for just that question. As casually as he could, keeping any trace of a chortle from his voice, he said, "I could sell you a lot of ginger now." He showed Ssofeg the spicepot full of it.

The scaly devil's tailstump lashed again. "I must have it! But how?"

"You buy it from me now," Yi Min repeated. "Then you keep some—enough for yourself—and sell the rest to other males of the Race. They will make up your cost and

more.”

Ssofeg turned both eyes full upon the apothecary, staring as if he were the Buddha reincarnated. “I could do that, couldn’t I? Then I could pass on to you what they convey to me, my own difficulties with inventory control would disappear, and you would gain the wherewithal to acquire still more of this marvelous herb which I desire more with each passing day. Truly you are a Big Ugly of genius, Yi Min!”

“The superior of mine is gracious to this humble inferior,” Yi Min said. He did not smile; Ssofeg was a clever little devil, and might notice and start asking questions better left unraised.

No, on second thought, Ssofeg was unlikely to notice anything. He was caught in the gloom that always seemed to seize him when ginger’s exhilaration wore off. Now he shook as if from an ague rather than with delight. He moaned, “But how can I in good conscience expose other males of the Race to this constant craving I feel myself? That would not be right”

He stared hungrily at the spicepot full of ginger. Fear bubbled through Yi Min. Some opium addicts would kill to keep from being separated from their drug, and ginger seemed to hit Ssofeg far harder than opium did its human users. The apothecary said, “If you take this from me now, superior of mine, where will you get more when you have used it all?”

The little devil made a noise like a boiling kettle. “Plan for tomorrow, plan for next year, plan for the generations yet to come,” he said, sounding as if he were repeating a lesson learned long ago in school. He resumed, “You are right, of course. Thievery would in the long run prove futile. What then is your price for the pot of precious herb you hold here?”

Yi Min had an answer ready: “I want one of the picture-taking machines the Race has made, the ones that take pictures you can look at from all around. I want also a supply of whatever it is the machine takes the pictures on.” He remembered how—interesting—the pictures the devils had taken of Liu Han and him were. Many men in the camp would pay well to watch such pictures...while he could give the young men and girls who would perform in them next to nothing.

But Ssofeg said, “I myself cannot get you one of these machines. Give me the ginger now, and I will use it to find a male who has access to them and can abstract it so it will not be missed.”

Yi Min laughed scornfully. “You called me wise before. Do you all at once think me a fool?” Hard bargaining followed. In the end, the apothecary surrendered a quarter of the ginger to Ssofeg, the rest to remain with him until payment was forthcoming. The little scaly devil reverently enclosed the ground spice in a transparent envelope, put that envelope into one of the pouches he wore on the belt round his waist, and hurried out of Yi Min’s hut. The devils’ gait always struck Yi Min as skittery, but Ssofeg’s movements seemed downright furtive.

*Well they might*, the apothecary thought. The Japanese had strict laws against selling equipment to the Chinese; since the little devils' gear was so much better than that of the Japanese, it only stood to reason that their regulations would be harsher. If Ssofeg got caught by his people's inspectors, he would probably be in even bigger trouble than he thought.

Well, that was his lookout. Yi Min had been certain almost from the day the scaly devils landed that they would make his fortune. At first he'd thought it would be as an interpreter. Now, though, ginger and—with luck—interesting films looked likely to prove even more profitable. He wasn't fussy about how he got rich, as long as he did.

*I'm on my way*, he thought.

Sweat trickled through Bobby Fiore's beard, dripped down onto the smooth, shiny surface of the mat on which he sat. When he got up to walk over to the faucet, his buttocks made rude squelching noises as they pulled free from the mat. The water that came when he pushed a button was warmer than luke-and had a faint chemical tang. He made himself drink anyhow. In heat like this, you had to drink.

He wished he had some salt tablets. He'd spent a couple of seasons playing ball in west Texas and New Mexico; the weather there hadn't been a lot cooler than the Lizards kept their spaceship. Every team in that part of the country kept a bowl of salt tablets by the bat rack. He thought they did some good: without them, how were you supposed to replace what you sweated away?

The door to his cubicle silently slid open. A Lizard brought in some rations for him, and a magazine as well. "Thank you, superior of mine," Fiore hissed politely. The Lizard did not deign to reply. It got out of the cubicle in a hurry. The door closed behind it.

The rations, as usual, were Earthly canned goods: this time, a can of pork and beans and one of stewed tomatoes. Fiore sighed. The Lizards seemed to pull cans off the shelf at random. The meal before had been fruit salad and condensed milk, the one before that chicken noodle soup (cold, undiluted, and still in the can) and chocolate syrup. After weeks on such fare, he would have killed for a green salad, fresh meat, or a scrambled egg.

The magazine, however, was a treat, even if it did date from 1941. When he wasn't with Liu Han, he was here by himself and had to make his own amusement. Something new to look at would keep him interested for several meals. The title—*Signal*—even let him hope it would be in English.

He found out it wasn't as soon as he opened it. Just what the language was, he couldn't tell, his formal education having stopped in the tenth grade. Something Scandinavian, he guessed: he'd seen o's with lines through them like these on Minnesota *shopfronts in towns where everybody seemed to be blond and blue-eyed*.

He didn't need to be able to read the *Signal* to figure out what it was—a Nazi propaganda magazine. Here was Goebbels smiling from behind his desk, here were

Russians surrendering to men in coalscuttle helmets, here were a rather beefy cabaret dancer and her soldier boyfriend. Here was the world that had been before the Lizards came. He clenched his teeth; tears stung his eyes. Being reminded of that world also reminded him how much things had changed.

One thing fifteen years of playing minor-league ball had taught him was how to roll with the punches. That meant eating pork and beans and stewed tomatoes when the Lizards gave them to him, lest his next meal be worse or fail to come at all. It meant looking at the pictures in the *Signal* when he couldn't read the words. And it meant hoping he could see Liu Han some time soon, but not letting himself get downhearted when he had to stay in his cubicle alone.

He was washing molasses and tomato juice off his fingers and trying to rinse his beard clean when the door opened again. The Lizard that had brought in the cans now carried them away. Fiore looked at the *Signal* a while longer, then lay down on the mat and went to sleep.

The lights in the cubicle never dimmed, but that didn't bother him. The heat gave him a harder time. Still, he managed. Anyone who could sleep on a bus rattling between Clovis and Lubbock in the middle of July could sleep damn near anywhere. He'd never realized how rough life was in the bush leagues until he found all the rugged things for which it had prepared him.

As usual, he woke slick with sweat. He splashed water over himself to get some of the greasy feel off his skin. For a little while, as it evaporated, he felt almost cool. Then he started sweating again. At least it was dry heat, he told himself. Had it been humid, he would have cooked long since.

He was glancing through the *Signal* again, trying to figure out what some of the Norwegian (or were they Danish?) words meant, when the door opened. He wondered what the Lizards wanted. He wasn't hungry yet; the pork and beans still felt like a medicine ball in his stomach. But instead of a Lizard with canned goods, in walked Liu Han.

"Your mate," said one of the Lizards escorting her. His mouth fell open. Fiore thought that meant he was laughing. That was all right He laughed at the Lizard, too, for not being able to mate.

He gave Liu Han a hug. Neither of them wore anything; they stuck to each other wherever they touched. "How are you?" he said, letting her go. "It's good to see you." It was good to see anyone human, but he didn't say that aloud.

"Good also to see you," Liu Han said, adding the Lizards' emphatic cough to end the sentence. They spoke to each other in a jargon they invented and expanded each time they were together, one no other two people could have followed: English, Chinese, and the Lizards' language pasted together to yield ever-growing meaning.

She said, "I am glad the scaly devils do not force us to mate"—she used the Lizards' word for that—"each time we see each other now."

“You’re glad?” He laughed. “I can only do so much.” He flicked his tongue against the inside of his upper lip as he blew air out through his mouth, making a noise like a window shade rolling up—and him with it.

He’d done that often enough for her to understand it. She smiled at his foolishness. “Not that I don’t like what you do when we mate”—again she used the Lizards’ emotionless word, which let her avoid choosing a human term with more flavor to it—“but I do not like having to do it at their order.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. Being a specimen didn’t appeal to him, either. Then he wondered what they ought to do instead. Besides their bodies, the only thing they had in common was that the Lizards had shanghaied both of them.

Since Liu Han plainly didn’t feel like screwing to pass the time, he went through the *Signal* with her. He’d decided a while ago that she was anything but stupid, but he found how little she knew of the world outside the village from which she’d come.

He couldn’t read the text of the magazine, but he recognized faces and places in the pictures: Goebbels, Marshal Pétain, Paris, North Africa. To Liu Han, they were all strange. He wondered if she’d even heard of Germany.

“Germany and Japan are friends,” he told her, only to discover that Japan wasn’t *Japan* in Chinese. He tried again: “Japan fights”—that in pantomime—“America and fights China, too.”

“Oh, the eastern devils,” she exclaimed. “Eastern devils kill my man, my child, just before little scaly devils come. This Germany friends with eastern devils? Must be bad.”

“Probably,” he said. He’d been sure the Germans were the *bad* guys *when they declared war on the United States*. Since then, though, he’d heard they had done a better job of fighting the Lizards than most. Did that all of a sudden turn them back into good guys? He had trouble figuring out where loyalty to his own country stopped and loyalty to—to his planet, would it be?—started. He wished Sam Yeager were around. Yeager was more used to thinking in terms like those.

He also noticed, not for the first time but more strongly than ever before, that anything not Chinese was somehow devilish to Liu Han. The Lizards were scaly devils; he himself, when he wasn’t *Bobbyfiore* pronounced all as one word, was a foreign devil; and now the Japs were eastern devils. Given what they’d done to her family, he couldn’t blame her for thinking of them like that, but he was pretty sure she would have hung the same label on them no matter what.

He asked her about it, using multilingual circumlocutions. When she finally understood, she nodded, surprised he needed to put the question to her. “If you are not Chinese, of course you are a devil,” she said, as if stating a law of nature.

“That’s not how it is,” Fiore told her; but she didn’t look convinced. Then he remembered that, till he’d started playing ball and meeting all sorts of people instead of just the ones from his neighborhood, he’d been sure everybody who wasn’t Catholic would burn in hell forever. Maybe this devil business was something like that.

They went back to looking at the *Signal*. The high-kicking nightclub dancer in her skimpy satin outfit made Liu Han laugh. “How can she show herself, wearing so little?” she asked, forgetting for the moment that she herself wore nothing. Fiore laughed in turn. Except when he stuck to the mat, he often forgot he was naked, too. Amazing what you got used to.

Liu Han pointed to an advertisement for an Olympia typewriter. “What?” she said in English, adding the Lizard interrogative cough.

Fiore had more trouble explaining it than he’d expected. After a while, he figured out that she couldn’t read or write. He’d known a few ballplayers, mostly from the South, who had the same trouble, but it wasn’t something that automatically occurred to him.

Now he wished more than ever that the *Signal* was in English; he would have started teaching her on the spot. He thought about showing her the alphabet—despite crossed o’s and a’s with little circles above them, the ABCs didn’t change much. But if he didn’t understand what he was reading, how was she supposed to? He gave it up as a bad job and turned to the next page.

It showed a flight of German bombers over some Russian city. In spite of the sweltering heat, she shivered and pressed herself against him. She might not know what a typewriter was for, but she recognized bombers when she saw them. Fiore clicked his tongue between his teeth. Wasn’t that a hell of a thing?

They came to the article about Marshal Pétain. Fiore thought he was going to have trouble putting across what Vichy France was all about, me more so as he didn’t understand all the details himself. But as soon as he managed to convey to her that it was a German puppet state, she nodded and exclaimed, “Manchukuo!”

“That’s right, the Japs have puppets, too, don’t they?” he said.

“Puppets?” She had the concept, but the word eluded her. He resorted to pantomime again until she got the idea. He hammed up his dumb show as much as he could; she always enjoyed that. She did smile now, but only for a moment. Then she said, “The scaly devils have made puppets of us all.”

He blinked; that was as serious an idea as she’d ever gotten across. She was also dead right. If it weren’t for the Lizards, he’d be...doing what? The answer he arrived at brought him up short. If it weren’t for the Lizards, all he’d be doing was trying to keep a floundering minor-league career alive, getting an off-season job, and waiting for Uncle Sam to send him a draft notice. When you stepped back and looked at it, none of that was worth writing home about.

“Maybe we were already puppets before the Lizards came,” he said harshly. His voice grew softer as he added, “if they hadn’t come, I never would have known you, so I guess I’m glad they did.”

Liu Han did not answer right away. Her face was unreadable as she studied Fiore. He flinched from that quiet scrutiny, wondering how badly he’d just stuck his foot in his mouth. He knew she’d been through hard times, and it was a lot rougher for a woman



to have to lie down with a strange man than the other way around. He suddenly wondered exactly what she thought of him. Was he something good, or simply something better than she'd known in captivity before?

How much the answer mattered surprised him. Till now, he hadn't asked himself what Liu Han meant to him, either. *Sure, getting laid was fine, and he'd found out more about that from her* than he'd thought he needed to learn until the Lizards brought him up here. But there was more to it. In spite of all the dreadful things that had happened to her, she remained good people. He wanted to take care of her. But did she want him for anything more than an insurance policy?

She never did answer, not in words. She put her head on his chest, smoothing away the hairs with her hand so they wouldn't tickle her nose. His arms closed around her back. He could have rolled over on top of her, but it didn't cross his mind, not now. They held each other for a while.

He wondered what his mother would say if he told her he was falling in love with a Chinese girl. He hoped he'd have the chance to find out.

Then he wondered how he'd say "I love you" to Liu Han. He didn't know the Chinese for it, she didn't know the English, and it was one place where the Lizards' language helped not at all. He patted her bare shoulder. One way or another, he'd get the idea across.

The latest storm had finally blown out of Chicago leaving a fine dusting of snow on the ground. The Lizards stared at it in swivel-eyed wonder as Sam Yeager marched them along toward the Metallurgical Laboratory. He was comfortable enough in a wool sweater, but they shivered in too-large peacoats scrounged from the Great Lakes Naval Base. Their breath, hotter than his, made puffs of steam in the crisp air.

In spite of intermittent Lizard air raids, a couple of students were playing catch on the dying grass by the walk. *Doing their best to pretend everything's normal*, Yeager thought. He envied them their determination.

As athletes, they weren't much. One of them flat-out missed the ball when it came to him. It skidded through the slush and stopped almost at Yeager's feet. He set down the rifle he was still required to carry, scooped up the baseball and fired it back to the student who'd thrown it. If the kid hadn't caught it, it would have hit him right in the middle of the chest. He stared at Yeager, as if to say *Who is this old guy?* Yeager just grinned, picked up his piece, and started shepherding the Lizards down the walk again.

Ristin said, "You"—he followed it with a Lizard word Yeager didn't know—"very well."

As best he could, Yeager echoed the croaked word. "Not understanding," he added in the Lizards' language. Ristin obligingly gestured while repeating the word. A light went on in Yeager's head. He dropped back into English. "Oh, you mean *throw*." He made as if to throw again, this time without a baseball. "Throw."

"Ssrow," Ristin agreed. He tried English himself: "You—ssrow—good."

"Thanks," Yeager said, and let it go at that. How was he supposed to explain to an alien that he'd made a living (not much of a living, sometimes, but he'd never gone hungry) because he could throw and hit a baseball? If he didn't have a better arm than a couple of half-assed college kids, he'd better leave town.

It wasn't much warmer inside Eckhart Hall than it had been outside. Heat was as hard to come by as electricity these days. Army engineers did a marvelous job of repairing bomb damage, but the Lizards could wreck things faster than they could fix them. Since the elevator wasn't running, Yeager took Ristin and Ullhass up the stairs to Enrico Fermi's office. He didn't know about them, but the exercise made him warmer.

Fermi bounced up out of his chair when Yeager walked the Lizards through his open door. "So good to see you and your friends here," he said effusively. Yeager nodded, hiding a smile at the physicist's heavy accent. He would have bet Bobby Fiore's father sounded the same way.

Fermi had a glass coffeepot set up above a tin of canned heat. Heavy china mugs,

cafeteria-style, stood beside the Sterno. The physicist gestured for Yeager to take one. “Thank you, sir,” Yeager said. He hadn’t noticed little things like cigarettes and coffee until he couldn’t get them whenever he wanted. Scarcity made them precious—and besides, the coffee was hot.

He glanced at Ullhass and Ristin. They’d tried coffee, too, but found it too bitter to stand. That was their tough luck, he thought; it cut them off from something that could heat them up from the inside out. He took another sip from his cup, felt his eyes opening wider. Coffee hit harder when you couldn’t have it every day. So did tobacco; he remembered how Barbara Larssen had reacted to her first smoke in a while.

At Fermi’s gesture, the Lizards perched themselves on a couple of chairs in front of the desk. Their feet barely touched the ground; human furniture was too big for them. Yeager sat down too, off to one side, his Springfield resting in his lap. He was still on guard duty, though that wasn’t his chief reason for being here. Enrico Fermi had more important things to do than learning the Lizards’ language, so Yeager interpreted whenever Ristin and Ullhass ran out of English.

Till the past few weeks, everything he knew about nuclear physics had come from the pages of *Astounding*. If stories like “Blowups Happen” and “Nerves” hadn’t had good science in them as well as good fiction, he would have been no use to Fermi—not because he couldn’t understand the Lizards, but because he wouldn’t have been able to understand the physicist.

Fermi asked the Lizards, “How long have your people known how to control and release the energy contained within the atomic nucleus?”

Yeager translated. He knew he didn’t do perfectly for *nucleus*; the word he used actually meant something closer to *center*. But the Lizards understood him well enough. They chattered back and forth between themselves for a few seconds before Ullhass said, “Somewhere between seventy and eighty thousand years, we think.”

Ristin added, “That’s our years, of course. Yours are about twice as long.”

Yeager did the arithmetic in his head. Even after dividing by two, it was still an ungodly long time. If Ristin and Ullhass were telling the truth, the Lizards had known about atomic power since humanity’s newest superweapon was fire against cave bears. If—He turned to Fermi. “Do you believe them, Professor?”

“Let me say that I know of no reason for them to lie,” Fermi answered. He looked like the fellow you’d find behind the counter of a delicatessen in half the medium-sized towns in the United States. He sounded like him, too, until you listened to what he had to say. Now he went on, “I think if we had had this power for so long, we would have accomplished more with it than they have.”

What the Lizards *had* done looked like plenty to Yeager. They’d crossed space to land on Earth, they’d kicked the tar out of every army they’d come up against, and they’d blown Berlin and Washington clean off the map. What did Fermi want, egg in his beer?

The physicist gave his attention back to the aliens. “How do you proceed in

separating the useful *U-235* from the much more abundant *U-238*?" In one form or another, he'd been asking that same question since he first set eyes on the Lizards.

As usual, they left him frustrated. Ullhass spread his clawed hands in a very human-seeming gesture of frustration. "You keep pestering us about this. We have told you before—we are soldiers. We do not know all the fine details of our technology."

This time, Fermi turned to Yeager. "Can you credit what they say?"

Not for the first time, Yeager wondered why the devil the experts were asking him questions. All at once, though, he realized he too was an expert of sorts: an expert on the Lizards. That made him chuckle; the only thing on which he'd been an expert before was hitting the cutoff man. He certainly hadn't been an expert at hitting a curve ball, or he'd have played at fields a lot fancier than the ones in the Three-I League.

He still didn't believe he had much expertise, but he did know more about the Lizards than most people. Mixing what he did know with his common sense (which, except for keeping him at a baseball career, had always been pretty good), he answered, "Professor, I think maybe I do believe them. You yank a couple of privates out of the American army and they might not be able to tell you everything you want to know about how an electrical generator works."

Fermi's sigh was melodramatic. "Si, this may be so. And yet I have learned a great deal from what they do know: they take for granted so many things which are for us on the cutting edge of physics—or beyond it. Just by examining what they know 'of course' to be true, we have tremendously refined our own lines of investigation. This will help us a great deal when we relocate our program."

"I'm glad you've—" Yeager broke off. "When you what?"

"When we move away from here," Fermi said. Sadness filled his liquid brown eyes. "It will be very hard, this I know. But how are we to do physics in a city, where we have not even electricity most of the day? How are we to proceed when the Lizards may bomb us at any time, may even capture Chicago before long? The line, I hear, is nearly to Aurora now. Under these circumstances, what is there to do but go?"

"Where will you go to?" Yeager asked.

"It is not yet decided. We will leave the city by ship, surely—much the safest way to go, as your little friends"—Fermi nodded toward Ullhass and Ristin—"do not seem to have grasped the importance of travel by water on this world. But where we shall try to set down new roots, that is still a matter for debate."

Yeager looked at the Lizards, too. "Are you going to want to take them with you?" he asked. If the answer was yes, he'd have to figure out whether he should try to finagle a way to come, too. He supposed he should; he couldn't think of any way in which he'd be more useful to the war effort.

But he seemed to have taken Fermi by surprise. The physicist rubbed his chin. Like most men's in Chicago, it was poorly shaven and had a couple of nicks; no new razor blades had made it into town for a long time. Yeager felt smug for using a straight

razor, which required only stropping to keep its edge. That also endeared him to his sergeant, who was an old-time graduate of the cleanliness-is-one-step-ahead-of-godliness school.

After a moment, Fermi said, "It may well be that we shall." He glanced at Yeager. In a lot of science fiction, scientists were supposed to be so involved in research that they took no notice of the world around them. Yeager's little while at the University of Chicago had shown him it didn't usually work that way in real life. Now Fermi confirmed that yet again, saying, "This affects you, no?"

"This affects me, yes," Yeager said.

"We do not leave tomorrow, or even the day after," Fermi said. "You will have time to make whatever arrangements you must. Ah! Would you like me to send a request for your services to your commanding officer? This will help you with your military formalities, not so?"

"Professor, if you'd do that, it would save me from a lot of red tape," Yeager said.

"I will see to it." To make sure he did see to it, Fermi jotted a note to himself. His head might have been in the clouds much of the time, but his feet were firmly on the ground. He also shifted gears as smoothly as a chauffeur. "At our last session, Ullhass was telling what he knew of the cooling systems employed by the Lizards' atomic power plants. Perhaps he will elaborate a little more on these." He poised his pencil above a fresh sheet of paper. Questions flew, one after another.

Finally Yeager had to call time. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I've got to take our friends here on to their next appointment."

"Sì, sì," Fermi said. "I understand. You do what you must do, Mr. Yeager. You have been helpful to us here. I want you to know that, and know you will be very welcome to come with us as we depart to—who knows where we are to depart to?"

"Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me." A proud smile stretched itself across Yeager's face. He gave Ullhass and Ristin a grateful look—if it hadn't been for them, he'd have been reading about scientists for the rest of his life without ever meeting one, let alone being useful to one. He got up, gestured with the rifle that had lain half-forgotten across his lap. "Come on, you two. Let's go. Time for us to be on our way."

One nice thing about the Lizards was that, unlike most people he knew, they didn't give him any back talk. Ullhass said, "It shall be done, superior sir," and that was that. They preceded him out the door. He'd long since been convinced that his standing orders never to let them get behind him were foolish, but he obeyed anyhow. Army orders were like baseball fundamentals: you couldn't go far wrong with them and you couldn't do anything right without them.

He almost bumped into Andy Reilly, the custodian, when he came out the door, and he and his charges hadn't taken more than a couple of steps down the hall when someone else called, "Hi, Sam!"

He couldn't just turn around; that would have put the Lizards at his back. So he went

around behind them before he answered, “Hi, Barbara. What are you doing up here?”

She smiled as she came up; she wasn’t skittish about Ullhass and Ristin any more. “I’m here a lot. My husband works for the Met Lab, remember?”

“Yeah, you did tell me. I forgot.” Yeager wondered if Barbara Larssen knew how big a misnomer “Metallurgical Laboratory” was. Maybe, maybe not. Secrecy about atomic energy research wasn’t as tight as it had been before the Lizards proved it worked, but he’d been warned in no uncertain terms about what would happen to him if he talked too much. He didn’t want a cigarette bad enough to get a blindfold with it. He didn’t even want to think about that. He asked, “Any word?”

“Of Jens? No, none.” Barbara kept up a brave front, but it was getting tattered. Worry—no, fear—showed in her voice as she went on, “He should have been back weeks ago—you know he was long overdue the first time you brought these little fellows into Dr. Burkett’s office. And if he doesn’t get back soon—”

From the way she stopped short, he thought he scented the great god Security. He said, “Professor Fermi told me the project is going to pull out of Chicago.”

“I wasn’t sure if you knew, and I didn’t want to say too much if you didn’t,” Barbara answered: security, sure enough. “Wouldn’t it be awful if he did make it here, only to find out there isn’t any Met Lab to come hack to?”

“There may not be any Chicago to come back to,” Yeager answered. “From what Fermi said, the line’s just outside Aurora now.”

“I hadn’t heard that.” Her lips thinned; a small vertical worry line appeared between her eyes. “They’re—getting close.”

“What will you do?” he asked. “Will you go with the Met Lab people when they pull out?”

“I just don’t know,” Barbara said. “That’s what I came up here to talk about, as a matter of fact. They’re holding a slot for me, but I don’t know if I should use it. If I were sure Jens was coming back, I’d stay no matter what. But he’s been gone so long, I have trouble believing that anymore. I try, but—” She broke off again. This time, security had nothing to do with it. She groped in her purse for a hanky.

Yeager wanted to put an arm around her. With the two Lizards standing between them, that wasn’t practical. Even without them, it probably would have been stupid. She’d just think he was coming on to her, and she’d be at least half right. He didn’t even tell her Fermi had asked him to evacuate with the Metallurgical Lab staff. Feeling awkward and useless, he said, “I hope he makes it back soon, Barbara.”

“Oh, God, so do I.” Her hands shaped themselves into claws; her red nail polish made them look like bloody claws. Her face twisted. “God *damn* the Lizards for coming down here and wrecking everything people have tried to do for as long as there’ve been people. Even the bad things—they’re *our* bad things, nobody else’s.”

Ullhass and Ristin had picked up almost as much English as Yeager had learned of their language. They flinched away from Barbara’s fury. “It’s all right,” Yeager told

them. “Nothing’s going to happen to you two.” He understood how Barbara felt; he knew much of that same rage himself. But constantly being around the Lizard POWs had made him start thinking of them as people, too—sometimes almost as friends. He hated the Lizards collectively but not individually. It got confusing.

Barbara seemed to share some of that confusion. She’d gotten to the point where she could tell one of the captive Lizards apart from another. “Don’t worry,” she said to Yeager’s two charges. “I know it’s not your fault in particular.”

“Yes, you know this,” Ullhass said in his hissing voice. “But what can we do if you not know this? No thing. We are—how you say it?—in your grip?”

“Grip, maybe,” Yeager. answered. “Or do you mean grasp?”

“I do not know what I mean,” Ullhass declared. “It is your speech. You teach, we learn.”

“They’re like that,” Yeager said to Barbara, trying to find less emotionally charged things to talk about. “Now that they’re our prisoners, it’s like we’ve become their superior officers and anything we say goes.”

“Dr. Burkett has talked about the same thing,” she said, nodding. She turned back to the Lizards. “Your people are trying to take our whole world into their grasp. Do you wonder that we don’t like you?”

“But we are the Race,” Ristin said. “It is our right.”

Yeager had got pretty good at reading tone in the Lizards’ voices. Ristin sounded surprised Barbara would question that “right.” Yeager clicked his tongue between his teeth. Both Lizard POWs swung their eyes toward him; it was something he did when he wanted to get their attention. He said, “You’ll find not everybody on this planet agrees with you about that”

Teerts wished his ejection seat had malfunctioned. Better to have crashed with his aircraft than to fall into the hands of the Nipponese. Those hands lacked the Race’s claws, but were no less cruel for that.

He’d found out about the Nipponese in a hurry. Even before they’d got him to Harbin, his illusion that they treated prisoners decently had been shattered. From what he’d seen of the way they treated their own kind, that shouldn’t have come as a surprise to him.

The rest of the Tosevite empires were barbarous, yes, but their leaders had the sense to recognize that war was a risky business in which things could go wrong, and that both sides were liable to lose prisoners when things did go wrong. Nipponese soldiers, however, were supposed to commit suicide before they let themselves be captured. That was bad enough. Worse, they expected their foes to play by the same set of rules, and scorned captives as cowards who deserved whatever happened to them.

Teerts looked down at himself. From his neck all the way down to his groin, every rib was clearly visible. The food they gave him was vile, and they didn’t give him very

much of it. He had the feeling that if they hadn't been interrogating him, they might not have bothered to feed him at all.

The door to the little room where they kept him swung noisily open on rusty hinges. A couple of armed guards came in. Teerts jumped to his feet and bowed to them. They'd beaten him once for forgetting. After that, he didn't forget.

The officer who had brought him to Harbin followed the guards into the smelly little cell. Teerts bowed again, deeper this time; the Nipponese made a point of being insanely punctilious about such things. Teerts said, "Good day, Major Okamoto. I hope you are well?"

"I am well." Okamoto did not ask how Teerts was; a prisoner's health was beneath his notice. He shifted from Nipponese to the tongue of the Race. Despite a heavy accent, he was growing fluent: "You shall come with me at once."

"It shall be done," Teerts said.

Okamoto turned his back and walked out of the chamber. Short for a Tosevite, he still towered over Teerts. So did the Nipponese guards; the knives mounted on the ends of their rifles looked very long and cold and sharp. They gestured with the guns for Teerts to precede them. He was already in motion. By now, captivity had become a routine like any other.

Cold smote him when he left the building where he was imprisoned. He was always chilly, even inside; what the Tosevites called heat was arctic to the Race. Outside, the weather really was arctic, with frozen water falling from the sky in feathery flakes. It clung to the ground, to trees, to buildings, coating everything with a layer of white that helped mask its inherent ugliness.

Teerts began to shiver violently. Okamoto paused, snapped an order to the guards. One of them set down his rifle for a moment, pulled a blanket out of his pack, and draped it over Teerts. The captured pilot pulled it as tight around himself as he could. Slowly, the shivers subsided.

Okamoto said, "You lucky you important prisoner. Otherwise, we let you freeze."

Teerts would willingly have forgone such luck. A truer measure of his importance was the vehicle that waited outside his prison to take him to his next interrogation session. It was noisy and smelly and had a ride like a killercraft out of control and about to crash, but at least it boasted an engine rather than a Big Ugly pedaling hard enough to grow warm even in this frigid weather. Better yet, it also had an enclosed cabin.

One of the guards drove. The other sat beside him in the front seat. Major Okamoto sat behind the driver, Teerts behind the other guard. Okamoto did not have a rifle with a long knife on the end, but he did carry both a sword and a pistol. And even if Teerts could somehow have overcome him, what was the point? How could he flee out of this teeming den of Big Ugliers without getting caught and meeting a fate even worse than the one he was now suffering?

*Den* was the right word for Harbin, he thought as the military vehicle made its slow



way through the narrow, twisting streets of Harbin. It was a city in size, but not, to his mind, in design. Indeed, it didn't seem to have a design. Streets ran every which way. Big, important buildings sprawled next to appalling hovels. Here and there, piles of rubble testified to the effectiveness of the Race's bombardment. Half-naked Big Ugliers labored at the piles, clearing them away a brick at a time.

Teerts thought longingly of Rosspan, the city back on Home where he'd grown up. Sunshine, warmth, cleanliness, streets wide enough for traffic, sidewalks wide enough for pedestrians—he'd taken all those things for granted till he came to Tosev 3. Now, by dreadful counterexample, he knew how lucky he'd been to enjoy them.

The truck rumbling along in front of Teerts' vehicle ran over one of the scavenger beasts that roamed the streets of Harbin. The animal's yelp of agony pierced the deep engine rattle that was the main traffic noise in Harbin. The truck never slowed as the animal passed under its wheels. It had somewhere important to go; what did one animal matter? Teerts got the idea it wouldn't have paused after running over a Big Ugly, either.

It could have, easily enough. If Harbin owned any traffic rules, Teerts hadn't discovered them. Vehicles with engines pushed their way as best they could through swarms of animal-drawn wagons and carts and even thicker swarms of Tosevites—Tosevites on foot, Tosevites carrying burdens on poles balanced on their shoulders, Tosevites riding two-wheeled contraptions that looked as if they ought to fall over but never did, Tosevites pedaling other Tosevites about in bigger contraptions or pulling them in carts as if they were beasts of burden themselves. Sometimes, at a particularly insane intersection, a Nipponese with white gloves and a swagger stick would try to bring a little order into the chaos. The next Big Ugly Teerts saw obeying any of them would be the first

He got the idea Harbin was a peculiar kind of place even by Tosevite standards, which was saying a good deal. Nipponese troops were the most aggressively visible piece of the blend; in a town near a fighting front, that was not surprising. What was surprising was the way they knocked around Big Ugliers not in uniform, natives who, to Teerts' inexperienced eyes, looked no different from themselves save in clothing.

The farther east Teerts' vehicle went, the more he saw of another variety of Big Ugly: pink-skinned, with light-colored—brown or even yellow—tufts of fluff or fur or whatever it was on top of their heads. They seemed less voluble than the darker natives who made up most of the local population, and went about their business with a stolid determination—that impressed Teerts.

He turned to Major Okamoto. "These pale Tosevites"—he'd learned, by painful experience, never to say *Big Ugly* to a Big Ugly's face—"may I ask where they come from?"

"No," Okamoto answered at once. "Prisoners may not spy. No questions from you, do you hear me? Obey!"

"It shall be done," Teerts said, anxious not to anger his captor. The small part of him

that was not hungry and afraid insisted the Big Ugly was being foolish: he would never escape to tell what he knew. But Okamoto tolerated no argument, so Teerts gave him none.

The vehicle pulled up in front of a building from which flew Nipponese flags, red ball on white ground. Several anti-aircraft guns poked their noses into the sky from sandbagged installations around it. When Teerts was flying killercraft, he'd laughed at such puny opposition. He'd stopped laughing when the Big Ugliers shot him down. He hadn't laughed since.

The guards got out of the vehicle. One unlocked Teerts' door and pulled it open, then jumped back so the other could level his rifle at the pilot. "Out!" they yelled together in Nipponese. Out Teerts came, marveling as usual that the Big Ugliers could find his unarmed and miserable self so dangerous. He only wished they were right.

Since they were unfortunately mistaken, he let them lead him into the building. The stairs did not fit his size or his gait. He climbed them anyhow; the interrogation chamber was on the third floor. He walked in with trepidation. Some very unpleasant things had happened to him in there.

Today, though, the three Big Ugliers behind the desk all wore pilot's wings. That relieved Teerts, a little. If these questioners were pilots, they'd presumably ask him about his killercraft. At least he would know the answers to their questions. Other interrogators had grilled him about the Race's landcruisers, ground tactics, automatic weapons, even its diplomatic dealings with other Tosevite empires. He'd pleaded ignorance, and they'd punished him for it even though he told the truth.

As he'd learned, he bowed low to the interrogation team and then to Major Okamoto, who interpreted for them. They didn't bow back; he gathered a prisoner forfeited the right to any gesture of respect.

The Big Ugly in the middle turned loose a torrent of barking Nipponese. Okamoto translated: "Colonel Doi is interested in the tactics you use with your killercraft against our planes."

Teerts bowed to the Tosevite who had asked the question. "Tactics are simple: you approach the enemy as closely as you can, preferably from behind and above so you are not detected, then you destroy him with missiles or cannon shells."

Doi said, "True, this is the basis of any successful fighter run. But how do you achieve it? Where precisely do you deploy your wing man? What is his role in the attack?"

"We commonly fly in groups of three," Teerts answered: "a leader and two trailers. But once in combat, we fly independent missions."

"What? That is nonsense," Doi exclaimed.

Teerts turned and bowed nervously to Okamoto, hoping to appease him. "Please tell the colonel that, while it would be nonsense for his aircraft, ours are superior enough to those you Tosevites fly to make my words the truth."

He didn't like the grunt that came from the colonel. Of itself, one of his eye turrets

swiveled to the collection of nasty tools hung on the wall behind him. When the Race needed to interrogate one of its own, or a Rabotev, or a Hallessi, they pumped the suspected offender full of drugs and then pumped him dry. No doubt physicians were hard at work developing drugs that would let them do the same for the Big Uglies.

The Nipponese were more primitive and more brutal. Techniques to gain information by inflicting pain were lost in the mists of the Race's ancient history. The Nipponese, however, had proved intimately familiar with such techniques. Teerts suspected they could have hurt him much worse had he been one of their own kind. Since he was strange and valuable, they'd gone easy for fear of killing him before they'd wrung out everything they wanted to know. What they had done was quite ingenious enough.

He felt like cheering when the Big Ugly named Doi changed the subject: "How do these missiles of yours continue to follow aircraft even through the most violent evasive actions?"

"Two ways," Teerts answered. "Some of them home on the heat from the target aircraft's engine, while others use radar."

The Nipponese translation of that took a good deal longer to say than Teerts' words had. Colonel Doi's answer was also lengthy, and Major Okamoto fumbled a good deal in putting it into the language of the Race. What he did say sounded like a paraphrase: "The colonel instructs you to give us more information on this radar."

"Do you mean he doesn't know what it is?" Teerts asked.

"Do not be insolent, or you shall be punished," Okamoto snapped. "He instructs you to give us more information on radar. Do so."

"The Deutsche, the Americans, and the British use it," Teerts said, as innocently as he could. When that got translated, all three of his interrogators let out excited exclamations. He just stood quietly, waiting for the hubbub to die down. He thought—he hoped—he'd managed to imply the Nipponese were barbarous even by Tosevite standards.

Eventually, Doi said, "Go on, prisoner. Speak of this device as *you* use it."

"It shall be done." Teerts bowed, granting the Big Ugly reluctant respect for not conceding Nipponese ignorance. "We shoot out a beam of rays like light but of longer wavelength, then detect those that reflect back from the objects they strike. From these we learn distance, speed, altitude, and bearing of targets."

The Nipponese chattered among themselves again before the one on-the left directly addressed Teerts. Okamoto translated: "Lieutenant Colonel Kobayashi says you are to help our technicians build one of these radar machines."

"I can't do that!" Teerts blurted, staring appalled at Kobayashi. Did the Big Ugly have any idea what he was asking for? Teerts couldn't have built, or even serviced, a radar set with the Race's tools, parts, and instruments. To expect him to do it with the garbage that passed for electronics among the Tosevites was insane.

Kobayashi spoke a few ominous-sounding words. They sounded even more ominous

when Okamoto turned them into the language of the Race:

“You refuse?”

Again, Teerts’ eyes involuntarily swung back to the instruments of pain on the wall behind him. “No, I don’t refuse, I am not able,” he said, so quickly that Okamoto had to force him to repeat himself. “I have not the knowledge either of radar itself or of your forms of apparatus. I am a pilot, not a radar technician.”

“*Honto?*” Kobayashi asked Okamoto. That was one Nipponese word Teerts had learned; it meant *Is it true?* He waited fearfully for the interpreter’s reply. If Okamoto thought he was lying, he would likely renew his acquaintance with some of those instruments.

“*Honto, hai,*” Okamoto said: “Yes, it is true.” Teerts did his best not to show his relief, as he had tried not to reveal fear before.

Kobayashi said, “What good is this Lizard if he can only babble of marvels without being able to share them?” Teerts took the return ride from relief to fear. The Nipponese kept him alive mainly because they were interested in what he could teach them. If they decided they weren’t learning, they wouldn’t hesitate to dispose of him.

Colonel Doi spoke at some length. Teerts had no idea what he said; instead of interpreting, Okamoto joined the discussion that came when the senior officer stopped talking. It grew loud. Several times, stubby Tosevite fingers stabbed out at Teerts. He did his best not to flinch. Any one of those gestures could have meant his death.

All at once, the anti-aircraft cannon outside the tower where he was being interrogated began to roar. The scream of killercraft overhead was incredibly loud and incredibly terrifying. The jolting thud of bombs going off made the floor shiver as if in an earthquake. If the Race had targeted this hall for destruction, it could kill Teerts along with the Nipponese. How dreadful, to die from the weapons of one’s friends!

He had to admit the Big Ugly officers showed courage. They sat unmoving while the building shook around them. Colonel Doi looked at Teerts and said something in his own language. Major Okamoto translated: “The colonel says that if he joins his ancestors in the next little while, he will have the happy—no, the pleasure—that you go with him.”

Maybe Doi’s words were intended to make Teerts afraid. Instead, they gave him one of the very few moments of pleasure he’d had since his aircraft swallowed those indigestible Nipponese bullets. He bowed first to Doi, then to Okamoto. “Tell the colonel I feel exactly the same way, with roles reversed.” Too late to regret the defiant words; they were already spoken.

Okamoto turned them into Nipponese. Instead of getting angry, Colonel Doi leaned forward in his chair, a sign of interest. Ignoring the dreadful racket all around, he said, “Is that so? What do you believe happens to you when you die?”

Had Teerts’ face been flexible like a Tosevite’s, he would have grinned enormously. At last, a question he could answer without fear of getting himself into deeper trouble! He said, “When we are through here, our spirits join those of the Emperors who guided the

Race in the past so that we may go on serving them.” He didn’t just believe that, he was as sure of it as he was that this part of Tosev 3 would turn away from its star tonight. Billions of individuals of three species on three worlds shared that certainty.

When his remarks had been translated, Colonel Doi made that mouthmotion of amiability, the first time Teerts had seen it from an interrogator. The officer said, “We have much the same belief. I shall be honored to serve my emperor in death as I have in life. I wonder if the spirits of our dead war against those of your kind.”

The notion made Teerts queasy; material Tosevites were quite troublesome enough, and he didn’t care to think of Emperors past being compelled to struggle against their spiritual counterparts. Then he brightened. Up until a handful of years before, the Big Ugliers had enjoyed no industrial technology. If their barbarous spirits dared assail those of the Race, surely they would be smashed.

He did not say that to Colonel Doi. “It may be so,” seemed a much safer answer. Then he swung his eyes toward Okamoto. “Please ask the colonel if I may ask him a question that has nothing to do with spying.”

“*Hai*,” Doi said.

Teerts asked, “Do all Tosevites hold the same idea about what will happen after you die?”

Even in the midst of chaos, that sent the Nipponese officers into gales of their barking laughter. Through Major Okamoto, Doi said, “We have as many beliefs as we have different empires, maybe more. That of us Nipponese is the correct one, however.”

Teerts bowed politely. He did not presume to contradict his captors, but Doi’s answer left him unsurprised. Of course the Big Ugliers were divided in opinion about the world to come. The Big Ugliers, as far as he could see, were divided about everything. Their little makeshift empires had all been fighting one another when the Race came; no doubt their little makeshift beliefs fought one another, too.

Then his scorn faded. In an odd way, the Big Ugliers’ innumerable different beliefs and languages and empires might have proved a source of strength for them. They competed so savagely among themselves that less effective methods fell by the wayside. Maybe that was why the sword-swinging savages the Race had expected to meet no longer inhabited Tosev 3.

Like any right-thinking member of the Race, Teerts automatically assumed unity and stability desirable in and of themselves. Until he came to Tosev 3, he’d never had any reason to assume otherwise. Now, as if a cold breeze blew through his thoughts, he wondered what price his species, and the Hallessi and Rabotevs with them, paid for their secure, comfortable lives.

Until the Race came to Tosev 3, it hadn’t mattered. Now it did. Even if the exalted fleetlord Atvar were to pull every starship off this chilly mudball tomorrow (which of course the exalted fleetlord would not do), the Race would not be finished with the Tosevites. One fine day—surely sooner than anyone back on Home would expect—

starships full of fierce, savage Big Ugliers would follow where Atvar had gone.

What did that leave? The only thing that occurred to Teerts was conquering the Tosevites and so thoroughly integrating them into the Empire that their competitiveness would be stifled for good. Failing that...he didn't want to think about *failing that*. The next best choice he came up with was sterilizing the planet altogether. That would keep the Empire safe, no matter how hard it was on the Big Ugliers. All other choices looked worse.

Bombs stopped falling; the turbofans of the Race's killercraft faded into the distance. In the streets of Harbin, a few Nipponese still fired rifles into the air at imaginary targets. "It is over," Lieutenant Colonel Kobayashi said. "Until the next time they come back."

"Let us resume the questioning, then," Colonel Doi said. He turned his face toward Teerts once more; his poor immobile eyes could not do the job by themselves. Whatever friendliness and recognition of Teerts as a fellow intelligent being he had shown while discussing the nature of the world to come now vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. "We were speaking of radar machines. I find your answer evasive and unsatisfactory. If you do not prove more forthcoming, you will be punished. Major Okamoto ..."

Teerts braced for what he knew was coming. Okamoto bowed to Doi, then stepped forward and slapped Teerts across the muzzle, just in front of his left eye turret. He staggered. When he regained his balance, he bowed to Okamoto, though he would sooner have killed him. "Please tell the colonel I will do my best to answer his question, but I am ignorant of the knowledge he seeks."

Okamoto translated that. Doi said, "Ha! More likely you are a liar. Major ..." Okamoto slapped Teerts again. While he desperately tried to think of something that might satisfy Doi, Okamoto drew back his hand for yet another blow. Teerts began to think that being killed by bombs from the Race might not have been so dreadful after all.

Atvar said, "We can now take it as certain that the Big Ugliers know enough to covet nuclear weapons of their own." His voice had the dreadful finality of a physician's when telling a patient only a little time was left.

The assembled shiplords stirred restlessly. Atvar tried to think of worse news he might have given them. Maybe that the Big Ughes had exploded a nuclear weapon under one of the Race's landed ships. Of course, they would have found out about that without his telling them.

Straha said, "Exalted Fleetlord how did our security procedures fail so abominably as to permit the Tosevites to raid a nuclear recovery team?"

Atvar wondered how his own security procedures had failed so abominably as to permit Straha to find out just what the Big Ugliest had done. He said, "Investigations are continuing, Shiplord." He was also investigating how Straha had learned what had

happened but forbore to mention it.

The shiplord said, “Forgive me, Exalted Fleetlord, but I would be grateful for somewhat more detail than you have furnished.”

“Forgive me, Shiplord, but I have difficulty in providing it.” Before Straha could come back with more sarcasm, Atvar went on, “One of the unfortunate things we have observed about the Big Ugliers is that, while we have better technology, they are better soldiers than we in tactical terms. We have practiced and studied war; they have lived it. To our cost, we are discovering what a difference that makes.”

“Let me give an example of this,” Kirel said, supporting the fleetlord. “In and around several of our positions, we installed sensors that detected Tosevites by sniffing out the uric acid that is one of the wastes they excrete. The concentration of it in the air lets us gauge the number of Big Ugliers in the vicinity.”

“This is adapted from standard techniques we use back on Home,” Straha said in challenging tones. “Why do you mention it now? What relevance has it to our failure?”

“Its relevance is that the Tosevites do not think in our standard terms,” Kirel answered. “They must somehow have become aware of our sensors—possibly by stumbling over one of them—and learned how they functioned.”

“So?” Straha said. “I assume this story has a point.”

“It does,” Kirel assured him. “The Tosevites began discharging their liquid wastes directly onto the sensors.”

“Disgusting,” Straha said. There if nowhere else, Atvar agreed with him. Having evolved on a hotter, drier planet than Tosev 3, the Race did not casually cast off water, but passed all its excreta in neat, solid form. Big Ugly prisoners had strained the fleet’s plumbing systems.

“Disgusting, true, but also informative,” Kirel said. “Some of our technicians suddenly began screaming in panic that four billion Tosevites were heading straight for their position. By our best estimates, that is about double the total population of Tosev 3, but it is also what the drenched, befouled, and overloaded sensors were reporting. And while we reacted to these frightening data, the Big Ugliers worked mischief elsewhere. Is this a ploy that would have occurred to any of us?”

Straha did not answer. None of the other shiplords said anything, either, though a few let their mouths fall open in amusement. Atvar thought the story was funny, too, in a scatological way, but it also had a point. He drove that point home: “The Big Ugliers are ignorant, but they are far from stupid. Within their limits, they can be very dangerous. They have learned better than to stand up to us in large-scale combat, but at these little pinprick raids they excel.”

“*This* raid was more than a pinprick,” Straha insisted.

“Strategically, yes, but not tactically,” Atvar said. “The Big Ugliers also use this world’s revolting weather to good advantage. They are accustomed to wet and cold, even to the various forms of frozen water which occur on Tosev 3. We have to learn to deal with

these case by case, and they are making our education expensive.”

Straha said, “In my opinion, this world may not be worth our settling. The weather is not its only revolting feature: the Big Uglies themselves certainly merit that description.”

“As may be,” Atvar said. “The Emperor has ordained that we bring Tosev 3 into the Empire, and so it shall be done.” That statement of unconditional obedience to the Emperor’s will brought up short the shiplords who before had plainly agreed with Straha. Atvar went on, “Many parts of this world will suit us well, and its resources, which the Big Uglies exploit only inefficiently, will be most valuable to us.”

“If this be so, let us use its resources as if they were on a lifeless planet of one of our own solar systems,” Straha said, “Kill all the Big Uglies and we solve most of our problems with Tosev 3.”

Atvar did not like the number of shiplords who looked as though they agreed with Straha. He said, “You forget one thing: the colonizing fleet is already on its way behind us. It will be here in less than forty years—twenty turns for this planet—and its commander will not thank us for presenting him with a dead world.”

“Given a choice between presenting him with a dead world and a lost war wherein the Big Uglies learn of nuclear weapons, Exalted Fleetlord, which would you prefer?” Straha demanded. Even the shiplords of his aggressive faction stirred restlessly at that; such acid sarcasm was rare among the Race.

The best way to defuse it, Atvar thought, was to pretend not to recognize it. He said, “Shiplord, I do not believe those are the only choices left to us. I intend to present the commander of the colonizing fleet a planet ready for his settlers.”

If the war went well, that still remained possible. Even Atvar, though, was beginning to doubt whether Tosev 3 would be as ready for the colonists as the plans back Home called for. Conditions on the planet were too different from-what the Race had expected: too many Big Uglies here with too many of their own factories.

And Straha, curse him, would not shut up. He said, “Exalted Fleetlord, how can we claim to be winning this war, conquering this world, when even the little gimcrack Tosevite empires which have allegedly surrendered to us continue to maintain armed resistance to our occupying forces?”

“If the sagacious shiplord has a solution to this difficulty, hearing it would gladden my spirit,” Atvar replied. “We continue to defend ourselves, of course, and to strike back against raiders as we may. What else would you have us do?”

Straha was never short on opinions. He said, “Retaliate massively for every act of banditry and sabotage. Slay ten Big Uglies for every truck damaged, a hundred for every soldier of the Race harmed. Force them to respect us—and eventually they will”

“Exalted Fleetlord, may I speak to this issue?” Kirel asked.

“Speak,” Atvar said.



“I thank you, Exalted Fleetlord. Straha, I want you to know I formerly held a view similar to yours; as you may or may not have heard, I strongly advocated the destruction of the Big Ugly city called Washington to terrify the Tosevites of the United States into ceasing their resistance to us. The strategy likely would have succeeded against the Hallessi or Rabotevs, or even against the Race. Against the Tosevites, it has failed.”

Straha started to interrupt; Kirel stuck out his tongue to stop him. “Let me finish, if you please. I do not claim we have failed to cow many of the Big Ugliers by massive shows of force. But there also exists among the Tosevites a strong minority impelled to ever greater resistance by such acts on our part. Your policy plays into the hands of these fanatics.”

“Why should the Big Ugliers be different from any civilized species?” Straha said.

“Our scholars will be debating that for thousands of years to come, as they review the records of this campaign,” Kirel said. Mouths lolled open here and there among the assembled shiplords; the Race’s scholars were notoriously more sure but slow than slow but sure. Kirel went on, “I, however, lack the luxury of leisure, as is true of everyone here on Tosev 3. Were I to speculate, I would say the Big Ugliers’ differences go back to their peculiar—I might say unique—mating patterns.”

Straha made a disgusted noise. “Always we come back to mating. Do the miserable Big Ugliers think of nothing else?”

“The answer to this may be no,” Atvar said. “The intense emotional bonds they form with sexual partners and with offspring make them willing to take risks any member of the Race would reckon insane, and also provoke them to take vengeance should partners or offspring be harmed.”

“There may even be more to it than that,” Kirel added. “Some of our scholars speculate that the Big Ugliers, because of the familial attachments they are accustomed to forming, also are predisposed toward forming equally strong attachments to the causes of their little empires and their implausible religious systems. We are in effect dealing with a species full of fanatics—and fanatics, by definition, are not to be constrained by threats of force which would deter more rational individuals.”

“Let me see if I understand you, Honored Shiplord,” Straha said. “You are advancing the hypothesis that Tosev 3 may never be as fully pacified as Halless 1 and Rabotev 2 are, and that the Big Ugliers may continue suicidal resistance to us even after overall military victory is achieved.”

“You extrapolate further than I have been willing to go, but the answer is basically yes,” Kirel said unhappily.

Atvar said, “Let us eat the worms ahead of the soup, Shiplords. Before we can discuss ways to reduce harassment of our forces after we conquer, we must first complete our conquest. The truly atrocious winter weather prevailing over much of the northern hemisphere of Tosev 3 makes matters no easier for us.”

“Our males should have been better trained to withstand such conditions,” Straha said.

The fleetlord wished one of the fearsome Tosevite snipers would draw a bead right in the middle of Straha’s snout. All he did was complain and intrigue; he didn’t care for solving the problems he pointed out. Atvar said, “I might remind the shiplord that no territory within the Empire closely simulates the climate of the Tosevite lands wherein, to our misfortune, our most formidable opponents dwell.”

Several males even of Straha’s faction showed their agreement with that. It relieved Atvar a little. He was coming to dread these assemblages. Too often he had bad news to report, and news bad in ways he never would have imagined before the fleet left Home. He’d expected his principal concern on this campaign to be how many soldiers carelessly got hurt in traffic accidents, not whether the Big Ugliers would soon be fighting him with nuclear weapons of their own.

He’d also expected much better data from the Race’s probes. He’d already resigned himself to their missing the weird technological jump the Tosevites had taken after they departed: that was the Big Ugliers’ fault, not theirs. But they should have done a better job of reporting on Tosevite social and sexual habits, so Kirel’s research crews wouldn’t have had to start learning about them from scratch.

What really worried him was the thought that maybe the probes had sent accurate data back to Home, only to have those data ignored, misinterpreted, or downright disbelieved by scholars who analyzed them from a Racecentered perspective. If similar mistakes had been made before the conquests of the Rabotevs and Hallessi, the Race not only got by with them but didn’t even notice them—the subject species really weren’t very different from their overlords. But the Big Ugliers were...and finding out how much so was proving more costly than anyone could have imagined.

“Exalted Fleetlord, how shall we minimize the mischief the Tosevites may cause with nuclear material in their possession?” Kirel asked.

“I shall summarize for the shiplords new orders which will soon reach them in written form,” Atvar answered. “In essence, we will increase our bombardment of major urban centers in which important scientific research is likeliest to take place. Let us see how well they do at such research if, for instance, their facilities lack electrical power.”

Horrep, one of the males of Straha’s faction, wagged his tailstump to ask to be recognized. When Atvar turned both eyes in his direction, he said, “I would respectfully remind the exalted fleetlord that our own stockpiles of munitions are not so high as they might be. We have used far more than we anticipated when we set out from Home, and our replenishment facilities have not been established here at the pace originally planned, due to both commitment of our resources to the actual fighting and unexpectedly heavy damage from Tosevite resistance.”

Several other males spoke up to support Horrep. Again Atvar had that unsettling mental image of expending his last round of ammunition, only to see one more Big Ugly landcruiser crawl out from behind a pile of rubble. “Do you say you cannot obey the forthcoming order?” he demanded.

“No, Exalted Fleetlord—it shall be done,” Horrep answered. “But I must warn you that such a program cannot be sustained indefinitely. I very much hope the results it achieves will be in proportion to the munitions it expends.”

*So do I*, Atvar thought. He thanked the forethoughtful spirits of Emperors past that the Race had brought far more weapons of war to Tosev 3 than would have been necessary to conquer the semisavages they’d expected to find here. If his people had done things hastily, they might have walked headlong into ignominious defeat.

On the other hand, if the Race had been hasty and come to Tosev 3 a few hundred years sooner, the Big Ugliers would have been much easier prey, because they wouldn’t have had the time to develop their own technology. Did that mean haste would have been advisable here? The harder one looked at a complicated question, the more complicated it generally became.

The fleetlord reluctantly decided to scrap for the time being another part of the order he’d intended to issue: he’d wanted to command increased efforts against the boats on which the Big Ugliers lavished so much effort and ingenuity. Because Tosev 3 had so much water, the locals made much more use of it than any species within the Empire. Atvar had the feeling they used water transport enough to make suppressing it worthwhile for the Race...but with munitions in shorter supply than he would have liked, he’d have to preserve as much as he could for targets of the highest priority.

He sighed. Back on Home, the aptitude tests had said he might make a successful architect as well as a soldier. The choice had been his. He’d always been an idealist, eager to serve the Emperor and the Race as fully as possible. Only when confronted with the unending morass of the conquest of Tosev 3 had he seriously started wondering whether he wouldn’t have been happier putting up buildings after all.

He sighed again. That choice was dead for him now. He had to do the best he could with the one he’d made. He said, “Shiplords, I know this meeting has been imperfectly satisfying. The Big Ugliers have shown a revolting knack for making everything we do appear unsatisfactory. Before I dismiss you back to your commands, has any of you anything further to note?”

More often than not, the formal question went unanswered. This time, however, a male named Relek signaled for recognition. When Atvar acknowledged him, he said, “Exalted Fleetlord, my vessel, the *16th Emperor Osjess*, is grounded in the eastern part of Tosev 3’s main continental mass, in the Big Ugly empire called China. Lately a fair number of males have made themselves unfit for duty due to excessive consumption of some local herb which apparently has a stimulant and addictive effect on them.”

“My ship is based in the center of that continental mass, and I’ve had the same experience with a handful of my troopers,” said another shiplord, this one called Tetter. “I thought I was the only shiplord so affected.”

“You are not,” said Mozzten, a shiplord whose vessel was based in the U.S.A. portion of the smaller continental mass—Atvar took notice of that. Mozzten went on, “The Big Ugly name—a Big Ugly name, I should say—for the herb is ‘ginger.’ Its effects on the

males in my command have been deleterious.”

“I shall issue a general order condemning this herb in no uncertain terms,” Atvar declared. “To add to its effectiveness, I would have each shiplord—especially you three who have indicated a problem—issue his own order forbidding the individuals under his jurisdiction from having anything to do with this—ginger, was that the name I heard?”

“It shall be done,” the shiplords chorused.

“Excellent,” Atvar said. “There’s one problem settled, at least.”

The mechanic spread his thick-fingered, greasy hands, shook his head helplessly. “I am very sorry, Comrade Pilot,” he said, “but I cannot find the cause of the trouble. As best I can tell, the devil’s grandmother has set up shop in your engine.”

“Move out of the way, then, and I will see for myself,” Ludmila Gorbunova snapped. She wanted to kick some sense into the stupid *muzhik*, but both his head and his arse were probably hard enough to break her foot. She wished she still had her old mechanic; unlike this oaf, Katya Kuznetsova had actually understood engines and gone after problems instead of babbling about the devil and his stupid relatives.

It wasn’t as if the little five-cylinder Shvetsov radial was the most complicated piece of machinery ever built, either. It was about as simple as an engine could be and still work, and as reliable as anything that didn’t walk on all fours.

As soon as she got a good look at the engine, she became certain this idiot mechanic walked on all fours. She reached up, asked, “Do you think this loose spark-plug wire might have something to do with the aircraft’s poor performance of late?” As she spoke, she connected the wire firmly.

The mechanic’s head bobbed up and down, as if on a string. “*Da*, Comrade Pilot, very likely it could.”

She wheeled on him. “Why didn’t you see it, then?” she shouted shrilly. She wished she were a man; she wanted to bellow like a bull.

“I’m sorry, Comrade Pilot.” The mechanic’s voice was humble, as if she were a priest who had caught him at some sordid little sin. “I am trying. I do the best I can.”

With that, Ludmila’s rage evaporated. She knew the fellow was telling the truth. The trouble was, his best just wasn’t good enough. The Soviet Union’s pool of skilled manpower had never been big enough to meet the country’s needs. The purges of the 1930s hadn’t helped, either; sometimes simply knowing something was enough to make one an object of suspicion. Then the Germans came, and after them the Lizards... Ludmila supposed it was a miracle any reliable technicians were left alive. *If* any were—she knew she hadn’t seen one lately.

She said, “We have here manuals for the *Kukuruznik* and its engine. Study them carefully, so we won’t have this kind of problem any more.”

“*Da*, Comrade Pilot.” The mechanic’s head bobbed up and down again. Ludmila was dully certain they wouldn’t have this kind of problem any less, either. She wondered if the mechanic could read the manuals. Before the war, he’d probably been a tinker or a blacksmith at a *kolkhoz*, good enough at patching a pot or hammering out a new blade for a shovel. Whatever he’d been, he was hopelessly out of his depth when it came to engines.

“Do the best you can,” she told him, and left the shelter of the U-2’s enclosure. It had been cold in there. Away from the heaped banks of earth that shielded from blast, away from the roof of camouflage netting covered over with dead grass, the wind bit with full force, driving sleet into her face. She was glad for her flying clothes of fur and leather and thick cotton padding, for the oversized felt *valenki* that kept her feet from freezing. Now that winter was here, she seldom took anything off.

The *valenki* acted almost like snowshoes, spreading her weight as she squelched along the muddy edge of the equally muddy landing strip. Only the slush-filled ruts from her plane and others distinguished the runway from any other part of the steppe. Even more than most Soviet aircraft, the *Kukuruznik* was made to operate from landing fields that were fields in truth.

Her head came up; her right hand went to the pistol she wore on her hip. Someone not part of the battered Red Air Force detachment was trudging across the airstrip, very likely without realizing it was one. A Red Army man, maybe—he had a rifle slung across his back.

No, not a Red Army man: he wasn’t dressed warmly enough, and the cut of his clothes was wrong. Ludmila needed only a moment to recognize the nature of the wrongness; she’d seen it enough. “*Germanski!*” she yelled, half to call to the fellow, half to warn the rest of the Russians on the little base.

The German spun, grabbed for his rifle, flopped down on his belly in the mud. A *combat veteran*, Ludmila thought, unsurprised: most of the German soldiers still alive in the Soviet Union were the ones with reactions honed by battle. This one was also smart enough not to start blazing away before he knew what he’d walked into, even if his thick red whiskers gave him the look of a bandit.

Ludmila frowned. She’d seen whiskers like those before. *On the kolkhoz, that’s right*, she thought. What had the fellow’s name been. “Schultz,” she murmured to herself. Then she shouted it, going on in German, “Is that you?”

“*Ja*. Who are you?” the red-bearded man yelled back: like her, he needed a few seconds to make the connection. When he did, he exclaimed, “You’re the pilot, right?” As it had back at the collective farm, the word sounded exotic with a feminine ending tacked onto it.

She waved for him to approach. He got to his feet; though he didn’t resling his rifle, he didn’t point it at her, either. He was grimy and ragged and looked cold: if not quite the pathetic Winter Fritz of Soviet propaganda, still a long way from the deadly-dangerous figure he’d seemed back in the summer. She’d forgotten how tall he was. He was

skinnier than he had been, too, which further exaggerated his height.”

He asked, “What are you doing here, out in the middle of nowhere?”

“This isn’t nowhere. This is an airfield,” she answered.

He looked around. There wasn’t much to see. He grinned impudently. “You Ivans really know how to camouflage things.”

She let that pass; she wasn’t sure whether it was a compliment or he was saying there wasn’t anything here worth hiding. She said, “I didn’t expect to see you again. I thought you and your major were on your way to Moscow.” As she spoke, she saw out of the corner of her eye that several pilots and mechanics had come out of their shelters and were watching her talk with the German. They all carried guns. No one who had fought the Nazis was inclined to trust them, not even now when the Soviet Union and Germany both faced the same foe.

“We were there,” Schultz agreed. He saw the Russians, too. His eyes were never still, not even for a second; he scanned everything around him, all the time. He unobtrusively shifted, his feet so Ludmila stood between him and most of her countrymen. With a wry smile, he went on, “Your people decided they’d rather have us go out and work for a living than sit around eating their kasha and borscht. So we did—and here I am.”

“Here you are,” she said, nodding. “Where is the major?”

“He was alive last I saw him,” Schultz answered. “We got separated; it was part of the operation. I hope he’s all right.”

“Yes,” Ludmila said. She still kept the letter Jager had sent her. She’d thought about answering, but hadn’t done it. Not only did she have no idea how to address a reply, but writing to a German would make another suspicious mark go down in her dossier. She’d never seen that dossier—she never would, unless charges were brought against her—but it felt as real as the sheepskin collar of her flying jacket.

Schultz said, “Anything to eat here? After what I’ve been stealing lately, even kasha and borscht would seem mighty fine.”

“We haven’t much for ourselves,” Ludmila answered. She didn’t mind feeding Schultz once or twice, but she didn’t want to turn him into a parasite, either. Then she had a new thought “How good a mechanic are you?”

“Pretty good,” he said, not arrogant but confident enough. “I had to help keep my panzer running, after all.”

“Do you think you could work on an aircraft engine?”

He pursed his lips. “I don’t know. I never tried. Do you have the manuals for it?”

“Yes. They’re in Russian, though.” Ludmila switched to her own language: “You didn’t know any back at the *kolkhoz*. Do you understand it better now?”

“*Da*, a little,” Schultz answered in Russian, his accent not too scurrilous. But he dropped back into German with every sign of relief: “I still can’t read it worth a damn, though. But numbers don’t change, and I can make sense out of pictures. Let me see

what you have.”

“All right.” Ludmila led him back toward the U-2 she’d just left. Members of the ground crew watched with hard, mistrustful stares as she approached. Some of that mistrust was aimed at Ludmila, for having anything to do with a German. She thought about her dossier again. But she said, “I think he can help us. He knows engines.”

“Ah,” everyone said, almost in unison. Ludmila didn’t care for that much more than she liked the mistrustful stares. Along with hating and fearing Germans, too many Russians were in the habit of attributing nearly magical abilities to them just because they came from the west. She hoped she knew better. They were good soldiers, yes, but they weren’t supermen.

When Georg Schultz saw the *Kukuruznik*, he rocked back on his heels and started to laugh. “You’re still flying these little bastards, are you?”

“What about it?” Ludmila said hotly. He’d have done better to insult her family than her beloved U-2.

But the panzer man answered, “We hated these stupid things. Every time I had to-go out and take a dump, I figured one of ’em would fly by and shoot my ass off. I swear they could stand on tiptoe and peek in through a window, and I bet the Lizards don’t like ’em one bit better’n we did.”

Ludmila translated that into Russian. As if by magic, the ground crew’s hostility melted. Hands fell away from weapons. Somebody dug out a pouch of *makhorka* and passed it to Schultz. He had some old newspaper in an inside pocket that hadn’t got wet. When he’d rolled himself a cigarette, a Russian gave him a light.

He shielded it with one hand from the drips that splattered down off the camouflage netting, walked around so he could get a good look at the engine and two-bladed wooden prop on the nose of the Wheatcutter. When he turned around, he wore a disbelieving grin. “It really flies?”

“It really flies,” Ludmila agreed gravely, hiding her own smile. She said it again in her own language. A couple of the mechanics laughed out loud. She returned to German: “Do you think you can help keep it flying?”

“Why not?” he said. “It doesn’t look near as bad as keeping a panzer going. And if that engine were any simpler, you’d run it off a rubber band like a kid’s toy.”

“Hmm,” Ludmila said, not sure she cared for the comparison. The little Shvetsov was made to be rugged as a mule, but surely that was something to be proud of, not to scorn. She pointed to Schultz. “Turn your back.”

“*Jawohl!*” He clicked his heels as if she were a field marshal in redstriped trousers, and performed a smart about-turn.

She gestured for a couple of Russians to stand behind him so he couldn’t see what she was doing, then loosened the sparkplug wire she’d noticed and her alleged mechanic hadn’t. “You can turn back now. Find out what’s wrong with the machine.”

Schultz walked over to the U-2, inspected the engine for perhaps fifteen seconds, and fixed the wire Ludmila had tampered with. His smile seemed to say, *Why don't you ask me a hard one next time?* The mechanic who had failed to find the same defect glared at the German as if suspecting the devil's grandmother had somehow migrated from the Shvetsov to him.

"This man will be useful on this base," Ludmila said. Her eyes dared the ground crew to argue with her. None of the men said anything, though several looked ready to burst with what they weren't saying.

The German panzer sergeant seemed at least as bemused as his Soviet counterparts. "First I fight alongside a bunch of Jewish partisans, and now I'm joining the Red Air Force," he said, maybe more to himself than to Ludmila. "I hope to God none of this ever shows up in my file."

So the Nazis worried about dossiers, too. The thought gave Ludmila something in common with Schultz, though it wasn't one she'd be able to share with him. Somehow that didn't matter, either. They both knew what was safe to talk about and what wasn't.

Schultz also knew what the hostile looks he was getting meant. He undid his canteen, tossed it to the mechanic who was glaring hardest. "*Vodka, russki vodka,*" he said in his pidgin Russian. He smacked his lips. "*Ochen khorosho.*"

The startled groundcrew man undid the stopper, sniffed, then grinned and enfolded Schultz in a bear hug. "That was clever," Ludmila said as the ground crew passed the flask from one eager hand to the next. A moment later, she added, "Your Major Jäger would have approved."

"Do you think so?" She'd found the right praise with which to reach him—his long, bony face glowed as if he were a small boy who'd just been told he'd written his school's prize essay for the year. He went on, "The major, miss, I think he's one hell of a man."

"Yes," Ludmila said, and realized she and Schultz might have something else in common after all.



Bicycling across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to Chicago had seemed a good idea when Jens Larssen set about it. In summer, in a country that had never known invasion, it might even have been a good idea. In winter, pedaling through territory largely occupied by the Lizards, it looked stupider with every passing moment

He'd seen newsreel footage of half-frozen German soldiers captured by the Russians in front of Moscow. The Russians, in their white snow suits, many of them on skis, had looked capable of going anywhere any time. That was how Jens had thought he would do, if he'd really thought about it at all. Instead, he feared he much more closely resembled one of those Nazi ice cubes with legs.

He didn't have the clothes he needed for staying out in the open when the temperature dropped below freezing and stayed there. He'd done his best to remedy that by piling on several layers at a time, but his best still left him shivering.

The other thing he hadn't thought about was that nobody was plowing or even salting the roads this winter. In a car, he would have done all right. A car was heavy, a car was fast—best of all, his Plymouth had had a heater. But drifted snow brought a bicycle to a halt. As for ice...he'd fallen more times than he could count. Only dumb luck had kept him from breaking an arm or an ankle. Or maybe God really did have a soft spot in his heart for drunks, children, and damn fools.

Jens looked at a map he'd filched from an abandoned gas station. If he was where he thought he was, he'd soon be approaching the grand metropolis of Fiat, by God, Indiana. He managed a smile when he saw that, and declaimed, "And God said, *Fiat, Indiana*, and there was Indiana."

His breath puffed out around him in a cloud of half-frozen fog. A couple of times, on really frigid days, he'd had it freeze in the mustache and beard he was growing. He hadn't seen himself in a mirror any time lately, so he didn't know what he looked like. He didn't care, either. He'd decided scrounging for razor blades was a waste of time, and shaving without either mirror or hot water hurt too much to be worthwhile. Besides, the new growth helped keep cheeks and chin warm. He wished he could sprout fur all over.

As he had on most of his journey, he owned the road. Cars and trucks just weren't moving, especially not in this Lizard-occupied stretch of country. Trains weren't moving much, either, and the few he'd seen had Lizards aboard. He'd wished for a white snow suit of his own, to keep from drawing their notice. But the aliens hadn't paid any attention to him as they chugged by.

He supposed that was one advantage to having been invaded by creatures from another planet as opposed to, say, Nazis or Japs. The Lizards didn't have a feel for what

was normal on Earth. A *Gestapo* man, spotting a lone figure pedaling down a road, might well have wondered what he was up to and radioed an order to pick him up for questions. To the Lizards, he was just part of the landscape.

He rolled past a burned-out farmhouse and the twisted wreckage of a couple of cars. Snow covered but did not erase the scars of bomb craters in the fields. There had been fighting here, not so long ago. Jens wondered how far west into Indiana the Lizards' control reached, and how hard crossing back into American-held territory would be.

(Down deep, he wondered if Chicago was still free; if Barbara was still alive; if this whole frozen trek wasn't for nothing. He seldom let those thoughts rise to the surface of his mind. Whenever he did, the urge to keep going faltered.)

He peered ahead, shielding his eyes against snow glare with the palm of his hand. Yes, those were houses up there—either Fiat or, if he'd botched his navigation, some other equally unimpressive little hamlet.

Off to one side of the road, he saw little dark figures moving against the white-splashed background. *Hunters*, he thought. In hard times, anything you could add to your larder was all to the good. A deer might mean the difference between starving and getting through the winter.

He was not a great outdoorsman (though he'd learned a lot lately), but one good glance at how the dark figures moved warned him his first hasty thought was wrong. Hunters, at least of the human variety, did not walk like that. It was some sort of Lizard patrol.

And, worse luck, they'd seen him, too. They broke off whatever they were doing and came toward the road. He thought about diving off his bike and running away from them, but no surer way to get himself shot came to mind. Better to assume the air of an innocent traveler out and about.

One of the Lizards waved to him. He waved back, then stopped his bicycle and waited for them to come up. The closer they got, the more motley and miserable they looked. That struck him as somehow wrong; bug-eyed monsters weren't supposed to have troubles of their own. At least, they never did in the *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* serials.

But a couple of the Lizards were tricked out in their own kind's shiny cold-weather gear, while the rest had draped themselves with a rummage sale's worth of stolen human coats, mufflers, hats, snow pants, and boots. They looked like sad little tramps, and they also looked frozen in spite of everything they had on. They were, in fact, so many Winter Fritzes in the scaly flesh.

The one who had waved led the squad out onto the roadway, which was hardly less snow-covered than the surrounding fields. "Who you?" he asked Larssen in English. His exhaled breath steamed around him.

"My name is Pete Smith," Jens answered. He'd been questioned by Lizard patrols before, and never gave his real name on the off chance that they'd somehow compiled a

list of nuclear physicists. He didn't give the same alias twice, either.

"What you do, Pete Ssmith? Why you out?" The Lizard turned the first sound in Larssen's assumed surname into a long hiss and pronounced the *th* at the end as a Cockney's *ff*

"I'm going to visit my cousins. They live a little past Montpelier," Jens said, naming the small town just west of Fiat on his map.

"You not cold?" the Lizard said. "Not cold on that—that thing?" He'd evidently forgotten the word *bicycle*.

"Of course I'm cold," Larssen answered; he had the feeling the Lizard would have shot him if he'd dared deny it. Hoping he sounded properly indignant, he went on, "Have to go by bike if I want to go, though. Don't have any gas for my car." That was true for everybody these days. He didn't mention that his dead car was back in eastern Ohio.

The Lizards sounded like steam engines as they talked among themselves. The one who'd been questioning Larssen said, "You come with us. We ask you more things." He gestured with his gun to make sure Jens got the point.

"I don't want to do that!" Larssen exclaimed, which was true for both his Pete Smith persona and his very own self. If the Lizards did any serious questioning, they'd find out he didn't know much about his alleged cousins west of Montpelier. They might even find out he didn't *have* any cousins west of Montpelier. And if they found that out, they'd likely start doing some serious digging about who he really was and why he was biking across eastern Indiana.

"Not care what you want," the Lizard said. "You come with us. Or you stay." He brought the rifle up to point straight at the middle of Larssen's chest. The message was clear: if he stayed here, he'd stay forever. The Lizard spoke in his own language, maybe translating for his friends what he'd told Jens. Their mouths fell open. Larssen had seen that before, often enough to figure out what it meant. They were laughing at him.

"I'll come," he said, as he had to. The Lizards formed up on either side of his bicycle and escorted him into Fiat.

The town wasn't even a wide spot on Highway 18, just a few houses, a general store, an Esso station (its pumps now snow-covered mounds), and a church along the side of the road. The store was probably the main reason the town existed. A couple of children ran shouting across the empty pavement of the highway, pelting each other with snowballs. They didn't even look up when the Lizards went past; by now they were used to them. *Kids adapt fast*, Larssen thought. He wished he did.

The Lizards had turned the general store into their headquarters. A razor-wire fence ringed the building to keep anyone from getting too close. A portable pillbox sat in front of the store. Larssen wouldn't have envied a human on duty in there. It had to seem even chillier for one of the invaders.

A blast of heat hit him in the face when the Lizards opened the store's front door. He went from too cold to too hot in the space of a few seconds. Sweat glands he'd thought

dormant till summer suddenly returned to life. In his wool hat, overcoat, and sweater, he felt like a main dish in a covered kettle that had just been moved from the icebox to the oven.

“Ahh!” The Lizards all said it together. As one, they stripped off their layers of insulation and drank in the heat they loved so well. They did not object when Larssen shed his own coat and hat and, a moment later, his sweater. Even in shirt and trousers, he was too warm. But while the Lizards took nudity in stride, the last time he’d been naked in public was at a swimming hole when he was thirteen years old. He left the rest of his clothes on.

The Lizard who spoke English led him to a chair, then sat down across a table from him. The alien reached forward and poked a knob on a small Lizardy gadget that lay on the table. Behind a small, transparent window, something inside the machine began to spin. Jens wondered what it was for.

“Who you?” the Lizard asked, as if seeing him for the first time. He repeated his Pete Smith alias. “What you do?” the alien said, and he gave back his story about the mythical cousins west of Montpelier.

The Lizard picked up another contraption and spoke into it. Larssen jumped when the contraption hissed back. The Lizard spoke again. He and the machine talked back and forth for a couple of minutes, in fact. Larssen thought at first that it was some kind of funny-looking radio or telephone, but the more the Lizard used it, the more he got the feeling the device itself was doing the talking. He wondered what it was saying, especially when it spoke his name.

The Lizard turned one of its turreted eyes toward him. “We have of you no record, Pete Smith.” It might have been pronouncing sentence. “How you explain this?”

“Well, uh, sir, uh—what is your name?”

“I am Gnik,” the Lizard said. “You call me superior sir.”

“Well, superior sir, Gnik, I guess the reason you don’t have any record of me is that till now I’ve just stayed on my own little farm and not bothered anybody. If I’d known I’d run into you, I’d have stayed there longer, too.” That was the best excuse Larssen could come up with on the spur of the moment. He wiped his forehead with a sleeve.

“It could be,” Gnik said neutrally. “These cousins of you—who, what they are?”

“They’re my father’s brother’s son and his wife. His name is Olaf Smith, hers is Barbara. They have two children, Martin and Josephine.” By naming the imaginary cousins (*what’s the square root of minus one cousin?* flashed across his mind) after his father, wife, brother, and sister, he hoped he’d be able to remember who they were.

Gnik talked to his gadget again, listened while it talked back. “No record of these Big Ugliers,” he said, and Larssen thought he was doomed. Then the Lizard went on, “Not have all records yet,” and he breathed again. “One day soon, put in machine here.” Gnik tapped the talking box with a clawed forefinger.

“What is that thing, anyway?” Larssen asked, hoping to get the Lizard to stop asking

him questions about relatives he didn't have.

But Gnik, though too short for basketball and too little for football, was too smart to go for a fake. "You not ask questions at I. I ask questions at you." Lizards didn't have much in the way of facial expressions, but what Gnik had, Larssen didn't like. "You ask questions at me to spy out secrets of Race, yes?"

Yes, Jens thought, though he didn't think coming out and admitting it would be the smartest thing he'd ever done. He didn't have to fake a stammer as he answered, "I don't know anything about your secrets and I don't want to know anything about them. I just never saw a box that talked back to somebody before, that's all."

"Yes. You Big Uglies are pri-mi-tive." Gnik pronounced the three-syllable English word with obvious relish; Larssen guessed he'd learned it so he could score points off uppity humans. He was still suspicious, too. "Maybe you find this things out, pass on to other sneaky Big Uglies, eh?"

"I don't know anything about sneaky Big Uglies—I mean, people," Larssen said, noticing that the Lizards had as unflattering a nickname for human beings as humans did for their kind. "I just want to go see my cousins, that's all." Now he wanted Gnik to ask questions about Olaf and his nonexistent family.

That suddenly seemed safer than being grilled about spies who might very well be real.

Gnik said, "We see more about this, Pete Smith. You not leave town called Fiat now. We keep your travel thing here"—he still couldn't remember how to say *bicycle*—"ask more questions to you later."

Larssen started to exclaim, "You can't do that!" He opened his mouth, but shut it again in a hurry. Gnik damn well *could* do that, and if he didn't care for the cut of Jens' jib, he could reslice it—and Jens—into a shape that better pleased his fancy. Losing a bicycle was the least of his worries.

No, that wasn't so. Along with the bike, he was also losing precious time. How long would he take to hike across Indiana in the dead of winter? How long before another Lizard patrol picked him up and started asking unanswerable questions? Not long, he feared. He wanted to ask Gnik where the Lizard-human frontier through Indiana ran, but didn't think it wise. For all he knew, the invaders had conquered the whole state by now. And even if they hadn't, Gnik almost certainly wouldn't answer and almost certainly would get even more suspicious.

He couldn't fail to make some kind of protest, though, not if he wanted to keep his self-respect, so he said, "I don't think you ought to take my bicycle when I haven't done anything to you."

"You say this. I not know this," Gnik retorted. "You put on now your warm things. We take you to other Big Uglies we keep here."

Putting on sweater, overcoat, and hat in the sweltering general store and then going outside reminded Jens of the runs from steam room to snow he'd shared with his

grandfather when he was a kid. The only thing missing was his father standing out there to whack him with birch twigs. The Lizards didn't seem invigorated when they left the store. They just seemed cold.

They took him over to the church. Lizard guards stood outside it. When they opened the closed door, he found it was heated to a more humanly tolerable level. He also found Gnik was using it as a holding pen for people who came through or near Fiat.

People sat up on the pews; turned around to look him over; and started talking, both at him and among themselves. "Look, another poor sucker." "What did they get him for?" "What *did* they get you for, stranger?"

"Sstay—here," one of the Lizards said to Jens, his words accented almost past comprehension. Then he left the church. As the door swung shut, Larssen saw him and his companion racing back toward the general store and what they thought of as a decent temperature.

"What *did* they get you for, stranger?" repeated the woman who'd asked the question before. She was a brassy blonde not far from Jens' age; she might have been pretty if her hair (which showed dark roots) hadn't been a snaky mess and if she didn't look as if she'd been wearing the same clothes for quite a while.

Everybody in the church had that same grubby look. The faces that turned toward Larssen were mostly clean, but a strong, almost barnyard odor in the air said no one had bathed lately. He was sure he contributed to that odor; he hadn't seen a bar of Lifebuoy for a while himself. Without hot water, baths in winter were more likely to be next to pneumonia than to godliness.

He said, "Hello, folks. I don't know just what they got me for. I don't think they know, either. One of their patrols spotted me on my bicycle and pulled me in so they could ask me questions. Now they don't want to let me go."

"Sounds like the little bastards," the woman said. She wore no lipstick (maybe she'd run out) but, as if to make up for it, had rouged her cheeks almost bloodred.

Her words touched off a torrent of abuse from the other involuntary churchgoers. "I'd like to squeeze their skinny necks till those horrible eyes of theirs pop," said a man with a scraggly reddish beard.

"Put 'em in a cage and feed 'em flies," suggested a skinny, swarthy gray-haired woman.

"I wouldn't mind if they bombed us off the face of the Earth here, so long as the Lizards went with us," added a stout, red-faced fellow. "The scaly sons of bitches won't even let us go out to scrounge around for cigarettes." Larssen missed his nicotine fix, too, but Redface sounded as though he'd forgive the Lizards anything, up to and including bombing Washington, if they'd only let him have a smoke. That struck Jens as excessive.

He gave his Pete Smith alias, and was bombarded with the others' names. He wasn't especially good at matching faces and monickers, and needed a while to remember that

the gray-haired woman was Marie and the bleached blonde Sal, that the fellow with the red beard was Gordon and the man with the red face Rodney. Then there were also Fred and Louella and Mort and Ron and Aloysius and Henrietta to keep straight.

“Hey, we still have pews to spare,” Rodney said. “Make yourself at home, Pete.” Looking around, Larssen saw people had made nests of whatever clothes they weren’t wearing. Sleeping wrapped in an overcoat on a hard pew did not strike him as making himself at home, but what choice had he?

He asked, “Where’s the men’s room?”

Everyone laughed. Sal said, “Ain’t no such thing, or powder room neither. No running water, see? We’ve got—what do you call ’em?”

“Slop buckets,” Aloysius said. He wore a farmer’s denim overalls; by the matter-of-fact way he spoke, he was more than familiar with such appurtenances of rural life.

The buckets were set in a hall behind a door which stayed sensibly closed. Larssen did what he had to do and got out of there as fast as he could. “My father grew up with a two-seater,” he said. “I never thought I’d have to go back to one.”

“Wish it *was* a two-seater,” Aloysius said. “Dang sight easier on my backside than squattin’ over one o’ them buckets.”

“What do you folks—what do *we*, I mean—do to pass the time here?” Jens asked.

“Cuss the Lizards,” Sal answered promptly, which brought a chorus of loud, profane agreement. “Tell lies.” She batted her eyes at him. “I can make like I was in Hollywood so good I almost believe it myself.” He found that more pathetic than alluring, and wondered how long she’d been cooped up here.

Gordon said, “I’ve got a deck of cards, but poker’s no damn good without real money. I’ve won a million dollars three or four times and thrown it away again on nothing better than a pair of sevens.”

“Do we have four for bridge?” Larssen was an avid contract player. “You don’t need to have money to enjoy bridge.”

“I know how to play,” Gordon admitted. “I think poker’s a better game, though.” A couple of other people also said they played. At first, Jens was as close to ecstatic as a prisoner could be; study and work had never left him as much time for cards as he would have liked. Now he could play to his heart’s content without feeling guilty. But the men and women who didn’t know bridge looked so glum that his enthusiasm faded. Was it really fair for some people to enjoy themselves when others couldn’t?

The church door opened. A tall, thin woman with her hair pulled back in a tight bun and her face set in disapproving lines put down a box of canned goods. “Here’s your supper,” she said, each word clipped as precisely as if by scissors. Without waiting for an answer, she turned and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

“What’s eating her?” Larssen said.

“Eating’s the word.” Sal tossed her head in fine contempt. “She says we’re eating the

people who live in this miserable little town out of house and home. As if we asked to get stuck here!”

“You notice we’re eating out of tin cans,” Rodney added, his features darkening even more with anger. “Nothing but farms around here, but they save all the good fresh food for themselves. We haven’t seen any of it, anyhow, that’s for sure.”

There weren’t enough spoons to go around; the town woman either hadn’t noticed or hadn’t cared that the church held a new arrival. Jens ate with somebody else’s, washed in cold water and dried on a trouser leg. Even though he’d given up on hygiene since leaving White Sulphur Springs, that was a new low.

As he chewed on tasteless beef stew, he worried what—if anything—Chicago was eating these days. Rather more to the point, he worried about Barbara. Fiat had at the outside a couple of hundred people for the surrounding countryside to feed. Chicago had three million, and was under Lizard attack, not safely under the Lizards’ thumb.

He wished he’d never left for Washington. He’d thought he was going into the worse danger himself, not leaving his wife behind to face it. Like most Americans under the age of ninety, he’d thought of war as something that happened only to unfortunate people in far-off lands. He hadn’t thought through all the implications of its coming home to roost.

Something strange happened as he was getting to the bottom of the can of stew. A Lizard skittered into the church, peered down into the box of food the grim-faced woman had brought. The alien looked up in obvious disappointment, hissed something that could equally well have been English or its own language. Whatever it was, Larssen didn’t understand it.

The people who’d been stuck in church longer did. “Sorry,”

Marie said. “No crabapples in this batch.” The Lizard let out a desolate hiss and slunk away.

“Crabapples?” Larssen asked. “What does a Lizard want with crabapples?”

“To eat ’em,” Sal said. “You know the spiced ones in jars, the ones that go so nice with a big ham at Christmas. time? The Lizards are crazy about ’em. They’d give you the shirt off their backs for a crabapple, except they mostly don’t wear shirts. But you know what I mean.”

“I guess so,” Larssen said. “Crabapples. Isn’t that a hell of a thing?”

“Gingersnaps, too,” Gordon put in. “I saw a couple of ’em damn near get into a fight one time over a box of gingersnaps.”

Marie said, “They look a little like gingerbread men, don’t they? They’re not all that far from the right color, and the paint they wear could do for icing, don’t you think?”

It was, without a doubt, the first time a Baptist church had ever resounded to the strains of “Run, run, as fast as you can! You can’t catch me—I’m the gingerbread man!” Laughing and cheering one another on, the prisoners made up verses of their own. Some



were funny, some were obscene, some—the best ones—were both.

Jens flogged his muse, sang, “I’ve blown up your cities, and I’ve shot up your roads, and I can take your crabapples, too, I can!” He knew it wasn’t very good, but the chorus roared out: “Run, run, as fast as you can! You can’t catch me—I’m the gingerbread man!”

When at last they ran out of verses, Sal said, “I hope that sour old prune who brings us our food is listening. ’Course, she probably thinks having a good time is sinful, especially in church.?”

“If she had her way, the Lizards would shoot us for having a good time in here,” Mort said.

Sal chuckled. “One thing is, the Lizards don’t pay no more attention to what she wants than we do. Other thing is, she don’t know what all goes on in here, neither.”

“Got to make our own fun,” Aloysius agreed. “Ain’t nobody gonna do it for us. Never thought how much I liked my radio till I didn’t have it no more.”

“That’s true; that’s a fact,” several people said together, as if they were echoing a preacher’s amens.

The short winter day wore on. Darkness poured through the windows and seemed to puddle in the church. Rodney walked over to the box the local woman had brought. “God damn her,” he said loudly. “She was supposed to bring us more candles.”

“Have to do without,” Marie said. “No use complaining about it. We’ll get by as long as we don’t run out of coal for the furnace.”

“And if we do,” Aloysius said, “we’ll be frozen hard enough that we won’t start to stink till they get around to buryin’ us.”

That cheerful thought pretty well halted conversation. Sitting huddled in his overcoat in the darkness, Larssen thought how important the discovery of fire had been, not just because it heated Neanderthal man’s caves but because it lit them as well. A man with a torch could go out at midnight unafraid, knowing it would show him any lurking danger. And electricity had all but banished night altogether. Now the age-old fears proved not dead but merely sleeping, ready to rouse whenever precious light was lost.

He shook his head. The best way he could think of to fight the night terrors was to sleep through them. Sleep was what day-loving animals did in the dark—stay cozy and quiet so nothing dangerous could find them. He stretched out on the hard pew. It wouldn’t be easy.

After a long spell of tossing and turning and twisting—and once almost rolling onto the floor—he managed at last to fall asleep. When he woke, he almost fell off the pew again before he remembered where he was. He looked at his wrist. The luminous dial on his watch said it was half past one.

The inside of the church was absolutely dark. It was not, however, absolutely quiet. He needed a few seconds to identify the noises floating up from a few rows behind him. When he did, he was surprised his ears didn’t glow brighter than his watch. People had

no business doing that in church!

He started to sit up and see who was screwing on the pews, but paused before he'd even leaned onto one elbow. For one thing, it was too dark for him to tell anyway. And was it any of his business? His first shock had sprung straight from the heart of his upper Midwestern Lutheran upbringing. But when he thought about it a little, he wondered how long most of these people had been cooped up together and where else they were supposed to go if they wanted to make love. He lay back down.

But sleep would not return. The whispered gasps and moans and endearments, the small creaking of the pew itself, shouldn't have been enough to keep him awake. They weren't, not really, not by themselves. Listening to them, though, smote him with the realization of how long it had been since he'd slept with Barbara.

He hadn't even looked at another woman in his erratic journey back and forth across the eastern half of the United States. Pedaling a bicycle a good many hours a day, he thought wryly, was liable to take the edge off other physical urges. Besides, it was *cold*. But if just then Sal or one of the other women in here had murmured a suggestion to him, he knew he would have pulled his pants down (if not off) without a moment's hesitation.

Then he wondered what Barbara was doing about such matters. He'd been gone a long time, a lot longer than he'd thought when he set out in: the late, lamented Plymouth. She might think he was dead. (For that matter, she might be dead herself, but his mind refused to dwell on that).

He'd never imagined he needed to worry about whether she'd stay faithful. But then, he'd never thought he needed to worry about whether he would, either. The middle of the night on a cold, hard pew was hardly the time or place for such thoughts. That didn't keep him from having them.

It did keep him from going back to sleep for a long, long lime.

"So," Zolraag said. Moishe Russie knew the Lizard's accent was the main thing that stretched the word into a hiss, but the knowledge didn't make it sound any less menacing. The governor went on, "So, *Herr* Russie, you will no longer for us speak on the radio? This is your measure of—what is the Deutsch word—gratitude, is that it?"

"Gratitude is the word, yes, Excellency," Russie said, sighing. He'd known this day was coming. Now it had arrived. "Excellency, not a Jew in Warsaw is ungrateful that the Race delivered us from the Germans. Had you not come when you did, there might be no Jews left in Warsaw. So I have said on the radio for your benefit. So much I would say again."

The Lizards had shown him the extermination camp at Treblinka. They'd shown him the much bigger one at Oswiecim—the Germans called it Auschwitz—which had just been starting up when they came. Both places were worse than anything he'd imagined in his worst nightmares. Pogroms, malignant neglect: those were standard tools in the

anti-Semite's kit. But murder factories...his stomach twisted whenever he thought of them.

Zolraag said, "If you are grateful, we expect you to show this in ways of usefulness to us."

"I thought I was your friend, not your slave," Russie answered. "If all you want of me is to repeat the words you say, better you should find a parrot. There must be one or two left in Warsaw."

His defiance would have been more impressive, even to himself, if he hadn't had to go back and explain to Zolraag what a parrot was. The Lizard governor took a while to get the whole idea. "One of these animals, then, would speak our message in your words? This could be done?" He sounded astonished; maybe Home didn't have any animals that could learn to talk. He also sounded excited. "You Tosevites would listen to such an animal?"

Russie was tempted to say yes: let the Lizards make laughing-stocks of themselves. Reluctantly, he decided he had to tell the truth instead; that much he owed to the beings who had saved his people. "Excellency, human beings would listen to a parrot, but only to be amused, never to take it seriously."

"Ah." Zolraag's voice was mournful. So was the Lizard's whole demeanor. His office was heated past what Russie found comfortable, yet he still draped himself in warm clothing. He said, "You know our studio has been repaired after the damage the Deutsch raiders caused."

"Yes." Russie also knew the raiders had been Jews, not Nazi. He was glad the Lizards had never figured that out.

Zolraag went on "You know you are now in good health."

"Yes," Moishe repeated. Suddenly the governor reminded him of a rabbi laying out a case for his interpretation of a Talmudic passage: this was so, and that was so, and therefore...He didn't like the *therefore* he saw ahead. He said, "I will not go on the radio and thank the Race for destroying Washington."

The irrevocable words, the ones he'd tried so long to evade, were spoken at last. A large lump of ice seemed to grow in his belly in spite of the overheated room He had always been at the Lizards' mercy, just as before he and all the Warsaw Jews were at the mercy of the Germans. A quick gesture from the governor and Rivka would be a widow.

Zolraag did not make the gesture—not yet, anyhow. He said, "I do not understand your trouble. Surely you did not object to the identical bombing of Berlin, which helped us take this city from the Deutsche. How does the one differ from the other?"

It was so obvious—but not to the Lizards. Looked at dispassionately, the distinction wasn't easy to draw. How many Germans incinerated in Berlin had been women children old men people who hated everything for which the regime centered there stood? Thousands upon thousands surely. Their undeserved deaths were as appalling as

anything Washington had suffered.

But that regime itself was so monstrous that no one—least of all Moishe Russie—could look at it dispassionately. He said, “You know the kinds of things the Germans did. They wanted to enslave or kill all their neighbors.” *Rather like you Lizards* he thought. Saying that out loud, however, seemed less than expedient. He went on, “The United States, though, has always been a country where people could be freer than they are anywhere else.”

“What is this freedom?” Zolraag asked. “Why do you esteem it so?”

A quotation from a scripture not his own ran through Russie’s mind: *Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?* Unlike the Roman, Zolraag seemed to want a serious answer. That only made Russie the sadder for him; he suspected he would be explaining music to a deaf man.

Nonetheless, he had to try. “When we are free, we may think as we like, believe as we like, and do as we like so long as what we do does not harm any of our neighbors.”

“All this you would enjoy under the beneficent rule of the Race.” No, Zolraag heard no music.

“But we did not—do not—choose to come under the rule of the Race, beneficent or not,” Russie said. “Another side of freedom is being able to choose our own leaders, our own rulers, rather than having them forced upon us.”

“If you enjoy the other freedom, how could this one possibly matter?” Zolraag sounded all at sea. Though he and Moishe both used a hodgepodge of Lizard and German words, they did not speak the same language.

“If we cannot choose our own leaders, we keep the other freedoms only on sufferance, not because they are truly ours,” Russie replied. “We Jews, we know all about having freedom taken away from us at a ruler’s whim.”

“You still have not answered my very first question,” the Lizard governor insisted. “How can you condone our bombing of Berlin while you condemn the bombing of Washington?”

“Because, Excellency, of all the countries on this world, Germany had the least freedom of either kind and, when you came, was busy trying to take away whatever freedom its neighbors possessed. That’s why most of the countries—empires, you would say, though most of them aren’t—had banded together to try to defeat it The United States, now, the United States gives its citizens more freedom than any other country. In hurting Berlin, you were helping freedom; in hurting Washington, you were taking it away.” Russie spread his hands. “Do you understand what I am trying to say, Excellency?”

Zolraag made a noise like a leaky samovar coming to a boil. “Since you Tosevites cannot come close to agreeing among yourselves in matters political, I hardly see how I am to be expected to grasp your incomprehensible feuds. But have I not heard that the Deutsche chose their—what is his name?—their Hitler for themselves in the senseless

manner you extol so highly? How do you square this with your talk of freedom?”

“Excellency, I cannot” Russie looked down at the floor. He wished the Lizard had not known about how the Nazis came to power. “I do not claim any system of government will always work well, only that more folk are likely to be made content and fewer harmed with freedom than under any other arrangement.”

“Not so,” Zolraag said. “Under the Empire, the Race and its subject species have prospered for thousands upon thousands of years without ever worrying about choosing their own rulers and the other nonsense of which you babble.”

“To this I say two things,” Moishe answered: “first; that you have not been trying to govern human beings—”

“To which I say, on short experience, that I am heartily glad,” Zolraag broke in.

“Humanity would be glad if you still weren’t,” Russie said. He did not stress that, though; as he’d already admitted, he and his people would have been exterminated had the Lizards not come. He tried another tack: “How would these subject races of yours feel about what you say?”

“They would agree with me, I believe,” Zolraag said, “They can scarcely deny their lives are better under our rule than they were in their barbarous days of what you, I suppose, would call freedom.”

“If they like you so well, why haven’t you brought any of them with you to Earth?” Russie was trying to make the governor out to be a liar. The Germans had had no trouble recruiting security forces from among the peoples they’d conquered. If the Lizards had done the same, why weren’t they using their subjects to help conquer or at least police this world?

But Zolraag answered, “The Empire’s soldiers and administrators come only from the ranks of the Race. This is partly tradition, dating from the epoch when the Race was the only species in the Empire...but then, you Tosevites care nothing for tradition.”

Russie wanted to bristle at that, belonging as he did to a tradition that stretched back more than three thousand years. But he’d gotten the idea that, to Zolraag, three thousand years was about the equivalent of summer before last—hardly worth mentioning if you wanted to talk about a long time ago.

The Lizard governor went on, “That the security of the Race’s rule is another consideration, I will not deny. You should be honored that you are allowed to aid us in our efforts to pacify Tosev 3. Such a privilege would not be afforded to a Hallessi or a Rabotev, I assure you, though the members of subject races may freely pursue careers in areas not affecting the government and safety of the Empire.”

“We do not use the word *freely* in the same way,” Russie said. “If I weren’t useful to you, I’m sure you wouldn’t grant me this privilege.” He packed all the irony he could into that last word. Zolraag had as much as said that if the Lizards brought Earth into their Empire, humans would be reduced to hewers of wood and drawers of water, with no voice in their own fate forevermore.

Zolraag answered, "You are undoubtedly correct, *Herr* Russie. I suggest you bear that in mind, make the most of the opportunity you are presented, and cease your foolish complaints against our dominion." Using irony against him was about as futile as German antitank guns firing on Lizard panzers.

Russie said, "I cannot do as you ask of me, not only for the sake of my own self-respect but also because no human who heard me praise you for destroying Washington could ever take my words seriously again."

"You have been useful to us up until this time, so I have given you many chances to change your mind: more than I should have, very likely. But after this you will have no more chances. Do you understand what I say to you?"

"Yes. Do what you want to me. I cannot speak as you wish." Russie licked dry lips. As he had when the Nazis ruled the ghetto, he hoped he could endure whatever the Lizards inflicted on him.

Zolraag said, "We will not do anything to you, *Herr* Russie. Direct intimidation has shown itself to be less valuable on this world than we might have wished." Russie stared at him, hardly believing his own ears. But the governor was not finished: "Research has suggested another tactic which may prove more effective. As I said, you will not suffer personally for this refusal. But we shall exact reprisals upon the female with whom you are mated and upon your hatchling. I hope this may suggest a possible change in your view."

Moishe stared at him, not so much in disbelief as in dreadful disappointment "And here I thought I'd helped drive the Nazis out of Warsaw," he said at last.

"The Deutsche are indeed well and truly driven from this city, and with your help," Zolraag said, missing the point completely. "We seek your continued assistance in persuading your fellow Tosevites of the justice of our cause."

The governor spoke without apparent irony. Russie concluded he'd noticed none. But even a Nazi might have hesitated to threaten a woman and child in one breath and proclaim the justice of his cause in the next *Alien*, Russie thought. Not till now had he had his nose rubbed in the meaning of the word.

He wanted to point out to Zolraag the errors in his reasoning, as if he were a rabbi correcting a young *yeshiva-bucher*. In the first days after the Lizards came, he could have done just that. Since then, little by little, he'd had to learn discretion—and now his temper could endanger not just himself but also Rivka and Reuven. Softly, then.

"You understand you offer me no easy choice," he said.

"Your lack of cooperation has forced me to this step," Zolraag answered.

"You ask me to betray so much of what I believe in," Russie said. That was nothing but truth. He tried to put a whine in his voice: "Please give me a couple of days in which to think on what I must do." Getting sick wouldn't be enough this time. He was already sure of that.

"I ask you only to go on working with us and for our cause as you have in the past."

Just as Russie was getting more cautious in what he said to Zolraag, so Zolraag was getting more suspicious about what he heard from Russie. “Why do you need time in which to contemplate this?” The governor spoke in his own language to the machine on the desk in front of him. It was no telephone, but it answered anyway; sometimes Moishe thought it did Zolraag’s thinking for him. The Lizard resumed: “Our research demonstrates that a threat against a Tosevite’s family is likely to be the most effective way to ensure his obedience.”

Something in the way he phrased that made Russie notice it. “Is the same not true among the Race?” he asked, hoping to distract Zolraag from wondering why he needed extra time to think.

The ploy worked, at least for a little while. The governor emitted a most human-sounding snort; his mouth fell open in amusement. “Hardly, *Herr* Russie. Among our kind, matings are but for a season, driven by the scent females exude then. Females brood and raise our young—that is their role in life—but we do not have these permanent families you Tosevites know. How could we, when parentage is less certain among us?”

The Lizards were all bastards, then, in the most literal sense of the word. Moishe liked that notion, especially with what Zolraag was putting him through now. He asked, “This is so even with your Emperor?”

Zolraag cast down his eyes at the mention of his ruler’s title. “Of course not, foolish Tosevite,” he said. “The Emperor has females reserved for him alone, so his line may be sure to continue. So it has been for a thousand generations and more; so shall it ever be.”

A *harem*, Russie thought That should have made him all the more scornful of the Lizards, but somehow it did not. Zolraag spoke of his Emperor with the reverence a Jew would have given to his God. *A thousand generations*. With a past of that depth upon which to draw, no wonder Zolraag saw the future as merely a continuation of what had already been.

The governor returned to the question he’d asked before: “With your family as security for your obedience, why do you still hesitate? This appears contrary to the results of our research on your kind.”

*What sort of research?* Russie wondered. He didn’t really want to know; the bloodless word too likely concealed more suffering than he could think about with equanimity. In doing as they pleased to people without worrying about the consequences of their actions, the Lizards weren’t too different from the Nazis after all. But all of mankind was for them as Jews were for the Germans.

*I should have seen that sooner*, Russie thought. Yet he could not blame himself for what he’d done before. His own people were dying then, and he’d helped save them. As so often happened, though, the short-term solution was proving part of a long-term problem.

“Please answer me, *Herr* Russie,” Zolraag said sharply.

“How can I answer now?” Russie pleaded. “You put me between impossible choices. I must have time to think.”

“I will give you one day,” the governor said with the air of one making a great concession. “Past that time, I shall have no more patience with these delaying tactics.”

“Yes, Your Excellency; thank you, Your Excellency.” Russie scurried out of Zolraag’s office before the Lizard got the bright idea of attaching a couple of guards to him. Whatever invidious comparisons he’d drawn, he had to recognize that the invaders were less efficient occupiers than the Nazis had been.

*What do I do now?* he wondered as he went back out into the cold. *If I praise the Lizards for bombing Washington, I deserve an assassin’s bullet. If I don’t ...*

He thought of killing himself to escape Zolraag’s demands. That would save his wife and son. But he did not want to die; he’d survived too much to throw away his life, if any other way was open, he would seize it.

He was not surprised to find his feet taking him toward Mordechai Anielewicz’s headquarters. If anyone could help him, the Jewish fighting leader was the man. Trouble was, he didn’t know if anyone could help him.

The armed guards outside the headquarters came, if not to attention, then at least to respectful alertness as he approached. He had no trouble getting in to see Anielewicz. The fighter took one look at his face and said, “What’s the Lizard said he’s going to do to you?”

“Not to me, to my family.” Russie told the story in a few words.

Anielewicz swore. “Let’s go for a walk, *Reb* Moishe. I have the feeling they can listen to whatever we say in here.”

“All right” Russie went out into the street again. Warsaw this winter, even outside the former ghetto, was depressingly drab. Smoke from soft-coal and wood fires hung over the city, tinting both clouds and scattered snow a dingy brown. Trees that would be green and lovely in summer now reached toward the sky bare branches that reminded Russie of skeletons’ arms and fingers. Piles of rubble were everywhere, swarmed over by antlike Poles and Jews out to take away what they could.

“So,” Anielewicz said abruptly. “What did you have in mind to do?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. We expected this would happen, and now it has. But I thought they would strike only at me, not at Rivka and Reuven.” Russie rocked back and forth on his heels, as if mourning lost chances.

Anielewicz’s eyes were hooded. “They’re learning. They aren’t stupid by any means, just naive. All right, here’s what it comes down to: do you want to disappear, do you want your family to disappear, or should you all vanish at the same time? I’ve set up plans for each case, but I need to know which to run.”

“What I would like,” Russie said, “is for the Lizards to disappear.”



“Ha.” Anielewicz gave that exactly as much laughter as it deserved. “A wolf was devouring us, so we called in a tiger. The tiger isn’t eating us right now, but we are still made of meat, so he’s not a good neighbor to have, either.”

“Neighbor? Landlord, you mean,” Russie said. “And he will eat my family if I don’t throw myself into his mouth.”

“I asked you once already how you want to keep from doing that?”

“I can’t afford to disappear,” Russie said reluctantly; he would have liked nothing better. “Zolraag would just pick someone else from among us to mouth his words. He may decide to do that anyhow. But if I’m here, I serve as a reproach to whoever might want to take such a course—and to Zolraag himself, not that he cares much about reproaches from human beings. But if you can get Rivka and Reuven away ...”

“I think I can. I have something in mind, anyhow.” Anielewicz frowned, thinking through whatever his scheme was. In what seemed a *non sequitur*, he asked, “Your wife reads, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. Write a note to tell her whatever you need to say about escaping: I’d bet the Lizards can hear what goes on at your flat, too. I’d be able to do that, if I were wearing their shoes.”

Russie looked at the Jewish fighting leader in sharp surprise. Sometimes Anielewicz was amazingly matter-of-fact about his own deviousness. Maybe only accident of birth separated him from a *Gestapo* man. The thought was depressing. Even more depressing that in times like these the Jews desperately needed such men.

Anielewicz had barely paused. Now he went on, “Out loud, you talk to her about the three of you going out shopping to the marketplace on Gesia Street. Then go, but in a couple of hours. Have her wear a hat that stands out.”

“What will happen then?”

The fighting leader let out an exasperated snort. “*Reb* Moishe, the more you know, the more somebody can squeeze out of you. Even after you see what we do, you won’t know all of it—which is for the best, believe me.”

“All right, Mordechai.” Russie glanced over at his companion. “I hope you’re not putting yourself in too much danger on account of me.”

“Life is a gamble—we’ve learned about that these past few years, haven’t we?” Anielewicz shrugged. “Sooner or later you lose, but there are times when you have to bet anyhow. Go on, do what I told you. I’m glad you don’t want to go into hiding yourself. We need you; you’re our conscience.”

Moishe felt like a conscience, a guilty one, all the way back to his block of flats. He paused along the way to scribble a note to his wife along the lines Anielewicz had suggested. As he stuck it back into his pocket, he wondered if he’d really have to use it. When he turned the last corner, he saw Lizard guards standing at the entrance to the

apartment building. They hadn't been there the day before. Guilt evaporated. To save his family, he would do what he must.

The Lizards scrutinized him as he approached. "You—Russie?" one of them asked in hesitant German.

"Yes," he snapped, and pushed past. Two steps later, he wondered if he should have lied. The Lizards seemed to have as much trouble telling people from one another as he did telling them apart. He stamped angrily on the stairs as he climbed up to his own flat. Maybe he'd wasted a chance.

"What's the matter?" Rivka asked, blinking, when he slammed the door behind him.

"Nothing." He answered as lightly as he could, mindful Zolraag's minions might be listening. "Why don't we go shopping with Reuven this afternoon? We'll see what they're selling over on Gesia Street."

His wife looked at him as if he'd suddenly taken leave of his senses. Not only was he anything but an enthusiastic shopper, his cheery manner did not match the way he'd stormed into the apartment. Before she could say anything, he pulled out the note and handed it to her.

"What is—?" she began, but fell silent at his urgent shushing motions. Her eyes widened as she read what he'd written. She rose to the occasion like a trouper. "All right, we'll go out," she said happily, though all the while her glance darted this way and that in search of the microphones he'd warned her about

*If we could spot them so easily, they wouldn't be a menace,* he thought He said, "When we go, why don't you put on that new gray fur hat you bought? It goes so nicely with your eyes." At the same time, he nodded vigorously to show her he wanted to be certain she did just that.

"I will. In fact, I'll fetch it now so I don't forget," she said, adding over her shoulder, "You should tell me things like that more often." She sounded more mischievous than reproachful, but he felt a twinge of guilt just the same.

*The hat, a sturdy one with earflaps, had once belonged to a Red Army soldier. It wasn't feminine, but it was warm, which counted for more in a city full of scarcity and too near empty of fuel. And it *did* set off her eyes well.*

They made small talk to kill the time Anielewicz had asked them to kill. Then Rivka buttoned her coat, put a couple of extra layers of outer clothes on Reuven—who squealed with excitement at the prospect of going out—and left the apartment with Moishe. As soon as they were outside, she said, "Now what exactly is this all about? Why are we—?"

While they walked to the stairs and then down them, he explained more than he'd been able to put in his note. He finished, "So they'll spirit the two of you away somehow, to keep the Lizards from using you to get a hold on me."

"What will they do with us?" she demanded. "Where will we go?"

“I don’t know,” he said. “Mordechai wouldn’t tell me. He may not know himself, but leave the choice to people the Lizards won’t automatically question. Though any rabbi would have a fit to hear me say it, sometimes ignorance is the best defense.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” she said. “Running from danger while you stay in it isn’t right. I—”

Before she could say *won’t*, he broke in, “This is the best thing you can do to keep me safe, too.” He wanted to say more, but by then they were at the entrance to the flats, and he couldn’t be sure how much Yiddish or Polish the Lizard guards there knew.

Somehow he wasn’t surprised when those guards, instead of staying at their post, started following him and his family. They didn’t come right alongside as if they were jailers, but they never let the Russies get more than ten or twelve meters ahead. If he or Rivka had tried to break and run, the Lizards would have had no trouble capturing or shooting them. Besides, if they broke and ran, they’d wreck whatever plan Anielewicz had made.

So they kept walking, outwardly as calm as if nothing unusual were happening. By the time they got to the market, four Lizards trailed them and two more walked ahead; with their swiveling eyes, the aliens could keep watch without constantly turning their heads back over their shoulders.

Gesia Street, as usual, boiled with life. Hawkers loudly peddled tea, coffee, and hot water laced with saccharine from samovars, turnips from pushcarts. A man with a pistol stood guard over a crate of coal. Another sat behind a table on which he had set out spare parts for bicycles. A woman displayed bream from the Vistula. The weather was cold enough to keep the fish fresh till spring.

Several stands sold captured German and Russian military clothing. More German gear was available, but the Red Army equipment brought higher prices—the Russians knew how to fight cold. Rivka had bought her hat at one of these stands. Now, Moishe saw, even Lizards crowded around them. That made him abruptly move away.

“Where are we going?” Rivka asked when he swerved.

“I don’t exactly know,” he said. “We’ll just wander about and see what there is to see.” *Wander about and let Anielewicz’s men see us*, he thought.

As if from a distant dream, he remembered the days before the war, when he could walk into any tailor’s or grocer’s or butcher’s in Warsaw, find what he wanted, and be sure he had the zlotys to buy it. Compared to those days, the market on Gesia Street was privation personified. Compared to what the ghetto market had been like when the Nazis ruled Warsaw, it seemed cigar-smoking Wall Street capitalist affluence.

People surged this way and that, buying and bartering, trading bread for books, marks for meat, vodka for vegetables. The Lizards who were watching Russie and his family had to get closer to make sure their quarry did not somehow vanish in the crowds. Even then, they had no easy time because they couldn’t even see over or through the taller humans who kept stepping between them and the Russies.

Moishe suddenly found himself in the middle of a large knot of large men. By main force of will, he made himself keep his face straight—a lot of them came from the ranks of Mordechai Anielewicz’s fighters. Whatever happened would happen now.

One of Anielewicz’s men bent down, muttered something in Rivka’s ear. She nodded, squeezed Moishe’s hand hard, then let go. He heard her say, “Come on, Reuven.” A couple of burly fighters shouldered themselves between him and his wife and son. He looked away, biting the inside of his lip and fighting back tears.

A few seconds later, a hand joined his again. He spun round, half afraid something was wrong, half delighted he wouldn’t have to be separated from Rivka and Reuven after all. But the young woman whose fingers interlaced with his, though a fair skinned, gray-eyed brunette who wore Rivka’s hat, was not his wife. *Nor* was the *boy* beside her his son:

“We’ll wander around the marketplace a few more minutes, then go back to your flat,” she said quietly.

Russie nodded. This impostor’s coat was much like his wife’s, the hat was hers. He didn’t think the ploy would have fooled, say, SS men, but to the Lizards, one human looked much like another. They might well have recognized Rivka by her hat rather than her features—that obviously was Anielewicz’s gamble, at any rate.

Russie’s first urge was to crane his neck to see where the fighters were taking his family. He fought it down. Then he really realized he was holding the hand of a woman not his wife. He jerked away as if she’d suddenly become red-hot. He would have been even more mortified if she’d laughed at him. To his relief, she just nodded in sympathetic understanding.

But his relief did not last long. “Could we leave now?” he asked. “It’s not only the Lizards, and it’s not that I’m not grateful, but people will see us together and wonder what on earth we’re doing. Or rather, they won’t wonder—they’ll decide they know.”

“Yes, that is one of the things that can go wrong,” the woman agreed, as coolly as if she were one of Anielewicz’s rifle-toting fighters herself. “But this was the best way we could come up with to make the switch on short notice.”

*We?* Russie thought *She is a fighter, then, regardless of whether she carries a gun. So is the boy..* He said, “What’s your name? How can I thank you properly if I don’t know who you are?”

She smiled. “I’m Leah. And this is David.”

“Hello, David,” Russie said. David nodded back, as soberly as any adult might have. Moishe felt a stab of guilt at using a child to protect himself.

A short woman with curly gray hair pushed her way between the fighters around him. “*Reb* Moishe, I need to ask you—” she began. Her words trailed away as she noticed Leah was not Rivka. She backed off, her eyes as wide and staring as if Russie had sprouted a second head.

“That’s torn it,” Leah muttered. “You’re right, *Reb* Moishe we’d better go. I’m sorry for

the damage I'm doing to your reputation."

"If I have to choose between my reputation and my family, I know which is more important," Russie said firmly, adding, "Besides, the way we gossip here, before long everyone will know why I'm playing this game." He spoke for Leah's benefit, but also eased his own mind because he realized he was probably right.

For the moment, though, what would spread was scandal. Before people started gathering around and pointing fingers, he and Leah and David left the market and strolled, not too fast and not too slow, back toward his home. The Lizard guards moving along in front and behind them were in a way a blessing, because they kept most folk from coming too close and puncturing the masquerade.

Russie's conscience twinged again when he closed the door to his flat behind him. Bringing a woman—a young, attractive woman—here...*shameful* was the mildest word he thought of. But Leah remained utterly prosaic. She took off the fur hat, handed it back to him, smiled without saying anything: she must have been warned the Lizards might be listening. She pointed to the hat, then to herself, and shrugged as if to ask how anyone, even a Lizard, could imagine she was Rivka if she didn't have it on her head. Then she walked out the door and was gone.

The simplicity of the escape took Moishe's breath away. The Lizards hadn't posted guards right outside the flat, only at the entrance to the building. Maybe they didn't want to act as if they were intimidating him, even though they were. Or maybe, as Anielewicz had said, they were just naive about how tricky human beings could be. Whichever was true, Leah, now that she was no longer disguised as Rivka, plainly intended to stroll right past them and off to freedom.

The boy David sat on the floor and played with Reuven's toys for a little while. Then he got up and stood by the door. Moishe opened it for him. He nodded again with that surprising gravity, then went out into the hall. Russie closed the door.

The flat seemed achingly huge and achingly empty now that he was here alone. He walked into the bedroom, shook his head, came out again in a hurry. Then he went into the kitchen and shook his head for a different reason—he was no cook, and now he'd have to feed himself for a while. He found some black bread and a slab of cheese on the counter. He picked a knife from the dairy service, made himself a sandwich. If he wanted anything fancier than that, he'd need to get someone else to fix it for him.

Of course, the Lizards might fix things so he wouldn't have to worry about food any more. He tried not to dwell on that. He went back into the main room, pulled out an old medical text on diseases of the large intestine. His eyes went back and forth, he turned pages, but he remembered nothing of what he read.

He slept badly that night. Rivka's bed next to his, Reuven's little cot, painfully reminded him his loved ones were not here. He was used to soft breathing and occasional snores in the bedroom with him. The silence their absence imposed on him somehow was more disturbing than a dreadful racket; he felt smothered in thick wool batting.

He ate more bread and cheese the next morning. He was still puttering around afterward, trying to figure out what to do next, when something clicked against the front door. Lizard claws tapping the wood in the quick little drum-rattle the aliens used in place of a knock.

Russie's mouth went dry. He'd hoped he'd have a full day in which to pretend to be making up his mind. But no. He opened the door. To his surprise, Zolraag himself stood in the hall, along with a large contingent of guards. "Excellency," Russie stammered. "I am honored. W-won't you come in?"

"There is no need," Zolraag answered. "I ask you one question, *Herr* Russie: will you speak over the radio as we desire and require of you?"

"No, Excellency, I shall not." Moishe waited for the sky to fall.

The Lizard governor remained businesslike. "Then we shall persuade you." His eyes swiveled toward one of the guards. "Your males shall now seize the Tosevite female and hatchling." He spoke, of course, in his own language, but Russie followed him well enough.

"It shall be done." The guard—officer?—hissed orders to the Lizards with him. One of them pointed his rifle at Russie, who stood very still.

"You will not interfere, *Herr* Russie," Zolraag said.

"I will not interfere," Moishe agreed.

Some guards went into the kitchen, Others into the bedroom. All returned in short order. "The other Big Ugliers are not here, superior sir, Provincelord," one of them reported. Had he been a man, Russie would have said he sounded worried.

"What?" the guard leader and Zolraag said together. The Lizard governor's eyes drilled into Russie. "Where are they?"

"Excellency, I do not know." Russie wished he could be as brave as Anielewicz's fighters, who seemed to go into combat without a trace of worry. If Zolraag had been angry at him before, he'd be furious now—but at least he could no longer vent that fury on the innocent. Russie went on, "As your male said, they are not here."

"Where did they go?" Zolraag demanded.

"I don't know that, either."

"You cannot deceive me as easily as you would hope," Zolraag said. "The female and hatchling were observed to return to this dwelling with you yesterday. They were not seen to leave. Therefore they must be in the building somewhere." He turned to the guard officer with whom he'd spoken before. "Summon more males. We shall peel this hovel as if it were a kleggfruit."

"Provincelord, it shall be done." The guard spoke into one of the incredibly small, incredibly light radiotelephones the Lizards carried.

Watching him, Russie tried not to show the jubilation he felt. Whatever happened to him, Rivka and Reuven were out of Zolraag's clawed, scaly hands. The Lizards were

welcome to search the block of flats from now until the Messiah came. They wouldn't find what wasn't there.

They made a good game try of it, though. Moishe didn't hear their lorries pull up, as he had too many times when the Nazis rumbled into the ghetto on a sweep. But the noises that came through his open doorway after the Lizards swarmed into the building were all too familiar—rifle butts hammering on doors, frightened Jews wailing as they were herded into hallways, overturned furniture crashing to the ground.

“Excellency, out of all the people in the world, we hailed you as rescuers when you came to Warsaw, and fought on your side against other men,” Russie said. “Now you are doing your best to turn us into foes.”

“You turn yourselves into foes by failing to obey,” Zolraag answered.

“We were happy to be your allies. I told you before that being your slaves, obeying because we have to rather than because we think you are in the right, is something else again.”

Zolraag made his unhappy-samovar noise. “Your effrontery is intolerable.”

Time dragged on. Every so often, a Lizard would come in and report to the governor. Not surprisingly, the searchers had no luck. Zolraag kept right on sounding like a teakettle with something wrong with it. Russie wondered if he could have hidden his wife and son in plain sight. Maybe so. The Lizards had already shown they weren't any good at telling one human from another. What they were probably doing now was looking for anyone in hiding.

They did bring one little old man with a white beard up in front of Zolraag, but the governor knew enough to dismiss him as a likely spouse for Moishe. By late afternoon, the Lizards confessed failure. Zolraag glared at Russie. “You think you have won a victory, do you, Big Ugly?” He hardly ever hurled the Lizards' offensive nickname for humanity into Moishe's face. That he did so now was a measure of his wrath. “Let me tell you, you shall not prove the happier for it”

“Do what you like with me, Excellency,” Russie said. “From your point of view, I suppose you have that right. But I think no one has any business taking hostages and enforcing his will through fear.”

“When I seek your opinions, be assured I shall request them of you,” the governor replied. “Until that time, keep them to yourself.”

Russie tried to figure out what he would do in Zolraag's position. Probably stick a gun to the recalcitrant human's head, hand him a script, and tell him to read it or else. And what would he do himself in the face of a threat like that? He hoped for defiance, but was far from sure he could come up with it. Few men had within them the stuff of martyrs.

Zolraag was not quite so peremptory as he'd feared. The Lizard said, “I shall consult with my superiors, *Herr* Russie, over the proper steps to take in response to this unprecedented act of defiance on your part.” He strode away, his retinue trailing after

him.

Limp as a wet blotter, Russie sank down onto the sofa. *Unprecedented*, he decided, was the word that had saved him. The Lizards were not good at thinking on their feet, at knowing what to do when something failed to go according to plan. That didn't mean he was out of danger, though, only that it was deferred for the moment. Somewhere higher in the Lizards' hierarchy was a male who could tell Zolraag what to do. And Zolraag, Russie knew, would do it, whatever it was.

He went into the kitchen, ate more bread and cheese. Then he opened the door—the bathroom was down at the end of the hall. Two armed Lizard guards stood outside; they'd been so quiet, he'd had no clue they were there.

They marched to the toilet with him. Despite his indignant protest, one went inside and kept watch on him while he made water. Then they marched him back to the apartment. He wondered if they'd come in with him, but they didn't.

Still, they made sure he wasn't going anywhere they didn't want him to go. As Mordechai had said, they weren't stupid. He looked around the flat. He was trapped, awaiting sentence.



An hour outside Chicago. Crouched behind an overturned drill press in a shattered factory building in Aurora, Illinois, Mutt Daniels reflected that this was about as close to the Windy City as he'd come since he fell out of the big leagues thirty years before.

The noise he made was half laugh, half cough. Steam swirled from his mouth, thick as cigarette smoke. Even in a sheepskin coat he shivered. Snow drifted down on him through holes in the roof. He kept his hands jammed in his pockets. If he happened to brush them against the frozen bare metal of the drill press, he knew it would strip off his skin like a scaling knife getting a bluegill ready for the frying pan.

Clanking outside in the rubble-strewn street. A few feet away, sprawled in back of a lathe lay Sergeant Schneider. "That there's a Lizard tank," Daniels whispered, hoping Schneider would tell him he was wrong. But the veteran noncom just nodded. Daniels swore. We didn't have to worry about these god damn things when we were Over There in the last war."

"Too goddamn right we didn't," Schneider said. "And all the time then I thought things couldn't get any worse." He spat on the floor. "Shows what I know, don't it?"

"Yeah." Daniels' shiver had only a little to do with the cold that snuck into his very bones. He'd read about tanks since the new war began, seen them in newsreels. But until, the Lizards turned the whole world upside down, he hadn't really understood what they did to fighting. It wasn't just that they picked up big guns and put them on tracks. Worse still, behind their thick armor, the crews that served those guns were almost invulnerable to infantry.

Almost. Mutt scuttled forward on hands and knees. If that tank—if any Lizard tank—forced its way to the eastern bank of the Fox River, the job of defending Chicago would take another step on the road to impossibility.

The tank's machine gun chattered, firing at one of the Americans defending Aurora or else at random to make humans keep their heads down. Combat here was house-to-house, concentrated; in fact, it reminded Daniels of the trench warfare he'd known in France. Aurora marked the western edge of the factory belt that spread out across the prairie from Chicago.

Fighting all the way into the big city would be like this—if anyone lived to retreat all the way into the big city. Mutt had his doubts about that. He'd had his doubts in 1918, too, but then he'd been on the side with more men and bigger guns. Now he was getting a taste of how the poor damned Boches must have felt as everything rained down on them.

The Germans had kept fighting like bastards right up till the Armistice. Mutt felt

asimilar obligation to keep going as long as he could. The front wall of the factory had been bombed not long before he holed up in it; its bricks were part of the rubble through which the Lizard tank was forcing its way. He crawled toward what had been a window opening and was now just a hole a little squarer than most. Knife-sharp shards of glass tore his pants and his knees.

Ever so cautiously, he peered out. The tank was about thirty yards east of him. It had slowed to shove aside some burned-out trucks the Americans were using as a roadblock. The commander had nerve. In spite of rattling small-arms fire, he stood head and shoulders out of his cupola so he could see what was going on around him.

His back was to Daniels. Mutt had grown up hunting squirrels and possums for the pot. He swung the rifle up to his shoulder, exhaled, saw the front of the Lizard's head explode in a red mist a split second before he threw himself away from his firing position.

“*Nailed* the son of a bitch!” he shouted through the din of gunfire and explosions. The other Americans sheltering in the ruined factory raised a cheer. Such a clear-cut cry of victory came their way too seldom. Had the Lizards had the numbers to match the might of their marvelous machines, Daniels knew the fight would have been long since lost.

Nor did he get more than a moment to exult in his successful piece of sniping. Bullets from the tank's machine gun lashed the factory building. He huddled in back of another broken power tool, grateful for the heavy chunk of iron and steel that shielded him from flying death.

“Good job, Mutt,” Sergeant Schneider bawled. “You diverted him from the advance he was making. Taking us out doesn't mean a thing strategically.”

Daniels wondered whether he'd be any less dead if he got killed in an action strategically meaningless. He didn't think so. “Damn shame,” he muttered. He also marveled that Schneider could still think and talk like a professional soldier while being hosed down by machine-gun slugs.

Then there was a sudden hot yellow glare outside, as if the sun had come on in the middle of the street. The roar that accompanied it was loud, the *wham-crash!* of the shell from the tank's big gun even louder. Chunks of brick rained down on Daniels; a timber that would have smashed him like a bug was instead smashed itself against the machine behind which he cowered.

The tank gave the factory two more rounds: *flash, boom crash; flash, boom, crash*. Mutt screamed for all he was worth, but couldn't hear himself or anyone else. He wondered if he'd ever hear anything again. At the moment, it was the least of his worries. He realized he'd wet his pants, but he didn't care about that, either.

When he tried to scramble away, his arms and legs shook so much he could hardly move. “Shell shock,” he said, feeling the words on his lips but not hearing them at all. He'd seen men like this in the trenches after a good German barrage. Other soldiers would jeer at them, but not too hard—it wasn't as if the poor bastards could help

themselves. He marveled at being alive.

“Hey, Schneider,” he called, “you think them Lizards are flicking diverted enough for now?”

He didn’t hear Schneider answer, but that was all right—he hadn’t heard himself ask the question. He glanced over to where the sergeant had been hiding. Any further jokes stuck in his throat. The veteran was nothing but splashed blood and raw meat ground not too fine.

Daniels gulped. “Jesus,” he whispered. Schneider was the best soldier he’d ever known—by a wide margin in this crazy war and, he thought, also better than any of the top sergeants he’d served under in France. One way you told good soldiers from bad was that the good ones lived to learn new things while the bad ones bought their farms in a hurry. Seeing a good soldier dead reminded you that you could end up the same way yourself. Mutt didn’t want reminders like that.

He smelled smoke, sharp and fresh. It was a reminder, too, a reminder there were nastier ways to die than getting chewed to pieces by a storm of shell splinters. Schneider, at least, never knew what hit him. If you roasted, you’d have plenty of time to regret it. All at once, Daniels’ shaky limbs worked, if not perfectly, then well enough.

He looked around the gloomy inside of the factory building—considerably less gloomy now that the Lizards had done some fresh ventilation work on the front—for the rest of the Americans who’d been in here with him. A couple of them weren’t going anywhere: they lay dead as gruesomely as Schneider. Three or four others, as lucky as he’d been himself, were getting away from the fire as fast as they could. And a couple of wounded men flopped on the floor like fresh-landed fish in the bottom of a boat.

Both Mutt’s grandfathers had fought in the War Between the States, and both, as old men will, told stories to the wide-eyed boy he’d been. He remembered Pappy Daniels, long white beard stained with tobacco juice, talking about the Battle of the Wilderness and how wounded men there had shot themselves before any of the little blazes all the musketry had started could wash over them.

That memory—one he hadn’t called to mind in years—told him what he had to do. He hurried forward, grabbed one of the injured soldiers, and dragged him away from the spreading flames over to a tumbledown wall that might shelter him for a little while.

“Thanks,” the fellow gasped.

“It’s okay.” Daniels quickly bandaged the worst of the man’s wounds, then went back to pick up his comrade. He had to sling his rifle; the other fellow had passed out, and was a two-hand carry. He’d just taken him onto his shoulders when a Lizard infantryman skittered into the factory.

He was sure he was dead. After what seemed an age but had to have been only a heartbeat, the Lizard pointed the muzzle of its rifle to the floor, gestured with its free hand: *get your wounded buddy out of here.*

Sometimes—far from always—the Germans had extended that courtesy in France;

sometimes—just as far from always—the Americans returned it. Daniels never expected to encounter it from a thing that looked like one of the monsters in the serials his ballplayers liked to watch.

“Obliged,” he told the Lizard, though he knew it couldn’t understand. Then he raised his voice to the men hiding somewhere in the ruins: “Don’t shoot this one, fellas! He’s all right.”

Staggering under the weight of the soldier he’d lifted, he carried him back to the wall behind which he’d laid the other wounded man. At the same time, the Lizard slowly backed out of the factory building. Nobody fired at it.

The tiny truce held for perhaps half a minute. Mutt rolled the second injured soldier off his shoulder, discovered he wasn’t breathing. He grabbed the fellow’s wrist; his finger found the spot just on the thumb side of the tendons. No pulse. The soldier’s arm flopped limply when he let it fall. “Aah, shit,” he said dully. The strange moment of comradeship had gone for nothing, lost in the waste that was war.

More Lizards dashed into the building. They fired their automatic weapons from the hip, not aiming at anything in particular but making the Americans keep their heads down. Only a couple of rifle rounds answered them. *The fellow who shoots first has the edge*, Daniels thought. He’d learned that in the trenches, and it still seemed true.

All at once, he realized that with Schneider dead, he was the senior noncom present. He’d been in charge of more men than these as a manager but the stakes hadn’t been so high—nobody shot you for hanging a curve ball no matter how much people talked about it

The first wounded man he’d dragged to cover was still very much alive. “Fall back!” Mutt yelled. He started crawling away, dragging the hurt soldier after him. Stand up now and you’d stop one of those sprayed bullets just as sure as sunrise.

A beam crashed down behind him. Flames crackled, then roared at his back. He tried to crawl faster. “Over here!” somebody shouted.

He changed direction. Hands reached out to help pull the wounded man behind a file cabinet that, between its metal and the reams of paper spilling from it, probably could have stopped a Lizard tank round. Mutt got in back of it himself and lay there, panting like a dog on a Mississippi summer day.

“Smitty still alive up there?” asked the soldier already under cover.

Daniels shook his head. “For all I know, he could’ve been dead when I picked him up. Goddamn shame.” He didn’t say anything about the Lizard who’d refrained from shooting him. He had the strange feeling that mentioning it would take the magic away, as if it were the seventh inning of a building no-hitter.

The other soldier—his name was Buck Risberg—pointed and said, “The fire’s holding the Lizards back.”

“Good to know somethin’ can.” Daniels made a sour face. He was turning cynical fast in this fight *I’m gettin’ old*, he thought, and then, *Gettin’? Hell, I am old*. But he was also

in command. He dragged his mind back to what needed doing right now. “Get Hank here out of this mess,” he told Risberg. “There ought to be a medic a couple blocks north o’here, less’n the Lizards drove him out by now. But you gotta try.”

“Okay, Mutt.” Half dragging, half carrying the now-unconscious Hank, Risberg made his way out of the firing line. The burning beam helped light his way through the gloom, and also provided a barrier the Lizards hesitated to cross.

Shells screamed down on the factory and the street outside: not from Lizard tank cannon, these, but out of the west from American batteries still in place on Stolp’s Island in the middle of the Fox River. The gunners were bringing the fire right down onto the heads of their own men in the hope of hitting the enemy, too. Daniels admired their aggressiveness, and wished he weren’t on the receiving end of it

The incoming artillery made the Lizards who were poking their snouts into the factory building stop shooting and hunker down. At least, that was what Mutt assumed they were doing—it was certainly what he was doing himself. But all too soon, even in the midst of the barrage, they started up again with nasty three and four-bullet bursts that would chew a man to rags. Mutt felt as inadequate with the Springfield jammed against his shoulder as Pappy Daniels must have if he’d ever tried to fight Yankees toting Henry repeaters with his single-shot, muzzle-loading rifle musket.

Then from in back of him came a long, ripping burst of fire that made him wonder for a dreadful instant how the Lizards had got round to his rear. But not only did the Lizards usually have better fire discipline than that, the weapon did not sound like one of theirs. When Daniels recognized it, he yelled, “You with the tommy gun! Get your ass up here!”

A minute later, a soldier flopped down beside him. “Where they at, Corporal?” he asked.

Mutt pointed. “Right over that way; leastways, that’s where they shot from last.”

The tommy gun chattered. The fellow with it—not a man from Daniels unit—went through a fifty-round drum as if he were going to have to pay for all the rounds he didn’t fire off. Another submachine gun opened up behind Daniels and to his left. Grinning at Mutt’s surprised expression, the soldier said, “Our whole platoon cathe’s ’em, Corporal. We got enough firepower to make these scaly sons of bitches think twice about messin’ with us.”

Daniels started to say, “That’s crazy,” but maybe it wasn’t. Out in open country it would have been; a tommy gun fired a .45-caliber pistol cartridge, and was accurate out to only a couple of hundred yards. But in street fighting or building-to-building combat like this, volume of fire counted for a lot more than accuracy. Since the U.S.A. couldn’t match the Lizards’ automatic rifles, submachine guns were probably the next best thing.

So instead of cussing the high command for a worthless brainstorm, Mutt said, “Yeah, some of the German assault troops in France carried those damn things, too. I didn’t much care to go up against ’em, either.”

The tommy-gunner turned his head. “You were Over There, were you? I reckon this is

worse.”

Daniels thought about it. “Yeah, probably. Not that that was any fun, mind you, but it’s always easier bein’ on the long end of the stick. And this here fightin’ in factories—I didn’t used to think they made anything worse’n trenches, but I’m comin’ round to believe I was wrong.”

An airplane roared by, just above rooftop height. “Ours,” the tommy-gunner said in glad surprise. Daniels shared it; American planes were all too few these days. The aircraft pounded the advancing Lizards for a few seconds, machine guns bellowing. Then came another bellow, an almost solid wall of noise, from the ground. The airplane’s engine stopped screaming; the machine guns cut off at the same time. The plane crashed with a boom that would have broken windows had Aurora had any windows left to break.

“Damn!” the tommy-gunner and Daniels said together. Mutt added, “I hope he came down on top of a whole pile of the baatars.”

“Yeah,” said the soldier with the Thompson gun. “I just wish he could have got away so he’d be able to hit ‘em again tomorrow.” Daniels nodded; he sometimes thought no American ever lived to fly more than one mission against the Lizards. Using up pilots as fast as planes was a losing way to do business.

The tommy-gunner squeezed off a burst in the direction of the Lizards. He said, “Corporal, I’ll cover you if you want to slide away from here. You ain’t much good in this fight with just your old Springfield.”

Had he left off the second sentence, Daniels might have taken him up on the offer. But he discovered he had pride left to flick. He could think of himself as old and he’d already thought of his rifle as antiquated, but he wasn’t about to let this punk kid tell him he couldn’t cut it “I’ll stick,” he said shortly.

“However you want it,” the tommy-gunner said, shrugging. Mutt got the idea that only his stripes kept the kid from tacking *Pop* onto the end of the sentence.

The Lizards skittered forward, firing as they came. The flames that leapt from the burning beam lit them up but also helped screen their movements. Daniels snapped off a shot. A skitter turned into a tumble. He raised a Rebel yell his grandpappy would have been proud of. “No good in a fight, am I?” The soldier beside him looked innocent “Did I say something?”

The kid got up on one knee to fire, then went over backward with almost the grace of a circus acrobat. Something hot and wet splashed Daniels. The flickering firelight showed red-streaked gray on the back of his hand. He violently wiped it against his trouser leg. “Brains,” he said, shuddering. When he glanced over at the tommy-gunner, the top of the youngster’s head was clipped off, as if by a hatchet. A spreading pool of blood reached toward him.

He didn’t have time to be as sick as he would have liked. As far as he could tell, he was the forwardmost American still fighting. He fired at one Lizard—a miss, he thought,

but he made the little monster duck—then whirled through a quarter-circle to shoot at another.

He had no idea what, if anything, that second round did. He did know that if he had to keep using a bolt-action rifle against what were in essence machine guns, he was going to get his ass killed—and the rest of him with it. He snatched up the tommy gun. The kid lying dead beside him was carrying another couple of drums of ammo, so he could use it for a while.

It bucked against his shoulder like an ornery horse when he opened up. He sprayed bullets hose-fashion out in front of him. The prolonged muzzle flash nearly blinded him before he dropped back behind cover. Hell of-a way to fight, he thought—lay down a lot of lead and hope the bad guys walk into it

It was, he realized, a hell of a place to fight, too: gloom-filled ruins lit only by fires and muzzle flashes, echoing with gunshots and screams, the air thick with smoke and the smells of sweat and blood and fear.

He nodded. If this wasn't hell, what the hell was it?

\* \*

The hospital ship *13th Emperor Poropss—the Merciful* should have been a taste of Home for Ussmak. And so, in a way, it was: it was heated to a decent temperature; the light seemed right, not the slightly too blue glare that lit Tosev's third world, and, best of all, no Big Ugliers were trying to kill him at the moment. Even the food was better than the processed slop he ate in the field. He should have been happy.

Had he felt more like himself, he might have been.

But when the Big Ugliers blew the turret off his landcruiser, he'd bailed out of the driver's escape hatch into a particularly radioactive patch of mud. The detectors had chattered maniacally when males in protective suits got near him. And so here he was, being repaired so he could return to action and let the Tosevites figure out still more ways to turn him into overcooked chopped meat

Radiation sickness had left him too nauseated to enjoy the good hospital food at first. By the time that subsided, his treatment was making him sick. He'd had a whole-blood-system transfusion and a cell transplant to replace his damaged blood-producing glands. The immunity-suppressing drugs and the others that resuppressed triggered oncogenes made him sicker than the radiation had. He'd spent a good many days being a very unhappy male indeed.

Now his body was beginning to feel as if it might actually be part of the Race again. His spirit, however, still struggled against the most insidious hospital ailment of all: boredom. He'd done all the reading, played all the computer simulations he could stand. He wanted to go back to the real world again, even if it was Tosev 3 full of large ugly aliens with large ugly cannon and mines and other unpleasant tools.

Yet at the same time he dreaded going back. They'd just make him part of another

patched-together landeruiser crew, another piece of a puzzle forced into a place where he did not quite fit. He'd already had two crews killed around him. Could he withstand that a third time and stay sane? Or would he die with this next group? That would solve his problems, but not in a way he cared for.

An orderly shuffled by, pushing a broom. Like a lot of the males who did such lowly work, he had green rings painted on his arms to show he was being punished for a breach of discipline. Ussmak idly wondered what he'd done. These days, idle wondering was about the only sort in which Ussmak indulged.

The orderly paused in his endless round of sweeping, turned one eye toward Ussmak. "I've seen males who looked happier, friend," he remarked.

"So?" Ussmak said. "Last I heard, the fleetlord hadn't ordered everybody to be happy all the time."

"You're a funny one, friend, you are." The orderly's mouth fell open. The two males were alone in Ussmak's chamber. All the same, the orderly swiveled his eyes in all directions before he spoke again: "You *want* to be happy for a while, friend?"

Ussmak snorted. "How can you make me be happy?" *Except by leaving*, he added to himself. If this petty deviationist kept bothering him, he'd say it out loud.

The orderly's eyes swiveled again. His voice fell to a dramatic half-whisper: "Got what you need right here, friend, you bet I do."

"What?" Ussmak said scornfully. "Cold sleep and a starship ride back Home? And it's right there in a belt pouch, is it? Tell me another one." He nodded slightly while opening his own mouth: a sarcastic laugh.

But he did not faze the other male. "What I've got, friend, is better than a trip Home, and I'll give it to you if you want it."

"Nothing is better than a trip Home," Ussmak said with conviction. Still, the fast-talking Orderly stirred his curiosity. That didn't take much; in the middle of stultifyingly dull hospital routine, anything different sufficed to stir his curiosity. So he asked, "What do you have in there, anyhow?"

The orderly looked all around again; Ussmak wondered if he expected a corrector to leap out of the wall and bring new charges against him. After that latest survey, he took a small plastic vial out of one of the pouches he wore, brought it over to Ussmak. It was filled with finely ground yellowbrown powder. "Some of this is what you need."

"Some of what?" Ussmak had guessed the male was somehow absconding with medications, but he'd never seen a medication that resembled this stuff.

"You'll find out, friend. This stuff makes you forgive the Big Ugliers for a whole lot of things, yes it does."

Nothing, Ussmak thought, could make him forgive the Big Ugliers either for the miserable world they inhabited or for killing his friends and landcruiser teammates. But he watched as the orderly undid the top of the vial, poured a little powder into the palm



of his other hand. He held that hand up to Ussmak's snout. "Go ahead, friend. Taste it—quick, before somebody sees."

Ussmak wondered again why the orderly was sporting green stripes—had he poisoned someone with the stuff? All at once, he didn't care. The doctors had been doing their level best to poison him, after all. He sniffed at the powder. The smell startled him—sweet, spicy...*tempting* was the word that sprang to mind. Of itself, his tongue flicked out and licked the fine grains off the scales of the orderly's hand.

The taste was like nothing he'd known before. The powder bit at his tongue, as if it had sharp little teeth of its own. Then the flavor filled his whole mouth; after a moment, it seemed to fill his whole brain as well. He felt warm and brilliant and powerful, as if he were the fleetlord and at the same time in the bosom of the Race's deceased Emperors. He wanted to go out, hop into a landcruiser—by himself, for he felt capable of driving, gunning, and commanding all at the same time—and blast Big Ugliers off their planet so the Race could settle here as it should. Getting rid of the Tosevites seemed as easy as saying, "It shall be done."

"You like that, friend?" the orderly asked, his voice sly. He put the vial of powder back into the pouch.

Ussmak's eyes followed it all the way. "I *like* that!" he said.

The orderly laughed again—he really was a funny fellow, Ussmak thought. He said, "Figured you would. Glad you found out it doesn't have to be a mope in here." He made a few haphazard swipes with his broom, then went out into the hallway to clean the next healing cubicle.

Ussmak reveled in the strength and might the Tosevite—herb, he supposed it was—had given him. He desperately wanted to be out and doing, not cooped up here as if he were being fattened for the stewpot. He craved action, danger, complication...for a while.

Then the feeling of invincibility started to fade. The harder he clung to it, the more it slipped between his fingers. Finally, too soon, it was gone, leaving behind the melancholy awareness that Ussmak was only himself (all the more melancholy because he so vividly remembered how he'd felt before) and a craving to know that strength and certainty once more.

Dull hospital routine was all the duller when set against that brief, bright memory. The day advanced on leaden feet. Even meals, till now the high points on Ussmak's schedule, seemed hardly worth bothering over. The orderly who took away Ussmak's tray—not the same male who'd given him his moments of delight—made disapproving noises when he found half the food uneaten.

Ussmak slept poorly that night. He woke up before the daytime bright lights in the ceiling went on. He lay tossing in the gloom, imagining time falling off a clock until at last the moment for the broom-pushing orderly to return arrived.

When that moment came, however, he was not in his cubicle. The doctors had

trundled him into a lab for another in a series of metabolic and circulatory tests. Before he tasted the Tosevite powder, he hadn't minded being poked, prodded, and visualized by ultrasound and X-rays. None of it hurt very much, and it was more interesting than sitting around all day like a long-unexamined document in a computer storage file.

Today, though, he furiously resented the tests. He tried to get the technicians to hurry through them, snapped when they sometimes couldn't, and had them snapping back at him. "I'm sorry, landcruiser driver Ussmak," one of the males said. "I didn't realize you had an appointment with the fleetlord this forenoon."

"No, it must be an audience with the Emperor," another technician suggested.

Fuming, Ussmak subsided. He was so upset, he almost forgot to cast down his eyes at the mention of his sovereign. As if to punish him, the males at the lab worked slower instead of faster. By the time they finally let him go back to his cubicle, the orderly with the green rings on his arms was gone.

Another desolate day passed. Ussmak kept trying to recapture the sensation the powder had given him. He could remember it, and clearly, but that wasn't the same as—or as good as—feeling it again.

When the orderly did show up at last, Ussmak all but tackled him. "Let me have some more of that wonderful stuff you gave me the other day!" he exclaimed.

The orderly put up both hands in the fending-off gesture the Race used to show refusal. "Can't do it" He sounded regretful and sly at the same time, a combination that should have made Ussmak see warning lights.

But Ussmak wasn't picking up subtleties, not at that moment "What do you mean, you can't do it?" He stared in blank dismay. "Did you use it all up? Don't tell me you used it all up!"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't" The orderly nervously turned his eyes this way and that. "Keep your voice down, will you, friend? Listen—there's something I didn't tell you about that stuff the other day, and you better hear it"

"What?" Ussmak wanted to grab the cutpurse or malingerer or whatever he was and shake the truth—or at least some more powder—out of him.

"Here, come on, settle down, friend." The orderly saw—would have needed to be blind to miss—his agitation. "Well, what you need to know is, this stuff—the Big Ugliers call it ginger, so you know that, too—anyhow, this stuff is under ban by order of the fleetlord."

"What?" Ussmak stared again. "Why?"

The orderly spread clawed bands. "Am I the fleetlord?"

"But you had this—ginger, did you say?—before," Ussmak said. Suddenly, breaking regulations seemed a lot less heinous than it had.

"The ban was in force then, too." The orderly sounded smug. Of course, he had the green arm stripes to show what he thought of regulations be found inconvenient in one

way or another.

Up until the moment his tongue touched ginger, Ussmak had been a law-abiding male, as most males of the Race were. Looking back on things, he wondered why. What had obeying laws and following orders ever gained him? Only a dose of radiation poisoning and the anguish of watching friends die around him.

But breaking a lifetime of conditioning did not come easy. Hesitantly, he asked, “Could you get me some even if—even if it is banned?”

The orderly studied him. “I might—just might, you understand—be able to do that, friend—”

“Oh, I hope you can,” Ussmak broke in.

“—but if I do, it’s gonna cost you,” the orderly finished, unperturbed.

Ussmak was confused. “What do you mean, cost me?”

“Just what I said.” The orderly spoke as if he were a hatchling still wet with the liquids from his egg. “You want more ginger, friend, you’re gonna have to pay me for it. I’ll take commissary scrip, voluntary electronic transfer from your account to one I have set up, Big Ugly souvenirs that I can resell, all kinds of things. I’m a flexible male; you’ll find that out”

“But you gave me the first bit of ginger for nothing,” Ussmak said, confused more than ever and hurt now, too. “I thought you were just being kind, helping me get through one of those endless days.”

The orderly’s mouth dropped open. “Why shouldn’t the first taste be free? It shows you what I’ve got. And you want what I’ve got, don’t you, friend?”

Ussmak hated to be laughed at. The orderly’s arrogant assumption of superiority also angered him. “Suppose I report you to the discipline-masters? We’ll see how you laugh then, by the Emperor.”

But the orderly retorted, “Suppose you do? Yeah, I’ll draw some more punishment, and likely worse than this, but you, friend, you’ll never taste ginger again, not from me, not from anybody else, either. If that’s how you want it, you go ahead and make that call.”

Never taste ginger again? The idea appalled Ussmak so much, he never wondered if the orderly was telling the truth. What did he know about ethics, or lack of ethics, among ginger sellers? Quickly, he said, “How much do you want?”

“Thought you’d be sensible.” The orderly ticked off rates on his claws. “If it’s just another taste you want, that’ll cost you half a day’s pay. But if you want a vial like the one you saw the other day, with enough ginger in it for maybe thirty tastes, that’s a tenday’s worth of pay. Cheap at the price, eh?”

“Yes.” With little to spend his money on, Ussmak had most of it banked in the fleet’s payroll accounting system. “Let me have a vial. What’s your account code, so I can make the transfer?”

“Transfer it to this code.” The orderly gave him the number, written down on a scrap of paper. “I’ll be able to use it, but the computer won’t pick up that it’s mine.”

“How did you manage that?” Ussmak asked, genuinely curious. Males could be bought, perhaps, but how did you go about bribing a computer?

The orderly let his mouth fall open again, but only a little: he wanted Ussmak to share the joke. “Let’s say there’s somebody who works in payrolls and likes ginger just as much as you do. I’m not gonna tell you any more than that, but I don’t need to tell you any more than that, do I? You’re a clever male, friend; I don’t have to draw you a circuit diagram.”

*Well, well,* Ussmak thought He wondered how long this clandestine trade in ginger had been going on, how widely its corruption had spread among the Race, and whether anyone in authority had the slightest notion it was there.

Those were all interesting questions. None, though, was as urgent to Ussmak as getting his tongue on some of the precious powdered herb. Like any compartment in a starship, his cubicle had a computer terminal. He used his own account code to access his payroll records, transferred a tenday’s salary to the code the orderly had given him. “There,” he said. “Now, when do I get my ginger?”

“Eager, aren’t you?” the orderly said. “Let’s see what I can do.”

Naive though he was, Ussmak belatedly realized the orderly might keep his money and give him nothing in return. If that happened, he resolved to tell the authorities about the ginger trade and take the cheater down into punishment with him. But the orderly, with the air of a stage magician producing a bracelet from someone’s snout, handed him a vial full of what he craved.

He wanted to pop it open and start tasting it right then. Somehow, though, he didn’t feel easy about doing it in front of the orderly: he didn’t want the fast-talking male to see what a hold he had on him. He knew that was probably foolish; how could the orderly not have a good notion of how much he desired ginger? He held back even so.

He wondered about something else. “Suppose I start running out of pay but still want more ginger? What do I do then?”

“You could do without” The cold, callous ring in the orderly’s voice chilled Ussmak. Then the fellow said, “Or you can find friends of your own to sell it to, and use what you make to buy more for yourself.”

“I—see.” Ussmak wondered about that. It might work for a while, but before too long, it seemed to him, every male in the invasion fleet would be selling ginger to every other male. He started to ask the orderly about that—the fellow certainly acted as if he had all the answers—but the male, having made his profit, left the healing cubicle without so much as a farewell.

Ussmak opened the plastic vial, poured a little ginger onto his palm as he’d seen the orderly do. His tongue flicked the precious powder into his mouth. And again—for a while—he felt powerful, clever, capable. As the wonderful sensation faded, he realized

he'd do whatever he had to do to keep on having it as often as he could. Against that stark need, the careful planning that had been a hallmark of the Race for millennia suddenly was of small import. If getting more ginger for himself meant peddling it to his friends...he hesitated. After the disasters that had befallen his landcruisers, few friends were left alive. But if he had to, he'd make more friends and then sell ginger to them.

He nodded to himself, pleased. He could still plan after all. Deliberately or not, he turned both eyes away from the shape of his plan.

Liu Han looked down at her belly. It did not bulge, not yet, but it would. Her homage to the moon had failed. Her breasts would never be large, but they felt tight and full; a new tracery of veins showed just below the skin. Her appetite was off. She knew the signs. She was with child.

She didn't think Bobby Fiore had noticed the absence of her monthly courses. She wondered if telling him she was pregnant was a good idea. She had no doubt the baby was his—given the way she was caged here, how could she? But she remembered how even her true husband had lost interest in her while she was carrying their child. If a Chinese treated her so, how would a round-eyed foreign devil react? She was afraid to have to find out.

Not too long after she began to worry, the door to her bare cubicle hissed open. Little scaly devils with guns escorted Bobby Fiore into the room. After so many trips where nothing untoward happened, she thought human guards would have fallen under the spell of routine. The scaly devils still acted as if they expected him—or her—to pull a gun out of the air and start shooting. They carefully backed out of the room, weapons at the ready all the time.

Liu Han got up from her mat, walked up to embrace Bobby Fiore while the door was still sliding shut. She'd long since resigned herself to the little devils' watching, knowing everything she did. Besides, she was starved for even the simplest contact with another human being.

His arms closed round her back. He kissed her. One hand slid down to cup a buttock. His manhood stirred against her hipbone. She smiled a little. Knowing he still wanted her was always reassuring. His mouth might lie, or even his hand, but not that part of him.

The kiss went on. He pulled her tightly to him. When at last he had to breathe, he asked her, "Shall we now?"

"Yes, why not?" she answered. If she did decide to tell him, what better time than when he was lazy and happy after love? And besides, what else was there to do in here?

They lay down together. His hands and mouth roamed her body. He was, she thought as she closed her eyes and let herself enjoy what he was doing, a much better lover than he had been when the scaly devils first put the two of them in the same cubicle and made them couple. She'd found ways to show him some of what she wanted without

hurting his pride while some he'd picked up on his own. All at once she gasped and quivered. Yes, he'd learned quite nicely...and the hair of his beard and mustache added a little to what his tongue could do, something she hadn't imagined when she'd known only smooth-faced men.

He sat back on his haunches. "Again?" he asked her.

"No not right now," she said after considering for a few seconds

"Well then," he said with a smile. "My turn"

She didn't mind taking him in her mouth. He kept himself as clean as he could with only warm water for washing, and she could tell how much pleasure she gave him. A sudden thought flashed through her mind: he'd been teaching her while she was teaching him. She'd never noticed till now.

His breath caught as she pulled back his foreskin. He was hot in her hand. But almost as soon as her lips and tongue touched him, she started to gag and had to pull away.

"Are you all right?" he asked, surprised. "What's the matter?"

Liu Han knew what the matter was. Just another proof she was pregnant, she thought. She hadn't been able to please her husband that way, either, not until she gave birth. Maybe that was one reason. he'd ignored her so much.

"What's the matter?" Bobby Fiore said again.

She didn't know how to answer. If she told him and he turned cold to her...she didn't think she could stand that. But he'd find out before too long, anyway. She remembered how good having the initiative with Yi Min had felt, even if only for a little while (she also wondered, for a very little while, what the scoundrel was up to—something to his own advantage, she had no doubt). That memory helped make up her mind.

She didn't know how to say "baby" in English or the little devils' speech; she knew Bobby Fiore wouldn't understand it in Chinese. She sat up, used her hand to sketch the shape her belly would take in a few months. He frowned—he didn't get it. She pantomimed cradling a newborn in her arms. If that didn't put the idea across, she didn't know what she'd do.

His eyes widened. "Baby?" he said in English, giving her the word. He pointed to her, to himself, made the cradling motion.

"Yes, ba-bee." Liu Han repeated the word so she'd remember it. "Baby." She'd need to use it a lot in the months—in the years—to come. "You, me, baby." Then she waited to see how he would react.

At first, he didn't seem sure what to do, what to say. He muttered something in English—"Goddamn, who woulda thought my first kid would be half Chink?"—she didn't completely follow, but she thought he was talking more to himself than to her. Then he reached out and laid the palm of his hand on her still-flat belly. "Really?"

"Really," she said. She had no doubts. If she'd had any before (and she hadn't, not in truth), choking on him blew them away.

“How about that?” he said, a phrase he used when he was thinking things over. His hand slid lower, down between her legs. “Will you still want to...?” Instead of finishing the question with words, he rubbed gently.

She wondered if he cared for her only because she gave him her body, but the worry that raised was more than balanced by relief that he did still want her. The other she could think, about later. For now, she let her thighs fall Open. “Yes,” she said, and did her best to prove it when he climbed on top of her.

They separated quickly after he’d spent himself; the little scaly devils kept the chamber too hot for them to lie entwined when they weren’t actually joined. Bobby Fiore kept staring at her navel, as if trying to peer inside her. “A baby,” he said. “How about that?”

She nodded. “Yes, a baby. Not surprising, when we do”—she twitched her hips—“so much.”

“I suppose not, not when you think about it like that, but it sure surprised me.” Behind the hair that half masked him, his face was thoughtful. She wondered what was going on in his mind to make his eyebrows lower and come together, the slight furrows on his forehead deepen. At last he said, “I wish I could do more—hell, I wish I could do anything—to take care of you and the kid.”

When he’d gone through the usual backing and filling to make her understand, Liu Han looked down at the smooth gray mat on which she was sitting. She didn’t want him to see the tears that stung her eyes. Her husband had been a good enough man, but she wondered if he would have said as much. For a foreign devil to think that way...She’d known next to nothing about foreign devils before she was snatched up into this airplane that never, landed, and Bobby Fiore was making her see that most of what she’d thought she knew was wrong.

“What is it?” he asked her. “What’s the matter now?”

She didn’t know how to answer him. “We both have to find a way to take care of—” As he had done before, she set her hand in the space between her navel and the small patch of short black hair that covered her secret place.

“Yeah,” he said. “Ain’t that a hell of a thing? How are we gonna be able to do anything at all for Junior, cooped up here like we are?”

As if to underscore his words, the door to the cubicle opened. A little scaly devil set down opened cans of food, then backed away from Liu Han and Bobby Fiore. She wondered if he thought it unsafe to turn around in their presence. She found that ludicrous, the more so as she knew herself to be so completely in the little devils’ power. But the presence of armed devils in the doorway covering their comrade argued that they feared her kind, too. She thought that foolish, but the little devils always did it

The food, as usual, was not much to her taste: some sort of salty pork in a square, dark blue tin, flavorless green beans, the little yellow lumps Bobby Fiore called “corn,” and canned fruit in a cloyingly sweet syrup. She missed rice, vegetables briefly steamed

or stir-fried, all the flavorings she'd grown up with: soy sauce, ginger, different kinds of peppers. She missed tea even more.

Bobby Fiore ate methodically and without complaint. This meal, like most they'd received, came from supplies canned by his people. Liu Han wondered if the foreign devils ever ate anything fresh.

Then another, more urgent, concern suddenly replaced that idle curiosity: she wondered if the pork and the rest were going to stay down. She hadn't been sick during her first pregnancy, but village gossip said every one was different. Saliva flooded into her mouth. She gulped. The tremor subsided.

"You okay?" Bobby Fiore asked. "You looked a little green there for a minute." Liu Han puzzled at the idiom, but he explained it a moment later "You coming down with—what do they call it?—morning sickness?"

"I don't know," Liu Han answered faintly. "Please don't talk about it" While discovering that foreign devil women suffered from the same infirmity as Chinese was interesting, she didn't want to think about morning sickness. Thinking about it might make her—

She got to the plumbing hole just in time. Bobby Fiore rinsed out the can the fruit had come in, filled it with water, and gave it to her so she could rinse her mouth. He put an arm around her shoulders. "I've got two married sisters. This happened to both of 'em when they were expecting. I don't know if you want to hear that or not, but they say misery loves company."

Liu Han did not understand all of what he said, which was perhaps just as well. She did appreciate the water, after she'd rinsed and spat a couple of times to take away the horrid taste, she felt much better. It wasn't like throwing up when she was ill: now that her body had done what it needed to do, it seemed willing to let her alone for a while.

"I wish the Lizards had a priest up here," Bobby Fiore said. "I want the kid to get brought up Catholic. I know I'm not the best Christian there ever was, but I try to do what's right"

Liu Han hadn't thought much of the Christian missionaries she'd seen in China. How to raise the baby was, however, the least of her worries at the moment. She said, "I wonder what the little scaly devils will do to me when they find out I am with child."

She did not think her fear was idle. After all, the little devils had snatched her from her village, then from the prison camp. While she was up here in the airplane that did not land, they'd made her submit to several men (and how relieved she was not to be carrying a baby by any of them!). They could do as they pleased with her, do whatever interested them...without caring in the least what she thought about what they wanted.

"Whatever they do, they'll have to do it to both of us," Bobby Fiore said stoutly. She reached out and set a hand on his arm, grateful he stood by her. She would have been more grateful had she thought his brave words bore any relation to reality. If the little devils decided to keep the two of them in separate cubicles, what could he possibly do



about it?

He said, "You ought to try and eat some more. You've got company in there, after all."

"I suppose so." Dutifully—but also cautiously—Liu Han ate a little corn, some of the beans, and even the last mouthful of pork left in the tin. She waited for her stomach to give them back, but it stayed quiet: having emptied once, it now seemed willing to relent. She hoped it would keep on being so forbearing.

Then, too late, she realized the little scaly devils would not have to wait until her belly bulged to learn she was pregnant. She'd grown so resigned to the moving pictures they made of her—not just when she was coupling but almost all the time—that she'd almost forgotten about them. But if the scaly devils could sort through the mix of Chinese, English, and their own language that she and Bobby Fiore spoke with each other, they'd know at once. And what would they do then?

*If they were human, they'd have known when my courses didn't come*, she thought. But the devils hadn't noticed that. Bobby Fiore didn't think they were devils at all, but creatures from another world. Most of the time, Liu Han remained convinced that was nonsense, but now and then she wondered. Could real devils be so ignorant of matters Earthly as her captors sometimes acted?

In the end, what they were didn't much matter. They had her—and Bobby Fiore—in their power either way. Liu Han wondered if any of the other women they'd brought up to the airplane that never landed were also pregnant. If they'd been used as she was, some probably were. She hoped so. She didn't want to face the ordeal alone.

She glanced over at Bobby Fiore. He'd been watching her; when her eyes met his, he looked away. *Wondering if I'll throw up again*, Liu Han guessed. She smiled wryly. What did a man know about a woman who was with child? Not much, which was why she hoped some of the others up here shared her predicament.

Then all at once she clung to Bobby Fiore, man though he was, foreign devil though he was, as she had not clung to him since the first day when he astonished her with his kindness. He might not know much about expectant mothers, but he was a veritable Kung Fu-Tze when set alongside even the wisest of the little scaly devils.

Smoke and a blast of heat greeted David Goldfarb when he walked into the White Horse Inn. "Shut the bloody door!" three people yelled from three different parts of the pub. Goldfarb quickly obeyed, then pushed his way through the crowd to get as close to the fireplace as he could.

The crackling wood fire, the torches that blazed in place of electric lights dark for want of power, took the White Horse Inn a long step back toward its medieval origins. Shadows jumped and flickered like live things, and puddled in corners as if they might creep out and pounce at any moment. Goldfarb had never been afraid of the dark, but these days he better understood why his ancestors might have been.

The reek of unwashed bodies was another step away from what had been the civilized norm. Goldfarb knew he added to it, but what could he do? Hot water was impossible to come by, and bathing in cold invited pneumonia.

Besides, when everyone stank, no one in particular stank. After a few breaths, the nose accepted the smell as part of the background and forgot about it, just as a radar operator learned to ignore echoes from the countryside in which his set was placed.

*Had been placed*, Goldfarb corrected himself. Ground-based radars had saved Britain against the Germans, but not against the Lizards. His own nervous forays in the belly of Ted Embry's Lanc continued. He hadn't been shot down yet, which was about as much as he could say for the project. The boffins were still trying to figure out whether the aircraft-mounted radar, used as intermittently as it had to be, helped them shoot down more Lizard planes.

Sylvia snaked her way through the crush. Smiling at Goldfarb, she asked, "What'll it be, dearie?" In the firelight, her hair glowed like molten copper.

"A pint of whatever you have," he answered; the White Horse Inn had never yet run out of beer, but it never got in the same brew twice running any more.

As he spoke, Goldfarb slipped his arm around the barmaid's waist for a moment. She didn't pull away or slap his hand, as she would have before he started climbing up into the cold and frightening night. Instead, she leaned closer, tilted her head up to brush her lips against his, and then slid away to find out what more drinkers wanted.

Wanting her, Goldfarb thought, had been more exciting than having her was. Or maybe he'd just expected too much. Knowing she shared her favors with a lot of men hadn't bothered him when he was on the outside looking in. It was different now that he'd become one of those blokes himself. He hadn't thought of himself as the jealous type—he still didn't, not really—but he would have wanted more of her than she was willing to give.

Not, he admitted to himself, that thinking of her bare under the covers didn't warm him when he sucked in frigid, rubber-tasting oxygen at Angels Twenty.

Her white blouse reappeared from out of the dark forest of RAF blue and civilian tweeds and serges. She handed Goldfarb a pint mug. "Here y'go, love. Tell me what you make of this." She took a step back and cocked her head, awaiting his reaction. He took a cautious pull. Some of the alleged bitters he'd drunk since the Lizards came made the earlier war beer seem ambrosial by comparison. But his eyebrows went up in surprise at the rich, nutty taste that filled his mouth. "That's bloody good!" he said, amazed. He sipped again, thoughtfully smacked his lips. "It's nothing I've drunk before, but it's bloody good. Where'd our sainted landlord come by it?"

Sylvia brushed red wisps of hair back from her eyes. "He brewed it his own self."

"Go on," Goldfarb said, in automatic disbelief.

"He did," Sylvia insisted indignantly. "Me and Daphne, we helped, too. It's dead easy when you know how. Maybe after the war—if there ever is an after the war—I'll start

my own little brewery and put a pub in front I'd invite you there, if I didn't think you'd drink up my profit."

Goldfarb emptied the mug with a practiced twist of the wrist. "If you do as well as this, I'd surely try. Bring me another, will you?"

He kept staring after her once she'd disappeared among the acres of dark cloth. She was the first person he'd heard speak of what might be after the war since the Lizards came. Thinking of what to do once Jerry was beaten was one thing, but as far as he could see, the fight against the Lizards would go on forever...unless it ended in defeat.

"Hullo, old man," said a blurry voice at his elbow. He turned his head. By the list Jerome Jones had developed, he'd taken on several pints of ale below the waterline and would likely start sinking at any moment. The other radarman went on, "D'you know what I had with my spuds tonight? Baked beans, that's what." His eyes glittered in sodden triumph.

"Anything with spuds is reason enough to shout," Goldfarb admitted. Britain was hungry these days, not only because the island could not grow enough to feed itself, but also because Lizard bombing of the railway net kept what food there was from moving around the country.

"So you needn't feel so bloody smug about moving in with your bloody aircrew. Baked beans." Jones smacked his lips, exhaled in Goldfarb's direction. He didn't smell like baked beans—he smelled like beer.

"I'm not smug, Jerome," Goldfarb said, sighing. "It's what I was ordered to do, so I did it." He knew the other radarman resented not being chosen to take a seat aloft in the Lancaster; not only did he crave the duty (no one could fault Jones' pluck) but, being stuck on the ground, he still had no luck with the White Horse Inn's barmaids.

At the moment, he was probably too drunk to do either of them justice even if she performed a striptease in front of him and then dragged him into the bushes. He blinked, stared at Goldfarb as if he had no idea who his friend (former friend? Goldfarb hoped not, hoped his jealousy didn't run so deep) was. Then his pale eyes focused again. He said, "We had electricity in the barracks yesterday."

"Did you?" Goldfarb said, wondering where—if anyplace—the seemingly random remark would lead and wishing Sylvia would fetch him another pint so he wouldn't have to worry about it. Power had been out at his own quarters for several days.

"Yes we did," Jones said. "Electricity in the barracks. We had it. Why did I want to tell you that?" *As if I knew*, Goldfarb felt like shouting. But Jones, though his own mental railway net had taken some bombing, got his train of thought through. "I was listening to the shortwave, that's it. Got Warsaw in clear as day, we did."

"*Did* you?" The words were the same as before, but informed with a whole new meaning. "Was Russie on the air?"

"Not a word from him. Not a word." Jones repeated himself with owlish solemnity. "That's what I wanted to tell you. He's some sort of cousin of yours, what?"

“Yes, I’m afraid so. His grandmother was my grandfather’s sister.” No one had been more astonished than Goldfarb when his cousin surfaced as the Lizards’ human spokesman. Unlike his gentile comrades, he’d believed most of what Russie said about Nazi’ horrors in Warsaw, though he remained unconvinced life under the Lizards was as invigorating as Russie painted it. Then, a few weeks before, his cousin disappeared from the airwaves as abruptly as he’d arrived. The Lizards had blamed illness at first. Now they didn’t bother saying anything, which struck Goldfarb as ominous.

“Bloody traitor. Maybe the sod sold them out, too, and they put paid to him for it,” Jones mumbled.

Goldfarb drew back a fist to smash him in the face—no one, he told himself, former friend, friend, or not, talked about his relatives like that and got away with it. But Sylvia chose that moment to return. “Ere now, David, don’t even think of it,” she said sharply. “You start the fight, you’re out of the pub for good—they’s the rules. *And* I won’t see you any more.”

The first threat was trivial. The second...Goldfarb considered, opened arid lowered his hand. Sylvia put a new pint mug in it. Jones just stood, swaying slightly, not knowing how close he’d come to getting his features rearranged.

“That’s better,” Sylvia said. Goldfarb wasn’t sure it was, but finally decided smashing a helpless drunk didn’t count toward upholding the family honor. He emptied the third pint with one long pull. Sylvia surveyed him with a critical eye. “That should be about right for you, unless you want to get as lost as he is.”

“What else have I to do?” Goldfarb’s laugh sounded thick even in his own ears as the potent brew swiftly did its work. But the question, despite its sardonic edge, was serious. Without electricity, radio and the cinema vanished as amusements and reading through long winter nights became next thing to impossible. That left getting out among one’s fellow men. And going up into the sky again and again to be shot at brought a need for the release only alcohol or sex could give. Since Sylvia was working tonight ...

She sighed; it was not, Goldfarb thought, as if he were the first lover she’d seen who also had a need to get drunk—probably not even the first tonight. Resentment flared in him, then died. If he was out for what he could get, how could he blame her for acting the same way?

Jerome Jones nudged him. “Is she good?” he asked, as if Sylvia weren’t standing beside him. “Do you know what I mean?” His wink was probably meant to be that of a man of the world, but the beery slackness to his features made it fail of its intention.

“Well, I like that!” Sylvia said with an indignant squeak. She swung round on Goldfarb. “Are you going to let him talk about me that way?”

“Probably,” Goldfarb answered, which made Sylvia squeak again, louder. He waved his hands in what he hoped was a placating gesture. “You stopped a fight a few minutes ago, and now you want to start one?”

By way of reply, Sylvia stamped on his foot and then stamped off. He didn’t figure

he'd see that next pint, let alone the inside of her bedroom, any time soon. *Try and figure women*, he thought. He was no knight in shining armor, and she was a long way from being a maiden whose virtue needed defending. But if he'd said that, he'd probably have got a knee in the family jewels, not a spike-heeled foot on the instep.

Jones nudged him again. "Fight? What fight?" he asked, sounding more interested than he had been in how Sylvia performed.

Suddenly the absurdity of it all was too much for Goldfarb. He forced his way out through the crowd that jammed the White Horse Inn, then stood on the sidewalk wondering where to go next. The first breath of frosty air in his lungs, the nip of night against his nose, loudly insisted leaving had been a mistake. But he couldn't make himself go back into the pub.

The night was clear. Stars burned in the dark sky, more stars than he ever remembered seeing in the days before the blackout. The Milky Way shone like sparkling sugar crystals spilled across a black tile floor. Before the Lizards came, the stars had been friendly, or at worst remote. Now they felt dangerous, as any enemy's homeland would.

To the south, the gray stone pile of Dover Castle concealed some of those stars from view. The Saxons had had a fort there. When Louis VIII failed to take the place in 1216, it likely staved off a French invasion of England. Henry VIII had added to it, and more brickwork had gone up against another feared French invader, Napoleon. Later in the nineteenth century, a turret with a sixteen-inch gun was added to ward the port from attack by sea.

But the turret designers never foresaw attack by air. Goldfarb's own radar masts had done more to defend Dover, to defend all of England, from Hitler's wrath than all the stone and brickwork put together. Against the Lizards, even the wizardry of radar seemed, if not futile, then surely inadequate.

A little red dot, fainter than a summer glowworm, came floating down St James Street toward him. His hand twitched; he hadn't had a cigarette in it for a long time. With imports even of food cut first by German submarines and then by Lizard aircraft, tobacco had all but disappeared.

During the Depression, people had scooped cigarette butts out of the gutter to smoke. Goldfarb was never reduced to that, though the scorn he'd felt the first time he saw it had dwindled first to pity and then to acceptance. But that scavenging sprang from a shortage of money, not a shortage of cigarettes.

Now Goldfarb called to whoever hid behind that seductively burning coal, "Here, friend, have you got another fag you can sell me?"

The smoker stopped. The lit end of the cigarette glowed brighter for a moment, then moved as its owner shifted it to the side of his mouth. "Sorry, chum, I'm down to my last three, and I won't sell 'em: I couldn't use the money on anything I'd sooner have. But you can take a drag off this one, if you like."

Goldfarb hesitated; in a way, that struck him as worse than nipping up fag-ends. But the unseen smoker sounded kindly. Even if he wouldn't give up what he had, he'd share a little. "Thanks," Goldfarb said, and stepped quickly forward.

He held the single lungful of smoke as long as he could, let it out with real regret. The owner of the cigarette puffed again. In the faint crimson glow, his face was rapt with pleasure. "Bloody war," he said on the exhale.

"Too right," Goldfarb said. He coughed; however much he liked it, his body was out of the habit of smoking. "I wonder what we'll run short of next. Tea, maybe."

"There's a horrible thought. You're likely right, though. Don't raise a lot of bloody tea in the fields of Kent, eh?"

"No," Goldfarb said morosely. He wondered what he'd do when his morning cuppa ran out. He'd do *without*, was what he'd do. "What did we do before there was tea?"

"Drank beer, I expect." The smoker carefully extinguished the cigarette. "That's what I'm about to do now. Don't want to go in there with this lit, though. I've heard of men knocked over the head for a pipe's 'orth of tobacco, and I don't fancy it happening to me."

"Clever," Goldfarb said, nodding. "There's enough smoke inside already that no one will smell it on you."

"My very thought." Now the other man was just a voice in the darkness. He went on, "I might want to try and get close to that redheaded barmaid they have here, too—what's her name?"

"Sylvia," Goldfarb said dully.

"Sylvia, that's right. Have you seen her?" Without waiting for an answer, the smoker added, "I'd spend a cigarette on *her*, I would." He found the door to the White Horse Inn by ear, slipped inside.

Goldfarb stood out in the cold a few seconds longer, then started the long hike back to his quarters. He didn't think Sylvia could be bought for a fag, but what did it matter? She wasn't his now, and she'd never really been his. Slaking your lust was all very well—was, when you got down to it, better than all very well—but you had to be sensible about it. If that was all you were doing with a woman, stopping oughtn't to be the end of the world.

Far away, like distant screams, he heard the shriek of Lizard aircraft engines. His shiver had nothing to do with the cold. He wondered who was up in the night sky with a balky radar, and whether the chap would make it back to the ground again.

Antiaircraft guns began their almost surely futile pounding. Goldfarb shivered again. Losing Sylvia was not the end of the world. Off in the distance, he could hear the sound the end of the world made.

Off in the distance, anti-aircraft guns yammered Heinrich Jäger listened enviously. If the *Wehrmacht* had had guns like those, Red Air Force planes would have had a thin time of it indeed. Going up against the Lizards, the Red Air Force still had a thin time of it.

But, as the stutter of AA fire proved, the Russians kept coming. Jäger had found out about that, too, in the eleven months before the Lizards' invasion shoved the war between National Socialism and Communism onto the back burner. Now the Lizards were learning about Soviet stubbornness. Jäger hoped they enjoyed their education as much as he'd liked his.

Maybe the Russians hadn't lied when they told him his horse had served as a cavalryman's mount. It only twitched its ears at the distant gunfire. Of course, how it would react if he had to shoot from its back was anyone's guess. With luck, he wouldn't have to find out.

"The sons of whores should have put me in a plane," he said aloud, as much to hear the sound of his own voice in this snowy wilderness as for any other reason. The horse snorted. It didn't understand German; they'd given him a list of Russian commands for it. But it seemed glad to be reminded it was carrying a human. If ever there was a country for wolves, this was it.

Jäger slapped his lead-lined saddlebags with a gloved hand. They held the *Reich's* fair share of the metal the partisan raid had stolen from the Lizards outside Kiev. And here he was, alone on horseback, carrying it to Germany.

"They want me to fail," he said. The horse snorted again. He patted its neck. "They really do."

When he and foul-mouthed Max made contact with a Red Army unit still in the direct chain of command from Moscow, the Soviets had been effusive in their praise and scrupulously exact in sharing out the precious booty Germans and Russians had combined to seize. Only afterward did things get difficult.

No, he'd been told, unfortunately air transportation wasn't available. Yes, the Red Army colonel understood his urgent need to return to Germany. But did *he* understand how likely he was to be shot down before he got there? No, the colonel could not in good conscience let him risk his life by flying.

Now Jäger snorted, louder than the horse had. "When a Russian colonel says he won't risk a life, you know something's screwy somewhere." Against the Germans in the last war and this one, the Russian way of putting out a fire was to throw bodies on it till it smothered.

With knees, reins, and voice, Jäger urged the horse forward. He hadn't done much

riding since before World War I broke out, but he still remembered the basics. It was a very different business from traveling by panzer. Inside that heavy steel turret, you felt cut off from the world and immune to whatever it might do to you...unless it decided to hit you with a shell, of course.

But on horseback, you met the world face to face. At the moment, the world was snowing in Jäger's face. The Russians had given him a fur hat, a padded jacket, and felt boots, so he wasn't chilly. Now that he was inside some of it, he discovered for himself how good Russian cold-weather gear really was. No wonder the Ivans had given the *Wehrmacht* such grief the winter before.

He leaned down, spoke confidentially into the horse's ear. "If anyone ever asks the Kremlin about this, they'll be able to say they gave me all the help they thought they could, but I just didn't make it back to Germany with this stuff." He slapped a saddlebag again. "But do you know what, Russian horse? I'm going to fool them. I'm going to get there whether they want me to or not. And if they don't like it, they can go piss themselves for all I care."

The horse, of course, had no idea what he was talking about. Not only was it a dumb animal, it was a Russian dumb animal. Till recently, it had been either pulling a plow for the enemy or carrying a Red Army cavalryman into action. But for the time being, its fate and his were bound together.

The snow muffled the animal's hoolbeats. Its body heat warmed the insides of his thighs and his rear end. His Panzer III, he remembered fondly, had had a heater that would warm all of him. On the other hand, he liked the horse's grassy smell better than the oil, petrol, cordite reek of the panzer.

"Yes, that's how the Kremlin wants it, horse," he said. "They needed German help to get this metal, but do they want the *Reich* to have the benefit of it? Not on your life they don't. They want to be the only ones who can make bombs like this, yes they do. They will use one on the Lizards, and if they beat the Lizards, wouldn't it be nice for them if they could hold one over Germany's head, too? But I already told you, horse, I don't intend to let that happen."

He peered ahead through the spattering snow. Unfortunately, what he intended to let happen and what would in fact happen were not necessarily one and the same. He didn't think he was inside what had been Soviet territory before the war any more, but rather in what was formerly Polishheld Ruthernia. Much of that land, after getting overrun first by the Russians and then by the Germans, was now in the Lizards' hands.

And here, as perhaps nowhere else on earth, the Lizards had their willing puppets—their quislings, the British would have called them, Jäger thought with wry amusement. In Moscow, he'd listened to Moishe Russie on the shortwave a couple of times. He'd judged the man a hysteric, a liar, and a traitor to mankind.

Now...now he was not so sure. Every time he tried to laugh off what the Jew said as just another atrocity story, he kept remembering the scar on the side of Max's neck and the Jewish partisan's obscenely embellished tale of slaughter and horror at Babi Yar.



Much as he wanted to, he didn't think Max lied. And if Max's horror was true, then Moishe Russie's might be, also.

Riding a horse alone through winter gave you a chance to think, maybe more of a chance than you really wanted. What *had* the *Reich* been doing behind the lines of the territory it held? Jäger was a field-grade officer, not a policymaker. But German officers were supposed to think for themselves, not blindly follow superiors' orders like their Soviet or Lizard counterparts. He could not for the life of him see how massacring Jews moved the war effort forward even a centimeter.

Massacring Jews might in fact push the war effort back. It had driven the Polish Jews who survived into the Lizards' arms. A lot of those Jews lay between Jäger and the *Reich*. If they spotted him and let their new masters know a German was loose on their territory...if they did that, the Russians' scheme would be realized in full.

"Stupid," he muttered. What did Jews do in battle against the *Reich* except get in the way like any other civilians?

He rode by a deserted farmhouse, shook his head. So much devastation. How long would people take to recover from it? Even more to the point, on what terms would they recover? Would they be their own masters, or slaves to the Lizards for untold centuries to come? Jäger found no sure answer. Humanity had discovered ways to hurt the Lizards, but not to beat them, not yet. Maybe—he hoped—he held a way to beat them in his saddlebags.

The road he was following (actually, it was more of a track) took him into a stand of pale-barked birches a few hundred meters past the farmhouse. He unslung his rifle, set it across his knees. Unpleasant things and even more unpleasant people could lurk among trees. He showed his teeth in a not-quite-humorless grin. A few weeks before, he'd been one of those unpleasant people, or so the Lizards would have said.

A man stepped out from behind a tree trunk. Like Jäger, he wore a mixture of Russian and German winter gear; also like Jäger, he carried a rifle. He didn't aim it at the German, but he looked ready to use it. He said something in Polish. Jäger didn't know any Polish. He weighed his chances as he reined in. If he could get in a quick, sure shot—no guarantee while on horseback—then set spurs to his mount, he had a chance at getting away from this...bandit?

The fellow might have been thinking along with him. "I wouldn't try that," he said, now in accented German—or was it Yiddish? "Look behind you." Jäger didn't look. The man standing in the track laughed, leaned his rifle against the nearest tree. "No trick. Go ahead and look."

This time, Jäger did. He could see two men, both with guns. He wondered how many he couldn't see. He turned back to the fellow in front of him. "All right, you have me," he said equably. "What happens now?"

He didn't know which nonplussed the fellow more, his calm or his clear German. The man grabbed his rifle, a Mauser just like Jäger's. "I thought you were one of those Nazi

bastards,” he growled. “You don’t ride like a Pole or a Russian. I ought to shoot you now.” He was speaking Yiddish. Jäger’s heart sank.

“Hold on, Yossel,” called one of the men in back of the German. “We’re supposed to take him in to—”

“If you’re going to take me to the Lizards, do me the favor of shooting me instead,” Jäger broke in. Here was his worst nightmare coming to life around him. If the Lizards made him talk—and who knew what the Lizards could do along those lines?—he might imperil the Russians’ efforts with the stolen metal, and Germany’s would never be born.

“Why should we do any favors for a German?” Yossel said. Jäger heard snarls from behind him. Here indeed was pointless cruelty coming home to roost.

But Jäger had an answer. “Because I fought alongside Russian partisans, most of them Jews, to get what I’m carrying away from the Lizards and bring it back toward Germany.” There. It was done. If these were truly the Lizards’ creatures, he’d just done himself in. But he was done in anyhow, the instant the Lizards found what his saddlebags held. And if his captors were men ...

Yossel spat. “You’re a fast liar, I give you that much. Where was this, on the road to Treblinka?” Seeing that that meant nothing to Jäger, he spoke a word of pure German: “*Vernichtungslager.*” Extermination camp.

“I don’t know anything of extermination camps,” Jäger insisted. The men behind him growled. He wondered if they would shoot him before he could go on. He spoke quickly: “I never heard of this Treblinka. But one of the Jews in the partisan band came back alive from a place called Babi Yar, outside Kiev. He and I worked together for this common good.”

Something changed in Yossel’s face. “So you know of Babi Yar, do you, Nazi? Tell me what you think of it.”

“It sickens me,” Jäger answered at once. “I went to war against the Red Army, not—not—” He shook his head. “I am a soldier, not a murderer.”

“As if a Nazi could tell the difference,” Yossel said scornfully. But he did not raise his rifle. He and the other—well, what were they? soldiers? partisans? merely bandits?—talked back and forth, partly in Yiddish, which Jäger could follow, and partly in Polish, which he couldn’t. Had the Jew in front of him looked less alert, Jäger might have made a break. As it was, he waited for his captors to figure out what to do with him.

After a couple of minutes, one of the men behind him said, “All right, off the horse.” Jäger dismounted. His back itched uncontrollably. He was ready to whirl and start shooting at the least untoward sound; they would not find a passive victim, if that was what they wanted. But then the fellow he could not see said, “You can sling that rifle, if you care to.”

Jäger hesitated. The invitation could have been a ruse to relax him for easier disposal. But the Jews already had him at their mercy, and no fighting man with even a gram of sense left an enemy armed. Maybe they’d decided he wasn’t altogether an enemy, then.

He slid the sling strap over his shoulder, asked, "What do you intend to do with me?"

"We haven't decided yet," Yossel said. "For now, you'll come with us. We'll take you to someone who can help us figure it out." Jäger's face must have said something, for Yossel added, "No, not a Lizard, one of us."

"All right," Jäger said, "but bring the horse, too; what he has in those saddlebags is more important than I am, and your officer will need to know of it."

"Gold?" asked the fellow who'd told Jäger to get off the horse

He didn't want the Jews to think he was just someone to be robbed. "No, not gold. If the NKVD doesn't miss its guess, I have there some of the same kind of stuff as the Lizards used to bomb Berlin and Washington."

That got a reaction, all right, "Wait a minute," Yossel said slowly. "The Russians are letting you take this—this stuff to Germany? How does that happen?"

*Why don't they keep it all themselves?* he meant. "If they could have kept it all, they would have, I'm sure," Jäger answered, smiling. "But as I said, it was a joint German-Soviet combat group that won this material, and however much reason the Russians have to dislike us Germans, they know also our scientists are not to be despised. And so ..." He slapped a saddlebag.

Further colloquy, now almost entirely in Polish, among the Jews. Finally Yossel said, "All right, German; if nothing else, you've confused us. Come along, you and your horse and whatever he's carrying."

"You have to keep me out of the Lizards' sight," Jäger insisted.

Yossel laughed. "No, no, we just have to keep you from being noticed. It's not the same thing at all. Get moving, we've already wasted too much time here on jabber."

The Jew proved to know what he was talking about. Over the next few days, Jäger saw more Lizards at closer range than he ever had before. Not one even looked at him; they all assumed he was just another militiaman, and so to be tolerated.

Encounters with armed Poles were more alarming. Although he'd grown a gray-streaked beard, Jäger was ironically aware he looked not the least bit Jewish. "Don't worry about it," Yossel told him when he said as much. "They'll think you're just another traitor."

That stung. Jäger said, "You mean the way the rest of the world thinks of you Polish Jews?" He'd been with the band long enough now to speak his mind without fearing someone would shoot him for it.

"Yes, about like that," Yossel answered calmly; he was hard to rile. "Of course, what the rest of the world still doesn't believe is that we had good reason to like the Lizards better than you Nazis. If you know about Babi Yar, you know about that."

Since he did know about that, and didn't like what he knew, Jäger changed the subject. "Some of those Poles looked like they'd just as soon start shooting at us as not."

"They probably would. They don't like Jews, either." Yossel's voice was matter-of-fact.

“But they don’t dare, because the Lizards have given us enough in the way of weapons to hurt them bad if they play their old games with us.”

Jäger chewed on that for a while. The Jew frankly admitted his kind depended on the Lizards. Yet he’d had endless chances to betray Jäger to them and hadn’t done it. Jäger admitted to himself that he didn’t understand what was going on. With luck, he’d find out.

That evening, they came to a town bigger than most of the others through which they’d passed. “What’s the name of this place?” Jäger asked.

At first he thought Yossel sneezed. Then the Jew repeated himself: “Hrubieszów.” The town boasted cobblestone streets, three-story buildings with cast-iron awnings, and a central boulevard that had a median strip planted with trees, perhaps to achieve a Parisian effect. Having seen the real Paris, Jäger found the imitation laughable, but kept that to himself.

Yossel went up to one of the three-story buildings, spoke in Yiddish to the man who answered his knock. He turned to Jäger. “You go in here. Take your saddlebags with you. We’ll get your horse out of town—a strange animal that stays around is plenty to make people start asking questions.”

Jäger went in. The gray-haired Jew who stood aside to let him pass said, “Hello, friend. I’m Lejb. What shall I call you while you’re here?”

“*Ich heisse Heinrich Jäger*” Jäger answered. He’d grown resigned to the looks of horror he got for speaking German, but it was his only fluent language—and, for better or worse, he *was* a German. He could hardly deny it. Stiffly, he said, “I hope my presence will not disturb you too much, sir.”

“A Nazi—in my house. They want to put a Nazi—in *my* house?” Lejb was not talking to Jäger. The German didn’t think he was talking to himself, either. Whom did that leave? God, maybe.

As if wound into motion by a key, Lejb bustled over and shut the door. “Even a Nazi should not freeze—especially if I would freeze with him.” With what seemed a large effort of will, he made himself look at Jäger. “Will you drink tea? And there’s potato soup in the pot if you want it.”

“Yes, please. Thank you very much.” The tea was hot, the potato soup both hot and filling. Lejb insisted on giving Jäger seconds; the Jew apparently could not force himself to be a poor host. But he would not eat with Jäger; he waited until the German finished before feeding himself.

That pattern persisted over the next two days. Jäger noticed he got the same chipped bowl, the same cup, at every meal; he wondered if Lejb would throw them away once he’d left, along with his bedding and everything else he’d touched. He didn’t ask, for fear the Jew would tell him yes.

Just when he started to wonder if Yossel and the rest of the Jewish fighters had forgotten about him, his first captor returned, again under cover of darkness. Yossel

said, “Somebody here wants to see you, Nazi.” From him, unlike from Lejb, the word had somehow lost most of its sting, as if it were a label and nothing more.

An unfamiliar Jew stepped into the living room of Lejb’s house. He was fair and thin and younger than Jäger would have expected for someone obviously important enough to be sent for. He did not offer to shake hands. “So you’re the German with the interesting package, are you?” he said, speaking German himself rather than Yiddish.

“Yes,” Jäger said. “Who are you?”

The newcomer smiled thinly. “Call me Mordechai.” By the way Yossel started in surprise, that might even have been his real name. *Bravado*, Jäger thought. The more the German studied Mordechai, the more impressed he grew. Young, yes, but an officer all the way: those light eyes were hooded and alert, alive with calculation. If he’d worn German field-gray, he’d have had a colonel’s pips and his own regiment before he hit forty; Jäger recognized the type. The Jews had themselves a hotshot here.

The hotshot said, “I gather you’re a panzer soldier and that you’ve stolen something important to the Lizards. What I’ve heard from Yossel here is interesting, but it’s also secondhand. Tell it to me yourself, Jäger.”

“Just a minute,” Jäger said. Yossel bristled, but Mordechai only grunted, waiting for him to go on. He did: “You Jews cooperate with the Lizards, yet now you seem ready to betray them. Show me I can trust you not to hand me straight over to them.”

“If we wanted to do that, we could have done it already,” Mordechai pointed out. “As for how and why we work with the Lizards—hmm. Think of it like this. Back three winters ago, Russia swamped the Finns. When you Nazis invaded Russia, Finland was happy enough to ride on your coattails and take back its own. But do you-think the Finns go around yelling ‘Heil Hitler!’ all day long?”

“Mmm—maybe not,” Jäger admitted. “And so?”

“And so we helped the Lizards against you Nazis, but for our own reasons—survival, for instance—not theirs. We don’t have to love them. Now I’ve told my story, and more than you deserve. You tell yours.”

Jäger did. Mordechai interrupted every so often with sharp, probing questions. The German’s respect for him grew at every one. He’d figured the Jew would know something of war and especially partisan operations—he had him pegged for a high military official. But he hadn’t figured Mordechai would know so much about the loot he carried in his saddlebags; he soon realized the Jew, though he’d never seen the mud-encrusted chunks of metal; understood them better than he did himself.

When Jäger was through (he felt squeezed dry), Mordechai steepled his fingers and stared up at the ceiling. “You know, before this war started, I worried more about what Marx thought than about God,” he remarked. His speech grew more guttural; his vowels shifted so Jäger had to think to follow him—he’d fallen out of German into Yiddish. He went on, “Ever since you Nazis shut me up in the ghetto and tried to starve me to death, I’ve had my doubts about the choice I made. Now I’m sure I was wrong.”

“Why now in particular?”lager asked.

“Because I would need to be the wisest rabbi who ever lived to decide whether I ought to help you Germans fight the Lizards with their own filthy weapons.”

Yossel nodded vehemently. “I was thinking the same thing,” he said.

Mordechai waved him to silence. “I wish this choice fell on someone besides me. All I wanted to be before the war was an engineer.” His gaze and Jäger’s clashed, swordlike. “All I am now, thanks to you Germans, is a fighting man.”

“That’s all I’ve ever been,” Jäger said. Once, before another war, he’d had hopes of studying biblical archaeology. But he’d learned in the trenches of France what he was good at—and how much the fatherland needed folk with talents like his. Set against that knowledge, biblical archaeology was small beer.

“And so on us the future turns,” Mordechai mused. “I don’t know about you, Jäger”—it was the first time he’d used the German’s name—“but I wish my own shoulders were wider.”

“Yes,” Jäger said.

Mordechai eyed him again, this time with a soldier’s calculation. “Simplest would be to shoot you and dump your body into the Vistula. So many have gone in that no one would notice one more. Toss your saddlebags in after you and I’d never have to wake up sweating in the night for fear of what you damned Nazis were going to do with this stuff you’ve stolen.”

“No—instead you’d wake up sweating in the night that no one could do anything to fight the Lizards.” Jäger tried to keep his voice and manner calm. He’d hazarded his life often enough on the battlefield, but never like this—it felt more like poker than war. He tossed another chip into the pot: “And no matter what you do to me, Stalin already has his share of the loot. Will you also sweat for what the Bolsheviks do with it?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Mordechai sighed, a sound that seemed to flow out from his whole body, not just his chest. “Better this choice should have fallen to Solomon the Wise than a poor fool like me. Then we would have some hope of a decision rightly taken.”

He started to sigh again, but the noise turned into a sudden, sharp inhalation halfway through. When he looked at Jäger now, his eyes blazed. Yes, the German thought, *an officer indeed, one men would follow into hell.*

“Maybe Solomon shows the way after all,” Mordechai said softly.

“What do you mean?” But even if he hadn’t thought of archaeology in years, Jäger knew his Bible well enough. Of themselves, his eyes went to the saddlebags leaning against the wall. “You want to cut the baby in half, do you?”

“That’s just what I want to do, Jäger,” Mordechai said. “Just exactly. All right, keep some of what you have. You Nazi bastards are smart, I give you that; maybe you’ll figure out what to do with it. But someone besides you and the Russians ought to have a chance with it, too.”

“Whom did you have in mind? You?” Jäger asked. The idea of Polish Jews with such horror weapons alarmed him as much as the prospect of the Germans with them appalled Mordechai. These Jews had too good a reason to want to use it on Germany.

But Mordechai shook his head. “No, not us. We haven’t the men, we haven’t the research facilities we’d need to figure out what we’d have to do, and there’d be too many Lizards underfoot for us to keep the work secret.”

“Who, then?” Jäger said.

“I was thinking the Americans,” Mordechai answered. “They’ve lost Washington, so they know in their bellies this thing is real. For all we know, they were working on it already. They have enough scientists there—plenty who fled to America away from you fascists, by all accounts. And it’s big, like Russia; they’d have plenty of places to hide from the Lizards while they figured things out.”

Jäger thought about that. He had an instinctive reluctance to hand over strategic material to the enemy—but compared to the Lizards, the Americans were allies. And even in terms of purely human politics, the more counterbalances to Moscow, the better. But one large question remained: “How do you propose to get this stuff across the Atlantic?”

He’d expected Mordechai to blanch, but the Jew was unperturbed “That we can manage easier than you’d think The Lizards don’t trust us as far as they used to, but we can still move pretty freely through the countryside—and we can get to the sea.”

“Then what?” Jäger said. “Put your saddlebag on a freighter and sail for New York?”

“You say it as a joke, but I think we could do it,” Mordechai answered. “There’s a surprising lot of water traffic going on; the Lizards don’t automatically attack it the way they do trains and lorries. But no, I hadn’t intended to put it on a freighter. We have ways of getting a submarine here without the Lizards’ noticing. We’ve done it a couple of times already, and it ought to be good for one more run.”

“A submarine?” *American?* Jäger thought. *No, more likely British.* The Baltic had been a German lake; a few months earlier, a British U-boat captain would have been suicidal to poke his periscope into it. Now, though, Germany had more urgent worries than British subs. “A submarine.” This time, Jäger made it a statement. “You know, that might be crazy enough to work.”

“Oh, we’re crazy, all right,” Mordechai said. “If we weren’t crazy before the war, you Nazis made us that way.” His laugh was full of self-mockery. “And now I must be crazier than ever, dickering to help Nazis make something that might be the end of the world. Only some ends are worse than others, eh?”

“Yes.” Jäger felt just as strange, dickering with Communists and now Jews. Now that he was close to Germany again, he suddenly wondered how his superiors—and the *Gestapo*—*would* view his dealings since the Lizards blew his Panzer III out from under him. But unless the world had turned completely insane, what was in the lead-lined saddlebag would redeem almost any amount of ideological contamination. Almost.

“We are agreed?” Mordechai asked.

“We are agreed,” Jäger said. Afterward, he was never sure which of them first stuck out a hand. They both squeezed, hard.

Atvar was busy checking the latest reports on how the Race was coping with the insane winter weather of Tosev 3 when a musical note from his computer reminded him of an appointment. He spoke into the intercom mike: “Drefsab, are you there?”

“Exalted Fleetlord, I am,” came the reply from an antechamber. Of course no one would presume to make the commander of the Race’s force wait, but formality persisted nonetheless.

“Enter, Drefsab,” Atvar declared, and pressed a button on his desk that made it possible for the operative to enter.

The fleetlord hissed in shocked dismay when Drefsab came into the office. The investigator had been one of his brightest males, infiltrating Straha’s staff to try to learn how the shiplord was spying on him and also dueling with Big Ugly intelligence agents who lacked his tools but made up for that with deceit unmatched even around the Emperor’s court. He’d always been dapper and crisp. Now his body paint was smeared, his scales dull, his pupils dilated.

“By the Emperor, what’s happened to you?” Atvar exclaimed.

“By the Emperor, Exalted Fleetlord, I find I must report myself unfit for duty,” Drefsab answered, casting down his eyes. Even his voice sounded as if he had rust in the works somewhere.

“I can see that,” Atvar said. “But what’s wrong? How have you become unfit?”

“I took it in my mind, Exalted Fleetlord, to investigate how traffic in the Tosevite herb called ginger was affecting our males. I realize I did so without orders, but I judged the problem to be of sufficient importance to justify the breach in conduct.”

“Go on,” Atvar said. Males who did things without orders were vanishingly rare in the Race, though that kind of initiative seemed all too common among the Big Ugliers. If this was what happened when the Race tried to match the Tosevites for sheer energy, the fleetlord wished his starships had never left Home.

Drefsab said, “Exalted Fleetlord, to evaluate both the traffic in ginger and the reasons for its spreading use, I deemed it necessary to seek out and sample the herb for myself. I regret to have to inform the fleetlord that I myself have fallen victim to its addictive properties.”

Males of the Race’s primitive ancestors had been hunters, carnivores. Atvar bent his fingers into the position that gave his claws the best opportunity to rend and tear. He did not need more bad news, not now. Tosev 3, and especially winter on Tosev 3’s northern hemisphere, were giving him plenty of bad news by themselves.

He had to say something. He didn’t know what. At last he tried, “How could you do



such a stupid thing, knowing your value to the Race?”

Drefsab hung his head in shame. “Exalted Fleetlord, in my arrogance I assumed I could investigate, could even sample the illicit herb, with no ill effects. I was, unfortunately, mistaken. Even now the craving burns in me.”

“What is it like, to be under the influence of this ginger substance?” The fleetlord had read reports, but his confidence in reports was not what it had been back Home. The report on Tosev 3, for instance, had made it sound like an easy conquest.

“I feel—bigger than myself, better than myself, as if I am capable of undertaking anything,” Drefsab said. “When I don’t have that feeling, I long for it with every scale of my skin.”

“Does this drug-induced feeling have any basis in reality?” Atvar asked. “That is, viewed objectively, do you in fact perform better while taking ginger than without it?” He had a moment of hope. If the noxious powder turned out to be a valuable pharmaceutical, some good might yet spring from Drefsab’s initiative.

But the agent only let out a long, whistling sigh. “I fear not, Exalted Fleetlord. I have examined work I produced shortly after tasting ginger. It contains more errors than I would normally find acceptable. I made them, but simply failed to notice them because of the euphoria the drug induces. And when I have not tasted ginger in some time... Exalted Fleetlord, it is very bad then.”

“Very bad,” Atvar echoed in a hollow voice. “How do you respond to this craving, Drefsab? Do you indulge it at every opportunity, or do you resist as best you can?”

“The latter,” Drefsab answered with a certain melancholy pride. “I go as long as I can between tastes, but that period seems to decrease as time passes. And I am also at less than maximum effectiveness in the black interval between tastes.”

“Yes.” Although with regret, Atvar’s thoughts now turned purely pragmatic: how could he get the best use out of this irrevocably damaged male? Decision came quickly. “If you find yourself more valuable to the Race than without taking it, use it at whatever level you find necessary for your continued function. Ignore all else. I so order you, for the good of the Race.”

“It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord,” Drefsab whispered.

Atvar went on, “I further order you to record in diary form all your reactions to this ginger. Physicians’ views of the problem are necessarily external; your analysis from the ginger user’s perspective will furnish them valuable data.”

“It shall be done,” Drefsab repeated, more heartily now.

“Further, continue your investigation into the trafficking in this drug. Bring down as many of those involved in the foul trade as you can.”

“It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord,” Drefsab said for the third time. For a moment, he sounded like the keen young male, the hunting *solmek*, he had always been for Atvar. But then he wilted before the fleetlord’s eyes, asking piteously, “Exalted Fleetlord, if I

bring them all down, whence shall my further supply of ginger come?”

Atvar hid his disgust. “Seize all you need to ensure your own stock for as long as you wish to continue your habit,” he said, reasoning that Drefsab on ginger was likely to make a better agent than he would pine for the herb, and was also likely to remain a better agent than any male, no matter how sober, he appointed in his place. To salve his conscience, Atvar added, “Our physicians will continue to seek a cure for this Tosevite herb. Spirits of dead Emperors grant they find it soon.”

“Aye, Exalted Fleetlord. Even now, I crave—” With a shudder, Drefsab broke off in the middle of the sentence. “Have I the Exalted Fleetlord’s gracious leave to depart?”

“Yes, go on, Drefsab, and may Emperors past look kindly on you.”

Drefsab’s salute: was ragged, but the male seemed to pull himself together as he left the fleetlord’s office. If nothing else, Atvar had imbued him with fresh purpose. The fleetlord himself was depressed as he returned to his paperwork. *I hate this cursed world*, he thought. *One way or another it is made only for driving the Race mad.*

His treatment of Drefsab left him no happier. Subordinate males owed their superiors obedience; superiors, in turn, were bound to grant those males under them support and consideration. Instead, he’d treated Drefsab exactly as he would have handled a useful but inexpensive tool: he’d seen the cracks, but he’d go on using it till it broke, then worry about acquiring another one.

Back Home, he’d not have used a male so. Back Home, he had luxuries long forgotten on Tosev 3, not least among them time to think. The Race made it a point never to do anything without due reflection. When you planned in terms of millennia, what was a day—or a year—more or less? But the Big Ugliers did not work that way, and forced haste and change on him because they were so cursedly mutable themselves.

“They’ve corrupted me along with Drefsab,” he said mournfully, and went back to work.

“What is this thing, anyway?” Sam Yeager asked as he lifted a piece of lab apparatus off a table and stuck it in a cardboard box.

“A centrifuge,” Enrico Fermi answered, which left Yeager little wiser than he had been before. The Nobel laureate crumpled old newspaper—not much in the way of new newspaper around these days—and padded the box with it.

“Don’t they have, uh, centrifuges where we’re going?” Yeager said.

Fermi threw his hands in the air in a gesture that reminded Yeager of Bobby Fiore. “Who knows what they have? The more we are able to bring, the less we shall have to rely on that which is and remains uncertain.”

“That’s true, Professor, but the more we bring, the slower we’re liable to move and the bigger the target we make for the Lizards.”

“What you say is so, but it is also a chance we must take. If, having relocated, we

cannot perform the work required of us, we might as well have stayed here in Chicago. We flee not just as individuals, but as an operating laboratory,” Fermi said.

“You’re the boss.” Yeager closed the box, sealed it with masking tape, pulled a grease pencil out of his shirt pocket. “How do you spell ‘centrifuge?’” When Fermi told him, he wrote it on the top and two sides of the box in big black letters.

He ran out of tape while sealing another centrifuge, so he went down the hall to see if he could snag another roll. The supply room had plenty; these days, the Metallurgical Laboratory got the best of whatever was left in Chicago. He was heading back to give Fermi more help when Barbara Larssen came out of a nearby room. The frosted glass window in the door from which she emerged was striped with tape to keep splinters from flying if a bomb hit nearby.

“Hi, Sam,” Barbara said. “How’s it going?”

“Not bad,” he answered, pausing for a moment. “Tired. How about you?”

“About the same.” She looked tired. From somewhere, she’d got hold of some face powder, but it couldn’t hide the dark circles under her eyes. The slump in her shoulders had nothing to do with the stack of file folders she carried. It spoke more of not enough sleep, too much work, too much fear.

Yeager hesitated, then asked, “Any good news?”

“About Jens, you mean?” Barbara shook her head. “I’ve just about given up. Oh, I still go through the motions: I just now left a note with Andy Reilly—do you know Andy?—saying where we were going to give to Jens in case he ever does come back.”

“The janitor, you mean? Sure. I know Andy. That’s a good idea; he’s reliable,” Yeager said. “Where *are* we going? Nobody’s bothered to tell me. Of course, I’m just a cook and bottle-washer around here, so it’s not surprising.”

“Denver,” Barbara said. “if we can get there.”

“Denver,” Sam repeated. “Yeah, I played there. I was with Omaha, I think.” That had been in the days before he broke his ankle, when the Class A Western League was a step up on a road he hoped would lead to the big leagues. Somehow he’d stayed even when he knew the road went nowhere. He shook his head, forcing his thoughts back to the here-and-now. “Why Denver? We’ll have the devil’s own time getting there from here.”

“I think that’s part of the idea,” Barbara said. “The Lizards haven’t bothered it much, especially since winter started. We’ll be safer there, with a better chance to work...if, as I said, we can get there.”

Yeager noticed that *as I said*. From his lips, it would have come out *like I said*. But then, he hadn’t done graduate work in English. They probably ran you out of the university on a rail if you used bad grammar; it had to be a sin on the order of trying to go from second to third on a ball hit to short-stop. He snorted.

He still had baseball on the brain. Barbara said, “Listen, I’d better take these downstairs.” She hefted the folders.

“I’ve got to get back to it, too,” Yeager said. “You take care of yourself, you hear? I’ll see you on the convoy.”

“Okay, Sam. Thanks.” She walked down the corridor toward the stairway. Sam’s eyes followed her. Too bad about her husband, he thought. Now even she’d started admitting to herself that he wasn’t coming back. But even worn as she was, she remained too pretty, and too nice, to stay a widow forever. Yeager told himself he’d do something about that, if and when he got the chance.

Not now. Back to work. He taped up the second centrifuge box, then, grunting, piled both of them onto a dolly. He set the sole of his Army boot against the bar in the back, tilted the dolly into the carrying position. He’d learned the trick as a moving man one off-season. He’d learned how to get a loaded dolly downstairs, too: backward was slower, but a lot safer. And from what Fermi said, every gadget here had to be treated as irreplaceable.

He was sweating from effort and concentration both by the time he got down to ground level. Camouflage netting covered a large expanse of lawn in front of Eckhart Hall. Under it, with luck concealed from Lizard fighter-bombers, huddled a motley collection of Army trucks, moving vans, stakebed pickups, buses and private cars. Uniformed guards with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets surrounded them, not so much to keep them from being stolen as from having their gas tanks siphoned dry. They were all full up, and in war-ravaged Chicago gasoline was more precious than rubies.

He didn’t begin to understand all the things people were stowing in them. One olive-drab Studebaker truck was full of nothing but blocks of black, smeary stuff, each with a number neatly stenciled onto the end. It was as if somebody had taken apart a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle and planned on putting it back together once he got to Colorado. But what was the thing *for*?

He turned and asked one of the men who’d got stuck behind him in a stairway traffic jam. The fellow said, “It’s graphite, to moderate the pile, slow down neutrons so uranium atoms have a better chance of capturing them.”

“Oh.” The answer left Yeager less than enlightened. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Not for the first time, he found that reading science fiction, while it put him ahead of where he would have been without it, didn’t magically turn him into a physicist. Too bad.

Barbara came outside with another load of file folders. Yeager went back and gave the graphite blocks another look so he could walk back upstairs with her. If she noticed what he was doing, she didn’t complain, but let him fall into step beside her.

They’d just got to the doorway when anti-aircraft guns began to pound off to the west. In moments, the noise spread through the city. Above it, through it, came the scream of Lizard planes’ jet engines, and then the flat, hard *cruump!* of bombs going off. Barbara bit her lip. “Those are close,” she said.

“Mile, maybe two, north,” Yeager said. Like everyone else in Chicago, he’d become a

connoisseur of explosions. He put a hand on Barbara's shoulder, happy for the excuse to touch her. "You get under a roof. Shrapnel'll start falling any minute, and you aren't wearing a tin hat." He rapped his own helmet with his knuckles.

Right on cue, pieces of anti-aircraft shell casing pattered down like hail. Barbara scurried inside Eckhart Hall—you didn't want to be under one when it landed. She said, "Those were between here and Navy Pier. I hope they don't fubar the evacuation route."

"I hope they don't, too." Sam stopped and stared. "You," he said severely, "have been listening to too many soldiers."

"What? Oh." Barbara's eyes widened in a good simulation of innocence. "It means 'fouled up beyond all recognition,' doesn't it?"

"Fouled up. Yeah. Right. Among other things." The noise Yeager made was half cough, half chuckle. Barbara stuck out her tongue at him. Laughing, they climbed the stairs together.

More Lizard planes hit Chicago that afternoon, and more again after night fell. They hadn't pounded the city so hard in a while. Yeager wished for bad weather, which sometimes kept the enemy away. Faint in the distance, he heard the wailing siren of a fire engine that still had fuel. He wondered if the firemen would find any water pressure when they got where they were going.

By the next morning, the loading was done. Yeager was crammed into a bus along with a bunch of boxes that could have held anything, a couple of other soldiers—and with Ullhass and Ristin. The two Lizard POWs were coming along to Denver for whatever help they could give the Met Lab project. Though swaddled in Navy peacoats that hung like tents on their slight frames, they still shivered. The bus had several broken windows; it was as cold inside as out.

All over the lawn, men grumbled about the cut fingers and mashed toes they'd gotten loading the convoy. Then, one after another, engines started up. The roar and vibration sank deep into Yeager's bones. Soon he'd be on the road again. After God only knew how many trips between towns, getting rolling felt good, felt normal. Maybe he was a nomad by nature.

Diesel and gasoline fumes wafted into the bus. Yeager coughed. He didn't remember the stink being so bad. But then, lately he hadn't smelled it much. Not a lot was on the roads these days to make a stink.

Inside of two gear changes, Yeager was convinced he had more business behind the wheel than the clod driving the bus. *No*, he thought with a touch of pride, *any fool can drive*. Guarding the Lizards was more important to the war effort.

The convoy rumbled north up University to Fifty-first, then swung left one vehicle at a time. The streets were mostly clear of debris and not too bumpy; rammed earth and rubble filled bomb craters and the subsidence caused by ruptured water mains. The sidewalks were something else again—bulldozers and pick-and-shovel crews had shoved up onto them all the garbage that had clogged the streets. These trucks were going to

get through no matter what.

To help make sure it got through, soldiers had machine gun nests in the rubble and stood menacingly at streetcorners. Here and there, colored faces, eyes huge and white within them, stared at the passing traffic from windows of houses and apartment buildings. Bronzeville, Chicago's black belt, began bare blocks from the university and indeed almost lapped around it. The government feared its Negro citizens only a little less than it feared the Lizards.

Before the aliens came, a quarter of a million people had been jammed into Bronzeville's six square miles. A lot fewer than that were there now, but the district still showed the signs of crowding and poverty: the storefront churches, the shops advertising mystic potions and charms, the little lunch counters whose windows (those that hadn't blown out) advertised chitlins and sweet potato pie, hot fish and mustard greens. Poor man's fare, yes, and poor black man's fare to boot, but the thought of fresh greens and hot fish was plenty to set Yeager's stomach rumbling. He'd been living out of cans too long. That was even worse than the greasy spoons he'd haunted as he bounced from one minor-league town to the next. Some of those diners—He hadn't thought anything could be worse.

"Why we leave this place where we so long stay?" Ristin said. "I like this place, as much as can like any place on this cold, cold world. Where we go now is warmer?" He and Ullhass both swiveled their eyes toward Yeager, waiting hopefully on his reply.

They squeaked in disappointment when he said, "No, I don't think it will be much warmer." He didn't have the heart to tell them it would be colder for a while: once on the Great Lakes, they'd almost certainly sail north and then west, because the Lizards held big stretches of Indiana and Ohio and controlled most of the Mississippi valley. The colder the country, the better, as far as evading them went.

Yeager continued, "As for why we're leaving, we're tired of having your people drop bombs on us, that's why."

"We tired of that, too," Ullhass said. He'd learned to nod like a human being to emphasize his words. So had Ristin. Their heads bobbed up and down together.

"I wasn't real fond of it myself," Yeager said, adding the Lizards' emphatic cough; he liked the way it served as a vocal exclamation point. His two charges let their mouths fall open. They thought his accent was funny. It probably was. He laughed a little, too. He and Ullhass and Ristin had rubbed off on one another more than he would have imagined possible back when he became their link to humankind.

The convoy chugged past the domed Byzantine bulk of Temple Isaiah Israel, then past Washington Park, bare-branched and brown and dappled with snow. It swung right onto Michigan Avenue, picking up speed as it went. There were advantages to being the only traffic on the road and not having to worry about stop lights.

Though it was winter, though the Lizards had cut off most rail and truck transport into Chicago, the stink of the stockyards lingered. Wrinkling his nose, Yeager tried to

imagine what it had been like on a muggy summer afternoon. No wonder colored folk had taken over Bronzeville—they usually ended up settling in places no one else much wanted.

He also wondered that Jens and Barbara Larssen had chosen to get an apartment somewhere near here. Maybe they hadn't known Chicago well when they moved, maybe they wanted to live close to the university, for the sake of his work, but Yeager still thought Barbara lucky to have had no trouble getting back and forth each day.

At the corner of Michigan and Forty-seventh, a sign proudly proclaimed, MICHIGAN BOULEVARD GARDEN APARTMENTS. The brick buildings looked as if they held more people than some of the towns Yeager had played for. One of them had taken a bomb hit and fallen in on itself. More bomb craters scarred the gardens and courts around the apartments. Skinny colored kids ran back and forth, running like banshees.

“What they do?” Ristin asked.

“Probably playing Lizards and Americans,” Sam answered. “It could be cowboys and Indians, though” He spent the next few minutes trying to get the alien to understand what cowboys and Indians were to say nothing of why they were part of a game. He didn't think he had much luck.

The convoy kept rolling north up Michigan Avenue. Before long though the bus Yeager was riding slowed then stopped. “What the hell s goin' on?” the driver said “This was supposed to be a straight shot.”

“It's the Army,” one of the other passengers explained. “The next time something goes just according to plan will be the first.” The fellow wore a major's gold oak leaves so no one presumed to argue with him. Besides he was obviously right.

After a minute or so, the bus started rolling again, more slowly now. Yeager leaned out into the aisle to peer through the front windows. At the corner of Michigan and Eleventh soldiers waved vehicle after vehicle onto the latter street.

The driver opened the front door with a hiss of compressed air. “What got screwed up now?” he called to one of the men on traffic-cop duty. “Why you movin' us offa Michigan?”

The soldier jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. “You can't get through no more on Michigan. The goddamn Lizards knocked down the Stevens Hotel this morning, and they're still clearin', the bricks and shit away.”

“So what am I supposed to do now?”

“Go over a block, then up Wabash to Lake. You can get back onto Michigan there.”

“Okay,” the driver said, and swung through the turn. No sooner had he rolled past the Woman's Club Building than more soldiers waved him right onto Wabash, one block west. St. Mary's Church there had had its spire blown off; the cross that had topped it lay half on the sidewalk, half in the gutter.

Since Wabash hadn't been cleared to let the convoy get through, the going was slow

and bumpy. Once the bus had to jounce up onto the sidewalk to get around a crater in the road. Two empty gas stations, one Shell, the other Sinclair, stood across the street from each other at Wabash and Balbo. A dusty sign in front of the Sinclair station advertised its regular gasoline, six gallons for ninety-eight cents, tax paid. A fifteen-foot-tall plywood cutout of a waving man in a parking attendant's uniform plugged the parking lot next to the gas station: twenty-five cents for one hour or less (SAT. NITE 50¢ AFTER 6 P.M.). But for parked cars and rubble, the lot was empty.

Yeager shook his head. Up until the Lizards came, life in the United States had been within shouting distance of normal, war or no war. Now...He'd seen newsreel film of wreckage in Europe and China, seen black-and-white images of stunned people trying to figure out how to go on with their lives after they'd lost everything—and often everybody—that mattered to them. He thought they'd sunk in. But the difference between seeing pictures of war and having war brought home to you was like the difference between seeing a picture of a pretty girl and going to bed with her.

The elevated train curled round the corner of Wabash and Lake. Lizard bombs had torn great gaps in the steel-and-wood superstructure. The trains in Chicago did not run on time, not any more.

Back onto Michigan Avenue. Half a block north of Lake, the forty-story Carbide and Carbon Building had been a Chicago landmark with its black marble base, dark green terra-cotta walls, and gilded trim. Now scorch marks ran up its flanks. Piles of the wall—hell, pieces of the building—were chewed out by bomb hits, as if a dog the size of King Kong had tried it for taste. The glass from hundreds of windows had been swept out of Michigan Avenue, but still glittered on the sidewalk.

The bus driver was evidently a native Chicagoan. Just past the Carbide and Carbon Building, he pointed to the opposite side of the street and said, "This here used to be the 333 North Michigan Building. Now it ain't."

*Now it ain't.* A mournful pronouncement, but accurate enough. The pile of debris—marble facings, wood floors, endless cubic yards of reinforced concrete, twisted steel girders beginning to be mangy with rust now that they were open to the snow and rain—had been a building once. It wasn't any more.

Nor was the double-decked Michigan Avenue Bridge a bridge any more. Army engineers had run a temporary pontoon bridge across the Chicago River to get the convoy to the other side. It would come down again as soon as the last truck rattled over it. If it didn't, the Lizards would blast it in short order.

Armchair strategists said the Lizards didn't really understand what all human beings used boats for. Yeager hoped they were right. He'd been strafed in a train the night the aliens came crashing down on Earth. Getting strafed on board ship would be ten times worse—no place to run, no place to hide.

But if the Lizards didn't understand boats, they sure knew what bridges were all about. Looking west as he bounced over the steel plates of the makeshift span the



engineers had thrown up, Yeager saw that bridges had leapt over the Chicago River at every block. They didn't overleap it now. Every one of them, like the Michigan Avenue Bridge, had been bombed into oblivion.

"Ain't it a bitch?" the driver said, as if reading his mind. "This here bridge was only about twenty, twenty-five years old—my old man was back from France to watch 'em open it up. Fuckin' waste, if you ask me."

On the north side of the river, the gleaming white Wrigley Building looked intact but for broken windows. Across the street, though, the Tribune Tower had been gutted. Yeager found a certain amount of poetic justice in that. Even when reduced to a skinny weekly by paper shortages, the *Chicago Tribune* hadn't stopped laying into Roosevelt for not Doing Something about the Lizards. Just what he was supposed to be Doing was never quite clear—but he obviously' wasn't Doing it, so the paper piled scorn on him.

Yeager felt like thumbing his nose at the ruined building. About all anyone could do about the Lizards was fight them as hard as he could for as long as he could. The United States was doing as well as any other country on Earth, and better than most. But Sam wondered if that would be enough.

Along with the rest of the convoy, the bus turned right on Grand Avenue toward the Navy Pier. The morning sun gleamed off Lake Michigan, which seemed illimitable as the sea.

The pier stretched more than half a mile into the lake. The bus rattled past sheds once full of merchandise, now mostly bombed-out shells. At the east end of the pier were playgrounds, a dance hail, an auditorium, a promenade—all reminders of happier times. Waiting at what had been the excursion landing was a rusty old freighter that looked like the maritime equivalent of the beat-up buses Yeager had been riding all his adult life.

Also waiting were a couple of companies of troops. Antiaircraft guns poked their noses into the sky. If Lizard planes swooped down on the convoy, they'd get a warm reception. Even so, Yeager wished the guns were someplace else—from everything he'd seen, they were better at attracting the Lizards than shooting them down.

But he wasn't the one who gave the orders—except to his Lizardy charges. "Come on, boys," he told them, and let them precede him, off the bus and onto the pier. At his urging, Ullhass and Ristin headed toward the freighter, on whose side was painted the name *Caledonia*.

The gathered soldiers swarmed onto the convoy vehicle like army ants—Yeager smiled as the comparison struck him. One truck after another was emptied and sped back down Navy Pier toward Chicago. Working transport of any sort was precious these days. Watching them head west, Yeager got an excellent view of the proud city skyline—and of the gaps the Lizards had torn in it.

Barbara Larssen came over and stood by him. "They just want us small fry out of the way," she said unhappily. "They put the physicists on board first, and now the

equipment they need. Afterward, if there's any room and any time, they'll let people like us get on."

Given the military needs of the moment, those priorities made sense to Yeager. But Barbara wanted sympathy, not sense. He said, "You know what they say—there's the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way."

She laughed, maybe a little more than the tired joke deserved. A chilly gust of wind off the lake tried to flip up her pleated skirt. She defeated it with the quick two-hand clutch women seem to learn as a tribal gesture, but shivered just the same. "Brr! I wish I were wearing pants."

"Why don't you?" he said. "With all the heaters to hell and gone, I bet you'd be a lot more comfortable. I wouldn't want to freeze my—well, I wouldn't want to freeze myself in a skirt just on account of fashion."

If she'd noticed what he started to say, she didn't let on. "If I find some that fit me, I think I will," she said. "Long johns, too."

Yeager let himself indulge in the fantasy of peeling her out of a pair of long johns until somebody bawled, "Come on, get those goddamn Lizards on board. We ain't got all day."

He urged Ullhass and Ristin ahead of him, then had a happy afterthought. Grabbing Barbara's hand, he said, "Make like you're a Lizardkeeper, too?" She caught on fast and fell into step behind him. She didn't shake off his hand, either.

The two Lizard POWs hissed in alarm as the gangplank swayed under their weight. "It's all right," Barbara reassured them, playing her part to the hilt. "If humans carrying heavy equipment didn't break this, you won't." Yeager had come to know Ullhass and Ristin well enough to tell how unhappy they were, but they kept walking.

They hissed again when they got up onto the deck of the *Caledonia* and discovered the ship was still shifting slightly to and fro. "It will fall over and put us all at the bottom of the water," Ristin said angrily. He didn't know nautical English, but got his meaning across.

Yeager looked around at the faded paint, the rust that streaked down from rivets, the worn woodwork, the grease-stained dungarees and old wool sweaters the crew wore. "I don't think so," he told the Lizards. "This boat's done a lot more sailing in its day. I expect it's good for some more yet."

"I think you're right, Sam," Barbara said, perhaps as much to reassure herself as to console Ristin.

"Out of the way, there," an officer in Navy uniform yelled at Yeager. "And get those damned things into the cabin we've set up for them."

"Yes, sir," Yeager said, saluting. "Uh, sir, where is this cabin? Nobody told me before I got here."

The Navy man rolled his eyes. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" He grabbed a passing

sailor by the arm. “Virgil, take this guy and his pet Lizards up to cabin nine. That one can be locked from the outside—here’s the key.” He turned to Barbara. “Who are you, ma’am?” When she gave him her name, he checked a list, then said, “You can go along if you like, since you don’t seem to mind being around these things—they give me the creeps. Anyway, you’re in cabin fourteen, just up the corridor. I hope that’s all right.”

“Sure—why not?” Barbara said. The Navy man looked at her, looked back to the Lizards, rolled his eyes again. He obviously didn’t want to have anything more to do with them than duty required.

“Come on,” Virgil said. He had an engaging hillbilly twang, and seemed more curious than repelled by the Lizards. Nodding to Ristin, he said, “You speak English?”

“Yess,” Ristin answered, fixing him with a baleful stare. “You are sure this—thing—will not fall over into the water?”

“Yup.” The sailor laughed. “Hasn’t yet, anyhow.” Just then, other sailors cast off lines at stern and bow. The ship’s engine roared into life, making the deck vibrate. Ristin and Ullhass both glared at Virgil as if they’d just convicted him of perjury in their minds. Black smoke poured from the *Caledonia*’s twin stacks. She slowly pulled away from the Navy Pier.

Back on the pier, some of the soldiers who’d done stevedore duty waved farewells. More, though, were too worn to do anything but stand or sit at the end of the pier. Yeager wondered how many of them had any idea why the cargo they’d loaded onto the freighter was so important. A handful if any, he guessed.

He was looking back toward Chicago when he saw flames and dust and smoke spurt up from an explosion, and then from another and another. Oddly flat across a widening stretch of water, the blasts reached his ears at about the same time he heard the screaming jets of the Lizard fighter-bombers.

The anti-aircraft gunners on the Navy Pier started firing for all they were worth. All that accomplished was to draw the Lizards’ attention to them. One of the planes zoomed along the length of the pier, turned loose a couple of bombs. The AA fire cut off as sharply as a chicken’s squawks when the cleaver comes down.

The Lizard plane shot over the *Caledonia*, so low Yeager could see the seams where pieces of its skin were joined together. He breathed a sigh of relief when it screamed out over the lake.

Along with his charges, Virgil had stopped to watch the enemy aircraft again. Now he said, “Let’s get you movin’ again.” But he kept his head cocked, as Yeager did, listening to the sound of the jet engine. Worry crossed his face. “I don’t much like that it’s—”

Before he could say *comin’ back*, a sharp bark rose above the scream. Yeager had been under fire often enough to make his reaction almost reflexive. “Hit the deck!” he yelled, and had the presence of mind to knock Barbara down beside him.

Cannon shells raked the *Caledonia* from starboard to port. Glass shattered. Metal screamed. A moment later, so did men. The Lizard pilot, happy with the strafing run,

darted westward toward his base.

Something hot and wet splashed Yeager. When he touched it, his hand came away smeared with red. He looked up. There on the deck, a little in front of him, lay Virgil's still-twitching legs. A few feet away were the soldier's head and shoulders and arms. Nothing but that red smear was left of the parts in between.

Ullhass and Ristin stared at the ruin of what had been a man with as much horror as if they'd been men themselves. As Yeager did, Barbara Larssen looked up into carnage. She was as smeared with blood as he, from her wavy hair to her pleated skirt: and beyond—a neat line between silkcovered pink and crimson on her calf showed just how far down the skirt had gone.

She saw what was left of Virgil, stared down at the slaughterhouse survivor she'd become. "Oh God," she said, "Oh God and was noisily sick on the deck in the middle of the blood. She clung to Yeager and he to her, his hands digging like claws into the firm, marvelously unbroken flesh of her back her breasts pressing against his chest as if they grew there Her head was jammed down into the hollow of his shoulder He didn't know if she could breathe and he didn't care In spite of the stink of the blood and the puke he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted a woman in all his life and from the way his hard-on rubbed her leg and she didn't pull away but moaned and just shoved herself to him harder than ever he knew she wanted him too and of course it was crazy and of course it was shock but he didn't care about that either, not one bit.

"Move," he growled to the Lizards in a voice not his own. They skittered round the pieces of poor dead Virgil. He followed, still clutching Barbara, hoping desperately he could find the cabins before the moment broke.

The numbers on the doors of the first corridor he ducked into showed him he'd been lucky. He opened cabin nine, marched Ullhass and Ristin in, slammed the door behind them, turned the key. Then, almost running, he and Barbara hurried up the echoing metal hallway to fourteen.

The cabin was tiny, the bunk even tinier. Neither of them cared. They fell on it together. She happened to land on top. It could have been the other way round just as easily.

His hand dove under her skirt. He stroked her smooth thigh above the top of her stocking, then yanked at the crotch of her panties. At the same time, she pulled his pants down just far enough. She was so wet, he went deep into her the moment she impaled herself on him.

He'd never known such heat. He exploded almost at once, and in the first instant of returning self-consciousness feared he'd been too quick to satisfy her. But her spine was arched, her head thrown back; she made little mewling noises deep in her throat as she quivered above him. Then her eyes opened. Like him, she seemed to be coming to herself after a hard bout of fever.

She scrambled off him. He hastily put his trousers to rights. They'd both left

bloodstains on the blanket that covered the bunk. Barbara stared wildly around the cabin, as if really seeing it for the first time. Maybe she was. “Oh God,” she moaned, “what have I gone and done to myself now?” But of that there could be no possible doubt.

Sam took a step toward her, made as if to take her in his arms. He said what countless men have said to women after lust takes them by surprise: “Darling, it’ll be all right—”

“Don’t you call me that,” she hissed. “Don’t you touch me, don’t you come near me.” She backed as far away from him as she could, which wasn’t very far. “Get out of here this instant. I never want to see you again. Go back to your damned Lizards. I’ll scream. I’ll—”

Yeager didn’t wait to find out what she’d do. He left the cabin in a hurry, closed the door behind him. By sheer dumb luck, the corridor was empty. Through the steel door, he heard Barbara start to cry. He wanted to go back in and comfort her, but she couldn’t have made it any plainer that she wanted no comfort from him. Since they were quartered right down the corridor from each other, she’d have to see him again, and soon. He wondered what would happen then.

“It’ll be all right,” he said without much conviction. Then, shoulders slumped, he walked slowly along the corridor to see how Ristin and Ullhass were. They didn’t have to worry about the whole business of male and female; out of sight was truly out of mind for them. He’d never thought he’d be jealous of that, but right now he was.

A Lizard threw open the door to the Baptist church in Fiat, Indiana. The people inside jerked their heads around in surprise and alarm; this was not a usual time for the aliens to bother them. They'd learned a basic lesson of war and captivity: anything out of the ordinary was frightening.

Jens Larssen started with the rest, though as he already faced the big double doors he didn't have to spin toward them. He'd been standing around kibitzing a game of hearts. Sal the waitress was going for it—trying to take the queen of spades and all the hearts and stick all three of her opponents with twenty-six points each. He didn't think she had the cards to make it, but you never could tell—she played like a barracuda.

He never found out what happened with the hand. The Lizard stalked into the church, automatic weapon at the ready. Two others covered it from the doorway. The creature hissed, "Piit Ssmiff?"

Larssen needed a second to recognize his alias in the alien's mouth. As the Lizard started to repeat it, he said, "That's me. What do you want?"

"Come," the Lizard said, which might have come close to exhausting its English. A jerk of the gun barrel, however, was hard to misconstrue.

"What do you want?" Larssen said again, but he was already moving. The Lizards were not long on patience with captives.

"Good luck, Pete," Sal called softly as he headed out toward the doorway.

"Thanks. You, too," he answered. He hadn't put a move on her, not yet; he still had hopes of making it home to Barbara. But day by day *not yet* was rising higher in his thoughts than *hadn't put a move on her*. And when he did (*if I do*, he halfheartedly reminded himself), he was pretty sure—no, he *was* sure—she'd come across. Once or twice, she'd put what might have been a move on him.

A couple of other people also wished him luck. The Lizard just waited for him to arrive, then fell in behind him. Outside the church, cold smote. His eyes filled with tears; he'd been inside the gloomy building so long that sun sparkling off snow was almost overpoweringly bright.

His guards marched him along to the store the Lizards used as their Fiat headquarters. As soon as he went inside, he started to sweat; the place was at the bake-oven heat the aliens enjoyed. The three who had brought him there hissed blissfully. He wondered how they escaped pneumonia from the drastic temperature shifts they endured whenever they went in or out. Maybe pneumonia bugs didn't bite Lizards. He hoped they wouldn't bite him.

The guards led him back to the table where Gnik had interrogated him before. The Lizard lieutenant or whatever he was waited there now. He was holding something Lizardy in his left hand. Without preamble, he said, "Open your mouth, Pete Smith."

"Huh?" Jens said, taken aback.

"Open your mouth, I say. You do not understand your own speech?"

"No, superior sir. Uh, I mean, yes, superior sir." Larssen gave that up as a bad job and opened his mouth; with guns all around him, he had no real choice.

Gnik started to reach up with the gadget in his-left hand, then paused. "You Big Ugliers are too tall," he said peevishly. Nimble as his Earthly reptilian namesake, he scrambled, up onto a chair, put the muzzle of the gadget into Larssen's mouth, squeezed a trigger.

The Lizardy thing hissed like a snake. A jet of something stung Jens on the tongue. "Ow!" he exclaimed, and involuntarily pulled back. "What the devil did you just do to me?"

"Injected you," Gnik answered; at least he didn't seem angry about Jens' retreat. "Now we will find out the truth."

"Injected me? But ..." When Larssen thought about injections, he thought about needles. Then he took a long look at Gnik's scaly hide. Would a hypodermic pierce it? He didn't know. The Lizards' only easily available soft tissue was inside their mouths. Some sort of compressed gas jet must have forced the drug into his system. But what was it? "Find out the truth?" he asked.

"New from our base." Gnik was one smug Lizard. "You will not lie to me. You cannot lie to me. The injection will not permit it."

*Uh-oh*, Jens thought. The sweat that sprang out on his forehead now had nothing to do with the hot, dry interior of the store. He felt woozy; he needed a distinct effort of will not to see double. "May I sit down?" he said. Gnik jumped off the chair he'd used. Larssen sank into it. His legs did not seem to want to support him. *Why not?* he thought vaguely. *I always supported them.*

Gnik stood and waited for a few minutes, presumably to let the drug take full effect. Larssen wondered if he'd throw up all the canned goods he'd been eating lately. His mind felt detached from his body; it was almost as if he were looking down on himself from the ceiling.

Gnik asked, "What is your name?"

*What is my name?* Jens wondered. *What a good question.* He wanted to giggle, but didn't have the energy. What had he been calling himself lately, anyhow? Remembering was a triumph. "Pete Smith," he said proudly.

Gnik hissed. He and the other Lizards talked among themselves for a couple of minutes. The officer swung his turreted eyes back toward Larssen. "Where you going when we catch you on that—thing?" He still couldn't remember the name for a bicycle.

"To, to visit my cousins west of, of, Montpelier." Sticking to his story wasn't easy for

Jens, but he managed. Maybe he'd already told it so many times that it felt true for him. And maybe the Lizards' drug wasn't as good as they thought it was. In a pulp science-fiction story, it was easy enough to imagine something one day, create it the next, and use it the day after that. Reality was different, as he'd found out time and again at the Met Lab: nature usually proved less tractable than pulp writers made it out to be.

Gnik hissed again. Maybe he wasn't convinced the drug was everything it was supposed to be—or maybe he had been convinced Jens was lying through his teeth and had got a nasty shock when he didn't come out with something new under the drug. Not only was the Lizard stubborn, he was sneaky as well. "Tell me more of the male of this grouping of yours, this cousin Osscarr." He put a hiss in the middle of the name, too.

"His name is, is Olaf," Larssen said, scenting the trap just in time. "He's my father's brother's son." He quickly rattled off the names of the fictitious Olaf's equally fictitious family. He hoped that would keep Gnik from trying to trip him up with them; it also helped fix them in his own mind.

The Lizards went back to talking to one another again. After a while, Gnik returned to English. "We still do not find this—these—cousins of yours anywhere about."

"I can't help that," Larssen said. "For all I know, maybe it's because you've killed them. But I hope not."

"More probably because their neighbors do not tell us who they are." Did Gnik sound conciliatory? Larssen hadn't heard conciliation in a Lizard's voice often enough to be sure. "Some of you Big Ugliers do not care for the Race."

"Why do you suppose that is?" Jens asked.

"It is a puzzlement," Gnik said, so seriously that Larssen knew he really was puzzled. *Are they that stupid?* he wondered. But the Lizards weren't stupid, not even slightly, or they'd never have been able to come to Earth, never have been able to make and drop their atomic bombs. They were sure naive, though. Had they expected to be welcomed as liberators?

Even under the mildly euphoric buzz of the not-quite-truth drug, Larssen worried a little. Suppose the Lizards decided to let him go and then followed him while he tried to find his cousins' farm? That would be the best way to make him out a liar. Or would it? He could always point to a ruined one and claim Olaf *et* mythical *cetera* had lived there.

The Lizards were chattering back and forth one more time. Gnik cut off debate with a sharp motion of his hand. He swung his eyes toward Larssen. "What you say with the drug in you must be true. So my superiors have told me; thus, so it must be. And if it is true, you is—*are*—no danger to the Race. You may go. Take up the things that are yours and travel on, Pete Smith."

"Just like that?" Larssen blurted. An instant later, he bit his tongue, which made him yelp—it was sore. But did he want the Lizard to change its mind? Like hell he did! His next question was distinctly more practical: "Where's my bike?"

Gnik understood the word, even if he couldn't recall it. "It will go to where you are



being kept. Go there now yourself to take up the things that are yours.”

Along with the drug-induced euphoria, Jens now had his own genuine variety. He put his cold-weather gear back on, all but floated over the snow back to the Baptist church. Questions rang out “What happened?” “What’d they want with you?”

“They’re letting me go,” he said simply. He was still absorbing the magnitude of his own luck. Back in White Sulphur Springs, Colonel Groves—or was it General Marshall?—had told him the Lizards were worse than Russians for depending on their higher-ups to tell them what to do. Gnik’s higher-ups had told him he had a real live truth drug here, and as far as he was concerned, that made it Holy Writ. As long as the higher-ups were right, it was a good enough system. When they were wrong ...

Half the people in the church came running forward to pound his back and shake his hand. Sal’s kiss was so authoritative, his arms automatically tightened around her. She molded herself to him, ground her hips against his crotch. “Lucky bastard,” she whispered when she finally pulled away.

“Yeah,” he muttered, dazed. All at once, he wanted not to leave...at least for one night. But no. If he didn’t get out while he could, the Lizards were liable to wonder why—and liable to change their minds. That did not bear thinking about.

He pushed through the friendly little crowd to get his belongings from the pew he’d come to call his own. As he slung his knapsack over his shoulders, he noticed for the first time the men and women who’d hung back from offering best wishes. Not to put too fine a point on it, they looked as if they hated him. Several—women and men both—turned away so he would not see them cry. He all but ran toward the doorway. No, even if the Lizards allowed it, he could not stay another night, not for Sal and all her blowsy charms. Even a few seconds of that envy and rage were more than he could stand.

The Lizards were efficient enough. By the time he got outside, one of them had his bicycle waiting. As he swung up onto it, he got a last glimpse of pale, hungry faces staring out from inside the church at the freedom they could not share. He’d expected to feel a lot of different things when he was set free, but never shame. He started to pedal. Snow kicked up from under his wheels. In bare seconds, the hamlet of Fiat vanished behind him.

After less than an hour, he stopped for a blow. He wasn’t in the shape he’d enjoyed before the Lizards put him out of circulation for a while. “Gotta keep going or I’ll stiffen up,” he said aloud. Unlike his wind, the habit of talking to himself came back right away.

When he came upon the signs announcing Montpelier, he skirted the town on the best paths he could find, then returned to Highway 18. For the next few days, everything seemed to go right. He rode around Marion as he had Montpelier, sailed right on through Sweetser and Converse, Wawpekong and Galveston. Whenever he needed food, he found some. Whenever he was tired, a hayloft or an abandoned farmhouse seemed to beckon.

Once, in a bureau drawer, he even found a pack of Philip Morris. He hadn't had a cigarette since he couldn't remember when; he smoked himself light-headed and half-sick in an orgy of making up for lost time. "Worth it," he declared as he coughed his way through the next day.

He saw few people as he rolled through central Indiana. That suited him fine. He saw even fewer Lizards, and that suited him better—how was he supposed to explain what he was doing a good many miles west of where he'd told Gnik he was going? Luck stayed with him; he didn't have to.

The war between humans and aliens seemed far away from that nearly deserted winter landscape (although, of course, it wouldn't have been deserted but for the war). A couple of times, though, off in the distance, he heard gunfire, the widely spaced barks of sporting or military rifles and the chatter of the Lizards' automatic weapons. And, once-or twice, Lizard planes screamed high overhead, scrawling trails—*ice crystals*, the physicist part of him said—across the sky.

Somewhere between Young America and Delphi, a new noise entered the mix: intermittent explosions. The farther west he traveled, the louder they got. Maybe half an hour after he first noticed them, his head went up like a hunted animal's when it catches a scent.

"That's artillery, is what that is!" he exclaimed. Excitement coursed through him—artillery meant people still fighting the Lizards on a level higher than bushwhacking. It also meant danger, since it lay in the direction he was riding.

The duel, he noticed as he drew near, was anything but intense. A few shells would come in, a few more go out. He rode past a Lizard battery. Instead of being towed, the guns were mounted on what looked like tank chassis. The Lizards serving them paid no attention to him.

Shortly after he passed the Lizard position, he started going by wrecked combat vehicles, most of them now just big shapes covered over with snow. The road, which had been pretty good, suddenly developed not just potholes but craters. The fighting hereabouts wasn't intense now, but had been not too long before.

He got off his bike before he went headlong into a snow-filled hole. Frustration ate at him. After fairly flying through Lizard-held territory, was he going to get delayed by humans? He'd started believing he'd get home to Chicago again fairly soon. Getting hopes up and then having them dashed seemed cruel and unfair.

Then he came to the first belt of rusty barbed wire. It was like something out of a movie about World War I. "How am I supposed to get through that?" he demanded of an uncaring world. "How am I supposed to get my bike through that?"

A hiss, a whistle, a scream, a crash! Frozen earth flew through the air off to his left. So did fragments of steel. One tore through a couple of spokes of the bicycle's rear wheel. It could have torn through Jens' leg just as easily. All at once, the artillery duel turned real for him. It wasn't just abstract shells flying back and forth on trajectories dictated by

Newtonian mechanics and air resistance. If one of those shells hit a little nearer (or no nearer, but with an unlucky spray of fragments), he wouldn't have to worry about getting to Chicago any more.

Another freight-train noise in the air. This time Larssen dove into the snow before the shell burst. It landed in the middle of the barbed-wire belt, and chunks of wire probably flew along with its own fragments. Getting hit by one sort of jagged metal would be about as bad as the other, Jens thought.

He cautiously raised his head, hoping the shell had cleared a way through the wire. A generation of young Englishmen who'd fought at the Somme—or, at any rate, the fraction of that generation which survived—could have told him he was wasting optimism. Tanks could crush wire, but shells couldn't smash it aside.

How to cross, then? With shells still falling in the neighborhood every so often, he didn't even want to get up and walk around to look for a path to the other side of the wire. He turned his head so he could see how far to the north and west the barrier ran. Farther than his ground-level Mark One eyeball carried, anyhow. Was it no-man's-land all the way from here to Chicago? With his luck, it might well be.

“Okay, pal, don't even blink, or you'll get yourself some .30 caliber ventilation.” The voice came from the direction in which Larssen wasn't looking. He obediently froze. Lying in the snow, he already had a good start on freezing, anyhow. “Awright,” the voice said. “Turn toward me, nice and slow. I better see your hands every second, too.”

Jens turned, nice and slow. As if he'd sprouted there like a mushroom, a fellow in a khaki uniform and a tin hat sprawled not fifty feet away. His rifle pointed right about at Larssen's brisket. “Jesus, it's good to see a human being holding a gun again,” Jens said.

“Shut up,” the soldier told him. The Springfield never wavered. “Likeliest guess is, you're a God-damned Lizard-spy.”

“A what? Are you crazy?”

“We shot two last week,” the soldier said flatly. ‘

Ice grew inside Larssen, to go with the snow all around. The fellow meant every word of it. Jens tried again: “I'm no spy, and I can prove it, by God.”

“Tell it to the Marines, Mac. I'm a harder sell than that.”

“Goddammit, will you listen to me?” Jens shouted, furious now as well as frightened. “I'm on my way back from White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. Jesus, I talked with General Marshall while I was there. He'll vouch for me, if he's still alive.”

“Yeah, pal, an' I was in Rome last week, for lunch with the Pope.” But the unwashed, unshaven soldier did move his rifle so it wasn't aimed at Larssen's midriff. “Awright, I'll take you in. You can peddle your papers to my lieutenant. If he buys, what you're pushin', that's his business. C'mere...No, dummy, leave the bike.”

*Sans* bicycle, Larssen came. He wondered how he was supposed to get through that impenetrable-looking mass of barbed wire. But a path was cut, with strands looking as if

they were firmly attached to their support posts but in fact just hanging from them. He didn't have much trouble crawling along after his captor, though he never could have navigated by himself. Although he tried to be careful, he got punctured a couple-of times. He tried to remember when his last tetanus shot had been.

More dirty faces peered out at him from the zigzagging trenches behind the wire. The lieutenant, instead of a British-style tin hat, wore a domed steel helmet that looked very modern and martial. He listened to Larssen's story, reached into a shirt pocket, then laughed at himself. "I still want a butt to help me think, but I haven't seen one in weeks. Hellfire, buddy, I don't know what to do with you. I'll bump you. on up the line, see if somebody else can figure you out."

Escorted by the soldier who'd found him—the fellow's name turned out to be Eddie Wagner—Larssen made the acquaintance of a captain, a major, and a lieutenant colonel. By then, he expected to be kicked on to a bird colonel, but the lieutenant colonel short-circuited the process, saying, "I'm going to send you to General Patton's headquarters, bud. If you say you've met Marshall, he's the one to decide what to do with you."

General Patton's headquarters proved to be in Oxford, something like twenty miles west. The march there, starting at dawn the next day, ended near dark and left Larssen footsore, weary, and mourning his lost bike. Little by little, as he tramped along, he began to notice how many field guns were disguised as tree trunks with branches wired onto their upright barrels, how many tanks inhabited barns or crouched under haystacks, how many airplanes rested beneath nets that hid them from the sky.

"You guys have a lot of stuff built up here," he remarked some time in the afternoon. "How'd you manage to do it right under the Lizards' snouts?"

"Wasn't easy," Wagner answered, who'd apparently decided he might not be a spy after all. "We been movin' it in a little at a time, just about all of it at night. The Lizards, they've let us do it. We hope to Jesus that means they ain't really noticed what we're up to. They'll find out, they sure as hell will."

Larssen started to ask what the Lizards would find out, then thought better of it. He didn't want to stir up his guide's suspicions again. Not only that, he could make a good stab at figuring it out for himself. Some sort of big push had to be in the offing. He wondered in which direction it would go.

General Patton's headquarters was in a white frame house on the outskirts of Oxford (though the town, with fewer than a thousand people, was barely big enough to have outskirts). The sentries on the covered porch—like everything else military hereabouts, they were concealed from aerial observation—were well shaved and wore neater uniforms than any Jens had seen for a while.

One of them nodded politely to him. "We've been expecting you, sir: Lieutenant Colonel Tobin telephoned to say you were on your way. The general will see you at once."

“Thanks,” Larssen said, feeling more draggled than ever in the presence of such all-but-forgotten spit and polish.

That feeling intensified when he went into the house. Major General Patton—he wore two stars on each shoulder of a sheepskin-collared leather jacket—was not only clean-shaven and neat, he even had creases in his trousers. The buttery light of a kerosene lamp left black shadows at the corners of his mouth, in the lines that grooved their way up alongside his nose, and beneath his pale, intense eyes. He had to be getting close to sixty, but Jens would not have cared to take him on.

He ran a hand through his short brush of graying sandy hair, then stabbed a finger out at Larssen. “I risked a radio call on you, mister,” he growled, his raspy voice lightly flavored by the South. “General Marshall told me to ask you what he said to you about the Lizards in Seattle.”

Panic quickly swamped relief that Marshall lived. “Sir, I don’t remember him saying anything about the Lizards in Seattle,” he blurted.

Patton’s fierce expression melted into a grin. “Good thing for you that you don’t. If you did, I’d know you were just another lying son of a bitch. Sit down, son.” As Larssen sank into a chair, the general went on, “Marshall says you’re important, too, though he wouldn’t say how, not even in code. I’ve known General Marshall a lot of years now. He doesn’t use words like *importint* just for show. So who and what the devil are you?”

“Sir, I’m a physicist attached to the Metallurgical Laboratory project at the University of Chicago.” Jens saw that didn’t mean anything to Patton. He amplified: “Even before the Lizards came, we were working to build a uranium weapon—an atomic bomb—for the United States.”

“Lord,” Patton said softly. “No, General Marshall wasn’t kidding, was he?” His laugh could have sprung from the throat of a much younger man. “Well, Mr. Larssen—no, you’d be Dr. Larssen, wouldn’t you?—if you want to get back to Chicago, you’ve come to the right place, by God.”

“Sir?”

“We are going to grab the Lizards by the nose and kick ’em in the ass,” Patton said with relish. “Come over here to the table and have a look at this map.”

Larssen came and had a look. The thumbtack-impaled map had come from an old *National Geographic*. “We’re here,” Patton said, pointing. Larssen nodded. Patton went on, “I’ve got Second Armored here, other assets, infantry, air support. And up *here*”—his finger moved to an area west of Madison, Wisconsin—“is General Omar Bradley with even more than I’ve got. Now all we’re doing is waiting for a good, nasty blizzard.”

“Sir?” Jens said again.

“We’ve found the Lizards don’t like fighting in winter conditions, not even a little bit.” Patton snorted. “Like any pansies, they wilt when it’s cold. The bad weather’ll help keep their aircraft on the ground. When the snow flies, my forces move northwest while Bradley comes southeast. God willing, we join hands somewhere not far from

Bloomington, Illinois, and put the spearhead of the Lizard forces attacking Chicago in a pocket—a *Kessel*, the Nazis were calling it in Russia.”

He shaped the movements of the two American forces with his hands, made Larssen see them, too. A real chance to hit back at the invaders from outer space...that made Jens catch fire, too. But a lot of people, all over the world, had tried to hurt the Lizards. Not many had much luck. “Sir, I’m no soldier and I don’t pretend to be one, but—can we really pull this off?”

“It’s a gamble,” Patton admitted. “But if we don’t, the United States is washed up, because we won’t get another chance to make troop concentrations like these. And I refuse to believe my country is washed up. We’ll be confused and scared in the attack, I don’t doubt it for a second, but the enemy’ll be more confused and scared than we are, because we’ll be taking the fight to him, not the other way round.”

A gamble. A chance. Larssen slowly nodded. A real victory against the Lizards would lift morale around the world. A defeat...well, humanity had known a lot of defeats. Why should one more be noticed?

Patton said, “You’ll have to stay here now, till the attack goes in. We can’t let you head through Lizard-held territory, not knowing what you do.”

“Why not? Their truth drug doesn’t work,” Larssen said.

“Dr. Larssen, you are a gentle soul and have led what is, I fear, a sheltered life,” Patton answered. “There are methods far more basic than drugs for extracting truth from a man. I’m sorry, sir, but I cannot afford the risk. In any case, hard fighting will start soon. You’ll be far safer with us than traveling on your own.”

Jens wasn’t sure about that, either. Trucks and tanks were far more likely to draw more fire than a lone man on a bicycle—or, now, afoot. But he was in no position to argue the point. Besides, just then an orderly brought in a tray with a roasted chicken and several baked potatoes and a bottle of wine along with it.

“You’ll take supper with me?” Patton asked.

“Yes, thank you.” Larssen had, all he could do not to grab the savory, golden-brown chicken and tear at it like a starving wolf. After cans in the church and a fast but hungry trip across Indiana, it looked wonderful beyond belief.

A little later, sucking the last scrap of meat off a drumstick, he said, “All I want to do is get back to my work, get back to my wife. Lord, she probably thinks I’m dead by now.” For that matter, he could only hope Barbara was still alive.

“Yes, I miss my Beatrice, too,” Patton said with a heavy sigh. He lifted his wineglass. “To snow, Dr. Larssen.”

“To snow,” Jens said. The glasses clinked together.

Moishe Russie had gone into the Lizards’ broadcasting studio a good many times before, but never at gunpoint. Zolraag stood beside the table with the microphone. “You

may be doing this broadcast under duress, *Herr* Russie,” the Lizard governor said, “but you *will* do it.” He added the emphatic cough.

“You’ve brought me here, anyhow.” Russie was amazed at how little fear he felt. Almost three years in the ghetto under German torment had been a sort of dress rehearsal for death. Now that the time had come...He murmured in Hebrew: “*Sh’ma yisroyal, adonai elohaynu adonai ekhod.*” He didn’t want to die with the prayer unspoken.

Zolraag said, “You would not have even this last chance to make yourself useful in our eyes if you had not shown you. truly knew nothing about the disappearance of your mate and hatchling.”

“So you have told me, Excellency.” Russie made his voice submissive. Let the governor think he was cowed. Inside, he exulted. Though he didn’t know everything of how Rivka and Reuven had vanished, he knew enough to endanger a lot of people. His tongue twitched at the memory Of the Lizards’ gas jet in action. But in spite of their drug, he’d been able to lie.

Mere human nostrums all too often did much less than what they claimed; as a onetime medical student, he had some feel for how complex the human organism was. He’d feared the Lizards had mastered it, though, especially when he went all dreamy after his dose. Somehow, though, he managed to withhold the truth. He wondered what went into the drug. Even if it didn’t work as advertised, it had promise.

No time to worry about that now. Zolraag said, “Read the script to yourself, *Herr* Russie, then read it aloud for our broadcast. You know the penalty for failure to comply.”

Russie sat down in the chair. It and the table in front of it were the only human-sized pieces of furniture in the room. One of the Lizard guards stepped up behind Russie, set the muzzle of his rifle against the back of the Jew’s head. Zolraag wasn’t playing games, not any more.

Moishe wondered who had typed—and probably written—the script. Some poor human, accommodating himself to the new masters as best he could. So many Poles, even so many Jews, had accommodated themselves to the Nazis as best they could...so why not to the Lizards as well?

The words were what he’d expected: sycophantic praise for the aliens and for everything they did, including the destruction of Washington. The Lizard studio engineer looked at a chronograph, spoke first in his own language and then in German:

“Quiet, all—we begin. *Herr* Russie, you speak.”

Russie whispered the *Sh’ma* to himself one last time, bent low over the microphone. He took a deep breath, made sure he spoke clearly: “This is Moishe Russie. Because of illness and other personal reasons, I have not broadcast in some time.” That much was on the paper in front of him. What came next was not: “I doubt I shall broadcast ever again.”

Zolraag spoke German well enough to realize he’d deviated from the script. He waited

for the bullet to crash through his skull. He wouldn't hear it; he hoped he wouldn't feel it. It would disrupt the program, by God! But the Lizard governor gave no sign he noticed anything wrong. The bullet did not come.

Russie went on, "I have been told to sing the praises of the Race's destruction of Washington to point out to all mankind that the Americans had it coming because of their stubborn and foolish resistance, that they should have surrendered. All these things are lies."

Again he waited for some reaction from Zolraag, for the bullet that would blow his head all over the studio. Zolraag just stood there listening. Russie plowed ahead, squeezing as much as he could from the Lizard's strange forbearance: "I told the truth when I said what the Germans did in Warsaw. I am far from sorry they are gone. To us, the Jews of Warsaw, the Race came as liberators. But they seek to enslave all men. What they did in Washington proves this, for any who still need proof. Fight hard, that we may be free. Better that than subjection forever. Good-bye and good luck."

The silence in the studio lasted more than a minute after he stopped. Then Zolraag said, "Thank you, *Herr* Russie. That will be all."

"But ..." Having prepared himself for martyrdom, Moishe felt almost cheated at failing to attain it. "What I said, what I told the world ..."

"I recorded, *Herr* Russie," the Lizard engineer said. "Go out tomorrow; your regular time."

"Oh," Moishe said in a hollow voice. Of course the broadcast would not go out tomorrow. Once the Lizards listened to it carefully, really understood it, they'd hear the sabotage he'd tried to commit. The shadow of death had not lifted from him. He would just have to wear it a little longer.

In a way, it might have been better had the Lizards shot him now. That would have been quick. Given time to reflect, they might come up with a more ingenious end for him. He shivered. He'd overcome fear once, to say what he'd said. He hoped he could nerve himself to do it again, but feared the second time would be harder."

"Take him away," Zobaag said in his own language. The Lizard guards led Moishe out to one of their vehicles parked outside the studio. As they always did, they hissed and-complained about the few meters of frigid cold they had to traverse between the bake ovens they thought comfortable.

Back in his flat, Russie pattered around, read the Bible and the apocryphal tale of the Maccabees, cooked himself supper with bachelor inefficiency. He, did his best to sleep and eventually succeeded. In the mornmg he heated up some of the potatoes he hadn't finished the night before. It-wasn't much of a last meal for *a* condemned man, but he lacked the energy to fix anything finer.

A few minutes in front of the appointed hour he turned on the shortwave set. He'd never listened to himself before; all his previous broadcasts had gone out live. He wondered why the Lizards chose to alter the pattern this time.



Music—a martial fanfare. Then a recorded tag: “Here is free Radio Warsaw!” He’d liked that, back when the city was freshly out from under the Nazis’ bootheels. Now it seemed-sadly ironic.

“This is Moishe Russie. Because of illness and other personal reasons, I have not broadcast in some time.” Was that voice really his? He supposed it was, but he didn’t sound the way he did when he listened to himself from inside, so to speak.

He dropped that thought as he listened to himself go on: “I sing the praises of the Race’s destruction of Washington. I point out to all mankind that the Americans had it coming because of their stubborn and foolish resistance. They should have surrendered. For any who still need proof, better subjection forever than to fight hard, that we may be free. What the Race did to Washington proves this. Good-bye and good luck.”

Russie stared in blank dismay at the speaker of the shortwave radio. In his mind’s eye, he saw Zolraag’s mouth falling open in a hearty Lizard guffaw. Zolraag had tricked him. He’d been ready to give up his life, but not to live on to be used to another’s purpose. Suddenly he understood why rape was called a fate worse than death. Had his words not been raped, employed in a way he would have died to prevent?

Distantly, abstractly, he wondered how the Lizards had managed their perversion of what he’d said. Whatever recording and editing technology they’d used was far ahead of anything men could boast. And so they’d threatened him with what seemed a sure and grisly end, let him make his defiant cry for liberty, and then not only smothered that cry but held up the surgically altered corpse to the world and pretended it had life. As far as the rest of mankind could tell, he was a worse collaborator now than ever before.

Rage ripped through him. He was not used to feeling anything so raw; it left him giddy and light-headed, as if he’d drunk too much plum brandy at Purim. The shortwave set brayed on—more propaganda, this time in Polish. Had the fellow talking really said these words in this order? Who could tell?

Moishe lifted the radio over his head. It fit in the palm of one hand and weighed hardly anything—it was of Lizard make, a gift from Zolraag. But even had it been a heavy, bulky human-made set, fury would have fueled his strength and let him treat it the same way. He smashed it to the floor as hard as, he could.

“The lies the Pole was squawking died in midsyllable. Bits of metal and glass and stuff that looked like Bakeite but wasn’t flew in every direction. Russie trampled the carcass of the radio, ground it into the carpet, turned it into a forlorn puddle of fragments that bore no resemblance to what it had been a moment before.

“Not half what the *mamzrim* did to me,” he muttered.

He threw on his long black coat, stormed out of his flat, slammed the door behind him. Three people along the corridor poked their heads out their doorways to see who’d just had a fight with his wife. “*Reb* Moishe!” a woman exclaimed. He stomped past without even looking her way.

Lizard guards still stood at the entrance to the block of flats. Moishe stomped past

them, too, though he wanted to snatch one of their rifles and drop them both bleeding to the sidewalk. He knew just what the muzzle of a Lizard rifle felt like, jammed against the curly hair at the back of his head. What would it be like to hold one in his arms, have it buck as he squeezed the trigger? He didn't know, but he wanted to find out.

Halfway down the block he stopped in his tracks "*Gevalt!*" he exclaimed, deeply shocked. "Am I turning into a soldier?"

The prospect was anything but appetizing. As a medical student, he knew too well how easy a human being was to damage, how hard to repair. In the German siege of Warsaw and since, he'd seen that proved too many times, too many horrible ways. And now he wanted to become a destroyer himself?

He did.

His feet figured it out before the rest of him knew. He found himself on the way to the headquarters of Mordechai Anielewicz before he consciously realized where he was going.

A light snowfall swirled through the air. Not many people were on the streets. Every so often, one of them would nod to him from beneath a black felt fedora like his own or a Russian-style fur cap. He braced himself for shouts of hatred, but none came. If only the rest of the world paid as little attention to his broadcast as the Jews of Warsaw!

Here came someone striding briskly toward him. Who? His spectacles didn't help enough to let him be sure. His eyes had grown weaker lately; what had suited them in 1939 wasn't good enough any more. He scowled. He'd been shortsighted a lot of different ways.

Whoever it was, the fellow waved vigorously at him. He recognized the motion if not the man. Fear flooded through him. While he'd gone looking for Mordechai Anielewicz, Anielewicz was looking for him too. Which meant Anielewicz if no one else hereabouts, had heard him on the radio. Which meant the fighting leader without a doubt had blood in his eye.

Which he did. "*Reb* Moishe, are you *meshuggeh?*" he yelled. "I thought you weren't going to turn into the Lizards' *tukhus-lekher.*"

The Lizards' *tukhus-lekher*. That was what it had come to. Mortification almost gagged Moishe. "I haven't. As God is my witness, I haven't," he choked out.

"What do you mean, you haven't?" Anielewicz said, still loudly. "With my own ears I heard you." He looked to right and left, lowered his voice. "Was it for this we made your wife and little boy disappear? So you could say what-the Lizards wanted you to say?"

"But I didn't!" Russie wailed. Anielewicz's face was full of flinty disbelief. Stammering, almost sobbing, Russie told how he had gone into the Lizards' broadcast studio expecting to die, how he'd hoped and intended to give one last *cri de coeur* before he did, and how Zolraag and the Lizards' engineers cheated him out of a death that had meaning. "Do you think I want to be alive, to have my friends call me filthy names on the street?" He took a clumsy, unpracticed swing at Anielewicz.

The Jewish fighting leader easily blocked the blow. He caught Russie's arm, twisted a little. Russie's shoulder creaked like a dead branch about to fall off a tree; fire shot through the joint. He bit back a gasp.

"Sorry." Anielewicz let go at once. "Didn't mean to jerk it quite so hard there. Force of habit. You all right?"

Russie gingerly tested the injured member. "For that, yes. Otherwise—"

"And I'm sorry about that, too," Anielewicz said quickly. "But I heard you with my own ears—how could I not trust my ears? Of course I believe you, *Reb* Moishe; don't even think you need to ask me. You couldn't have guessed the Lizards would do things to a recording. They outfoxed you; it happens. The next question is, how do we get our revenge?"

"Revenge." Moishe tasted the word. Yes, it was right. He hadn't found a name for it himself. "That's what I want."

"I'll tell you something." Mordechai Anielewicz laid a finger alongside his nose., "It may just be taken care of. You haven't played a direct part, but all us Jews owe you a lot of what freedom we have. And if we hadn't been free to move through Poland, none of what I'm talking about would have happened."

"What *are* you talking about?" Russie demanded. "You haven't really said anything."

"No, and I don't intend to, either," Anielewicz answered. "What you don't know, you can't tell, and the Lizards may find better—more painful—ways of asking questions than that *verkakte* drug of theirs. But one fine day before too long, the Lizards may have cause to notice something for which you'll be partly responsible. And if they do, you'll have your revenge, I promise you."

That all sounded very good, and Anielewicz was not in the habit of talking about what he couldn't deliver. Nonetheless... "I want more," Russie said. "I want to hurt the Lizards myself."

"*Reb* Moishe, a soldier you're not," Anielewicz said, not unkindly but very firmly.

"I could learn—"

"No." Now the Jewish fighting leader's voice turned hard. "If you want to fight them, there are ways you can be more valuable than with a gun in your hand. You'd be wasted as a common soldier."

"What, then?"

"You're serious about this." To Moishe's relief, it was not a question. Anielewicz studied him as if trying to figure out how to field-strip some new kind of rifle. "Well, what could you do?" The fighting leader rubbed his chin. "How's this? How would you like to tell the world how much of a liar the Lizards have made you out to be?"

"You could arrange for me a broadcast?" Russie asked eagerly.

"A broadcast, no. Too dangerous." Anielewicz shook his head. "A recording, though, just possibly. Then we might smuggle it out for others to broadcast. That would make

the Lizards blush—if they knew how to blush, that is. Only one trouble—well, more than one, but this you have to think about especially hard: once you make this recording, if you make it, you have to disappear.”

“Yes, I see that. Zolraag would not be pleased with me, would he? But I’d sooner have him angry than laughing as he surely is now.” Russie let his mouth hang open in an imitation of a Lizard chuckle. Then, in a sudden, completely human gesture, he stabbed a finger out at Anielewicz. “Could you arrange for me to vanish into the same place where Rivka and Reuven have gone?”

“I don’t even know where that place is,” Anielewicz reminded him.

“But that’s more of your not knowing so you can’t talk in case you’re interrogated. Don’t tell me you can’t arrange to have me sent there without ever learning directly about that place, because I won’t believe you.”

“Maybe you *should* disappear. You’re getting too cynical and suspicious to make a proper *reb* any more.” But amusement glinted in Anielewicz’s pale eyes. “I won’t say yes to that and I won’t say no.” He wagged his hand back and forth. “For that matter, I don’t even know for certain if I can arrange for you to make this recording, but if you want me to, I’ll try.”

“Try,” Russie said at once. He cocked his head, peered sidelong at the Jewish fighting leader. “I notice you don’t say you’re worried about smuggling the recording out of Warsaw once it’s made.”

“Oh, no.” Anielewicz looked like a cat blowing canary feathers off its nose. “If we make the recording, we’ll get it out. That we can manage. We’ve had practice.”

Ludmila Gorbunova stared at her CO. “But, Comrade Colonel,” she exclaimed, her voice rising to a startled squeak, “why *me*?”

“Because your aircraft is suited to the task, and you are suited to be its pilot,” Colonel Feofan Karpov replied. “The Lizards hack all sorts of aircraft out of the sky in large numbers, but fewer *Kukuruzniks* than any other type. And you, Senior Lieutenant Gorbunova, have flown combat missions against the Lizards since they came, and against the Germans before that. Do you question your own ability?”

“No, Comrade Colonel, by no means,” Ludmila answered. “But the mission you have outlined is not—or should not become, let me say—one involving combat.”

“It should not become such, no,” Karpov agreed. “It will be the easier on account of that, though, not the more difficult. And having a combatproved pilot will increase its chances for success. So—you. Any further questions?”

“No, Comrade Colonel.” *What am I supposed to say?* Ludmila thought.

“Good,” Karpov said. “He is expected to arrive tonight. Make sure your plane is in the best possible operating condition. Lucky you have that German mechanic.”

“Yes, he’s quite skilled.” Ludmila saluted. “I’ll go check out the airplane with him now.”

Pity I can't take him with me."

Back at the revetments, she found Georg Schultz already tinkering with the *Kukuruznik*. "Wire to one of your foot pedals here wasn't as tight as it could have been," he said. "I'll have it fixed in a minute here."

"Thank you; that will help," she answered in German. Speaking it with him every day was improving her own command of the language, though she had the feeling several of the phrases she now used casually around him were unsuited for conversation with people who didn't have greasy hands. Feeling her way for words, she went on, "I want the machine to be as good as it can. I have an important flight tomorrow."

"When isn't a flight important? It's your neck, after all." Schultz checked the feel of the pedal with his foot. He was always checking, always making sure. Just as some men had a feel for horses, he had a feel for machines, and a gift for getting them to do what he wanted. "There. That ought to fix it"

"Good. This one, though, is important for more than just my neck. I'm to go on a courier mission." She knew she should have stopped there, but how important the mission was filled her to overflowing, and she overflowed: "I am ordered to fly the foreign commissar, Comrade Molotov, to Germany for talks with your leaders. I am so proud!"

Schultz's eyes went wide. "Well you might be." After a moment, he added, "I'd better go over this plane from top to bottom. Pretty soon you're going to have to trust it to Russian mechanics again."

The scorn in that should have stung. In fact, it did, but less than it would have before Ludmila saw the obsessive care the German put into maintenance. She just said, "We'll do it together." They checked everything from the bolt that held on the propeller to the screws that attached the tailskid to the fuselage. The brief Russian winter day died while they were in the middle of the job. They worked on by the light of a paraffin lantern. Ludmila trusted the netting overhead to keep the, lantern from betraying them to the Lizards.

Bell above the center horse—the one in shafts—jangling, a *troika* reached the airstrip about the time they were finishing. Ludmila listened to the team approaching the revetment. The Lizards mostly ignored horsedrawn sledges, though they shot up cars and trucks when they could. Anger filled her. More even than the Nazis, the Lizards aimed to rob mankind of the twentieth century.

"Comrade Foreign Commissar!" she said when Molotov came. in to have a look at the airplane that would fly him to Germany.

"Comrade Pilot," he answered with an abrupt nod. He, was shorter and paler than she'd expected, but just as determined-looking. He didn't bat an eye at the sight of the beat-up old U-2. He gave Georg Schultz another of those the-cut jerks of his head. "Comrade Mechanic."

"Good evening, Comrade Foreign Commissar," Schultz said in his bad Russian.

Molotov gave no overt reaction, but hesitated a moment before turning back to Ludmila. “A German?”

“*Da*, Comrade Foreign Commissar,” she said nervously: Russians and Germans might cooperate against the Lizards, but more out of desperation than friendship. She added, “He is skilled at what he does.”

“So.” The word hung ominously in the air. Behind his trademark glasses, Molotov’s eyes were unreadable. But at last he said, “If I can talk with them after they invaded the *rodina*, no reason for those who are here not to be put to good use.”

Lucimila sagged with relief. Schultz did not seem to have followed enough of the conversation to know he’d been in danger. But then, he’d been in danger since the moment he rolled across the Soviet border. Perhaps he’d grown used to it—though Ludmila never had.

“You have the flight plan, Comrade Pilot?” Molotov asked.

“Yes,” Ludmila said, tapping a pocket in her leather flying suit. That made her think of something else. “Comrade Foreign Commissar, your clothing may be warm enough on the ground, but the *Kukuruznik*, as you see, is an airplane with open cockpits. The wind of our motion will be savage...and we will be flying north.”

To get to Germany at all, the little U-2 would have to fly around three sides of a rectangle. The short way, across Poland, lay in the Lizards’ hands. So it would be north past Leningrad, then west through Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, and finally south into Germany. Ludmila hoped the fuel dumps promised on paper would be there in fact. The *Kukuruznik*’s range was only a little better than five hundred kilometers; it would have to refuel a number of times on the journey. On the other hand, if travel arrangements for the foreign commissar of the Soviet Union went awry, the nation was probably doomed.

“Can I draw flying clothes like yours from the commandant of this base?” Molotov asked.

“I am certain Colonel Karpov will be honored to provide you with them, Comrade Foreign Comntissar,” Ludmila said. She was just as certain the colonel would not dare refuse, even if it meant sending one of his pilots out to freeze on the fellow’s next mission.

Molotov left the revetment. Schultz started to laugh. Ludmila turned a questioning eye on him. He said, “A year ago this time, if I’d shot that little hardnosed pigdog, the *Führer* would have stuck the Knight’s Cross, the Swords, and the Diamonds on me—likely kissed me on both cheeks, too. Now I’m helping him. Bloody strange world.” To that Ludmila could only nod.

When the foreign commissar returned half an hour later, he looked as if he’d suddenly gained fifteen kilos. He was bundled into a leather and sheepskin flight suit, boots, and flying helmet, and carried a pair of goggles in his left hand. “Will these fit over my spectacles?” he asked.

“Comrade Foreign Commissar, I don’t know.” Ludmila had never heard of a Red Air Force flier who needed spectacles. “You can try them, though.”

Molotov looked at his wristwatch. Just getting to it under the bulky flight suit was a struggle. “We are due to depart in less than two hours. I trust we shall be punctual.”

“There should be no trouble,” Ludmila said. A lot of the mission would be flown at night to minimize the chance of interception. The only problem with that was the U-2’s aggressively basic navigational gear: compass and airspeed indicator were about it.

As things happened, there was a problem: the little Shvetsov engine didn’t want to turn over when Georg Schultz spun the prop. In the seat in front of Ludmila’s, Molotov clenched his jaw. He said nothing, but she knew he was making mental notes. That chilled her worse than the frigid night air.

But this problem had a solution, borrowed from the British: a Hicks starter, mounted on the front of a battered truck, revolved the propeller shaft fast enough to kick the engine into life. “God-damned sewing machine!” Schultz bawled up to Ludmila, just to see her glare. The acrid stink of the exhaust was perfume in her nostrils.

The U-2 taxied to the end of the airstrip, bumped along the couple of hundred meters of badly smoothed ground as it built up speed—and at the end of one bump, didn’t come back to earth. Ludmila always relished the feeling of leaving the ground. The wind that blasted into her face over and around her little windscreen told her she was really flying.

And tonight she relished taking off for another reason as well. As long as the *Kukuruznik* stayed in the air, she was in charge, not Molotov. That was a heady feeling, like being on the way to drunk. If she did a tight snap roll and flew upside down for a few seconds, she could check how well he’d fastened his safety belt ...

She shook her head. Foolishness, foolishness. If people-had disappeared in the purges of the thirties—and they had, in great carload lots—the German invasion proved there were worse things. Some Soviet citizens had been willing (and *some* Soviet citizens had been eager) to collaborate with the Nazis, but the Germans showed themselves even more brutal than the NKVD.

But now Soviets and Nazis had a common cause, a foe that threatened to crush them both, regardless, even heedless, of ideology. Life, Ludmila thought with profound unoriginality, was very strange.

The biplane droned through the night. Snow-draped fields alternated with black pine forests below. Ludmila stayed as low as she dared: not as low as she would have during the day, for now a swell of ground could be upon her before she knew it was there. Her route swung wide around the Valdai Hills just to cut that risk.

The farther north she flew, the longer the night became, also. It was as if she drew darkness around the aircraft...though winter nights anywhere in the Soviet Union were quite long enough.

Her first assigned refueling stop was between Kalinin and Kashin, on the upper

reaches of the Volga. She buzzed around the area where she thought the airstrip was until her fuel started getting dangerously low. She hoped she wouldn't have to try to put the U-2 down in a field, not with the passenger she was carrying.

Just when she thought she would have to do that—better with power than dead stick—she spied a lantern or electric torch, swung the *Kukuruznik* toward it. More torches came on, briefly, to mark the borders of a landing strip. She brought in the U-2 with gentleness that surprised even herself.

Whatever Molotov thought of the landing, he kept it to himself. He rose stiffly, for which Ludmila could hardly blame him—after four and a half hours in the air, she too had cramps and kinks aplenty.

Ignoring the officer in charge of the airstrip, the foreign commissar stumped off into the darkness. *Looking for a secluded place to piss*, Ludmila guessed: the most nearly human response she'd yet seen from Molotov.

The officer—the collar tabs of his greatcoat were Air Force sky-blue and bore a winged prop and a major's two scarlet rectangles—turned to Ludmila and said, "We are ordered to render you every assistance, Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov."

"Gorbunova, sir," Ludmila corrected, only a little put out: the heavy winter flight suit would have disguised any shape at all.

"Gorbunova—pardon me," the major said, eyebrows rising. "Did I read the despatch wrong, or was it written incorrectly? Well, no matter. If you have been chosen to fly the comrade foreign àommissar, your competence cannot be questioned." His tone of voice said he did question it, but Ludmila let that go. The major went on, more briskly now, "What do you require, Senior Lieutenant?"

"Fuel for the aircraft, oil if necessary, and a mechanical check if you have a mechanic who can do a proper job." Ludmila put first things first (she also wished she could have lashed Georg Schultz to the U-2's fuselage and carried him along). Almost as an afterthought, she added, "Food and someplace warm for me to sleep through the day would be pleasant."

"Would be necessary," Molotov amended as he came back to the *Kukuruznik*. His face remained expressionless, but his voice betrayed more animation; Ludmila wondered how hard he'd been fighting to hold it in. Her own bladder was pretty full, too. Perhaps confirming her thought, the foreign commissar continued, "Tea would also be welcome now." Not before, ran through Ludmila's mind—he would have exploded. She knew that feeling.

The major said, "Comrades, if you will come with me...He led Ludmila and Molotov toward his own dwelling. As they kicked their way through the snow, he bawled orders to his groundcrew. The men ran like wraiths in the predawn darkness, easier to follow by-ear than by eye.

The major's quarters were half-hut, half dug-out cave. A lantern on a board-and-trestle table cast a flickering light over the little chamber. A samovar stood nearby; so did a



spirit stove. Atop the latter was a pot from which rose a heavenly odor.

With every sign of pride, the major ladled out bowls of borscht, thick with cabbage, beets, and meat that might have been veal or just as easily might have been rat. Ludmila didn't care; whatever it was, it was hot and filling. Molotov ate as if he were stoking a machine.

The *major* handed them glasses of tea. It was also hot, but had an odd-taste—a couple of odd tastes, in fact. “Cut with dried herbs and barks, I'm afraid,” the major said apologetically, “and sweetened with honey we found ourselves. Haven't seen any sugar for quite a while.”

“Given the circumstances, it is adequate,” Molotov said: not high praise, but understanding, at any rate.

“Comrade Pilot, you may rest there,” the major said, pointing to a pile of blankets in one corner that evidently served him for a bed. “Comrade Foreign Commissar, for you the men are preparing a cot, which should be here momentarily.”

“Not necessary,” Molotov said. “A blanket or two will also do for me.”

“What?” The major blinked. “Well, as you say, of course. Excuse me, comrades.” He went back out into the cold, returned in a little while with more blankets. “Here you are, Comrade Foreign Commissar.”

“Thank you. Be sure to awaken us at the scheduled time,” Molotov said.

“Oh, yes,” the major promised.

Yawning, Ludmila buried herself in the blankets. They smelled powerfully of their usual user. That didn't bother her, if anything, it was reassuring. She wondered how Molotov, who was used to sleeping softer than with blankets on dirt, would manage here. She fell asleep herself before she found out.

Some indefinite while later, she woke with a start. Was that horrible noise some new Lizard weapon? She stared wildly around the Air Force major's quarters, then started to laugh. Who would have imagined that illustrious Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov, foreign commissar of the USSR and second in the Soviet Union only to the Great Stalin, snored like a buzzsaw? Ludmila pulled the blankets up over her head, which cut the din enough to let her get back to sleep herself.

After more borscht and vile, honey-sweetened tea, the flight resumed. The U-2 droned slowly through the night—an express train could have matched its speed—north and west. Snow-dappled evergreen forests slid by below. Ludmila hugged the ground as tightly as she dared.

Then, without warning, the trees disappeared, to be replaced by a long stretch of unbroken whiteness. “Lake Ladoga,” Ludmila said aloud, pleased at the navigational check the lake gave her. She flew along the southern shore toward Leningrad.

Well before she got to the city, she skimmed low over the lunar landscape of the German and Soviet lines around it. The Lizards had pounded both impartially. Before

they came, though, the heroism and dreadful privations of the defenders of Leningrad, home and heart of the October Revolution, had rung through the Soviet Union. How many thousands, how many hundreds of thousands, starved to death inside the German ring? No one would ever know.

And now she was flying Molotov to confer with the Germans who had subjected Leningrad to such a cruel siege. Intellectually, Ludmila understood the need for that. Emotionally, it remained hard to stomach.

Yet the *Kukuruznik* she flew had been efficiently maintained by a German, and, from what Georg Schultz had said, he and Major Jäger had fought alongside Russians to do something important: either he didn't understand exactly what or he was keeping his mouth shut about that or both. So it could be done. It would have to be done, in fact. But Ludmila did not like it.

As the shore of Lake Ladoga had before, now the Gulf of Finland gave her something to steer by. She began to peer ahead, looking for landing lights: the next field was supposed to be not far from Vyborg.

When Ludmila finally spotted the lights, she bounced the biplane in a good deal more roughly than she had at the last airstrip. The officer who greeted her spoke Russian with an odd accent. That was not unusual in the polyglot Soviet Union, but then she noticed that several of his men wore coalscuttle helmets. "Are you Germans?" she asked, first in Russian and then *auf Deutsch*.

"*Nein*," he answered, though his German sounded better than hers. "We are Finns. Welcome to Viipuri." His smile was not altogether pleasant; the town had passed from Finnish to Soviet hands in the Winter War of 1939-40, but the Finns took it back when they joined the Nazis against the USSR in 1941.

"Can one of your mechanics handle this type of aircraft?" she asked.

With an ironic glint in his eye, he scanned the *Kukuruznik* from one end to the other. "Meaning no disrespect, but I think any twelve-year-old who is handy with tools could work on one of these," he answered. Since he was probably right, Ludmila kept her annoyance to herself.

The Finnish base had better food than Ludmila had tasted in some time. It also seemed cleaner than the ones from which she'd been fighting. She wondered whether that was because the Finns hadn't seen as much action against the Lizards as the Soviets had.

"Partly," the officer who'd greeted her said when she asked. His greatcoat, she noticed once they were inside, was gray, not khaki; it had three narrow bars on the cuffs. She wondered what rank that made him. "And partly, again meaning no disrespect, you may see that other people are often just generally neater about things than you Russians. But never mind that. Would you care to use our *sauna*?" When he saw she didn't understand the Finnish word, he turned it into German: "Steam-bath."

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. Not only was it a chance to get clean, it was a chance to get *warm*. The Finns didn't even leer at her when she went in alone, as Russians would have

done. She wondered how manly they were.

Flying over Finland and then over Sweden, she thought about what the Finnish officer had said. Just looking down at countryside that war had not ravaged was new and different; flying past towns that weren't burned-out ruins took her thoughts back to better days she'd almost forgotten in the midst of combat's urgency.

Even under snow, though, she could see the orderly patterns of fields and fences. Everything was on a smaller scale than in the Soviet Union, and almost toylike in its tiny perfection. She wondered if the Scandinavians were neater than Russians simply because they had so much less land and had to use it more efficiently.

That impression grew stronger in Denmark, where even forest had all but vanished and every square centimeter seemed put to some useful purpose. And then, past Denmark, she flew into Germany.

Germany, she saw at once, had been at war. Though her flight path took her a couple of hundred kilometers west of murdered Berlin, she saw devastation that matched anything she'd come across in the Soviet Union. In fact, first the British and then the Lizards had given Germany a more concentrated beating from the air than the Soviet Union as a whole had received. Town after town had factories, train stations, and residential blocks pounded to ruins.

For that matter, the Lizards were still pounding Germany. When Ludmila heard the roar of their jets, she flew doubly low and slow, as if her U-2 were a tiny gnat buzzing by the floor, too small to be worth noticing.

The Germans were still fighting back, too. Tracers spiderwebbed across the night sky like fireworks. Searchlights stabbed, trying to pin Lizard raiders with their beams. Once or twice, off in the distance, Ludmila heard piston engines racing. So, she thought, *the Luftwaffe still has fighters in the air too.*

As she flew farther south, the land began to rise. Her landing strip the fourth night of her flight, outside a little town called Suilzbach, was in what looked to have been a potato field. A ground crew dragged her plane to cover while a *Luftwaffe* officer drove her and Molotov to town in a horsedrawn wagon. "The Lizards are too likely to shoot at automobiles," he explained apologetically.

She nodded. "It is so with us, too."

"Ah," said the *Luftwaffe* man.

Every so often, *Pravda* or *Izvestia* would describe the atmosphere in diplomatic talks as "correct." Ludmila hadn't quite understood what that meant. Now, seeing the way the Germans treated her and Molotov, she did. They were polite, they were attentive, but they couldn't hide that they wished they didn't have to deal with the Soviets at all. It was mutual, Ludmila thought, at least as far as she was concerned. As for Molotov, he was seldom more than civil to anyone, Russian or German.

Ludmila had to work hard to suppress a yelp of glee at the prospect of sleeping in a real bed for the first time in she couldn't remember how long. Suppress it she did, lest

the Nazis take her for uncultured. She also studiously ignored the *Luftwaffe* officer's hints that he wouldn't mind sleeping in that same bed with her.

To her relief, he didn't get obnoxious about it. He did say, "You will, I hope, forgive me; but I would not recommend trying to fly to Berchtesgaden by night, *Fräulein* Gorbunova."

"My rank is senior lieutenant," Ludmiila answered. "Why would you not recommend this?"

"Flying at night is difficult enough—"

"I have flown a good many night attack missions, both against the Lizards and against you Germans," she said: let him make of that what he would.

His eyes widened, but only momentarily. Then he said, "Maybe so, but those, I dare say, were out on the Russian steppe, not in the mountains." He waited for her response; she nodded, yielding the point. He went on, "The danger is worse in the mountains, not only because of the terrain but also from gusts of wind. Your margin of error would be unacceptably low for a mission of this importance, especially since you will want to stay as low to the ground as you can."

"What do you suggest, then? A flight by day? The Lizards are too likely to shoot me down."

The German said, "I admit this. To protect you as you fly by day, though, we will sortie several squadrons of fighters—not to escort you, for that would attract unwanted attention to your aircraft, but to distract the Lizards from the area through which you will be passing."

Ludmila considered that. Given the inequality between German planes and what the Lizards flew, some pilots would almost certainly be sacrificing their lives to make sure she and Molotov got through to this Berchtesgaden place. She also knew she had no experience in mountain flying. If the Nazis were willing to help her mission so, she decided she had to accept. "Thank you," she said.

"*Heil Hitler!*" the *Luftwaffe* man answered, which did nothing to make her happier about working with Germans.

When she and Molotov went dip-clopping out to the airstrip next morning, she discovered the German ground crew had daubed the U-2's wings and fuselage with splotches of whitewash. One of the fellows in overalls said, "Now you'll look more like snow and rocks."

Soviet winter camouflage was more thoroughly white, but snow drifted more evenly across the steppe than it did in mountains. She didn't know how much the whitewash would help, but supposed it couldn't hurt. The groundcrew man grinned as she thanked him in her accented German.

When she got a good look at the mountains toward which she was flying, she was glad she'd taken the *Luftwaffe* officer's advice and not tried to make the trip by night. The landing field to which she was ordered lay not far outside the village of

Berchtesgaden. When she set the *Kukuruznik* down there, she assumed Hitler's residence lay within the village.

Instead, a long wagon ride up the side of the mountain—Obersalzberg, she learned it was called—followed. Molotov sat staring stonily straight ahead the whole way up. He said nothing much. Whatever went on behind the mask of his face, he kept it there. He glared right through the soldiers at two checkpoints, ignored the barbed wire that ringed the compound.

Hitler's *Berghof*, when the wagon finally reached it, reminded Ludmila of a pleasant little resort house (the view was magnificent) swallowed up by a residence that met the demands of a world leader. Molotov was whisked away into the *Berghof*; Ludmila thought she recognized his German counterpart, von Ribbentrop, from newsreels during the strange couple of years when the Soviet Union and Germany held to their friendship treaty.

She wasn't important enough to be lodged in the *Berghof*. The Germans escorted her over to a guesthouse not far away. As she stood in the splendid lobby, all she could think was how many workers and peasants had had their labor exploited to create it. She was primly certain no one in the classless Soviet Union cared to live in such unnecessary splendor.

Down the staircase came an officer in the natty black uniform and beret of the German panzer formations: a colonel, by the two pips on each braided shoulder strap. On his right breast he wore a large, garish eight-pointed gold star with a swastika in the center. He was lean and perfectly shaved and looked quite at home here close by his *Führer*; just watching his smooth stride made Ludmila feel short, and dumpy and out of place. She swung the knapsack that held her few belongings over one shoulder.

The motion drew the natty colonel's eye. He stopped, stared, then hurried across the parquet floor to her. "Ludmila!" he exclaimed, and went on in fair Russian: "What the devil are you doing here?"

She recognized his voice even if she hadn't known his face. "Heinrich!" she said, trying hard not to pronounce it with an initial g as Russians often did. She was so glad to find someone she knew that, heedless equally of startled looks from her German escorts and, of what Molotov would think when the news got back to him, she gave Jäger a hug he enthusiastically returned. "You've been promoted two grades," she observed. "That's wonderful."

His grin was self-deprecating. "They offered me a choice: lieutenant colonel and the Knight's Cross or colonel and just Hitler's fried egg here." He patted the gaudy medal. "Excuse me, the German Cross in gold. They thought I'd take glory. I took rank. Rank lasts.

"Hitler's fried egg?" Ludmila echoed in delicious amazement. She noticed her escorts were ostentatiously pretending they hadn't noticed that. She shook her head. "My, we'll have a lot to talk about."

“Yes we will.” For a moment Jäger’s face assumed the watchful expression she’d first seen at the Ukrainian *kolkhoz*. Then the smile came back. “Yes, we will,” he repeated. “Quite a lot.”

Atvar stared out at the assembled shiplords. They silently stared back. He tried to gauge their mood before he called the meeting to order. Nothing short of mutiny—maybe not even that—would have surprised him. Well past one of the Race’s years into a campaign expected to be a walkover, no one had yet turned one eye turret, let alone two, toward victory.

The fleetlord decided to confront that head-on: “Assembled males, I know we face new problems almost every day on Tosev 3. Sometimes we are even forced to face old problems over again, as in the Tosevite empire called Italia.”

The shiplord Straha stood, crouched, and waited to be recognized. When Atvar pointed to him, he asked, “How *did* the Deutsche manage to kidnap what’s-his-name—the Big Ugly in charge of Italia—”

“Mussolini,” Atvar supplied.

“Thank you, Exalted Fleetlord. Yes, Mussolini. How did the Deutsche manage to steal him when we shut him up in that castle away from everything after he had surrendered his empire to us?”

“How they learned where he was, we do not know,” Atvar admitted. “They are skilled at such irregular warfare, and I must concede the move has embarrassed us.”

“Embarrassed us? I should say so.” Straha added an emphatic cough. “His radio broadcasts from Deutschland negate much of the value we got from that Big Ugly from Warsaw, the one who spoke so convincingly against the Deutsche.”

“Russie,” Atvar said after a quick glance at a tickler file on the computer screen in front of him. The file also told him something else: “We’d reached the point of diminishing returns with that one in any case. His last statement had to be electronically altered to make it conform to our requirements.”

“The Big Ugliers have not yet adjusted themselves to the idea that the Race will rule over them,” the shiplord Kirel said mournfully.

“And why should they?” Straha retorted, his voice dripping sarcasm. “As far as I can see, they have no reason to. This affair with Mussolini is but one more embarrassment in a long series. Now Italia seethes with sabotage, where before it was among the calmest of the empires under our control”

Feneress, a male of Straha’s faction, chimed in, “Moreover, it lets the Deutsche make a folk hero of this”—he checked his own computer for the name he sought—“this Skorzeny who led the raid, and encourages other Tosevites to try to emulate his feat.”

Kirel started to come to Atvar’s defense, but the fleetlord held up a hand. “What you

say is true, Feneress,” he replied. “For his failure, the male in charge of the Big Ugly Mussolini’s security would normally have found himself liable to severe disciplinary action. As, however, he perished in the Tosevite raid, this has become impracticable.”

The assembled shiplords stirred and murmured among themselves. For the fleetlord to admit failure so frankly was strange and untoward. No wonder they murmured they had to be trying to figure out what Atvar’s concession meant. Did it signal a change in strategy? Did it mean Atvar would resign his post perhaps in favor of Straha? If so, what did that imply for each shiplord?

Atvar raised his hand again. Slowly, the murmurs died away. The fleetlord said, “I did not summon you to the bannership to dwell on failure, assembled shiplords. On the contrary. I summoned you here to outline a course which, I believe, will give us victory.”

The officers stirred and murmured all over again. Some of them, Atvar knew, had begun to despair of victory. Others still thought it could be attained, but the means they wanted to use would leave Tosev 3 a ruin unfit for settlement by the colonization fleet now traveling across interstellar space toward the planet. If he could prove them wrong and still make the Big Ugliers submit, Atvar would be ahead indeed. And he thought he could.

He said, “We have been discomfited by the disturbingly advanced technology the Tosevites have demonstrated. Were it not for those advances—those causes we are still investigating—the conquest of Tosev 3 would have been routine.”

“And we all would have been a lot happier,” Kirel put in. Atvar saw shiplords’ mouths fall open. That they could still laugh was a good sign.

“We have been perhaps slower than we should in appreciating the implications of the Big Ugliers’ technology,” the fleetlord said. “Compared to the Tosevites, the Race is slow. They have used that fact to their advantage against us. But we are also thorough. Compare our Empire, *the* Empire, to the ephemeral makeshift empires and irrational administrative schemes under which they live. And now we have found a flaw in their technology which we hope we can exploit.”

He’d grabbed their attention. By the way they stared hungrily at him, he might have been some powdered ginger in front of a crowd of addicts. (He made himself put that problem out of his mind for now. He had to dwell on advantages, not problems.) He said, “Our vehicles and aircraft are fueled by hydrogen and oxygen produced electrolytically from water with energy from the atomic engines of our starships. Getting all the fuel we need has never been a problem—if Tosev 3 possesses anything in excess, it is water. And, perhaps not surprisingly, we have evaluated the Big Ugliers’ capabilities in terms of our own. This evaluation has proved erroneous.”

The shiplords murmured yet again. High-ranking members of the Race were usually less candid about admitting error, especially when it reflected discredit on them. Atvar would also have been less candid than he was, had the advantage he gained here not outweighed the damage he suffered for acknowledging previous wrong.



“Instead of hydrogen and oxygen, Tosevite aircraft and ground and sea vehicles run on one distillate of petroleum or another,” he said. “This has disadvantages, not least among them the noxious fumes such vehicles emit while operating.”

“That’s true, by the Emperor,” Straha said. “Go into one of the cities that we rule and your nictitating membranes will sizzle from all the garbage in the air.”

“Indeed,” Atvar said. “Pollutants aside, however, our engineers assure me there is no reason for petroleum-based engines to be less efficient than our own. In fact, they may even have certain minor advantages: because their fuels are liquids at ordinary temperatures, they don’t require the extensive insulation around our vehicles’ hydrogen tanks, and thus save weight.”

Kirel said, “Still, it is criminal to waste petroleum by simply burning it when it may be put to so many more advantageous uses.”

“Truth. When the conquest is complete, we shall phase out this profligate technology,” Atvar said. “I might note, however, that our geologists believe Tosev 3 has more petroleum than any of the Empire’s other planets, perhaps more than all three put together, in part due to its anomalously large percentage of water surface area. But this takes us away from the point on account of which I summoned today’s assembly.”

“What is that point?” Three shiplords said it together. In other circumstances, the blunt question would, have come perilously close to insubordination. Now, though, Atvar was willing to forgive it.

“The point, assembled males, is that even on Tosev 3 petroleum is, as the shiplord Kirel said, a precious and relatively uncommon commodity,” the fleetlord answered. “It is not found worldwide. The empire, or rather the not-empire, of Deutschland, for example, has but one primary source of petroleum, that being in the subordinate empire called Romania.” He used a hologram to show the shiplords where Romania lay, and where inside its boundaries sat the underground petroleum pool.

“A question, Exalted Fleetlord?” called Shonar, a male of Kirel’s faction. He waited for Atvar to recognize him, then said, “Shall we be required to occupy the petroleum-producing regions not already under our control? That could prove expensive in terms of both males and munitions.”

“It will not be necessary,” Atvar declared. “In some instances, we need not even attack the areas where petroleum comes from the ground. As I noted before, the Big Ugliers burn not just petroleum in their vehicles, but rather distillates of petroleum. The facilities which produce those distillates are large and prominent. Identify and destroy them and we have destroyed the Tosevites’ ability to resist. Is this clear?”

By the excited hisses and squeaks that came from the assembled shiplords, it was. Atvar wished the Race had found this strategy as soon as the conquest began. Wish as he would, though, he could not blame anyone too severely: Tosev 3 was simply so different from what the Race had expected to find that his technical staff had needed a while to figure out what was important and what wasn’t. Now—he hoped—they had.

“By a year from now,” he said, “Tosev 3 shall be under our claws.” The males in the conference chamber gobbled and hooted. The Race’s applause filled Atvar with a warm glow of pride. He might yet go down in the annals of his people as Atvar the Conqueror, subduer of Tosev 3.

The shiplords took up a chant: “May it be so! May it be so!” At first, Atvar took that as an expression of confident expectation. After a moment, though, he realized it could also have another meaning: if the Race hadn’t conquered the Big Ugliers within the coming year, how much trouble would it face by that year’s end?

Grinding through the air high above the Isle of Wight, George Bagnall thought he could see forever. The day was, for once, brilliantly clear. As the Lancaster wheeled through another of its patrol circuits, the English Channel, France across it, and England were in turn spread out before him like successive examples of the cartographer’s craft.

“Wonder how they ever made maps and got the shapes right back before they could fly over them and *see* the way they were supposed to look,” he said.

In the pilot’s seat beside him, Ken Embry grunted. “I wonder what it looks like to the Lizards. They get up high enough to take in the whole world at a glance.”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” the flight engineer said. “It would be something to see, wouldn’t it?” He was filled with sudden anger that the Lizards had a privilege denied mankind. Under the anger, he realized, lay pure and simple envy.

“We’ll just have to make the best of what we’ve got.” Embry leaned forward against the restraint of his belts, pointed down toward the gray-blue waters of the Channel. “What do you make of that ship, for instance?”

“What do you think I am, a bloody spotter?” But Bagnall leaned forward, too. “It’s a submarine, by God,” he said in surprise. “Submarine on the surface in the Channel...one of ours?”

“I’d bet it is,” Embry said. “Lizards or no Lizards, somehow I don’t think Winnie is dead keen on having U-boats slide past the skirts of the home islands.”

“Can’t blame him for that.” Bagnall took another look. “Westbound,” he observed. “Wonder if it’s carrying something interesting for the Yanks.”

“There’s a thought. Lizards aren’t much when it comes to sea business, are they? I expect a sub’d be all the harder for them to take out.” Embry leaned forward once more himself. “A bit of fun to guess, eh? Most days we’d be all swaddled in cotton batting up here and not, have the sport of it.”

“That’s true enough.” Now Bagnall twisted around in his chair to peer back into the bomb bay—which for some time had housed no bombs. “Most days Goldfarb has a better view of the world than we do. Radar cares nothing for clouds: it peers right through them.”

“So it does,” Embry. said. “On the other band, given the choice of jobs, I’d sooner

peep out through the Perspex on a scene likethis—or even on the usual clouds, come to that—than be stuck in the bowels of the aircraft watching electrons chase themselves.”

“You get no arguments from me,” Bagnall said. “None whatevet But then, I dare say Goldfarb’s a bit of a queer bird all the way around. Fancy spending so long mooning after that barmaid Sylvia, finally getting her, and then throwing her aside bare days later.”

The pilot laughed goatishly. “Maybe she wasn’t as good as he’d hoped.”

“I doubt that.” Bagnall spoke from experience. “Never a dull moment there.”

“I’d have thought as much from her looks, but one can’t always judge by looks, enjoyable as it may be to try.” Embry shrugged. “Well, it’s not my affair, in either the literal or figurative sense of the word, and just as well, too. Speaking of Goldfarb, however ...” He flicked the intercom switch. “Any sign of our scaly little chums, Radarman?”

“No, sir,” Goldfarb said. “Dead quiet here.”

“Dead quiet,” Embry repeated. “Do you know, I quite like the ring of that?”

“Yes, rather,” Bagnall said. “One more mission from which we have some reasonable hope of landing?” The flight engineer chuckled, ‘We’ve been living so long on borrowed time by now that I sometimes entertain hopes we shan’t have to repay it one day.’”

“Disabuse yourselves of those, my friend. The day they took the limit off the number of missions an aircrew could be ordered to fly, they signed our death warrants, and no mistake. The trick lies in evading the inevitable as long as one can.”

“After you got us down safe in France, I refuse to believe anything is impossible,” Bagnall said.

“I was at least as surprised at surviving that as you, believe me: nothing like a bit of luck, what?” Embry laughed. “But if the Lizards choose not to stir about for another couple of hours, I concede we shall have had an easy time of it today. We are orcasionally entitled to one such, don’t you think?”

The Lizards did stay quiet. At the appointed hour, Embry gratefully swung the Lanc back toward Dover. The return descent and landing were so smooth that the pilot said, “Thank you for flying BOAC today,” as the bulky bomber rolled to a stop. No commercial passengers, however, ever deplaned so rapidly as the men who flew with him.

As Bagnall scrambled out of the cockpit and down onto the tarmac, one of the groundcrew men gave him a cheeky grin.

“Ere, you must’ve heard they’ve got the power on again, you’re out an’ ’eadin’ for the barracks so quick.”

“Have they?” The flight engineer stepped up his pace from quick to double-quick. All sorts of delightful visions danced in his head: light by which to read or play cards, an electric fire, a working hotplate on which to brew tea or heat water for a proper shave,

a phonograph that spun...the possibilities seemed to stretch as far as the horizon had up in the Lancaster.

One that had entirely slipped his mind was listening to the BBC. Several weeks had gone by since the barracks last had power while the Beeb was on the air: the Lizards kept plastering the transmitter, trying to silence the human broadcast. Just hearing the newsreader made Bagnall once more feel part of a world larger than the airbase and its environs.

It had a different effect on David Goldfarb. "By God," he said, cocking his head toward the wireless set, "I wish I could talk like that."

Having a pretty fair public-school accent himself, Bagnall took the broadcaster's smooth tones for granted. When it was pointed out to him, though, he could see how they'd rouse jealousy in the heart of one from London's lower middle class: he was no Henry Higgins, but his ear pretty accurately placed Goldfarb.

The BBC man said, "We now present in its entirety a recording recently received in London from underground sources in Poland. The speaker is Mr. Moishe Russie, hitherto familiar to many as an apologist for the Lizards. A translation will follow."

The recording began. Bagnall had a little German, but found it didn't help much; unlike Russie's previous propaganda broadcasts, this one was in Yiddish. The flight engineer wondered if he should ask Goldfarb what Russie was saying. Perhaps not; the Jewish radarman was humiliated at having a quisling for a cousin. Goldfarb plainly had no trouble following Russie without translation. He stared at the wireless set as if he could see his relative there. Every so often, his right fist would come down thump on his thigh.

In the brief moment of silence that followed the end of Russie's statement, the radarman exclaimed, "Lies! I knew it was all lies!"

Before Bagnall could ask what was all lies, the BBC newsreader returned. "That was Mr. Moishe Russie," he said, his voice even more mellow than usual when heard hard on the heels of Yiddish gutturals. "And now, as promised, the translation. Here is our staffer, Mr. Nathan Jacobi."

A brief rustle of papers, then a new voice, just as cultured as the one that had gone before: "Mr. Russie spoke as follows: 'My last broadcast for the Lizards was, a fraud from top to bottom. I was forced to speak with a gun to my head. Even then, the Lizards had to alter my words to force them into the meaning they desired. I categorically condemn their efforts to enslave mankind, and urge all possible resistance. Some may wonder why I ever spoke on their behalf. The answer is simple: their attack on Germany aided my people, whom the Nazis were murdering. When a folk is being slaughtered, even slavery seems a preferable alternative, and an enslaver can be looked upon with gratitude. But the Lizards have proved murderers, too, not just of Jews but of mankind in its entirety. God help each and every one of us find the strength and courage to resist them.'

After more rustlings, the first BBC man came back on the air: “That was Mr. Nathan Jacobi, translating into English Mr. Moishe Russie’s repudiation of recent statements he has made on behalf of the Lizards. This cannot fail to embarrass the alien invaders of our world, who see even their seemingly loyalest associates turn against their vicious and aggressive policies. The prime minister, Mr. Chuithill, has expressed his admiration for the courage required of Mr. Russie in making this repudiation and his hope that Mr. Russie will succeed in escaping the Lizards’ vengeance. In other news—”

David Goldfarb sighed deeply. “Nobody here has any notion of how fine that makes me feel,” he announced to the barracks at large.

“Oh, I think we might,” Ken Embry said. Bagnall had been about to say something along those lines himself, but decided the pilot’s understatement did the job for both of them.

Goldfarb laughed. “The British way of speaking used to drive my father mad. He learned English quick enough after he got over here, but he never has fathomed how people can get along without screaming at each other now and again, whether they’re angry or happy.”

“What do you think we are, a pack of bloody fishwives?” Bagnall did his best to sound deeply offended. The restrained public-school accent didn’t make it any easier.

“I was talking about him, not me,” Goldfarb said. “I can read between the lines, you might say, and I know what you mean. You’re a grand lot of chaps, every bloody one of you.” He laughed again. “And I know that’s more than a proper Englishman ought to say, but who says I’m proper? I wish I could get some leave; it’s been too damned long since I got to go home and shout at my relations.”

*What a bizarre notion*, Bagnall thought. Family ties were all very well, but the aircrew had largely replaced his relatives at the center of his life. Only after a few seconds did he think to wonder whether Goldfarb had something he lacked.

Through his interpreter, Adolf Hitler said, “Good day, *Herr* Foreign Commissar. I hope you slept well? Come in, come in; we have much of which to speak.”

“Thank you, Chancellor.” Vyacheslav Molotov followed Hitler into the small living room which had been part of the German leader’s Berchtesgaden retreat before that was incorporated into the grander *Berghof* surrounding it.

Molotov supposed being ushered into Hitler’s *sanctum sanctorum* was an honor. If so, he would willingly have forgone it. Everything in the room screamed *petit-bourgeois* at him: the overstuffed furniture with its old-German look, the rubber plants, the cactus—good heavens, the place even had a brass canary cage! Stalin would laugh when he heard about that.

Strewn here and there on the chairs and couches were embroidered pillows, most of them decorated with swastikas. Swastika-bedizened knick knacks crowded tables. Even Hitler looked embarrassed at their profusion. “I know they aren’t what you’d call

lovely,” he said, waving at the display, “but the German women make them and send them to me, so I don’t like to throw them away.”

Petit-bourgeois *sentimentality*, too, Molotov thought scornfully. Stalin would also find that funny. The only sentiment Stalin had in him was a healthy regard for his own aggrandizement and that of the Soviet Union.

But the twisted romantic streak made Hitler more dangerous, not less, because it meant he acted in ways that could not be rationally calculated. His invasion of the USSR had sent Stalin into several days of shock before he began rallying Soviet resistance. Compared to German imperialism, that of the British and French was downright genteel.

Now, though, the whole world faced imperialism from aliens whose ancient economic and political systems were joined with a technology more than modern. Molotov had repeatedly gone through the words of Marx and Engels to try to grasp how such an anomaly could be, but without success. What was clear was that advanced capitalist (even fascist) and socialist societies had to do everything in their power to resist being thrown catastrophically backward in their development.

Hitler said, “You may thank General Secretary Stalin for sharing with Germany the possible explosive materials which were obtained by the combined German-Soviet fighting team.”

“I shall do so.” Molotov inclined his head in a precise nod. As well he had long schooled his features to reveal nothing, for they did not show Hitler the consternation he felt. So that damned German tankman had got through after all! That was very bad. Stalin had intended proffering the image of cooperation, not its substance. He would not be pleased.

Hitler went on, “The government of the Soviet Union is to be commended for thinking this explosive too valuable to be flown to Germany and letting it come by the overland route where even you, *Herr* Foreign Commissar, traveled here by air.”

The sarcasm there was enough to raise welts, not least because Molotov loathed flying of any sort and had been ordered by Stalin into the horrible little biplane that brought him to Germany. Pretending everything was serene, Molotov said, “Comrade Stalin solicited the advice of military experts and then followed it. He is of course delighted that your consignment reached you safely by the plan he devised.” A thumping lie, but how. was Hitler supposed to call him on it, especially since the courier had somehow beaten the odds of the journey?

But Hitler found a way: “Please tell *Herr* Stalin also that he would have done better to fly it here, as then we should not have had half of it hijacked by Jews.”

“What’s that?” Molotov said.

“Hijacked by Jews,” Hitler repeated, as if to a backward child. Molotov concealed his irritation in the same way he concealed everything not immediately relevant to the business at hand. Hitler gestured violently; his voice rose to an angry shout. “As the good German major was traversing Poland, he was halted at gunpoint by Jewish

bandits who forced him to divest himself of half the precious treasure he was bringing to German science.”

This was news, and unsettling news, to Molotov. He could not resist a barb in return: “Had you not so tormented the Jews in the states your armies overcame, no doubt they would have been less eager to interfere with the courier.”

“But the Jews are parasites on the body of mankind,” Hitler said earnestly. “They have no culture of their own; the foundations of their situation of living are always taken from those around them. They completely lack the idealistic attitude, the will to contribute to the development of others. Look how they, more than anyone else, have cozied up to the Lizards’ backsides.”

“Look why they have,” Molotov returned. His wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, was of Jewish blood, though he did not think Hitler knew that. “Anyone drowning will grab for a spar, no matter where he finds it.” *So the British joined us in the fight against you*, he thought. Aloud, he went on, “Besides, has not the Lizards’ former chief spokesman among the Polish Jews repudiated them and gone into hiding?”

Hitler waved that aside. “Aliens themselves in Europe, they find their fit place toadying to the worse aliens who now torment us.”

“What do you mean?” Molotov asked sharply. “Have they turned over to the Lizards the explosive metal they took from the courier? If so, I demand that you allow me to communicate with my government immediately.” Stalin would have to know at once that the Lizards knew for certain human beings were working to duplicate their much greater weapons so he could apply yet another layer of secrecy to his project.

“No, not even they were so depraved as that,” Hitler admitted; he sounded reluctant to make any concession, no matter how small.

“Well, what then? Did they keep it for themselves?” Molotov wondered what the Polish Jews would do if they had kept the explosive metal. Would they make a bomb and use it against the Lizards, or would they make one and use it against the *Reich*? That question would have been going through Hitler’s mind, too.

But the German leader shook his head. “They did not keep it, either. They are going to try to smuggle it to the fellow Jews in the United States.” Hitler’s little toothbrush mustache—quivered, as if he’d just smelled something rotten.

Molotov wondered how many of those Jews would have fled to the United States had the Nazis not forced them out of Germany and its allies. The tsars and their pogroms had done the same thing in pre-Communist Russia, and the present Soviet Union was the poorer for their shortsightedness. Molotov was too convinced an atheist to take any religion seriously as far as doctrine, but Jews tended to be both clever and well educated, valuable traits in any nation that aspired to build and grow.

With a scissorslike effort of will, the foreign minister snipped off those irrelevant threads of-thought and returned to the matter at hand. He said, “I need to inform the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of this development.” It

wasn't as urgent as if the Lizards had learned what Stalin was up to, but it was important news. America, after all, not Germany or Britain, was the most powerful capitalist state and so the most likely future opponent of the Soviet Union...assuming such concerns kept their meaning in a world with Lizards in it.

“Arrangements will be made for you to communicate,” Hitler said. “The telegraph through Scandinavia remains fairly reliable and fairly secure.”

“That will have to do,” Molotov said. Fairly reliable he could deal with; nothing could be expected to work perfectly. But fairly secure! The Nazis were bunglers indeed if they tolerated security that was only fair. Inside, where it did not show, the Soviet foreign minister smiled. The Germans had no idea how thoroughly agents of the USSR kept Stalin informed about everything they did.

“The nefarious Jews came close to preventing our brilliant Aryan scientists from having the amount of explosive metal with which they needed to work,” Hitler said. Molotov made a mental note of that; it meant the Americans also probably had a marginal quantity of the material—and it meant the Soviet Union had plenty. Stalin had a right to expect results from his own researchers, then.

But Hitler wasn't thinking about that; what he had in mind was vengeance. “The Lizards must come first,” he said. “I admit this. They are the greatest present danger to mankind. But after them, we shall punish the Jewish traitors who, true to their nature, aligned themselves with the alien against the Aryan essence of true creative humanity.”

His voice rose almost to a screech in that last sentence. Now, abruptly, it turned low, conspiratorial: “And you Russians owe the Poles a little something, eh?”

“What's that?” Molotov said, caught off guard and stalling for time. Even though he needed the interpreter to follow Hitler's words, he could hear the control the German leader had over his tone. That made him a formidable orator—certainly more effective there than Stalin, who was not only pedantic but had never lost his Georgian accent.

“Come, come,” Hitler said impatiently. “You must have heard the Lizards' Polish collaborators going on about the so-called massacre of their officers at Katyn, trying to discredit the Soviet Union in the same way the Jews paint the *Reich* with a big black brush.”

“I do not trouble myself with the Lizards' propaganda broadcasts,” Molotov said, which was true; he had underlings listen to them for him. “As for Katyn, he thought, the Poles had little to fuss about. After the Soviets reannexed the eastern half of Poland (which had, after all, belonged to Russia for more than a century before the chaos of the Revolution broke it loose and let Pilsudski establish his fascist state there), what were they to do with the reactionary officers who had fallen into their hands? Turn them loose and let them foment rebellion? Not likely! By Soviet standards, getting rid of those few thousand unreliaables was but a small purge.

Hitler said, “Both your government and mine have reason to be unhappy with those who dwell in the anomalous territory of Poland. We were wise to divide it between



ourselves once. When the Lizards are dealt with, we can join in punishing the inhabitants of that land to the full extent they deserve.”

“By which you mean with bombs of this explosive metal?” Molotov asked. Hitler nodded. Molotov said, “I cannot view this proposal favorably. Our scientists report the wind spreads poisons from these weapons over an area far broader than the site of the explosion itself. And since the prevailing winds are from west to east, the Soviet Union would be adversely affected by this, devastation, however much the Poles may deserve it.”

“Well, we can discuss it further at another time.” Hitler sounded casual but looked unhappy. Had he expected Molotov to cooperate in devastating his own country? Maybe he had; the Germans had even less use for Russians than they did, for Poles. But Russian scientists and engineers had already shown themselves better than the Nazis expected a great many times.

“No, let us discuss it now,” Molotov said. Hitler looked unhappier yet, as he had back in 1940 when Molotov demanded specifics on the workings of the German-Soviet nonaggression treaty. No wonder he’d looked unhappy then; he was already plotting the Nazi attack on the USSR. What was he plotting now? The Soviet foreign minister repeated, “Let us discuss it now. Let us assume, for example, that we manage to defeat the Lizards completely. What then will be the proper relations, what then will be the proper boundaries between the German *Reich* and the Soviet Union? Both I and General Secretary Stalin await your reply to this question with great interest.”

The interpreter stumbled a couple of times in translating that; perhaps he tried to shade its bluntness. Hitler gave Molotov a baleful stare. His German toadies did not talk to him like that (for that matter, had Molotov talked to Stalin that way, he would have vanished within days, perhaps within minutes).

“If the Lizards are completely defeated, we will then review our relations with the Soviet Union, as with all nations of the world,” the *Führer* answered. “How they are defeated will obviously have a great deal to do with the nature of that review.”

Molotov started to complain that Hitler hadn’t really said anything, but left those words unuttered. The Nazi leader had a point. Who did what to beat the Lizards would play a role in what the world looked like after they were beaten...if they were beaten.

*Not a complaini*, Molotov decided—a *warning*. “You must be aware of one thing,” he told Hitler, who assumed an apprehensive expression, as if a dentist had just announced he needed more work. Molotov went on, “Your earlier remark indicated that you hoped to exploit Soviet ignorance of these explosive-metal bombs. This behavior is intolerable, and makes me understand how and why the Jews of Poland preferred the Lizards’ yoke to yours. We have need of one another now, but Comrade Stalin will never again trust you, as he did after August 1939.”

“I never trusted your pack of Jews and Bolsheviks,” Hitler shouted. “Better to be under the hissing Lizards than the red flag.” His whole body quivered. Molotov braced himself to endure a ranting speech like those that came hissing and popping out of the world’s

shortwave sets. But then, with an almost physical effort of will, Hitler made himself be calm. “Living alongside the red flag, however, may yet be possible. As you say, *Herr* Molotov, we have need of each other.”

“*Da*,” Molotov said. He’d pushed Hitler hard, as Stalin had ordered, and the German still seemed to think cooperation—even if on his own terms wherever possible—a better gamble than any other.

“On one thing I think we can agree,” Hitler persisted: “when all this is done, the map of Europe need no longer be stained by what has been miscalled the nation of Poland.”

“Perhaps not. Its existence has sometimes been inconvenient for the Soviet Union as well as Germany,” Molotov said. “Where would you place the boundary between German and Soviet control? On the line our two states established in 1939?”

Hitler looked pained. *Well he might*, Molotov thought with a frosty smile. The Nazis had overrun Soviet-occupied Poland in the first days of their treacherous attack; their line ran hundreds of kilometers to the east when the Lizards came. But if they were serious about working with the USSR, they would have to pay a price.

“As I said before, precise details can be worked out come the day,” Hitler said. “For now, let me ask again if we agree in principle: first the Lizards, then the *Untemenschen* between us?”

“In principle, yes,” Molotov said, “but as with all principles, details of implementation are critical. I might also note in passing—speaking of principles—that in times past German propaganda has frequently identified the people and Communist Party of the USSR as subhuman. This produces yet another difficulty in harmonious relations between our two nations.”

“When we announce that you and I have conferred, we shall make no such statements,” Hitler assured him. “You and I both know that what one advances for purposes of propaganda is often irrelevant to one’s actual beliefs.”

“That is certainly true,” Molotov said. The example that flashed through his mind was all the pro-German material his own government had pumped out in the year and ten months before June 22, 1941. The converse also applied, but he had no doubts about where the Nazis’ sincere feelings lay.

Hitler said, “You will of course take lunch with me.”

“Thank you,” Molotov said resignedly. The meal proved as abstemious as he’d expected: beef broth, a dry breast of pheasant (Hitler did not touch his portion), and a salad. The *Führer* kept his personal life simple. That did not, however, make him any more comfortable to deal with.”

“I haven’t ridden on a hay wagon, since I got off the farm,” Sam Yeager said as the wagon in question rolled west on U.S. 10 into the outskirts of Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. “And I haven’t been through here since—was it ’27? ’28? something like that—when I

was in the Northern League and we'd swing through on the way from Fargo to Duluth."

"Duluss I know, for we get off horrible boat thing there," said Ristin, who huddled in the wagon beside him, "but what is—Fargo?" The Lizard POW made the name sound like a Bronx cheer.

"Medium-sized town, maybe fifty miles west of where we are," Yeager' answered.

Barbara Larssen rode in the wagon, too, though she sat as far away from him as she could. Still, her voice was casual as she asked, "Is there any place in the United States you haven't been, one time: or another?"

"I haven't been up through the Northeast much—New York, New England. The towns there, they either belong to the International League or the bigs, and I never made it there." Yeager spoke without bitterness, simply stating a fact.

Barbara nodded. Yeager cautiously watched her. After those frenzied couple of minutes in her cabin on the *Caledonia*, he hadn't touched her, not even to help her in or out of a wagon. She hadn't spoken to him at all the first three days they were on the ship, and only in monosyllables the fourth. But since they'd unloaded at Duluth and started the slow plod west, she'd traveled in the same part of the wagon convoy as he did, and the last couple of days in the same wagon. Yesterday she'd talked more with Ullhass and Ristin than with him, but today everything seemed—well, not quite all right, but at least not too bad.

He looked around. The low, rolling hills were white with snow; it also covered the ice that sealed northern Minnesota's countless lakes. "It's not like this in summer," he said. "Everything's smooth and green, and the lakes sparkle like diamonds when the sun hits them at the right angle. The fishing is good around these parts—walleyes, pike, pickerel. I hear they fish here in the wintertime, too, cut holes in the ice and drop a line down. I don't see much sport in going out and freezing when you don't have to, myself."

"So much water," Ullhass said, turning one eye turret to the left and the other to the right. "It seems not natural."

"It seems not natural to me, too," Barbara said, "I'm from California, and the idea of fresh water just lying around all over the place strikes me as very strange. The ocean is all right, but fresh water? Forget it."

"Ocean is not natural, too," Ullhass insisted. "Have seen pictures of Tosev 3—this world—from—what do you say—outer space, yes? Looks all water, sometimes. Looks wrong." He emphasized the last word with the emphatic cough.

"Seeing Earth from space," Yeager said dreamily. How long would it have been before men managed that? In his lifetime? Maybe.

On the north shore of Detroit Lake, a little south of the actual town of Detroit Lakes, stood a tourist camp with cabins and picnic benches and a couple of bigger resort hotels, all looking much forlorn half a year out of the season for which they were built. "This place just buzzes in July," Yeager said. "They have themselves a summer carnival that won't quit, with floats and swimming and diving, races for canoes, races for speedboats,

bathing beauties—”

“Yes, you’d like that,” Barbara murmured.

Sam’s ears got hot, but he gamely went on with what he’d been about to say: “—and all the beer a man could drink, even though it was still Prohibition when I went through here. I don’t know if they brought it down from Canada or brewed it themselves, but the whole team got blitzed—’course, we didn’t call it that back then. Good thing the road back to Fargo ran straight and flat, or the bus driver would’ve killed us all, I expect.”

Though the cabins were intended for summer use, several of them were open now, with wagons pulled up alongside. Barbara pointed. “Some of those aren’t from our convoy; they’re in the group that came by way of Highway 34.”

“Good to see they’ve made it here,” Yeager said. The refugees from the Met Lab hadn’t traveled west across Minnesota all together, for fear such a large wagon train would bring Lizard aircraft down on them. In some places, though, the roads came together. Detroit Lakes was a scheduled layover point.

The wagon driver looked back from his team of plodding horses and said, “Look at all the firewood the people round about here got chopped for us. It’s like, if they’d known we were coming, they’d’ve baked a cake.”

When he got down from the wagon, Yeager discovered the locals *had* baked a cake. In fact, they’d baked a lot of cakes—though some, he noted, were made from potato flour, and none had any frosting. But such details were soon lost in a great profusion of eggs and turkey, steaks and fried chickens, legs of lamb...he lost track of what he was eating as he stuffed himself. “After so long living out of tin cans in Chicago, I almost forgot they made spreads like this,” he said to a Detroit Lakes man who carried around yet another platter of drumsticks.

“We’ve got more than we know what to do with, when it comes to livestock,” the fellow answered. “We used to ship all the way to the East Coast before the damned Lizards came. Now everything’s just bottled up here. We’ll run short of feed before too long, and have to really start slaughtering, but for now we’re still fat. Happy to share with you folks. It’s a Christian thing to do...even for those critters.”

With undisguised curiosity, the local watched Ristin and Ullhass eat. The Lizards had manners, though not identical to those of Earthlings. Their technique for eating a drumstick was to stab it with a fork, hold it up to their snouts, and then nibble off bits. Every so often, their forked tongues would come out to clean grease off their hard, immobile lips.

Wagons kept coming into Detroit City every fifteen or twenty minutes; they’d been widely spread out to minimize damage from any air strikes that did descend on them (so far, none had, for which Yeager was heartily grateful—coming under air attack once was a thousand times too many). The natives greeted each one as if it held the Prodigal Son.

When shelters were assigned, Yeager found himself with a double cabin that had been

altered in advance for use by him and his alien charges. Each of the two rooms had its own wood-burning stove and a bountiful supply of fuel—by now, Ullhass and Ristin knew how to keep a fire going. The windows on the Lizards' side had boards nailed across them to prevent escape (though Yeager was willing to bet they wouldn't have tried to run away from their heater). The connecting door between the rooms opened only from his side.

He got Ullhass and Ristin settled for the evening, then went back to his own half of the cabin. It wasn't luxuriously furnished. a table with a kerosene lantern, clothes tree, slop bucket (better that, he thought, than going to an outhouse in the middle of the night—it'd probably freeze right off), cot piled high with extra blankets. *So it isn't the Biltmore*, he thought. *It'll do.*

He sat down on the cot. He wished he had something to read—an *Astounding*, by choice. He wondered what had happened to *Astounding* since the Lizards came; the last issue he'd seen was the one he'd been reading the day the train down from Madison got shot up. But science fiction wouldn't be the same now that real live bug-eyed (or at least chameleoneyed) monsters were loose on Earth and bent on conquest.

He bent down to untie his shoes, the only item of clothing he intended to take off tonight. He'd grown so used to sleeping in his uniform to stay warm that doing anything else was starting to seem unnatural.

He'd just grabbed a shoelace when someone scratched at the door. "Who's that?" Yeager wondered out loud. It had to be something to do with the Lizards, he thought, but whatever it was, couldn't it wait till morning? The scratching came again. Evidently it couldn't. Muttering under his breath, he got up and opened the door. "Oh," he said. It wasn't anything to do with the Lizards. It was Barbara Larssen.

"May I come in?" she asked.

"Oh," he said again, and then, "Sure. You'd better, in fact, or all the heat will get out."

There was no place to sit but the cot, so that was where she sat. After what had happened on the *Caledonia* and the way she'd acted since, Yeager didn't know if he ought to sit down beside her. With the instincts of a man who automatically moved back a few steps to prevent the extra-base hit in the late innings, he decided to play safe. He paced back and forth in front of the stove.

Barbara watched him for a few seconds, then said, "It's all right, Sam. I don't think you're going to molest me. That's what I wanted to talk about with you, anyway."

Yeager perched cautiously near the head of the cot, at the opposite end from Barbara. "What is there to talk about?" he said. "It was just one of those crazy things that happens sometimes. if you want to pretend it never did—" He started to finish with *that's all right*. But it wasn't, not quite. He tried a different phrase: "You can." That was better.

"No. I owe you an apology." She wasn't looking at him; she was looking at the worn, grayish-yellow boards of the floor. "I shouldn't have treated you the way I did

afterward. I'm sorry. It's just that after we—did it, I really realized Jens is, is dead, he has to be dead, and that all came down on me at once. I am sorry." She covered her face with her hands. After a few seconds, he realized she was crying.

He slid down the cot toward her, put a hesitant hand on her shoulder. She stiffened at his touch, but then spun half around and buried her face against his chest. His arms could hardly help folding around her. "It's okay," he said, not knowing whether it was okay or not, not even knowing whether she heard him or not. "It's okay."

After a while, her sobs subsided to hiccups. She pushed herself away from him, then reached into her purse and dabbed at herself with a hanky. She ruefully shook her head. "I must look like hell."

Sam considered that. Tears still glistened on her cheeks and brimmed in her eyes. She wasn't wearing any mascara or shadow to streak and run. *if* her face was puffy from crying, it didn't show in the lantern light. But even if it had, so what? "Barbara, you, look real good to me," he said slowly. "I've thought so for a long time."

"Have you?" she said. "You didn't really let on, not until—"

"Wasn't my place to," he answered, and stopped there.

"Not as long as there was any hope Jens was still alive, you mean," she said, filling it in for him. He nodded. Her face twisted, but she forced it back to steadiness. "You're a gentleman, Sam, do you know?"

"Me? I don't know anything about that. All I know is—" He stopped again. What had started to come out of his mouth was, *All I know is baseball, and I've spun my wheels there for too damn many years*. That was true, but it wasn't what Barbara needed to hear right now. He gave another try: "All I know is, I'll try to be good for you if that's what you want me to do."

"Yes, that's what I want," she said seriously. "Times like these, nobody can get through by himself. If we don't help each other, hold onto each other, what's the use of anything?"

"You've got me." He'd been on the road by himself for a lot of years. But he hadn't really been alone: he'd always had the team, the pennant race, the hope (though that had faded) of moving up—substitutes for family, goal, and dreams.

He shook his head. No matter how deeply baseball had dug its claws into his soul, this was not the time to be thinking about it. Still wary, still a little unsure, he put his arms around Barbara again. She looked at the floor and let out such a long sigh, he almost let go. But then she shook her head; he had a pretty good idea what she was telling herself to forget. She tilted her face up to his.

Later, he asked, "Do you want me to blow out the lamp?"

"Whichever way you'd like," she answered. She was probably less shy about undressing with it burning than he was; he reminded himself she was used to being with a man. They got under the covers together, not for modesty but for warmth.

Later still, after they'd warmed themselves enough to kick most of the blankets onto the floor, they lay with their arms wrapped around each other. The cot was so narrow it gave them little choice about that. Yeager ran a hand down Barbara's back, learning the shape and feel of her. There hadn't been time for that aboard the *Caledonia*; there hadn't been time for anything except raw, driving lust. He'd never known anything to match that, maybe not even the night he lost his cherry, but this was pretty fine, too. It felt somehow more certain, as if he could be sure it would last.

Barbara's breasts slid against his chest as she leaned up on one elbow. She lay between him and the lamp, so her face was full of shadow. When she spoke, though, her words weren't quite what he thought of as romantic: "Do you want to see if you can buy some rubbers tomorrow, Sam? This place seems in good shape; the drugstore may still have a supply."

"Uh, okay," he said, taken aback. She was indeed used to being with a man, he thought. He did his best to sound matter-of-fact as he went on, "Probably a good idea."

"Certainly a good idea," she corrected. "We're all right about the first time—I know—and I don't mind taking a chance now and again, but if we're going to be making love a lot, we'd better be careful. I don't want to be expecting going cross-country in a wagon train."

"I don't blame you," he said. "I'll try and find some. Uh—what happens if I don't?" He wished he hadn't said that. It would make her think he only wanted to lay her. He did want to lay her, but he'd learned you seldom got anywhere treating a woman like a piece of meat, especially not a woman like this, who'd been married to a physicist and had plenty of brains herself.

He was in luck—she didn't get mad. Her hand wandered now, or rather moved, for she knew where it was, as going. It closed on him. "if you don't," she said, "we'll just have to figure out something else to do." She squeezed gently.

He couldn't decide whether he wanted some Detroit Lakes drugstore to have rubbers or not.

Behind Mutt Daniels, the Preemption House was burning. His heart felt like breaking for several reasons. It was always sad to see history go up in smoke, and the two-story Greek Revival frame building had been one of Naperville, Illinois', prides since 1834. More immediately, it was far from the only burning building in Naperville. Mutt didn't see how the Army could hold the town—and there wasn't a hell of a lot behind Naperville but Chicago. itself.

And more immediately still, the Preemption House had been Naperville's leading saloon. Daniels hadn't been in town long, but he'd managed to liberate a fifth of good bourbon. He wore three stripes on his sleeves these days; just as kids had looked to him on how to be ballplayers, now he had to show them how to be soldiers. These days he borrowed his precepts from Sergeant Schneider instead of his own old managers.

Every half a minute or so, another liquor bottle inside the Preemption House would cook off, like a round inside a burning tank. Looking back, Mutt saw little blue alcohol flames flickering among the big lusty red ones from the burning timbers. He sighed and said, "Hell of a waste."

"You bet, Sarge," said the private beside him, a little four-eyed fellow named Kevin Donlan, who, by his looks, would probably start shaving one day fairly soon. Donlan went on, "That building must be more than a hundred years old."

Daniels sighed again. "I wasn't thinkin' so much about the building."

A whistling roar in the sky, growing fast, made both men dive for the nearest trench. The shell went off above ground level fragments hissed through the air. So did other things that pattered and bounced off the hard ground like hailstones.

"You gotta watch where you put your feet now, son," Daniels said. "That bastard just spit out a bunch o' little bombs or mines or whatever you want to call 'em. First saw those out around Shabbona. You step on one, you'll walk like Peg-Leg Pete in the, Disney cartoons the rest of your days."

"More shells rained down; more of the little rolling mines scattered from them. A couple went off with short, unimpressive cracks, hardly louder than the screams that followed them, "They keep throwin' those at us, *we ain't gonna be able to move around at all, Sergeant Daniels,*" Donlan said.

"That's the idea, son," Mutt said dryly. "They pound on us for a while, freeze us in place like this, then they bring in the tanks and take the ground away from us. If they had more tanks, they'd've finished kickin' our butts a long time ago."

Donlan-hadn't seen close-up action yet, he'd joined the squad during the retreat from Aurora. He said, "How can those things beat on us like this? They ain't even human."

"One of the things you better understand right quick, kid, is that a bullet or a shell, it don't care who shot it or who gets in the way," Daniels said. "Besides, the Lizards got plenty o' balls of their own. I know the radio keeps callin' 'em 'push-button soldiers' to make it sound like all their gadgets is what's whuppin' us and keep the civilians cheerful, but don't let anybody tell you they can't fight."

The artillery barrage went on and on. Mutt endured it, as he'd endured similar poundings in France. In a way, France had been worse. Each of the Lizards' shells was a lot more deadly than the ones the *Boches* had thrown, but the Germans had thrown a *lot* of shells, so it sometimes seemed whole steel mills were falling out of the sky on top of the American trenches. Men would go mad from that—shell shock, they called it. This bombardment was more likely to kill you, but it probably wouldn't drive you nuts.

Through a pause in the shelling, Daniels heard running feet behind him. He swung around with his tommy gun—maybe the Lizards had used their whirligig flying machines to land troops behind human lines again.

But it wasn't a Lizard: it was a gray-haired colored fellow in blue jeans and a beat-up overcoat running along Chicago Avenue with a big wicker basket under one arm. A



couple of shells burst perilously close to him. He yelped and jumped into the trench with Daniels and Donlan.

Mutt looked at him. “Boy, you are one crazy nigger, runnin’ around in the open with that shit fallin’ all around you.”

He didn’t mean anything particularly bad by his words; in Mississippi, he was used to talking to Negroes that way. But this wasn’t Mississippi, and the colored man glared at him before answering, “I’m not a boy and I’m not a nigger, but I guess maybe I am crazy if I thought I could bring some soldiers fried chicken without getting myself called names.”

Mutt opened his mouth, closed it again. He didn’t know what to do. He’d hardly ever had a Negro talk back to him, not even up here in the North. Smart Negroes knew their place...but a smart Negro wouldn’t have braved shellfire to bring him food. *Braved* was the word, too; Daniels didn’t want to be anywhere but here under cover.

“I think maybe I’ll shut the fuck up,” he remarked to nobody in particular. He started to address the black man directly, but found himself brought up short—what did he call him? *Boy* wouldn’t do it, and *Uncle* wasn’t likely to improve matters, either. He couldn’t bring himself to say *Mister*. He tried something else: “Friend, I do thank you.”

“I’m no friend of yours,” the Negro said. He might have added a couple of choice phrases himself, but he had an overcoat and his basket, of chicken to set against Daniels’ stripes and tommy gun. And Mutt had, after a fashion, apologized. The colored man sighed and shook his head. “What the hell’s the use? Here, come on, feed yourselves.”

The chicken was greasy, the baked potatoes that went with it cold and savorless without salt or butter. Daniels wolfed everything down anyhow. “You gotta eat when you get the chance,” he told Kevin Donlan, “on account of you ain’t gonna get the chance as often as you want to.”

“You bet, Sarge.” The kid wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He took his own tack in talking to the Negro: “That was great, Colonel. A real lifesaver.”

“Colonel?” The colored fellow spat in the dirt of the trench.

“You know damn well I’m not a colonel. Why don’t you just call me by my name? I’m Charlie Sanders, and you could have found it out by askin’.”

“Charlie, that was good chicken,” Mutt said solemnly “I’m obliged.”

“Huh,” Sanders said. Then he scrambled up out of the trench and dashed away toward the next couple of foxholes maybe thirty yards off.

“Watch out for them little mine things the Lizard shells throw around,” Daniels yelled after him. He turned back to Donlan. “Hope he makes it. He keeps goin’ all around like that, though, his number’s gonna come up pretty damn quick.”

“Yeah.” Donlan peered over in the direction Charlie Sanders had run. “That takes guts. He doesn’t even have a gun. I didn’t think niggers had guts like that.”

“You’re under shellfire, son, it don’t matter if you’ve got a gun,” Mutt answered. But

that wasn't the point, and he knew it. After a while, he went on, "One of my grandfathers, I misremember which one right now, he fought against colored troops one time in the States War. He said they weren't no different than any other damn yankees. Maybe he was right. Me, I don't know anything any more."

"But you're a sergeant," Donlan said, in exactly the same tone some of Daniels' ballplayers had used in exclaiming, *But you're the manager*

Mutt sighed. "Just on account of I'm supposed to have all the answers, son, that don't mean I can pull 'em out from under my tin hat whenever you need 'em. Hell, come to that, it don't even mean they're really there. You get as old as I am, you ain't sure o' nothin' no more."

"Yes, Sergeant," Donlan said. By the way things were going, Mutt thought, the kid didn't have much chance of getting that old.

"No," General Patton said. "Hell, no."

"But, sir"—Jens Larssen spread his hands and assumed an injured expression—"all I want to do is get in touch with my wife, let her know I'm alive."

"No," Patton repeated. "No, repeat no, traffic about the Metallurgical Laboratory or any of its personnel save in direst emergency—from which personal matters of any sort are specifically excluded. Those are my direct orders from General Marshall, Dr. Larssen, and I have no intention of disobeying them. That is the most basic security precaution for any important project, let alone one of this magnitude. Marshall has told me next to nothing about the project, and I do not wish to acquire more information: I have not the need to know, and therefore should not—must not—know."

"But Barbara's not even with the Met Lab," Jens protested.

"Indeed not, but *you* are," Patton said. "Are you so soft that you would betray the hope of the United States to the Lizards for the sake of your own convenience? By God, sir, I hope you are not."

"I don't see how one message constitutes a betrayal," Larssen said. "Odds are the Lizards wouldn't even notice it."

"Possible," Patton admitted. He got up from behind his desk and stretched, which also gave him the advantage of staring down at Jens. "Possible, but not likely. If the Lizards' doctrine is at all like ours—and I've seen no reason to doubt that—they monitor as many of our signals as they can, and try to shape them into informative patterns. I speak from experience, sir, when I say that no one—no one—can know in advance which piece of the jigsaw puzzle will reveal enough for the enemy to form the entire picture in his mind."

Jens knew about security; the Met Lab had had large doses of it. But he'd never been subject to military discipline, so he kept arguing: "You could send a message without my name on it, just 'Your husband is alive and well' or something like that."

“No; your request is refused,” Patton said. Then, as if reading Larssen’s mind, he added, “Any attempt to ignore what I have just said and inveigle a signals officer into clandestinely sending such a message will result in your arrest and confinement, if not worse. I remind you I have military secrets of my own here, and I shall not permit you to compromise them. Do I make myself quite clear?”

“Yes, sir, you do,” Larssen said dejectedly. He’d been all set to try to find a sympathetic radioman no matter what Patton said; he still didn’t believe such an innocuous message would have blown the Met Lab’s cover. But he couldn’t gauge how much outgoing, messages might endanger the offensive still building here in western Indiana. That had to succeed, too, or nothing that happened in Chicago would matter, because Chicago would belong to the Lizards.

“If it helps at all, Dr. Larssen, you have my sympathy,” Patton said.

In a gruff sort of way, he probably even meant it, Jens thought. He said, “Thank you, General,” and walked out of Patton’s office.

Outside, the ground was mottled with melting snow and clumps of yellowish dead grass. Thick low yellow-gray clouds rolled by overhead, The wind came from out of the northwest, and carried a nip that quickly started to turn Jens’ beaky nose to an icicle. It had all the makings of a winter storm, but no snow fell.

His thoughts as gloomy as the weather, Larssen walked on in Oxford, Indiana. *Potem/cin village* ran through his mind. From the air, the little town undoubtedly seemed as quiet as any other gasoline-starved hamlet in the Midwest. But concealed by houses and garages, haystacks and woodpiles, gathered armored forces plenty, Jens thought, to give the Nazis pause. The only trouble was, they faced worse foes than mere Germans.

Larssen stepped into the Bluebird Cafe. A couple of locals and a couple, of soldiers in civvies (nobody not, in civvies was allowed on the streets of *Oxford—security again*, Jens thought) sat at the counter. Behind it, the cook made pancakes on a wood-burning griddle instead of his now useless gas range. The griddle wasn’t vented; smoke filled the room. He looked over his shoulder at-Larssen. “Waddaya want, mac?”

“I know what I *want*: how about a broiled lobster tail with drawn butter, asparagus in hollandaise sauce, and crisp green salad? Now, what do you have?”

“Good luck with the lobster, buddy,” the cook said. “What I got is flapjacks here, powdered eggs, and canned pork and beans. You don’t fancy that, go fishing.”

“I’ll take it,” Jens said. It was what he’d been eating ever since that wonderful chicken dinner with General Patton. He wasn’t as skinny as he had been when the Army scooped him up, but he’d long since sworn he’d never look a baked bean in the eye again if and when the war ever ended.

The only virtue he could find to the meal was that he didn’t have to pay for it. Patton had taken over the handful of eateries in town and incorporated them into his commissary department. Larssen supposed that was fair, without the supplies they drew from the Army, they’d long since have closed down.

The better to conceal his soldiers, Patton had also billeted them on the townsfolk. As far as Jens knew, he hadn't asked anybody for permission before he did it, either. If Patton worried about that, he didn't let on. Maybe he had a point, the Founding Fathers hadn't anticipated an invasion from outer space.

But if you started fiddling with the Constitution and pleading military necessity, where would you stop? Jens wished he'd been in a better position to take that up with Patton. It might have made an interesting philosophical discussion if the general hadn't been steamed at him for trying to get a message to Barbara. As things were, Patton would either roar at him or ignore him, neither of which constituted an enlightened exchange of views.

"Anybody got a cigarette?" asked one of the soldiers in civvies.

The only answer Larssen expected to that was a hoarse laugh, and the soldier got one. Then a civilian, a leathery fellow in a hunting cap who had to be pushing seventy, looked the kid over and drawled, "Son, even if I did have one, you ain't pretty enough to give me what I'd want for it."

The young soldier turned the color of the fire under the griddle. The cook solemnly sketched a hash mark in the air. Larssen whistled. The oldtimer let out a dry chuckle to show he wasn't all that impressed with his own wit, then returned to his cup of what the Army called, for lack of a suitable term of opprobrium, coffee.

High overhead, above the clouds, a Lizard jet flew by, its wail thin and fading with distance. Larssen's shiver had nothing to do with the weather. He wondered how well the aliens' sensors, whatever they were, could peer through the gray mass that shielded Oxford and the countryside around it from the sky and how well Patton had managed to hide the carefully husbanded gear here. He'd know soon enough.

In one corner of the cafe stood a broken pinball machine, the mournful word TILT permanently on display. Since that constituted the place's entire potential for entertainment, Jens handed his plate and cutlery back to the cook and went out onto the street.

The wind had picked up while he ate. He was glad for his overcoat. His nose was also relieved at the fresh air. Full of soldiers as it was and without much working plumbing, Oxford had become an odorous place. If the buildup here went on a little longer, the Lizards wouldn't need visual reconnaissance to find their human foes: their noses would do the job for them.

Something stung Jens on the cheek. By reflex he brought up his hand, but felt only a tiny patch of moisture. Then he got stung again, this time on the wrist. He looked down, saw a fat white snowflake melting away to nothingness. More slipped and slid wildly through the air, jitterbug dancers made of ice.

For a moment, he just watched. The start of a snowfall always took him back to his Minnesota childhood, to snowmen and snow angels and snowballs knocking stocking caps off heads. Then the present rose up and smote nostalgia. This snow had nothing to

do with childhood's pleasures. This snow meant attack.

Yi Min felt bigger than life, felt, in fact, as if he were the personification of Ho Tei, fat little god of luck. Who would have imagined so much profit was to be made from the coming of the little scaly devils? At first, when they'd raped him away from his home village and then taken him up into the plane that didn't land, the plane where he weighed nothing and his poor stomach even less, he'd thought them the worst catastrophe the world had ever known. Now, though...He smiled oleagiously. Now life was good.

True, he still lived in this camp, but he lived here like a warlord, almost like one of the vanished Manchu emperors. His dwelling was a hut in name only. Its wooden sides were proof against the worst winter winds. Brass braziers gave heat, soft carpets cushioned his every stride, fine pieces of jade and cloisonné delighted his eye wherever it happened to light. He ate duck and dog and other delicacies. When he wanted them, he enjoyed women who made Liu Han seem a diseased sow by comparison. One waited on his mattress now. He'd forgotten her name. What did it matter?

And all from a powder the scaly devils craved!

He laughed out loud. "What is it, man full of *yang*?" the pretty girl called from the other room. She sounded impatient for him to join her.

"Nothing—just a joke I heard this morning," he answered. However full of masculine essence he was, he still had too much hard sense to make a hired mattress partner privy to his thoughts. What one set of ears heard in the afternoon, a score would know by sunrise and the whole world by the next night.

Without false modesty (Yi Min had little modesty, false or otherwise), he knew he was far and away the biggest ginger dealer in the camp, probably in China, maybe in the whole world. Under him (the girl crossed his mind again, but only for a moment) were not only men who grew the spice and others who cured it with lime to make it particularly tasty to the scaly devils, but several dozen scaly devils who bought from him and sold to their fellows, either directly or through their own webs of secondary dealers. How the loot rolled in!

"Will you come soon, Tiger of the Floating World?" the girl said. She did her best to make herself alluring, but she was too much a businesswoman—and too little an actress—to keep a strident note from her voice. *What's keeping you?* she meant.

"Yes, I'll be there in a moment," he answered, but his tone suggested she wasn't worth hurrying over. Having a woman resent him for what he made her do fed his own excitement. He wasn't just taking pleasure that way, but also control.

*What should we do when I finally go to her?* he wondered: always an enjoyable

contemplation. Something she wouldn't care for—she'd annoyed him. Maybe he'd use her as if she were a boy. He snapped his fingers in delight. The very thing! Women were so proud of the slit between their legs; ignoring it in favor of the other way never failed to irritate them. Besides, it would hurt her a little too, make her remember to treat him as the person of consequence he was.

Warmth flowed through him, tingled across his skin. He felt himself rising. He took one step toward the bedroom, then checked himself. Anticipation was also a pleasure. Besides, let her stew.

After a minute or two, she called, "Please hurry! Longing eats at me." She played the game, too, but her mah-jongg hand did not have the tiles to beat his.

When at last he judged the moment ripe, he started off to the back part of the dwelling. Before he'd gone three paces, though, a scratching noise came from the front door. He let out a long, angry hiss. That was a scaly devil. The girl's comeuppance would have to wait. No matter-how thoroughly he controlled the devils who bought ginger from him, the illusion remained that he was servant and they masters.

He opened the door. Cold nipped at his fingers and face. A little scaly devil indeed, but not one he'd seen before—he'd grown skilled at telling them, apart, even when, as now, the swaddlings they wore against winter hid their body paint. He'd also grown fluent in their speech. He bowed low, said, "Superior sir, you honor my humble hut. Enter, please, and warm yourself"

"I come." The little scaly devil skittered past Yi Min. He closed the door after it. He was pleased it had answered him in its own language. If he could do business in that tongue, he wouldn't have to send away the courtesan. Not only would she have longer to wait, she'd be impressed at how he dealt with the little devils on their terms.

The devil looked around his front room, its eye turrets swiveling independent of each other. That no longer unnerved Yi Min; he was used to it. He studied the scaly devil, the strong color inside its nostrils, the way its clawed hands had a slight quiver to them. Inside, he smiled. He might not know the devil, but he knew the signs. This one needed ginger, and needed it worse every second.

He bowed again. "Superior sir, will you tell me your name, that I may serve you better?"

The little scaly devil hissed, as if suddenly reminded of Yi Min's presence. "Yes. I am called Drefsab. You are the Big Ugly Yi Min?"

"Yes, superior sir, I am Yi Min." The Race's insulting nickname for human beings didn't bother Yi Min. After all, he thought of its males as little scaly devils. He said, "How may I be of assistance to you, superior sir Drefsab?"

The scaly devil swung both eyes in his direction. "You are the Big Ugly who sells to the Race the powder known as ginger?"

"Yes, superior sir, I am that humble person. I have the honor and privilege to provide the Race with the pleasure the herb affords." Yi Min thought about asking the little scaly

devil straight out whether it wanted ginger. He decided not to; though the devils were more direct about such matters than Chinese, they sometimes found direct questions rude. He did not want to offend a new customer.

“You have much of this herb?” Drefsab asked.

“Yes, superior sir.” Yi Min was getting tired of saying that. “As much as any valiant male could desire. if I may say so, I think I have given more males bliss with powdered ginger than all but a handful of Tosevites.” He used the little devils’ less offensive name for his own kind. Now he did ask: “If the superior sir Drefsab desires a sample of the wares here, I would be honored to provide him with one without expecting anything in return.” *This time*, he added to himself.

He thought Drefsab would leap at that; he’d hardly ever seen a scaly devil, in more obvious need of his drug. But Drefsab still seemed to feel like talking. He said, “You are the Big Ugly whose machinations have turned males of the Race against their own kind, whose powders have spread corruption through the shining ships from Home?”

Yi Min stared; no matter how well he’d come to use the devils’ language, he needed a moment to understand Drefsab’s words, which were the opposite, of what he’d expected to hear. But the pharmacist’s reply came fast and smooth: “Superior sir, I do but try to give the valiant males of the Race what they seek.” He wondered what game Drefsab was playing. If the little scaly devil thought to muscle in on his operation, he’d get a surprise. Ginger powder had bought Yi Min the adjutants to several high-ranking officers, and a couple of, the officers themselves. They would clamp down on any scaly devil who got too bold with their supplier.

Drefsab said, “This ginger is a tumor eating at the vitality of the Race. This I know, for it has devoured me. Sometimes a tumor must be cut out.”

Yi Min again had to struggle to make sense of that; he and the scaly devils with whom he’d conversed hadn’t had any occasion to talk about tumors. He was still trying to figure out what the word meant when Drefsab reached inside his protective clothing and pulled out a gun. It spat fire, again and again and again. Inside Yi Min’s hut, the shots rang incredibly loud. As the bullets clubbed him to the carpet, he heard through the reports the girl in the bedroom starting to scream.

At first Yi Min felt only the impacts, not the pain. Then it struck him. The world turned black, shot through with scarlet flames. He tried to scream himself, but managed only a bubbling moan through the blood that flooded into his mouth.

Dimly—ever more dimly—he watched Drefsab take the head off the plump Buddha that sat on a low lacquer table. The stinking little devil knew just where he stowed his ginger. Drefsab took a taste, hissed in delight, and poured the rest of the powder into a clear bag he’d also brought along inside his coat. Then he opened the door and left.

The courtesan kept screaming. Yi Min wanted to tell her to shut up and close the door; it was getting cold. The words would not come. He tried to crawl toward the door himself. The cold reached his heart. The scarlet flames faded, leaving only black.



Harbin was falling. Any day now, the Race would be in the city. It would be an important victory; Harbin anchored the Nipponese line. Teerts would have been gladder of it had the town not been falling around his head.

That was literally true. During the most recent raid on Harbin, bombs hit so close to his prison that chunks of plaster rained down from the ceiling and just missed knocking out what few brains he had left after so long in Tosevite captivity.

Outside, an anti-aircraft gun began to hammer. Teerts didn't hear any planes; maybe the Big Ugly was just nervous. *Go ahead, waste ammunition*, Teerts thought. *Then you'll have less to fire off when my friends break in here, and then, dead Emperors willing, they won't have to suffer what I've gone through.*

He heard a commotion up the hall, orders barked in loud Nipponese too fast for him to follow. One of the guards came up to his cell. Teerts bowed; with this kind of Big Ugly, you couldn't go far wrong if you bowed and you could go disastrously wrong if you didn't. Better to bow, then.

The guard didn't bow back; Teerts was a prisoner, and so deserving only of contempt. Behind the armed man came Major Okamoto. Teerts bowed more deeply to his interrogator and interpreter. Okamoto didn't acknowledge him, either, not with a bow. He spoke in Teerts' language as he unlocked the cell door: "You will come with me. We leave this city now."

Teerts bowed again. "It shall be done, superior sir." He had no idea how it would be done, or if it could be done, but wondering about such things was not his responsibility. As a prisoner, as had been true in the days before he was captured, his duty was but to obey. Unlike his superiors of the Race, though, the Nipponese owed him no loyalty in return.

Major Okamoto threw at him a pair of black trousers and a baggy blue coat that could have held two males his size. Then Okamoto put a conical straw hat on his head and tied it under his jaws with a scratchy piece of cord. "Good," the Nipponese said in satisfaction. "Now if your people see you from the sky, they think you just another Tosevite."

They would, too, Teerts realized dismally. A gun camera, maybe even a satellite photo, might have picked him out from among the swarming masses of Big Ugliers around him. Bundled up like this, though, he would be just one more grain of rice (a food he had come to loathe) among a million.

He thought about throwing off the clothes if one of the Race's aircraft came overhead. Reluctantly, he decided he'd better not. Major Okamoto would make his life not worth living if he tried it, and the Nipponese could spirit him away before his own folk, who were none too hasty, arranged a rescue effort.

Besides, Harbin was *cold*. The hat helped keep his head warm, and if he threw aside the coat, he was liable to turn into a lump of ice before either the Nipponese or the Race could do anything about it. Okamoto's hat and coat were made from the fur of Tosevite

creatures. He understood why the beasts needed insulation from their truly beastly climate, and wondered why the Big Ugliers themselves had so little hair that they needed to steal it from animals.

Outside the building in which Teerts had been confined, he saw more rubble than he ever had before. Some of the craters looked like meteor strikes on an airless moon. Teerts didn't get much of a chance to examine them; Major Okamoto hustled him onto a two-wheeled conveyance with a Big Ugly between the shafts instead of a beast of burden. Okamoto spoke to the puller in a language that wasn't Nipponese. The fellow seized the shafts, grunted, and started forward. The guard strode stolidly along beside the conveyance.

Tosevites streamed out of Harbin toward the east, fleeing the expected fall of the city. Disciplined columns of Nipponese soldiers contrasted with the squealing, squalling civilians all around them. Some of those, females hardly larger than Teerts, bore on their backs bundles of belongings almost as big as they were. Others carried burdens hung from poles balanced on one shoulder. It struck Teerts as a scene from out of the Race's prehistoric past, vanished a thousand centuries.

Before long, the guard got in front of the manhandled conveyance and started shouting to clear a path for it. When that failed, he laid about him with the butt end of his rifle. Squeals and squalls turned to screams. Teerts couldn't see that the brutality made much difference in how fast they went.

Eventually they reached the train station, which was noisier but less chaotic than the surrounding city. The Race had repeatedly bombed the station. It was more debris than building, but somehow still functioned. Machine-gun nests and tangles of wire with teeth kept everyone but soldiers away from the trains.

When a sentry challenged him, Major Okamoto flipped up Teerts' hat and said something in Nipponese. The sentry bowed low, answered apologetically. Okamoto turned to Teerts. "From here on, we walk. No one but Nipponese—and you—permitted in the station."

Teerts walked, Okamoto on one side of him and the guard on the other. For a little while, a surviving stretch of roof and wall protected them from the biting wind. Then they were picking their way through stone and bricks again, with snow sliding down from a gray, dreary sky.

Out past the station in the railroad yard, troops were filing onto a train. Again a sentry challenged Okamoto on his approach, again he used Teerts as his talisman to pass. He secured half a car for himself, the guard, and his prisoner. "You are more important than soldiers," he smugly told Teerts.

With a long, mournful blast from its whistle, the train jerked into motion. Teerts had shot up Tosevite trains when he was still free. The long plumes of black smoke they spat made them easy to pick out, and they could not flee, save on the rails they used for travel. They'd been easy, enjoyable targets. He hoped none of his fellow males would think the one he was riding a tempting target.

Major Okamoto said, “The farther from Harbun we go, the more likely we are to be safe. I do not mind losing my life for the emperor, but I am ordered to see that you safely reach the Home Islands.”

Teerts was willing to lay down his life for *his* Emperor, *the* Emperor, but not for the parvenu Big Ugly who claimed the same title. Given a choice, he would have preferred not to lay down his life for anyone. He’d been given few choices lately.

The train rattled eastward. The ride was tooth-jarringly rough; the Race hit the rails themselves as well as the trains that rolled on them. But the Big Ugliers, as they’d proved all over the planet, were resourceful beings. In spite of the bombs, the railroad kept working.

Or so Teerts thought until, some considerable time after the train had pulled out of Harbun, it shuddered to a stop. He hissed in dismay. He knew from experience what a lovely, tasty target a stopped train was. “What’s wrong?” he asked Major Okamoto.

“Probably you males of the Race have broken the track again.” Okamoto sounded more resigned than angry; that was part of war. “You are sitting by the window—tell me what you see.”

Teerts peered through the dirty glass. “I see a whole swarm of Tosevites working at the curve ahead.” How many Big Ugliers labored there? Hundreds certainly, more likely thousands. No one carried anything more impressive than a pick, a shovel, or a crowbar. If one of the Race’s aircraft spied them, a strafing run would leave great red steaming pools in the snow.

But if no aircraft came over, the Big Ugliers could perform astonishing feats. Before he came to Tosev 3, Teerts had taken machinery for granted. He’d never imagined that masses of beings armed with hand tools could not only duplicate their results but also work nearly as fast as they did.

He said, “Forgive the ignorant question, superior sir, but how do you keep them from perishing of cold or from being injured at this hard, dangerous work?”

“They are only Chinese peasants,” Major Okamoto said with chilling indifference. “As we use them up, we seize as many more as we need to do what must be done.”

For some reason, Teerts had expected the Big Ugliers to treat their own kind better than they did him. But to the Nipponese, the Tosevites here were not of their own kind, however much alike they seemed to a male of the Race. The reasons for distinction at a level lower than the species, as a whole were lost on Teerts. Whatever they were, though, they let the Nipponese treat their laborers like pieces of the machines in whose place they were used, and with as little concern about their fate. That was something else Teerts hadn’t imagined before he came to Tosev 3. This world was an education in all sorts of matters where he would have preferred continued ignorance.

The vast swarms of workers (Teerts thought not so much of people as of the little social hive-creatures that occasionally made nuisances of themselves back on Home) drew back from the railroad track after a surprisingly short time. The train rolled slowly

forward.

Three or four laborers lay in the snow, too worn to move on to the next stretch of broken track. Nipponese guards—males dressed far more warmly than those in their charge—came up and kicked at the exhausted peasants. One managed to stagger to his feet and rejoin his comrades. The guards picked up crowbars and methodically broke in the heads of the others.

Teerts wished he hadn't seen that. He already knew the Nipponese had no compunctions about doing dreadful things to him if he failed to cooperate or even failed to be useful to them. Yet now he discovered that having knowledge confirmed before his eyes was ten times worse than merely knowing.

The train picked up speed after it passed the repaired curve. "Is this not a fine way to travel?" Okamoto said. "How swiftly we move!"

Teerts had crossed the gulf between the stars at half the speed of light—admittedly, in cold sleep. He ranged the air above this main landmass of Tosev 3 at speeds far greater than sound. How, then, was he supposed to be impressed with this wheezy train? The only conveyance next to which it seemed fast was the one in which the poor straining Tosevite had hauled him to the station.

But that latter sort of conveyance was what the Race had expected to find all over Tosev 3. Maybe the train, decrepit as it appeared to Teerts, was new enough to be marvelous to the Big Ugliers. He knew better than to contradict Major Okamoto, anyhow. "Yes, very fast," he said with as much enthusiasm as he could feign.

Through the dirty window, Teerts watched more Tosevites—Chinese peasants, he supposed—struggling to build new defensive lines for the Nipponese. They were having a tough time; the miserable local weather had frozen the ground hard as stone.

He had no idea how sick he'd become of the train, of its endless shaking, of the seat that did not conform to his backside because it made no provision for a tailstump, of the endless jabber from the Nipponese troops in the back of the car, of the odor that rose from them and grew thicker as the journey went on. He even came to miss his cell, something he had not imagined possible.

The journey seemed to stretch endlessly, senselessly. How long could it take to traverse one small part of a planetary surface? Given fuel and maintenance for his killercraft, Teerts could have circumnavigated the whole miserable world several times in the interval he needed to crawl across this tiny portion of it.

He finally grew fed up—and incautious—enough to say that to Major Okamoto. The Big Ugly looked at him for a moment, then asked, "And how fast could you go if someone kept dropping bombs in front of your aircraft?"

After heading east for a day and a half, the train swung south. That puzzled Teerts, who said to his keeper, "I thought Nippon lay in this direction, across the sea."

"It does," Okamoto answered, "but the port Vladivostok, which is nearest to us, belongs to the Soviet Union, not to Nippon."

Teerts was neither a diplomat nor a particularly imaginative male. He'd never thought about the complications that might arise from having a planet divided up among many empires. Now, being forced to stay on the train because of one of those complications, he heaped mental scorn on the Big Ugliers, though he realized the Race benefited from their disunity.

Even when the train came down close by the sea, it did not stop, but rumbled through a land Major Okamoto called Chosen. "*Wakarimasen,*" Teerts said, working on his villainous Nipponese: "I do not understand. Here is the ocean. Why do we not stop and get on a ship?"

"Not so simple," Okamoto answered. "We need a port, a place where ships can safely come into land, not be battered by storms." He leaned across Teerts, pointed out the window at the waves crashing against the shore. Home's lakes were surrounded by land, not the other way round; they seldom grew boisterous.

*Shipwreck* was another concept that hadn't crossed Teerts' mind till he watched this bruising ruffian of an ocean throwing its water about with muscular abandon. It was fascinating to see—certainly more interesting than the mountains that flanked the other side of the track—at least until Teerts had a really horrid thought: "We need to go across that ocean to get to Nippon, don't we?"

"Yes, of course," his captor answered blithely. "This disturbs you? Too bad."

Here in Chosen, farther from the fighting, damage to the railway net was less. The train made better time. It finally reached a port, a place called Fusan. Land ended there, running out into the sea. Teerts saw what Okamoto had meant by a port: ships lined up next to wooden sidewalks that ran out into the water on poles. Big Ugliers and goods moved on and off.

Teerts realized that, primitive and smoky as this port was, a lot of business got done here. He was used to air and space transportation and the weight limits they imposed; one of these big, ugly Big Ugly ships could carry enormous numbers of soldiers and machines and sacks of bland, boring rice. And the Tosevites had many, many ships.

Back on the planets of the Empire, transportation by water was an unimportant sidelight; goods flowed along highways and railroads. All the interdiction missions Teerts had flown on Tosev 3 were against highways and railroads. Not once had he attacked shipping. But from what he saw in Fusan, the officers who gave him his targets had been missing a bet.

"Off," Okamoto said. Teerts obediently descended from the train, followed by the Nipponese officer and the stolid guard. After so long on the jouncing railway car, the ground seemed to sway beneath his feet.

At his captor's orders, he walked up a gangplank and onto one of the ships; the claws on his toes clicked against bare, cold metal. The floor (the Big Ugliers had a special word for it, but he couldn't remember what the word was) shifted under his feet. He jumped into the air in alarm. "Earthquake!" he shouted in his own language.

That was not a word Major Okamoto knew. When Teerts explained it, the Nipponese let out a long string of the yips the Big Ugliers used for laughter. Okamoto spoke to the guard in his own tongue. The guard, who had hardly said three words all the way down from Harbin through Chosen, laughed loudly, too. Teerts glared at one of them with each eye. He didn't see the joke.

Later, when out of sight of land the ship really started rolling and pitching, he understood why the Big Ugliers had found his startlement at that first slight motion funny. He was, however, too busy wishing he was dead to be amused himself.

A rowboat took Colonel Leslie Groves across the Charles River toward the United States Navy Yard. The Charlestown Bridge, which had spanned the river and connected the yard with the rest of Boston on the southern bank, was nothing but a ruin. Engineers had repaired it a couple of times, but the Lizards, kept knocking it down.

The ferryman pulled up under what had been the northern piers of the bridge. "Heah y'aah, friend," he said in broad New England accents, pointing to a set of rickety wooden stairs that led up to Main Street.

Groves scrambled out of the rowboat. The steps squeaked under his weight, though he, like most people, was a good deal lighter than he would have been had the Lizards stayed away. The fellow in the boat was backing oars, heading south across the river for his next ferry run.

As Groves turned right onto Chelsea Street, he reflected on how natural his ear found the Boston accent, though he'd not heard much of it since his days at MIT more than twenty years before. The country had been at war then, too, but with a foe safely across the ocean, not lodged, all through the United States itself.

Naval ratings with rifles patrolled the long, high wall that separated the Navy Yard from the town behind it. Groves wondered how useful the fence was. If you stood on Breed's Hill (where, history books notwithstanding, the Americans and British had fought the Battle of Bunker Hill), you could look right down into the Yard. The colonel was, however, long used to security for security's sake. As he approached, he tapped the shiny eagle on the shoulders of his overcoat. The Navy guards saluted and stood aside to let him enter.

The Yard was not crowded with warships, as it had been before the Lizards came. The ships—those that survived—were dispersed up and down the coast, so as not to make any one target too attractive to bombardment from the air.

Still berthed in the Navy Yard was the USS *Constitution*. As always, seeing "Old Ironsides" gave Groves a thrill. In his MIT days, he'd toured the ship several times, and almost banged his head on the timbers belowdecks: any sailor much above five feet tall would have knocked himself silly running to his battle station; Glancing at the tall masts that probed the sky, Groves reflected that the Lizards had made the whole Navy as obsolete as the tough old frigate. It was not a cheery thought.

His own target lay a couple of piers beyond the *Constitution*. The boat tied up there was no longer than the graceful sailing ship, and much uglier: slabs of rust-stained iron could not compete against Old Ironsides' elegant flanks. *The only curves sweeter than a sailing ship's*, Groves thought, *are a woman's*.

The sentry who paced the pier wore Navy uniform, but not quite the one with which Groves was familiar. Nor was the flag that flapped from the submarine's conning tower the Stars and Stripes, but rather the Union Jack. Groves wondered if any Royal Navy vessels had used the Boston Navy Yard since the Revolution took Massachusetts off George III's hands.

"Ahoy the *Seanymph!*" he called as he strode up to the sentry. He was close enough now to see that the man carried a Lee-Enfield rifle, not the Springfields of his American counterparts.

"Ahoy yourself," the sentry answered; his vowels said London, not Back Bay. Make yourself known, sir, if you'd be so kind."

"I am Colonel Leslie Groves, United States Army. Here are my identification documents." He waited while the Englishman inspected them, carefully comparing his photograph to his face. When the sentry nodded to show he was satisfied, Groves went on, "I am ordered to meet your Commander Stansfield here, to pick up the package he's brought to the United States."

"Wait here, sir." The sentry crossed the gangplank to the *Seanymph's* deck, climbed the ladder to the conning tower, and disappeared below. He came out again a couple of minutes later. "You have permission to come aboard, sir. Watch your step, now."

The advice was not wasted; Groves did not pretend to be a sailor. As he carefully descended into the submarine, he was glad he'd lost some weight. As things were, the passage seemed alarmingly tight.

The long steel tube in which he found himself did nothing to ease that feeling. It was like peering down a dimly lit Thermos bottle. Even with the hatch open, the air was closed and dank; it smelled of metal and sweat and hot machine oil and, faintly in the background, full heads.

An officer with three gold stripes on the sleeves of his jacket came forward. "Colonel Groves? I'm Roger Stansfield, commanding the *Seanymph*. May I see your *bona fides*, please?" He examined Groves' papers with the same care the sentry had given them. Returning them, he said, "I hope you will forgive me, but it has been made quite clear that security is of the essence in this matter."

"Don't worry about it, Commander," Groves said easily. "The same point has been impressed upon me, I assure you."

"I don't even precisely know what it is I've ferried over to you Yanks," Stansfield said. "All I know is that I've been ordered to treat the stuff with the utmost respect, and have obeyed to the best of my ability."

"Good." Groves still wondered how he'd gotten roped into this atomic explosives

project himself. Maybe the talk he'd had with the physicist—Larsen? was that the name?—had linked him and uranium in General Marshall's mind. Or maybe he'd complained once too often about fighting the war from behind a desk. He wasn't behind a desk any more, and wouldn't be for God only knew how long.

Stansfield said, "Having turned this—material—over to you, Colonel Groves, is there any way, in which I can be of further assistance?"

"You'd have made my life a hell of a lot easier, Commander, if you could have sailed your *Seanymph* to Denver instead of Boston," Groves answered dryly.

"This is the port to which I was ordered to bring my boat," the Englishman said in a puzzled voice. "Had you wanted the material delivered elsewhere, your chaps upstairs should have told the Admiralty as much; I'm sure we would have done our best to oblige."

Groves shook his head. "I'm pulling your leg, I'm afraid." No reason for a Royal Navy man to be familiar with an American town that, to put it mildly, was not a port. "Colorado is a landlocked state."

"Oh. Quite." To Groves' relief, Stansfield didn't get mad. His grin showed pointed teeth that went well with his sharp, foxy features and hair that was somewhere between sandy and red. "They do say the new class of submarines was to have been capable of nearly everything, but that might have challenged it even had the advent of the Lizards not scuttled its development."

"Too bad," Groves said sincerely. "Now I have to transport the stuff myself."

"Perhaps we can make matters a bit easier," Stansfield said. One of the *Seanymph's* ratings fetched up a canvas knapsack, which he presented to Groves with a flourish. Stansfield went on, "This arrangement should make rather easier transporting the saddlebag contained inside, which is, if you'll forgive the, vulgarity, bloody heavy. I'd not be surprised to learn it was lined with lead, though I've been studiously encouraged not to enquire."

"Probably just as well." Groves knew the saddlebag was lined with lead. He didn't know how well the lead would shield him from the radioactive material inside; that was one of the things he'd have to find out the hard way. If this mission took years off his life but helped defeat the Lizards, the government had concluded that was a worthwhile price to pay. Having served that government his entire adult life, Groves accepted the estimation with as much equanimity as he could muster.

He shrugged on the knapsack. His shoulders and back did indeed feel the weight. If he had to haul it around for a while, he might even end up somewhere close to svelte. He hadn't been anything but portly—or worried about it—since his West Point days.

"I assume you have plans on how to reach, ah, Denver with your burden there," Stansfield said. "I do apologize, for my limited ability to help you in that regard, but we are only a submarine, not a subterrene." He grinned again; he seemed taken with the idea of sailing to Colorado.



“Can’t talk about that, I’m afraid,” Groves said. “By rights, I shouldn’t even have told you where I’m going.”

Commander Stansfield nodded in understanding sympathy. He would have been even more sympathetic, Groves thought, had he known just how sketchy the American’s plans were. He’d been ordered not to fly toward Denver; a plane was too likely to get knocked down. Not many trains were running, and even fewer cars. That left shank’s mare, horseback, and luck—and as an engineer, Groves didn’t take much stock in luck.

Complicating matters further was the stranglehold the Lizards had on the Midwest. Here on the coast, they were just raiders. But the farther inland you went, the more they seemed to have settled down to stay.

Groves wondered why the aliens didn’t pay more attention to the ocean and to the land that lay alongside it. They hit land and air transportation all over the world, but ships still had a decent chance of getting through. Maybe that said something about the planet they came from. Groves shook his head. He had more immediate things to worry about.

Not least of them was the battle breaking out right around halfway between here and Denver. If that went wrong, not only would Chicago surely fall, but the United States would be hard pressed to put up more than guerrilla resistance to, the Lizards anywhere outside the East Coast. For that matter, getting to Denver might not matter if the battle went wrong, though Groves knew he’d keep going until he was either dead or ordered to turn aside.

He must have looked grim, for Commander Stansfield said, “Colonel, I’ve heard it said that your Navy bans alcohol aboard its vessels. Fortunately, the Royal Navy observes no such tiresome custom. Would you care for a tot of rum to fortify you for the journey ahead?”

“Commander, I’d be delighted, by God,” Groves said. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure—I thought it might do you some good. Wait here, if you please; I’ll be back directly.”

Stansfield hurried down the steel tube of the hull toward the rear of the submarine—aft, Groves supposed it was called in proper naval jargon. He watched the British officer lean into a little chamber off to the side of the main tube. *His cabin*, Groves realized. Stansfield didn’t need to lean very far; the cabin had to be tiny. Bunks were stacked three deep, with bare inches between them. All things considered, the *Seanympth* was a claustrophobe’s nightmare brought to clattering life.

The squat brown glass jug in Commander Stansfield’s hand gurgled encouragingly. “Jamaican, than which there is none finer,” he said, puffing the cork. Groves could almost taste the thick, heavy aroma that rose from it. Stansfield poured two healthy tots, handed one glass to Groves.

“Thanks.” Groves took it with appropriate reverence. He raised it high—and almost barked his knuckles on a pipe that ran along the low ceiling. “His Majesty, the King!” he

said gravely.

“His Majesty the King,” Stansfield echoed. “Didn’t think you Yanks knew to make that one.”

“I read it somewhere.” Groves knocked back the rum at a gulp. It was so smooth, his throat hardly knew he swallowed it, but it exploded in his stomach like a mortar round, throwing warmth in all directions. He looked at the empty glass with genuine respect. “That, Commander, is the straight goods.”

“So it is.” Stansfield sipped more sedately. He proffered the bottle once more. “Another?”

Groves shook his head. “One of those is medicinal. Two and I’d want to go to sleep. I appreciate the offer, though.”

“You have a clear notion of what’s best for you. I admire that.” Stansfield turned so he faced west. The motion was quite deliberate; Groves imagined—as he was supposed to imagine—the Royal Navy man peering out through the sub’s hull and across two thousand miles of dangerous country to the promised land of Denver, high in the Rockies. After a moment, Stansfield added, “I must say I don’t envy you, Colonel.”

Groves shrugged. With the heavy canvas knapsack on his shoulders, he felt like Atlas, trying to support the whole world. “The job has to be done, and I’m going to do it.”

Rivka Russie scratched a match against the sole of her shoe. It flared into life. She used it to light, first one *shabbas* candle, then the other. Bowing her head over them, she murmured the Sabbath blessing.

The puff of sulfurous smoke from the matchhead filled the little underground room and made Moishe Russie cough. The fat white candles were a sign he and his family had survived another week without the Lizards’ finding them. They also helped light the bunker where the Russies sheltered.

Rivka lifted the ceremonial cloth cover from a braided loaf of *challah*. “I want some of that bread, Mama!” Reuven exclaimed.

“Let me slice it first, if you please,” Rivka told her son. “Look: we even have some honey to spread on it.”

*All the comforts of home.* The irony of the phrase echoed in Moishe’s mind. Instead of their flat, they sheltered in this secret chamber buried under another Warsaw apartment block. In further irony, the bunker had been built to shelter Jews not from the Lizards but from the Nazis, yet here he used it to save himself from the creatures who had saved him from the Germans.

And yet the words were not entirely ironic. The vast majority of Warsaw’s Jews lived far better under the Lizards than they had when Hitler’s henchmen ruled the city. The wheat-flour *challah*, rich with eggs and dusted with poppy seeds, would have been unimaginable in the starving Warsaw ghetto—Russie remembered too well the chunk of

fatty, sour pork for which he'd given a silver candlestick the night the Lizards came to Earth.

"When will I get to go out and play again?" Reuven asked. He looked from Rivka to Moishe and back again, hoping one of them would give him the answer he wanted.

They looked at each other, too. Moishe felt himself sag. "I don't know exactly," he told his son; he could not bring himself to lie to the boy. "I hope it will be soon, but more likely the day won't come for quite some time."

"Too bad," Reuven said.

"Don't you think we could—?" Rivka broke off, tried again: "I mean, who would betray a little boy to the Lizards?"

Moishe usually let his wife run their household, not least because she was better at it than he was. But now he said, "No," so sharply that Rivka stared at him in surprise. He went on, "We dare not let him go up above ground. Remember how many Jews were willing to betray their brethren to the Nazis for a crust of bread regardless of what the Nazis were doing to us? People have cause to *like* the Lizards, at least compared to the Germans. He wouldn't be safe where anybody could see him."

"All right," Rivka said. "*If* you think he'd be in danger up there, here he'll stay." Reuven let out a disappointed howl, but she ignored him.

"Anyone who has anything to do with me is in danger," Moishe answered bitterly. "Why do you think we never get to talk to the fighters who bring our supplies?" The door to the bunker was concealed by a sliding plasterboard panel; with the panel closed, the entranceway looked like a blank wall from the other side.

Russie wondered if the anonymous men who kept his family in food and candles even knew whom they were helping. He could easily imagine Mordechai Anielewicz ordering them to take their—boxes down and leave them in the basement without telling them whom the things were for. Why not? What the men didn't know, they couldn't tell the Lizards.

He made a sour face: he was learning to think like a soldier. All he'd wanted to do was heal people and then, after the Lizards came like a sign from heaven, set people free. And the result? Here he was in hiding and thinking like a killer, not a healer.

Not too long after supper, Reuven yawned and went to bed without his usual fuss. In the dark, closed bunker, night and day no longer had much meaning for the little boy. Had the fighters not furnished the place with a clock, Moishe would have had no idea of the hour, either. One day he'd forget to wind it and slip into timelessness himself.

The *shabbas* candles were still burning. By their light, Moishe helped Rivka wash the supper dishes (though without electricity, the bunker had running water). She smiled at him. "The time you lived by yourself taught you some things. You're much better at that than you used to be."

"What you have to do, you learn to do," he answered philosophically. "Hand me that towel, would you?"

He'd just slid the last dish into its stack when he heard noise in the cellar next to the hidden bunker: men moving about in heavy shoes. He and Rivka froze. Her face was frightened; he was sure his was, too. Had their secret been betrayed? The Lizards wouldn't shout "*Juden heraus!*" but he didn't want to be caught by them any more than by the Nazis.

He wished he had a weapon. He wasn't altogether a soldier yet, or he'd have had the sense to ask for one before he sealed himself away here. Too late to worry about it now.

The footsteps came closer. Russie strained his ears, trying to pick out the skitters and clicks that would have meant Lizards were walking with the humans. He thought he did. Fear rose up in him like a smothering cloud.

The people—and aliens?—stopped just on the other side of the plasterboard barrier. Moishe's eyes flicked to the candlesticks that held the Sabbath lights. These were of pottery, not silver like the one he'd given up for food. But they were heavy, and of a length to serve as bludgeons. *I won't go down without a fight*, he promised himself.

Someone rapped on the barrier. Russie grabbed for a candlestick, then caught himself: two knocks a pause, then another knock was the signal Anielewicz's men used when they brought him supplies. But they'd just done that a couple of days before, and the bunker still held plenty. They seemed to have a schedule of sorts, and even though the signal was right, the timing wasn't.

Rivka knew that, too. "What do we do?" she mouthed silently.

"I don't know," Moishe mouthed back. What he did know, though he didn't want to dishearten his wife by saying so, was that if the Lizards were out there, they were going to take him. But the footsteps receded. Had he really heard skitterings after all?

Rivka raised her voice to a whisper. "Are they gone?"

"I don't know," Russie said again. After a moment, he added, "Let's find out." If the Lizards knew he was here, they didn't need to wait for him to come out.

He picked up a candlestick, lit candle still inside (the cellar was as dark as the bunker would have been without light), unbarred the door, took half a step forward so he could slide aside the plasterboard panel. No box of food sat in front of it...but an envelope lay on the cement floor. He scooped it up, replaced the concealing panel, and went back into his hidey-hole.

"What is it?" Rivka asked when he was back inside.

"A note or letter of some sort," he answered, holding up the envelope. He tore it open, pulled out the folded sheet of paper inside, and held it close to the candlestick so he could see what it said. The one great curse of this underground life was never having either sunlight or electric light by which to read.

The candle sufficed for something short, though. He unfolded the paper. On it was a neatly typed paragraph in Polish. He read the words aloud for Rivka's benefit: "Just so you know, your latest message has been received elsewhere and widely circulated. Reaction is very much as we had hoped. Sympathy for us outside the area has increased,

and certain parties would have red faces under other circumstances. They still would like to congratulate you for your wit. Suggest you let them continue to lavish their praises from a distance.”

“That’s all?” Rivka asked when he was through. “No signature or anything?”

“No,” he answered. “I can make a pretty good guess about who sent it, though, and I expect you can, too.”

“Anielewicz,” she said.

“That’s what I think,” Moishe agreed. The note had all the hallmarks of the Jewish fighting leader. No wonder it was in Polish: he’d been thoroughly secular before the war. Being typewritten made it harder to trace if it fell into the wrong hands. So did its elliptical phrasing: someone who didn’t know for whom it was intended would have trouble figuring out what it was supposed to mean. Anielewicz was careful every way he could think of. Moishe was sure he wouldn’t know how the note had got down to the bunker.

Rivka said, “So the recording got abroad. Thank God for that. I wouldn’t want you known as the Lizards’ puppet.”

“No; thank God I’m not.” Moishe started to laugh. “I’d like to see Zolraag with his face all red.” After what the Lizard governor had done to him, he wanted Zolraag both embarrassed and furious. From what the note said, he was getting his wish.

One of the things with which the bunker had been stocked was a bottle of *slivovitz*. Till now, Moishe had ignored it. He pulled it off the high shelf where it sat, yanked out the cork, and poured two shots. Handing one glass to Rivka, he raised the other himself.

“Confusion to the Lizards!” he said.

They both sipped the plum brandy. Fire ran down Moishe’s throat. Rivka coughed several times. Then she lifted her glass. Quietly, she offered a toast of her own: “Freedom for our people, and even, one day, for us.”

“Yes.” Moishe finished the *slivovitz*. One of the Sabbath candles went out, filling the bunker with the smell of hot tallow—and cutting the light inside almost in half. New shadows swooped.

“The other one will go soon,” Rivka said, watching that flame approach the candlestick, too.

“I know,” Moishe answered gloomily. Up where Reuven could not knock them over, two little oil lamps burned. But for being made out of tin, they probably weren’t much different from the ones the Maccabees had used when they took the Temple in Jerusalem away from Antiochus and his Greeks. The tiny amount of light they gave made Moishe think they were primitive, anyhow.

He carefully refilled them all the same. Waking up in absolute blackness in the crowded little underground room was a nightmare he’d suffered only once. The dreadful groping search for a box of matches made him vow never to go through it again. He’d

lived up to the vow so far.

Reuven, Rivka, and he all shared one crowded bed. He gently rolled his son against the far wall. Reuven mumbled and thrashed, but didn't wake up. Moishe got into bed next to him, held up the covers so Rivka could slide in, too.

His hand brushed her hip as he let the blankets down over them. She turned toward him. The lamps gave just enough light to let him see the questioning look on her face. The touch had been as much an accident as a caress, but he drew her to him just the same. The questioning look turned to a smile.

Later, they lay nestled together like spoons, her backside warm against the bottom of his belly. It was a gentle way to make love, and one not likely to disturb their son. Moishe stroked Rivka's hair. She laughed quietly. "What's funny?" he asked. He could hear sleepiness blur his voice.

She laughed again. "We didn't do—this—so much when we were first married."

"Well, maybe not," he said. "I was just starting medical school and busy all the time, and then the baby came ..."

*And now, he thought, what else is there to do? It's too dark to read much, we're both sleeping a lot—if we didn't take our pleasure from each other we'd be as cross as a couple of bears cooped up down here.*

He didn't think saying he enjoyed Rivka's body because there wasn't anything else to do would endear him to her. Instead, he said with mock severity, "Most women, I hear, *kvetch* because their husbands don't pay them enough attention. Are you complaining because I pay you too much?"

"I didn't think I was complaining." She moved away from the edge of the bed, and against him. Pressed tight against her firm flesh, he felt himself begin to rise again. So did she. Without a word, she raised a leg enough to let him slip himself back into her. Her breath sighed out when he did.

*No hurry, he thought. We aren't going anywhere.* Unhurriedly, he tried to make the best of where they were.

The door to Bobby Fiore's cell hissed open. It wasn't the usual time for food, as well as he could judge without any clock. He looked around hopefully. Maybe the Lizards were bringing in Liu Han.

But no. It was only Lizards: the usual armed guards and another one, the latter with more elaborate body paint than the others. He'd figured out that was a mark of status among them, just as a man who wore a fancy suit was likely to be a bigger wheel than one in bib overalls and a straw hat.

The Lizard with the expensive paint job said something in his own language, too fast for Fiore to follow. He said as much, *I don't understand* being a phrase he'd found worth memorizing. The Lizard said, "Come—with," in English.

“It shall be done, superior sir,” Fiore answered, trotting out a couple of other stock phrases. He got to his feet and approached the Lizard—not too close, though, because he’d learned that made the guards anxious. He didn’t want anybody with a gun anxious about him.

The guards fell in around him, all of them too far away for him to try grabbing one of those guns. He wasn’t feeling suicidal this morning—assuming it *was* morning; only God and the Lizards knew for sure—so he didn’t try.

When the Lizards took him to Liu Han’s cell, they turned right out the door. This time they turned left. He didn’t know whether to be curious or apprehensive, and finally settled for a little of each: heading someplace out of the ordinary might be dangerous, but it gave him the chance to see something new. After being cooped up so long with essentially nothing to see, that counted for a good deal.

The trouble was, just because something was new didn’t necessarily make it exciting. Corridors remained corridors, their ceilings unpleasantly close to his head. Some were bare metal, others painted a flat off-white. The Lizards who passed him in those corridors paid him no more attention than he would have given a dog walking down the street. He wanted to shout at them, just to make them jump. But that would have made the guards jumpy, too, and maybe earned him a bullet in the ribs, so he didn’t.

Peering through open doorways was more interesting. He tried to figure out what the Lizards in those rooms that weren’t cells were up to. Most of the time, he couldn’t. A lot of the aliens just sat in front of what looked like little movie screens. Fiore couldn’t see the pictures on them, just that they were in color: the bright squares stood out in the midst of silver and white.

Then came something new: an oddly curved stairway. But as he descended it, Fiore discovered that while his eyes saw the curve, his feet couldn’t feel it, and when he got to the bottom, he seemed lighter than he had up at the top. He shifted his weight back and forth. No, he wasn’t imagining it.

*Boy, if I’d been this light on my feet, I’d’ve made the big leagues years ago,* he thought. Then he shook his head. Maybe not. His bat had always been pretty light, too.

The Lizards took the weird stairs. and the change in weight utterly for granted. They hustled him along the corridors on this level, which didn’t seem any different from those up above. At last they took him into one of the rooms with the movie screens.

The Lizard who’d ordered him out of his own cell spoke to the one who waited in there. That one had an even spiffier paint job than the alien who’d come in with the guards. Fiore couldn’t follow what the Lizards said as they talked back and forth, but he heard his own name several times. The Lizards massacred it worse than Liu Han did.

The alien who’d been in the room. surprised him by speaking decent English: “You are the Tosevite male Bobby Fiore, the one mated to the female Liu Han in an exclusive”—the word came out as one long hiss—”arrangement?”

“Yes, superior sir,” Fiore answered, also in English. He took a small chance by asking,

“Who are you, superior sir?”

The Lizard didn't get mad. “I am Tessrek, senior psychologist.” More hisses there. Tessrek went on, “I seek to learn more about this—arrangement.”

“What do you want to know?” Fiore wondered if the Lizards had figured out Liu Han was pregnant yet. He or she would have to spell things out pretty soon if they kept on being dumb about it.

They knew more than he'd thought. Tessrek turned a knob on the desk behind which he was sitting. Out of thin air, Fiore heard himself saying, “Goddamn, who woulda thought my first kid would be half Chink?” Tessrek turned the knob again, then asked, “This mean the female Liu Han will lay eggs—no, will reproduce; you Big Ugliers do not lay eggs—the female Liu Han will reproduce?”

“Uh, yeah,” Fiore said.

“This is as a result of your matings?” Tessrek twiddled with another knob. The little screen behind him, which had been a blank blue square, started showing a picture.

*Stag film*, Fiore thought; he'd seen a few in his time. This one was in color good enough for Technicolor, not the grainy black-and-white typical of the breed. The color was what he noticed first; only half a heartbeat later did he realize the movie was of Liu Han and him.

He took a step forward. He wanted to squeeze Tessrek's neck until the Lizard's strange eyes popped from his head. The murder on his face must have shown even to the guards, because a couple of them hissed a sharp warning and trained their weapons on his midsection. Reluctantly, every muscle screaming to go on, he checked himself.

Tessrek seemed to have no notion of what had rattled his cage. The psychologist went on blithely, “This mating—this spawn, you would say—you and the female Liu Han will care for it?”

“I guess so,” Bobby mumbled. Behind the Lizard, the dirty picture went on, Liu Han's face slack with ecstasy, his own intent above her. In a distant way, he wondered how the Lizards managed to show a movie in a lighted room with no projector visible. He made himself come back to the question. “Yeah, that's what we'll do if you”—*things*—“let us.”

“This will be what you Big Ugliers call a—family?” Tessrek pronounced the word with extra care, to make sure Fiore understood him.

“Yeah,” he answered, “a family.” He tried to look away from the screen, toward the Lizard, but his eyes kept sliding back. Some of his embarrassed anger spilled over into words: “What's the matter, don't you Lizards have families of your own? You gotta come to Earth to poke your snouts into ours?”

“No, we have none,” Tessrek said, “not in your sense of word. With us, females lay eggs, raise hatchlings, males do other things.”

Fiore gaped at him. More than his surroundings, more than the shamelessness with



which the Lizards had filmed his lovemaking, the simple admission brought home how alien the invaders were. Men might build spaceships one day (Sam Yeager had read about that rockets-to-Mars stuff all the time; Bobby wondered if his roommate was still alive). Plenty of men were shameless, starting with Peeping Tom. But not knowing what a family was ...

Oblivious to the turmoil he'd created, Tessrek went on, "The Race needs to learn how you Big Ugliers live, so we rule you better, easier. Need to understand to—how do you say?—to control, that that word I want?"

"Yeah, that's it, all right," Fiore said dully. *Guinea pig* ran through his head, again and again. He'd had that thought before, but never so strong. The Lizards didn't care that he knew they were experimenting with him; what could he do about it? To them, he was just an animal in a cage. He wondered what guinea pigs thought of the scientists who worked on them. If it was nothing good, he couldn't blame them.

"When will the hatchling come out?" Tessrek asked.

"I don't know exactly," Fiore answered. "It takes nine months, but I don't know how long it's been since she caught. How am I supposed to tell you? You don't even turn off the lights in my room."

"Nine—months?" Tessrek fiddled with something on his desk. The dirty movie disappeared from the screen behind him, to be replaced by Lizard squiggles. Those changed as he did more fiddling. He turned one of his eye turrets back toward them. "This would be one and one-half years of the Race? One year of the Race, I tell you, is half a Tosev year, more or less."

Bobby Fiore hadn't juggled fractions in his head since high school. The trouble he'd had with them then had helped convince him he'd be better off playing ball for a living. He needed some painful mental work before he finally nodded. "Yeah, I think that's right, superior sir."

"Sstrange." Another word Tessrek turned into a hiss. "You Big Ugliers take so long to give birth to your hatchlings. Why is this?"

"How the devil should I know?" Fiore answered; again he had the feeling of taking a test he hadn't studied for. "It's just the way we are. I'm not lying, superior sir. You can check that one with anybody."

"Check? This means confirm? Yes, I do that." The Lizard psychologist spoke Lizard talk into what looked like a little microphone. Different squiggles went up on the screen. Fiore wondered if it was somehow writing down what Tessrek said. Hell of a gadget if it could do that, he thought. The Lizard went on, "I do not think you lie. What is the advantage to you on this question? But I wonder why you Tosevites are so, not like Race and other species of the Empire."

"You oughta talk to a scientist or a doctor or somebody."

Fiore scratched his head. "You say you Lizards lay eggs?"

"Of course." By his tone, Tessrek implied that was the only thing a right-thinking

creature could possibly do.

Bobby thought back to the chickens that had squawked and clucked in a little coop behind his folks' house in Pittsburgh. Without those chickens and their eggs, he and his brothers and sisters would have gone hungry a lot more than they did, but that wasn't why they came to mind now. He said, "An egg can't get any bigger once you lay it. When the chick inside—or I guess the baby Lizard, too—is too big for the eggshell to hold it any more, it has to come out. But a baby inside a woman has more room to grow."

Tessrek brought both eyes to bear on him. He'd learned a Lizard did that only when you'd managed to get its full attention (he'd also learned its full attention wasn't always something you Wanted to have). The psychologist said, "This may be worth more study." He made it sound like an accolade.

He leaned close to the microphone, went back into his language. Again, the screen showed fresh Lizard writing. It really was a note-taker, Fiore realized. He wondered what else it could do—besides showing movies that should never have been made.

Tessrek said, "You Big Ugliers are of the kind of Tosevite creature where the female feeds the hatchling with a fluid that comes out of her body?" It wasn't exactly a question, even though he made the interrogative noise at the end: he already knew the answer.

Bobby Fiore had to take a mental step backward and work out what the Lizard was talking about. After a second, the light bulb went on. "With milk, you mean, superior sir? Yeah, we feed babies milk." He'd been a bottle baby himself, not nursed, but he didn't complicate the issue. Besides, what had the bottle held?

"Milk. Yes." Now Tessrek sounded as if Bobby had admitted humans picked their noses and fed babies on boogers, or else like a fastidious clubwoman who for some reason had to talk about syphilis. He paused, pulled himself together. "Only the females do this, am I correct? Not the males?"

"No, not the males, superior sir." Imagining a baby nursing at his flat, hairy tit made Fiore squeamish and also made him want to laugh. And it rammed home, just when he was starting to get used to the Lizards again, how alien they were. They didn't have a clue about what being human meant. Even though Liu Han and he had to use some Lizard words to talk with each other, they used them in a human context they both understood just because they were people, and probably used them in ways the Lizards would have found nonsensical.

That made him wonder how much Tessrek, in spite of his fluent English, truly grasped of the ideas he mouthed. Passing information back and forth was all very well; the Lizard psychologist's grasp of the language was good enough for that. But once he had the information, how badly would he misinterpret it just because it was different from anything he was used to?

Tessrek said, "If you males do not give—milk—to hatchlings, what point to staying by

them and by females?’

“Men help women take care of babies,” Fiore-answered, “and they can feed babies, too, once the babies start eating real food. Besides, they usually make the money to keep families going.”

“Understand *what* you Big Ugliers do; not understand *why*,” Tessrek said. “*Why* males want to stay with females? Why you have families, not males with females at random, like the Race and other species we know?”

In an abstract way, Bobby thought males with females at random sounded like fun. He’d enjoyed himself with the women with whom the Lizards had paired him before he’d ended up with Liu Han. But he enjoyed being with her, too, in a different and maybe deeper sense.

“Answer me,” Tessrek said sharply.

“I’m sorry, superior sir. I was trying to figure out what to say. I guess part of the answer is that men fall in love with women, and the other way round, too.”

“Love.” Tessrek used the word with almost as much revulsion as he had when he said *milk*. “You Big Ugliers talk loudly of this word. You do not ever make this a word with a meaning. You, Bobby Fiore, tell me what this *love* word means.”

“Uh,” Fiore said. That was a tall order for a poet, a philosopher, or even Cole Porter, let alone a minor-league second baseman. As he would have at the plate overmatched against Bob Feller, he gave it his best shot: “Love is when you care about somebody and want to take care of them and want them to be happy all the time.”

“You say *what*. I want *why*,” the Lizard psychologist said with a discontented hiss. “Is because you Big Ugliers mate all the time, use mating as social bond, form families because of this mating bond?”

Fiore was anything but an introspective man. Nor had he ever spent much time contemplating the nature of the family: families were what you grew up in, and later what you started for yourself. Not only that, all the talk about sex, even with a Lizard, embarrassed him.

“I guess maybe you’re right,” he mumbled. When he thought about it, what Tessrek had to say did make some sense.

“I *am* right,” Tessrek told him, and added the emphatic cough. “You help me show the disgusting habits of you Big Ugliers are to blame for you being so strange, so—what is word?—so anomalous. Yes, anomalous. I prove this, yes I do.” He spoke in his own language to the guards, who started marching Fiore back to his cell.

As he went, he reflected that while the Lizards were massively ignorant of humanity, they and people weren’t so different in some ways: just like a lot of people he’d known, Tessrek was using his words to prop up an idea the Lizard had already had. If he’d said just the opposite, Tessrek would have found some way to use that, too.

Jens Larssen's neck muscles tensed under the unaccustomed weight of the tin hat on his head. He was developing a list to the right from the slung Springfield he'd been issued. Like most farm kids, he'd done some plinking with a .22, but the military rifle had a mass and heft to it unlike anything he'd ever known.

Technically, he still wasn't a soldier. General Patton hadn't impressed him into the Army—"Your civilian job is more important than anything you can do for me," he'd rumbled—but had insisted that he be armed: "We've got no time to coddle noncombatants." Jens knew an inconsistency when he heard one, but hadn't had any luck convincing the major general.

He looked at his watch. The greenly glowing hands showed it was just before four A.M. The night was dark and cloudy and full of blowing snow, but it was anything but peaceful. More engines added their roar and the stink of their exhaust to the air every moment. The second hand ticked round the dial. A minute before four...half a minute ...

His watch was synchronized pretty well, but not perfectly. At—by his reckoning—3:59:34, what seemed like every cannon in the world cut loose. The low clouds glowed yellow for a few seconds from all the muzzle flashes packed together. The three-inch howitzers and the 90mm antiaircraft cannon pressed into service as field guns roared again and again, as fast as their crews could keep the shells coming.

As he'd been told, Jens yelled as loud as he could, to help equalize the pressure on his ears. The noise was lost in the overwhelming cacophony of the guns.

Lizard counterbattery fire began coming in a couple of minutes later. By then the tanks and men of Patton's force were already on the move. The American artillery barrage eased up as abruptly as it had begun. "Forward to the next firing position!" an officer near Larssen screamed. "The Lizards zero in on you fast if you stay, in one place too long."

Some of the howitzers were on their own motorized chassis. Halftracks towed most of the rest of the artillery pieces. A few were either horsedrawn or pulled by teams of soldiers. If the advance went as Patton planned (*hoped*, Jens amended to himself), those would soon fall behind. For the moment, every shell counted.

"Come on, you lugs—get your butts in gear!" a sergeant yelled with the dulcet tones of sergeants all through history.

"You think you're scared, just wait'll you see the goddamn Lizards when we hit 'em." That was the gospel according to Patton. Whether it was the gospel truth remained to be proved. Along with, the men around him, Jens tramped off toward the west.

Airplanes roared low overhead carefully husbanded against this day of need and now

to be expended, win or die Larssen waved at the planes as they darted past; he didn't think many of the pilots would be coming back. If attacking Lizard positions in the snowy dark wasn't a suicide mission he didn't know what was.

Of course, he realized a few seconds later, that was what he was doing too even if he wasn't in a fighter. Off to one side a soldier with a voice that still cracked exclaimed, "Ain't this exciting!"

"Now that you mention it, no," Larssen said.

Artillery Supervisor Svallah shouted into his field telephone: "What do you mean, you can't send me any more ammunition right now? The Big Ugliers are *moving*, I tell you! We haven't faced large-scale combat like this since just after we landed on this miserable ball of muddy ice."

The voice that came out of the speaker was cold: "I am also receiving reports of heavy fighting on the northwestern flank of our thrust toward the major city by the lake. Supply officers are still evaluating priorities."

Had Svallah possessed hair like a Big Ugly, he would have pulled great clumps of it from his head. Supply still seemed to think they were back Home, where a delay of half a day never mattered and one of half a year wasn't always worth getting excited about, either. The Tosevites, worse luck, didn't operate that way.

"Listen," he yelled, "we're low on cluster bombs, our landcruisers are short of both high-explosive and antiarmor rounds, we don't have enough antilandcruiser missiles for the infantry...By the Emperor, though it's not my province, I hear we're even short on small-arms rounds!"

"Yours is not the only unit in this predicament," replied the maddeningly dispassionate voice on the other end of the line. "Every effort will be made to resupply to the best of our ability as quickly as possible. Shipments may not be full resupplies; shortages do exist, and expenditures have been too high for too long. I assure you, we shall do the best we can under the circumstances."

"You don't understand!" Svallah wasn't yelling any more—he was screaming. He had reason: Tosevite shells had started feeling for his position. "Do you hear those bursts? Do you hear them? May you be cursed with an Emperorless afterlife, those aren't *our* guns! The stinking Big Ugliers have ammunition. It's not as good as ours, but if they're shooting and we're not, what difference does it make?"

"I assure you, Artillery Supervisor, resupply will reach you as expeditiously as is practicable," answered the male in Supply, who wasn't being shot at (*not yet*, Svallah thought bitterly). "I also assure you that yours is not the only unit urgently requesting munitions. We are making every effort to balance demands—"

The Tosevites' shells were walking closer, fragments of brass and steel rattled off tree trunks and branches. Svallah said, "Look, if you don't get me some shells pretty quick, my request won't matter, because I'm about to be overrun here. Is that plain enough for

you? By the Emperor, it'd probably make you happy, because then you'd have one thing fewer to worry about."

"Your attitude is not constructive, Artillery Supervisor," the male safe in the rear said in hurt tones.

"Ask me if I care," Svallah retorted. "Just so you know, I'm going to order a retreat before I get chopped to pieces. Those are my only two choices, since you can't get me ammunition. I—"

A Tosevite round landed within a male's length of him. Between them, blast and fragments left him hardly more than a red rag splashed across the snow. By a freak of war, the field telephone was undamaged. It squawked, "Artillery Supervisor? Are you there, Artillery Supervisor? Respond, please. Artillery Supervisor...?"

For the first couple of days, it was easier than Larssen would have imagined possible. Patton really had managed to catch the Lizards napping, and to hit them where their defenses were thin. How the soldiers cheered when they crossed from Indiana into Illinois! Instead of running or desperately holding on like a stunned boxer in a clinch, they were advancing. It made new men of them—got *their peckers up*, was the way one sergeant had put it.

All of a sudden, it wasn't easy any more. In the open fields in front of a grim little town called Cissna Park stood a Lizard tank. It was defiantly out in the open, with a view that reached for miles. In front of it, burning or by now burnt out, lay the hulks of at least half a dozen Lees and Shermans. Some had been killed at close to three miles. They didn't have a prayer of touching the Lizard tank at that range, let alone killing it.

The tank crew had high-explosive shells as well as armor-piercers. Larssen had been on the receiving end of bombardments back in Chicago. He preferred giving them out. He couldn't do anything about it, though, except throw himself flat when the big gun spoke again.

"That son of a whore's gonna hold up the whole brigade all by his lonesome," somebody said with sick dread in his voice. The soldiers' peckers might be up now, but how long would they stay that way if the onslaught failed?

A fellow who looked much too young to be wearing a major's gold oak leaves began ticking off men on his fingers. "You, you, you, you, and you, head off to the right flank and make that bastard notice you. I'm coming, too. We'll see what we can do about him."

Jens was the second of those *yous*. He opened his mouth to protest: he was supposed to be a valuable physicist, not a dog-face. But he didn't have the nerve to finish squawking, not when the rest of the party was heading out, not when everybody was looking at them—and at him. Legs numb with fear, he lurched after the others.

The tank seemed almost naked out there. If it had any infantry support, the Lizards on the ground were holding their fire. Larssen watched the distant turret. It got less

distant all the time, which meant it got more and more able to kill him. *If it swings this way, I know I'm going to run*, he thought. But he kept trotting forward.

One of the soldiers lay flat on the ground, opened up with a Browning automatic rifle. He had about as much chance of hurting the tank with it as a mosquito did blowing holes in an elephant. “Come on, keep moving!” the kid who was a major bawled. Jens kept moving. The farther he got from the brave maniac with the BAR, the better he liked it.

A couple of hundred yards farther on, another fellow, also armed with a BAR, took cover in some bushes that wouldn't have been there if the field had been tended since last summer. He too started firing short bursts at the Lizard tank. Now Larssen was close enough to see a couple of sparks as bullets spanged off its turret. Again, he couldn't see that they did any good.

“The rest of you, spread out, find what cover you can, and start shooting,” the major said. “We are a diversion. We have to make that gunner pay attention to us.”

*Diversion indeed*, Jens thought. The Lizard gunner ought to have extraordinarily good sport chewing up humans who couldn't do him any damage in return.

But there was another tall patch of snow-covered dead weeds just ahead. He dropped down behind them. Even through several layers of clothes, the snow chilled his belly. He drew a bead on the tank, squeezed the Springfield's trigger.

Nothing happened. Scowling, he checked the rifle. He'd left the safety on. “You idiot!” he snarled to himself as he clicked it off. He aimed again, fired. The kick hammered his shoulder, a lot harder than he remembered from when he'd fooled around with a .22.

The physicist part of him took over: *You're sending a heavier slug out at a higher velocity—of course it'll kick harder. Newton's Second Law, remember—good old  $F = ma$ ?* He adjusted the sight for long range; his first shot, with it set for four hundred yards, couldn't have come close. He pulled the trigger again. This time he was better braced against the recoil. He still couldn't tell whether he hit it or not.

As he'd been ordered, he banged away. The rest of the detachment was making a lot of noise, too. If somebody got real lucky with a round, he might mess up a sight or a periscope. Past that, the major's diversion wasn't doing anything more than standing out in the open with a SHOOT ME sign would have accomplished.

After a while, though, the Lizard commanding the tank must have got tired of just sitting there in a target suit. The turret skewed toward one of the BAR men. Having seen American tank turrets in action, Larssen was appalled at how fast this one traversed.

Fire spurted from the turret, not the main armament—why swat flies with a sledgehammer?—but the coaxial machine gun by it. Snow and dirt spurted up all around the soldier with the automatic rifle. It wasn't a long burst—the gunner was flung for effect. After a few seconds' silence, the BAR man shifted his weapon on its bipod, sent back a few defiant rounds. *Here I am!* he seemed to be saying. *Nyaah, nyaah!*

The tank gunner squeezed off an answering burst, longer this time. Another silence

fell after he stopped. The fellow with the Browning automatic rifle did not reply now. *Wounded or dead*, Larssen thought grimly, The tank turret turned on to the other BAR man.

He had a better spot from which to shoot back, and lasted quite a bit longer than the first gunner had. The firefight between him and the tank gunner went on through several exchanges. But the fellow, with the BAR was under orders to keep the tank busy, and brave enough to carry out those orders with exactitude. That meant he had to keep exposing himself to fire and in any case, the dirt and bushes behind which he lay were no match for the inches of armor that sheltered the Lizard in the tank turret.

When the second BAR fell silent, the tank turret traversed through another few degrees. Larssen watched it with fearful fascination—for now it bore on him. He was lying in what had been a plowed furrow. When the machine gun began to chatter again, he flattened himself out like a snake, hoping—praying—the hard earth would offer some protection. The second BAR man had lived a little while, after all.

Bullets lashed the ground all around him. Freezing dirt spattered onto his coat and the back of his neck. He could not force himself to get up and shoot back; not in the face of a machine gun behind armor. Did that make him a coward? He didn't know or care.

The burst from the tank broke off. He lifted his head out of the dirt. If by some miracle the turret had moved on to take up the hunt for someone else, he thought, he might start firing again, and then scoot for new cover. But no. The cannon—and, therefore, the machine gun, too—still bore on him.

He saw motion on the far side of the Lizard tank: more human soldiers, men who'd snuck close to the monster while he and his comrades occupied its attention. He wondered if they'd leap aboard and throw explosives into the turret through the cupola. Lizard tanks had died that way, but an awful lot more soldiers had died trying to kill them.

One of the Americans raised something to his shoulder. It wasn't a gun: it was longer and thicker. Flame spurted from its rear end. Trailing fire all the way, some kind of rocket round shot across the couple of hundred yards that separated the soldiers from the Lizard tank. It slammed into the engine compartment at the rear, right where the armor was thinnest.

More fire, some blue, some orange, spurted from the stricken vehicle. Hatches popped open in the turret; three Lizards bailed out. Now, yelling like a savage, Jens fired with ferocious glee. Suddenly the tables were turned, the tormentors all but helpless against those they had bedeviled. One Lizard fell, then another.

Then the tank brewed up as the fire reached the main fuel storage. Flame washed over the whole chassis; a smoke ring spurted up from the turret. Pops and booms marked ammunition starting to cook off. The last Lizard who'd made it out of the hatch went down under a fusillade of bullets.

The kid major was up on his feet, waving like a madman. Off to the east, the distant



roar of engines marked new motion from the tanks and self-propelled guns the Lizard tank had stalled. Then the major ran back to see how the two BAR men were. Jens ran with him.

One of them was gruesomely dead, the top of his skull clipped off by a Lizard round and gray-red brains splashed in the snow. The other had a belly wound. He was unconscious but breathing. The major pulled aside clothes, dusted the bleeding wound with sulfa powder, slapped on a field dressing, and waved for a medic.

He turned to Larssen: "You know what? I think we're really gonna do this!"

"Maybe." Jens knew his voice wasn't everything it should be; he hadn't hardened himself against human beings looking like selections from the butcher's. Trying not to think of that, he asked, "What did they use to take out the tank?" As if to punctuate his words, more rounds went up inside the blazing hulk.

"The rocket? Wasn't that great?" When the major grinned, he didn't look a day over seventeen. "The fancy name is 2.36-inch Rocket Launcher, but all the teams I know are calling it after that crazy instrument Bob Burns plays on the radio."

"A bazooka?" Larssen grinned, too. "I like that."

"So do I." The major's grin slipped a little. "I just wish we had a hell of a lot more of 'em. They were brand new last year, and of course we've had the devil's own time building 'em since the damned Lizards came. But what we've got, we're using." All at once, he went from informant back to officer. "Now we've got to get moving. Bust your hump, there!"

"Shouldn't they go ahead, sir?" Jens pointed to the Lees and Shermans just now rattling past the carcass of the Lizard tank.

"They need us, too," the major answered. "They make the hole, we go through it and we support them. If the Lizards had had some infantry on the ground to support that vehicle, we couldn't have stalked it the way we did. Their machines are marvelous and you can't say they're not brave, but their tactical doctrine stinks."

Colonel Groves, Larssen remembered, had said the same thing. At the time, it hadn't seemed to matter; the aliens' machines were carrying everything before them. But it seemed they might be fought successfully after all.

The major was already moving west again. Jens trotted heavily after him, giving the pyre of the Lizard tank a wide berth.

Assault Force Commander Reihost said, "No, I can't send you more landcruisers up there in your sector."

On the radio, the voice of Zingiber, the Northern Flank Commander, was anguished. "But I need them! The Big Uglies have so much of their garbage coming at me that they're pushing me back. And it's not all garbage any more, either: I lost three landcruisers today to those stinking rockets they've started using. Our crews aren't

trained to regard infantry as a tactical threat, and we can't pull them out for training sessions now."

"Hardly." Reihost didn't want to know whether Zingiber was serious or not. He might have been; some males still hadn't adjusted to the pace war required on Tosev 3. Rethost went on, "I say again, I have no more landcruisers to send. We've lost seven on the southern flank as well, and the rocket threat is making us deploy them more cautiously there, too."

"But I need them," Zingiber repeated, as if his need would conjure landcruisers out of thin air. "I say again, superior sir, that as things stand we are losing ground. The two Big Ugly attacks may even succeed in joining."

"Yes, I know. I am also looking at a map screen." Rethost didn't like what he saw there, either if the Big Ugliers did manage to link their thrusts, they'd cut support for his principal assault force, which was finally pounding into the suburbs of Chicago. That was expensive, too; in the rubble of their towns, the Tosevites fought like *ssvapi* on Rabotev 2 protecting their burrows.

Zingiber said, "If you can't send landcruisers, send helicopters to help me take out some more of the Tosevites' armor."

Rethost made up his mind that if Zingiber made one more such idiotic request, he'd relieve him. He hissed angrily before he pressed the TRANSMIT button. "We have fewer helicopters than landcruisers to spare. The miserable Tosevites have learned something new." *They're faster at that than we are.* The thought worried him. He made himself continue: "They've brought their anti-aircraft artillery as far forward as they can, towing it with light armor or sometimes even with soft-skinned vehicles. The helicopters are armored against rifle-caliber bullets. To armor them against these shells would make them too heavy to fly."

"Let them ship us landcruisers from elsewhere on this stinking planet, then," Zingiber said.

"The logistics!" Rethost cringed. "Landcruisers are so big and heavy only two will fit onto even our biggest hauler aircraft. And we brought few of those aircraft to Tosev 3, not anticipating so large a need. Besides, the haulers are unarmed and vulnerable to the upsurge in Tosevite air activity lately. It takes only one of those nasty little machines slipping through a killercraft screen to bring down the hauler and the landcruiser both."

"But if we don't get reinforcements from somewhere, we'll lose this battle," Zingiber said. "Let them put the landcruisers on a starship if they must, so long as we get them."

"Land a starship in the middle of a combat zone, vulnerable to artillery and the Emperor only knows what ingenious sabotage the Big Ugliers can devise? You must be joking." Rethost made a bitter decision. "I'll pull a few landcruisers back from the principal assault force...maybe more than a few. They can return once they rectify the situation."

*I hope,* he thought. The landcruisers didn't run without fuel, and the Tosevites were

doing everything they could to interfere with supply lines. No one loved logistics, but armies that ignored logistics died.

Of course, the Tosevites had fuel problems of their own. They'd stockpiled the noxious stuff their machines burned for this campaign, but the facilities that produced it were vulnerable to assault. Rethost looked at the map again. He hoped the Race would assault them soon.

A couple of Big Ugliers in long black coats and wide-brimmed black hats pushed an ordnance cart toward the flight of killercraft. Gefron took no notice of them; Tosevites were doing a lot of menial work these days, to let males of-the Race get on with the business of conquering Tosev 3.

Gefron gave Rolvar and Xarol, his fellow pilots in the flight, their last few instructions: "Remember, this one is important. We really have to plaster that Ploesti place; the Big Ugliers of Deutschland draw much of their fuel from it."

"It shall be done," the other two males chorused together.

Gefron went on, "So much I have been ordered to tell you. But for myself, I would like to dedicate this mission to the spirit of my predecessor as head of this unit, Flight Leader Teerts. We shall aid in making it impossible for the Big Ugliers to kill or capture—we still do not know his exact fate—any more brave males like Teerts. Thanks to us, the conquest of Tosev 3 shall grow nearer its completion."

"It shall be done," the pilots chorused again.

Mordechai Anielewicz walked along Nowolipie Street between closed armaments plants, listening to Nathan Brodsky. The Jewish fighting leader had long since grown used to taking promenades through Warsaw to listen to things he didn't want to take the chance of having the Lizards overhear. This was one of those things: Brodsky, who worked as a laborer at the airport, had picked up a lot of the Lizards' language.

"No doubt about it," Brodsky was saying. The hem of his coat flapped around his ankles as he walked beside Anielewicz. "Their destination is Ploesti; they were talking about knocking out all the Nazis' oil. *Nu*, I know that's important, so I told the Lizard boss I was sick and came straight to you."

"*Nu, nu*," Anielewicz answered. "You're not wrong; it is important. Now I have to figure out what to do about it." He stopped. "Let's head back toward my headquarters."

Brodsky obediently turned. Now Anielewicz walked with his head down, hands jammed into his pockets against the cold. He was thinking very hard indeed. Cooperating with the Germans in any way still left the worst of bad tastes in his mouth. He kept having second thoughts about letting that damned panzer major through with even half his saddlebag of explosive metal.

And now again, If the Lizards wrecked Ploesti, the Nazi war machine was liable to

grind to a halt; the Germans, without oil of their own, desperately needed what they got from Romania. The Nazis were still fighting hard against the Lizards; and even hurting them now and again: no one could deny they turned out capable soldiers and clever engineers.

Suppose in the end the Germans won. Would they rest content inside their own borders? Anielewicz snorted. Not bloody likely! But suppose the Germans—suppose mankind—lost. Would the Lizards ever use human beings as anything but hewers of wood and drawers of water? That wasn't bloody likely, either.

The Jewish fighting leader came around the last corner before the office building his men occupied. Among many others, his bicycle stood out in front of it. Seeing it there helped him make up his mind. He slapped Brodsky on the back. "Thank you for letting me know, Nathan. I'll take care of it."

"What will you do?" Brodsky asked.

Anielewicz didn't answer; unlike Brodsky, he'd come to appreciate the need for tight security. What the other Jew didn't know, he couldn't tell. Anielewicz hopped on his bicycle, rode rapidly to a house outside the ghetto. He knocked on the door. A Polish woman opened it. "May I use your telephone?" he said. "I'm sorry; I'm afraid it's quite urgent."

Her eyes went wide: few people who are part of contingency plans ever expect the contingencies to arrive. But after a moment she nodded. "Yes, of course. Come in. It's in the parlor."

Anielewicz knew where the phone was; his men had installed it. He cranked it, waited for an operator to answer. When she did, he said, "Give me Operator Three-Two-Seven, please."

"One moment." He heard clicks from the switchboard, then: "Three-Two-Seven speaking."

"Yes. This is Yitzhak Bauer. I need to place a call to my uncle Michael in Satu Mare, please. It's urgent."

The operator was one of his people. The false name was one for which she was supposed to be alert. And she was. Without a second's hesitation, she said, "I will try to put you through. It may take some time."

"As fast as you can, please." At full stretch from where he stood, Anielewicz could just reach a chair. He snagged it, sank into it. Polish long-distance phone service had been bad before the war started. It was worse now. He kept the receiver pressed to his ear. What he mostly heard was silence. Every so often, there would be more switchboard clicks or operators' voices at the very limit of hearing.

Time crawled by. The Polish woman brought him a cup of coffee, or rather the burnt-kasha brew that substituted for it. He'd long since grown used to the ersatz, and besides, it was warm. But if the call didn't get through pretty soon, he wouldn't have needed to bother making it: the Lizards would have bombed Ploesti and headed back.

*How long to finish arming their planes?* he wondered. That was the biggest variable; the flight from here to a little north of Bucharest wouldn't take long, especially not at the speeds the Lizards' aircraft used.

More clicks, more distant chatter, and then, sounding almost as clear as if she were sitting in his lap, Operator Three-Two-Seven said, "I am through to Sate Mare, sir." He heard another operator's voice, more distant, speaking oddly accented German rather than Polish or Yiddish: "Go ahead, Warsaw. To whom do you wish to speak?"

"My uncle Michael—Michael Spiegel, that is," Anielewicz said. "Tell him it's his nephew Yitzhak." Lieutenant Colonel Michael Spiegel, he was given to understand, commanded the Nazi garrison at Sate Mare, the northernmost Romanian town still in German hands.

"I will connect you. Please wait," the distant operator said.

Anielewicz listened to still more clicks, and then at last a ringing phone. Someone picked it up; he heard a brisk male voice say, "*Bitte?*" The operator explained who he claimed to be. A long pause followed, and then, "Yitzhak? Is that you? I hadn't expected to hear from you."

*I hadn't expected to call, either you Nazi bastard* Anielewicz thought; Spiegel's clear German set his teeth on edge by conditioned reflex. But he made himself say, "Yes, it's me, Uncle Michael. I thought you ought to know that our friends will want some cooking grease from your family—as much as you can spare."

He felt how crude the improvised code was. Spiegel, fortunately, proved quick on the uptake. Hardly missing a beat, the German said, "We'll have to get it ready for them. Do you know when they're coming?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if they'd already left," Anielewicz answered. "I'm sorry, but I just found out they felt like getting it myself."

"Such is life. We'll do what we can. *Hei*—Good-bye." The line went dead.

*He started to say Heil Hitler,* Anielewicz thought. *Damn good thing he caught himself in case the Lizards are listening in.*

As soon as he replaced the receiver, the Polish woman stuck her head into the parlor. "Is everything all right?" she asked anxiously.

"I—hope so," he answered, but felt he had to add, "If you have relatives you can stay with, that might be a good idea."

Her pale blue eyes went wide. She nodded. "I'll arrange to have someone get word to my husband," she said. "Now you'd better go."

Anielewicz left in a hurry. He felt bad about endangering a noncombatant family, and even worse about endangering them to benefit the Nazis. *I hope I did the right thing,* he thought as he climbed onto his bicycle. *I wonder if I'll ever be sure.*

Blips appeared on the head-up display that reflected into Gefron's eyes from the inside

of the killercraft's windscreen. "Some of the Big Uglies on the ground must have spotted us," the flight leader said. "They're sending aircraft up to try to keep us away from Ploesti." His mouth fell open in amusement at the absurdity of the idea.

The other two pilots in the flight confirmed that their electronics saw the Tosevite aircraft, too. Xarol observed, "They're sending up a lot of aircraft."

"This fuel is important to them," Gefron answered. "They know they have to try to protect it. What they don't know is that they can't. We'll have to show them."

He studied the velocity vectors of the planes the Big Uglies were flying. A couple were the new jets the Deutsche had started throwing into the air. They were fast enough to have been troublesome if they were equipped with radar. As it was, he knew they were there while they still groped for him.

"I'll take the jets," he told the other males. "You two handle the ones with the revolving airfoils. Knock down a few and keep going; we haven't any time to waste toying with them."

He chose targets for his missiles, gave them to the computer.

When the tone from the speaker tapped to his hearing diaphragm told him the computer had acquired them, he touched the firing button. The killercraft bucked slightly as the wingtip missiles leapt away.

One of the jets never knew what hit it. He watched electronically as a missile swatted it out of the air. The other Tosevite pilot must have spotted the missile meant for him. He tried to dive away from it, but his aircraft wasn't fast enough for that. He went down, too.

Gefron's wingmales salvoed all their missiles, wingtip and pylon both, at the Deutsche aircraft. That blasted a gaping hole in their formation, through which the killercraft flew. Rolvar and Xarol shouted excitedly; they hadn't seen so much opposition since the war was new.

Gefron was pleased, too, but also a little worried. The Big Ugly pilots weren't fleeing; they were trying to regroup in the wake of the killercraft. Returning to base, only he would have missiles left to fire at them.

*It shouldn't matter,* Gefron told himself. *If we can't get by them with our speed, altitude, radar and cannon, we don't deserve to conquer this planet.* But it was one more thing to worry about.

He studied the radar display. "Approaching target," he said. "Remember, the Deutsche have set up a dummy target north of the real installation. If you bomb that one, by mistake, I promise that you'll never get your tailstumps into a killercraft again as long as you live."

The real Ploesti lay in a little vale. Gefron had it on his radar set. He peered through the windscreen, ready to paint the assigned refineries with his laser to guide the bombs in. But instead of the towers of the refineries and petroleum wells, the big squat cylinders that stored refined hydrocarbons, all he saw was a spreading, thickening cloud

of gray-black smoke. He hissed. The Deutsche weren't playing fair.

His wingmales noticed the problem at the same time he did. "What are we supposed to do now?" Rolyar asked. "How can we light up the targets through all that junk?"

Gefron wanted to abort the mission and fly back to base. But, because he was the flight leader, anything that went wrong would get blamed on him. "We'll bomb anyway," he declared. "Whatever in the smoke we hit will hurt the Deutsche somehow."

"Truth," Xarol declared. The flight went on. Gefron turned on the laser targeting system in the hope it would penetrate the smoke or find some clear patches through which to acquire accurate targets for the bombs his killercraft carried under its wings. No luck—instead of the steady tone he wanted to hear, all he got was the complaining warble of a system that couldn't lock on.

The Deutsch anti-aircraft guns that lined the ridges on either side of the petroleum wells and refineries opened up with everything they had. More smoke dotted the sky, now in big black puffs around and mostly behind the flight of killercraft: the Big Ugliers at the guns weren't leading the Race's aircraft quite enough.

Even so, the display of firepower was impressive. The bursts from exploding Tosevite shells seemed close enough together for Gefron to get out of his aircraft and walk across them. Once or twice he heard sharp rattles, like gravel bouncing off sheet metal. It wasn't gravel, though; it was fragments of shell casing punching holes in his fuselage and wing. He anxiously scanned the instrument panel for damage lights. None came on.

The Deutsche were defending Ploesti every way they knew how. Above the clotted smoke floated balloons tethered to stout cables that might wreck an aircraft that ran into them. More anti-aircraft guns, some cannons like those on the high ground to either side, others mere machine guns that spat glowing tracers, fired out of the smoke. They had no radar control and so could not see what they hoped to hit, but they added more metal to an already crowded sky.

"Does anyone have laser lock-on?" Gefron asked hopefully. Both wingmales denied it. Gefron sighed. The results would not be what his superiors had hoped for. "Proceed on purely visual bombing run."

"It shall be done, Flight Leader," Xarol and Rolvar chorused.

Then they were over the billowing smoke. Gefron poised a claw at the bomb-release button. The killercraft lost both weight and drag as the ordnance fell away. All at once it seemed a much better performer.

"We *did* hurt them, by the spirits of departed Emperors!" Xarol said exultantly.

The wingmale was right. Sudden new angry clouds of black, greasy smoke roiled up through the screen the Deutsche had stretched above Ploesti. Through new smoke and old, Gefron saw sullen orange fireballs blooming like so many huge, terrible flowers.

"The Big Ugliers will be a long time repairing that," the flight leader agreed happily. He radioed a report of success to the base from which he'd set out, then returned to the intraflight frequency: "Now we go home."

“As if we had any real home on this cold ball of mud,” Rolvar said.

“Part of it—the more southerly latitudes—can be quite pleasant,” Gefron replied. “And even this area’s not too bad in local summer. Present conditions, of course, are something else again—I assure you, I find frozen water as revolting as does any other male in his right mind.”

He brought his killercraft onto the reciprocal of the course he’d flown to Ploesti. As he did so, his radar picked up the Big Ugly aircraft through which his flight had barreled on the way to the refinery complex. They hadn’t come straight after the killercraft; instead, they’d loitered along the likely return route and used the time while he and his wingmales were making their bombing run to gain altitude.

Gefron would have been just as glad to scoot past unnoticed, but one of the Big Ugliers spotted him and his comrades. They might have been radarless, but they had radios. What one of them saw, the others learned in moments. Their aircraft turned toward the flight for an attack run.

The range closed frighteningly fast. The Big Ugliers flew inadequate aircraft, but they flew them with panache and courage, darting straight at Gefron and his wingmales. The flight leader fired his next-to-last missile and then, a moment later, his last one. Two Tosevite-planes tumbled in ruins. The rest kept coming.

On the head-up display, Gefron saw another enemy aircraft break up, and yet another: Rolvar and Xarol were using their cannon to good effect. But the Big Ugliers were firing, too; through the windscreen, past the headup display, the flight leader watched the pale flashes from their guns. He turned the nose of his killercraft toward the nearest Big Ugly, fired a short burst. Smoke poured from the enemy’s engine; the plane began to fall.

Then the flight was through the horde of Tosevites. Gefron let out a long sigh of relief: the Big Ugliers could not hope to pursue. He keyed his radio: “All well, wingmales?”

“All well, Flight Leader,” Rolvar answered. But Xarol said, “Not all well, superior sir. I took several hits as we mixed it up with the Big Ugliers. I’ve lost electrical power to some of my control surfaces, and I’m losing hydraulic pressure in the backup system. I am not certain I will be able to complete return to base.”

“I will inspect visually.” Gefron gained altitude and lost speed, letting Xarol pull ahead of him: What he saw made him hiss in dismay: part of the tail surface of his wingmale’s killercraft had been shot away, and two lines of dismayingly large holes stitched the right wing and fuselage. “You didn’t just take several hits; you got yourself chewed up. Can you keep it flying?”

“For the time being, superior sir, but altitude control grows increasingly difficult.”

“Do the best you can. If you are able to set down on one of our airstrips, the Race will have the opportunity to repair your aircraft rather than writing it off.”

“I understand, superior sir.”

The Race had lost far more equipment on Tosev 3 than even the most pessimistic



forecasts allowed for. Keeping what was left operational was a priority that grew higher every day.

But luck was not with Xarol. He did manage to keep his killercraft airborne until the flight reached territory the Race controlled. Gefron had just radioed the nearest landing strip of his wingmale's predicament when Xarol announced, "I regret, superior sir, that I have no choice but to abandon the aircraft."

Moments later, a blue-white fireball marked the machine's impact point. When Gefron landed back at Warsaw, he learned his wingmale had ejected safely and been rescued. That pleased him—but the next time Xarol needed to fly, what aircraft would he use?

Small-arms fire rattled through Naperville. Mutt Daniels crouched in the trench in front of the ruins of the Preemption House. Every so often, when the firing slackened, he'd stick his tommy gun up over the forward rim of the trench, squeeze off a short burst in the direction of the Lizards, and then yank it back down again.

"Kinda quiet today, isn't it, Sarge?" Kevin Donlan said just as one such burst was answered by a storm of fire from the aliens, whose forward outposts were only a few hundred yards to the east.

Mutt pressed his face against the dirt wall of the trench as bullets whined just overhead. "You call this here quiet?" he said, thinking he'd chill the kid with sarcasm.

But Donlan wouldn't chill. "Yeah, Sarge. I mean, it is, isn't it. Just rifle fire right now—just rifle fire all day long, pretty much. I don't miss the artillery one little bit, let me tell you."

"Me neither. Rifles are bad enough, but that other stuff, that's what slaughters you." Daniels paused, played back the day's action in his head. "You know, you're right, and I didn't even notice. They ain't done much with their big guns today, have they?"

"I didn't think so. What do you suppose it means?"

"Damfino." Mutt wished he had a cigarette or a chew or even a pipe. "I ain't sorry not to be on, this end of it either, though; don't get me wrong about that. But why they're off with it son, I couldn't begin to tell you."

The more he thought about it, the more it worried him. The Lizards didn't have numbers going for them; their strength had always lain in their guns: their tanks and self-propelled pieces; if they were easing off with those ...

"Maybe our offensive really is putting the screws to them, making, them pull back," Donlan said.

"Mebbe." Daniels remained unconvinced. He'd been falling back before the invaders ever since he got strafed out of his train. The idea that other troops could move forward against them was galling; it seemed to say nothing he'd done, nothing Sergeant Schneicier—as fine a soldier as ever lived—had done, was good enough. He didn't like believing that.

Behind him, back toward Chicago, an American artillery barrage opened up on the Lizard position. It was an odd, pawky sort of shelling, on again, off again, nothing like the endless rains of projectiles that had punctuated combat in France. If you kept a gun in the same place for more than two or three rounds, the Lizards would figure out where it was and blast it. Mutt didn't know how they did it, but he knew they did. He'd seen too many dead artillerymen and wrecked guns to have any doubt left.

He waited for counterbattery fire to start. With the cynical sense of self-preservation soldiers soon develop, he would sooner have had the Lizards shelling positions miles behind him than lobbing their presents into his trench.

American shells kept falling on the Lizards. When half an hour went by without reply, Daniels said, "You know, kid, you might just be right. Feels mighty damn good to give it to 'em instead of taking it, don't you reckon?"

"Hell yes, Sergeant," Donlan said happily.

A runner came down heavily into the trench where the two men sheltered. He said, "Check your watches, Sergeant, soldier. We're advancing against their lines in"—he glanced at his own watch—"nineteen minutes." He ran down the trench toward the next knot of men. "You got a watch?" Donlan asked.

"Yeah," Mutt answered absently. Advancing against the Lizards! He hadn't heard orders like that since outside Shabbona, halfway across the state. That had been a disaster. This time, though... "Maybe we really are hurting 'em out there. God damn, I hope we are."

General Patton's personal vehicle was a big, ungainly Dodge command and reconnaissance car, one of the kind that had been nicknamed jeeps until the squarish little Willys vehicles took the name away from them. This one had been altered with a .50 caliber machine-gun mount that let Patton blaze away as well as command.

To Jens Larssen, who munched on crackers in the backseat and tried to stay inconspicuous, the gun seemed excessive. No one had asked his opinion. As far as he could see, no one ever asked anyone's opinion in the Army. You either gave orders or you went out and did what you were told.

Patton turned to him and said, "I do regret that you were thrust into the front line, Dr. Larssen. You bear too much value to your country for you to have been so cavalierly risked."

"It's all right," Larssen said. "I lived through it." *Somehow*, he added to himself. "Where are we now, anyhow?"

"D'you see that hill there, the one with the tall building sprouting from it?" Patton asked, pointing through the Dodge jeep's windshield. On the flat prairie country of central Illinois, any rise, no matter how slight, stood out. Patton went on, "The building is the State Farm Insurance headquarters, and the town"—he paused for dramatic effect—"the town, Dr. Larssen, is Bloomington."

“The objective.” Larssen hoped General Patton would not take offense at the surprise in his voice. The Lizards had seemed so nearly invincible ever since they came to Earth. He hadn’t dared believe Patton could not only force a breakthrough but exploit it once made.

“The objective,” Patton agreed proudly. As if answering the thought Jens hadn’t spoken, he added, “Once we broke through their crust, they were hollow behind it. No doubt we were confused and scared, attacking such a formidable foe. But they showed confusion and fright themselves, sir, not least because they were being attacked.”

The bulky radio console set into the space behind the rear seat of the Dodge jeep let out a squawk. Patton grabbed for the earphones and mike. He listened for a minute or so, then softly breathed one word: “Outstanding.” He stowed the radio gear, gave his attention back to Larssen: “Our scouts, sir, have met advance parties from General Bradley’s army north of Bloomington. We now have the force which was attacking Chicago trapped within our ring of steel.”

“That’s—wonderful,” Larssen said. “But will they stay trapped?”

“A legitimate question,” Patton said. “We will learn soon: reports indicated that the armor they had been using to spearhead their advance into Chicago has now reversed its direction.”

“It’s bearing down on us?” Jens felt some of the bladder-loosening fear he’d known while diverting the Lizard tank so the fellow with the bazooka could stalk and kill it. He remembered the gaggle of American tanks the monster had taken out, and the wrecked fighting vehicles that littered the snowy plains of Indiana and Illinois. If lots of those tanks were heading this way, how was Second Armor supposed to stop them?

Patton said, “I understand your concern, Dr. Larssen, but fighting aggressively while holding the strategic defensive should let us inflict heavy losses on them. And infantry teams firing antitank rockets from ambush will present a challenge they have not previously experienced,”

“I sure hope so,” Larssen said. He went on, “If they’re coming from Chicago, sir, when will I be able to go into the city to find out what’s become of the Metallurgical Laboratory?” *And even more important, what’s become of Barbara*, he thought. But he’d learned he was more likely to get what he wanted from Patton by leaving personal concerns out of the equation.

“As soon as we have destroyed the Lizard tank forces, of course,” Patton said grandly. “We’ll do to them what Rommel did to the British time and again in the desert: make them charge down lines of fire we’ll already have preregistered. Not only that, our forces farther east have gone over to the attack and are pursuing them out of Chicago. It should be a slaughter.”

*Of whom?* Jens wondered. The Lizard tanks were not the slow, balky, unreliable machines England used. Would any defenses be enough to hold them back when they wanted to go somewhere?

As if to underscore his concern, half a mile ahead a helicopter skimmed low over the ground like a mechanized shark. A rocket lanced out to obliterate an American halftrack and however many men it was carrying. Patton swore and started hammering away with his heavy machine gun. The noise was overpowering, like standing next to a triphammer. Tracers showed he was scoring hits, but the tough machine ignored them.

Then, without warning, something heavier than a .50 caliber slug must have hit it. It heeled awkwardly in the air; Patton almost shot off his driver's ear as he tried to keep a bead on it. The helicopter scurried away, back toward the west where the Lizards still held the countryside.

Maybe another shell found it then. Maybe the cumulative damage from all the bullets Patton and every other American in range poured into it took a toll. Or maybe the Lizard pilot, fleeing under heavy fire, just made a mistake. The helicopter's rotor clipped a tree. The machine did a twisting somersault straight into the ground.

Patton yelled like a madman. So did Jens and the jeep driver. Patton pounded the physicist on the back. "Do you see, Dr. Larssen? Do you see?" he shouted. "They're not invulnerable, not even slightly."

"So they're not," Jens admitted. Lizard tanks, though, carried more firepower and more armor than their helicopters. They might not be invulnerable, but they sure had seemed close to it until that crazy bazooka thing took one out. Even then, the rocket round hadn't wrecked it with a frontal hit, but with one to the less heavily protected engine compartment.

"Yes, sir, Larssen, it won't be long before you can head into Chicago as a conqueror," Patton boomed. "If you're going to do, by God, do it with style!"

Jens didn't care anything about style. He would gladly have gone into Chicago naked and in blackface if that was the only way to get there. And if Patton insisted on holding him away much longer, he'd damn well take French leave and head into town on his own. *Why not?* he thought. *It's not like I'm really a soldier*

Atvar increased the magnification on the situation map. The Race's movements appeared in red arrows, those of the Big Ugliers in rather fuzzier white ones that reflected the uncertainties of reconnaissance. The fleetlord hissed in discontent. "I don't know whether we're going to be able to extricate our forces there or not."

Kirel peered at the situation map, too. "This is the pocket in which the Tosevites on the lesser continental map have trapped our assault units, Exalted Fleetlord?"

"Yes," Atvar said. "They have taught us a lesson here: never be so concerned about the point of an attack as to neglect the flanks."

"Indeed." Kirel left one eye on the map, turned the other toward Atvar. "Forgive me, Exalted Fleetlord, but I had not looked for you to be so, ah, sanguine over our misfortunes in the, ah, not-empire called the United States."

“You mistake me, Shiplord,” Atvar said sharply, and Kirel lowered his eyes in apology. Atvar went on, “I do not enjoy seeing our brave males endangered by the Big Ugliers under any circumstances. Moreover, I have hope we shall still be able to get many of them out. If the beastly weather would let up, our aircraft ought to be able to blast an escape corridor through which we could conduct our retreat. Failing that, the landcruisers will have to do the job.”

“Landcruiser losses have been unusually heavy in this action,” Kirel said.

“I know.” That did pain Atvar; without those landcruisers, his groundbased forces were going to have ever more trouble conducting needed operations. He said, “The Big Ugliers have come up with something new again.”

“So they have.” The disgust with which Kirel freighted his words made it sound as if he were cursing the Tosevites for their ingenuity. The Race had had plenty of cause to do that; had the Big Ugliers been less fiendishly ingenious, all of Tosev 3 would long since have been incorporated into the Empire.

Atvar said, “As with most of their innovations, we will need a certain amount of time to develop appropriate countermeasures.” *They should be in place about the time the Big Ugliers invent their next new weapon*, he thought. *And of course, they won't work against that.* Aloud, he continued, “Still, considering how different this world is from what our probe predicted, we should count ourselves lucky that we've not got our tailstumps pinched in the doorway more often.”

“As you say, Exalted Fleetlord.” But Kirel sounded anything but convinced.

Atvar let his mouth fall open. “In case you're wondering, Shiplord, I've not started tasting ginger; I don't suffer from the insane self-confidence the drug induces. I have reason for being sanguine, as you termed it. Observe.”

He poked a control with a claw. The situation map vanished from the screen, to be replaced by images from a killercraft's gun cameras. On the screen, bombs arced down into drifting, blowing smoke. Moments later, fireballs and more smoke mushroomed into the sky. The angle of the tapejerked sharply as the killercraft dodged through desperate Tosevite efforts to shoot it down.

“That, Shiplord,” Atvar declared, “is a Tosevite petroleum refinery going up in flames. It happens to be the one that supplies Deutschland, but we have struck several in recent days. If we continue on that pattern, the embarrassments we have suffered around this town of Chicago should soon fade into insignificance as the Big Ugliers run low on fuel.”

“How massive is this destruction when compared to the overall production of the facility?” Kirel asked.

Atvar replayed the tape. He enjoyed watching the enemy's petroleum stocks going up in flames. “Do the images not speak for themselves? Smoke has shrouded this, ah, Ploesti place ever since our attack, which means the Big Ugliers have yet to suppress the blazes we started.”

“But there was smoke around the facility before,” Kirel persisted. “Is this not part of

the Tosevites' ongoing camouflage efforts?"

"Infrared imaging indicates otherwise," Atvar said. "Some of these hot spots have remained in place since our bombs ignited them."

"That is good news," Kirel admitted.

"It is the best possible news, and the story at other refineries is similar," the fleetlord said. "They have gone down to destruction more easily even than I anticipated when I began this series of strikes against them. The war for Tosev 3 may have hung in the balance up until this time, but now we are tilting the balance decisively in our favor."

"May it be so." Ever cautious, Kirel accepted nothing new until it was proved overwhelmingly. "The future of the Race here depends on its being so. The colony ships are behind us, after all."

"So they are." Atvar played the tape of the burning refinery yet again. "We shall be ready for them, by the Emperor." He cast his eyes to the floor in reverence for his sovereign. So did Kirel.

George Patton aimed the jeep's machine gun up in the air, squeezed the triggers. As the gun roared, he tried to outyell it. After a few seconds, he stopped firing and turned to Jens Larssen. He pummeled the physicist with his fists. "We've done it, by God!" he bawled. "We've held the sons of bitches."

"We really have, haven't we?" Larssen knew he sounded more amazed than overjoyed, but he couldn't help it—that was how he felt.

Patton didn't get angry; nothing, Jens thought, would have angered Patton this morning.. He said, "This is the greatest victory in the war against the Lizards." (It was also, for all practical purposes, the first and only victory in the war against the alien invaders, but Jens didn't want to cut into Patton's ebullience by pointing that out.) "Now that we know it can be done and how to do it, we'll beat them again and again."

If confidence-had anything to do with anything, Patton would, too. He looked as if he'd just stepped off a recruiting poster. His chin, as usual, was naked of stubble, his uniform clean, his boots shiny. He smelled of Ivory soap and aftershave.

How he managed that right through a hard-driving campaign was beyond Larssen, whose own face was like a wire brush, whose splotted and spotted overcoat (he devoutly hoped) helped camouflage him, and whose shoes had broken laces and no finish whatsoever. Patton insisted spruced-up soldiers had better morale. Seeing the spruced-up Patton beside him only reminded Jens. how grubby he was himself.

But victory kicked morale harder and higher than mere cleanliness ever could. Larssen said, "It's a damn shame any of the Lizards broke out."

"It is indeed," Patton said. "I console myself by remembering that perfection is an attribute belonging only to God. This consolation comes easier because we closed off the breakout after the tanks punched through. Few foot soldiers managed to follow them."

He pointed to a burnt-out Lizard tank not far away. “And more of their armor ended up like that.”

Larssen remembered the murdered Lees and Shermans in the front of the Lizard tank—he’d helped stalk. “A lot of ours ended up that way, too, sir. Do you know what the ratio was?”

“About a dozen to one,” Patton answered easily. Jens’ mouth fell open in dismay; he hadn’t thought the butcher’s bill as high as that. Patton held up a hand. “Before you expostulate, Dr. Larssen, let me remind you: that is far and away the best ratio we have yet achieved in combat with the Lizards. If we can maintain it, the ultimate triumph will be ours.”

“But—” A Lizard tank had a crew of three. A Sherman carried five men, a Lee six; the casualty ratio had to be even worse than the one for vehicles.

“I know, I know.” Patton cut off his objection before it could get started. “We are still manufacturing tanks; so far as we know, the Lizards cannot make good their losses. The same applies to crews: our pool replenishes itself, while theirs does not.”

A couple of men with technical sergeants’ stripes climbed onto the dead Lizard tank. One peered down into the turret through the open cupola. He called to his companion, who scrambled over to take his own look.

Patton beamed at them. “And, you see, with every vehicle of theirs we examine, we learn more about how to defeat them. I tell you, Dr. Larssen, we are tilting the balance in our favor.”

“I hope you’re right.” Jens decided to strike while the iron was hot: “Since we’ve won this battle, sir, may I finally have permission to go into Chicago and see what’s become of the Metallurgical Laboratory?”

The general frowned; he looked like a poker player deciding whether to play a hand or throw it in. At last he said, “I don’t suppose I can in justice object, Dr. Larssen, and no doubt your country needs your services with that project.” He wouldn’t say what the Met Lab was about, even with only his driver listening. *Security*, Jens thought. Patton went on, “I also want to thank you for the good nature with which you have borne your stay with us.”

Larssen nodded politely, though there hadn’t been anything goodnatured about it, not from his end. He’d simply had to yield to superior force. Whining about it afterward would only have put him further into the doghouse.

“I will provide you with an escort to take you into the city,” Patton said. “Lizard holdouts still infest the territory through which you’ll have to pass.”

“Sir, if it’s all the same to you, that’s an honor I’d really like to decline,” Larssen said. “Wouldn’t traveling with an escort just make me a likelier target rather than safer? I’d sooner hunt up a bicycle and go by myself.”

“You are a national resource, Dr. Larssen, which in some measure gives me continued responsibility for your well-being.” Patton chewed on his lower lip. “You may be right,

though; who can say? Will you also decline help in the form of, ah, hunting up a bicycle and a letter of *laissez-passer* from me?"

"No, sir," Jens answered at once. "I'd be very grateful for both those things."

"Good." Patton smiled his wintry smile. Then he waved to draw the attention of some soldiers not far away. They came trotting over to find out what he wanted. When he'd explained, they grinned and scattered in all directions to do his bidding. While he waited for them to return, he pulled out a sheet of stationery embossed with two gold stars (Jens marveled that he'd still have a supply of such a thing) and a fountain pen. Shielding the paper from blowing snow with his free hand, he wrote rapidly, then handed the sheet to Larssen. "Will this suffice?"

Jens' eyebrows rose. It was more than a *laissez-passer*: it not only ordered the military, to feed him, but nearly conferred on him the power to bind and to loose. Larssen wouldn't have cared to be a soldier who ignored it and had word of that get back to Patton. He folded it, stuck it in a trouser pocket. "Thank you, sir. That's very generous."

"I've given you a hard time since you turned up on my doorstep. I don't apologize for it; military necessity took precedence over your needs. But I will make such amends for it as I can."

Inside half an hour, the soldiers had come up with four or five bikes for Jens to choose from. Nobody said anything about giving back the Springfield he'd been issued, so he kept it. He swung onto a sturdy Schwinn and pedaled off toward the northeast.

"Chicago," he said under his breath as he rolled along. But the grin he wore at being at last free of the army soon fell from his lips. The country between Bloomington and Chicago had been fought over twice, first when the Lizards pushed toward Lake Michigan and then when they tried to break back through the ring Patton and Bradley had thrown around them. Larssen found out firsthand how ugly the aftermath of war could be.

The only thing he'd known about Pontiac, Illinois, was that the phrase "out at Pontiac" meant somebody was at the state penitentiary on the southern edge of town. The penitentiary was a bombed-out ruin now. The wreckage of an American fighter plane lay just outside the prison gates, the upright tail the only piece intact. It was also probably the only cross the pilot who'd been inside would ever get.

The rest of the town was in no better shape. Machine-gun bullet scars pocked the soot-stained walls of the county courthouse. Larssen almost rode over a crumpled bronze tablet lying in the street. He stopped to read it. It had, he found, been mounted on a cairn of glacial stones as a monument to the Indian chief who'd given Pontiac its name. He looked at the courthouse lawn. No cairn stood, only scattered and broken. stones. He pedaled out of town as fast as he could.

Every so often he'd hear gunfire. From a distance, it sounded absurdly cheerful, like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. Now that he'd been on the receiving end of it, though, it made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Those little popping noises meant



somebody was trying to kill someone else.

The next day he came to Gardner, a little town dominated by slag piles. Gardner couldn't have been lovely before war raked it coming and going; it was a lot less lovely now. But the Stars and Stripes fluttered from atop one of the piles. When Larssen saw soldiers moving around up there, he decided to test Patton's letter.

It worked like a charm. The men fed him a big bowl of the mulligan stew they were eating, gave him a slug of what he presumed to be highly unofficial whiskey to wash it down, and plied him with questions about the general whose signature he flourished.

The squad leader, a worn-looking, chunky sergeant whose thinning gray hair said he was surely a First World War veteran, summed up the soldiers' view of Patton by declaring, "Shitfire there, pal, sure is fine to see somebody. goin' for'ards instead o' back. We done went back too much." His drawl was thick and rich as coffee heavily laced with chicory; he seemed to go by the name Mutt.

"It cost us a lot," Larssen said quietly.

"Goin' back toward Chicago wasn't what you'd call cheap, neither," the sergeant said, to which Jens could only nod.

He got into Joliet just before dark. Joliet had had a prison, too, with thick corbeled limestone walls. It was just rubble; it had been made into a fortress to try to halt the Lizards—the twisted barrel of a field gun still stuck out through a window—and then bombed and shelled into oblivion. Jens wondered what had become of the prisoners.

As he had so often in his wandering through war-torn America, he found a ruined, empty house in which to sleep. Only after he'd already unrolled his sleeping bag did he notice the bones scattered across the floor. A caved-in skull left no doubt they were human. Before the Lizards came, he wouldn't have stayed there for a minute. Now he just shrugged. He'd seen worse than bones lately. Thinking again of the prisoners, he made sure his Springfield had a round in the chamber and the safety off when he set it beside the sleeping bag.

No one murdered him in the night. When he woke up, he flipped on the safety but left the round chambered. Chicago lay straight ahead.

He took longer to get there than he'd expected. The heaviest, most sustained fighting had been in the suburbs right on the edge of town. He'd never seen devastation like that, nor had to try to pick his way through it. Long stretches were impassable by bike; he had to lug the two-wheeler along with him, which also made him slower afoot.

Scavengers were out poking through the ruins. Some, who wore Army uniform, were busy examining disabled Lizard vehicles and aircraft to see what they could learn from them, or else salvaging as much American gear from the field as they could. Others were in no uniform at all, and plainly out for whatever they could get their hands on. Jens flipped the Springfield's safety off again.

Once he actually got into Chicago, the going improved. Rubble still spilled onto roads, but on the whole you could tell where the roads were. Some of the buildings had signs

painted across them: WHEN SHELLS COME IN, THIS SIDE OF THE STREET IS SAFER. A lot of shells had come in.

Along with rubble, the streets also had people in them. Except for soldiers, Jens hadn't seen so many people in a long time. Where there'd been fighting, the civilians were mostly either dead or fled. Many were dead or fled in Chicago, too, but the town had had three million to start out with, and a good many were left, too.

They were skinny and ragged and dirty; a lot of them had haunted eyes. They didn't look like the Americans Larssen was used to seeing. They looked like people you'd see in a newsreel, people who'd been through a war. He'd never expected to come across that in the United States, but here it was, like a kick in the teeth.

A girl leaned against a streetcorner lamppost. Her dress was too short for the chilly weather. She twitched her hips at Jens as he rode by. No matter how long he'd been celibate, he kept riding—her face was as hard and merciless as any combat veteran's.

"Cheap bastard!" she yelled after him. "Lousy fairy! I hope it rots off!" He wondered how she treated men who actually bought from her. Better than that, he hoped.

If possible, the Negroes in the Bronzeville district looked even more miserable than the whites in the rest of town. Jens felt the glances he was drawing as he pedaled along, but no one seemed inclined to do more than glance at a man who wore an Army overcoat and carried an Army rifle.

The apartment building where he'd lived with Barbara was on the edge of Bronzeville. He rounded the last corner, used the hand brake to slide to a stop...In front of a pile of bricks and tiles and broken glass that wasn't a building any more. Sometime after he'd left, it had taken a direct hit. A couple of colored kids were pawing through the ruins. One of them exclaimed in triumph over a foot-long board. He stuck it into a burlap bag.

"Do you know what happened to Mrs. Larssen, the white lady who used to live here?" Jens called to the boys. Fear rose up in him like a choking cloud; he wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

But both kids just shook their heads. "Never heard of her, mistuh," one of them said. They went back to looking for fuel.

Larssen rode east, to the University of Chicago campus. If he couldn't find Barbara, the Met Lab crew was the next best bet—they might even know what had happened to her.

Though bare of students, the university didn't seem as badly battered as the city around it, perhaps because its buildings were more widely scattered. Jens rode up Fifty-eighth and then across the lawns in the center of campus. They had been a lot more pleasant before they were pocked with bomb and shell craters.

Off to the right, Swift Hall was a burnt-out ruin; God hadn't spared the university's divinity school. But Eckhart Hall still stood, and, but for broken windows, looked pretty much intact. Worn as he was, hope made Jens all but sprint the bike toward the entrance.

He started to leave it outside, then thought better of that and brought it in—no use

giving booters temptation they didn't need. "Where is everybody?" he called down the hallway. Only echoes answered. *It's after quitting time*, he told himself, but hope flickered all the same.

He walked to the stairway, took the steps two at a time. No matter when the secretaries and such went home, the Met Lab scientists were busy almost around the clock. But the halls upstairs were empty and silent, the offices and labs not only vacant but methodically stripped. Wherever the Metallurgical Laboratory was, it didn't live at the University of Chicago any more.

He trudged downstairs much more slowly than he'd gone up. Somebody was standing by his bicycle. He started to snatch his rifle off his shoulder, then recognized the man. "Andy!" he exclaimed

The gray-haired custodian whirled in surprise. "Jesus and Mary, it's you, Dr. Larssen," he said, his voice still flavored with the Auld Sod though he'd been born in Chicago. "I tell you true, I never thought I'd see you again."

"Plenty of tines I never thought I'd get here," Jens answered. "Where the devil has the Met Lab gone?"

Instead of answering directly, Reilly fumbled in his shirt pocket, pulled out a creased and stained envelope. "Your wife gave me this to give to you if ever you came back. Like I said, I had my doubts you would, but I always hung on to it, just on the off chance —"

"Andy, you're a wonder." Jens tore open the envelope. He let out a soft exclamation of delight as he recognized Barbara's handwriting. The note was stained and blurry—probably from the janitor's sweat—but the gist was still clear. Larssen shook his head in tired dismay. He'd come so far, been through so much.

"Denver?" he said aloud. "How the devil am I supposed to get to Denver?" Like the war, his journey had a long way to go.

This is a bundled book. You may experience changes in navigation functionality, but the content has not been affected.

A Del Rey® Book

Published by Ballantine Books

Copyright © 1994 by Harry Turtledove

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

<http://www.randomhouse.com>

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-22133

eISBN: 978-0-345-45613-7

v3.0

**Praise for Harry Turtledove's  
WORLDWAR:  
IN THE BALANCE**

“Readers will have a perfectly delightful time ... Turtledove’s storytelling and historiography now march in perfect step. World War II buffs will have a particular romp ... But the readership will be much wider than this, and all will be glad that Turtledove plans three more volumes in *Worldwar*.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Totally fascinating ... With this engrossing volume, Turtledove launches a four-book alternate-history saga, possibly the most ambitious in the subgenre’s history and definitely the work of one of alternate history’s authentic modern masters.”

—*Booklist*

“I literally could not put *Worldwar: In the Balance* down. I carried it with me to the doctor’s office and to a dinner date the day it arrived! The novel is a tour de force in three acts.”

—*S. M. STIRLING*

“A fast-paced, suspenseful work.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

# **Worldwar: Tilting the Balance**

BOOKS BY HARRY TURTLEDOVE

*The Guns of the South*

THE WORLDWAR SAGA

*Worldwar: In the Balance*

*Worldwar: Tilting the Balance*

*Worldwar: Upsetting the Balance*

*Worldwar: Striking the Balance*

COLONIZATION

*Colonization: Second Contact*

*Colonization: Down to Earth*

*Colonization: Aftershocks*

*Homeward Bound*

THE VIDESSOS CYCLE

*The Misplaced Legion*

*An Emperor for the Legion*

*The Legion of Videssos*

*Swords of the Legion*

THE TALE OF KRISPOS

*Krispos Rising*

*Krispos of Videssos*

*Krispos the Emperor*

*Noninterference*

*Kaleidoscope*

*A World of Difference*

*Earthgrip*

*Departures*

*How Few Remain*

THE GREAT WAR

*The Great War: American Front*

*The Great War: Walk in Hell*

*The Great War: Breakthroughs*

AMERICAN EMPIRE

*American Empire: Blood and Iron*

*American Empire: The Center Cannot Hold*

*American Empire: The Victorious Opposition*

SETTLING ACCOUNTS

*Settling Accounts: Return Engagement*

*The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century*

*The Best Military Science Fiction of the 20th Century*

(with Martin H. Greenburg)



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(Characters with names in CAPS are historical, others fictional)

### HUMANS

<b>ANIELEWICZ, MORDECHAI</b>	<i>Leader of Jewish fighters in Poland</i>
<b>Auerbach, Rance</b>	<i>Captain, U.S. Army Cavalry</i>
<b>Bagnall, George</b>	<i>Flight engineer, RAF</i>
<b>Barisha</b>	<i>Tavern keeper in Split, Independent State of Croatia</i>
<b>Berkowicz, Stefan</b>	<i>Landlord in Lodz</i>
<b>BLAIR, ERIC</b>	<i>BBC talks producer, Indian Section, London</i>
<b>Borcke, Martin</b>	<i>Wehrmachtcaptain and interpreter in Pskov</i>
<b>CHILL, KURT</b>	<i>Wehrmacht lieutenant general, 122nd Infantry, in Pskov</i>
<b>CHURCHILL, WINSTON</b>	<i>Prime Minister, Great Britain</i>
<b>COMPTON, ARTHUR</b>	<i>Nuclear physicist with the Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
<b>Cooley, Mary</b>	<i>Waitress in Idaho Springs, Colorado</i>
<b>Daniels, Pete (“Mutt”)</b>	<i>Sergeant, U.S. Army, in Illinois; former minorleague manager</i>
<b>DIEBNER, KURT</b>	<i>Nuclear physicist, Hechingen, Germany</i>
<b>Donlan, Kevin</b>	<i>U.S. Army private in Illinois</i>
<b>Embry, Ken</b>	<i>Pilot, RAF</i>
<b>FERMI, ENRICO</b>	<i>Nuclear physicist with the Metallurgical Laboratory</i>

<b>FERMI, LAURA</b>	<i>Enrico Fermi's wife</i>
<b>Fiore, Bobby</b>	<i>Lizard experimental subject; former baseball player</i>
<b>FLEROV, GEORGI</b>	<i>Soviet nuclear physicist</i>
<b>Fritzie</b>	<i>Cowboy in Chugwater, Wyoming</i>
<b>Fukuoka, Yoshi</b>	<i>Japanese soldier in China</i>
<b>GERMAN, ALEKSANDR</b>	<i>Commander of Second Partisan Brigade in Pskov</i>
<b>Goldfarb, David</b>	<i>Radarman, RAF</i>
<b>Gorbunova, Ludmila</b>	<i>Pilot, Red Air Force</i>
<b>GROVES, LESLIE</b>	<i>Engineer; U.S. Army colonel</i>
<b>Harvey</b>	<i>Civilian guard in Idaho Springs, Colorado</i>
<b>HEISENBERG, WERNER</b>	<i>Nuclear physicist in Hechingen, Germany</i>
<b>Henry</b>	<i>Wounded U.S. soldier in Chicago</i>
<b>Hexham</b>	<i>U.S. Army colonel in Denver</i>
<b>Hicks, Chester</b>	<i>U.S. Army lieutenant in Chicago</i>
<b>Higuchi</b>	<i>Japanese scientist</i>
<b>Hipple, Fred</b>	<i>RAF group captain in Bruntingthorpe</i>
<b>HO-T'ING, NIEH</b>	<i>Chinese Communist guerrilla officer</i>
<b>Horton, Leo</b>	<i>RAF radarman in Bruntingthorpe</i>
<b>HULL, CORDELL</b>	<i>U.S. Secretary of State</i>
<b>Isaac</b>	<i>Jew in Leczna, Poland</i>
<b>Jacobi, Nathan</b>	<i>BBC broadcaster in London</i>
<b>Jäger, Heinrich</b>	<i>Wehrmacht panzer colonel</i>
<b>Jones, Jerome</b>	<i>RAF radarman</i>
<b>Karpov, Feofan</b>	<i>Red Air Force colonel</i>
<b>Kennan, Maurice</b>	<i>RAF flight lieutenant in Bruntingthorpe</i>
<b>Klein, Sid</b>	<i>U.S. Army captain in Chicago</i>

<b>Klopotowski, Roman</b>	<i>Townsmen in Leczna, Poland</i>
<b>Klopotowski, Zofia</b>	<i>Daughter of Roman Klopotowski</i>
<b>KONIEV, IVAN</b>	<i>Red Army general</i>
<b>KURCHATOV, IGOR</b>	<i>Soviet nuclear physicist</i>
<b>Laplace, Freddie</b>	<i>U.S. Army private in Illinois</i>
<b>Larssen, Barbara</b>	<i>see Yeager, Barbara</i>
<b>Larssen, Jens</b>	<i>Nuclear physicist with the Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
<b>Leon</b>	<i>Jewish fighter in Lodz</i>
<b>Lidov, Boris</b>	<i>NKVD lieutenant-colonel in Moscow</i>
<b>Liu Han</b>	<i>Chinese peasant woman; Lizard experimental subject</i>
<b>Lo</b>	<i>Communist Chinese partisan</i>
<b>Maczek</b>	<i>U.S. Army captain in Illinois</i>
<b>Meinecke, Klaus</b>	<i>Sergeant; gunner on Heinrich Jäger's panzer</i>
<b>MOLOTOV, VYACHESLAV</b>	<i>Foreign Commissar, USSR</i>
<b>Morozkin, Sergei</b>	<i>Red Army interpreter in Pskov</i>
<b>MURROW, EDWARD R.</b>	<i>Radio news broadcaster</i>
<b>Nakayama</b>	<i>Japanese scientist</i>
<b>NISHINA, YOSHIO</b>	<i>Japanese nuclear physicist</i>
<b>Okamoto</b>	<i>Japanese Army major; interpreter and translator</i>
<b>Olson, Louise</b>	<i>Inhabitant of New Salem, North Dakota</i>
<b>Olson, Thorkil</b>	<i>Inhabitant of New Salem, North Dakota</i>
<b>Oscar</b>	<i>U.S. Army bodyguard in Denver</i>
<b>Peary, Julian</b>	<i>RAF wing commander in Bruntingthorpe</i>
<b>Petrovic, Marko</b>	<i>Captain, Independent State of Croatia</i>

<b>Potter, Lucille</b>	<i>Nurse in Illinois</i>
<b>RIBBENTROP, JOACHIM VON</b>	<i>German foreign minister</i>
<b>ROOSEVELT, FRANKLIN D.</b>	<i>President of the United States</i>
<b>Roundbush, Basil</b>	<i>RAF flight officer in Bruntingthorpe</i>
<b>RUMKOWSKI, MORDECHAI CHAIM</b>	<i>Eldest of the Jews in the Lodz ghetto</i>
<b>Russie, Moishe</b>	<i>Former medical student; leader among Polish Jews; fugitive</i>
<b>Russie, Reuven</b>	<i>Son of Moishe and Rivka Russie</i>
<b>Russie, Rivka</b>	<i>Moishe Russie's wife</i>
<b>Sawatski, Emilia</b>	<i>Wife of Wladyslaw Sawatski</i>
<b>Sawatski, Ewa</b>	<i>Daughter of Wladyslaw and Emilia Sawatski</i>
<b>Sawatski, Jozef</b>	<i>Son of Wladyslaw and Emilia Sawatski</i>
<b>Sawatski, Maria</b>	<i>Daughter of Wladyslaw and Emilia Sawatski</i>
<b>Sawatski, Wladyslaw</b>	<i>Polish farmer</i>
<b>Schultz, Georg</b>	<i>Former Wehrmacht panzer gunner; Red Air Force mechanic</i>
<b>Sharp, Hiram</b>	<i>Physician in Ogden, Utah</i>
<b>Shmuel</b>	<i>Jewish fighter in Lodz</i>
<b>Sholudenko, Nikifor</b>	<i>NKVD man in the Ukraine</i>
<b>Shura</b>	<i>Whore in Shanghai</i>
<b>SKORZENY, OTTO</b>	<i>SS colonel</i>
<b>Sobieski, Tadeusz</b>	<i>Grocer in Leczna, Poland</i>
<b>STALIN, IOSEF</b>	<i>General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union</i>
<b>Sumner, Joshua ("Hoot")</b>	<i>Justice of the peace in Chugwater, Wyoming</i>

<b>Szabo, Bela (“Dracula”)</b>	<i>U.S. Army private in Illinois</i>
<b>SZILARD, LEO</b>	<i>Nuclear physicist with the Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
<b>Tatiana</b>	<i>Sniper and companion of Jerome Jones in Pskov</i>
<b>TOGO, SHIGENORI</b>	<i>Japanese foreign minister</i>
<b>Tolya</b>	<i>Groundcrew man, Red Air Force</i>
<b>Tsuye</b>	<i>Japanese scientist</i>
<b>Ussishkin, Judah</b>	<i>Doctor in Leczna, Poland</i>
<b>Ussishkin, Sarah</b>	<i>Wife of Judah Ussishkin; midwife in Leczna, Poland</i>
<b>van Alen, Jacob</b>	<i>U.S. Coast Guard lieutenant in Oswego, New York</i>
<b>VASILIEV, NIKOLAI</b>	<i>Commander, First Partisan Brigade in Pskov</i>
<b>Vernon, Hank</b>	<i>Ship’s engineer in the Duluth Queen</i>
<b>Victor</b>	<i>Wounded U.S. soldier in Chicago</i>
<b>Whyte, Alf</b>	<i>RAF navigator</i>
<b>Wittman, Rolf</b>	<i>Driver in Heinrich Jäger’s panzer</i>
<b>Yeager, Barbara</b>	<i>Former graduate student in medieval literature; Sam Yeager’s wife</i>
<b>Yeager, Sam</b>	<i>U.S. Army corporal; liaison with Lizard POWs; former baseball player</i>
<b>ZHUKOV, GEORGI</b>	<i>Marshal of the Soviet Union</i>

## THE RACE

<b>Atvar</b>	<i>Fleetlord, conquest fleet of the Race</i>
<b>Bunim</b>	<i>Official in Lodz</i>

<b>Drefsab</b>	<i>Intelligence agent and ginger addict</i>
<b>Forssis</b>	<i>Landcruiser gunner in Besançon, France</i>
<b>Hessef</b>	<i>Landcruiser driver in Besançon, France</i>
<b>Ianxx</b>	<i>Officer in Shanghai</i>
<b>Kassnass</b>	<i>Landcruiser unit commander in Besançon, France</i>
<b>Kirel</b>	<i>Shiplord of the 127th Emperor Hetto</i>
<b>Nejas</b>	<i>Landcruiser commander in Besançon, France</i>
<b>Nossat</b>	<i>Psychologist</i>
<b>Ristin</b>	<i>Lizard POW with the Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
<b>Sherran</b>	<i>The first male to circumnavigate Home</i>
<b>Skoob</b>	<i>Landcruiser gunner in Besançon, France</i>
<b>Ssamraff</b>	<i>Investigator in China</i>
<b>Starraf</b>	<i>Researcher in China</i>
<b>Straha</b>	<i>Shiplord of the 206th Emperor Yower</i>
<b>Teerts</b>	<i>POW in Japan</i>
<b>Tessrek</b>	<i>Psychologist</i>
<b>Ttomalss</b>	<i>Researcher in China</i>
<b>Tvenkel</b>	<i>Landcruiser gunner in Besançon, France</i>
<b>Ullhass</b>	<i>Lizard POW with the Metallurgical Laboratory</i>
<b>Ussmak</b>	<i>Landcruiser driver in Besançon, France</i>

For nostalgia's sake, Fleetlord Atvar called up the hologram of the Tosevite warrior he had often studied before the invasion fleet actually reached the world of Tosev 3. Nostalgia was an emotion that came easily to the Race: with a unified history of a hundred thousand years, with an empire that stretched over three solar systems and now reached out to a fourth, the past seemed a safe, comfortable place, not least because it was so much like the present.

The hologram sprang into being before the fleetlord: a stalwart savage, his pinkish face sprouting yellowish hairs, clad in soft iron mail and woven animal and plant fibers, armed with spear and rust-flecked sword, and mounted on a Tosevite quadruped that looked distinctly too scrawny for the job of carrying him.

Sighing, Atvar turned to the shiplord Kirel, who commanded the *127th Emperor Hetto*, bannership of the invasion fleet. He stabbed a fingerclaw at the image. "If only it had been so easy," he said with a sigh.

"Yes, Exalted Fleetlord." Kirel sighed, too. He turned both eye turrets toward the hologram. "It was what the probe led us to expect."

"Yes," Atvar said sourly. Preparing in its methodical way for another conquest, the Race had sent a probe across the interstellar void sixteen hundred years before (years of the Race, of course; Tosev 3 orbited its primary only about half as fast). The probe dutifully sampled the planet, sent its images and data back Home. The Race prepared the invasion fleet and sent it out, certain of easy victory: how much could a world change in a mere sixteen hundred years?

Atvar touched a control in the base of the holographic projector. The Tosevite warrior disappeared. New images took the Big Ugly's place: a Russki landcruiser, red star painted on its turret, lightly armed and protected by the Race's standards but well-designed, with sloped armor and wide treads for getting over the worst ground; an American heavy machine gun, with a belt full of big slugs that tore through body armor as if it were fiberboard; a Deutsche killercraft, turbojets slung under swept wings, nose bristling with cannon.

Kirel pointed toward the killercraft. "That one concerns me more than either of the others, Exalted Fleetlord. By the Emperor"—both he and Atvar briefly cast down their eyes at the mention of the sovereign—"the Deutsche did not have that aircraft less than two years ago, when our campaign began."

"I know," Atvar said. "All their aircraft—all Tosevite aircraft then—were those slow, awkward things propelled by rapidly rotating airfoils. But now the British are flying jets, too."

He summoned an image of the new British killercraft. It didn't look as menacing as the machine the Deutsche made: its wings lacked sweep and its lines were more

graceful, less predatory. From the reports Atvar had read, it didn't perform quite as well as the Deutsch killercraft, either. But it was a quantum leap better than anything the British had put into the air before.

Fleetlord and shiplord stared glumly at the hologram. The trouble with the natives of Tosev 3 was that they were, by the Race's standards, insanely inventive. The social scientists attached to the fleet were still trying to figure out how the Big Ugliers had gone from barbarism to a full-grown industrial civilization in the blink of an historical eye. Their solutions—or rather, conjectures—had yet to satisfy Atvar.

Part of the answer, he suspected, lay in the squabbling multiplicity of empires that divided up Tosev 3's meager land surface. Some of them weren't even empires in the strict sense of the word; the regime of the SSSR, for instance, openly boasted of liquidating its former ruling dynasty. The idea of impericide was enough to make Atvar queasy.

Empires and not-empires had competed fiercely among themselves. They'd been fighting a planetwide war when the Race arrived. Doctrine from earlier conquests said the Race ought to have been able to take advantage of their factionalism, play off one side against another. The tactic had worked now and again, but not as well and not as often as doctrine suggested it would.

Atvar sighed and told Kirel, "Before I came to Tosev 3, I was like any sensible male: I was sure doctrine held all the answers. Follow it and you'd obtain the results it predicted. The males who designed our doctrines should have seen this world first; it would have broadened their horizons."

"This is truth, Exalted Fleetlord," the shiplord said. "One thing Tosev 3 has taught us is the difference between precept and experience."

"Yes. Well put," Atvar said. The last world conquest the Race had undertaken lay thousands of years in the past. The fleetlord had pored over the manuals of what had worked then, and in the Race's previous victory, even more thousands of years before that. But no one living had any practice using what was in the manuals.

The Tosevites, by contrast, conquered one another and dickered with one another all the time. They made deception and deceit into an art, and were perfectly willing to educate the Race as to their use. Atvar had learned the hard way how much—or rather, how little—Big Ugly promises were worth.

"The other trouble is, they make war the same way they conduct the rest of their dealings with us: they cheat," Atvar grumbled.

"Truth again, Exalted Fleetlord," Kirel said.

The fleetlord knew it was truth. Machine against machine, the Big Ugliers could not match the Race: one landcruiser Atvar commanded, for instance, was worth anywhere between ten and thirty of its Tosevite opponents. The Big Ugliers fought back with everything from mine-carrying animals trained to run under landcruiser tracks to set off their explosives to attacks that concentrated so many of their inferior weapons against



the Race's thin-stretched resources that they achieved breakthrough in spite of lower technology.

Kirel might have plucked that thought from Atvar's head. "Will we resume our assault on the city by the lake in the northern section of the smaller continental mass? Chicago, the local name is."

"Not immediately," Atvar answered, trying to keep from his voice all the frustration he felt at the failure. Taking advantage of Tosev 3's truly abominable winter weather, the Americans had broken through the flanks of the assault force, cut off the lead element, and wrecked most of it. It was the worst—and most expensive—embarrassment the Race had suffered on Tosev 3.

"We do not enjoy as many resources as we would like," Kirel observed.

Now Atvar had to say, "Truth." The Race was careful and thorough: the weapons they'd brought from Home would have conquered a hundred times over the Tosev 3 they thought they would find, very possibly without losing a male. But on the industrialized planet they discovered, they'd taken major losses. They'd inflicted far worse, but the Big Ugliers' factories kept turning out weapons.

"We need to keep working to co-opt as much of their industrial capacity as we can," Kirel said, "and to wreck that part which persists in producing arms used against us."

"Unfortunately, the two goals often contradict each other," Atvar said. "Nor is our progress in destroying their fuel sources as great as they would wish us to believe, though we persist in those efforts."

The three males who had bombed the refineries at Ploesti, which supplied the Deutsche with much of their fuel, were convinced they'd wrecked the place. Since then, a pall of smoke had continuously lain over it, making reconnaissance difficult.

For as long as he could—for longer than he should have—Atvar believed with his pilots that that smoke meant the Deutsche could not control the refinery fires. But it wasn't so; he couldn't make himself think it was any more. The Big Ugliers were shipping refined petroleum out of Ploesti every way they knew how: by water, by their battered rail network, by motorized conveyance, even by animal-drawn wagon.

The story wasn't much different at the other refinery complexes scattered across Tosev 3. They were easy to damage, hard to eliminate; since they were huge fire hazards just by existing, the Big Ugliers had built them to minimize danger from explosions. They ferociously defended them and repaired bomb damage faster than the Race's alleged experts had thought possible.

Atvar's phone squawked at him. He welcomed the distraction from his own gloomy thoughts. "Yes?" he said into the speaker.

"Exalted Fleetlord, the male Drefsab awaits your pleasure in the antechamber," an aide reported.

"I am still conferring with the shiplord Kirel," Atvar said. "Tell Drefsab I shall see him directly when I'm finished."

“It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord.” The aide switched off.

Being reminded of Drefsab did nothing to improve Atvar’s mood. “There’s something else that hasn’t worked as well as I’d hoped,” he complained.

“What’s that, Exalted Fleetlord?” Kirel asked.

“The whole problem with that vile Tosevite herb, ginger,” Atvar said. “Drefsab recently tracked down and eliminated the Big Ugly who was a major supplier of the horrid drug, and I had hoped that would help us control our addicted males’ demand for it. Unfortunately, a thicket of smaller dealers has sprung up to take the exterminated major supplier’s place.”

“Frustrating,” Kirel observed, “to say nothing of dangerous to our cause.”

Atvar swung one eye turret toward Kirel in a sidelong glance of suspicion. The commander of the bannership was the second highest ranking male in the fleet, his body paint less elaborate only than Atvar’s own. If Atvar’s policies led to disaster, he was the next logical choice as fleetlord. He was stable and conservative and had always acted loyal, but who could say when the fangs of ambition would begin to gnaw? Any remark that sounded like criticism made Atvar wary.

Not that ginger wasn’t a problem. *One more thing we didn’t learn from the probe*, Atvar thought. The cursed herb made males feel they were brighter and stronger than they really were; it also made them want to recapture that feeling as often as they could. They’d do almost anything to get ginger, even trade weapons and information to the Big Ugliers.

“With the problem ginger poses to our security, it occurs to me that we may have been lucky the Big Ugliers succeeded in blowing up the ship which carried the bulk of our nuclear weapons,” the fleetlord said. “Otherwise, some male seeking pleasure for his tongue might have sought to convey one to the Tosevites in exchange for his precious herb.”

“There’s a pleasant thought!” Kirel exclaimed. “The Tosevites are barbarians without care for tomorrow—they would not hesitate to ruin their own planet if it meant defeating us.”

“Truth,” Atvar said glumly. After initial in-atmosphere bursts to wreck Tosevite communications with electromagnetic pulse (unsuccessfully, because the Big Ugliers’ electronic devices were too primitive to use solid-state components), the Race had expended only two nuclear devices: against Berlin and Washington, centers of local resistance. But resistance had continued anyhow.

“Ironic that we have a greater obligation to maintain this world as nearly intact as possible than does the species that evolved on it,” Kirel said. “Of course, the Tosevites are not aware our colonization fleet is on the way behind us.”

“Indeed,” Atvar said. “If it arrives and finds Tosev 3 uninhabitable, we will have failed here, no matter what else we accomplish.”

“We also have to bear in mind that the Big Ugliers are engaging in nuclear weapons

research of their own, certainly with the material their guerrillas captured from us in the SSSR and, the evidence would suggest, with projects altogether their own as well,” Kirel said. “Should one of those projects succeed, our problems here will become measurably more difficult.”

“Immeasurably, you mean,” Atvar said. The Big Ugliers would not worry about what they did to Tosev 3, as long as that meant getting rid of the Race. “Deutschland, the SSSR, the United States, maybe those little island empires, too—Nippon and Britain—we have to keep both eye turrets on every one of them. The trouble is, a planet is a very large place. Their projects will not be easy to track down. But it must be done.” He spoke as much to remind himself as to tell Kirel.

“It shall be done,” the shiplord echoed loyally.

*It had better be done,* they thought together.

The horse-drawn wagon pulled to a stop in New Salem, North Dakota. Sam Yeager looked around. As a seventeen-year veteran of bush-league baseball and its endless travel, he was a connoisseur of small towns. New Salem might have had a thousand people in it; then again, it might not.

He scrambled out of the wagon. Barbara Larssen handed him his Springfield. He took the rifle, slung it over his shoulder, then held out a hand to help Barbara down. They clung to each other for a moment. He kissed the top of her head. The ends of her dark blond hair still showed traces of permanent wave. Most of it was straight, though; a long time had gone by since she’d got a permanent.

He didn’t want to let her go, but he had to. He grabbed the rifle again, pointed it at the wagon. *Military routine*, he thought, and then, *military fiddlesticks*. But since he wore a corporal’s stripes these days, he played the game by the rules. “Come on out, boys,” he called.

Ristin and Ullhass, the two Lizard POWs who accompanied the Metallurgical Laboratory’s wagon train on the way from Chicago to the Lab’s planned new home in Denver, poked their heads up over the side of the wagon. “It shall be done, superior sir,” they chorused in hissing English. They dropped down in front of Yeager and Barbara.

“Hard to think—things—so small could be so dangerous,” Barbara murmured. Neither of the Lizards came up even to her shoulder.

“They aren’t small with guns in their hands, or inside tanks, or inside planes, or inside their spaceships,” Yeager answered. “I fought against them, remember, before my unit captured these boys.”

“We thought you kill us,” Ullhass said.

“We thought you kill us, then eat us,” Ristin agreed.

Yeager laughed. “You’d been reading too much science fiction, both of you.” He laughed again, more reflectively. If he hadn’t been in the habit of reading science fiction himself to pass the time on trains and buses, he never would have volunteered—or been

accepted—as the Lizards’ principal guard, translator, and explainer of matters Earthly.

He’d been with them continuously for better than six months now, long enough to come to see them as individuals rather than mere creatures. They never had been much like the bug-eyed monsters he used to read about. They were short and skinny and, even dressed in multiple layers of warm clothes that hung on them like sacks, complained all the time about how cold it was (it wasn’t just midwinter on the northern Great Plains, either; they’d complained about all but the hottest days back in Chicago, too).

By now, Yeager took for granted their turreted eyes that, chameleonlike, moved independently of each other, the green-brown scales they used for skin, their clawed hands and feet, their wide mouths full of little pointed teeth. Even the bifurcated tongues they sometimes used to lick their hard, immobile lips were just part of them, although he’d needed quite a while to get used to those.

“We will be warm tonight?” Ristin asked. Though he spoke English, at the end of the sentence he tacked on the little cough the Lizards used: sort of an audible question mark.

“We will be warm tonight,” Sam answered in the Lizards’ language, punctuating his sentence with a different cough, the one that put emphasis on his words.

He had reason for his confidence. The Lizards’ bombers hadn’t hit North Dakota badly: not much up here needed hitting, Yeager thought. The flat farming country reminded him of the flat farming country in eastern Nebraska where he’d grown up. New Salem could easily have been one of the little towns between Lincoln and Omaha.

The wagon had stopped not far from a snow-covered boulder with an unnaturally flat top. Barbara brushed off the snow with her sleeve. “Oh, it has a plaque on it,” she said, and brushed away more snow so she could read the words on the bronze. She started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Yeager asked. He absentmindedly tacked the interrogative cough onto that question, too.

“This is the Wrong Side Up Monument,” she answered. “That’s what the plaque says, anyhow. Seems one of the early farmers had just started breaking the ground so he could plant for the first time when an Indian came along, looked at a chunk of sod, set it back the right way, and said, ‘Wrong side up.’ The farmer thought about it, decided he was right, and went into dairying instead. This is part of a big dairy area now.”

“We should eat well tonight, then.” Yeager’s mouth watered at the thought of milk, cheese, probably big steaks, too—the folk around here might well be inclined to do some slaughtering for their guests, because they wouldn’t be able to keep feeding all their livestock now that the Lizards had made moving grain and hay on a large scale impossible.

More wagons from the convoy came into town, some carrying people but more loaded down with the equipment that had filled much of Eckhart Hall back at the University of Chicago. Not all the wagons would stop here tonight; they were spread out for miles along the highway and back roads that ran parallel to it, both to avoid looking

interesting to the Lizards and to keep from taking too much destruction from an air attack if they did.

Enrico Fermi helped his wife Laura down from their wagon, then waved to Yeager. He waved back. He still felt a rush of pride at hanging around with scientists and even helping them when they had questions for the Lizard prisoners. Till a few months ago, his closest brush with scientists had been with the near-supermen who populated the pages of *Astounding*.

The real ones, while bright enough, weren't a lot like their fictional counterparts. For one thing, a lot of the best ones—Fermi, Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner—were dumpy foreigners with funny accents. Fermi talked like Bobby Fiore's father (he wondered what had happened to his old roommate, the second baseman on the Decatur Commodores). For another, just about all of them, foreign and American, were much more *human* than their fictional analogs: they'd have a drink (or more than one), they'd tell stories, and they'd argue with their wives. Yeager liked them more for it, not less.

Steaks there proved to be, cooked over open flames and eaten by the fireside—no gas and no electricity in New Salem. Yeager cut his into very small pieces as he ate it: though he wouldn't be thirty-six for another couple of months, he had full upper and lower plates. He'd almost died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, and his teeth had rotted in his head. The only teeth of his own he had were the ones that gave everybody else trouble: seven or eight years after the epidemic, his wisdom teeth had come in fine.

Ullhass and Ristin, by contrast, held big chunks of meat up to their mouths and worried bites off them. The Lizards didn't chew much; they'd get a gobbet in and then gulp it down. The locals watched with undisguised curiosity—these were the first Lizards they'd ever seen. Yeager had watched that at every stop all the way across Minnesota and North Dakota.

“Where you going to put those critters tonight?” a man asked him. “We sure as hell don't want them getting loose.”

“They're not critters. They're people—funny kind of people, but people,” Yeager said. With small-town politeness, the man didn't argue, but obviously didn't believe him, either. Yeager shrugged; he'd seen that happen before, too. He asked, “Do you have a jail here?”

The local hooked a thumb into the strap of his denim overalls. “Yah, we do,” he said. Yeager hid a smile—he'd heard “yah” for “yes” at every stop in North Dakota. Grinning, the local went on, “We'll put a drunk Indian in there every now and again—or sometimes a drunk squarehead, too. Hell, I'm an eighth Sioux myself, even if my name is Thorkil Olson.”

“That'd be perfect,” Yeager said, “especially if you can put a board or a blanket or something over the window, if there is one. Lizards can't take as much cold as people can. Can you take us there, let me look it over?”

With Ristin and Ullhass safely behind bars, Yeager figured he had the night off. A lot

of times, he'd had to stay alert because they were in the next room of a private house. He didn't think they'd try to escape; they risked both freezing and getting shot on a world not their own. You couldn't afford to take chances, though.

He and Barbara went home with Olson and his wife Louise, a pleasant, red-cheeked woman in her late forties. "Take the spare bedroom for the night, and welcome," Louise said. "We've rattled around the house since our boy George and his wife headed down to Kansas City so he could work in a defense plant." Her face clouded. "The Lizards are in Kansas City. I pray he's all right."

"So do I, ma'am," Yeager said. Barbara's hand tightened on his; her husband Jens, a Met Lab physicist, had never come back from a cross-country trip that had skirted Lizard-held territory.

"Plenty of blankets on the bed, folks, and Grandma's old thundermug under it," Thorkil Olson boomed as he showed them the spare room. "We'll feed you breakfast when you get up in the morning. Sleep tight, now."

There were plenty of blankets, heavy wool ones from Sears, with a goose-down comforter on top. "We can even get undressed," Yeager said happily. "I'm sick of sleeping in three, four layers of clothes."

Barbara looked at him sidelong. "Stay undressed, you mean," she said, and blew out the candle Olson had set on the nightstand. The room plunged into darkness.

Afterwards, Sam peeled off his rubber, then groped around under the bed till he found the chamber pot. "Something for them to cluck over after we leave," he said. He dove back under the covers as fast as he could; without them, the bedroom was a chilly place.

Barbara clung to him, for warmth, but for reassurance, too. He ran a hand down the velvety skin of her back. "I love you," he said softly.

"I love you, too." Her voice caught; she shoved herself against him. "I don't know what I would have done without you. I'd have been so lost. I—" Her face was buried in the hollow of his shoulder. A hot tear splashed down on him. After a few seconds, she raised her head. "I miss him so much sometimes. I can't help it."

"I know. You wouldn't be who you are if you didn't." Yeager spoke with the philosophy of a man who had spent his entire adult life playing bush-league ball and never come close to the majors: "You do the best you can with the cards you get dealt, even if some of them are pretty rotten. Me, I never got an ace before." Now he squeezed her.

She shook her head; her hair brushed softly across his chest. "But it's not fair to you, Sam. Jens is dead; he has to be dead. If I'm going to go on—if we're going to go on, I have to look ahead, not backwards. As you said, I'll do the best I can."

"Can't ask for more than that," Yeager agreed. Slowly, he went on, "Seems to me, honey, that if you hadn't loved your Jens a lot, and if he hadn't loved you, too, you wouldn't have been anybody I'd've wanted to fall in love with. And even if I had, just on account of you're such a fine-looking woman"—he poked her in the ribs, because he

knew she'd squeak—"you wouldn't have loved me back. You wouldn't have known how to."

"You're sweet. You make good sense, too. You seem to have a way of doing that." Instead of clutching, now Barbara snuggled against him; he felt her body relax. The tip of her nipple brushed his arm, just above the elbow. He wondered if she felt like making love again. But before he could try to find out, she yawned enormously. Voice still blurry, she said, "If I don't get some sleep, God only knows what kind of wreck I'll be tomorrow." In the darkness, her lips found his, but only for a moment. "Good night, Sam. I love you." She rolled over onto her side of the bed.

"I love you, too. Good night." Sam found himself yawning, too. Even if she had been interested, he wasn't sure he could have managed two rounds so close together. He wasn't a kid any more.

He rolled over onto his left side. His behind brushed against Barbara's. They chuckled and moved a little farther apart. He popped out his dentures, set them on the nightstand. Inside a minute and a half, he was snoring.

\* \* \*

Jens Larssen most cordially cursed the United States Army, first in English and then in the fragmentary Norwegian he'd picked up from his grandfather. Even as the oaths fell from his lips, he knew he was being unfair: if the Army hadn't scooped him up as he was making his way across Indiana, he might well have got himself killed trying to sneak into Chicago as the Lizard attacks on the city rose to a climax.

And even now, after General Patton and General Bradley had pinched off the neck of that attack, nobody would let him fly out to join the rest of the Met Lab team in Denver. Again, the brass had their reasons—save for combat missions, aviation had almost disappeared in the United States. Human aviation had almost disappeared, anyhow. The Lizards dominated the skies.

"Hellfire," he muttered, clinging to the rail of the steamer *Duluth Queen*, "the damn Army wouldn't even tell me where they'd gone. I had to go into Chicago and find out for myself."

That rankled; it struck him as security gone mad. So did everyone's refusal to let him send on any word to the Met Lab crew. He couldn't even let his wife know he was alive. Once more, though, the mucky-mucks had a point he couldn't honestly deny: the Met Lab was America's only hope of producing an atomic bomb like the ones the Lizards had used on Berlin and Washington, D.C. Without that bomb, the war against the aliens would probably fail. Nobody, then, could afford to draw any sort of attention toward the Metallurgical Laboratory or communicate with it in any way, for fear the Lizards would intercept a message and draw the wrong—or rather, the right—conclusions from it.

The orders he'd been given made just enough sense for him not to try disobeying. But oh, how he hated them!

“And now I can’t even get into Duluth,” he grumbled.

He could see the town, which lay by the edge of Lake Superior where it narrowed to its westernmost point. He could see the gray granite bluffs that dwarfed man’s houses and buildings, and felt he could almost reach out and touch some of the homes atop these bluffs, the taller business buildings that climbed the steep streets toward them. But the feeling was an illusion; a sheet of blue-gray ice held the *Duluth Queen* away from the Minnesota town that had given it its name.

Jens turned to a passing sailor. “How far out on the lake are we?”

The man paused to think. His breath came out thick as smoke as he answered, “Can’t be more than four, five miles. Up to less than a month ago, it was open water all the way in.” He chuckled at Larssen’s groan. “Some years the port stays open all winter long. More often, though, it’ll freeze for twenty miles out, so this ain’t so bad.” He went on his way, whistling a cheery tune.

He’d misunderstood why Jens groaned. It wasn’t at the cold weather; Jens had grown up in Minnesota, and spent enough time skating on frozen lakes to take for granted that water—even as massive a body of water as Lake Superior—turned to ice when winter came. But a month before, he could have gone straight into town. That ate at him. Probably the same blizzard that let Patton launch his attack against the Lizards had also finally frozen the lake.

In any other year, the *Duluth Queen* would have stopped sailing for the winter. The Lizards, though, had paid much more attention to knocking out road and rail traffic than to knocking out ships. Jens wondered what that meant about their home planet—maybe it didn’t have enough water for them to take shipping seriously as a way of getting things from one place to another.

If that was so, the aliens were missing a trick. The *Duluth Queen* carried ball bearings, ammunition, gasoline, and motor oil to keep resistance to the Lizards strong in Minnesota; it would take back steel from Duluth and milled grain from Minneapolis to forge into new weapons and feed the people who fought and built.

Lots of little boats—boats small enough to haul across the ice, some of them even rowboats—clustered around the steamship. Deck cranes lowered crates to them and picked up others, with a lot of shouted warnings going back and forth with the goods. A quasi-harbor had sprung into being at the edge of the ice: crates from the *Duluth Queen* went back and forth toward town on man-hauled sledges, while others, outbound, were muscled onto the boats for transport out to the *Queen*.

Jens doubted the system was even a tenth as efficient as a proper harbor. But the proper harbor was icebound, and what the locals had worked out was a lot better than nothing. From his point of view, the only real trouble was that cargo was so much more important than passengers that he couldn’t get off the steamship.

The sailor came back down the deck, still whistling. Larssen felt like throttling him. “How much longer before you’ll be able to start moving actual real live people off?” he



asked.

“Shouldn’t be more than another day or two, sir,” the fellow answered.

“A day or two!” Jens exploded. He wanted to dive into Lake Superior and swim the mile or so over to the edge of the ice. He knew perfectly well, though, that he’d freeze to death if he tried it.

“We’re doing the best we can,” the sailor said. “Everything’s screwed up since the Lizards came, that’s all. Wherever you need to get to, people will understand that you’ve been held up.”

That this was true made it no easier to bear. Unconsciously, Larssen had assumed that because the Lizards had been beaten back from Chicago and he was free to travel again without the Army trying to tie him down, the world would automatically unfold at his feet. But the world was not in the habit of working that way.

The sailor went on, “Long as you’re stuck on board, sir, you might as well enjoy yourself. The grub’s good here, and there aren’t many places ashore where you’ll find steam heat, running water, and electric lights.”

“Isn’t that the sad and sorry truth?” Jens said. The Lizards’ invasion had badly disrupted the complex web the United States had become, and pointed out the hard way how much every part of the country depended on every other—and how ill-equipped most parts were to go it alone. Burning wood to keep warm and depending on muscles—animal or human—to move things about made America feel as if it had slipped back a century from 1943.

And yet, if Jens ever made it to Denver, he’d get back to work on a project that seemed to belong at least a hundred years in the future. The world to come would spring into being amidst the obtrusive reemergence of the past. And where was the present? *The present*, thought Jens, who had a weakness for puns, *is absent*.

He went below, to get out of the cold and to remind himself the present still existed. The *Duluth Queen*’s galley boasted not only electric lights but a big pot of hot coffee (a luxury that grew rarer as stocks dwindled) and a radio. Jens remembered his parents saving up to buy their first set in the late twenties. It had felt like inviting the world into their parlor. Now, most places, you couldn’t invite the world in even if you wanted to.

But the *Duluth Queen* didn’t depend on distant power plants, now likely to be either wrecked or out of fuel, for electricity. It made its own. And so, static squawked and muttered as Hank Vernon spun the tuning knob and the red pointer slid across the dial. Music suddenly came out. The ship’s engineer turned to Larssen, who was getting a mug of coffee. “The Andrews Sisters suit you?”

“They’re okay, but if you can find some news, that would be even better.” Jens poured in cream. The *Duluth Queen* had plenty of that, but no sugar.

“Let’s see what I can do. I wish this was a shortwave set.” Vernon worked the knob again, more slowly now, pausing to listen to every faint station he brought in. After three or four tries, he grunted in satisfaction. “Here you go.” He turned up the volume.

Larssen bent his head toward the radio. Even through the waterfall of static, he recognized the newscaster's deep, slow voice: "—three days of rioting reported from Italy, where people went into the streets to protest the government's cooperation with the Lizards. Pope Pius XII's radio appeal for calm, monitored in London, seems to have had little effect. Rioters are calling for the return of Benito Mussolini, who was spirited to Germany after being placed under arrest by the Lizards—"

Hank Vernon shook his head in bemusement. "Isn't it a hell of a thing? A year ago, Mussolini was the enemy with a capital E because he was buddies with Hitler. Now he's a hero because the krauts got him away from the Lizards. And Hitler's not such a bad guy any more, since the Germans are still fighting hard. Just because you're fighting the Lizards doesn't make you a good guy in my book. Was Joe Stalin a good guy just on account of he was fighting the Nazis? People say so, yeah, but they can't make me believe it. What do *you* think?"

"You're probably right," Larssen answered. He agreed with most of what the engineer had said, but wished Vernon hadn't chosen just then to say it—his loud, nasal tones drowned out Edward R. Murrow, to whom Jens was trying to listen.

Vernon, however, kept right on talking, so Jens got the news in disconnected snatches: ration cuts in England, fighting between Smolensk and Moscow, more fighting in Siberia, a Lizard push toward Vladivostok, a passive resistance campaign in India.

"Is that against the English or the Lizards?" he asked.

"If it's all the way over in India, what the devil difference does it make?" the engineer said. On a cosmic scale, Larssen supposed he had a point, but for someone who was trying to catch up with what was going on in the world, losing any facts felt frustrating.

From the radio, Murrow said, "And for those who think the Lizard devoid of humor, consider this: outside of Los Angeles, the Army Air Force recently had occasion to build a dummy airport, complete with dummy planes. Two Lizard aircraft are said to have attacked it—with dummy bombs. This is Edward R. Murrow, somewhere in the United States."

"Nobody on the radio admits where they are any more, you notice that?" Vernon said. "From FDR on down, it's 'somewhere in the United States.' It's like if anybody knows where you are, you can't be a bigshot, 'cause if you were a bigshot and the Lizards knew where you are, they'd go after you. Am I right or am I right?"

"You're probably right," Jens said again. "You don't happen to have a cigarette, do you?" Now that he didn't get the chance to drink coffee often, one cup kicked the way three or four had in the good old days. The same was even more true of tobacco.

"Wish to hell I did," Vernon answered. "I smoked cigars myself, but I wouldn't turn down anything these days. I used to work on the rivers in Virginia, North Carolina, and we'd go right past the tobacco farms, never even think a thing about 'em. But when it can't get from where they grow it to where you want to smoke it—"

"Yeah," Larssen said. It was true of more than tobacco. That was why the Lizards

didn't have to conquer the whole country to make the United States stop working. It was why the *Duluth Queen* sat off the ice and unloaded: anything to keep the wheels turning.

He stayed stuck for the next three days, biding his time and biting his nails. When he finally did get to descend into one of the small boats that was unloading the *Duluth Queen*, he almost wished he'd stayed stuck longer. Clambering down a cargo net with a knapsack and a rifle slung over his shoulder was not his notion of fun.

One of the sailors lowered his Schwinn on a line. It banged against the side of the steamship a couple of times on the way down. Jens grabbed it and undid the knot. The line snaked back up to the *Duluth Queen*.

The small boat had a crew of four. They all looked at the bicycle. "You're not going anywhere far by yourself on that, are you, mister?" one of them said at last.

"What if I am?" Larssen had ridden a bicycle across most of Ohio and Indiana. He was in the best shape of his life. He'd always look skinny, but he was stronger than most people with bulging biceps.

"Oh, I won't say you couldn't do it—don't get me wrong," the crewman said. "It's just that—this is Minnesota, after all." He patted himself. He was wearing boots with fur tops, an overcoat over a jacket over a sweater, and earmuffs on top of a knitted wool cap. "You don't want to get stuck in a snowstorm, is what I mean. You do and you won't even start to stink till spring—and spring comes late around Duluth."

"I know what Minnesota's like. I was raised here," Jens said.

"Then you ought to have better sense," the sailor told him.

He started to come back with a hot reply, but it didn't get past his lips. He remembered all the winter days he'd had to stay home from school when snow made the going impossible. And his grammar school had been only a couple of miles from the farm where he'd grown up, the high school less than five. If a bad storm hit while he was in the middle of nowhere, he'd be in trouble and no doubt about it.

He said, "Things must move, or else you guys wouldn't be out here working in the middle of winter. How do you do it?"

"We convoy," the sailor answered seriously. "You wait until there's a bunch of people going the same way you are, and then you go along with 'em. Where you headin' for, mister?"

"Denver, eventually," Jens said. "Any place west of Duluth now, I guess." In a pocket of his overcoat he had a letter from General Patton that essentially ordered the entire civilized world to drop whatever it was doing and give him a hand. It had got him his cabin on the *Duluth Queen* ... but the *Duluth Queen* was going from Chicago to Duluth anyhow. Even a sizzling letter from Patton probably couldn't call a land convoy into being at the drop of a hat. But that sparked a thought. "Any trains still running?"

"Yeah, we try to keep 'em going, best we can, anyhow. I tell you, though, it's like playing Russian roulette. Maybe you'll get through, maybe you'll get your ass bombed off. If it was me, I wouldn't ride one, not now. The Lizards go after 'em on purpose, not

for the hell of it like they do ships.”

“I may take my chances,” Larssen said. If the trains were running right, he could be in Denver in a couple of days, not a couple of weeks or a couple of months. If they weren’t—He tried not to worry about that.

The boat drifted to a stop at the edge of the ice. Gunnysacks made the treacherous surface easier to walk on. The crew handed Larssen his gear, wished him good luck, and headed back to the *Duluth Queen*.

He headed over toward a dog-drawn sledge that didn’t have too many crates in it. “Can I get a ride?” he called, and the driver nodded. He felt like a character out of Jack London as he got in behind the man.

The trip across the ice gave him more time to think. It also convinced him that if he was going to live in the twentieth century, he’d use its tools where he could. He’d do better even if the Lizards did bomb him while he was just partway to Denver. When at last he got into Duluth, he went looking for the train station.

The hauler aircraft rolled to a stop. Ussmak stared out the window at the Tosevite landscape. It was different from the flat plains of the SSSR where the landcruiser driver had served before, but that didn’t make it any better, not as far as he was concerned. The plants were a dark, wet-looking green under sunlight that seemed too white, too harsh.

Not that the star Tosev adequately heated its third world. Ussmak felt the chill as soon as he descended from the hauler onto the concrete of the runway. Here, though, at least water wasn’t falling frozen from the sky. That was something.

“Landcruiser crew replacements!” a male bawled. Ussmak and three or four others who had just deplaned tramped over to him. The male took their names and identity numbers, then waved them into the back of an armored transporter.

“Where are we?” Ussmak asked as the machine jounced into life. “Whom are we fighting?” That was a better question; the names the Big Ugliers gave to pieces of Tosev 3 meant little to him.

“This place is called France,” a gunner named Forssis answered. “I served here for a while shortly after we landed, before the commander decided it was largely pacified and transferred my unit to the SSSR.”

All the males let their mouths fall open in derisive laughter at that. Everything had seemed so easy in the days right after the landing. Ussmak remembered being part of a drive that had smashed Soviet landcruisers as if they were made of cardboard.

Even then, though, he should have had a clue. A sniper had picked off his commander when Votal, like any good landcruiser leader, stuck his head out the cupola to get a decent view of what was going on. And Krentel, the commander who replaced him, did not deserve the body paint that proclaimed his rank.

Well, Krentel was dead, too, and Telerep the gunner with him. A guerrilla—Ussmak

did not know whether he was Russki or Deutsch—had blown the turret right off the landcruiser while they were trying to protect the crews cleaning up nuclear material scattered when the Big Ugliers had managed to wreck the starship that carried the bulk of the Race's atomic weapons.

From his driver's position, Ussmak had bailed out of the landcruiser when it was stricken—out of the landcruiser and into radioactive mud. He'd been in a hospital ship ever since ... till now.

“So whom are we fighting?” he repeated. “The Français?”

“No, the Deutsche, mostly,” Forssis answered. “They were ruling here when we arrived. I hear the weapons we'll be facing are better than the ones they threw at us the last time I was here.”

Silence settled over the transporter's passenger compartment. Fighting the Big Ugliers, Ussmak thought, was like poisoning pests: the survivors kept getting more resistant to what you were trying to do to them. And, like any other pests, the Big Ugliers changed faster than you could alter your methods of coping with them.

The heated compartment, the smooth ride over a paved highway, and the soft purr of the hydrogen-burning engine helped most of the males doze off before long: veterans, they knew the value of snatching sleep while they had the chance. Ussmak tried to rest, too, but couldn't. The longing for ginger gnawed at him and would not let go.

An orderly had sold him some of the precious herb in the hospital ship. He'd started tasting as much out of boredom as for any other reason. When he was full of ginger, he felt wise and brave and invulnerable. When he wasn't—that was when he discovered the trap into which he'd fallen. Without ginger, he seemed stupid and fearful and soft-skinned as a Big Ugly, a contrast just made worse because he so vividly remembered how wonderful he knew himself to be when he tasted the powdered herb.

He didn't care how much he gave the orderly for his ginger: he had pay saved up and nothing he'd rather spend it on. The orderly had an ingenious arrangement whereby he got Ussmak's funds even though they didn't go directly into his computer account.

In the end, it hadn't saved him. One day, a new orderly came in to police up Ussmak's chamber. Discreet questioning (Ussmak could afford to be discreet then, with several tastes hidden away) showed that the only thing he knew about ginger was the fleetlord's general order prohibiting its use. Ussmak had stretched out the intervals between tastes as long as he could. But finally the last one was gone. He'd been gingerless—and melancholy—ever since.

The road climbed up through rugged mountains. Ussmak got only glimpses out the transporter's firing ports. After the monotonous flatlands of the SSSR and the even more boring sameness of the hospital ship cubicle, a jagged horizon was welcome, but it didn't much remind Ussmak of the mountains of Home.

For one thing, these mountains were covered with frozen water of one sort or another, a measure of how miserably cold Tosev 3 was. For another, the dark conical

trees that peeked out through the mantling of white were even more alien to his eye than the Big Ugliers.

Those trees also concealed Tosevites, as Ussmak discovered a short while later. Somewhere up there in the woods, a machine gun began to chatter. Bullets spanged off the transporter's armor. Its own light cannon returned fire, filling the passenger compartment with thunder.

The males who had been dozing were jerked rudely back to awareness. They tumbled for the firing ports to see what was happening, Ussmak among them. He couldn't see anything, not even muzzle flashes.

"Scary," Forssis observed. "I'm used to sitting inside a landcruiser where the armor shields you from anything. I can't help thinking that if the Tosevites had a real gun up there, we'd be cooked."

Ussmak knew only too well that not even landcruiser armor guaranteed protection against the Big Ugliers. But before he could say as much, the transporter driver came on the intercom: "Sorry about the racket, my males, but we haven't rooted out all the guerrillas yet. They're just a nuisance as long as we don't run over any mines."

The driver sounded downright cheery; Ussmak wondered if he was tasting ginger. "I wonder how often they do run over mines," Forssis said darkly.

"*This* male hasn't, or he wouldn't still be driving us," Ussmak said. A couple of the other landcruiser crewmates opened their mouths at him.

After a while, the mountains gave way to wide, gently rolling valleys. Forssis pointed to neat rows of gnarled plants that clung to stakes on south-facing slopes. He said, "I saw those when I was in this France place before. The Tosevites ferment alcoholic brews from them." He ran his tongue over his lips. "Some have a very interesting flavor."

The passenger compartment had no view straight forward. The driver had to make an announcement for the males he was hauling: "We are coming into the Big Ugly town of Besançon, our forward base for combat against the Deutsche. You will be assigned to crews here."

All Ussmak had seen of Tosevite architecture was the wooden farming villages of the SSSR. Besançon was certainly different from those. He didn't quite know what to make of it. Compared to the tall, blocklike structures of steel and glass that formed the cities of Home, its buildings seemed toys. Yet they were very ornate toys, with columns and elaborate stone-and brickwork and steep roofs so the frozen water that fell from the sky hereabouts would slide off.

The Race's headquarters in Besançon was on a bluff in the southeastern part of the town. Not only was the place on high ground, Ussmak discovered on alighting from the transporter that a river flowed around two sides of it. "Well sited for defense," he remarked.

"Interesting you should say that," the driver answered. "This used to be a Big Ugly fortress." He pointed to a long, low, gloomy-looking building. "Go in there. They'll

process you and assign you to a crew.”

“It shall be done.” Ussmak hurried toward the doorway; the cold was nipping at his fingers and eye turrets.

Inside, the building was heated to the point of comfort for civilized beings—Ussmak hissed gratefully. Otherwise, though, the local males were mostly using the furnishings they’d found. A planet was a big place, and the Race hadn’t brought enough of everything to supply all its garrisons. And so a personnel officer seemed half swallowed by the fancy red velvet chair in which he sat, a chair designed to fit a Big Ugly. The male had to stretch to reach the computer on the heavy, dark wood table in front of him; the table was higher off the ground than any the Race would have built.

The personnel officer turned one eye toward Ussmak. “Name, specialization, and number,” he said in a bored voice.

“Superior sir, I am Ussmak, landcruiser driver,” Ussmak answered, and gave the number by which he was recorded, paid, and would be interred if he got unlucky.

The personnel officer entered the information, used his free eye to read Ussmak’s data as they came up. “You were serving in the SSSR against the Soviets, is that correct, until your landcruiser was destroyed and you were exposed to excess radiation?”

“Yes, superior sir, that is correct.”

“Then you’ve not had combat experience against the Deutsche?”

“Superior sir, I am told the guerrilla team that wrecked my vehicle was part Deutsch, part Soviet. If you are asking whether I’ve faced their landcruisers, the answer is no.”

“That is what I meant,” the personnel officer said. “You will need to maintain a higher level of alertness hereabouts than was your habit in the SSSR, landcruiser driver. Tactically, the Deutsche are more often clever than perhaps any other Tosevite group. Their newest landcruisers have heavier guns than you will have seen, too. Combine these factors with their superior knowledge of the local terrain and they become opponents not to be despised.”

“I understand, superior sir,” Ussmak said. “Will my landcruiser commander be experienced?” *I hope.*

The personnel officer punched at the computer again, waited for a response to appear on the screen. “You’re going to be assigned to Landcruiser Commander Hessef’s machine; his driver was wounded in a bandit attack here in Besançon a few days ago. Hessef compiled an excellent record in España, south and west of here, as we expanded out of our landing zone. He’s relatively new to the northern sector.”

Ussmak hadn’t known España from France until the moment the personnel officer named them. And no matter what that officer said about the superior skills of the Deutsche, to Ussmak one band of Big Uglys seemed pretty much like another. “I’m glad to hear that he has fought, superior sir. Where do I report to him?”

“The hall we are using as a barracks is out the door through which you entered and to

your left. If you do not find Hessef and your gunner—whose name is Tvenkel—there, try the vehicle park down past the anti-aircraft missile launcher.”

Ussmak tried the vehicle park first, on the theory that any commander worth his body paint took better care of his landcruiser than he did of himself. Seeing the big machines lined up in their sandbagged revetments made him eager to get back to the work for which he'd been trained, and also eager for the tight-knit fellowship that flowered among the males of a good landcruiser crew.

Crewmales working on their landcruisers directed him to the one Hessef commanded. But when he walked into its stall, he found it buttoned up tight. That presumably meant Hessef and Tvenkel *were* back at the barracks. *Not a good sign*, Ussmak thought as he began to retrace his steps.

He longed to feel a part of something larger than himself. That was what the Race was all about: obedience from below, obligation from above, all working together for the common good. He'd known that feeling with Votal, his first commander, but after Votal died, Krentel proved such an incompetent that Ussmak could not bond to him as subordinate was supposed to bond to superior.

Then Krentel had got himself killed, too, and Ussmak's original gunner with him. That worsened the driver's feeling of separation, almost of exclusion, from the rest of the Race. The long stay in the hospital ship and his discovery of ginger had pushed him even further out of the niche he'd been intended to fit. If he couldn't have ginger any more, crew solidarity would have been a good second best. But how could he really feel part of a crew that didn't have the simple sense to treat their landcruiser as if their lives depended on it?

As he walked back past the missile launcher, bells began to ring down in the town of Besançon. He turned to one of the males. “I'm new here. Are those alarms? Where should I go? What should I do?”

“Nothing—take no notice of them,” the fellow answered. “The Big Ugliers just have a lot of mechanical clocks that chime to divide up the day and night. They startled me at first, too. After a while here, you won't even notice them. One is spectacular for something without electronics. It must have seventy dials, and these figures all worked by gears and pulleys come out and prance around and then disappear back into the machine. When you get some slack time, you ought to go see it: it's worth turning both eye turrets that way.”

“Thanks. Maybe I will.” Relieved, Ussmak kept on toward the barracks building. Just as he pushed the door open, the sweet metallic clangor ceased.

Even the cots the males were using had formerly belonged to the Big Ugliers. The thin mattresses looked lumpy, the blankets scratchy. They were undoubtedly woven from the hair of some native beast or other, an idea that made Ussmak itch all by itself. A few males lounged around doing nothing in particular.

“I seek the landcruiser commander Hessef,” Ussmak said as some of those males



turned an eye or two toward him.

“I am Hessef,” one of them said, coming forward. “By your paint, you must be my new driver.”

“Yes, superior sir.” Ussmak put more respect into his voice than he truly felt. Hessef was a jittery-looking male, his body paint sloppily applied. Ussmak’s own paint was none too neat, but he thought commanders should adhere to a higher standard.

Another male came up to stand beside Hessef. “Ussmak, I introduce you to Tvenkel, our gunner,” the landcruiser commander said.

“Be good to have a whole crew again, go out and fight,” Tvenkel said. Like Hessef, he couldn’t quite hold still. His body paint was, if possible, in even worse shape than the landcruiser commander’s—smearred, blotched, daubed on in a hurry. Ussmak wondered what he’d done to deserve becoming part of this substandard crew.

Hessef said, “Sitting around the barracks all day with nothing to do is as boring as staying awake while you go into cold sleep.”

*Then why aren’t you out tending to your landcruiser?* Ussmak thought. But that wasn’t something he could say, not to his new commander. Instead, he answered, “Boredom I know all about, superior sir. I just spent a good long while in a hospital ship, recovering from radiation sickness. There were times when I thought I’d been in that cubicle forever.”

“Yes, that could be bad, just staring at the metal walls,” Hessef agreed. “Still, though, I think I’d sooner stay in a hospital ship than in this ugly brick shed that was never made for our kind.” He waved to show what he meant. Ussmak had to agree: the barracks was indeed a dismal place. He suspected even Big Ugliers would have found themselves bored here.

“How did you get through the days?” Tvenkel asked. “Recovering from sickness makes time pass twice as slowly.”

“For one thing, I have every video from the hospital ship’s library memorized,” Ussmak said, which drew a laugh from his new crewmates. “For another—” He stopped short. Ginger was against regulations. He didn’t want to make the commander and gunner aware of his habit.

“Here, drop your gear on this bed by ours,” Hessef said. “We’ve been saving it against the day when we’d be whole again.”

Ussmak did as he was asked. The other two males crowded close around him, as if to create the unity that held a good landcruiser crew together. The rest of the males in the barracks looked on from a distance, politely allowing Ussmak to bond with his new comrades before they came forward to introduce themselves.

Quietly, Tvenkel said, “You may not know it, driver, but the Big Ugliers have an herb that makes life a lot less boring. Would you care to try a taste, see what I mean?”

Ussmak’s eyes both swung abruptly, bored into the gunner. He lowered his voice, too.

“You have—ginger?” He hesitated before he named the precious powder.

Now Tvenkel and Hessef stared at him. “You know about ginger?” the landcruiser commander whispered. His mouth fell open in an enormous grin.

“Yes, I know about ginger. I’d love a taste, thanks.” Ussmak wanted to caper like a hatchling. Instead, the three males looked at each other for a long time, none of them saying anything. Ussmak broke the silence: “Superior sirs, I think we’re going to be an *outstanding crew*.”

Neither commander nor gunner argued with him.

The big Maybach engine coughed, sputtered, died. Colonel Heinrich Jäger swore and flipped up the Panther D’s cupola. “More than twice the horsepower of my old Panzer III,” he grumbled, “and it runs less than half as often.” He pulled himself out, dropped down to the ground.

The rest of the crew scrambled out, too. The driver, a big sandy-haired youngster named Rolf Wittman, grinned impudently. “Could be worse, sir,” he said. “At least it hasn’t caught fire the way a lot of them do.”

“Oh, for the blithe spirit of the young,” Jäger said, acid in his voice. He wasn’t young himself. He’d fought in the trenches in the First World War, stayed in the Weimar Republic’s *Reichswehr* after it was over. He’d switched over to panzers as soon as he could after Hitler began rearming Germany, and was commanding a company of Panzer IIIs in the Sixteenth Panzer Division south of Kharkov when the Lizards came.

Now, at last, the *Reich* had made a machine that might make the Lizards sit up and take notice when they met it. Jäger had killed a Lizard tank with his Panzer III, but he was the first to admit he’d been lucky. Anybody who came out alive, let alone victorious, after a run-in with Lizard armor was lucky.

The Panther he now stood beside seemed decades ahead of his old machine. It incorporated all the best features of the Soviet T-34—thick sloped armor, wide tracks, a powerful 75mm gun—into a German design with a smooth suspension, an excellent transmission, and better sights and gun control than Jäger had ever imagined before.

The only trouble was, it was a brand-new German design. Bumping up against the T-34 and the even heavier KV-1 in 1941 had been a nasty surprise for the *Wehrmacht*. The panzer divisions had held their own through superior tactics and started upgunning their Panzer IIIs and IVs, but getting better tanks became urgent. When the Lizards arrived, *urgent* turned mandatory.

And so development had been rushed, and the Panther, powerful machine that it was, conspicuously lacked the mechanical reliability that characterized older German models. Jäger kicked at the overlapping road wheels that carried the tracks. “This panzer might as well have been built by an Englishman,” he growled. He knew no stronger way to condemn an armored fighting vehicle.

The rest of the crew leaped to their panzer’s defense. “It’s not as bad as that, sir,”

Wittman said.

“It has a real gun in it, by Jesus,” added Sergeant Klaus Meinecke, “not one of the peashooters the English use.” The gun was his responsibility; he sat to Jäger’s right in the turret, on a chair that looked like a black-leather-covered hockey puck with a two-slat back.

“Having a real gun doesn’t matter if we can’t get to where we’re supposed to use it,” Jäger retorted. “Let’s fix this beast, shall we, before the Lizards fly by and strafe us.”

That got the men moving in a hurry. Attack from the air had been frightening enough when it was a *Shturmovik* with red stars painted on wings and fuselage. It was infinitely worse now; the rockets the Lizards fired hardly ever missed.

“Probably the fuel lines again,” Wittman said, “or maybe the fuel pump.” He rummaged in one of the outside stowage bins for a wrench, attacked the bolts that held the engine louvers onto the Panther’s rear deck.

The crew was a good one, Jäger thought. Only veterans, and select veterans at that, got to handle Panthers: no point in frittering away the important new weapon by giving it to men who couldn’t get the most out of it.

Klaus Meinecke grunted in triumph. “Here we go. This gasket in the pump is *kaput*. Do we have a spare?” More rummaging in the bins produced one. The gunner replaced the damaged part, screwed the top back onto the fuel pump case, and said, “All right, let’s start it up again.”

The crew had to take off the jack to get at the starter dog clutch. “That’s poor design,” Jäger said, and pulled a piece of paper and pencil out of a pocket of his black panzer crewman’s tunic. *Why not stow jack vertically between exhausts, not horizontally below them?* he scribbled.

Cranking up the Panther was a two-man job. Wittman and Meinecke did the honors. The engine belched, farted, and came back to life. After handshakes all around, the crew climbed back into the machine and rolled on down the road.

“We’ll want to look for a good patch of woods where we can take cover for the night,” Jäger said. Such a patch might be hard to find. He checked his map. They were somewhere between Thann and Belfort, heading down to try to hold the Lizards away from the latter strategic town.

Jäger stuck his head out of the drum-shaped cupola. If he was where he thought he was—He nodded, pleased with his navigation. There ahead stood Rougement-le-Château, a Romanesque priory now in picturesque ruin. Navigating through the rugged terrain of Alsace and the Franche-Comté was a very different business from getting around on the Ukrainian steppe, where, as on the sea, you picked a compass heading and followed it. If you got lost here, heading across country wasn’t so easy. More often than not, you had to back up and retrace your path by road, which cost precious time.

The woods were still leafless, but Jäger found a spot where bare branches interlaced thickly overhead. Behind scattered clouds, the pale winter sun was low in the west.

“Good enough,” he said, and ordered Wittman to pull off the road and conceal the Panther from prying eyes in the sky.

Within the next half hour, four more tanks—another Panther, two of the new Panzer IVs with relatively light protection but a long 75mm gun almost as good as the Panther’s, and a huge Tiger that mounted an 88 and armor poorly sloped but so thick and heavy that it made the panzer slower than it should have been—joined him there. The crews swapped rations, spare parts, and lies. Somebody had a deck of cards. They played skat and poker till it got too dark to see.

Jäger thought back to the splendid organization of Sixteenth Panzer when the division plunged into the Soviet Union. Back then, the thought of getting tanks into action by these dribs and drabs would have caused apoplexy in the High Command. That was before the Lizards had started plastering the German rail and road networks. Now any movement toward the front was counted a success.

He squeezed butter and meat paste from their tubes onto a chunk of black bread. As he chewed, he reflected that a lot of things had happened to him that he never would have expected before the Lizards came. He’d fought against the alien invaders side by side with a band of Russian partisans, most of them Jews.

He hadn’t had much use for Jews before then. He still didn’t have a whole lot of use for them, but now he understood why the Jews of Warsaw had risen against the town’s German occupiers to help the Lizards take it. Nothing the aliens did to them could come close to what they’d suffered at the hands of the *Reich*.

And yet those same Polish Jews had let him cross their territory, and hadn’t even confiscated from him all the explosive metal that had been his booty from the joint German-Soviet raid on the Lizards. True, they’d taken half to send it to the United States, but they’d let him deliver the rest to his own superiors. Even now, German scientists were working to avenge Berlin.

He took another bite. Even that wasn’t the strangest. Had anyone told him on June 22, 1941, that he would—have an affair with? fall in love with? (he still wasn’t sure about that himself)—a Soviet pilot, his most likely reaction would have been to punch the teller in the eye for calling him a fairy. On the day the war with the Soviet Union started, no one in Germany knew the Russians would use female fliers in combat.

He hoped Ludmila was all right. They’d first met in the Ukraine, where she’d plucked him and his gunner (he hoped Georg Schultz was all right, too) off a collective farm and taken them to Moscow so they could explain to the Red Army brass how they’d managed to kill a Lizard panzer. He’d written to her after that—she had some German, he a little Russian—but got no answer.

Then they’d come together at Berchtesgaden, where Hitler had pinned on him the German Cross in gold (a medal so ugly he wore only the ribbon these days) and she’d flown in Molotov for consultation with the *Führer*. He smiled slowly. That had been as magical a week as he’d ever known.

*But what now?* he wondered. Ludmila had flown back to the Soviet Union, where the NKVD would not look kindly upon her for sleeping with a Nazi ... any more than the *Gestapo* was pleased with him for sleeping with a Red. "Screw em all," he muttered, which drew a quizzical glance from Rolf Wittman. Jäger did not explain.

A motorcycle came put-putting slowly down the road, its headlight dimmed almost to extinction by a blackout slit cap. With the Lizards' detectors, even that could be dangerous, but not so dangerous as driving a winding French road in pitch darkness.

The motorcycle driver spotted the panzers off under the trees. He stopped, throttled down, and called, "Anyone know where I can find Colonel Heinrich Jäger?"

"Here I am," Jäger said, standing up. "*Was ist los?*"

"I have here orders for you, Colonel." The driver pulled them out of his tunic pocket.

Jäger unfolded the paper, stooped down and held it in front of the motorcycle headlamp so he could read it. "*Scheisse*," he exclaimed. "I've been recalled. They just put me back in frontline service, and now I've been recalled."

"Yes, sir," the driver agreed. "I am ordered to take you back with me."

"But why?" Jäger said. "It makes no sense. Here I am an experienced fighter for *Führer* and *Vaterland* against the Lizards. But what good will I do in this Hechingen place? I've scarcely even heard of it."

But he had heard of it, and fairly recently, too. Where? When? He stiffened as memory came. Hechingen was where Hitler had said he was sending the explosive metal. Without another word, Jäger walked over to his Panther, got on the radio, and turned command over to the regimental lieutenantcolonel. Then he slung his pack onto his shoulders, went back to the motorcycle, climbed on behind the driver, and headed back toward Germany.

Ludmila Gorbunova did not care for Moscow. She was from Kiev, and thought the Soviet capital drab and dull. Her impression of it was not improved by the endless grilling she'd had from the NKVD. She'd never imagined the mere sight of green collar tabs could reduce her to fearful incoherence, but it did.

And, she knew, things could have been worse. The *chekists* were treating her with kid gloves because she'd flown Comrade Molotov, second in the Soviet Union only to the Great Stalin, and a man who loathed flying, to Germany and brought him home in one piece. Besides, the *rodina*—the motherland—needed combat pilots. She'd stayed alive through most of a year against the Nazis and several months against the Lizards. That should have given her value above and beyond what she got for ferrying Molotov around.

Whether it did, however, remained to be seen. A lot of very able, seemingly very valuable people had disappeared over the past few years, denounced as wreckers or traitors to the Soviet Union or sometimes just vanished with no explanation at all, as if they had suddenly ceased to exist ...

The door to the cramped little room (cramped, yes, but infinitely preferable to a cell in the Lefortovo prison) in which she sat came open. The NKVD man who came in wore three crimson oblongs on his collar tabs. Ludmila bounced to her feet. "Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel!" she said, saluting.

He returned the salute, the first time that had happened since the NKVD started in on her. "Comrade Senior Lieutenant," he acknowledged. "I am Boris Lidov." She blinked in surprise; none of her questioners had bothered giving his name till now, either. Lidov looked more like a schoolmaster than an NKVD man, not that that meant anything. But he surprised her again, saying, "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, thank you very much, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel," she answered—quickly, before he changed his mind. The German attack had deranged the Soviet distribution system, that of the Lizards all but destroyed it. These days, tea was rare and precious.

*Well*, she thought, *the NKVD will have it if anyone does*. And sure enough, Lidov stuck his head out the door and bawled a request. Within moments, someone fetched him a tray with two gently steaming glasses. He took it, set it on the table in front of Ludmila. "Help yourself," he said. "Choose whichever you wish; neither one is drugged, I assure you."

He didn't need to assure her; that he did so made her suspicious again. But she took a glass and drank. Her tongue found nothing in it but tea and sugar. She sipped again, savoring the taste and the warmth. "Thank you, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel. It's very good," she said.

Lidov made an indolent gesture, as if to say she didn't need to thank him for anything

so small. Then he said idly, as if making casual conversation, “You know, I met your Major Jäger—no, you’ve said he’s Colonel Jäger now, correct?—your Colonel Jäger, I should say, after you brought him here to Moscow last summer.”

“Ah,” Ludmila said, that being the most noncommittal noise she could come up with. She decided it was not enough. “Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, as I have said before, he is not *my* colonel by any means.”

“I do not necessarily condemn,” Lidov said, steeping his fingers. “The ideology of the fascist state is corrupt, not the German people. And”—he coughed dryly—“the coming of the Lizards has shown that progressive economic systems, capitalist and socialist alike, must band together lest we all fall under the oppression of the ancient system wherein the relationship is slave to master, not worker to boss.”

“Yes,” Ludmila said eagerly. The last thing she wanted to do was argue about the dialectic of history with an NKVD man, especially when his interpretation seemed to her advantage.

Lidov went on, “Further, your Colonel Jäger helped perform a service for the people of the Soviet Union, as he may have mentioned to you.”

“No, I’m afraid he didn’t. I’m sorry, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, but we talked very little about the war when we saw each other in Germany. We—” Ludmila felt her face heat. She knew what Lidov had to be thinking. Unfortunately—from her point of view—he was right.

He looked down his long, straight nose at her. “You like Germans well, don’t you?” he said sniffily. “This Jäger in Berchtesgaden, and you attached his gunner”—he pulled out a scrap of paper, checked a name on it—“Georg Schultz, *da*, to the ground crew at your airstrip.”

“He is a better mechanic than anyone else at the airstrip. Germans understand machinery better than we do, I think. But as far as I am concerned, he is only a mechanic,” Ludmila insisted.

“He is a German. They are both Germans.” So much for Lidov’s words about the solidarity of peoples with progressive economic systems. His flat, hard tone made Ludmila think of a trip to Siberia on an unheated cattle car, or of a bullet in the back of the neck. The NKVD man went on, “It is likely that Comrade Molotov will dispense with the services of a pilot who forms such un-Soviet attachments.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel,” Ludmila said, though she knew Molotov would have been glad to dispense with the services of any pilot, given his attitude about flying. But she insisted, “I have no attachments to Georg Schultz save those of the struggle against the Lizards.”

“And to Colonel Jäger?” Lidov said with the air of a man calling checkmate. Ludmila did not answer; she knew she was checkmated. The lieutenant-colonel spoke as if pronouncing sentence: “Because of this conduct of yours, you are to be returned to your former duties without promotion. Dismissed, Comrade Senior Lieutenant.”

Ludmila had been braced for ten years in the *gulag* and another five of internal exile. She needed a moment to take in what she'd just heard. She jumped to her feet. "I serve the Soviet state, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel!" *Whether you believe me or not*, she added to herself.

"Prepare yourself for immediate departure for the airport," Lidov said, as if her mere presence polluted Moscow. An NKVD flunky must have been listening outside the door or to a concealed microphone, for in under half a minute a fellow in green collar tabs brought in a canvas bag full of her worldly goods.

Before long, a *troika* was taking her from the Kremlin to the airport on the edge of Moscow. The sleigh's runners and the hooves of the three horses that drew it kicked up snow gone from white to gray thanks to city soot. Only when her beloved little U-2 biplane came into view on the runway did she realize she'd been returned to this duty, which she wanted more than any other, as if it were a punishment. She chewed on that a long time, even after she was in the air.

"I'm bloody lost," David Goldfarb said as he pedaled his RAF bicycle through the countryside south of Leicester. The radarman came to an intersection. He looked for signs to tell him where he was—and looked in vain, because the signs taken down in 1940 to hinder a feared German invasion had never gone back up.

He was trying to get to the Research and Development Test Flying Aerodrome at Bruntingthorpe, to which he'd been ordered to report. *South from the village of Peatling Magna*, his directions read. The only trouble was, nobody had bothered to tell him (for all he knew, nobody was aware) *two* roads ran south from Peatling Magna. He'd taken the right-hand track, and was beginning to regret it.

Peatling Magna hadn't looked *magna* enough to boast two roads when he rolled through it; he wondered if there could possibly be a Peatling Minima, and, if so, whether it was visible to the naked eye.

Ten minutes of steady pedaling brought him into another village. He looked around hopefully for anything resembling an aerodrome, but nothing he saw matched that description. A matronly woman in a scarf and a heavy wool coat was trudging down the street. "Begging your pardon, madam," he called to her, "but is this Bruntingthorpe?"

The woman's head whipped around—his London accent automatically made him out to be a stranger. She relaxed, a little, when she saw he was in RAF dark blue and thus had an excuse for poking his good-sized nose-into a place where he didn't belong. But even though she used the broader vowels of the East Midlands, her voice was sharp as she answered, "Bruntingthorpe? I should say *not*, young man. *This* is Peatling Parva. Bruntingthorpe lies down that road." She pointed east.

"Thank you, madam," Goldfarb said gravely. He bent low over his bicycle, rode away fast so she wouldn't hear him start to snicker. Not Peatling Minima—Peatling Parva. The name fit; it had looked a pretty *parva* excuse for a village. Now, though, he was on the right track and—he looked at his watch—near enough on time that he could blame



his tardiness on the train's getting into Leicester late, which it had.

He hadn't gone far toward Bruntingthorpe when he heard a screaming roar, saw an airplane streak across the sky at what seemed an impossible speed. Alarm and fury coursed through him—had he come here just in time to see the Lizards bomb and wreck the aerodrome?

Then he played in his mind the film of the aircraft he'd just seen. After the Lizards destroyed the radar station at Dover, he'd been an aircraft spotter the old-fashioned way, with binoculars and field telephone, for a while. He recognized the Lizards' fighters and fighter-bombers. This aircraft, even if it flew on jets, didn't match any of them. Either they'd come up with something new or the plane was English.

Hope replaced anger. Where was he more likely to find English jet aircraft than at a research and development aerodrome? He wondered why the powers that be wanted him there. He'd find out soon.

The village of Bruntingthorpe was no more prepossessing than either of the Peatlings. Not far away, though, a collection of tents, corrugated-iron Nissen huts, and macadamized runways marred the gently rolling fields that surrounded the hamlets. A soldier with a tin hat and a Sten gun demanded to see Goldfarb's papers when he pedaled up to the barbed-wire fence and gate around the RAF facility.

He surrendered them, but could not help remarking, "Seems a fairish waste of time, if anyone wants to know. Not bloody likely I'm a Lizard in disguise, is it?"

"Never can tell, chum," the soldier answered. "Besides, you might be a Jerry in disguise, and we're not dead keen on that even if the match there won't be played to a finish."

"Can't say I blame you." Goldfarb's parents had got out of Russian-ruled Poland to escape pogroms against the Jews. By all accounts, the Nazis' pogroms after they conquered Poland had been a hundred times worse, bad enough for the Jews there to make common cause with the Lizards against the Germans. Now, from the reports that leaked out, the Lizards were beginning to make things tough on the Jews. Goldfarb sighed. Being a Jew wasn't easy anywhere.

The sentry opened the gate, waved him through. He rode over to the nearest Nissen hut, got off his bicycle, pushed down the kickstand, and went into the hut. Several RAF men were gathered round a large table there, studying some drawings by the light of a paraffin lamp hung overhead. "Yes?" one of them said.

Goldfarb stiffened to attention: the casual questioner, though just a couple of inches over five feet tall, wore the four narrow stripes of a group captain. Saluting, Goldfarb gave his name, specialization, and service number, then added, "Reporting as ordered sir!"

The officer returned the salute. "Good to have you with us, Goldfarb. We've had excellent reports of you, and we're confident you'll make a valuable member of the team. I am Group Captain Fred Hipple; I shall be your commanding officer. My

speciality is jet propulsion. Here we have Wing Commander Peary, Flight Lieutenant Kennan, and Flight Officer Roundbush.”

The junior officers all towered over Hipple, but he dominated nonetheless. He was a dapper little fellow who held himself very erect; he had slicked-down wavy hair, a closely trimmed mustache, and heavy eyebrows. He spoke with almost professional precision: “I am told that you have been flying patrols aboard a radar-equipped Lancaster bomber in an effort to detect Lizard aircraft prior to their reaching our shores.”

“Yes, sir, that’s correct,” Goldfarb said.

“Capital. We shall make great use of your experience, I assure you. What we are engaged in here, Radarman, is developing a jet-propelled fighter aeroplane to be similarly equipped with radar, thus facilitating the acquisition and tracking of targets and, it is to be hoped, their destruction.”

“That’s—splendid, sir.” Goldfarb had always thought of radar as a defensive weapon, one to use to detect the enemy and send properly armed planes after him. But to mount it on a fighter already formidably armed in its own right ... He smiled. This was a project in which he would gladly take part.

Flight Officer Roundbush shook his head. He was as big and blond and blocky as Hipple was spare and dark. He said, “It’d be a lot more splendid if we could make the bloody thing fit in the space we have for it.”

“Which is, at the moment, essentially nil,” Hipple said with a rueful nod. “The jet fighter you may have seen taking off a few moments ago, that little Gloster Pioneer, is not what one would call lavishly equipped with room. It was, in fact, in the air more than a year before the Lizards came.” Bitterness creased his face. “As I had produced a working jet engine as far back as 1937, I find the delay unfortunate, but no help for it now. When the Lizards descended, the Pioneer, though intended only as an experimental aircraft, was rushed into production to give us as much of an equalizer as was possible.”

“Might as well be tanks,” Roundbush murmured. Both the German invasion of France and the fighting in the North African desert had shown severe deficiencies in British armor, but the same old obsolescent models kept getting made because they did work, after a fashion, and England had no time to tool up to build anything better.

Group Captain Hipple shook his head. “It’s not as bad as that, Basil. We have managed to get the Meteor off the ground, after all.” He turned back to Goldfarb. “The Meteor is more a proper fighter than the Pioneer. The latter carries a single jet engine placed in back of the cockpit, whereas the former has two, of an improved design, mounted on the wings. The improvement in performance is considerable.”

“We also have a considerable production program laid on for the Meteor,” Flight Lieutenant Kennan said. “With luck, we should be able to put large numbers of jet fighters into the air by this time next year.”

“Yes, that’s so, Maurice,” Hipple agreed. “Of all the great powers, we and the Japanese have proved most fortunate, in that the Lizards did not invade either island nation. From the depths of space, I suppose we seemed too small to be worth troubling over. We’ve endured a worse blitz than the Jerries gave us, but life does go on despite a blitz. You should know that, eh, Goldfarb?”

“Yes, sir,” Goldfarb said. “It got a bit lively at Dover now and again, but we came through.” Though only a first-generation Englishman, he had a knack for understatement.

“Exactly.” Hipple’s nod was vehement, as if Goldfarb had said something important. The group captain went on, “As Flight Lieutenant Kennan and I have noted, our industrial capacity is still respectable, and we shall be able to get considerable numbers of Meteors airborne within a relatively short period. What point to it, however, if, once airborne, they are shot down again in short order?”

“Which is where you come in, Goldfarb,” Wing Commander Peary said. He was a slim fellow of medium height with sandy hair starting to go gray; his startling bass voice seemed better suited to a man of twice his bulk.

“Exactly,” Hipple said again. “Julian—the wing commander—means we need a chap with practical experience in airborne radar to help us plan its installation in Meteors as quickly as possible. Our pilots must be able to detect the enemy’s presence at a distance comparable to that at which he can ‘see’ us. D’you follow?”

“I believe so, sir,” Goldfarb said. “From what you say, I gather you intend the Meteor to have a two-man cockpit, pilot and radar observer. With the sets we have, sir, a pilot would be hard-pressed to tend to them and fly the aircraft at the same time.”

The four RAF officers exchanged glances. Goldfarb wondered if he’d just stuck his foot in it. That would be lovely, a lowly radarman affronting all his superiors within five minutes of arriving at a new posting.

Then Julian Peary rumbled, “This is a point which was much debated during the design of the aircraft. You may be interested to know that the view you just expressed is the one which prevailed.”

“I’m—pleased to hear that, sir,” Goldfarb said, with such transparent relief that Basil Roundbush, who seemed not overburdened with military formality, broke into a large, toothy grin.

Group Captain Hipple said, “Having established your level of expertise with such dispatch, Radarman, you give me hope you will also be able to assist us in reducing the size of the radar set to be carried. The fuselage of the Meteor is rather less spacious than the bomb bay of the Lancaster where you were previously ensconced. Perhaps you’ll have a look at these drawings with us so you can get a notion of the volume involved—”

Goldfarb stepped up to the table. With no more fanfare than that, he found himself a part of the team. He said, “I don’t know the solution to one problem we faced in the Lanc.”

“Which is?” Hipple asked.

“Of course, the Lizards’ guided rockets can knock down a plane at longer range than any guns that we have can hit back. One of those rockets definitely seems to home in on our radar transmissions—probably the same sort the Lizards used to knock out our ground stations. Turning off the set made that particular rocket go wild, but it also left us blind—something I shouldn’t fancy if I were in the midst of a dogfight.”

“Indeed not.” Hipple nodded vigorously. “Even under ideal circumstances, the Meteor does not pull us level with the Lizards; it merely reduces our disadvantage. We remain deficient in speed and, as you say, in armament as well. To have to engage enemy aircraft without being able to detect them past the range of the pilot’s eye would be a dreadful handicap. I do not pretend to be an expert in radar; as I said, engines are my speciality.” He turned to the other officers. “Suggestions, gentlemen?”

Basil Roundbush said, “Can your airborne radar set emit more than one frequency, Goldfarb? If so, perhaps switching between one and the next might, ah, confuse the rocket and cause it to miss without losing radar capacity.”

“That might work, sir; I honestly don’t know,” Goldfarb said. “We weren’t any too keen on experimenting, not up above Angels Twenty, if you know what I mean.”

“No quarrel there,” Roundbush assured him. “We’d have to try it on the ground first: if a transmitter there survived by shifting frequencies, the result might be worth testing in aircraft as well.”

He paused to scribble some notes. Goldfarb was delighted research and development had not stopped because of wartime emergencies, and even more delighted to be a part of the effort at Bruntingthorpe. But he’d already promised himself that, when the radar-equipped Meteors flew, he’d be in the rear seat of one of them. Having become part of an aircrew, he knew he’d never again be content to stay on the ground.

Moishe Russie was tired of staying underground. The irony of his position hit him in the teeth like a rifle butt in the hands of an SS man. When the Lizards came to Earth, he’d thought they were the literal answer to his prayers; absent their arrival, the Nazis would have massacred the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, and in the others they’d set up throughout Poland.

The Jews had been looking for a miracle then. When Moishe declared that he’d had one, he gained enormous prestige in the ghetto; before, he’d been just another medical student slowly starving to death along with everyone else. He’d urged the Jews to rise, to help throw the Germans out and let the Lizards in.

And so he’d become one of the Lizards’ favorite humans. He’d broadcast propaganda for them, telling—truthfully—of the horrors and atrocities the Nazis had committed in Poland. The Lizards came to think he would say anything for them. They’d wanted him to praise their destruction of Washington, D.C., and say it was as just as the devastation that had fallen on Berlin.

He'd refused ... and so he found himself here, hiding in a ghetto bunker that had been built with the Nazis, not the Lizards, in mind.

His wife Rivka picked that moment to ask, "How long have we been down here?"

"Too long," their son Reuven chimed in.

He was right; Moishe knew he was right. Reuven and Rivka had been cooped up in the bunker longer than he had; they'd gone into hiding so the Lizards couldn't use threats against them to bend him to their will. After that, the Lizards put a gun to his head to make him say what they wanted. He did not think of himself as a brave man, but he'd defied them even so. They hadn't killed him. In a way, what they did was worse—they killed his words, broadcasting a twisted recording that made him seem to say what they wanted even when he hadn't.

Russie had had his revenge; he'd made a recording in a tiny studio in the ghetto that detailed what the Lizards had done to him, and the Jewish fighters had managed to smuggle it out of Poland to embarrass the aliens. After that, he'd had to disappear himself.

Rivka said, "Do you even know, Moishe, whether it's day or night up there?"

"No more than you do," he admitted. The bunker had a clock; both he and Rivka had been faithful about keeping it wound. But the clock had only a twelve-hour dial, and after a while they'd lost track of which twelve hours they were in. Even by candlelight, he could see the dial from where he stood: it was a quarter past three. But did that mean bustling afternoon or dead of night? He had no idea. All he knew was that, at the moment, everyone here was awake.

"I don't know how much longer we can stand this," Rivka said. "It's no fit life for a human being, hiding down here in the darkness like a rat in its hole."

"But if it's the only way we can go on, then go on we will," Moishe answered sharply. "Life in wartime is never easy—do you think you're in America? Even if we are underground, we're better off now than when the Nazis ruled the ghetto."

"Are we?"

"I think so. We have plenty of food—" Their other child, a daughter, had died during the Nazi occupation, of dysentery aggravated by starvation. Moishe had known what he needed to do to save her, but without food and medicine he'd been helpless.

But now Rivka said, "So what? We could see our friends before, share our troubles. If the Germans beat us on the streets, it was just because we happened to be there. If the Lizards spy us, they'll shoot us on sight."

Since that was manifestly true, Moishe chose the only ploy left to him: he changed the subject. "Even now, our people are better off under the Lizards than they were under the Germans."

"Yes, and that's thanks in large part to you," Rivka retorted. "And what have you got for it? Your whole family, buried alive!" So much anger and bitterness clogged her voice

that Reuven started to cry. Even as he comforted his son, Moishe blessed the little boy for short-circuiting the argument.

After he and Rivka got Reuven calmed down again, Moishe said carefully, “If you feel you must, I suppose you and Reuven can go back above ground. Not that many people knew you by sight; with God’s help, you might go a long time before you were betrayed. Anyone who wanted to curry favor with the Lizards could gain it by turning me in. Or a Pole might do it for no better reason than that he hates Jews.”

Rivka sighed. “You know we won’t do that. We won’t leave you, and you’re right, you can’t come up. But if you think we’re well off here, you’re *meshuggeh*.”

“I never said we were well off,” Russie answered after a brief pause to search his memory and make sure he really hadn’t said anything so foolish. “I only said things could be worse, and they could.” The Nazis could have shipped the whole Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka or that other extermination camp they were just finishing when the Lizards came, the one they called Auschwitz. He didn’t mention that to his wife. Some things, even if true, were too horrific to use as fuel in a quarrel.

The argument petered out. Reuven got sleepy, so they put him to bed. That meant they needed to go to bed themselves not much later; they couldn’t get much sleep when the boy was awake and bouncing off the walls of the cramped bunker.

Noises woke Rivka first, then Moishe. Reuven snored on, even when his parents sat up. Noises in the cellar of the block of flats that concealed the bunker were always frightening. At times, Jewish fighters whom Mordechai Anielewicz led came down with fresh supplies for the Russies, but Moishe always wondered if the next appearance would be the one that brought the knock on the plasterboard panel hiding the doorway.

*Rap, rap, rap!* The sharp sound echoed through the bunker. Russie started violently. Beside him, Rivka’s lips pulled back from her teeth, her eyes widened, and the skin all over her face tightened down onto the bones in a mask of fear. *Rap, rap, rap!*

Russie had vowed he wouldn’t go easily. Moving as quiet as he could, he slid out of bed, grabbed a long kitchen knife, and blew out the last lamp, plunging the bunker into darkness blacker than any above-ground midnight.

*Rap, rap, rap!* Shoving and scraping noises as the plasterboard panel was dislodged and pushed aside. The bunker door itself was barred from the inside. Moishe knew it wouldn’t hold against anyone determined to break it down. He raised the knife high. The first one who came through—Jewish traitor or Lizard—would take as much steel as he could give. That much he promised himself.

But instead of booted feet pounding on the door or a battering ram crashing against it, an urgent Yiddish voice called, “We know you’re in there, *Reb* Moishe. Open this *verkakte* door, will you? We have to get you away before the Lizards come.”

A trick? A trap? Automatically, Moishe looked toward Rivka. The darkness he’d made himself stymied him. “What to do?” he called softly.

“Open the door,” she answered.

“But—”

“Open the door,” Rivka repeated. “Nobody in the company of the Lizards would have sworn at it that way.”

It seemed a slim reed to snatch. If it broke, it would pierce more than his hand. But how could he hold the invaders at bay? All at once, he realized they didn’t have to come in after him. Suppose they just stood back and sprayed the bunker with machine-gun bullets ... or started a fire and let him and his wife and child roast? He let the kitchen knife clatter to the floor, fumbled blindly for the bar, lifted it out of its rest, and pushed the door open.

One of the two Jews in the cellar carried an oil-burning lantern and a pistol. The lantern wasn’t very bright, but dazzled Moishe anyhow. The fighter said, “Took you long enough. Come on. You have to hurry. Some *mamzer* talked where he shouldn’t, and the Lizards’ll be here soon.”

Belief took root in Russie. “Get Reuven,” he called to his wife.

“I have him,” she answered. “He’s not quite awake, but he’ll come—won’t you, dear?”

“Come where?” Reuven asked blurrily.

“Out of the bunker,” Rivka said, that being all she knew. It was plenty to galvanize the boy. He let out a wild whoop and bounded out of bed. “Wait!” Rivka exclaimed. “You need your shoes. In fact, we all need our shoes. We were asleep.”

“At half past eight in the morning?” the Jew with the lantern said. “I wish I was.” After a moment, though, he added, “Not down here, though, I have to admit.”

Moishe had forgotten he wore only socks. As he pulled on shoes and tied the laces, he asked, “Do we have time to take anything with us?” The books on a high shelf had become more like siblings than friends.

But the other Jew impatiently waiting outside, the one with a German Mauser slung on his back, shook his head and answered, “*Reb* Moishe, if you don’t get moving, you won’t have time to take yourself.”

Even the low-ceilinged cellar seemed spacious to Moishe. He started to pant on his way up the stairs; he’d had no exercise at all in the bunker. The gray, leaden light at the top of the stairwell made him blink and set his eyes to watering. After so long with candles and oil lamps, even a distant hint of daylight was overwhelming.

Then he walked out onto the street. Thick clouds hid the sun. Dirty, slushy snow lay in the gutters. The air was hardly less thick and smoky than it had been in his underground hideaway. All the same, he wanted to throw his arms wide and dance like a Chasid to let loose his delight. Reuven *did* caper, coltlike; with a child’s compressed grasp of time, he must have felt he’d been entombed forever. Rivka walked steadily beside him, but her pale face was alight with joy and wonder, too.

Pale—Moishe looked down at his own hands. Beneath dirt, they were white and transparent as skimmed milk. His wife and son were just as pale. Everyone grew pallid

through a Polish winter; but if he and his family lost any more color, they'd disappear.

"What's the date?" he asked, wondering how long he'd been cooped up in the bunker.

"Twenty-second of February," the Jew with the lantern answered. "A month till spring." He snorted. Spring seemed more likely a year away than mere weeks.

The first Lizard Moishe saw on the street made him want to run back to the bunker. The alien, though, paid him no special attention. Lizards had as much trouble telling humans apart as people did with Lizards. Moishe glanced over to Reuven and Rivka. The aliens' difficulties in that regard had helped the Jews spirit the two of them away from right under their snouts.

"In here," the fighter with the pistol said. The Russies obediently went up a stairway and into another block of flats. The halls smelled of cabbage and unwashed bodies and urine. In an apartment at the back of the third floor, more of Anielewicz's warriors waited. They whisked Moishe and his family inside.

One of them grabbed Moishe by the arm and hustled him over to a table set out with a bar of yellow-tan soap, an enameled basin, a pair of shears, and a straight razor. "The beard, *Reb* Moishe, has to come off," he said without preamble.

Moishe drew back in dismay. A protective hand rose to cover his chin. The SS had cut off the beards—and sometimes the ears and noses—of Jews in the ghetto for sport.

"I'm sorry," the fellow—bearded himself—said. "We're going to move you, we're going to hide you. Look at yourself now." He picked up a fragment of what might once have been a full-length mirror, thrust it in Moishe's face.

Moishe perforce looked. He saw—himself, paler than usual, his beard longer and fuzzier than usual because he hadn't bothered trimming it while in the bunker, but otherwise the same rather horse-faced, studious-looking Jew he'd always been.

The fighter said, "Now imagine yourself clean-shaven. Imagine a Lizard with a photograph of you as you are now looking at you—and walking on to look at someone else."

The closest Moishe could come to seeing himself beardless was remembering what he'd looked like before his whiskers sprouted. He had trouble bringing the youth across the years and putting that face on the man he'd become.

Then Rivka said, "They're right, Moishe. It will make you different, and we need that. Please, go ahead and shave."

He sighed deeply, a token of surrender. Then he took the mirror from the fighter and leaned it on a shelf so he could see what he was doing. He picked up the shears and rapidly clipped as short as he could the beard he'd worn his whole adult life. What he knew about shaving was all theoretical. He splashed his face with water, then lathered the strong-smelling soap and spread it over cheeks and chin and neck.

Reuven snickered. "You look funny, Father!"

"I feel funny." He picked up the razor. The bone grip molded itself to his hand, like



the handle of a scalpel. The comparison seemed even more apt a few minutes later. He thought he'd seen less blood flow at an appendectomy. He nicked his ear, the hollow under his cheekbone, his chin, his larynx, and he made a good game try at slicing off his upper lip. When he rinsed himself, the water in the basin turned pink.

"You look funny, Father," Reuven said again.

Moishe peered into the scrap of mirror. A stranger stared back at him. He looked younger than he had with the beard, but not really like his earlier self. His features were sharper-edged, bonier, more defined. He looked *tougher* than he'd expected. The dried blood here and there on his face might have had something to do with that; it gave him the air of a boxer who'd just lost a tough match.

The fellow who'd handed him the mirror patted him on the back and said, "Don't worry, *Reb* Moishe. They say it gets easier with practice." He wasn't speaking from experience; his own gray-brown beard reached halfway down his shirtfront.

Russie started to nod, then stopped and stared. It hadn't occurred to him that he'd have to do this more than once. But of course the fighter was right—if he wanted to keep up his disguise, he'd have to go on shaving. It struck him as a great waste of time. Even so, after he rinsed and dried the razor, he stuck it into a pocket of his long, dark coat.

The man with the pistol who'd plucked him from the bunker said, "All right, I think we can get you out of here now without too many people recognizing you."

His own mother wouldn't have recognized him ... but she was dead, like his daughter, of intestinal disease aggravated by starvation. He said, "If I stay in Warsaw, sooner or later I'll be spotted."

"Of course," the fighter said. "So you won't stay in Warsaw."

It made sense. It was like a kick in the belly just the same. He'd spent his whole life here. Till the Lizards came, he'd been sure he would die here, too. "Where will I—where will we—go?" he asked quietly.

"Lodz," the fellow answered.

The word tolled through the room like the deep chime of a funeral bell at a Catholic church. The Germans had done their worst to the Lodz ghetto, second largest in Poland after Warsaw's, just before the Lizards came. Many of the quarter-million Jews who had lived there were shipped to Chelmno and Treblinka, never to come out again.

Russie's newly bared face must have shown his thoughts all too clearly. The Jewish fighter said, "I understand how you feel, *Reb* Moishe, but it's the best place. No one, not even, God willing, a Lizard, would think to look for you there, and if you're needed, we can bring you back in a hurry."

He could not fault the logic, but when he looked at Rivka, he saw the same sick dread in her eyes that he felt himself. The Jews of Lodz had passed into the valley of the shadow of death. Going to live in a town where that shadow had fallen ...

"Some of us still survive in Lodz," the fighter said. "We'd not send you there

otherwise, you may be sure of that.”

“Let it be so, then,” Russie said with a sigh.

The fighter with the pistol drove the horse-drawn wagon out of Warsaw. Russie sat beside him, feeling horribly visible and vulnerable. Rivka and Reuven huddled in back along with several other women and children amid scraps and rags and odd-shaped pieces of sheet metal: the stock of a junkman’s trade.

The Lizards had a checkpoint on the highway just outside of town. One of the males there carried a photograph of Russie with his beard. His heart thuttered in alarm. But after a cursory glance, the Lizard turned to his comrade and said in his own language, “Just another boring bunch of Big Ugliers.” The comrade waved the wagon ahead.

After a couple of kilometers, the fighter pulled over to the side of the road. The women and children who had served to camouflage Reuven and Rivka got down and started walking back to Warsaw. The fighter flicked the reins, clucked to the horse. The wagon rattled down the road toward Lodz.

Liu Han looked mistrustfully at the latest assortment of canned goods the little scaly devils had brought into her cell. She wondered what was most likely to stay down this time. The salty soup with noodles and bits of chicken, perhaps, and the canned fruit in syrup. She knew she wouldn’t touch the stew with the thick gravy; she’d already given that back twice.

She sighed. Being pregnant was hard enough anywhere. It was even worse imprisoned here in this airplane that never came down. Not only was she alone in the little metal room except when the scaly devils brought Bobby Fiore to her, but almost all her food was put up by foreign devils like him and not to her taste.

She ate what she could, wishing she were back in her Chinese village or even in the prison camp from which the little scaly devils had plucked her. In either place, she would have been among her own kind, not caged all alone like a songbird for the amusement of her captors. If she ever got out of here, she vowed she would free every bird she could.

Not that getting out seemed likely. She shook her head—no indeed. Her straight black hair tumbled over her face, over her bare shoulders—the scaly devils, who wore no clothes themselves, allowed their human prisoners none and kept the cell too warm to make them comfortable anyhow—and across her newly tender breasts. Her hair hadn’t been long enough to do that when the little devils brought her up here. It was now, and growing toward her waist.

She belched uncomfortably and got ready to dash for the plumbing hole. But what she’d eaten decided to stay where it belonged. She wasn’t sure exactly how far gone she was, not in here where the little scaly devils never turned off the light to let her reckon the passage of days. But she wasn’t throwing up as much as she had at first. Her belly hadn’t started to swell, though. Getting close to four months was the best guess she could

make.

Part of the floor, instead of being metal like the rest, was a raised mat covered with slick gray stuff that looked more like leather than anything else but didn't smell like it. Her body, sweaty in the heat, stuck to the mat when she lay down on it, but it was still better for resting than anywhere else in the cell. She closed her eyes, tried to sleep. She'd been sleeping a lot lately, partly because she was pregnant and partly because she had nothing better to do.

She was just dozing off when the door to her cell hissed open again. She opened one eye, sure it would be the little devil who came in to take away the cans after every meal. Sure enough, in he skittered, but several others came with him. A couple of them had body paint more ornate than she was used to seeing.

One, to her surprise, spoke Chinese after a fashion. Pointing to her, he said, "You come with us."

She quickly got to her feet. "It shall be done, superior sir," she said, using one of the phrases she'd learned of the little devils' language.

The devils fell in around her at more than arm's length. She was on the small side, an inch or so above five feet, but she towered over the scaly devils, enough so to make them nervous around her. She joined them eagerly enough; any trip out of her cell was unusual enough to count as a treat. And maybe, better still, they would take her to Bobby Fiore.

They didn't; they led her in the opposite direction from his cell. She wondered what they wanted with her. Wondering made her hopeful and anxious by turns. They might do anything at all to her, from setting her free to taking her away from Bobby Fiore and giving her to some new man who would rape and beat her. She had no say. She was just a prisoner.

What they did reached neither extreme. They took her down an oddly curved stairway to another deck. She felt lighter there than she should have; her stomach didn't like it. But much of her fear went away. She knew they'd brought Bobby Fiore here, and nothing too bad had happened to him.

The scaly devils escorted her into a chamber full of their incomprehensible gadgetry. The devil sitting behind the desk surprised her by speaking fair Chinese: "You are the female human Liu Han?"

"Yes," she answered. "Who are you, please?" Her own language tasted sweet in her mouth. Even with Bobby Fiore, she spoke a curious mixture of Chinese, English, and the little devils' tongue, eked out with much gesture and dumb show.

"I am called Nossat," the scaly devil answered. "I am a—I do not know it, your language has an exact word for it—I am a male who studies how you humans think. I am colleague to Tessrek, who spoke with your mate Bobby Fiore."

"Yes, I understand," Liu Han said. That was the little scaly devil with whom Bobby Fiore had spoken down here. What had he called the devil Tessrek? English had a name

for what that devil did—*psychologist*, that was it. Liu Han relaxed. Talking could not be dangerous.

Nossat said, “You are going to lay an egg in the time to come? No, your kind does not lay eggs. You are going to give birth? Is that what you say, ‘give birth’? You will have a child?”

“I am going to have a child, yes,” Liu Han agreed. Of themselves, the fingers of her right hand spread fanlike over her belly. She had long since resigned herself to being naked in front of the scaly devils, but she remained automatically protective of the baby growing inside her.

“The child is from matings between Bobby Fiore and you?” Nossat said. Without waiting for her to reply, he stuck one of his thin, clawed fingers into a recess on the desk. A screen, as if for motion pictures, lit up behind him. The picture that moved upon it was of Bobby Fiore thrusting atop Liu Han.

She sighed. She knew the little scaly devils took pictures of her while she made love, as well as any other time they chose. They had mating seasons like farm animals, and were utterly uninterested in matters of the flesh at any other time. The way people mated the whole year round seemed to fascinate and appall them.

“Yes,” she answered as the picture played on, “Bobby Fiore and I made love to start this baby.” Before long, it would begin to kick inside her, hard enough to feel. She remembered what a marvel that was from the boy she’d borne her husband before the Japanese killed him and the child.

Nossat stuck his finger into a different recess. Liu Han was not sorry to see the picture of her joined gasping to Bobby Fiore fade. A different moving picture took its place, this one of an immensely pregnant black woman giving birth to her baby. Liu Han watched the woman with more interest than the birth process: she knew about that, but she’d never before seen a black, man or woman. She hadn’t known the palms of their hands and soles of their feet were so pale.

“This is how your young are born?” Nossat said as the baby’s head and then shoulders emerged from between the straining woman’s legs.

“What else could it possibly be?” To Liu Han, the little scaly devils were an incomprehensible blend of immense and terrifying powers on the one hand and childish abysmal ignorance on the other.

“This is—dreadful,” Nossat said. The motion picture kept running. The woman delivered the afterbirth. It should have been over then. But she kept on bleeding. The blood was hard to see against her dark skin, but it spread over and soaked into the ground where she lay. The little scaly devil went on, “This female died after the young Tosevite came out of her body. Many females in the land we hold have died bearing their young.”

“That does happen, yes,” Liu Han said quietly. It was not something she cared to think about. Not just bleeding, but a baby trying to come out while in the wrong position, or

fever afterwards ... so many things could go wrong. And so many babies never lived to see their second birthday, their first outside their mother.

“But it’s not right,” Nossat exclaimed, as if he held her personally responsible for the way people had their babies. “No other kind of intelligent creature we know puts its mothers in such danger just to carry on life.”

Liu Han had never imagined any kind of intelligent creatures but human beings until the little scaly devils came. Even after she knew of the devils, she hadn’t thought there could be still more varieties of such creatures. Irritation in her voice, she snapped, “Well, how do you have your babies, then?” For all she knew, the little devils might have been assembled in factories rather than born.

“Our females lay eggs, of course,” Nossat said. “So do those of the Rabotevs and Hallessi, over whom we rule. Only you Tosevites are different.” His weird eyes swiveled so that one watched the screen behind him while the other stayed accusingly on Liu Han.

She fought to keep from laughing, fought and lost. The idea of making a nest—out of straw, maybe, like a chicken’s—and then sitting on it till the brood hatched was absurd enough to tickle her fancy. Hens certainly didn’t seem to have trouble laying eggs, either. It might be an easier way to do the job. But it wasn’t the way people did it.

Nossat said, “Your time to have the young come out of your body is now about a year away?”

“A year?” Liu Han stared at him. Didn’t the little scaly devils know *anything*?

But the devil said, “No—this is my mistake, for two years of the Race, more or less, make one of yours. I should say—should have said—you are half a year from your time?”

“Half a year, yes,” Liu Han said. “Maybe not quite so long.”

“We have to decide what to do with you,” Nossat told her. “We have no knowledge of how to help you when the young is born. You are only a barbarous Tosevite, but we do not want you to die because we are ignorant. You are our subject, not our enemy.”

Fear blew through Liu Han, a cold wind. Give birth here, in this place of metal, with only scaly devils beside her, without a midwife to help her through her pangs? If the least little thing went wrong, she *would* die, and the baby, too. “I will need help,” she said, as plaintively as she could. “Please get some for me.”

“We are still planning,” Nossat said, which was neither yes nor no. “We will know what we do before your time comes.”

“What if the baby is early?” Liu Han said.

The little devil’s eyes both swung toward her. “This can happen?”

“Of course it can,” Liu Han said. But nothing was *of course* for the little scaly devils, not when they knew so little about how mankind—and, evidently, womankind—functioned. Then, suddenly, Liu Han had an idea that felt so brilliant, she hugged herself

in delight. “Superior sir, would you let me go back down to my own people so a midwife could help me deliver the baby?”

“This had not been thought of.” Nossat made a distressed hissing noise. “I see, though, from where you stand, it may have merit. You are not the only female specimen on this ship who will have young born. We will—how do you say?—consider. Yes. We will consider.”

“Thank you very much, superior sir.” Liu Han looked down at the floor, as she had seen the scaly devils do when they meant to show respect. Hope sprang up in her like rice plants in spring.

“Or maybe,” Nossat said, “maybe we bring up a—what word did you use?—a midwife, yes, maybe we bring up a midwife to this ship to help you here. We will consider that, too. You go now.”

The guards took Liu Han out of the psychologist’s office, led her back to her cell. She felt heavier with each step up the curiously curving stairway that returned her to her deck—and also because the hope which had sprouted now began to wilt.

But it didn’t quite die. The little scaly devils hadn’t said no.

A blank-faced Nipponese guard shoved a bowl of rice between the bars of Teerts’ cell. Teerts bowed to show he was grateful. Feeding prisoners at all was, in Nipponese eyes, a mercy: a proper warrior would die fighting rather than let himself be captured. The Nipponese were in any case sticklers for their own forms of courtesy. Anyone who flouted them was apt to be beaten—or worse.

Since the Nipponese shot down his killercraft, Teerts had had enough beatings—and worse—that he never wanted another (which didn’t mean he wouldn’t get one). But he hated rice. Not only was it the food of his captivity, it wasn’t something any male of the Race would eat by choice. He wanted meat, and could not remember the last time he’d tasted it. This bland, glutinous vegetable matter kept him alive, although he often wished it wouldn’t.

No, that was a falsehood. If he’d wanted to die, he had only to starve himself to death. He did not think the Nipponese would force him to eat; if anything, he might gain their respect by perishing this way. That he cared whether these barbarous Big Ugliers respected him showed how low he had sunk.

He lacked the nerve to put an end to himself, though; the Race did not commonly use suicide as a way out of trouble. And so, miserably, he ate, half wishing he never saw another grain of rice, half wishing his bowl held more.

He finished just before the guard came back and took away the bowl. He bowed again in gratitude for that service, though the guard would also have taken it even if he hadn’t finished.

After the guard left, Teerts resigned himself to another indefinitely long stretch of tedium. So far as he knew, he was the only prisoner of the Race the Nipponese held here

at Nagasaki. No cells within speaking distance of him held even Big Ugly prisoners, lest he somehow form a conspiracy with them and escape. He let his mouth fall open in bitter laughter at the likelihood of that.

Six-legged Tosevite pests scuttled across the concrete floor. Teerts let his eye turrets follow the creatures. He had nothing in particular against them. The real pests on Tosev 3 were the ones who walked upright.

He drifted away into a fantasy where his killercraft's turbo-fans hadn't tried to breathe bullets instead of air. He could have been back at a comfortably heated barracks talking with his comrades or watching the screen or piping music through a button taped to a hearing diaphragm. He could have been snapping bites off a chunk of dripping meat. He could have been in his killercraft again, helping to bring the pestilential Big Ugliers under the Race's control.

Though he heard footsteps coming down the corridor toward him, he did not swing his eyes to see who was approaching. That would have returned him to grim reality too abruptly to bear.

But then the maker of those footsteps stopped outside his cell. Teerts quickly put fantasy aside, like a male saving a computer document so he can attend to something more urgent. His bow was deeper than the one he'd given the guard who fed him. "*Konichiwa*, Major Okamoto," he said in the Nipponese he was slowly acquiring.

"Good day to you as well," Okamoto answered in the language of the Race. He was more fluent in it than Teerts was in Nipponese. Learning a new tongue did not come naturally to males of the Race; the Empire had had but one for untold thousands of years. But Tosev 3 was a mosaic of dozens, maybe hundreds, of languages. Picking up one more was nothing out of the ordinary for a Big Ugly. Okamoto had been Teerts' interpreter and interrogator ever since he was captured.

The Tosevite glanced down the hall. Teerts heard jingling keys as a warder drew near. Another round of questions, then, the pilot thought. He bowed to the warder to show he was grateful for the boon of leaving the cell. Actually he wasn't; as long as he stayed in here, no one hurt him. But the forms had to be observed.

A soldier with a rifle tramped right behind the warder. He covered Teerts as the other male used the key. Okamoto also drew his pistol and held it on Teerts. The pilot would have laughed, except it wasn't really funny. He only wished he were as dangerous as the Big Ugliers thought he was.

The interrogation room was on an upper floor of the prison. Teerts had seen next to nothing of Nagasaki. He knew it lay by the sea; he'd come here by ship after being evacuated from the mainland when Harbin fell to the Race. He didn't miss seeing the sea. After that nightmare voyage of storms and sickness, he hoped he'd never see—much less ride upon—another overgrown Tosevite ocean again.

The guard opened the door. Teerts walked in, bowed to the Big Ugliers inside. They wore white coats rather than uniforms like Okamoto's. *Scientists, not soldiers*, Teerts

thought. He'd come to realize the Tosevites used clothing to indicate job and status as the Race used body paint. The Big Ugliers, however, were much less systematic and consistent about it—*typical of them*, he thought.

Nonetheless, he was glad not to face another panel of officers. The military males had been much quicker than scientists to resort to the instruments of painful persuasion in the interrogation room.

One of the men in white addressed Teerts in barking Nipponese, much too fast for him to follow. He turned both eye turrets toward Major Okamoto, who translated: "Dr. Nakayama asks whether, as has been reported, all members of the Race who have come to Tosev 3 are male."

"*Hai*," Teerts answered. "*Honto*." Yes, that was the truth.

Nakayama, a slim male on the small side for a Tosevite, asked another long question in his own tongue. Okamoto translated again: "He asks how you can hope to keep Tosev 3 with males alone."

"We don't, of course," Teerts answered. "We who are here make up the conquest fleet. Our task is to subjugate this world, not to colonize it. The colonization fleet will come. It was being organized even as we set out, and will arrive in this solar system about forty years from now."

So long a gap should have given the males of the conquest fleet plenty of time to get Tosev 3 into good running order for the colonists. It would have done just that, had the Big Ugliers been the pre-industrial savages the Race thought they were. Teerts still thought they were savages, but, worse luck, they were anything but pre-industrial.

All three Nipponese in white started talking volubly at one another. Finally one of them put a question to Teerts. "Dr. Higuchi wants to know whether you mean your years or ours."

"Ours," Teerts said; would he waste his time learning Tosevite measurements? "Yours is longer—I don't remember how much."

"So, then, this colonization fleet, as you call it, will arrive on our planet in fewer than forty years' time as we reckon it?" Higuchi said.

"Yes, superior sir." Teerts suppressed a sigh. It should have been so easy: smash the Big Ugliers, prepare the planet for full exploitation, then settle down and wait till the colonists arrived and were thawed out. When at last he smelled mating pheromones again, Teerts might even have sired a couple of clutches of eggs himself. Raising hatchlings, of course, was females' work, but he liked thinking of passing on his genes so he could contribute to the future of the Race.

The way things looked now, this world might still be troublesome when the colonization fleet got here. And even if it wasn't, his own chance of being around to join the colony's gene pool wasn't big enough to be visible to the naked eye—he couldn't see it, at any rate.

He had a while to think of such things, because the Nipponese were chattering



furiously among themselves again. Finally the male who hadn't addressed him before spoke through Major Okamoto: "Dr. Tsuye wishes to know the size of the colonization fleet as opposed to that of the conquest fleet."

"The colonization fleet is not opposed to the conquest fleet," Teerts said. Clearing up the idiom took a couple of minutes. Then he said, "The colonization fleet is larger, superior sir. It has to be: it carries many more males and females as well as what they will need to establish themselves here on Tosev 3."

His answer produced more sharp colloquy among the Nipponese. Then the one named Tsuye said, "This colonization fleet—is it, ah, as heavily armed as your invasion fleet?"

"No, of course not. There would be no need—" Teerts corrected himself. "There was thought to be no need for including many weapons with the colonization fleet. It was assumed that you Tosevites would already be thoroughly subdued by the time the colonists arrived here. We hadn't counted on your resisting so ferociously." *I hadn't counted on being shot down*, the pilot added to himself.

His words seemed to please the Nipponese. They bared their flat, square teeth in the facial gesture they used to show they were happy. Major Okamoto said, "All Tosevites are brave, and we Nipponese the bravest of the brave."

"*Hai*," Teerts said. "*Honto*." The interrogation broke up not long after that. Okamoto and the guard, who had waited outside, escorted Teerts back to his cell. That evening, he found small chunks of meat mixed in with his rice. That had only happened a couple of times before. Flattery, he thought as he gratefully swallowed them down, had got him something.

Mutt Daniels looked at his hand: four clubs and the queen of hearts. He discarded the queen. "Gimme one," he said.

"One," Kevin Donlan agreed. "Here you go, Sarge." The new card was a diamond. None of the other soldiers in the game would have known it from Mutt's face. He'd played countless hours of poker on trains and bus rides as a minor-league (and, briefly, major-league) catcher and as a longtime minor-league manager. He'd played in the trenches in France, too, in the last war. He didn't care to risk a big roll of money when he gambled, but he won more often than he lost. Every so often he'd stolen a pot on a busted flush, too.

Not tonight, though. One of the privates in his squad, a big hunkie named Bela Szabo who was universally called Dracula, had drawn three cards and raised big when it was his turn to bet. Mutt pegged him for at least three of a kind, maybe better. When the action came round to him, he tossed in his cards. "Can't win 'em all," he said philosophically.

Kevin Donlan, who couldn't possibly have been as young as he looked, hadn't learned that yet. Calling Szabo was okay if you had two little pair, but raising back struck Mutt as foolhardy. Sure as hell, Dracula was holding three kings. He scooped up the folding

money.

“Son, you gotta watch what the other guy’s doin’ better’n that,” Daniels said. “Like I told you, you ain’t gonna win ’em all.” If nothing else, years of managing in the minors had pounded that home as a law of nature. Mutt chuckled. The life he’d lived beat the hell out of the one he’d have had if he hadn’t played ball. Likely he’d still be watching a mule’s hind end on the Mississippi farm where he’d been born and raised.

Like trains in the distance, shells rumbled by overhead. Everybody looked up, though the roof of the barn where they sheltered held the sky at bay. Szabo cocked his head, gauging the sound. “Southbound,” he said. “Those are ours.”

“Probably landing on the Lizards in Decatur right now,” Kevin Donlan agreed. A moment later, he added, “What’s funny, Sarge?”

“I reckon I’ve said I was managing the Decatur team in the Three-I League when the Lizards came,” Mutt answered. “Matter of fact, I was on the train from Madison to Decatur when we got strafed right outside o’ Dixon, upstate. This here’s the closest I’ve come to makin’ it to where I was goin’ since, and most of a year’s gone by now.”

“This here”—the barn—was on a farm just south of Clinton, Illinois, about halfway between Bloomington and Decatur. The Americans had taken Bloomington in an armored blitz. Now it was slow, tough work again, trying to push the Lizards farther back from Chicago.

More shells hissed through the sky, these from the south. “Goddamn, the Lizards are quick with counterbattery fire,” Donlan said.

“They’re dead on, too,” Mutt said. “I hope our boys moved their guns before those little presents came down on ’em.”

The poker game went on by lantern light, shelling or no shelling. Mutt won a hand with two pair, lost expensively to a straight when he was holding three nines, didn’t waste money betting on a couple of others. Another American battery opened up, this one a lot closer. The thunder of the big guns reminded Mutt of bad weather back home.

“Hope they blow all the Lizards in Decatur straight to hell,” Szabo said.

“Hope one of ’em lands on second base at Fan’s Field and blows the center-field fence out to where it belongs,” Daniels muttered. It was 340 down each foul line at the Decatur ballpark, a reasonable poke, but dead center was only 370, a pain in the ERA to every Commodore pitcher who took the mound.

Small-arms fire rattled only a few hundred yards away, some M-1s and Springfields, some from the automatic rifles the Lizards carried. Before Mutt could say a word, everybody in the latest hand grabbed his money from the pot, stuffed it into a pocket, and reached for his weapon. Someone blew out the lantern. Someone else pushed the barn door open. One by one, the men emerged.

“You want to be careful,” Mutt said quietly. “The Lizards have those damn night sights, let ’em see like cats in the dark.”

Dracula Szabo laughed, also softly. “That’s why I got me this here Browning Automatic Rifle, Sarge. Put out enough lead and some of it’ll hit somebody.” He wasn’t much older than Donlan, young enough to be gut-sure no bullet could possibly find him. Mutt knew better. France had convinced him he wasn’t immortal, and several months fighting the Lizards drove the lesson home again.

“Spread out, spread out,” Daniels called in an urgent whisper. To his ear, the men sounded like a herd of drunken rhinos. Several were new recruits; by virtue of having lived through several encounters with the Lizards, Mutt was reckoned suitable for showing others how to do likewise.

“How many Lizards you think there are, Sarge?” Kevin Donlan asked. Donlan wasn’t eager any more; he’d been through enough of the tough defensive fighting outside Chicago to be sure his number could come up. The question came in a tone of intelligent professional concern.

Daniels cocked his head, listened to the firing. “Damfino,” he said at last. “Not a whole bunch, but I wouldn’t peg it tighter’n that. Those rifles o’ theirs shoot so fast, just a couple can sound like a platoon.”

Off to one side lay the concrete ribbon of US 51. A couple of soldiers charged straight down it. Daniels yelled at them, but they kept going. He wondered why they didn’t paint big red-and-white bull’s-eyes on their chests, too. He dodged from bush to upended tractor to hedgerow, making himself as tough a target as he could.

That wasn’t the only reason he fell behind most of the squad. He had fifty-odd years and a pot belly under his belt, though he was in better shape now than he had been before the Lizards came. Even in his long-gone playing days, he’d been a catcher, so he’d never moved what anybody would call fast.

He was panting and his heart thudded in his chest by the time he half jumped, half fell into a shell hole at the edge of the American firing line. Somebody not far away was screaming for a medic and for his mother; his voice was ebbing fast.

Cautiously, Mutt raised his head and peered into the night to see if he could pick up muzzle flashes from the Lizards’ rifles. Over there, a yellow-white flicker ... He raised his Springfield to his shoulder, squeezed off a round, worked the bolt, fired again. Then he threw himself flat again.

Sure enough, bullets cracked by, just above the hole where he hid. If he could pick up the Lizards’ muzzle flashes, they could find his as well. And if he fired again from here, he was willing to bet some turret-eyed little scaly sharpshooter would punch his ticket for him. The Lizards weren’t human, but they were pretty fair soldiers.

He scrambled out of the hole and crawled across cold ground over to something made of bricks—a well, he realized when he got behind it. Szabo was making a hell of a racket with that BAR; if he wasn’t hitting the Lizards, he was sure making them keep their heads down. Even more warily than before, Daniels looked south again.

He saw a flash, fired at it. In the night, it was the next closest thing to shooting blind.

No more flickers of light came from that spot, but he never found out whether it was because he'd scored a hit or the Lizard moved to a new firing spot, as he'd done himself.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, the firing faded. The Americans slowly moved forward to discover the Lizards had pulled out. "Just a recon patrol," said another sergeant who, like Mutt, was trying to round up his squad and not having much luck.

"Don't rightly recall the Lizards doin' a whole lot o' that, not at night and not on foot," Daniels said with a thoughtful frown. "Ain't been their style."

"Maybe they're learning," the other noncom answered. "You don't really know what the other fellow's doing till you sneak around and see it with your own eyes."

"Yeah, sure, but the Lizards, they mostly fight one way," Mutt said. "Don't know as how I like 'em learnin' how to do their job better. That'll mean they got more chance of shootin' my personal, private ass off."

The other sergeant laughed. "Somethin' to that, pal. I don't know what we can do about it, though, short of giving their patrols enough lumps to make 'em try something else instead."

"Yeah," Mutt said again. He blew air out through his lips to make a whuffling noise. This hadn't been too bad—just a little skirmish. As far as he could tell, he didn't have anybody dead or even hurt. But if the Lizards were skirmishing outside of Clinton, it was liable to be a good long while yet before he saw Decatur.

*Clip-clop, clip-clop.* Colonel Leslie Groves hated slowness, hated delay, with the restless passion of an engineer who'd spent a busy lifetime fighting inefficiency wherever it reared its head. And here he was, coming into Oswego, New York, in a horse-drawn wagon because the cargo he had in his charge was too important to risk putting it on an airplane and having the Lizards shoot it down. *Clip-clop, clip-clop.*

Rationally, he knew this slow, safe trip didn't stall anything. The Met Lab team, traveling by the same archaic means he was using himself, wasn't close to Denver yet and couldn't work with the uranium or whatever it was that the British had fetched over to the United States from eastern Europe.

*Clip-clop, clip-clop.* Riding alongside the wagon was a squadron of horse cavalry, an antique arm Groves had long wished would vanish from the Army forever. The horsemen were useless against the Lizards, as they had been for years against any Earthly mechanized force. But they did a first-class job of overawing the brigands, bandits, and robbers who infested the roads in these chaotic times.

"Captain, will we reach the Coast Guard station by sunset?" Groves called to the commander of the cavalry unit.

Captain Rance Auerbach glanced westward, gauged the sun through curdled clouds. "Yes, sir, I believe so. Only a couple more miles to the lake shore." His Texas drawl drew looks here in upstate New York. Groves thought he should be wearing Confederate gray and maybe a plume in his hat, too; he was too flamboyant for olive drab. That he called his horse Jeb Stuart did nothing to weaken that freewheeling image.

The wagon rolled past a wooden ballpark with a sign that read, OTIS FIELD, HOME OF THE OSWEGO NETHERLANDS, CANADIAN-AMERICAN LEAGUE. "Netherlands," Groves said with a snort. "Hell of a name for a baseball team."

Captain Auerbach pointed to a billboard across the street. In faded, tattered letters it proclaimed the virtues of the Netherland Ice Cream and Milk Company. "Bet you anything you care to stake they ran the team, sir," he said.

"No thank you, Captain," Groves said. "I won't touch that one."

Otis Field didn't look as if it had seen much use lately. Planks were missing from the outer fence; they'd no doubt helped Oswegians stay warm during the long, miserable winter. The gaps showed the rickety grandstand and the dugouts where in happier—and warmer—times the opposing teams had sheltered. Stands and dugout roofs also had the missing-tooth effect from vanished lumber. If the Netherlands ever returned to life, they'd need somewhere new to play.

From long experience, Groves reckoned Oswego a town of twenty or twenty-five thousand. The few people out on the streets looked poor and cold and hungry. Most people looked that way these days. The town didn't seem to have suffered directly in the

war, though the Lizards were in Buffalo and on the outskirts of Rochester. Groves guessed Oswego wasn't big enough for them to have bothered pulverizing it. He hoped they'd pay for the omission.

On the east side of the Oswego River stood the U.S. Military Reservation, with the earthworks of Fort Ontario. The fort dated back even further than the French and Indian War. Holding enemies at bay now, unfortunately, wasn't as simple as it had been a couple of centuries before.

The Coast Guard station was a two-story white frame building at the foot of East Second Street, down by the cold, choppy gray waters of Lake Ontario. The cutter *Forward* was tied up at a pier out in the lake. A seaman policing up outside the station spied the wagon and its escort approaching. He ducked into the building, calling loudly, "The U.S. Cavalry just rode into town, sir!"

Groves smiled at that, in amusement and relief. An officer came out of the station. He wore a U.S. Navy uniform; in time of war, the Coast Guard was subsumed into the Navy. Saluting, he said, "Colonel Groves?"

"Right here." Groves ponderously descended from the wagon. Even with wartime privation, he carried well over two hundred pounds. He returned the salute and said, "I'm afraid I wasn't given your name"—the Coast Guardsman had two broad stripes on his cuffs and shoulder blades—"Lieutenant, ah ...?"

"I'm Jacob van Alen, sir," the Coast Guardsman said.

"Well, Lieutenant van Alen, I gather the messenger got here ahead of us."

"From what Smitty yelled, you mean? Yes, sir, he did." Van Alen had an engaging grin. He was a tall, skinny fellow somewhere close to thirty, very blond, with an almost invisible little mustache. He went on, "Our orders are to give you whatever you want, not to ask a whole lot of questions, and never, ever put your name on the radio. I'm paraphrasing, but that's what they boil down to."

"It sounds right," Groves agreed. "You'd be better off forgetting we even exist once we're gone. Impress that on your sailors, too; if they start blabbing and any word of us gets out, they'll be arrested and tried as traitors to the United States. That comes straight from President Roosevelt, not from me. Make sure your people understand it."

"Yes, sir." Van Alen's eyes sparkled. "If they hadn't told me to keep my big mouth shut, I'd have at least a million questions for you; you'd best believe that."

"Lieutenant, believe me—you don't want to know." Groves had seen the slagged ruin a single Lizard bomb had made of Washington, D.C. If the Lizards had that power, the United States had to have it, too, to survive. But the idea of a uranium bomb chilled him. Start throwing those things around and you were liable to end up with an abattoir instead of a world.

"What you say has already been made very clear to me, Colonel," van Alen said. "Suppose you tell me what it is you want me to do for you."

"If the Lizards weren't in Buffalo, I'd have you sail me all the way to Duluth," Groves

answered. "As it is, you're going to take me across to the Canadian side so I can continue on the overland route."

"To wherever you're going." Van Alen raised a hand. "I'm not asking, I'm just talking. One thing I do need to know, though: whereabouts on the Canadian side am I taking you? It's a biggish country, you know."

"I have heard rumors to that effect, yes," Groves said dryly. "Sail us across to Oshawa. They should be expecting me there; if a messenger got through to you, no reason to think one didn't make it to them."

"You're right about that. The Lizards haven't hit Canada as hard as they've hit us."

"By all I've heard, they don't care for cold weather." Now Groves held up a broad-palmed hand. "I know, I know—if they don't care for cold weather, what are they doing in Buffalo?"

"You beat me to it," the Coast Guardsman said. "Of course, they did get there in summertime. I hope they had themselves a hell of a surprise along around November."

"I expect they did," Groves said. "Now then, Lieutenant, much as I'd like to stand around shooting the breeze"—something he loathed—"I have a package to deliver. Shall we get moving?"

"Yes, sir," van Alen answered. He glanced toward the wagon from which Groves had got down. "You won't be bringing that aboard the *Forward*, will you? Or the horses?"

"What are we supposed to do for mounts without 'em?" Captain Auerbach demanded indignantly.

"Captain, I want you to take a good look at that cutter," Jacob van Alen said. "It carries me and a crew of sixteen. Now there's what, maybe thirty of you folks? Okay, we can squeeze you onto the *Forward*, especially just for one fast run across the lake, but where the hell would we stow those animals even if we could get 'em on board?"

Groves looked from the *Forward* to the cavalry detachment and back again. As an engineer, he was trained in using space efficiently. He turned to Auerbach. "Rance, I'm sorry, but I think Lieutenant van Alen knows what he's talking about. What is that, Lieutenant, about an eighty-foot boat?"

"You have a good eye, Colonel. She's a seventy-eight-footer, forty-three tons displacement."

Groves grunted. Thirty-odd horses weighed maybe twenty tons all by themselves. They'd have to stay behind, no doubt about it. He watched Captain Auerbach unhappily making the same calculation and coming up with the same result. "Cheer up, Captain," he said. "I'm sure the Canadians will furnish us with new mounts. They don't know what we're carrying, but they know how important it is."

Auerbach reached out to stroke his mount's velvety muzzle. He answered with a cavalryman's *cri de coeur*: "Colonel, if they took your wife away and issued you a replacement, would you be satisfied with the exchange?"

“I might, if they issued me Rita Hayworth.” Groves let both hands rest on his protuberant belly. “Trouble is, she probably wouldn’t be satisfied with me.” Auerbach stared at him, let out an amazingly horsey snort, and spread his palms in surrender.

Lieutenant van Alen said, “Okay, no horses. What about the wagon?”

“We don’t need that either, Lieutenant.” Groves walked over, reached in, and pulled out a saddlebag that had been fixed with straps so he could carry it on his back. It was heavier than it looked, both from the uranium or whatever it was the Germans had stolen from the Lizards and from the lead shielding that—Groves hoped—kept the metal’s ionizing radiation from ionizing him. “I have everything required right here.”

“Whatever you say, sir.” What van Alen’s eyes said was that the pack didn’t look important enough to cause such a fuss. Groves stared stonily back at the Coast Guardsman. Here, as often, looks were deceiving.

Regardless of what van Alen might have thought, he and his crew efficiently did what was required of them. Inside half an hour the *Forward*’s twin gasoline engines were thundering as the cutter pulled away from the dock and headed for the Canadian shore.

As Oswego receded, Groves strode up and down the *Forward*, curious as usual. The first thing he noticed was the sound of his shoes on the deck. He paused in surprise and rapped his knuckles against the cutter’s superstructure. That confirmed his first impression. “It’s made out of wood!” he exclaimed, as if inviting someone to contradict him.

But a passing crewman nodded. “That’s us, Colonel—wooden ships and iron men, just like the old saying.” He grinned impudently. “Hell, leave me out in the rain and I rust.”

“Get out of here,” Groves said. But when he thought about it, it made sense. A Coast Guard cutter wasn’t built to fight other ships; it didn’t need an armored hull. And wood was strong stuff. Apart from its use in shipbuilding, the Russians and England both still used it to build highly effective aircraft (or so the Mosquito and LaGG were reckoned before the Lizards came). Even so, it had taken him aback here.

Lake Ontario had a light chop. Even Groves, hardly smooth on his feet, effortlessly adjusted to it. One of his cavalymen, though, bent himself double over the port rail puking his guts out. Groves suspected the sailors’ ribbing would have been a lot more ribald had the luckless fellow’s friends not outnumbered them two to one and been more heavily armed to boot.

The *Forward* boasted a one-pounder mounted in front of the superstructure. “Will that thing do any good if the Lizards decide to strafe us?” Groves asked the Coast Guardsman in charge of the weapon.

“About as much as a mouse giving a hawk the finger when the hawk swoops down on it,” the sailor answered. “Might make the mouse feel better, for a second or two, anyhow, but the hawk’s not what you’d call worried.” In spite of that coldblooded assessment, the man stayed at his post.

The way the Coast Guardsmen handled their jobs impressed Groves. They knew what



they needed to do and they did it, without fuss, without spit and polish, but also without wasted motion. Lieutenant van Alen hardly needed to give orders.

The trip across the lake was long and boring. Van Alen invited Groves to take off his pack and stow it in the cabin. "Thank you, Lieutenant, but no," Groves said. "My orders are not to let it out of my sight at any time, and I intend to take them literally."

"However you like, sir," the Coast Guardsman said. He eyed Groves speculatively. "That must be one mighty important cargo."

"It is." Groves let it go at that. He wished the heavy pack were invisible and weightless. That might keep people from jumping to such accurate conclusions. The more people wondered about what he was carrying, the likelier word was to get to the Lizards.

As if the thought of the aliens were enough to conjure them out of thin air, he heard the distant scream of one of their jet planes. His head spun this way and that, trying to spot the aircraft through scattered clouds. He saw the contrail, thin as a thread, off to the west.

"Out of Rochester, or maybe Buffalo," van Alen said with admirable sangfroid.

"Do you think he saw us?" Groves demanded.

"Likely he did," the Coast Guardsman said. "We've been buzzed a couple times, but never shot at. Just to stay on the safe side, we'll crowd your men down below, where they won't show, and look as ordinary as we can for a while. And if you won't leave that pack in the cabin, maybe you'll step in yourself for a bit."

It was as politely phrased an order as Groves had ever heard. He out-ranked van Alen, but the Coast Guardsman commanded the *Forward*, which meant authority rested with him. Groves went inside, jammed his face against a porthole. With luck, he told himself, the Lizard pilot would go on about his business, whatever that was. Without luck ...

The throb of the engines was louder inside, so Groves needed longer to hear the shriek the Lizard plane made. That shriek grew hideously fast. He waited for the one-pounder on the foredeck to start banging away in a last futile gesture of defiance, but it stayed silent. The Lizard plane screamed low overhead. Through the porthole, Groves saw van Alen looking up and waving. He wondered if the Coast Guard lieutenant had gone out of his mind.

But the jet roared away, the scream of its engine fading and dopplering down into a deep-throated wail. Groves hadn't known he was holding his breath until he let it out in one long sigh. When he couldn't hear the Lizard plane any more, he went out on deck again. "I thought we were in big trouble there," he told van Alen.

"Naah." The Coast Guardsman shook his head. "I figured we were all right as long as they didn't notice all your men on deck. They've seen the *Forward* out on the lake a good many times, and we've never done anything that looks aggressive. I hoped they'd just assume we were out on another cruise, and I guess they did."

"I admire your coolness, Lieutenant, and I'm glad you didn't have to show coolness

under fire,” Groves said.

“You can’t possibly be half as glad as I am, sir,” van Alen answered. The Coast Guard cutter sailed on toward the Canadian shore.

In the midst of the trees—some bare-branched birches, more dark pine and fir—the ice-covered lake appeared as suddenly as a rabbit out of a magician’s hat. “By Jove,” George Bagnall exclaimed as the Lancaster bomber ducked down below tree-top height to make it harder for Lizard radar to pick them up. “That’s a nice bit of navigating, Alf.”

“All compliments gratefully accepted,” Alf Whyte replied. “Assuming that’s actually Lake Peipus, we can follow it straight down to Pskov.”

From the pilot’s seat next to Bagnall, Ken Embry said, “And if it’s not, we don’t know where the bloody hell we are, and we’ll all be good and Pskoved.”

Groans filled the earphones on Bagnall’s head. The flight engineer studied the thicket of gauges in front of him. “It had better be Pskov,” he told Embry, “for we haven’t the petrol to go much farther.”

“Oh, petrol,” the pilot said airily. “We’ve done enough bizarre turns in this war that flying without petrol wouldn’t be that extraordinary.”

“Let me check my parachute first, if you don’t mind,” Bagnall answered.

In fact, though, Embry had a point. The aircrew had been over Cologne on the thousand-bomber raid when Lizard fighters started hacking British planes out of the sky by the score. They’d made it back to England and gone on to bomb Lizard positions in the south of France—where they were hit. Embry had set the crippled bomber down on a deserted stretch of highway by night without smashing or flipping it. If he could do that, maybe he *could* fly without petrol.

After getting to Paris and being repatriated with German help (that still grated on Bagnall), they’d been assigned to a new Lanc, this one a testbed for airborne radar. Now, the concept being deemed proved, they were flying a set to Russia so the Reds would have a better chance of seeing the Lizards coming.

Ice, ice, close to a hundred miles of blue-white ice, with white snow drifted atop it. From the bomb bay, Jerome Jones, the radarman, said, “I looked up Pskov before we took off. The climate here is supposed to be mild; the proof adduced is that the snow melts by the end of March and the ice on the lakes and rivers in April.”

More groans from the aircrew. Bagnall exclaimed, “If that’s what the Bolshies make out to be a mild climate, what must they reckon harsh?”

“I’m given to understand Siberia has two seasons,” Embry said: “Third August and winter.”

“Good job we have our flight suits on,” Alf Whyte said. “I don’t think there’s another item in the British inventory that would do in this weather.” Below the Lanc, Lake Peipus narrowed to a neck of water, then widened out again. The navigator went on,

“This southern bit is called Lake Pskov. We’re getting close.”

“If it’s all one lake, why has it got two names?” Bagnall asked.

“Supply the answer and win the tin of chopped ham, retail value ten shillings,” Embry chanted, like an announcer over the wireless. “Send your postal card to the Soviet Embassy, London. Winners—if there are any, which strikes me as unlikely—will be selected in a drawing at random.”

After another ten or fifteen minutes, the lake abruptly ended. A city full of towers appeared ahead. Some had the onion domes Bagnall associated with Russian architecture, while others looked as if they were wearing witches’ hats. The more modern buildings in town were scarcely worth noticing among such exotics.

“Right—here’s Pskov,” Embry said. “Where’s the bloody airfield?”

Down in the snow-filled streets, people scattered like ants when the Lancaster flew by. Through the bomber’s Perspex windscreen, Bagnall spied little flashes of light. “They’re shooting at us!” he yelled.

“Stupid sods,” Embry snarled. “Don’t they know we’re friendly? Now *where’s* that bleeding airfield?”

Away to the east, a red flare rose into the sky. The pilot swung the big, heavy aircraft in that direction. Sure enough, a landing strip appeared ahead, hacked out of the surrounding forest. “It’s none too long,” Bagnall observed.

“It’s what we’ve got.” Embry pushed forward on the stick. The Lancaster descended. The pilot was one of the best. He set the bomber down at the back edge of the landing strip and used up every inch braking to a stop. The tree trunks ahead were looking very thick and very hard when the Lancaster finally quit moving. Embry looked as if he needed to will himself to let go of the stick, but his voice was relaxed as he said, “Welcome to beautiful, balmy Pskov. You have to be balmy to want to come here.”

No sooner had the Lancaster’s three-bladed props spun to a stop than men in greatcoats and thick padded jackets dashed out of the trees to start draping it with camouflage netting. Groundcrews had done that back in England, but never with such élan. The outside world disappeared in a hurry; Bagnall could only hope the bomber disappeared from outside view as quickly.

“Did you see?” Embry asked quietly as he disconnected his safety belt.

“See what?” Bagnall asked, also freeing himself.

“Those weren’t all Russians out there covering us up. Some of them were Germans.”

“Bloody hell,” Bagnall muttered. “Are we supposed to give them the airborne radar, too? That wasn’t in our orders.”

Alf Whyte stuck his head out from the little black-curtained cubicle where he labored with map and ruler and compasses and protractor. “Before the Lizards came, Pskov was headquarters for Army Group North. The Lizards ran Jerry out, but then they left themselves when winter started. It’s Russian enough now for us to land here, obviously,

but I expect there will be some leftover Nazis as well.”

“Isn’t that wonderful?” By Embry’s tone, it was anything but.

The cold hit like a blow in the face when the aircrew left the Lanc. They were an abbreviated lot, pilot, flight engineer (Bagnall doubled as radioman), navigator, and radarman. No bomb-aimer on this run, no bombardiers, and no gunners in the turrets. If a Lizard jet attacked, machine guns weren’t going to be able to reply to its cannon and rockets.

“*Zdrast’ye*,” Ken Embry said, thereby exhausting his Russian. “Does anyone here speak English?”

“I do,” two men said, one with a Russian accent, the other in Germanic tones. They looked suspiciously at each other. Some months of joint battle against a common foe had not eased the memory of what they’d been doing to each other before the Lizards came.

Bagnall had done some German before he left college to join the RAF. That was only three years ago, but already most of it had vanished from his brain. Like most undergraduates taking German, he’d come upon Mark Twain’s “The Awful German Language.” *That* he remembered, especially the bit about sooner declining two beers than one German adjective. And Russian was worse—even the alphabet looked funny.

To Bagnall’s surprise, Jerome Jones started speaking Russian—halting Russian, but evidently good enough to be understood. After a brief exchange, he turned back to the air crew and said, “He—Sergei Leonidovich Morozkin there, the chap who knows a bit of English—says we’re to accompany him to the *Krom*, the local strongpoint, I gather.”

“By all means let us accompany him, then,” Embry said. “I didn’t know you had any Russian, Jones. The chaps who put this mission together had a better notion of what they were about than I credited them for.”

“I doubt that, sir,” Jones said, unwilling to give RAF higher-ups any credit for sense. But he had reason on his side: “When I was at Cambridge, I was interested for a while in Byzantine history and art, and that led me to the Russians. I hadn’t the time to do them properly, but I did teach myself a bit of the language. That wouldn’t be in any of my papers, though, so no one would have known of it.”

“Good thing it’s so, all the same,” Bagnall said, wondering if Jones was a Bolshevik himself. Even if he was, it didn’t matter now. “My German is villainous, but I was about to trot it out when you spoke up. I wasn’t what you’d call keen on trying to speak with our Soviet friends and allies in the language of a mutual foe.”

The German who spoke English said, “Against the *Eidechsen*—I am sorry, I do not know your word; the Russians call them *Yashcheritsi*—against the invaders from the sky, no men are foes to one another.”

“Against the Lizards, you mean,” Bagnall and Embry said together.

“Lizards.” Both the German and Morozkin, the anglophone Russian, echoed the word to fix it in their minds; it was one that would be used a good deal in days to come. The

German went on, “I am *Hauptmann*—Captain *auf Englisch, ja?*—Martin Borcke.”

As soon as the men of the aircrew had introduced themselves in turn, Morozkin said, “Come to *Krom* now. Get away from airplane.”

“But the radar—” Jones said plaintively.

“We do. Is in box, *da?*”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Come,” Morozkin said again. At the far end of the airstrip—a long, hard slog through cold and snow—three-horse sleighs waited to take the Englishmen into Pskov. Their bells jangled merrily as they set off, as if in a happy winter song. Bagnall would have found the journey more enjoyable had his Russian driver not had a rifle slung across his back and half a dozen German potato-masher grenades stuffed into his belt.

Pskov had been built in rings where two rivers came together. The sleigh slid past churches and fine houses in the center of town, many bearing the scars of fighting when the Germans had taken it from the Soviets and when the Lizards struck north.

Closer to the joining of the two streams were a marketplace and another church. In the market, old women with scarves around their heads sold beets, turnips, cabbages. Steam rose from kettles of borscht. People queued up to get what they needed, not with the good spirits Englishmen displayed on similar occasions but glumly, resignedly, as if they could expect nothing better from fate.

Guards prowled the marketplace to make sure no one even thought of turning disorderly. Some were Germans with rifles and coal-scuttle helmets, many still wearing field-gray greatcoats. Others were Russians, carrying everything from shotguns to military rifles to submachine guns, and dressed in a motley mixture of civilian clothes and khaki Soviet uniform. Everyone, though—Germans, Russians, even the old women behind their baskets of vegetables—wore the same kind of thick felt boot.

The sleigh driver had on a pair, too. Bagnall tapped the fellow on the shoulder, pointed at the footgear. “What do you call those?” He got back only a smile and a shrug, and regretfully tried German: “*Was sind sie?*”

Comprehension lit the driver’s face. “*Valenki.*” He rattled off a couple of sentences in Russian before he figured out Bagnall couldn’t follow. His German was even slower and more halting than the flight engineer’s, which gave Bagnall a chance to understand it: “*Gut—gegen—Kalt.*”

“Good against cold. Thanks. Uh, *danke. Ich verstehe.*” They nodded to each other, pleased at the rudimentary communication. The *valenki* looked as if they’d be good against cold; they were thick and supple, like a blanket for the feet.

The sleigh went past a square with a monument to Lenin and then, diagonally across from it, another onion-domed church. Bagnall wondered if the driver was conscious of the ironic juxtaposition. If he was, he didn’t let on. Letting on that you noticed irony probably wasn’t any safer in the Soviet Union than in Hitler’s Germany.

Bagnall shook his head. The Russians had become allies because they were Hitler's enemies. Now the Russians and Germans were both allies because they'd stayed in the ring against the Lizards. They still weren't comfortable company to keep.

The horses began to strain as they went uphill toward the towers that marked old Pskov. As the beasts labored and the sleigh slowed, Bagnall grasped why the fortress that was the town's beginning had been placed as it was: the fortress ahead, which he presumed to be the *Krom*, stood on a bluff protected by the rivers. The driver took him past the tumbledown stone wall that warded the landward side of the fortress. Some of the tumbling down looked recent; Bagnall wondered whether Germans or Lizards were to blame.

The sleigh stopped. Bagnall climbed out. The driver pointed him toward one of the towers; its witches'-hat roof had had a bite taken out of it. A German sentry stood to one side of the doorway, a Russian to the other. They threw the doors wide for Bagnall.

As soon as he stepped over the threshold, he felt as if he'd been taken back through time. Guttering torches cast weird, flickering shadows on the irregular stonework of the wall. Up above, everything was lost in gloom. In the torchlight, the three fur-clad men who sat at a table waiting for him, weapons in front of them, seemed more like barbarian chieftains than twentieth-century soldiers.

Over the next couple of minutes, the other Englishmen came in. By the way they peered all around, they had the same feeling of dislocation as Bagnall. Martin Borcke pointed to one of the men at the table and said, "Here is *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill, commander of the 122nd Infantry Division and now head of the forces of the *Reich* in and around Pskov." He named the RAF men for his commander.

Chill didn't look like Bagnall's idea of a Nazi lieutenant general: no monocle, no high-peaked cap, no skinny, hawknosed Prussian face. He was on the roundish side and badly needed a shave. His eyes were brown, not chilly gray. They had an ironic glint in them as he said in fair English, "Welcome to the blooming gardens of Pskov, gentlemen."

Sergei Morozkin nodded to the pair who sat to Chill's left. "Are leaders of First and Second Partisan Brigades, Nikolai Ivanovich Vasiliev and Aleksandr Maksimovich German."

Ken Embry whispered to Bagnall, "There's a name I'd not fancy having in Soviet Russia these days."

"Lord, no." Bagnall looked at German. Maybe it was the steel-rimmed spectacles he wore, but he had a schoolmasterly expression only partly counteracted by the fierce red mustache that sprouted above his upper lip.

Vasiliev, by contrast, made the flight engineer think of a bearded boulder: he was short and squat and looked immensely strong. A pink scar—maybe a crease from a rifle bullet—furrowed one cheek and cut a track through the thick, almost seallike pelt that grew there. A couple of inches over and the partisan leader would not have been sitting

in his chair.

He rumbled something in Russian. Morozkin translated: “He bid you welcome to forest republic. This we call land around Pskov while Germans rule city. Now with Lizards”—Morozkin pronounced the word with exaggerated care—“here, we make German-Soviet council—German-Soviet *soviet, da?*” Bagnall thought the play on words came from the interpreter; Vasiliev, even sans scar, would not have seemed a man much given to mirth.

“Pleased to meet you all, I’m sure,” Ken Embry said. Before Morozkin could translate, Jerome Jones turned his words into Russian. The partisan leaders beamed, pleased at least one of the RAF men could speak directly to them.

“What is this thing you have brought for the Soviet Union from the people and workers of England?” German asked. He leaned forward to wait for the answer, not even noticing the ideological preconceptions with which he’d freighted his question.

“An airborne radar, to help aircraft detect Lizard planes at long range,” Jones said. Both Morozkin and Borcke had trouble turning the critical word into their native languages. Jones explained what a radar set was and how it did what it did. Vasiliev simply listened. German nodded several times, as if what the radarman said made sense to him.

And Kurt Chill purred, “You have, *aber natürlich*, also brought one of these radar sets for the *Reich?*”

“No, sir,” Embry said. Bagnall started to sweat, though the room in this drafty old medieval tower was anything but warm. The pilot went on, “Our orders are to deliver this set and the manuals accompanying it to the Soviet authorities at Pskov. That is what we intend to do.”

General Chill shook his head. Bagnall sweated harder. No one had bothered to tell the RAF crew that Pskov wasn’t entirely in Soviet hands. Evidently, the Russians who’d told the English where to fly the set hadn’t thought there would be a problem. But a problem there was.

“If there is only one, it shall go to the *Reich*,” Chill said.

As soon as Sergei Morozkin translated the German’s English into Russian, Vasiliev snatched up the submachine gun from the table in front of him and pointed it at Chill’s chest. “*Nyet*,” he said flatly. Bagnall needed no Russian to follow that.

Chill answered in German, which Vasiliev evidently understood. It also let Bagnall understand some of what was going on. The Nazi had courage, or at least bravado. He said, “If you shoot me, Nikolai Ivanovich, Colonel Schindler takes command—and we are still stronger around Pskov than you.”

Aleksandr German did not bother gesticulating with the pistol on the table. He simply spoke in a dry, rather pedantic voice that went well with his eyeglasses. His words sounded like German, but Bagnall had even more trouble with them than he had in following Kurt Chill. He guessed the partisan was actually speaking Yiddish. To stay up

with that, they should have kept David Goldfarb as crew radarman.

Captain Borcke made sense of it. He translated: “German says the *Wehrmacht* is stronger around Pskov than Soviet forces, yes. He asks if it is also stronger than Soviet and Lizard forces combined.”

Chill spoke a single word: “Bluff.”

“*Nyet*,” Vasiliev said again. He put down his weapon and beamed at the other partisan leader. He’d found a threat the Germans could not afford to ignore.

Bagnall did not think it was a bluff, either. Germany had not endeared itself to the people of any of the eastern lands it occupied before the Lizards came. The Jews of Poland—led by, among others, a cousin of Goldfarb’s—had risen against the Nazis and for the Lizards. The Russians might do the same if this Chill pushed them hard enough.

He might, too. Scowling at the two partisan brigadiers, he said, “You may do this. The Lizards may win a victory through it. But this I vow: neither of you will live long enough to collaborate with them. We will have that radar.”

“*Nyet*.” This time Aleksandr German said it. He switched back to Yiddish, too fast and harsh for Bagnall to follow. Captain Borcke again did the honors: “He says this set was sent to the workers and people of the Soviet Union to aid them in their struggle against imperialist aggression, and that surrendering it would be treason to the Soviet state.”

Communist rhetoric aside, Bagnall thought the partisan was dead right. But if Lieutenant General Chill didn’t, the flight engineer’s opinion counted for little.

And Chill was going to be hard-nosed about it. Bagnall could see that. So could everyone else in the tower chamber. Captain Borcke edged away from the RAF air crew to one side, Sergei Morozkin to the other. Both men slid a hand under their coats, presumably to grab for pistols. Bagnall got ready to throw himself flat.

Then, instead, he hissed at Jerome Jones: “You have the manuals and such for the radar, am I right?”

“Of course,” Jones whispered back. “Couldn’t very well come without them, not when the Russians are going to start making them for themselves. Or they will if anyone comes out of this room alive.”

“Which doesn’t look like the best wager in the world. How many sets have you got?”

“Of the manuals and drawings, you mean? Just the one,” Jones said.

“Bugger.” That put a crimp in Bagnall’s scheme, but only for a moment. He spoke up in a loud voice: “Gentlemen, please!” If nothing else, he succeeded in distracting the Germans and partisans from the bead they were drawing on each other. Everyone stared at him instead. He said, “I think I can find a way out of this dispute.”

Grim faces defied him to do it. Trouble was, he realized suddenly, the Germans and Russians really wanted to have a go at each other. In English, Kurt Chill said, “Enlighten us, then.”

“I’ll do my best,” Bagnall answered. “There’s only the one radar, and no help for that.”



If you hijack it, word will get back to Moscow—and to London. Cooperation between Germany and her former foes will be hampered, and the Lizards will likely gain more from that than the *Luftwaffe* could from the radar. Is this so, or not?”

“It may be,” Chill said. “I do not think, though, there is much cooperation now, when you give the Russians and not us this set.” Captain Borcke nodded emphatically at that.

There was much truth in what the German general said. Bagnall was anything but happy about sharing secrets with the Nazis, and his attitude reflected that of British leaders from Churchill on down. But setting the *Wehrmacht* and the Red Army back at each other’s throats wasn’t what anyone had had in mind, either.

The flight engineer said, “How is this, then? The radar itself and the manuals go on toward Moscow as planned. But before they do”—he sighed—“you make copies of the manuals and send them to Berlin.”

“Copies?” Chill said. “By photograph?”

“If you have that kind of equipment here, yes.” Bagnall had been thinking of doing the job by hand; Pskov struck him as a burnt-out backwater town. But who could say what sort of gear the division intelligence unit of the 122nd Infantry—or whatever other units were in the area—had available?

“I’m not sure the higher-ups back home would approve, but they didn’t anticipate this situation,” Ken Embry murmured. “As for me, I’d say you’ve managed to saw the baby in half. King Solomon would be proud.”

“I hope so,” Bagnall said.

Sergei Morozkin was still translating his suggestion for the partisan leaders. When he finished, Vasiliev turned to Aleksandr German and said with heavy humor, “*Nu, Sasha?*” It had to be more Yiddish—Bagnall had heard that word from David Goldfarb.

Aleksandr German peered through his spectacles at Chill the German. Having Goldfarb in the aircrew for a while had made Bagnall more aware of what the Nazis had done to Eastern European Jews than he otherwise would have been. He wondered what went on behind German’s poker face, how much hatred seethed there. The partisan did not let on. After a while, he sighed and spoke one word: “*Da.*”

“We shall do this, then.” If Chill was enthusiastic about Bagnall’s plan, he hid it very well. But it gave him most of what he wanted, and kept alive the fragile truce around Pskov.

As if to underline how important that was, Lizard jets streaked overhead. When bombs began to fall, Bagnall felt something near panic: a hit anywhere close by would bring all the stones of the *Krom* down on his head.

Through the fading wail of the Lizards’ engines and the ground-shaking crash of the bombs came the rattle of what sounded like every rifle and submachine gun in the world going off at once. Pskov’s defenders, Nazis and Communists alike, did their best to knock down the Lizards’ planes.

As usual, their best was not good enough. Bagnall listened hopefully for the rending crash that would have meant a fighter-bomber destroyed, but it never came. He also listened for the roar that would warn of a second wave of attackers. That didn't come, either.

"Anyone would think that flying more than a thousand miles would take us out of the bloody blitz," Alf Whyte complained.

"They called it a world war even before the Lizards came," Embry said.

Nikolai Vasiliev shouted something at Morozkin. Instead of translating it, he hurried away to return a few minutes later with a tray full of bottles and glasses. "We drink to this—how you say?—agreement," he said.

He was pouring man-sized slugs of vodka for everyone when a partisan burst in, shouting in Russian. "Uh-oh," Jerome Jones said. "I didn't catch all of that, but I didn't care for what I understood."

Morozkin turned to the RAF air crew. "I have—bad news. Those—how you say?—Lizards, they bomb your plane. Is wreck and ruin—is that what you say?"

"That's what we say," Embry answered dully.

"*Nichevo, tovarishchi,*" Morozkin said.

He didn't translate that, maybe because it was so completely Russian that doing so never occurred to him. "What did he say?" Bagnall demanded of Jerome Jones.

"It can't be helped, comrades'—something like that," the radarman answered. "There's nothing to be done about it, might be a better rendering."

Bagnall didn't care a pin for fine points of translation. "We're stuck here in bloody Pskov and there's bloody nothing to be done about it?" he burst out, his voice rising to a shout.

"*Nichevo,*" Jones said.

Science Hall was a splendid structure, a three-story red brick building on the northwest corner of the University of Denver campus. It housed the university's chemistry and physics departments, and would have made a fine home for the transplanted Metallurgical Laboratory from the University of Chicago. Jens Larssen admired the facility intensely.

There was only one problem: he had no idea when the rest of the Met Lab team would show up.

"All dressed up with no place to go," he muttered to himself as he stalked down a third-floor corridor. From the north-facing window at the end of that corridor, he could see the Platte River snaking its way south and east through town, and beyond it the state capitol and other tall buildings of the civic center. Denver was a pretty place, snow still on the ground here and there, the air almost achingly clear. Jens delighted in it not at all.

Everything had gone so perfectly. He might as well have been riding the train in those dear, vanished pre-Lizard days. He wasn't bombed, he wasn't strafed, he had a lower Pullman berth more comfortable than any bed he'd slept in for months. He had heat on the train, and electricity; the only hint there was a war on was the blackout curtain on the window and a sign taped alongside it: USE IT. IT'S YOUR NECK.

An Army major had met him when the train pulled into Union Station, had taken him out to Lowry Field east of town, had arranged a room for him at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters. He'd almost balked at that—he was no bachelor. But Barbara wasn't with him, so he'd gone along.

“Stupid,” he said aloud. Going along even once had got him tangled up again in the spiderweb of military routine. He'd had a taste of that in Indiana under George Patton. The local commanders were less flamboyant than Patton, but no less inflexible.

“I'm sorry, Dr. Larssen, but that will not be permitted,” a bird colonel named Hexham had said. The colonel hadn't sounded sorry, not one bit. By *that* he meant Larssen's going out of town to find out where the rest of the Met Lab team was.

“But why?” Jens had howled, pacing the colonel's office like a newly caged wolf. “Without the other people, without the equipment they have with them, I'm not much good to you by myself.”

“Dr. Larssen, you are a nuclear physicist working on a highly classified project,” Colonel Hexham had answered. He'd kept his voice low, reasonable; Jens supposed he'd got on the fellow's nerves as well as the other way round. “We cannot let you go gallivanting off just as you please. And if disaster befalls your colleagues, who better than you to reconstruct the project?”

Larssen hadn't laughed in his face, but he'd come close. Reconstruct the work of several Nobel laureates—by himself? He'd have to be Superman, able to leap tall buildings at a single bound. But there was just enough truth in it—he'd been part of the project, after all—to keep him from taking off on his own.

“Everything is fine,” Hexham had told him. “They're heading this way; we know that much. We're delighted you're here ahead of them. That means you can help get things organized so they'll be able to hit the ground running when they arrive.”

He'd been a scientist at the Met Lab, not an administrator. Administration had been a headache for other people. Now it was his. He went back to his office, wrote letters, filled out forms, tried the phone three or four times, and actually got through once. The Lizards hadn't hit Denver anywhere near the way they'd plastered Chicago; to a large degree, it still functioned as a modern city. When Jens turned the switch on the gooseneck lamp on his desk, the bulb lit up.

He worked a little longer, then said the hell with it and went downstairs. His bicycle waited there. So did a glum, unsmiling man in khaki with a rifle on his back. He had a bike, too. “Evening, Oscar,” Jens said.

“Dr. Larssen.” The bodyguard nodded politely. Oscar wasn't his real name, but he

answered to it. Jens thought it amused him, but his face didn't show much. Oscar had been detailed to keep him safe in Denver—and to keep him from leaving town. He was depressingly good at his job.

Larssen rode north up University, turned right toward Lowry Field. Oscar stuck to the physicist like a burr. Jens was in good shape. His bodyguard, he was convinced, could have made the Olympic team. All the way back to BOQ, he sang, "I'm Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage." Oscar joined in the choruses.

But in the next morning, instead of biking back to the University of Denver, Larssen (Oscar in his wake) reported to Colonel Hexham's office. The colonel looked anything but delighted to see him. "Why aren't you at work, Dr. Larssen?" he said in a tone that probably turned captains to Jell-O.

Jens, however, was a civilian, and a fed-up civilian at that. "Sir, the more I think about my working conditions here, the more intolerable they look to me," he said. "I'm on strike."

"You're what?" Hexham chewed toothpicks, maybe in lieu of scarce cigarettes. The one he had in his mouth jumped. "You can't do that!"

"Oh yes I can, and I'm going to stay on strike until you let me get in touch with my wife."

"Security—" Hexham began. Up and down, up and down went the toothpick.

"Stuff security!" Jens had wanted to say that—he'd wanted to scream it—for months. "You won't let me go after the Met Lab. Okay, I guess I can see that, even if I think you're pushing it too far. But you as much as told me the other day you know where the Met Lab wagon train is, right?"

"What if I do?" the colonel rumbled. He was still trying to intimidate Larssen, but Larssen refused to be intimidated any more.

"This if you do: unless you let me send a letter—just an ordinary, handwritten letter—to Barbara, you get no more work out of me, and that's that."

"Too risky," Hexham said. "Suppose our courier is captured—"

"Suppose he is?" Jens retorted. "I'm not going to write about uranium, for God's sake. I'm going to let her know I'm alive and in one piece and that I love her and I miss her. That's all. I won't even sign my last name."

"No," said Hexham.

"No," said Larssen. They glared at each other. The toothpick twitched.

Oscar escorted Larssen back to BOQ. He lay down on his cot. He was ready to wait as long as it took.

\* \* \*

The fat man in the black Stetson paused in the ceremony first to spit a brown stream into the polished brass spittoon near his feet (not a drop clung to his handlebar

mustache) and then to sneak another glance at the Lizards who stood in one corner of his crowded office. He half shrugged and resumed: "By the authority vested in me as justice of the peace of Chugwater, Wyoming, I now pronounce you man and wife. Kiss her, boy."

Sam Yeager tilted Barbara Larssen's—Barbara *Yeager's*—face up to his. The kiss was not the decorous one first post-wedding kisses are supposed to be. She molded herself against him. He squeezed her tight.

Everybody cheered. Enrico Fermi, who was serving as best man, slapped Yeager on the back. His wife Laura stood on tiptoe to kiss Sam's cheek. Seeing that, the physicist made a Latin production out of kissing Barbara on the cheek. Everybody cheered again, louder than ever.

Just for a second, Yeager's eyes went to Ullhass and Ristin. He wondered what they made of the ceremony. From what they said, they didn't mate permanently—and to them, human beings were barbarous aliens.

*Well, to hell with what they think of human beings*, he thought. As far as he was concerned, having Fermi as his best man was almost—not quite—as exciting as getting married to Barbara. He'd been married once before, unsuccessfully, and he'd sometimes thought about marrying again. But never in all the hours he'd spent reading science fiction on trains and buses between one minor-league game and the next had he thought he'd really get to hobnob with scientists. And having a Nobel Prize winner as your best man was about as hob a nob as you could find.

The justice of the peace—the sign on his door said he was Joshua Sumner, but he seemed to go by Hoot—reached into a drawer of the fancy old rolltop desk that adorned his office. What he pulled out was most unjudicial: a couple of shot glasses and a bottle about half full of dark amber fluid.

"Don't have as much here as we used to. Don't have as much here as we'd like," he said as he poured each glass full. "But we've still got enough for the groom to make a toast and the bride to drink it."

Barbara eyed the full shot dubiously. "If I drink all that, I'll just go to sleep."

"I doubt it," the justice of the peace said, which raised more whoops from the predominantly male crowd in his office. Barbara turned pink and shook her head in embarrassment but took the glass.

Yeager took his, too, careful not to spill a drop. He knew what he was going to say. Even though he hadn't expected to have to propose a toast, one leaped into his mind the moment Sumner said he'd need it. That didn't usually happen with him; more often than not, he'd come up with snappy comebacks a week too late to use them.

Not this time, though. He raised the shot glass, waited for quiet. When he got it, he said, "Life goes on," and knocked back the shot. The whiskey burned its way down his throat, filled his middle with warmth.

"Oh, that's good, Sam," Barbara said softly. "That's just right." She lifted the shot glass

to her lips. She started to sip, but at the last moment drank it all down at once as Sam had. Her eyes opened very wide and started to water. She turned much redder than she had when the justice of the peace flustered her. What should have been her next breath became a sharp cough instead. People laughed and clapped anyhow.

Joshua Sumner said, “Don’t do that every day, you tell me?” He had the deadpan drollness that goes with many large men who are sparing of speech.

As the wedding party filed out of the justice of the peace’s office, Ristin said, “What you do here, Sam, you and Barbara? You make”—he spoke a couple of hissing words in his own language—“to mate all the time?”

“An agreement, that would be in English,” Yeager said. He squeezed Barbara’s hand. “That’s just what we did, even if I am too old to mate ‘all the, time.’”

“Don’t confuse him,” Barbara said with a cluck in her voice.

They went outside. Chugwater was about fifty miles north of Cheyenne. Off against the western horizon, snow-cloaked mountains loomed. The town itself was a few houses, a general store, and the post office that also housed the sheriff’s office and that of the justice of the peace. Hoot Sumner was also postmaster and sheriff, and probably none too busy even if he did wear three hats.

The sheriff’s office (fortunately, from Yeager’s point of view) boasted a single jail cell big enough to hold the two Lizard POWs. That meant he and Barbara got to spend their wedding night without Ristin and Ullhass in the next room. Not that the Lizards were likely to pick that particular night to try to run away, nor, being what they were, that they would make anything of the noises coming from the bridal bed. Nevertheless ...

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Sam explained as he and the new Mrs. Yeager, accompanied by cheering well-wishers from the Met Lab and from Chugwater, made their way to the house where they’d spend their first night as man and wife. He spoke a little louder, a little more earnestly, than he might have earlier in the day: when they found they were going to host a wedding, the townsfolk had pulled out a good many bottles of dark amber and other fluids.

“You’re right,” Barbara said, also emphatically. Her cheeks glowed brighter than could be accounted for by the chilly breeze alone.

She let out a squeak when Sam picked her up and carried her over the threshold of the bedroom they’d use, and then another one when she saw the bottle sticking out of a bucket on a stool by the bed. The bucket was ordinary galvanized iron, straight out of a hardware store, but inside, nestled in snow—“Champagne!” she exclaimed.

Two wineglasses—not champagne flutes, but close enough—rested alongside the bucket. “That’s very nice,” Yeager said. He gently lifted the bottle out of the snow, undid the foil wrap and the little wire cage, worked the cork a little—and then let it fly out with a report like a rifle shot and ricochet off the ceiling. He had a glass ready to catch the champagne that bubbled out, then finished filling it the more conventional way.

With a flourish, he handed the glass to Barbara, poured one for himself. She stared

down into hers. “I don’t know if I ought to drink this,” she said. “If I have a whole lot more, I *will* fall asleep on you. That wouldn’t be right. Wedding nights are supposed to be special.”

“Any night with you is special,” he said, which made her smile. But then he went on more seriously, “We ought to drink it, especially now that we’ve opened it. Nobody has enough of anything any more to let it go to waste.”

“You’re right,” she said, and sipped. An eyebrow rose. “That’s pretty good champagne. I wonder how it got to the great metropolis of Chugwater, by God, Wyoming.”

“Beats me.” Yeager drank, too. He didn’t know much about champagne; he drank beer by choice and whiskey every so often. But it did taste good. The bubbles tickled the inside of his mouth. He sat down on the bed, not far from the stool with the bucket.

Barbara sat down beside him. Her glass was already almost empty. She ran a hand along his arm, let it rest on his corporal’s chevrons. “You were in uniform, so you looked fine for the wedding.” She made a face. “Getting married in a gingham blouse and a pair of dungarees isn’t what I had in mind.”

He slid an arm around her waist, then drained his glass of champagne and pulled the bottle from its bed of snow. It held just enough to fill them both up again. “Don’t worry about it. There’s only one proper uniform for a bride on her wedding night.” He reached behind her, undid the top button of her blouse.

“That’s the proper uniform for bride and groom both,” she said. Her fingers fumbled as she worked at one of his buttons. She laughed. “See—I told you I shouldn’t have had that champagne. Now I’m having trouble getting you out of soldier’s uniform and into bridegroom’s.”

“No hurry, not tonight,” he said. “One way or another, we’ll manage.” He drank some more, then looked at the glass with respect. “That takes me to a happier place than I usually go when I’ve had a few. Or maybe it’s the company.”

“I *like* you, Sam!” Barbara exclaimed. For some reason—maybe it was the champagne—that made him feel better than if she’d said *I love you*.

Presently, he asked, “Do you want me to blow out the candles?”

Her eyebrows came together in thought for a moment. Then she said, “No, let them burn, unless you really want it to be dark tonight.”

He shook his head. “I like to look at you, honey.” She wasn’t a Hollywood movie star or a Vargas girl: a little too thin, a little too angular, and, if you looked at things objectively, not pretty enough. Sam didn’t give two whoops in hell about looking at things objectively. She looked damn good to him.

He ran his hands over her breasts, let one of them stray down her belly toward where her legs joined. She stretched luxuriously and made a noise like a purring cat, down deep in her throat. His tongue teased a nipple. She grabbed the back of his head, pulled him against her.

After his mouth had followed his hand downward, she rubbed at the soft flesh of her inner thighs. “I wish there were more razor blades around,” she said in mock complaint. “Your face chafes me when you do that.”

He touched her, gently. Her breath sighed out. She was wet. “I thought you liked it while it was going on,” he said, grinning. “Shall I get that rubber now?”

“Wait.” She sat up, bent over him, and lowered her head. It was the first time she’d ever done that without being asked. Her hair spilled down and tickled his hipbones.

“Easy, there,” he gasped a minute later. “You do much more and I won’t need to bother with a rubber.”

“Would you like that?” she asked, looking up at him from under her bangs. She still held him. He could feel the warm little puffs of breath as she spoke.

He was tempted, but shook his head. “Not on our wedding night. Like you said, it ought to be perfect. And it’s for something else.”

“All right, let’s do something else,” she said agreeably, and lay back on the bed. He leaned over the side and pulled a rubber out of the back pocket of his chinos. But before he could peel it open, she grabbed his wrist and repeated, “Wait.” He gave her a quizzical look. She went on, “I know you don’t like those all that much. Don’t bother tonight—if we’re going to make it perfect, that will help. It should be okay.”

He tossed the rubber onto the floor. He wasn’t fond of them. He wore them because she wanted him to, and because he could see why she didn’t want to get pregnant. But if she felt like taking a chance, he was eager to oblige.

“It does feel better without overshoes,” he said. He guided himself into her. “Oh, God, does it!” Their mouths met, clung. Neither of them said anything then, not with words.

“I always said you were a gentleman, Sam,” Barbara told him as he rolled off her: “You keep your weight on your elbows.” He snorted. She said, “Don’t go away now.”

“I wasn’t going anywhere, not without you.” He put an arm around her, drew her close. She snuggled against him. He liked that. In some ways, it seemed more intimate than making love. You could make love with a stranger; he’d done it in a fair number of minor-league whorehouses in minor-league towns. But to snuggle with somebody, it had to be somebody who really mattered to you.

As if she’d picked the thought out of his head, Barbara said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too, hon.” His arms tightened around her. “I’m glad we’re married.” That seemed just the right thing to say on a wedding night.

“So am I.” Barbara ran the palm of her hand along his cheek. “Even if you are scratchy,” she added. He tensed, ready to grab her; sometimes when she made jokes in bed, she’d poke him in the ribs. Not tonight—she turned serious instead. “You made exactly the right toast this afternoon. ‘Life goes on’ ... It has to, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what I think, anyhow.” Yeager wasn’t sure whether she was asking him or trying to convince herself. She still couldn’t be easy in her mind about her first husband.



He had to be dead, but still ...

“You have the right way of looking at things,” Barbara said, serious still. “Life isn’t always neat; it’s not orderly; you can’t always plan it and make it come out the way you think it’s supposed to. Things happen that nobody would expect—”

“Well, sure,” Yeager said. “The war made the whole world crazy, and then the Lizards on top of that—”

“Those are the big things,” she broke in. “As you say, they change the whole world. But little things can turn your life in new directions, too. Everybody reads Chaucer in high-school English, but when I did, he just seemed the most fascinating writer I’d ever come across. I started trying to learn more about his time, and about other people who were writing then ... and so I ended up in graduate school at Berkeley in medieval literature. If I hadn’t been there, I never would have met Jens, I never would have come to Chicago—” She leaned up and kissed him. “I never would have met you.”

“Little things,” Sam repeated. “Ten, eleven years ago, I was playing for Birmingham down in the Southern Association. That’s Class A-1 ball, the second highest class in the minor leagues. I was playing pretty well, I wasn’t that old—if things had broken right, I might have made the big leagues. Things broke, all right. About halfway through the season, I broke my ankle. It cost me the rest of the year, and I wasn’t the same ballplayer afterwards. I kept at it—never found anything I’d rather do—but I knew I wasn’t going anywhere any more. Just one of those things.”

“That’s just it.” She nodded against his chest. “Little things, things you’d never expect to matter, can turn up in the most surprising ways.”

“I’ll say.” Yeager nodded, too. “If I hadn’t read science fiction, I wouldn’t have gotten chosen to take our Lizard POWs back to Chicago or turned into their liaison man—and I wouldn’t have met you.”

To his relief, she didn’t make any cracks about his choice of reading; someone who dove into Chaucer for fun was liable to think of it as the literary equivalent of picking your nose at the dinner table. Instead, she said, “Jens always had trouble seeing that the little things could make—not a big difference, but a *surprising* difference. Do you see what I’m saying?”

“Mm-hmm.” Yeager kept his answer to a grunt. He didn’t have anything against Jens Larssen, but he didn’t want his ghost coming between them on their wedding night, either.

Barbara went on, “Jens wanted things just so, and thought they always had to be that way. Maybe it was because his work was so mathematically precise—I don’t know—but he thought the world operated that way, too. That sort of need for exactitude could be hard to live with sometimes.”

“Mm-hmm.” Sam grunted again, but something loosened in his chest even so. He never remembered her criticizing Jens before.

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than she said, “I guess what I’m trying to

tell you, Sam, is that I'm glad I'm with you. Taking things as they come is easier than trying to fit everything that happens into some pattern you've worked out."

"That calls for a kiss," he said, and bent his head down to hers. She responded eagerly. He felt himself stirring, and knew a certain amount of pride: if you couldn't wear yourself out on your wedding night, when were you supposed to?

Barbara felt him stirring, too. "What have we here?" she said when the kiss finally broke. She reached between them to find out. Yeager's lips trailed down her neck toward her breasts again. Her hand tightened on him. His found the dampness between her legs.

After a while, he rolled onto his back: easier to stay hard for a second round that way, especially if you weren't in your twenties any more. He'd learned Barbara didn't mind getting on top every so often.

"Oh, yes," he said softly as she straddled him. He was glad she hadn't made him put on a rubber tonight; you could feel so much more without one. He ran his fingers lightly down the smooth curve of her back. She shivered a little.

Afterwards, she didn't pull away, but sprawled down on top of him. He kissed her cheek and the very corner of her mouth. "Nice," she said, her voice sleepy. "I just want to stay right here forever."

He put his arms around her. "That's what I want, too, hon."

Oscar appeared in the doorway of Jens Larssen's BOQ room. "Colonel Hexham wants to see you, sir. Right away."

"Does he?" Larssen had been sprawled out on the cot, reading the newest issue of *Time*—now getting on toward a year old—he could find. He got up in a hurry. "I'll come." He hadn't been "sir" to Oscar since he'd gone on strike, not till now. Maybe that was a good sign.

He didn't think so when the guard escorted him back into the colonel's office. Hexham's toothpick was going back and forth like a metronome, his bulldog face pinched and sour. "So you won't do any work unless you write your miserable letter, eh?" he ground out, never opening his mouth wide enough for the toothpick to fall out.

"That's right," Jens said—not defiantly, but more as if stating a law of nature.

"Then write it." Hexham looked more unhappy than ever. He shoved a sheet of paper and a pencil across the desk at Jens.

"Thank you, sir," Larssen exclaimed, taking them gladly. As he started to write, he asked, "What made you change your mind?"

"Orders." Hexham bit the word off. *So you've been overruled, have you?* Jens thought as he let the pencil race joyously across the paper. Trying to get a little of his own back, the colonel went on, "I will read that letter when you're done with it. No last names, no other breaches of security will be permitted."

“That’s fine, sir. I’ll go back to Science Hall the minute I’m done here.” Larssen scrawled *Love, Jens* and handed the paper back to Colonel Hexham. He didn’t bother waiting for Hexham to read it, but started out to keep his end of the bargain. If you worked at it, he thought, you could make things go the way they were supposed to.

## ☆ IV ☆

Bobby Fiore almost wished he was still on the Lizards' spaceship. For one thing, as far as he was concerned, the food had been better up there. For another, all the human beings on the spaceship had been aliens, guinea pigs. Plopped down in the middle of God only knew how many Chinamen, he was the alien in this refugee camp.

His lips quirked wryly. "I'm the only guinea here, too," he said out loud.

Speaking English, even to himself, felt good. He didn't get much chance to do it these days, even less than he'd had when he was up in space. Some of the Lizards there had understood him. Here nobody did; if the Lizard camp guards spoke any human language—not all of them did—it was Chinese. Only Liu Han knew any English at all.

His face set in a frown. He hated depending on a woman; it made him feel as if he were eight years old again, and back in Pittsburgh with his mama. He couldn't help it, though. Except for Liu Han, nobody for miles around could speak with him.

He rubbed his chin. He needed a shave. The first thing he'd done when the Lizards dumped him here was get a razor and get rid of his beard. Not only did shaving make him stand out less from everybody else, a razor was a handy thing to have in a fight. He'd seen enough barroom brawls to know that; he'd been in a few, too.

The funny thing was how little notice he drew. He wore wide-legged pants and baggy shirts that reminded him of pajamas, the same as the Chinese (even with them, he was cold a lot of the time—and he wasn't used to *that* after the spaceship, either), which helped him fit in. A lot of the locals were too busy to pay him any mind, too; they made stuff for the Lizards out of straw and wicker and leather and scrap metal and God only knew what all else, and they worked hard.

But what really surprised him was that his looks weren't so far out of place. Sure, he still had his big Italian nose; his eyes were too round and his hair was wavy. But eyes and hair were dark; a blond like Sam Yeager would have stood out like a sore thumb. And his olive skin wasn't that different from the color of the people around him. As long as he stayed cleanshaven, he wasn't that remarkable.

"I'm even tall," he said, smiling again. Back in the States, five-eight was nothing. Even here he wasn't huge, but for a change he was bigger than average.

Sudden shouts not far away—even when he didn't speak the language, Fiore knew fury and outrage when he heard them. He turned toward the sudden racket. Being taller than most let him see over the crowd. A man was running his way with a hen under each arm. Behind him, screeching like a cat with its tail stuck in a door, dashed a skinny woman. The chicken thief gained ground with every stride.

Fiore looked down to the dirt of the street. A nice-sized rock lay there, just a couple of feet away. He snatched it up, took a couple of shuffling steps sideways to get a clear shot at the man, and let fly.

When he was playing second base for the Decatur Commodores, he'd had to get off accurate throws to first with a runner bearing down on him with spikes high. Here he didn't even need to pivot. He hadn't done any throwing since the Lizards took him up into space, but he'd played pro ball for a lot of years. The smooth motion was still there, automatic as breathing.

The rock caught the fellow with the chickens right in the pit of the stomach. Fiore grinned; he couldn't have placed it any better with a bull's-eye to aim at. The would-be thief dropped the chickens and folded up like an accordion. His face was comically amazed as he fell—he had no idea what had hit him.

The two chickens ran away, squawking. The screeching woman started kicking the fellow who'd swiped them. She might have been better advised to chase them, but she seemed to put revenge ahead of poultry. The chicken thief couldn't even fight back. He'd had the wind knocked out of him, and had to lie there and take it.

One of the chickens darted past Fiore. It disappeared between two huts before he could decide to grab it for himself. "Damn," he said, kicking at the dirt. "I should've brought that home for Liu Han." Somebody else—almost certainly not its proper owner—would enjoy it now.

"Too bad," he muttered. He'd eaten some amazing things since the Lizards stuck him here. He'd thought he knew what Chinese food was all about. After all, he'd stopped at enough chop suey joints on the endless road trips that punctuated his life. You could fill yourself up for cheap, and it was usually pretty good.

The only familiar thing here was plain rice. No chop suey, no crunchy noodles, no little bowls of ketchup and spicy mustard. No fried shrimp, though that made sense, because he didn't think the camp was anywhere near the ocean. Not even fried rice, for God's sake. He wondered if the guys who ran the chop suey places were really Chinese at all.

The vegetables here looked strange and tasted stranger, and Liu Han insisted on serving them while they were still crunchy, which meant raw as far as he was concerned. He wanted a string bean—not that there *were* any string beans—to keep quiet between his teeth, not fight back. His mama had cooked vegetables till they were soft, which made it Gospel to him.

But Liu Han's mama had had different ideas. He wasn't about to cook for himself, so he ate what Liu Han gave him.

If the vegetables were bad, the meat was worse. Papa Fiore had known hard times in Italy; every once in a while, he'd slip and call a cat a roof rabbit. Roof rabbit seemed downright tempting compared to some of the things for sale in the camp marketplace: dog meat, skinned rats, elderly eggs. Bobby had quit asking about the bits and strips of flesh Liu Han served along with her half-raw vegetables: better not to know. That was one of the reasons he regretted not grabbing the chicken—for once, he would have been sure of what he was eating.

The woman quit kicking the chicken thief and started after the bird that hadn't come near Fiore. That hen had sensibly decided to go elsewhere. The woman stopped screeching and started wailing. What with all the racket she made, Fiore decided he was on the chicken's side. That wouldn't help the bird; if it stayed anywhere in camp, it would end up in somebody's pot pretty damn quick.

Fiore picked his way through the crowded, narrow streets back toward his hut. He was glad he had a good sense of direction. Without it, he wouldn't have gone out past his own front door. Nobody here had ever heard of street signs, and even if signs hung on every corner, they wouldn't have been in a language he could read.

Liu Han was chattering away in Chinese with a couple of other women when he walked in. They turned and stared at him, half in curiosity, half in alarm. He bowed, which was good manners here. "Hello. Good day," he said in his halting Chinese.

The women giggled furiously, maybe at his accent, maybe just at his face: as far as they were concerned, anybody who wasn't Chinese might as well have been a nigger. They spoke rapidly to each other; he caught the phrase *foreign devil*, which they applied to those not of their kind. He wondered what they were saying about him.

They didn't stay long. After good-byes to Liu Han and bows to him—he had been polite, even if he was a foreign devil—they headed back to wherever they lived. He hugged Liu Han. You still couldn't tell she was pregnant when she wore clothes, but now he felt the beginning of a bulge to her belly when they embraced.

"You okay?" he asked in English, and added the Lizards' interrogative cough at the end.

"Okay," she said, and tacked on the emphatic cough. For a while, the Lizards' language had been the only one they had in common. Nobody but the two of them understood the mishmash they spoke these days. She pointed to the teapot, used the interrogative cough.

"*M'goi*—thanks," he said. The pot was cheap and old, the cups even cheaper, and one of them cracked. The Lizards had given them the hut and everything in it; Fiore tried not to think about what might have happened to whoever was living there before.

He sipped the tea. What he wouldn't have given for a big mug of coffee with sugar and lots of cream! Tea was okay once in a while, but all the time every day? Forget it. He started to laugh.

"Why funny?" Liu Han asked.

"Up there"—their shorthand for the spaceship—"you eat my kind food." Most of the canned goods the Lizards fed them with came from the States or from Europe. Fiore made a horrible face to remind her how well she'd liked them. "Now I eat your kind food." He made the face again, but this time he pointed to himself.

A mouse scuttled across the floor, huddled against the baked-clay hearth to get warm. Liu Han didn't carry on the way a lot of American women would have. She just pointed at it.

Fiore picked up a brass incense burner and flung it at the mouse. His aim was still good. He caught the rodent right in the ribs. It lay there twitching. Liu Han picked it up by the tail and threw it out. She said, “You”—she made a throwing gesture—“good.”

“Yeah,” he said. With their three languages and a lot of dumb show, he told her how he’d nailed the chicken thief. “The arm still works.” He’d tried explaining about baseball. Liu Han didn’t get it.

She made the throwing gesture. “Good,” she repeated. He nodded; this wasn’t the first mouse he’d nailed. The camp was full of vermin. It had been a jolt, especially after the metallic sterility of the spaceship. It was also another reason not to want to know too much about what he ate. He’d never worried about what health departments back in the U.S.A. did. But seeing what things were like without them gave him a new perspective.

“Should make money, arm so good,” Liu Han said. “Not do like here.”

“God knows that’s so,” Fiore answered, responding to the second part of what she’d said. Most Chinamen, he thought scornfully, threw like girls, shortarming it from the elbow. Next to them, he looked like Bob Feller. Then he noticed the key word from the first part. “Money?”

He didn’t need much, not in camp. He and Liu Han were still the Lizards’ guinea pigs, so they didn’t pay rent for the hut and nobody dared haggle too hard in the marketplace. But more cash never hurt anybody. He’d made a little doing the hard physical work—hauling lumber and digging trenches—he’d started playing ball to avoid. And he won more than he lost when he gambled. Still ...

Mountebanks did well here, among people starved for any other entertainment: jugglers, clowns, a fellow with a trained monkey that seemed smarter than a lot of people Fiore knew. All the baseball skills he had—throwing, catching, hitting, even sliding—were ones the people here didn’t use. He’d never thought about turning baseball into a vaudeville act, but you could do it.

He bent to kiss Liu Han. She liked that—not just that he did it, but that he made a production of it. She needed to know he kept caring for her. “Baby, you’re brilliant,” he said. Then he had to stop and explain what brilliant meant, but it was worth it.

Ussmak was unenthusiastic about leaving the nice warm barracks at Besançon. The cold outside made his muzzle tingle. He hurried toward his landcruiser, whose crew compartment had a heater.

“We’ll kill all the stupid Deutsch Big Ugliers as far as the eye can see, then come back here and relax some more. Shouldn’t take long,” Hessef said. The landcruiser commander let the lid to his cupola fall with a clang.

*That’s the ginger talking,* Ussmak thought. Hessef and Tvenkel had both tasted just before they started this mission: ginger was cheap and easy to come by here in France. They’d both laughed at him for declining—he’d used even more than they had while sitting around waiting for something to happen.

But he still thought combat was different. The Big Ugliers were barbarous, but he knew they could fight. He'd had landcruisers wrecked around him; he'd lost crewmates. And the Deutsche were supposed to be more dangerous than the Russki had been. That was plenty to make him want to go at them undrugged.

Tvenkel had sneered, "Don't worry about it. The landcruiser just about fights itself."

"Do what you want," Ussmak had answered. "I'll taste plenty when we get back, I promise you that." He missed the confidence and exuberance ginger gave him, but he didn't think he really was smarter when he tasted—he only felt that way. A lot of tasters failed to draw the distinction, but he thought it was there.

At Hessef's blithe order, he started the landcruiser's engine. Part of a long column, the big, heavy machine rumbled out of the fortress and through the narrow streets of Besançon. Big Ugliers in their ridiculous clothes stared as it went past. Some of the Big Ugliers yelled things. Ussmak hadn't learned any Français, but the tone didn't sound friendly.

Males of the Race, aided here and there by Tosevites in low, flat-topped cylindrical hats, held back local traffic until the column passed by. Most of the traffic was Big Ugliers on foot or on the two-wheeled contraptions that used their own body energy for propulsion. Others sat atop animal-drawn wagons that seemed to Ussmak something straight out of an archaeology video.

One of the animals let a pile of droppings fall to the street. None of the Big Ugliers rushed to clean it up; none of them seemed to notice it was there. Hessef spoke to Ussmak from the landcruiser's intercom: "Filthy creatures, aren't they? They deserve to be conquered, and we're going to do it." An unnatural confidence filled his voice.

But for the landcruisers, only a couple of motorized vehicles moved in Besançon. Both of them had big metal cylinders rising from the rear like tumors. "What are those things?" Ussmak asked. "Their engines?"

"No," Tvenkel answered. The gunner went on, "They're built to burn petroleum by-products, like Tosevite landcruisers. But they can't get those by-products any more. The gadgets you see extract burnable gas from wood. They're ugly makeshifts like most of what the Big Ugliers do, but they work after a fashion."

"Oh." Up in the fortress that overlooked Besançon, Ussmak had grown used to smells he'd never smelled before. Now that he saw what produced some of those smells, he wondered what they were doing to his lungs.

The operations order said the landcruisers were to proceed northeast from Besançon. Through the town, however, they rumbled northwest. Ussmak wondered if that was right, but didn't say anything about it. All he was doing was following the male in front of him. You couldn't possibly get in trouble if you did that.

The male in front of him—and all the males in the column, right up to the lead driver, who had to make his own decisions—proved to know what they were doing. They rattled across a bridge (to the relief of Ussmak, who wasn't sure it would take his



landcruiser's weight), past the earthworks of yet another fort, and then out onto a road that led in the proper direction.

Ussmak undogged his entry hatch and stuck out his head. Driving unbuttoned gave him the best view, even if the breeze in his face was chilly. *Shouldn't be dangerous here*, he thought. Nothing even slightly out of the ordinary had happened since he came to Besançon. He'd become convinced the area was thoroughly pacified.

Up ahead, something went *whump*. Ussmak recognized that noise from the SSSR: somebody had driven over a land mine. Sure enough, landcruisers started going off the road on either side to get around a disabled vehicle. From the commander's cupola, Hessef said, "Ah, will you look at that? It's blown the track right off him."

The ground to either side of the paved road was soft and soggy: not surprising, Ussmak supposed, since the highway ran parallel to the river that flowed through Besançon. He didn't think anything of it until a landcruiser, and then another one, bogged down in the muck.

From the woods to the north of the road came another sound with which Ussmak had become intimately familiar in the SSSR: a sharp, fast, harsh *tac-tac-tac*. He slammed the hatch with a clang. "They're shooting at us!" he screamed. "That's an egg-addled machine gun, that's what that is!" Bullets ricocheting from the landcruiser's composite armor underscored his words.

In the turret, Hessef shouted in high excitement. "I see muzzle flashes, by the Emperor! There he is, Tvenkel, right over there! Bring the turret around—that's the way. Give him some with the machine gun, and then a round of high explosive. We'll teach the Big Ugliers to fool with *us!*"

Ussmak let out a slow hiss of wonder. Hessef's sloppy commands weren't anything like the ones that had been drilled into the landcruiser crews in endless days of simulator training and exercises back on Home. Ussmak realized he was listening to the ginger talking again. An adjutant monitoring Hessef would have swelled up as if he had the gray staggers.

However unorthodox the orders, though, they accomplished their purpose. Hydraulics whirred as the turret smoothly traversed. The coaxial machine gun opened up. Heard from inside the landcruiser, it wasn't loud at all. "Fool with us, will they?" Tvenkel yelled. "I'll teach them this world belongs to the Race!" He fired a long, long burst. Not being turned toward the Big Ugliers with the machine gun, Ussmak at first had trouble judging how effective Tvenkel's shooting was. But then more bullets pattered off the landcruisers like pebbles thrown at a metal roof. They did no more damage than pebbles would have, but showed the Tosevite gunners were still in business.

"Give 'em the real thing," Hessef said. Again, thick armor muffled the cannon's roar, though the landcruiser rocked slightly on its treads as it took up the recoil.

"There, that's done it," Tvenkel said with satisfaction. "We put enough rounds on that machine gun so the Big Ugliers running it won't bother their betters again." As if to

underscore his words, bullets stopped hitting the landcruiser.

Ussmak peered through his forward vision slits. Some of the other vehicles in the column were already moving ahead. A moment later, Hessef said, "Forward."

"It shall be done, superior sir." Ussmak released the brake, put the landcruiser into low gear. It rumbled forward. He steered very close to the machine that had thrown a track, keeping one of his own on the paved road to make sure he didn't bog down. As soon as he was past the crippled landcruiser, he sped up to try to recapture some of the time everyone had lost shooting at the Big Ugliers and their machine gun.

Hessef said, "Not bad at all. The column commander reports only two wounds, neither serious. And we obliterated those Tosevites."

The ginger was still talking through him, Ussmak thought. Landcruiser crews shouldn't have taken any casualties from a nuisance machine gun. Besides which, Hessef was ignoring the disabled fighting vehicle and the delay that sprang from the little firefight. If you'd tasted ginger a while before, such setbacks were too small to be worth noticing. Had Ussmak tasted along with the rest of the crew, he wouldn't have noticed them, either. Without a particle of the herb in him, though, they bulked large. He wondered just how clever he really was after a good taste.

From behind and to the left, bullets clattered off the landcruiser's rear deck and the back of the turret. The Big Ugliers at their machine gun had lived through the firestorm around them after all.

"Halt!" Hessef screeched. Ussmak obediently hit the brake. "Five rounds high explosive this time," the commander ordered. "Do you hear me, Tvenkel? I want those maniacal males blown to bloody bits."

"So do I," the gunner said. He and his commander agreed perfectly, just as training said members of a landcruiser crew should. The only trouble was that the tactic on which they agreed struck Ussmak as insane.

The landcruiser's main armament boomed, again and again. And Hessef's was not the only crew that had halted. Through his vision slits, Ussmak watched several other landcruisers stop so they could pour fire down on the Tosevites who had had the temerity to annoy them. The driver wondered if their commanders were tasting, too.

When the barrage was done, Hessef said, "Forward," in tones of self-satisfaction. Ussmak obeyed again. Not much later, the landcruiser column came to an enormous hole blown in the highway. "The Big Ugliers can't stop us with nonsense like that," Hessef declared. And sure enough, the armored fighting vehicles swung off the road one by one.

The machine just in front of Ussmak's rolled over a mine and lost a track. As soon as it slewed to a stop, a concealed Tosevite machine gun opened up. The landcruisers again returned fire with cannon and machine guns.

The column was very late reaching its assigned destination.

Heinrich Jäger paced through the cobblestoned streets of Hechingen. Up on a spur of the Schwäbische Alb stood Burg Hohenzollern. Its turrets, seen mistily through fog, made Jäger think of medieval epic, of maidens with long golden tresses and of the dragons that coveted them for their own dragonish reasons.

The trouble these days, however, was Lizards, not dragons. Jäger wished he were back at the front so he could do something useful about them. Instead, he was stuck here with the best scientific minds of the *Reich*.

He had nothing against them: on the contrary. They were far more likely to save Germany—to save mankind—than he was. But they thought they needed him to help them do it, and in that, as far as he could see, they were badly mistaken.

He'd watched soldiers make the same kind of mistake. If a detachment from the quartermaster's office brought a new model field telephone to the front-line soldiers, they were automatically seen as experts on the gadget, even if the only thing they knew about it was how to get it out of its crate.

So with him now. He'd helped steal the explosive metal from the Lizards, he'd hauled it across the Ukraine and Poland. Therefore, the presumption ran, he had to know all about it. Like a lot of presumptions, that one presumed too much.

Coming up the street toward him, munching on a chunk of black bread, was Werner Heisenberg. In spite of the bread, Heisenberg looked very much the academic: he was tall and serious-looking, with bushy hair combed straight back, fluffy eyebrows, and an expression mostly, as now, abstracted.

"*Herr Doktor Professor*," Jäger said, touching the brim of his service cap. No matter how bored he was, he remained polite.

"Ah, Colonel Jäger, good day. I did not see you." Heisenberg chuckled uneasily. Being taken for the traditional absent-minded professor had to embarrass him, not least because he really wasn't that way. Up till now, he'd always seemed plenty sharp—and not just brilliant, which went without saying—to Jäger. He went on, "I am glad to find you, though. I must thank you again for the material you have given us to work with."

"To serve the *Reich* is my pleasure and my duty," Jäger answered, politely still. If Heisenberg had ever seen combat, he didn't show it. He could thank Jäger for bringing the explosive metal, but he didn't really know what that meant, or how much blood had been spilled to get him his experimental material.

He proceeded to prove that, saying, "A pity you could not have fetched us a bit more. Theoretical calculations indicate the amount we have is marginal for the production of a uranium explosive. Another three or four kilos would have been most beneficial."

That did it. Jäger's boredom boiled away in fury. "Dr. Diebner had the courtesy to be grateful for what was provided rather than to complain about it. He also had the sense, sir"—Jäger loaded the title with scorn—"to remember how many lives were lost obtaining it."

He'd hoped to make Heisenberg ashamed. Instead, he flicked him on his vanity.

“Diebner? Ha! He has not even his *Habilitation*. He is, if you ask me, more tinkerer than physicist.”

“He knows what war entails, which is more than you seem to. And, by all accounts, he and his group are further along than yours in setting up the apparatus to produce more of this explosive metal for ourselves after we expend what we procured from the Lizards.”

“By no means is his work theoretically sound,” Heisenberg said, as if he were accusing the other physicist of embezzlement.

“I don’t care about theory. I care about results.” Jäger automatically reacted like a soldier. “Without results, theory is irrelevant.”

“Without theory, results are impossible,” Heisenberg retorted. The two men glared at each other. Jäger wished he hadn’t bothered to greet the physicist. By the expression on his face, Heisenberg wished the same thing.

Jäger shouted, “The metal is more real to you than the men who fell getting it.” He wanted to clout Heisenberg down from his cloud, make him glimpse, however distantly, the world beyond equations. He also wanted to kick him in the teeth.

“I tried to express to you a civil good day, Colonel Jäger,” Heisenberg said in tones of ice. “That you return it to me with such, such recriminations I can take only as the mark of an unbalanced mind. Believe me, Colonel, I shall trouble you no further.” The physicist stalked off.

Still steaming, Jäger stalked, too, in the opposite direction. He jumped and almost grabbed for his sidearm when someone said, “Well, Colonel, what was that in aid of?”

“Dr. Diebner!” Jäger said. “You startled me.” He took his hand away from the flap of his holster.

“I shall try not to do that again,” Kurt Diebner said. “I can see it might not be healthy for me.” Where Heisenberg looked like a professor, Diebner at first glance seemed more likely to be a farmer. He was in his thirties, with a broad, fleshy face and a receding hairline which he emphasized by slicking down his dark hair with grease and combing it straight back. He wore his baggy suit as if he’d been out walking the fields in it. Only the thick glasses that showed how nearsighted he was argued for a different interpretation of his character.

Jäger said, “I had a—disagreement with your colleague.”

“I saw that, yes.” Behind the glasses, amusement glinted in Diebner’s eyes. “I don’t believe I have ever seen Dr. Heisenberg so provoked; he normally cultivates an Olympian imperturbability. I came round the corner only for the tail end of the—disagreement, you said?—and was wondering what touched it off.”

The panzer colonel hesitated, since his compliments for Diebner had helped set Heisenberg off. At last he said, “I was concerned that Professor Heisenberg did not, ah, fully realize the difficulties in getting this metal to you nuclear physicists so you could exploit it.”

“Ah.” Diebner turned his head, peered this way and that; unlike Jäger and Heisenberg, he was careful about who heard him speak. His big thick spectacles and their dark rims gave him the air of a curious owl. “Sometimes, Colonel Jäger,” he said when he was sure the coast was clear, “from the top of the ivory tower it is hard to see the men struggling down in the mud.”

“This may be so.” Jäger studied Diebner. “And yet—forgive me, *Herr Doktor Professor*—it seems to me, a colonel of panzers admittedly ignorant of all matter pertaining to nuclear physics, that you, too, dwell in this ivory tower.”

“Oh, I do, without a doubt.” Diebner laughed; his plump cheeks shook. “But I do not dwell on the topmost floor. Before the war, before uranium and its behavior became so important to us all, Professor Heisenberg concerned himself almost exclusively with the mathematical analysis of matter and its behavior. You have perhaps heard of the Uncertainty Principle which bears his name?”

“I’m sorry, but no,” Jäger said.

“Ah, well.” Diebner shrugged. “Put me in charge of a panzer and I would be quickly killed. We all have our areas of expertise. My gift is in physics, too, but in experimenting to see what the properties of matter actually are. Then the theoreticians, of whom Professor Heisenberg is among the best, use these data to develop their abstruse conclusions over what it all means.”

“Thank you. You have clarified that for me.” Jäger meant it—now he understood why Heisenberg had sneeringly called Diebner a tinkerer. The difference was something like the one between himself and a colonel of the General Staff. Jäger knew he didn’t have the broad strategic vision he’d need to succeed as a man with the *Lampassen*—the broad red stripes that marked a General Staff officer—on his trousers. On the other hand, a General Staff officer wasn’t likely to have acquired the nuts-and-bolts knowledge (often in the literal sense of the words) to run a panzer regiment.

Diebner said, “Do try to bear with us, Colonel. The difficulties we face are formidable, not least because we are under such desperate pressure of time and strategy.”

“I follow,” Jäger said. “I wish I were back with my unit, so I could use what I have learned to help hold the Lizards out of the *Reich* and let you complete your work. I am badly out of place here.”

“If you advance our building of the uranium bomb, you will have done more for the *Reich* than you could possibly accomplish in the field. Believe me when I say this.” Now Diebner looked earnest, like a farmer solemnly explaining how excellent his beets were.

“If.” Jäger remained unconvinced that he could do anything useful here at Hechingen: he was about as valuable as oars on a bicycle. He came up with a plan, though, one that made him smile. Diebner smiled back; he seemed a very decent fellow. Jäger felt a little guilty at going against him, but only a little.

When he got back to his quarters, he drafted a request to be returned to active duty. On the space in the form that asked his reason for seeking the transfer, he wrote, *I am of*

*no use to the physicists here. If confirmation is required, please inquire of Professor Heisenberg.*

He sent the request off with a messenger and awaited results. They were not long in coming—the application got approved faster than he had thought possible. Diebner and a couple of the other physicists expressed regret that he was leaving. Professor Heisenberg said not a word. He'd no doubt had his say to the office who'd called or telegraphed about Jäger.

Maybe he thought he'd had his revenge. As far as Jäger was concerned, the distinguished professor had done him a favor.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.* Lodz constantly put Moishe Russie in mind of the Twenty-third Psalm, and of that valley. Lodz, though, had only walked into the valley, not through it. The shadow of death still lay over the town.

In Warsaw, thousands in the ghetto had died of starvation and disease before the Lizards came. Starvation and disease had walked the streets of Lodz, too. But the Nazis hadn't let them work alone here. They'd started shipping Jews off to their murder factories. Maybe the memory of those death transports was what made Lodz still seem caught in the grip of a nightmare.

Russie walked southeast down Zgierska Street toward the Balut Market square to buy some potatoes for his family. Up the street toward him came a Jewish policeman of the Order Service. His red-and-white armband bore a six-pointed black star with a white circle in the center, marking him as an under-officer. He had a truncheon on his belt and a rifle across his back. He looked like a tough customer.

But when Russie tugged at the brim of his hat in salute, the Order Service man returned the gesture and kept on walking. Emboldened, Russie turned and called after him: "How are the potatoes today?"

The policeman stopped. "They're not wonderful, but I've seen worse," he answered. Pausing to spit in the gutter, he added, "We all saw worse last year."

"Isn't that the sad and sorry truth?" Russie said. He headed on down to the market while the Order Service man resumed his beat.

More policemen roamed the Balut Market square, to keep down thievery, maintain order—and cadge what they could. Like the underofficer, they still wore the emblems of rank they'd got from the Nazis.

That helped make Lodz feel haunted to Russie. In Warsaw the *Judenrat*—the Jewish council that had administered the ghetto under German authority—collapsed even before the Lizards drove out the Nazis. Its police force had fallen with it. Jewish fighters, not the hated and discredited police, kept order there now. The same held true in most Polish towns.

Not in Lodz. Here, the walls of the buildings that fronted the market square were

plastered with posters of balding, white-haired Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. Rumkowski had been Eldest—puppet ruler—of Lodz’s Jews under the Nazis. Somehow, he was still Eldest of the Jews under the Lizards.

Russie wondered how he’d managed that. He must have jumped from the departing train to the arriving one at just the right instant. In Warsaw, there were stories that he’d collaborated with the Nazis. Russie had asked no questions of that sort since he got into Lodz. He didn’t want to draw Rumkowski’s attention toward him and his family. For all he knew, the Eldest would turn him over to Zolraag, the local Lizard governor.

He got into line for potatoes. The lines moved fast; the Order Service men saw to that. They were fierce and fussy at the same time, a manner they must have learned from the Germans. Some of them still wore German-style jackboots, too. As with the ghetto stars on their armbands, the boots raised Russie’s hackles.

When he reached the front of the line, such worries fell away. Food was more important. He held out a burlap bag and said, “Ten kilos of potatoes, please.”

The man behind the table took the bag, filled it from a bin, plopped it onto a scale. He’d had endless practice; it weighed ten kilos on the dot. He didn’t hand it back to Russie. Instead, he asked, “How are you going to pay? Lizard coupons, marks, zlotys, Rumkies?”

“Rumkies.” Russie pulled a wad of them out of his pocket. The fighter who’d driven him into Lodz had given him what seemed like enough to stuff a mattress. He’d imagined himself rich until he discovered that the Lodz ghetto currency was almost worthless.

The potato seller made a sour face. “If it’s Rumkies, you owe me 450.” The potatoes would have cost only a third as many Polish zlotys, the next weakest currency.

Russie started peeling off dark blue twenty-mark notes and blue-green tens, each printed with a Star of David in the upper left-hand corner and a cross-hatching of background lines that spiderwebbed the bills with more *Magen Davids*. Each note bore Rumkowski’s signature, which gave the money its sardonic nickname.

The potato seller made his own count after Moishe gave him the bills. Even though it came out right, he still looked unhappy. “Next time you come, bring real money,” he advised. “I don’t think we’re going to take Rumkies a whole lot longer.”

“But—” Russie waved to the ubiquitous portraits of the Jewish Eldest.

“He can do what he wants in here,” the potato seller said. “But he can’t make anybody outside think Rumkies are good for anything but wiping your behind.” The merchant’s shrug was eloquent.

Russie started back to his flat with the potatoes. It was on the corner of Zgierska and Lekarska, just a couple of blocks from the barbed wire that had sealed off the ghetto of Lodz—*Litzmannstadt*, the Nazis had renamed it when they annexed western Poland to the *Reich*—from the rest of the city.

Much of the barbed wire remained in place, though paths had been cut through it here

and there. In Warsaw, Lizard bombs had knocked down the wall the Germans made. Of course, that barrier had looked like a fortification and most of this one didn't. But something else went on here, too. The potato seller had said that Rumkowski could do what he wanted inside the ghetto. He'd meant it scornfully, but Moishe thought his words held a truth he hadn't intended. He had the feeling Rumkowski liked being a big fish, no matter how small his pond was.

At least there were enough potatoes to go around these days. The Lodz ghetto had been as hungry as Warsaw's, maybe hungrier. The Jews inside remained gaunt and ragged, especially compared to the Poles and Germans who made up the rest of the townsfolk. They weren't actively starving any more, though. From where they'd been a year before, that wasn't just progress. It felt like a miracle.

A horse-drawn wagon clattered up behind Russie. He stepped aside to let it pass. It was piled high with curious-looking objects woven out of straw. "What are those things, anyway?" Russie called to the driver.

"You must be new in town." The fellow pulled back on the reins, slowed his team to an amble so he could talk for a while. "They're boots, so the Lizards won't freeze their little chicken feet every time they go out in the snow."

"Chicken feet—I like that," Russie said.

The driver grinned. "Every time I see two or three Lizards together, I think of the front window of a butcher's shop. I want to go down the street yelling, 'Soup! Get your soup fixings here!'" He sobered. "We were making straw boots for the Nazis before the Lizards came. All we had to do was make 'em smaller and change the shape."

"Wouldn't it be fine to make what we wanted just for ourselves, not for one set of masters or another?" Russie said wistfully. His hands remembered the motions they'd made sewing seams on field-gray trousers.

"Fine, yes. Should you hold your breath? No." The driver coughed wetly. *Tuberculosis*, said the medical student Russie had once been. The driver went on, "It'll probably happen about the time the Messiah comes. These days, stranger, I'll take small things—my wife's not embroidering little eagles for *Luftwaffe* men, a *kholereye* on them, to wear on their shoulders. You ask me, *that's* fine."

"It is fine," Russie agreed. "But it shouldn't be enough."

"If God had asked me when He was making the world, I'm sure I could have done much better for His people. Unfortunately, He seems to have been otherwise engaged." Coughing again, the driver flicked the reins and sent the wagon rattling on down the street. Now at least he could go outside the ghetto.

More posters of Rumkowski were plastered on the front of Russie's block of flats. Under his lined face was one word—WORK—in Yiddish, Polish, and German. His hope had been to make the industrious Jews of Lodz so valuable to the Nazis that they would not want to ship them to extermination camps. It hadn't worked; the Germans were running trains to Chelmno and other camps until the day the Lizards drove them away. Russie



wondered how much Rumkowski had known about that.

He also wondered why Rumkowski fawned so on the Lizards when only horror had come from his efforts at accommodating the Nazis. Maybe he didn't want to lose the shadowy power he enjoyed as Jewish Eldest. Or maybe he just didn't know any other way to deal with overlords so much mightier than he. For the Eldest's sake, Russie hoped the latter was true.

*Shlepping* the potatoes up three flights of stairs as he walked down the hallway to his flat, years of bad nutrition and weeks of being cooped up inside the cramped bunker had taken their toll on his wind and on his strength generally. He tried the door. It was locked. He rapped on it. Rivka let him in.

A small tornado in a cloth cap tackled him just above the knees. "Father, Father!" Reuven squealed. "You're back!" Ever since they'd come out of the bunker—where they'd been together every moment, awake and asleep—Reuven had been nervous about his going away for any reason. He was, however, starting to get over that, for he asked, "Did you bring me anything?"

"Sorry, son; not this time. I just went out for food," Moishe said. Reuven groaned in disappointment. His father pulled his cap down over his eyes. He thought that was funny enough to make up for the lack of trinkets.

People sold toys in the market square. How many of them, though, used to belong to children who'd died in the ghetto or been taken away to Chelmno or some other camp? When even something that should have been joyous, like buying a toy, saddened and frightened you because you wondered why it was for sale, you began to feel in your belly what the Nazis had done to the Jews of Poland.

Rivka took the sack of potatoes. "What did you have to pay?" she asked.

"Four hundred and fifty Rumkies," he answered.

She stopped in dismay. "This is only ten kilos, right? Last week ten kilos only cost me 320. Didn't you haggle?" When he shook his head, she rolled her eyes toward the heavens. "Men! See if I let you go shopping again."

"The Rumkie's worth less every day," he said defensively. "In fact, it's almost worthless, period."

As if she were explaining a lesson to Reuven, she said, "Last week, the potato seller's first price for me was 430 Rumkies. I just laughed at him. You should have done the same."

"I suppose so," he admitted. "It didn't seem to matter, not when we have so many Rumkies."

"They won't last forever," Rivka said sharply. "Do you want us to have to go to work in the Lizards' factories to make enough to keep from starving?"

"God forbid," he answered, remembering the wagon full of straw boots. Making things for the Germans had been bad enough; making boots and coats for the aliens who

aimed to conquer all mankind had to be worse, although the wagon driver hadn't seemed to think so.

Rivka laughed at him. "It's all right. I got us some nice onions from Mrs. Jakubowicz downstairs for next to nothing. That should cancel out your foolishness."

"How does Mrs. Jakubowicz come by onions?"

"I didn't ask. One doesn't, these days, but she had enough of them that she didn't gouge me."

"Good. Do we have any of that cheese left?" Moishe asked.

"Yes—plenty for today, with some left over for tomorrow, too."

"That's very good," Moishe said. Food came first. The ghetto had taught him that. He sometimes thought that if he ever got rich (not likely) and if the war ever ended (which seemed even less likely), he'd buy himself a huge house, live in half of it, and fill the other half with meat and butter (in separate rooms, of course) and pastries and all manner of wonderful things to eat. Maybe he'd open a delicatessen. Even in wartime, people who sold food didn't go as hungry as those who had to buy it.

The part of him that had studied human nutrition said cheese and potatoes and onions could keep body and soul together a long time. Protein, fat, vitamins (he wished for something green, but that would have been hard to come by in Poland in late winter even before the war), minerals. Unexciting food, yes, but food.

Rivka carried the sack of potatoes into the kitchen. Moishe trailed after her. The apartment was scantily furnished—just the leftovers of the people who had lived, and probably died, here before his family came. One thing it did boast, though, was a hot plate, and Lodz, unlike Warsaw even now, had reliable electricity.

Rivka peeled and chopped up a couple of onions. Moishe drew back a few paces. Even so, the onions were strong enough to make tears start in his eyes. The onions went into the stew pot. So did half a dozen potatoes. Rivka didn't peel them. She glanced over to her husband. "Nutrients," she said seriously.

"Nutrients," he agreed. Potatoes in their jackets had more than potatoes without. When potatoes were most of what you ate, you didn't want to waste anything.

"Supper in—a while," Rivka said. The hot plate was feeble. It would take a long time to boil water. Even after it did, the potatoes would take a while to cook. When your stomach was none too full, waiting came hard.

Without warning, a huge *bang!* rattled the windows. Reuven started crying. As Rivka rushed to comfort him, sirens began to wail.

Moishe followed his wife out to the front room. "It frightened me," Reuven said.

"It frightened me, too," his father answered. He'd tried to forget how terrifying an explosion out of the blue could be. Hearing just one took him back to the summer before, when the Lizards had forced the Germans out of Warsaw, and to 1939, when the Nazis had pounded a city that couldn't fight back.

“I didn’t think the Germans could hurt us any more,” Rivka said.

“I didn’t, either. They must have gotten lucky.” Moishe spoke as much to reassure himself as to hearten his wife. Believing they were safe from the Nazis was as vital to them as to every other Jew in Poland.

*Bang!* This one was louder and closer. The whole block of flats shook. Glass tinkled down on the floor as two windows blew in. Faint in the distance, Moishe heard screams. The rising bay of the sirens soon drowned them out.

“Lucky?” Rivka asked bitterly. Moishe shrugged with as much nonchalance as he could find. If it wasn’t just luck—He didn’t want to think about that.

“The Deutsche got lucky,” Kirel said. “They launched their missiles when our antimissile system was down for periodic maintenance. The warheads did only relatively minor damage to our facilities.”

Atvar glowered at the shiplord, though it was only natural that he try to put the best face on things. “Our facilities may not be badly damaged, but what of our prestige?” the fleetlord snapped. “Shall we give the Big Ugliers the impression they can lob these things at us whenever it strikes their fancy?”

“Exalted Fleetlord, the situation is not so bad as that,” Kirel said.

“No, eh?” Atvar was not ready to be appeased. “How not?”

“They fired three more at our installations the next days and we knocked all of those down,” Kirel said.

“This is less wonderful than it might be,” Atvar said. “I presume we expended three antimissile missiles in the process?”

“Four, actually,” Kirel said. “One went wild and had to be destroyed in flight.”

“Which leaves us how many such missiles in our inventory?”

“Exalted Fleetlord, I would have to run a computer check to give you the precise number,” Kirel said.

Atvar had run that computer check. “The precise number, Shiplord, is 357. With them, we can reasonably expect to shoot down something over three hundred of the Big Ugliers’ missiles. After that, we become as vulnerable to them as they are to us.”

“Not really,” Kirel protested. “The guidance systems on their missiles are laughable. They can strike militarily significant targets only by accident. The missiles themselves are—”

“Junk,” Atvar finished for him. “I know this.” He poked a claw into a computer control on his desk. The holographic image of a wrecked Tosevite missile sprang into being above the projector off to one side. “Junk,” he repeated. “Sheet-metal body, glass-wool insulation, no electronics worthy of the name—”

“It scarcely makes a pretense of being accurate,” Kirel said.

“I understand that,” Atvar said. “And to knock it out of the sky, we have to use weapons full of sophisticated electronics we cannot hope to replace on this world. Even at one for one, the exchange is scarcely fair.”

“We cannot show the Big Uglies how to manufacture integrated circuits,” Kirel said. “Their technology is too primitive to let them produce such sophisticated components for us. And even if it weren’t, I would hesitate to acquaint them with such an art, lest we find ourselves on the receiving end of it in a year’s time.”

“Always a question of considerable import on Tosev 3,” Atvar said. “I thank the forethoughtful spirits of Emperors past”—he cast his eyes down to the floor, as did Kirel—“that we stocked any antimissiles at all. We did not expect to have to deal with technologically advanced opponents.”

“The same applies to our ground armor and many other armaments,” Kirel agreed. “Without them, our difficulties would be greater still.”

“I understand this,” Atvar said. “What galls me still more is that, despite our air of superiority, we have not been able to shut down the Big Uglies’ industrial capacity. Their weapons are primitive, but continue to be produced.”

He had once more the uneasy vision of a new Tosevite landcruiser rumbling around a pile of ruins just after the Race’s last one had been lost in battle. Or maybe it would be a new missile flying off its launcher with a trail of fire, and no hope of knocking it down before it hit.

Kirel said, “Our strategy of targeting the Tosevites’ petroleum facilities has not yet yielded the full range of desired results.”

“I am painfully aware of this,” Atvar replied. “The Big Uglies are better at effecting makeshift repairs than any rational being could have imagined. And while their vehicles and aircraft are petroleum-fueled, the same is not true of a large proportion of their heavy manufacturing capacity. This also makes matters more difficult.”

“We are beginning to get significant amounts of small-arms ammunition from Tosevite factories in the areas under our control,” Kirel said, resolutely looking at the bright side of things. “The level of sabotage in production is acceptably low.”

“That’s something, anyhow. Up till now, these Tosevite facilities have produced nothing but frustration for us,” Atvar said. “The munitions they turn out are good enough to damage us, but not of sufficient quality or precision to be useful to us in and of themselves. We cannot merely match them bullet for bullet or shell for shell, as they have more of each. Ours, then, must have the greater effect.”

“Indeed so, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said. “To that end, we have recently converted a munitions factory we captured from the Français to producing artillery ammunition in our calibers. The Tosevites manufacture the casings and the explosive charges; our only contribution to the process is the electronics for terminal guidance.”

“Something,” Atvar said again. “But when our supply of seeker heads runs out—” In his mind, that ugly, smoke-belching landcruiser came out from behind the pile of ruins

again.

“Such stocks are still fairly large,” Kirel said. “Again, we now have factories in Italia, France, and captured areas of the U.S.A. and the SSSR beginning to turn out brakes and other mechanical parts for our vehicles.”

“This is progress,” Atvar admitted. “Whether it proves sufficient progress remains to be seen. The Big Ugliers, unfortunately, also progress. Worse still, they progress qualitatively, where we are lucky to be able to hold our ground. I still worry about what the colonization fleet will find here when it arrives.”

“Surely the conquest will be complete by then,” Kirel exclaimed.

“Will it?” The more Atvar looked ahead, the less he liked what he saw. “Try as we will, Shiplord, I fear we shall not be able to prevent the Big Ugliers from acquiring nuclear weapons. And if they do, I fear for Tosev 3.”

Vyacheslav Molotov detested flying. That gave him a personal reason for hating the Lizards to go along with reasons of patriotism and ideology. Ideology came first, of course. He hated the Lizards for their imperialism, for the efforts to cast all of mankind—and the Soviet Union in particular—back into the ancient economic system, with the aliens taking the role of masters and reducing mankind to slaves.

But beneath the imperatives of the Marxist-Leninist dialectic, Molotov also despised the Lizards for making him fly here to London. This trip wasn't as ghastly as his last one, when he had flown in the open cockpit of a biplane from just outside Moscow to Berchtesgaden to beard Hitler in his den. He'd been in a closed cabin all the way—but he'd been no less nervous.

True, the Pe-2 fighter-bomber that had brought him across the North Sea was more comfortable than the little U-2 he'd used before. But it was also more vulnerable. The U-2 seemed too small for the Lizards to notice. Not so the machine he'd flown in yesterday. If he'd gone down into the cold, choppy gray water below, he knew he wouldn't have lasted long.

But here he was, at the heart of the British Empire. For the five major powers still resisting the Lizards—the five major powers which, before the Lizards came, had been at war with one another—London remained the most accessible common ground. Large parts of the Soviet Union, the United States, and Germany and its European conquests lay under the aliens' thumb, while Japan, though like England free of invaders, was next to impossible for British, German, and Soviet representatives to reach.

Winston Churchill strode into the Foreign Office conference room. He nodded first to Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State, then to Molotov, and then to Joachim von Ribbentrop and Shigenori Togo. As former enemies, they stood lower on his scale of approval than did the nations that had banded together against fascism.

But Churchill's greeting included all impartially: “I welcome you, gentlemen, in the cause of freedom and in the name of His Majesty the King.”

Molotov's interpreter murmured the Russian translation for him. Big Five conferences got along on three languages: America and Britain shared English, while Ribbentrop, a former German ambassador to the Court of St. James's, was also fluent in that tongue. That left Molotov and Togo linguistically isolated, but Molotov, at least, was used to isolation—serving as foreign commissar for the only Marxist-Leninist state in a capitalist world was good pariah training.

The envoys delivered their replies. When Molotov's turn came, he said, "The peasants and workers of the Soviet Union express through me their solidarity with the peasants and workers of worldwide humanity against our common foe."

Ribbentrop gave him a dirty look. Getting the Nazi's goat, though, was no great accomplishment; Molotov thought of him as nothing more than a champagne salesman jumped up beyond his position and his abilities. Churchill's round pink face, on the contrary, remained utterly imperturbable. For the British Prime Minister, Molotov had a grudging respect. No doubt he was a class enemy, but he was an able and resolute man. Without him, England might have yielded to the Nazis in 1940, and he had unhesitatingly gone to the support of the Soviet Union when the Germans invaded a year later. Had he thrown his weight behind Hitler then in the crusade against Bolshevism he'd once preached, the USSR might have fallen.

Cordell Hull said, "It's a good idea that we get together when we can so we can plan together the best way of ridding ourselves of the damned Lizards." As he had been at previous meetings, Molotov's interpreter was a little slower in translating for Hull than he had been for Churchill: the American's dialect differed from the British English he'd learned.

"Ridding ourselves of the Lizards now is not our only concern," Shigenori Togo said.

"What could possibly be of greater concern to us?" Ribbentrop demanded. He might have been a posturing, popeyed fool, but for once Molotov could not disagree with his question.

But Togo said, "We also have now a future concern. Surely you all hold captives from among the Lizards. Have you not observed they are all males?"

"Of what other gender could warriors properly be?" Churchill said.

Molotov lacked the Englishman's Victorian preconceptions on that score: female pilots and snipers had gone into battle—and done well—against both the Germans and the Lizards. But even Molotov reckoned that a tactic of desperation. "What are you implying?" he asked of the Japanese foreign minister.

"Under interrogation, a captive Lizard pilot has informed us that this enormous invasion force is but the precursor to a still larger fleet now traveling toward our planet," Togo replied. "The second fleet is termed, if we understand correctly, the colonization fleet. The Lizards intend not merely conquest but also occupation."

He could have created no greater consternation if he'd thrown a live grenade onto the gleaming mahogany surface of the table in front of him. Ribbentrop shouted in German;

Cordell Hull slammed the palm of his hand down onto the tabletop and shook his head so that the fringe of hair he combed over his bald crown flailed wildly; Churchill choked on his cigar and coughed harshly.

Only Molotov still sat unmoved and unmoving. He waited for the hubbub to die down around him, then said, "Why should we allow this to surprise us, comrades?" He used the last word deliberately, both to remind the other dignitaries that they were in the struggle together and to irk them on account of their capitalist ideology.

Speaking through an interpreter had its advantages. Among them was getting the chance to think while the interpreter performed his office. Ribbentrop started off in German again (a mark of indiscipline, to Molotov's mind), then switched to spluttering English: "But how are we to defeat these creatures if they throw at us endless waves of attack?"

"This is a question you Germans should have asked yourselves before you invaded the Soviet Union," Molotov said.

Hull raised a hand. "Enough of that," he said sharply. "Recriminations have no place at this table, else I would not be sitting here with Minister Togo."

Molotov dipped his head slightly, acknowledging the Secretary of State's point. He enjoyed twitting the Nazi, but enjoyment and diplomacy were two separate things.

"The depths of space between the stars are vaster than any man can comfortably imagine, and traveling them, even near the speed of light, takes time, or so the astronomers have led me to believe," Churchill said. He turned to Togo. "How long have we before the second wave falls on us?"

The Japanese foreign minister answered, "The prisoner states that this colonization fleet will reach Earth in something under forty of his kind's years. That is less than forty of our years, but by how much he does not know."

The interpreter leaned close to Molotov. "I am given to understand that two of the Lizards' years are more or less equal to one of ours," he murmured in Russian.

"Tell them," Molotov said after a moment's hesitation. Revealing information of any sort went against his grain, but joint planning required this.

When the interpreter finished speaking, Ribbentrop beamed. "So we have twenty years or so, then," he said. "This is not so bad."

Molotov was dismayed to see Hull nod at that. To them, he concluded, twenty years hence was so far distant that it might as well not exist. The Soviet Union's Five-Year Plans forced a concentration on the future, as did continued study of the ineluctable dynamics of the historical dialectic. As far as Molotov was concerned, a state that did not think about where it would be twenty years from now did not deserve to be anywhere.

He saw intense concentration on Churchill's face. The Englishman had no dialectic to guide him—how could he, when he represented a class destined for the ash-heap of history?—but was himself a student of history of the reactionary sort, and thus used to

contemplating broad sweeps of time. He could look ahead twenty years without being dizzied at the distance.

“I shall tell you what this means, gentlemen,” Churchill said: “It means that, even after we have defeated the Lizards even now encroaching on the green hills of Earth, we shall have to remain comrades in arms—even if not comrades in Commissar Molotov’s sense—and ready ourselves and our world for another great battle.”

“I agree,” Molotov said. He was willing to let Churchill twit him without mercy if that advanced the coalition against the Lizards. Next to them, even a fossilized conservative like Churchill was reminted in shiny progressive metal.

Ribbentrop said, “I agree also. I must say, however, that certain countries now preaching the gospel of cooperation would do well to practice it. Germany has noted several instances of new developments transmitted to us incompletely or only with reluctance, while others at this table have shared more equally and openhandedly.”

Churchill’s bland face remained bland. Molotov did not change expression, either—but then he rarely did. He knew Ribbentrop was talking about the Soviet Union, but declined to feel the least bit guilty. He was still sorry that Germany had succeeded in smuggling even half his share of explosive metal back to his homeland. That hadn’t been part of the Soviet plan. And Churchill couldn’t be enthusiastic about sharing British secrets with the power that had all but brought Britain to her knees.

“Minister Ribbentrop, I want to remind you that this notion of sending new ideas runs both ways,” Cordell Hull said. “You haven’t shared your fancy long-range rockets with the rest of us, I notice, nor the improved sights I hear tell about in your new tanks.”

“I will investigate this,” Ribbentrop said. “We shall not be less forthcoming than our neighbors.”

“While you are investigating, you ought to look into the techniques involved in your Polish death camps,” Molotov said. “Of course, the Lizards have publicized them so well that I doubt many secrets are left any more.”

“The *Reich* denies these vicious fabrications advanced by aliens and Jews,” Ribbentrop said, sending Molotov an angry glare that made him want to smile—he’d hurt the German foreign minister where it mattered. And Germany could deny all she pleased; no one believed her. Then Ribbentrop went on, “And in any case, *Herr* Molotov, I doubt whether Stalin needs any instruction in the art of murder.”

Molotov bared his teeth; he hadn’t expected the normally fatuous German to have such an effective comeback ready. Stalin, though, killed people because they opposed him or might be dangerous to him (the two categories, over the years, had grown closer together until they were nearly identical), not merely because of the group from which they sprang. The distinction, however, was too subtle for him to set it forth for the others around the mahogany table.

Shigenori Togo said, “We need to remember that, while we were enemies, we now find ourselves on the same side. Things which detract from this should be left by the



wayside as inessential. Perhaps one day we shall find the time to pick them up once more and reexamine them, but that day is not yet.”

The Japanese foreign minister was the appropriate man to speak to both Molotov and Ribbentrop, as his country had been allied with Germany and neutral to the Soviet Union before the Lizards came.

“A sensible suggestion,” Hull said. His agreement with Togo meant something, for the United States and Japan had the same reasons for hatred as Russians and Germans.

Molotov said, “As best we can, then, we shall maintain our progressive coalition and continue the struggle against the imperialist invaders, at the same time seeking ways to share the fruits of technical progress among ourselves?”

“As best we can, yes,” Churchill said. Everyone else around the table nodded. Molotov knew the qualification would weaken their combined effort. But he also knew that, without it, the Big Five might have balked at sharing anything at all. An agreement with an acknowledged flaw was to his mind better than one that could blow up without warning.

They were keeping the fight alive. Past that, little mattered now.

The air—raid siren at Bruntingthorpe began to howl. David Goldfarb sprinted for the nearest slit trench. Above the siren came the roar of the Lizards' jets. It seemed to grow impossibly fast.

Bombs started falling about the time Goldfarb dove headlong into the trench. The ground shook as if it were writhing in pain. Antiaircraft guns hammered. The Lizard planes screamed past at just above treetop height. Their cannon were pounding, too. Through everything, the siren wailed on.

The jets streaked away. The AA around Bruntingthorpe sent a last few futile rounds after them. Shell fragments pattered down from the sky like jagged metal hail. Stunned, half deafened, filthy, his heart pounding madly, Goldfarb climbed to his feet.

He glanced down at his watch. "Bloody hell," he muttered, and then, because that didn't have enough kick, "*Gevalt.*" Hardly more than a minute had gone by since the air raid warning began.

In that minute, Bruntingthorpe had been turned upside down. Craters pocked the runway. One of the bombs had struck an airplane in spite of the camouflaged revetment in which it huddled. A column of greasy black smoke rose into the cloudy sky.

Goldfarb looked around. "Oh, bloody *fucking* hell," he said. The Nissen hut where he'd been studying how to fit a radar into the Meteor jet fighter was just a piece of rubble. Part of the curved roof of corrugated galvanized iron had been blown fifty feet away.

The radarman scrambled out of the trench and dashed toward the Nissen hut, which was beginning to burn. "Group Captain Hipple!" he shouted, and then called in turn the names of the other men with whom he'd been working. A dreadful fear that he would hear no reply rose in him.

Then, one by one, the heads of the RAF officers popped up out of the trench close by the hut. Only the top of Hipple's cap was visible; he really was very short. "That you, Goldfarb?" he called. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir," Goldfarb said. "Are you?"

"Quite, thanks," Hipple answered, scrambling out spryly. He looked around at the hut, shook his head. "There's a good deal of work up in smoke. I'm glad we salvaged what we did." As the other officers got out, he waved Goldfarb over to see what he meant.

The bottom of the slit trench was covered with manila folders and the papers that had spilled out of them. Goldfarb stared from them to Hipple and back again. "You—all of you—stopped to grab papers when the air raid alarm went off?"

"Well, the work upon which we are engaged here is of considerable importance, don't you think?" Hipple murmured, as if he hadn't imagined doing anything but what he'd done. He probably hadn't. Had Goldfarb been in the Nissen hut with the others, the only

thing he would have thought about was getting to cover as fast as he could.

Groundcrew men had already emerged from their shelters. They swept and pushed chunks of tarmac off onto the winter-brown grass to either side of the newly hit runways, or else tossed them into the craters the bombs had made. Others started dragging up lengths of pierced-steel planking material to put over the holes until they could make more permanent repairs.

Flight Lieutenant Kennan pointed toward the burning aircraft. “I do hope that’s not one of our Pioneers.”

“Not in that revetment, sir.” Flight Officer Roundbush shook his head. “It’s only a Hurricane.”

“*Only* a Hurricane?” Kennan looked scandalized; he’d flown one during the Battle of Britain. “Basil, if it weren’t for Hurricanes, you’d have had to trim that mustache of yours down to a toothbrush and start learning German. The Spitfires grabbed the glory—they look like such thoroughbreds, after all—but Hurricanes did more of the work.”

Roundbush’s hand went protectively to the bushy blond growth on his upper lip. “I beg your pardon, sir. Had I realized the Hurricane stood between my mustache and war’s desolation, I should have spoken of it with more respect—even if it is as obsolete as a Sopwith Camel these days.”

If possible, Kennan looked even more affronted, not least because Roundbush was in essence right. Indeed, against the Lizards a Sopwith Camel might have been of more use than a Hurricane, simply because it contained very little metal and so was hard for radar to pick up.

Before Kennan could return to the verbal charge, Group Captain Hipple said, “Maurice, Basil, that’s quite enough.” They shuffled their feet like a couple of abashed schoolboys.

Wing Commander Peary jumped back down into the trench, started rummaging through file folders. “Oh, capital,” he said a minute later. “We didn’t lose the drawings for the installation of the multifrequency radar in the Meteor fuselage.”

At the same time as Goldfarb breathed a silent sigh of relief, Basil Roundbush said, “I had to save those. David would have smote me hip and thigh if I’d left them behind.”

“Heh,” Goldfarb said. He wondered if Roundbush was using that pseudo-Biblical language to mock his Jewishness. Probably not, he decided. Roundbush made fun of everything on general principles.

“Shall we gather up our goods and see who will give us a temporary home?” Hipple said. “We shan’t have a hut of our own for a while now.”

Planes were taking off and landing on the damaged runways by that afternoon. By then, Goldfarb and the RAF officers were back at work in a borrowed corner of the meteorological crew’s Nissen hut. The inside of one of the temporary buildings was so much like that of another that for a few minutes at a time Goldfarb was able to forget he wasn’t where he had been.

The telephone rang. One of the weathermen picked it up, then held it out to Hipple. "Call for you, Group Captain."

"Thank you." The jet engine specialist took the phone, said, "Hipple here." He listened for a couple of minutes, then said, "Oh, that's first-rate. Yes, we'll be looking forward to receiving it. Tomorrow morning some time, you say? Yes, that will do splendidly. Thanks so much for calling. Good-bye."

"What was that in aid of?" Wing Commander Peary asked.

"There may be some justice in the world after all, Julian," Hipple answered. "One of the Lizard jets which strafed this base was later brought down by anti-aircraft fire north of Leicester. The aircraft did not burn upon impact, and damage was less extensive than in most other cases where we have been fortunate enough to strike a blow against the Lizards. An engine and the radar will be sent here for our examination."

"That's wonderful," Goldfarb exclaimed; his words were partly drowned by similar ones from the other members of his team and from the meteorologists as well.

"What happened to the pilot?" Basil Roundbush asked, adding, "Nothing good, I hope."

"I was told he used one of the Lizards' exploding seats to get free of the aircraft, but he has been captured by Home Guards," Hipple answered. "Perhaps it might be wise for me to seek to have him placed here so we can draw on his knowledge of the parts of his aircraft once he gains some command of English."

"I've heard the Lizards sing like birds once they get to the point where they can talk," Roundbush said. "They're supposed to be even worse than the Italians for that. It's odd, if you ask me."

Maurice Kennan walked into the trap: "Why's that?"

"Because they all come with stiff upper lips, of course." Roundbush grinned.

"You're one of the brightest Britain has to offer?" Kennan said, groaning. "God save us all."

Goldfarb groaned, too—Basil Roundbush would have been disappointed if he hadn't—but he was also smiling. He'd seen this kind of chaffing at the radar station in Dover at the height of the Battle of Britain, and then again with the Lancaster crew testing airborne radar. It made men work better together, lessened their friction against one another. Some, like Group Captain Hipple, didn't need such social lubrication, but most mere mortals did.

They labored on until well past eight, trying to make up for time lost to the Lizard raid. They didn't catch up; Goldfarb spent most of his time looking for the papers he needed, and didn't always find them. The other four men, being more concerned with engines than radar, had grabbed those file folders first and his as an afterthought.

When Fred Hipple yawned and stood up from his stool, that was a signal for everyone else to knock off, too: if he'd had enough, they didn't need to be ashamed to show they

were worn. Goldfarb felt it in the shoulders and in the small of the back.

Hipple, a man of uncommon rectitude, headed for the refectory and then, presumably, for his cot—such, at least, was his usual habit. Goldfarb, though, had had a bellyful—in both the literal and figurative senses of the word—of the food the RAF kitchens turned out. After a while, stewed meat (when there was meat), soya links, stewed potatoes and cabbage, dumplings the size, shape, and consistency of billiard balls, and stewed prunes got to be too much.

He climbed onto his bicycle and headed for nearby Bruntingthorpe. Nor was he surprised to hear the rattling squeak of another bicycle's imperfectly oiled chain right behind him. Looking back over his shoulder in the darkness would have been an invitation to go straight over the handlebars. Instead, he called, "A Friend In Need—"

Basil Roundbush's chuckle came ahead to him. The flight officer finished the catch phrase: "—is a friend indeed."

A few minutes later, they both pulled up in front of A Friend In Need, the only pub Bruntingthorpe boasted. Without the RAF aerodrome just outside the hamlet, the place would not have had enough customers to stay open. As things were, it flourished. So did the fish-and-chips shop next door, though Goldfarb fought shy of that one because of the big tins of lard that showed up in its refuse bins. He was not nearly so rigid in his Orthodox faith as his parents, but eating chips fried in pig's fat was more than he could stomach.

"Two pints of bitter," Roundbush called. The publican poured them from his pitcher, passed them across the bar in exchange for silver. Roundbush raised his pint pot in salute to Goldfarb. "Confusion to the Lizards!"

They both drained their pints. The beer was not what it had been before the war. After the first or second pint, though, you stopped noticing. Following immemorial custom, Goldfarb bought the second round. "No confusion to us tomorrow, when they fetch the damaged goods," he declared. He said no more, not off the base.

"I'll drink to that, by God!" Roundbush said, and proved it. "The more we can learn about how they do what they do, the better our chance of keeping them from doing it."

The innkeeper leaned across the waxed oak surface of the bar. "I've still got half a roasted capon in the back room, lads," he said in a confidential voice. "Four and six, if you're interested—"

The slap of coins on the bar gave his sentence its end punctuation. "Light meat or dark?" Goldfarb asked when the bird appeared: as an officer, Roundbush had the right to choose.

"I fancy breasts more than legs," Roundbush answered, and added, after the perfect tiny pause, "and I like light meat better, too."

So did Goldfarb, but he ate the dark without complaint; it was vastly better than anything they made back at the aerodrome. The two RAF men each bought another round. Then, regretfully, they rode back to the base. Keeping bicycles on a steady course

seemed complicated after four pints of even bad bitter.

The headache Goldfarb had the next morning told him he probably shouldn't have drunk the last one. Basil Roundbush looked disgustingly fresh. Goldfarb did his best to keep Group Captain Hipple from noticing he was hung over. He thought he succeeded, and got help because no one was working at his best, not only because of yesterday's raid, but also because everyone was looking forward to examining the wreckage from the Lizard plane.

Said wreckage did not arrive until nearly eleven, which put everyone, even the patient, mild-mannered Hipple, on edge. When it finally happened, though, the arrival was a portent: the fragments came to Bruntingthorpe aboard a pair of 6x6 GMC trucks.

The big rumbling American machines seemed to Goldfarb almost as great a prodigy as the cargo they bore. Next to them, the British lorries he was used to were awkward makeshifts, timid and underpowered. If the Lizards hadn't come, thousands of these broad-shouldered bruisers would have been hauling men and equipment all around England. As it was, only the earliest handful of arrivals were working here. The Yanks had more urgent use for the rest on their own side of the Atlantic.

That a couple of the precious American lorries had been entrusted with their present cargo spoke volumes about how important the RAF reckoned it. The lorries also boasted winches, which helped get the pieces out of the cargo compartments: radar and engine, especially the latter, were too heavy for convenient manhandling.

"We have to get these under cover as quickly as we can," Hipple said. "We don't want Lizard reconnaissance aircraft noting that we're trying to learn their secrets."

Even as he spoke, men from the groundcrew were draping camouflage netting over the wreckage. Before long, it looked pretty much like meadow from above. Goldfarb said, "They'll expect us to rebuild the Nissen hut they wrecked yesterday. When we do, it might be worthwhile to move this gear into it. That way, the Lizards won't be able to tell we have it."

"Very good suggestion, David," Hipple said, beaming. "I expect we'll do that as soon as we have the opportunity. Yet no matter how quickly they can run up a Nissen hut, we shan't wait for them. I want to attack these beasts as rapidly as possible, as I'm certain you do also."

There Hipple was right. Even though it was gloomy under the netting, Goldfarb got to work right away. The Lizard plane must have come down on its belly rather than nose first, a happy accident that had indeed kept it from being too badly smashed up. Part of the streamlined nose assembly remained in place in front of the parabolic radar antenna.

The antenna itself had escaped crumpling. It was smaller than Goldfarb had expected; for that matter, the whole unit was smaller than he'd expected. The Lizards had mounted it in front of their pilot—that was obvious. It was good design; Goldfarb wished the set that would go into the Meteor was small enough to imitate it.

Some of the sheet metal around the radar had torn. Peering through a gap, Goldfarb saw bundles of wires with bright-colored insulation. *Coded somehow*, he thought, wishing he knew which color meant what.

Even wrecked, the finish of the Lizard aircraft was very fine. Welds were smooth and flat, rivets countersunk so their heads lay flush with the metal skin. Even tugging with pliers at a tear in the metal to widen it so he could reach inside felt like tampering to Goldfarb.

Behind the radar antenna lay the magnetron; he recognized the curved shape of its housing. It was the last piece of apparatus he did recognize. Things that looked like screws held it to the rest of the unit. They did not, however, have conventional heads. Instead of openings for a flat-blade or Phillips-head screwdriver, they had square cavities sunk into the centers of the heads.

Goldfarb rummaged through the tools on his belt till he found a flat-blade screwdriver whose blade fit across the diagonal of one of the Lizard screws. He turned it. Nothing happened. He gave the screw a hard look that quickly turned speculative and tried to turn it the other way. It began to come out.

Bad language was coming from the RAF men working on the engine. Suspecting he knew why, Goldfarb called, "The screws are backwards to ours: anticlockwise tightens, clockwise loosens."

He heard a couple of seconds' silence, then a grunt of satisfaction. Fred Hipple said, "Thank you, David. Lord only knows how long that would have taken to occur to us. One can sometimes become too wedded to the obvious."

Goldfarb fairly burst with pride. This from the man who had designed and patented the jet engine almost ten years before the war began! *Praise indeed*, he thought.

The bad language from the engine crew faded away as the officers got the casing off and started looking at the guts. "They use fir-tree roots to secure the turbine blades, sir," Julian Peary said indignantly. "Pity you had so much trouble convincing the powers that be it was a good notion."

"The Lizards have had this technology in place rather longer than we have, Wing Commander," Hipple answered. Despite long thwarting by RAF indifference and even hostility, he showed no bitterness.

"And look," Basil Roundbush said. "The blades have a slight twist to them. How long ago did you suggest that, sir? Two years? Three?"

Whatever Hipple's answer was, Goldfarb didn't hear it. He'd loosened enough screws himself to get off a panel of the radar's case. He had a good notion of what he'd find inside: since physical laws had to be the same all through the universe, he figured the Lizard set would closely resemble the ones he was used to. Oh, it would be smaller and lighter and better engineered than RAF models, but still essentially similar. Valves, after all, remained valves—unless you went to the United States, where they turned into tubes.

But the second he got a good look at the radar, the flush of pride he'd felt a little while before evaporated. Hipple and his team could make some sense of what they saw inside the jet engine. The parts of the radar set remained a complete mystery to Goldfarb. The only thing of which he could be certain was that it had no valves ... or even tubes.

What took their place was sheets of grayish-brown material with silvery lines etched onto them. Some had little lumpy things of various shapes and colors affixed. Form said nothing about function, at least not to Goldfarb.

Basil Roundbush chose that moment to inquire, "How goes it with you, David?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't go at all." Goldfarb knew he sounded like a bad translation from the French. He didn't care: he'd found the simplest way to tell the truth.

"Pity," Roundbush said. "Well, I don't suppose we need every single answer this morning. One or two of them may possibly wait until tonight."

Goldfarb's answering laugh had a distinctly hollow ring.

Mutt Daniels drew the cloth patch through the barrel of his tommy gun. "You got to keep your weapon clean," he told the men in his squad. Telling—even ordering—accomplished only so much. Leading by example worked better.

Kevin Donlan obediently started in on his rifle. He obeyed Daniels like a father (or maybe, Mutt thought uneasily, like a grandfather—he was old enough to be the kid's grandfather, if he and his hypothetical child had started early). Other than that, though, he had a soldier's ingrained suspicion of anyone of higher rank than his own—which in his case meant just about the whole Army. He asked, "Sarge, what are we doing in Mount Pulaski anyways?"

Daniels paused in his cleaning to consider that. He wished he had a chew; working the wad of tobacco in his mouth always helped him think. He hadn't come across one in a long time, though. He said, "Near as I can see, somebody looked at a map, saw 'Mount,' and figured this here was high ground. Hell of a mountain, ain't it?"

The men laughed. Mount Pulaski was on higher ground than the surrounding hamlets—by twenty, thirty, sometimes even fifty or sixty feet. It hardly seemed worth having spent lives to take the place, even if it did also sit at the junction of State Roads 121 and 54.

Bela Szabo said, "They finally figured out we weren't about to take Decatur, so they figured they'd move us someplace new and see how many casualties we can take here." Szabo wasn't much older than Kevin Donlan, but had a couple of extra lifetimes' worth of cynicism under his belt.

But Mutt shook his head. "Naah, that ain't it, Dracula. What they're really after is seein' how many fancy old-time buildings they can blow to hell. They're gettin' right good at it, too."

The Mount Pulaski Courthouse was his case in point here. Almost a hundred years old, it was a two-story Greek Revival building of red-brown brick with a plain classical



pediment. Or rather, it had been: after a couple of artillery hits, more of it was rubble than building. But enough still stood to show it would have been worth saving.

“You boys hungry?” a woman called. “I’ve got some ducks and some fried trout here if you are.” She held up a big wicker picnic basket.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mutt said enthusiastically. “Beats the sh—pants off what the Army feeds us—when they feed us.” Quartermaster arrangements had gone to hell, what with the Lizards hitting supply lines whenever they could. If it hadn’t been for the kindness of locals, Daniels and his men would have gone hungry a lot more than they did.

The woman came up to the front porch of the wrecked house where the squad was sitting. None of the young soldiers paid her any particular mind—she was a year or two past forty, with a tired face and mouse-brown hair streaked with gray. Their attention was on the basket she carried.

Springfields and M-1s still came with bayonets, even if nobody was likely to use them in combat any more. They turned out to make first-rate duck carvers, though. The roast ducks were greasy and gamy. Mutt still ate duck in preference to trout; the only fish he cared for was catfish.

“Mighty fine, ma’am,” Kevin Donlan said, licking his fingers. “Where’d you come by all this good stuff, anyhow?”

“Up in Lincoln Lakes, six, seven miles north of here,” she answered. “They aren’t real lakes, just gravel pits filled with water, but they’re stocked with fish and I can use a shotgun.”

“Found that out,” Mutt said. His teeth had stumbled on birdshot a couple of times. You could break one that way if you weren’t lucky. He tossed aside a leg bone gnawed bare, then went on, “Mighty kind of you to go to so much trouble for us, uh”—his eyes flicked to her left hand to see if she wore a ring—“Miss ...”

“I’m Lucille Potter,” she answered. “What’s your name?”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Lucille,” he said. “I’m M—uh, Pete Daniels.” He thought of himself as Mutt these days; he had for years. But that didn’t seem the right way to introduce yourself to a woman you’d just met. The kids might ignore her—they were younger than most of the players he’d managed—but she didn’t look half bad to him.

Only trouble was, the kids wouldn’t let him get away with being Pete. Some of them started rolling in the dirt; even Kevin Donlan snorted. Lucille looked from one of them to the next. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

Resignedly, Daniels said, “My name’s Pete, but they usually call me Mutt.”

“Is that what you’d rather be called?” she asked. When he nodded, she went on, “Why didn’t you say so, then? There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Her brisk tones made a couple of the soldiers look abashed, but more of them didn’t care what she said, even if she had brought them food. The matter-of-fact common sense in her words made him eye her speculatively. “You a schoolteacher, ma’am?”

She smiled. That made some of her tiredness fall away and let him see what she'd looked like when she was twenty-five or so. No, she wasn't bad at all. She said, "Pretty good guess, but you didn't notice my shoes."

They were white—an awfully dirty white now—with thick, rubbery soles. "You're a nurse," Mutt said.

Lucille Potter nodded. "I sure am. I've been doing a doctor's work since the Lizards came, though. Mount Pulaski only had Doc Hanrahan, and somebody's bomb—God knows whose—landed in his front yard just when he was coming out the door. He never knew what hit him, anyhow."

"Lord, I wish we could take you with us, ma'am," Kevin Donlan said. "The medics we got, they ain't everything they oughta be. 'Course, what is these days?"

"That purely is a fact," Daniels agreed. The Army tried hard, the same as it did with supplies. As with supplies, war's disruption was too great to permit hurt men proper care. He suspected his grandfathers in the War Between the States hadn't risked much worse medical treatment. Doctors knew a lot more nowadays, but so what? All the knowledge in the world didn't matter if you couldn't get your hands on the medicines and instruments you needed to use it.

Lucille Potter said, "Why the hell not?"

Mutt gaped at her, startled twice—first at the casual way she swore and then by how she fell in with Donlan's suggestion, which had been more wistful than serious. Mutt said, "But, ma'am, you're a woman." He thought that explained everything.

"So?" Lucille said—evidently she didn't. "Would you care if I was digging a bullet out of your leg? Or do you think your boys here are going to gang-rape me the second your back is turned?"

"But—But—" Mutt spluttered like a man who can't swim floundering out of a creek. He felt his face turn red. His men were staring at Lucille Potter with their mouths open. *Rape* wasn't a word you said around a woman, let alone a word you expected to hear from one.

She went on, "Maybe I should bring my shotgun along. You think that might make 'em behave?"

"Y'all mean it," he said, surprised again, this time into a Southernism he seldom used.

"Of course I mean it," she said. "Get to know me for a while and you'll find out I hardly ever say things I don't mean. People in town were stupid, too, till they started coming down sick and breaking bones and having babies. Then they found out what I could do—because they had to. You can't afford to wait around like that, can you? If you give me five minutes, I'll go home and get my black bag. Or"—she shrugged—"you can do without."

Mutt thought hard. Whatever the trouble she brought with her, could it be worse than the hurts they'd take that would go bad without a doctor? He didn't think so. But he also wanted to find out why she was volunteering, so he asked, "How come you want to

leave this town, if you're the only thing even halfway close to a doctor here?"

"When the Lizards held this part of the state, I had to stay here—I was the only one around who could do anything," Lucille answered. "But now that proper human beings are back in charge, it'll be easier to bring a real doctor around. And an awful lot of what I've been doing lately is patching up hurt soldiers. I hate to put it so plain, Mutt, but I think you people are liable to need me worse than Mount Pulaski does."

"That makes sense," Mutt said. Glancing at Lucille Potter, he got the feeling she would make sense a lot of the time. He rubbed his chin. "Tell you what, Miss Lucille. Let's take you over to Captain Maczek, see what he thinks about the idea. If it's all right with him, I like it." He looked over to the men in his squad. They were all nodding. Mutt suddenly grinned. "Here—bring some of this duck along with you. That'll help put him in the right kind of mood."

Maczek was around the corner, eating with another squad from the company. He was maybe half Mutt's age, but not altogether lacking in sense. Mutt grinned again to see him digging a spoon in what looked like a can of baked beans. He held up the duck leg. "Got something better'n that for you, sir—an' here's the lady who shot the bird."

The captain stared in delight at the duck, then turned to Lucille. "Ma'am, my hat's off to you." He took himself literally, doffing his net-covered helmet. The sweaty blond hair underneath it stuck up in all directions.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain." Lucille Potter gave her name, shook Maczek's hand with a decisive pump. Then the captain took the drumstick and thigh from Daniels and bit into it. Grease ran down his chin. His expression turned ecstatic.

"You know what else, sir?" Mutt said. He told Maczek what else.

"Is that a fact?" Maczek said.

"Yes, sir, it is," Lucille said. "I'm not a proper doctor, and I don't claim to be one. But I've learned a hell of a lot these past few months, and I'm a lot better than nothing."

Maczek absently took another bite of duck. As Mutt had, he eyed the men around him. They'd all been listening with eager curiosity. You couldn't run an army by asking what everybody thought all the time, but you didn't ignore what people thought, either, not if you were smart. Maczek wasn't stupid, anyhow. He said, "I'll clear it with the colonel later, but I don't think he'll say no. It's irregular as all get out, but this whole stinking war is irregular."

"I'll go get my tools," Lucille said, and strode off to do just that.

Captain Maczek watched her no-nonsense walk for a few seconds before he turned back to Daniels. "You know, Sergeant, if you'd come along to me with some little chippy you'd found, I'd have been very angry at you. But this one—I think she may do. If I've ever seen a female who can take care of herself, she's it."

"Reckon you're right, sir." Mutt pointed to the bones Maczek was still holding. "And we already know she can handle a shotgun."

“That’s true, by God.” Maczek laughed. “Besides, she’s old enough to be a mother for most of the men. You have anybody in your squad with an Oedipus complex, you think?”

“With a what, sir?” Mutt frowned—just because Maczek had been to college, he didn’t need to show off. And besides—“She’s not bad-lookin’, I don’t think.”

Captain Maczek opened his mouth to say something. By the glint in his eye, it would have been lewd or rude or both. But he didn’t say it—he was too smart an officer to make fun of his noncoms, especially in front of a bunch of listening soldiers. What he did finally say was, “However you like, Mutt. But remember, she’s going to be medic for the whole company, maybe the battalion, not just your squad.”

“Yeah, sure, Captain, I know that,” Daniels said. To himself, he added, *I saw her first, though.*

The U-2 droned through the night just above the treetops. The cold slipstream buffeted Ludmila Gorbunova’s face. It was not the only reason her teeth chattered. She was deep inside Lizard-held territory. If anything went wrong, she wouldn’t make it back to her dirt airstrip and the cramped little space she shared with the other female pilots.

She forced such thoughts from her mind, concentrated on the mission at hand. That was the only way to get through them, she’d learned: keep your mind firmly fixed on what you had to do *now*, then what you had to do *next*, and so on. Look ahead or off to one side and you were in trouble. That had been true against the Nazis; it was doubly so against the Lizards.

“What I have to do *now*,” she said aloud, letting the slipstream fling her words away behind her, “is find the partisan battalion.”

Easier said than done, in what looked like endless stretches of forest and plain. She thought her navigation was good, but when you were flying by compass and wristwatch, little errors always crept in. She thought about gaining altitude so she could see farther, but rejected the idea. It would also have made it easier for the Lizards to spot her.

She worked the pedals and the stick, swung the U-2 into a wide, slow spiral to search the terrain below. The little wood-and-fabric biplane responded beautifully to the controls, probably better than it had when it was new. Georg Schultz, her German mechanic, might be—was—a Nazi, but he was also a genius at keeping the aircraft not only flying but flying well in spite of an almost complete lack of spare parts.

There down below—was that a light? It was, and a moment later she spotted the other two with it. She’d been told to look for an equilateral triangle of lights. Here they were. She buzzed slowly overhead, hoping the partisans had all their instructions straight.

They did. As soon as they heard the sewing-machine whine of the U-2’s little Shvetsov engine, they set out two more lights, little ones, that were supposed to mark out the

beginning of a stretch of ground where she could land safely. Her mouth went dry, as it did every time she had to land at night on a strip or a field she'd never seen before. The *Kukuruznik* was a rugged machine, but a mistake could still kill her.

She lined up on the landing lights, lost altitude, killed her airspeed—not that the U-2 had much to lose. At the last moment, the lights disappeared: they must have had collars, to keep them from being seen at ground level. Losing them made her heart thump fearfully, but then she was down.

The biplane bounced along over the field. Ludmila hit the brakes hard; every meter she traveled was one more meter in which a wheel might go into a hole and flip the U-2 over. Fortunately, it did not need many meters in which to stop.

Men—dark shapes in darker night—came running up and got to the *Kukuruznik* while the prop was still spinning. “You have presents for us, Comrade?” one of them called.

“I have presents,” Ludmila agreed. She heard the mutters when they heard her voice—variations on the theme of *a woman!* She was used to that; she'd been dealing with it ever since she joined the Red Air Force. But there were fewer such murmurs among the partisans than there had been at some air force bases to which she'd flown. A fair number of partisans were women, and most male partisans understood that women could fight.

She climbed down from the front cockpit, set a foot in the metal stirrup on the left side of the fuselage that gave access to the rear one. She didn't go up into it, but started handing out boxes. “Here we are, Comrades: presents,” she said. “Rifles—with ammunition ... submachine guns—with ammunition.”

“The weapons are good, but we already have most of the weapons we need,” a man said. “But next time you come, Comrade Pilot, bring us lots more bullets. It's the ammunition we're short of—we use a lot of it.” Wolflike chuckles rose from the partisans' throats.

From back in the crowd of fighters, someone called, “Comrade, did you fetch us any 7.92mm ammunition? We have a lot of German rifles and machine guns we could use more if we had bullets for them.”

Ludmila hauled out a canvas bag that clinked metallically. The partisans' murmurs turned appreciative; a couple of them clapped gloved hands together in delight. Ludmila said, “I am told to tell you: you cannot expect this bounty on every resupply run. We have to scavenge German cartridges—we don't manufacture them. The way things are, we have a hard enough time manufacturing our own calibers.”

“Too bad,” said the man who had asked about German ammunition. “The Mauser is not a great rifle—accurate, *da*, but a slow, clumsy bolt—but the Nazis make a very fine machine gun.”

“Maybe we can work a trade,” the fellow who'd first greeted Ludmila said. “There's a mostly German band of fighters back around Konotop, and they use our weapons just as we use theirs. They might swap some of their caliber for some of ours.”

Those couple of sentences spoke volumes about the anguish of the Soviet Union. Konotop, a hundred fifty kilometers east of Ludmila's native Kiev, had been in German hands. Now it belonged to the Lizards. When would the Soviet workers and people be able to reclaim the *rodina*, the motherland?

Ludmila started handing out cardboard tubes and pots of paste. "Here you are, Comrades. Because wars are not won only by bullets, I bring also the latest posters by Efrimov and the Kukryniksi group."

That drew pleased exclamations from the partisans. Newspapers hereabouts had been forced to echo the Nazi line; now they slavishly reproduced Lizard propaganda. Radios, especially those able to pick up signals from land still under human control, were few and far between. Posters gave one way of striking back. They could go up on a wall in seconds and show hundreds the truth for days.

"What do the men of Kukryniksi do this time?" a woman asked.

"It's one of their better ones, I think," Ludmila said, which was no small praise, for the team of Kupryanov, Krylov, and Sokolov probably turned out the best Soviet poster art. She went on, "This one shows a Lizard in Pharaoh's headdress lashing Soviet peasants; the caption reads, 'A Return to Slavery.'"

"That is a good one," the partisan leader agreed. "It will make the people think, and make them less likely to collaborate with the Lizards. We will post it widely, in towns and villages and at collective farms."

"How much collaboration goes on with the Lizards?" Ludmila asked. "This is something of which our authorities need to be aware."

"It's not as bad as what went on with the Germans at first," the man answered. Ludmila nodded; little could be as bad as that. Large segments of the Soviet populace had welcomed the Nazis as liberators in the early days of their invasion. If they'd played on that instead of working to prove they could be even more savage and brutal than the NKVD, they might have toppled the Soviet regime. The partisan went on, "We do have collaboration, though. Many people passively accept whatever power they find above them, while others welcome the rather indifferent rule of the Lizards as superior to the hostility they had known before."

"Hostility from the fascists, you mean," Ludmila said.

"Of course, Comrade Pilot." The partisan leader's voice was innocence personified. No one could safely speak of hostility to the people from the Soviet government, though that shadow lay across the whole of the *rodina*.

"You called the Lizards' rule indifferent," Ludmila said. "Explain that more fully, please. Intelligence is worth more than many rifles."

"They take crops and livestock for themselves; in the towns, they try to set up manufacturers that might be useful to them: forges and chemical works and such. But they care nothing for what we do as people," the partisan said. "They do not forbid worship, but they do not promote it, either. They do not even forbid the Party, which

would be only elementary prudence on their part. It is as if we are beneath their notice unless we take up arms against them. Then they hit hard.”

That much Ludmila already knew. The other perplexed her. By the sound of his voice, it perplexed the partisan, too. They were used to a regime that minutely regulated every aspect of its citizens’ lives—and disposed of them without mercy when they didn’t meet its expectations ... or sometimes even if they did. Simple indifference seemed very alien by contrast. She hoped her superiors would have a better idea of what to make of it.

“Does anyone have letters for me?” she asked. “I’ll be glad to take them along, though with the post as disrupted as it is, they may be months on the way.”

The partisans queued up to hand her their notes to the outside world. None of them had envelopes; those had been in short supply before the Lizards came. The papers were folded into triangles to show they came from soldiers: the Soviet mail system carried such letters, albeit slowly, without a postage fee.

When she had the last letter, Ludmila climbed back into the front cockpit and said, “Would you please swing my aircraft around nose for tail? If I landed safely on this strip, I’d like to take off down the same ground.”

The little U-2 was easy to haul around by hand; it weighed less than a thousand kilos. Ludmila had to explain to someone how to turn the prop. As always on these missions, she had an anxious moment wondering whether the engine would start—no mechanical starter here if it didn’t. But it was still warm from the flight in, and kicked over almost at once.

She released the brake, pushed the stick forward. The *Kukuruznik* jounced over the rough field. A few partisans ran alongside, waving. They soon fell behind. The takeoff run was longer than the one she’d needed to land. That meant she was going over some new terrain (to say nothing of the holes she might have missed while she was landing). But after a last couple of jolts, the biplane made an ungainly leap into the air.

She swung the U-2 north and west, back toward the base from which she’d set out. Finding it again would take the same kind of search she’d needed to locate the partisans’ makeshift airstrip. A base that advertised its presence soon drew the attention of the Lizards. Once that happened, the base was unlikely to remain present for long.

Not that she had any guarantees of getting back safely, anyhow. U-2s were detected and destroyed less often than any other Soviet aircraft; Ludmila’s best guess was that they were too small and light and flimsy to be noticed most of the time. But *Kukuruzniks* did not always come home, either.

Off in the distance, she saw flashes, like heat lightning on a summer evening: someone’s artillery, probably the Lizards’. She glanced at her watch and compass, made the best position estimate she could. When she landed, she’d report it to Colonel Karpov. Maybe one day before too long, the partisans would fire a rack of *Katyusha* rockets that way.

Stars twinkled through gaps in the clouds. A couple of times, she spotted brief

twinkles of light on the ground, too: muzzle flashes. They made the stars seem less safe and friendly.

Watching the compass and her watch, she flew on toward the base. When she thought she was overhead, she looked down and saw—nothing. That failed to surprise her; finding it on the first try by dead reckoning was no likelier than plunging your hand into a haystack and bringing out a needle between thumb and forefinger.

She began another search spiral. Now she watched her fuel gauge, too. If she was lost and had to set down in a field, she wanted to do it while she still had power, not dead stick.

Just when she was beginning to worry she might have to do exactly that, she spied the lights she'd been looking for. She gratefully made for them; knowing where you were made you feel ever so much more in control of things.

The airstrip had supposedly been leveled. As a matter of fact, it was no smoother than the one the partisans had marked off for her. Ludmila's teeth clicked together at every jolt until the U-2 stopped. She told herself the roughness made the runway harder to spot. Was that consolation enough for the bruises she'd have wherever her safety harness touched her? Maybe.

She unbuckled the harness, got out of the plane while the prop was still spinning. The groundcrew ran up, hauled the *Kukuruznik* away to its between-missions home in a camouflaged revetment. "Where's Colonel Karpov?" she asked.

"He went to bed an hour ago," somebody answered. "It is close to three in the morning. You have anything so important it won't keep till dawn?"

"I suppose not," she said. The Lizard artillery wasn't something he had to know about right now. She followed the *Kukuruznik* toward its shelter.

Ludmila would have bet as much money as she had that she'd find Georg Schultz waiting at the revetment. Sure enough, there he was. "*Alles khorosho?*" he asked in his usual mixture of German and Russian.

"*Gut, da,*" she answered, mixing the languages the same way.

He scrambled up into the cockpit. No lantern was lighted, not even beneath the camouflage netting; the Lizards had gadgets that could pick up the tiniest gleam. That didn't stop Schultz from starting to work on Ludmila's biplane. He tested the pedals and other controls, leaned out to say, "Left aileron cable not good—feels a little loose. Come light, I fix."

"Thank you, Georgi Mikhailovich," Ludmila answered. She hadn't noticed anything wrong with the cable, but if Schultz said it needed tightening, she was willing to believe him. His understanding for machinery was, to her way of thinking, all but uncanny. She flew the aircraft; Georg Schultz projected himself into it as if he were part plane himself.

"Nothing else bad," he said, "but here—you leave on floor." He handed her a folded triangle of paper.



“Thank you,” she said again. “Our post is unreliable enough without me losing a letter before it ever gets into the mail.” She wasn’t sure how much of that he understood, but found herself yawning enormously. She was too tired to try to dredge up German to make things clear for him. If Colonel Karpov was asleep, she saw no reason she shouldn’t grab a couple of hours for herself, too.

She shrugged out of her parachute harness—not that she’d have much chance to use a chute if she got hit while she was hedgehopping the way she usually did—and stowed it in the cockpit, then started out of the revetment toward her sleeping quarters. As she passed Georg Schultz, he patted her on the backside.

Ludmila took a skittering half step, half jump. She whirled around in fury. This wasn’t the first time such things had happened to her since she’d joined the Red Air Force, but somehow she’d thought Schultz too *kulturny* to try them.

“Don’t you ever do that again!” she blazed in Russian, then switched to German to drive it home: “*Nie wieder, verstehst du?*” It was the *du* of insult, not intimacy. She added, “What would your Colonel Jäger think if he found out what you just did?”

Schultz had been the gunner in the tank Jäger commanded; he thought highly of his former leader. Ludmila hoped reminding him of that would bring him to his senses. But he just laughed quietly and said, “He would think I wasn’t doing anything he hadn’t done himself.”

A short, deadly silence followed. Ludmila broke it in tones of ice: “That is none of your business. If it will not make you keep your hands where they belong, maybe this will: remember, you are the only Nazi on a base full of Red Air Force men. They leave you alone because you work well. But they do not love you. *Verstehst du das?*”

He drew himself to stiff attention, did his best to click his heels in soft felt *valenki*, shot out his arm in a defiant Hitlerite salute. “I remember very well, and I do understand.” He stomped away.

Ludmila wanted to kick him. Why couldn’t he have just said he was sorry and gone on about his business instead of getting angry, as if she had somehow wronged him instead of the other way round? Now what was she supposed to do? If he was that angry with her, did she still want him working on her aircraft? But if he didn’t, who would?

The answer to that formed in her mind with the question: some quarter-trained Russian peasant who hardly knew the difference between a screwdriver and a pair of pliers. She could do some work herself, but not all, and she knew she didn’t have Schultz’s artist’s touch with an engine. Her show of temper was liable to end up getting her killed.

But what should she have done? Let him treat her like a whore? She shook her head violently. Maybe she should have responded with a joke instead of a blast, though.

Too late to worry about it now. Slowly, tiredly, she walked over to the building that sheltered the women pilots. It wasn’t much of a shelter: the walls were dirt-filled sandbags and bales of hay like the revetments that protected the aircraft, the roof

camouflage netting over straw over unchinked boards. It leaked and let in the cold. But no one here, Colonel Karpov included, had quarters any better.

The door to the improvised barracks had no hinges, and had to be pushed aside. Inside was a blackout curtain. Ludmila pulled the door closed before she went through the curtain. *Let no light leak out* was a rule she took as much for granted as *take off into the wind*.

The barracks held little light to leak, anyhow: a couple of candles and an oil lamp were enough to keep you from stumbling over blanket-wrapped women snoring on straw pallets, but that was about all. Yawning, Ludmila stumbled toward her own place.

A white rectangle lay on top of her folded blankets. It hadn't been there when she went out on her mission a few hours earlier. "A letter!" she said happily—and from a civilian, too, or it would have been folded differently. Hope flared in her, painfully intense: she hadn't heard from anyone in her family since the Lizards came. Maybe they were safe after all, when she'd almost given up on them.

In the dim light, she had to pick up the letter to realize it was in an envelope. She turned it over, bent her head close to it to look at the address. She needed a moment to notice part of it was written in the Roman alphabet, and the Cyrillic characters were printed with a slow precision that said the person who used them wasn't used to them.

Then her eyes fixed on the stamp. Had anyone told her a year before that she'd have been glad to see a picture of Adolf Hitler, she'd either have thought him mad or been mortally insulted—probably both. "Heinrich," she breathed, doing her best to pronounce the H at the beginning of the name, which was not a sound the Russian language had.

She tore the envelope open, eased out the letter. To her relief, she saw Jäger had considerately printed: she found German handwriting next to indecipherable. She read, *My dear Ludmila, I hope this finds you safe and well. In fact, I have to hope it finds you at all.*

In her mind's eye she could see one corner of his mouth quirking upwards as he set his small joke down on paper. The perfection and intensity of the image told her how much she missed him.

*I was on duty in a town I cannot name lest the censor reach for his razor, he went on. I will be leaving in the next day or two, though, and going back to a panzer outfit I also cannot name. I wish I were returning to you instead, or you to me. So much easier to travel long distance by plane than by horse or even by panzer.*

She remembered some of his stories of crossing Lizard-occupied Poland on horseback. That made anything she'd done in her U-2 seem tame by comparison. In the letter, he went on, *I wish we could be together more. Even at best, we have so little time on this world, and with the war we do not have the best. Yet without it, we would not have met, you and I, so I suppose I cannot say it is altogether a bad thing.*

"No, it isn't," she whispered. Having an affair with an enemy might be stupid (a feeling Jäger no doubt shared with her), but she couldn't make herself believe it was a bad thing.

The letter continued, *I thank you for looking out for my comrade Georg Schultz; your country is so vast that only great luck could have brought him to your base, as you said when we were last together. Greet him for me; I hope he is well.*

Ludmila didn't know whether to laugh or cry when she read that. Schultz was well, all right, and she had looked out for him, and all he wanted was to get her pants down. She wondered whether he had enough sense of shame to be embarrassed if she showed him Jäger's letter.

She didn't have to decide now. She wanted to finish the letter and get a little sleep. Everything else could wait. She read, *If fate is kind, we will meet again soon in a world at peace. If it is less kind, we will meet again though the war goes on. It would have to be very cruel to keep us from meeting again at all. With love and the hope you stay safe—Heinrich.*

Ludmila folded the letter small and stuck it in a pocket of her flying suit. Then she took off her leather helmet and goggles, but none of the rest of the outfit, not even her *valenki*. The inside of the barracks was cold. She lay down on the straw, pulled the blanket up over her head, and fell asleep almost at once.

When she woke the next morning, she found one hand in the pocket where she'd put the letter. That made her smile, and resolved her to answer it right away. Then she had to figure out whether to show it to Schultz. She decided she would, but not this minute. Time enough when they were calmer, not actively angry at each other. Meanwhile, she still had to make her report to Colonel Karpov.

\* \* \*

The Nipponese guard handed Teerts his bowl of food. He bowed polite thanks, turned one eye toward it to see what he'd got. He almost hissed with pleasure: along with the rice, the bowl was full of chunks of some kind of flesh. The Big Ugliers had been feeding him better lately; by the time he finished the meal, he was almost content.

He wondered what they were up to. Captivity had taught him they were not in the habit of doing gratuitous favors for anybody. Up till now, captivity had taught him they weren't in the habit of doing any favors whatever. The change made him suspicious.

Sure enough, Major Okamoto and the usual stone-faced, rifle-toting guard marched up to the cell door not long after the bowl was taken away. As the door swung open, Okamoto spoke in the language of the Race: "You will come with me."

"It shall be done, superior sir," Teerts agreed. He left the cell with no small relief. His step seemed lighter than it had in a long time; going upstairs to the interrogation chamber of the Nagasaki prison felt like good exercise, not a wearing burden. *Amazing what something close to proper food can do, he thought.*

Again, the Nipponese inside the chamber wore the white robes of scientists. The Big Ugly in the center chair spoke. Major Okamoto translated: "Dr. Nishina wishes to discuss today the nature of the bombs with which the Race destroyed the cities of Berlin and Washington."

“Why not?” Teerts answered agreeably. “These bombs were made from uranium. In case you do not know what uranium is, it is the ninety-second element in the periodic table.” He let his mouth fall slightly open in amusement. The Big Ugliers were so barbarous, they would surely have not the slightest notion of what he was talking about.

After Okamoto relayed his answer to the Nipponese scientists, he and they talked back and forth for some time. Then he returned his attention to Teerts, saying, “I do not have the technical terms I need to ask these questions in proper detail. Give them to me as we speak, please, and do your best to understand even without them.”

“It shall be done, superior sir,” Teerts said, agreeable still.

“Good.” Okamoto paused to think; his rubbery Big Ugly features made the process easy to watch. At length, he said, “Dr. Nishina wishes to know which process the Race uses to separate the lighter, explosive kind of uranium from the more common heavy kind.”

Teerts bit down on that as if it were an unsuspected bone in his meat. Not in his wildest nightmares—and he’d had some dreadful ones since his capture—had he imagined that the Big Ugliers had the slightest clue about atomic energy, or even that they’d heard of uranium. If they did—He abruptly realized they might be dangerous to the Race, not just the horrid nuisances they’d already proved themselves.

To Major Okamoto, he said, “Tell the learned Dr. Nishina that I do not know which processes he means.” He had to work not to turn an eye turret toward the instruments of torture in the interrogation chamber.

Okamoto fixed him with a stare he’d come to identify as hostile, but passed his words on to Nishina without comment. Nishina spoke volubly in reply, ticking off points on his fingers as if he were a male of the Race.

When he was through, Okamoto translated: “He says theory shows several ways which might accomplish this. Among them are successive barriers to a uranium-containing gas, heating the gas so that part of it which has the lighter kind of uranium rises more than the other, using a strong electromagnet”—a word that took a good deal of backing and filling to get across—“and using rapid spinning to concentrate the lighter kind of uranium. Which of these does the Race find most efficient?”

Teerts stared at him. He was even more appalled than he had been when his killercraft got shot down. That had affected only his own fate. Now he had to worry about whether the Race had any idea what the Tosevites were up to. They might be barbarians—by everything Teerts had seen, they *were* barbarians—but they were also alarmingly knowledgeable ... which meant it behooved Teerts to be more than cautious in his answers. He’d have to do his best to avoid giving away any information at all.

He took so long figuring that out that Okamoto snapped, “Don’t waste time dreaming up lies. Answer Dr. Nishina.”

“I beg your pardon, superior sir,” Teerts said, and added, “*Gomen nasai*—so sorry,” from his limited stock of Nipponese. “Part of the problem is my not having enough

words to give a proper answer, and another part is my own ignorance, for which I again beg pardon. You must remember that I am—I was—a pilot. I had nothing at all to do with uranium.”

“You certainly were glib enough talking about it a little while ago,” Okamoto said. “You do not want to make me disbelieve you. Some of the tools back there are very sharp, others can be made hot, and still others can be hot and sharp at the same time. Do you want to learn which is which?”

“No, superior sir,” Teerts gasped with utmost sincerity. “But I truly am ignorant of the knowledge you seek. I am only a pilot, not a nuclear physicist. What I know of flying, I have freely told you. I am not an expert in the matter of atomic weapons. What little I know of nuclear energy I learned in school as I was growing from hatchlinghood. It is no more and no less than any other ordinary male of the Race would know.”

“This is difficult to believe,” Okamoto said. “You spoke quite a lot about uranium just a little while ago.”

*That was before I realized how much you knew about it,* Teerts thought. He wondered how he was going to escape with his integument intact. He knew he couldn’t lie to the Nipponese; he didn’t know how much they knew, and the only way to find out—getting caught—would involve the painful penetration of that integument.

He said, “I do know that atomic weapons do not necessarily use uranium alone. Some involve, I am not sure how, hydrogen as well—the very first element.” *Let the Japanese chew on that paradox for a while,* he thought: how could a weapon involve the lightest and heaviest elements at the same time?

After Okamoto interpreted, the team of Big Ugly scientists chattered for a while among themselves. Then Nishina, who seemed to be their spokesman, put a question to Okamoto. The major translated for Teerts: “The uranium explosion, then, is hot enough to make hydrogen act as it does in the sun and convert large amounts of matter to energy?”

Horror filled Teerts. Every time he tried to escape from this hideous mess in which he found himself, he sank deeper instead. The Big Ugliers knew about fusion. To Teerts, the product of a civilization that grew and changed at a glacial pace, knowing about something was essentially the same as being able to do it. And if the Tosevites could make fusion bombs ...

Major Okamoto knocked him out of his appalled reverie by snapping, “Answer the learned Dr. Nishina!”

“I beg your pardon, superior sir,” Teerts said. “Yes, everything the learned doctor says is true.”

There. He’d done it. Any day now, he feared, the Nipponese would start using nuclear weapons against the Race on the mainland—which still struck Teerts as nothing more than a big island; he was used to water surrounded by land, not the other way around.

He heard Okamoto say “*Honto,*” confirming his answer to the Nipponese scientist’s

question. The cold of the interrogation room sank deeply into his spirit. The Nipponese hardly seemed to need him. By their questions, they had all the answers already, just waiting to be put into practice.

Then Nishina spoke again: “We return to the question of getting the lighter uranium, the kind which is explosive, out of the other, more common, type. This as yet we have not succeeded in doing; indeed, we have only just begun the attempt. That is why we will learn from you how the Race solves this problem.”

Teerts needed a moment to understand that. The Race had been shocked when they reached Tosev 3 to discover how advanced the Big Uglies were. Before Teerts was captured, pilots had talked endlessly about that; they’d expected no opposition, and here the Tosevites were, shooting back—not very well, and from inadequate aircraft, but shooting back. How could they have learned to build combat aircraft in the eight hundred local years since the Race’s probe examined them?

Now, for the first time, Teerts got a glimmering of the answer. The Race made change deliberately slow. When something new was discovered, extrapolationists performed elaborate calculations to learn in advance how it would affect a long-stable society, and how best to minimize those effects while gradually acquiring the benefits of the new device or principle.

With the Big Uglies, the tongue was on the other side of the mouth. When they found something new, they seized it with both hands and squeezed until they got all the juice out. They didn’t care what the consequences five generations—or even five years—hence would be. They wanted advantages now, and worried about later trouble later, if at all.

Eventually, they’d probably end up destroying themselves with that attitude. At the moment, it made them far more deadly opponents than they would have been otherwise.

“Do not waste time thinking up lies. I warned you before,” Major Okamoto said. “Tell Dr. Nishina the truth at once.”

“By what I know, superior sir, the truth is that we do not use any of these methods,” Teerts said. Okamoto drew back his hand for a slap. Afraid that would be the start of a torture session worse than any he’d yet known, Teerts went on rapidly, “Instead, we use the heavier form of uranium: isotope is the term we use.”

“How do you do this?” Okamoto demanded after a brief colloquy with the Nipponese scientists. “Dr. Nishina says the heavier isotope cannot explode.”

“There is another element, number ninety-four, which does not occur in nature but which we make from the heavier, nonexplosive—Dr. Nishina is right—isotope of uranium. This other element is explosive. We use it in our bombs.”

“I think you are lying. You will pay the penalty for it, I promise you that,” Okamoto said. Nevertheless, he translated Teerts’ words for the Big Uglies in the white coats.

They started talking excitedly among themselves. Nishina, who looked to be the senior

male, sorted things out and relayed an answer to Okamoto. He said to Teerts, "I may have been wrong. Dr. Nishina tells me the Americans have found this new element as well. They have given it the name plutonium. You will help us produce it."

"Past what I have already said, I know little," Teerts warned. Despair threatened to consume him. Every time he'd revealed something new to the Nipponese, it had been with the hope that the technical difficulties of the new revelation would force them off the road that led toward nuclear weapons. Instead, everything he told them seemed to push them further down that road.

He wished a plutonium bomb would fall on Nagasaki. But what were the odds of that?

## ☆ VI ☆

WELCOME TO CHUGWATER, POPULATION 286, the sign said. Colonel Leslie Groves shook his head as he read it. “Chugwater?” he echoed. “Wonder why they call it that.”

Captain Rance Auerbach read the other half of the sign. “Population 286,” he said. “Sounds like Jerkwater’d be a better name for it.”

Groves looked ahead. The cavalry officer had a point. It didn’t look like much of a town. But cattle roamed the fields around it. This late in winter, they were on the scrawny side, but they were still out there grazing. That meant Chugwater had enough to eat, anyhow.

People came out to look at the spectacle of a cavalry company going through town, but they didn’t act as impressed as townsfolk had in Montana and farther north in Wyoming. One boy in ragged blue jeans said to a man in overalls who looked just like him, “I liked the parade a couple of weeks ago better, Dad.”

“You had a parade through here a couple of weeks ago?” Groves called to a heavysset man whose black coat, white shirt, and string tie argued that he was a person of some local importance.

“Sure as hell did.” The pear-shaped man spat a stream of tobacco juice into the street. Groves envied him for having tobacco in any form. He went on, “Only thing missing then was a brass band. Had us a whole slew o’ wagons and soldiers and foreigners who talked funny and even a couple of Lizards—silly-lookin’ little things to cause all the trouble they do, aren’t they?”

“Yes, now that you mention it.” Excitement coursed through Groves. That sounded very much like the Met Lab crew. If he was only a couple of weeks behind them, they’d be into Colorado by now, not too far from Denver. He might even catch them before they got there. Whether he did or not, the lead-lined saddlebag in his wagon would push their work forward once they got themselves settled. Trying to make his hope a certainty, he asked, “Did they say what they were up to?”

The heavysset man shook his head. “Nope. They were right close-mouthed, as a matter of fact. Friendly enough people, though.” His chest inflated, although not enough to stick out over his belly. “I married off a couple of ’em.”

One of the other men on the sidewalk, a stringy, leathery fellow who looked like a real cowboy, not the Hollywood variety, said, “Yeah, go on, Hoot, tell him how you laid the bride, too.”

“You go to hell, Fritzie,” the pear-shaped man—Hoot—said. *A cowboy named Fritzie?* Groves thought. Before he had time to do more than marvel, Hoot turned back to him. “Not that I would’ve minded: pretty little thing, a widow I think she was. But I do believe the corporal she married would have kicked my ass around the block if I’d even looked at her sideways.”



“You’d’ve deserved it, too,” Fritzie said with a most uncowboylike giggle.

“Oh, shut up,” Hoot told him. Again, he returned to Groves: “So I don’t know what they were doing, Colonel, only that there were a lot of ’em, heading south. Toward Denver, I think, not Cheyenne, but don’t make me swear to that.”

“Thank you very much. That helps,” Groves said. If they weren’t talking about the crew from the University of Chicago, he’d eat his hat. He’d made better time coming across Canada and then down through Montana and Wyoming than they had traveling straight west across the Great Plains. Of course, his party had only the one wagon in it, and that lightly loaded, while theirs was limited to the speed of their slowest conveyance. And they’d have been doing a lot more scrounging for fodder than his tight band. If you couldn’t think in terms of logistics, you didn’t deserve to be an Army engineer.

“You folks going to put up here for the night?” Hoot asked. “We’ll kill the fatted calf for you, like the Good Book says. ‘Sides, there’s nothin’ between here and Cheyenne but miles and miles of miles and miles.”

Groves looked at Auerbach. Auerbach looked back, as if to say, *You’re the boss*. Groves said, “I know things are tight, Mister, uh—”

“I’m Joshua Sumner, but you may as well call me Hoot; everybody else does. We got plenty, at least for now. Feed you a nice thick steak and feed you beets. By God, we’ll feed you beets till your eyeballs turn purple—we had a bumper crop of ’em. Got a Ukrainian family up the road a couple miles, they showed us how to cook up what they call borscht—beets and sour cream and I don’t know what all else. They taste a sight better that way than what we were doing with ’em before, I tell you for a fact.”

Groves was unenthusiastic about beets, with or without sour cream. But he didn’t think he’d get anything better farther south on US 87. “Thanks, uh, Hoot. We’ll lay over, then, if it’s all right with you people.”

Nobody in earshot made any noises to say it wasn’t. Captain Auerbach raised his hand. The cavalry company reined in. Groves reflected that a couple of the old-timers on the street had probably seen cavalry go through town before, back before the turn of the century. The idea left him unhappy; it was as if the Lizards were forcing the United States—and the world—away from the twentieth century.

Such worries receded after he got himself outside of a great slab of fat-rich steak cooked medium-rare over a wood fire. He ate a bowl of borscht, too, not least because the person who pressed it on him was a smiling blonde of about eighteen. It wasn’t what he would have chosen for himself, but it wasn’t as bad as he’d thought it would be, either. And somebody in Chugwater made homebrew beer better than just about anything that came out of a big Milwaukee brewery.

Hoot Sumner turned out to be sheriff, justice of the peace, and postmaster all rolled into one. He gravitated to Groves, maybe because they were the leaders of their respective camps, maybe just because they were about the same shape. “So what brings

you through town?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that," Groves said. "The less I say, the less chance the Lizards have of finding out."

"As if I'm gonna tell 'em," Sumner said indignantly.

"Mr. Sumner, I have no way of knowing whom you'd tell, or whom *they'd* tell, or whom they'd tell," Groves said. "What I do know is that I have orders directly from President Roosevelt that I tell no one. I intend to obey those orders."

Sumner's eyes got big. "Straight from the President, you say? Must be something important, then." He cocked his head, studied Groves from under the brim of his Stetson. Groves looked back at him, his face expressionless. After close to a minute of that tableau, Sumner scowled in frustration. "Goddamn, Colonel, I'm glad I don't play poker against you, or I'd be walking home in my long johns, I think."

"Hoot, if I can't tell you anything, that means I really can't tell you anything," Groves said.

"Thing is, though, a small town like this one here runs on gossip. If we can't get any, we'll just shrivel up and die," Sumner said. "The folks who came through a couple weeks ago were just as tight-lipped as you people are—they wouldn't've said shit if they had a mouthful, if you know what I mean. All this stuff going through us, and we don't even get to find out what the hell it is?"

"Mr. Sumner, it's altogether possible that you and Chugwater don't want to know," Groves said. His face did twist then, in annoyance at himself. He shouldn't have said anything at all. How many mugs of that good home brew had he drunk?

He consoled himself with the thought that he'd learned something from Sumner. If the previous set of travelers had been as secretive as he was, the odds were even better than good that they came from the Metallurgical Laboratory.

The justice of the peace said, "Hellfire, man, those people even had an Eytalian with 'em, and ain't Eytalians supposed to be the talkingest people on the face of the earth? Brother, not this one! Nice enough feller, but he wouldn't give you the time of day. What kind of an Eytalian is that?"

*A smart one*, Groves thought. It sounded like Enrico Fermi to him ... which just about nailed things down.

"Only time he unbent *a*-tall," Sumner went on, "was when he did best man duty at the wedding I told you about—kissed the bride right pert, he did, even though his own wife—not a bad looker herself—was standing right there beside him. Now *that* sounds like an Eytalian to me."

"Maybe so." Groves wondered where Sumner got his ideas about how Italians were supposed to act. Not in the great metropolis of Chugwater, Wyoming—or at least Groves hadn't seen any here. *Most likely from Chico Marx*, he thought.

Wherever he got those ideas, though, Sumner was no fool in matters directly under his

own eye. Nodding to Groves, he said, “Stands to reason your business, whatever it is—and I won’t ask any more—is somehow connected with that other crowd. We hadn’t seen hardly anybody from the outside world since things went to hell last year, and then two big bunches both goin’ the same direction, almost one on top of the other. You gonna tell me it’s a coincidence?”

“Mr. Sumner, I’m not saying yes and I’m not saying no. I am saying we’d all be better off—you and me and the country, too—if you didn’t ask questions like that.” Groves was a career Army man; to him, security was as natural as breathing. But civilians didn’t, wouldn’t, think that way. Sumner set a finger alongside his nose and winked, as if Groves had told him what he wanted to know.

Gloomily, Groves sipped more homemade beer. He was afraid he’d done just that.

“Ah, the vernal equinox,” Ken Embry exclaimed. “Harbinger of mild weather, songbirds, flowers—”

“Oh, shut your bleeding gob,” George Bagnall said, with heartfelt sincerity.

Breath came from both Englishmen in great icy clouds. Vernal equinox or not, winter still held Pskov in an iron grip. The oncoming dawn was just beginning to turn the eastern horizon gray above the black pine forests that seemed to stretch away forever. Venus blazed low in the east, with Saturn, far dimmer and yellower, not far above her. In the west, the full moon was descending toward the land. Looking that way, Bagnall was painfully reminded of the Britain he might never see again.

Embry sighed, which turned the air around him even foggier. He said, “I’m not what you’d call dead keen on being demoted to the infantry.”

“Nor I,” Bagnall agreed. “That’s what we get for being supernumeraries. You don’t see them handing Jones a rifle and having him give his all for king and country. He’s useful here, so they have him teaching everything he can about his pet radar. But without the Lanc, we’re just bodies.”

“For commissar and country, please—remember where we are,” Embry said. “Me, I’d sooner they tried training us up on Red Air Force planes. We are veteran aircrew, after all.”

“I’d hoped for that myself,” Bagnall said. “Only difficulty with the notion is that, as far as I can see, the Red Air Force, whatever may be left of it, hasn’t got any planes within God knows how far from Pskov. If there’s damn all here, they can hardly train us up on it.”

“Too true.” Embry tugged at his *shlem*—sort of a balaclava that didn’t cover his nose or mouth—so it did a better job of keeping his neck warm. “And I don’t like the tin hat they’ve kitted me out with, either.”

“Then don’t wear it. I don’t fancy mine, now that you mention it.” Along with Mauser rifles, both Englishmen had received German helmets. Wearing that coal scuttle with its painted swastika set Bagnall’s teeth on edge, to say nothing of worrying him lest he be

mistaken for a Nazi by some Russian more eager for revenge against the Germans than to attack the Lizards.

“Don’t like to leave it off, either,” Embry said. “Puts me too much in mind of the last war, when they went for a year and a half with no tin hats at all.”

“That is a poser,” Bagnall admitted. Thinking about the infinite slaughter of World War I was bad enough anyhow. Thinking how bad it had been before helmets was enough to make your stomach turn over.

Alf Whyte came walking toward them. He had his helmet on, which made his silhouette unnervingly Germanic. He said, “You chaps ready to find out about the way our fathers fought?”

“Sod our fathers,” Bagnall muttered. He stamped his feet up and down. Russian felt boots kept them warm; boots were the one part of his flying suit he’d willingly exchanged for their local equivalents.

Other small groups of men gathered in Pskov’s market square, chatting softly among themselves in Russian or German. It was a more informal muster than any Bagnall had imagined; the occasional female voice among the deeper rumbles only made the scene seem stranger.

The women fighters were as heavily bundled against the cold as their male counterparts. Pointing to a couple of them, Embry said, “They don’t precisely put one in mind of Jane, do they?”

“Ah, Jane,” Bagnall said. He and Alf Whyte both sighed. *The Daily Mirror’s* marvelous comic-strip blonde dressed in one of two ways: very little and even less. Bagnall went on, “Even Jane would dress warmly here. And the Russians, even dressed like Jane, wouldn’t much stir me. The ones I’ve seen are most of them lady dockwallopers or lorry drivers.”

“Too right,” Whyte said. “This is a bloody place.” All three Englishmen nodded glumly.

A couple of minutes later, officers—or at least leaders—moved the fighters out. Bagnall’s rifle was heavy; it made him feel lopsided and banged his shoulder at every step he took. At first it drove him to distraction. Then it became only a minor nuisance. By the time he’d gone a mile or so, he stopped noticing it.

He did expect to see some difference in the way the Russians and Germans went off to war. German precision and efficiency were notorious, while the Red Army, although it had a reputation for great courage, was not long on spit and polish. He soon found what such clichés were worth. He couldn’t even tell the two groups apart by their gear: many Russian partisans bore captured German equipment, while about an equal number of Hitler’s finest eked out their own supplies with Soviet stocks.

They even marched the same way, in loose, widespread groups that got looser and more spread out as the sun rose. “We might do well to emulate them,” Bagnall said. “They have more experience at this kind of thing than we do.”

“I suppose it’s to keep too many from going down at once if they’re caught out in the open by aircraft,” Ken Embry said.

“If we’re caught out in the open, you mean,” Alf Whyte corrected him. As if with one accord, the three RAF men spread out a little farther.

Before long, they entered the forest south of Pskov. To Bagnall, used to neat, well-trimmed English woods, it was like stepping into another world. These trees had never been harvested; he would have bet money that many of them had never been seen by mortal man till this moment. Pine and fir and spruce held invaders at bay with their dark-needled branches, as if the only thing they wanted in all the world was for the men to go away. The occasional pale gray birch trunks among them startled Bagnall each time he went past one; they reminded him of naked women (he thought again of Jane) scattered among matrons properly dressed for the cold.

Off in the distance, something howled. “A wolf!” Bagnall said, and grabbed for his rifle before he realized there was no immediate need. Wolves had been hunted out of England for more than four hundred years, but he reacted to the sound by instinct printed on his flesh by four hundred times four hundred generations.

“We’re rather a long way from home, aren’t we?” Whyte said with a nervous chuckle; he’d started at the wolf call, too.

“Too bloody far,” Bagnall said. Thinking about England brought him only pain. He tried to do it as little as he could. Even battered and hungry from war, it felt infinitely more welcoming than wrecked Pskov, tensely divided between Bolsheviks and Nazis, or than this forbidding primeval wood.

In amongst the trees, the almost eternal ravaging wind was gone. That let Bagnall grow as nearly warm as he’d been since his Lancaster landed outside Pskov. And Jerome Jones had said the city was known for its mild climate. Trudging through snow as spring began gave the lie to that, at least if you were a Londoner. Bagnall wondered if spring ever truly began here.

Alf Whyte said, “What precisely is our mission, anyhow?”

“I was talking with a Jerry last night.” Bagnall paused, and not just to take another breath. He had a little German and no Russian, so he naturally found it easier to talk with the *Wehrmacht* men than with Pskov’s rightful owners. That bothered him. He was so used to thinking of the Germans as enemies that dealing with them in any way felt treasonous, even if they loved the Lizards no better than he.

“And what did the Jerry say, pray tell?” Whyte asked when he didn’t go on right away.

Thus prompted, Bagnall answered, “There’s a Lizard ... I don’t know what exactly—forward observation post, little garrison, something—about twenty-five kilometers south of Pskov. We’re supposed to put paid to it.”

“Twenty-five kilometers?” As a navigator, Whyte was used to going back and forth between metric and imperial measures. “We’re to hike *fifteen miles* through the snow

and then fight? It'll be nightfall by the time we get there.”

“I gather that’s part of the plan,” Bagnall said. Whyte’s scandalized tone showed what an easy time England had had in the war. The Germans and, from what Bagnall could gather, the Russians took the hike for granted: just one more thing they had to do. They’d done worse marches to get at each other the winter before.

He munched cold black bread as he shuffled along. While he paused to spend a penny against the trunk of a birch tree, a Lizard jet wailed by, far overhead. He froze, wondering if the enemy could have spotted the advancing human foes. The trees gave good cover, and most of the fighters wore white smocks over the rest of their clothes. Even his own helmet had whitewash splashed across it.

The leaders of the combat group (or so his German of the night before had called it) took no chances. They hurried the fighters along and urged them to scatter even more widely than before. Bagnall obeyed, but worried. He’d thought nothing could be worse than fighting in these grim woods. But suppose he got lost in them instead? The shiver that brought had nothing to do with cold.

On and on and on. He felt as if he’d marched a hundred miles already. How was he to fight after a slog like this? The Germans and Russians seemed to think nothing of it. A British Tommy might have felt the same, but the RAF let machines carry warriors to combat. In a Lanc, Bagnall could do things no infantry could match. Now, quite literally, he found the shoe on the other foot.

The sun swung through the sky. Shadows lengthened, deepened. Somehow, Bagnall kept up with everyone else. As shadows gave way to twilight, he saw the men ahead of him going down on their bellies, so he did, too. He slithered forward. Through breaks in the forest he saw a few houses—huts, really—plopped down in the middle of a clearing. “That’s it?” he whispered.

“How the devil should I know?” Ken Embry whispered back. “Somehow, though, I don’t think we’ve been invited here for high tea.”

Bagnall didn’t think the village had ever heard of high tea. By its look, he wondered if it had heard of the passing of the tsars. The wooden buildings with carved walls and thatched roofs looked like something out of a novel by Tolstoy. The only hint of the twentieth century was razor wire strung around a couple of houses. No one, human or Lizard, was in sight.

“It can’t be as easy as it looks,” Bagnall said.

“I’d like it if it were,” Embry answered. “And who says it can’t? We—”

Off in the distance a small *pop!* interrupted him. Bagnall had been involved in dropping countless tons of bombs and had been on the receiving end of more antiaircraft fire than he cared to think about, but this was the first time he’d done his fighting on the ground. The mortar fired again and again, fast as its crew—Bagnall didn’t know whether they were Russians or Germans—could serve it with bombs.

Snow and dirt fountained upward as the mortar rounds hit home. One of the wooden

houses caught fire and began to burn merrily. Men in white burst from the trees and dashed across the clearing. Bagnall wondered if the village really was a Lizard outpost after all.

He fired the Mauser, worked the bolt, fired again. He'd trained on a Lee-Enfield, and vastly preferred it to the weapon he was holding. Instead of angling down to where it was easy to reach, the Mauser's bolt stuck straight out, which made quick firing difficult, and the German rifle's magazine held only five rounds, not ten.

Other rifles started hammering, and a couple of machine guns, too. Still no response came from the village. Bagnall began to feel almost, sure they were attacking a place empty of the enemy. Relief and rage fought in him—relief that he wasn't in danger after all, rage that he'd made that long, miserable march in the snow.

Then one of the white-cloaked figures flew through the air, torn almost in two by the land mine he'd stepped on. And then muzzle flashes began winking from a couple of the village buildings as the Lizards returned fire. The charging, yelling humans began to go down as if scythed.

Bullets kicked up snow between Bagnall and Embry, whacked into the trees behind which they hid. Bagnall hugged the frozen earth like a lover. Shooting back was the last thing on his mind. This was, he decided in an instant, a much uglier business than war in the air. In the Lanc, you dropped your bombs on people thousands of feet below. They shot back, yes, but at your aircraft, not at your precious and irreplaceable self. Even fighter aircraft didn't go after you personally—their object was to wreck your plane, and your gunners were trying to do the same to them. And even if your aircraft got shot down, you might bail out and survive.

It wasn't machine against machine here. The Lizards were doing their best to blow large holes in his body so he'd scream and bleed and die. Their best seemed appallingly good, too. Every one of however many Lizards there were in the village had an automatic weapon that spat as much lead as one of the raiders' machine guns and many times as much as a bolt-action rifle like his Mauser. He felt like Kipling's Fuzzy-Wuzzy charging a British square.

But you couldn't charge here, not if you felt like living. The Russians and Germans who'd tried it were most of them down, some chewed to bits by a hail of bullets, others shredded like the first luckless fellow by stepping on a mine. The few still on their feet could not go forward. They fled for the shelter of the woods.

Bagnall turned to Embry, shouted, "I think we just stuck our tools in the meat grinder."

"Whatever gave you that idea, dearie?" Even in the middle of battle, the pilot managed to come up with a high, shrill falsetto.

In the gathering gloom, one of the houses in the village began to move. At first Bagnall rubbed his eyes, wondering if they were playing tricks on him. Then, after Mussorgsky, he thought of the Baba Yaga, the witch's hut that ran on chicken's legs. But

as the wooden walls fell away, he saw that this house moved on tracks. “Tank!” he screamed. “It’s a bleeding tank!”

The Russians were yelling the same thing, save with a broad a rather than his sharp one. The Germans screamed “*Panzer!*” instead. Bagnall understood that, too. He also understood that a tank—no, two tanks now, he saw—meant big trouble.

Their turrets swiveled toward the heaviest firing. Machine guns opened up on them as they did so; streams of bullets struck sparks from their armor. But they’d been made to withstand heavier artillery than most merely Earthly tanks commanded—the machine guns might as well have been firing feathers.

Their own machine guns started shooting, muzzle flashes winking like fireflies. One of the raiders’ machine guns—a new German one, with such a high cyclic rate that it sounded like a giant ripping an enormous canvas sail when it opened up—abruptly fell silent. It started up again a few seconds later. Bagnall admired the spirit of the men who had taken over for its surely fallen crew.

Then the main armament of one of the tanks spoke, or rather bellowed. From less than half a mile away, it sounded to Bagnall like the end of the world, while the tongue of flame it spat put him in mind of hellmouth opening. The machine gun stopped firing once more, and this time did not open up again.

The other tank’s cannon fired, too, then slowed so it pointed more nearly in Bagnall’s direction. He scrambled deeper into the woods: anything to put more distance between himself and that hideous gun.

Ken Embry was right with him. “How the devil do you say, ‘Run like bloody hell!’ in Russian?” he asked.

“Not a phrase I’ve learned, I’m afraid, but I don’t believe the partisans need our advice in that regard,” Bagnall answered. Russians and Germans alike were in full retreat, the tanks hastening on their way—and hastening too many of them into the world to come—with more cannon rounds. Shell splinters and real splinters blown off trees hissed through the air with deadly effect.

“Someone’s reconnaissance slipped up badly,” Embry said. “This was supposed to be an infantry outpost. No one said a word about going up against armor.”

Bagnall only grunted. What Embry had said was self-evidently true. Men were dying because of it. His main hope at present was not being one who did. Through the crash of the cannon, he heard another noise, one he didn’t recognize: a quick, deep thutter that seemed to come out of the air.

“What’s that?” he said. Beside him, Embry shrugged. The Russians were running faster than ever, crying “*Vertolyet!*” and “*Avtozhir!*” Neither word, unfortunately, meant anything to Bagnall.

Fire came out of the sky from just above treetop height: streaks of flame as if from a *Katyusha* launcher taken aloft and mounted on a flying machine instead of a truck. The woods exploded into flame as the rocket warheads detonated. Bagnall shrieked like a



lost soul, but couldn't even hear himself.

Whatever had fired the rockets, it wasn't an ordinary airplane. It hung in the sky, hovering like a mosquito the size of a young whale, as it loosed another salvo of rockets on the humans who had presumed to attack a Lizard position. More deadly shrapnel flew. Buffeted, half stunned by the blast, Bagnall lay flat on the ground, as he might have during a great earthquake, and prayed the pounding would end.

But another helicopter came whickering up from the south and poured two more salvos of rockets into the raiders' ranks. Both machines hovered overhead and raked the forest with machine-gun fire. The tanks came crashing closer, too, smashing down everything that stood in their way but the bigger trees.

Somebody booted Bagnall in the backside, hard. "Get up and run, you bloody twit!" The words were in English. Bagnall turned his head. It was Ken Embry, his foot drawn back for another kick.

"I'm all right," Bagnall said, and proved it by getting up. As soon as he was on his pins again, adrenaline made him run like a deer. He fled north—or, at any rate, away from the tanks and the helicopters' killing ground. Embry matched him stride for desperate stride. Somewhere in their mad dash, Bagnall gasped out, "Where's Alf?"

"He bought his plot back there, I'm afraid," Embry answered.

That hit Bagnall like—like a machine-gun round from one of the deathships up there, he thought. Watching Russians and Germans he didn't know getting shot or blown to bits was one thing. Losing someone from his own crew was ten times worse—as if a flak burst had torn through the side of his Lancaster and slaughtered a bombardier. And since Whyte was—had been—one of the three other men in Pskov with whom he could speak freely, he felt the loss all the more.

Bullets still slashed the woods, most of them, though, behind the fleeing Englishmen now. The Lizards' tanks did not press the pursuit as aggressively as they might have. "Maybe they're afraid of taking a Molotov cocktail from someone up a tree whom they don't spy till too late," Embry suggested when Bagnall said that out loud.

"Maybe they are," the flight engineer said. "I'm damned sure I'm afraid of them."

The gunfire and rockets and cannon rounds had left his ears as dazed as any other part of him. Dimly, as if from far away, he heard screams of terror and the even more appalling shrieks of the wounded. One of the helicopters flew away, then, after a last hosing of the woods with bullets, the other one. Bagnall looked down at his wrist. The glowing hands of his watch said only twenty minutes had gone by since the first shots were fired. Those twenty minutes of hell had stretched for an eternity. Though not ordinarily a religious man, Bagnall wondered how long a real eternity of hell would seem to last.

Then his thoughts snapped back to the present, for he almost stumbled over a wounded Russian lying in a pool of blood that looked black against the snow at night. "*Bozhemoi,*" the Russian moaned. "*Bozhemoi.*"

“My God,” Bagnall gasped, unconsciously translating. “Ken, come over here and help me. It’s a woman.”

“I hear.” The pilot and Bagnall stooped beside the wounded partisan. She pressed a hand against her side, trying to stanch the flow of blood.

As gently as he could, Bagnall undid her quilted coat and tunic so he could see the wound. He had to force her hand away before he could bandage it with gauze from his aid kit. She groaned and thrashed and weakly tried to fight him off. “*Nemtsi*,” she wailed.

“She thinks we’re Jerries,” Embry said. “Here, give her this, too.” He pressed a morphia syrette into Bagnall’s hand.

Even as he made the injection, Bagnall thought it a waste of precious drug: she wasn’t going to live. Her blood had already soaked the bandage. Maybe a hospital could have saved her, but here in the middle of a frozen nowhere ... “*Artzt!*” he yelled in German. “*Gibt es Artzt hier?* Is there a doctor here?”

No one answered. He and Embry and the wounded woman might have been alone in the woods. She sighed as the morphia bit into her pain, took a couple of easy breaths, and died.

“She went out peacefully, anyhow,” Embry said; Bagnall realized the pilot hadn’t thought she’d make it, either. He’d done her the last favor he could by freeing her death from agony.

Bagnall said, “Now we have to think about staying alive ourselves.” In the middle of the cold woods, after a crushing defeat that showed only too clearly how the Lizards had seized and held great stretches of territory from the mightiest military machines the world had known, that seemed to require considerable thought.

Liu Han called, “Come and see the foreign devil do amazing things with stick and ball and glove. Come and see! Come and see!”

Mountebanks of all sorts could be sure of an audience in the Chinese refugee camp. Behind her, Bobby Fiore tossed into the air the leather-covered ball he’d had made. Instead of catching it in his hands, he tapped it lightly with his special stick—a *bat*, he called it. The ball went a couple of feet into the air, came straight down. He tapped it up again and again and again. All the while, he whistled a merry tune.

“See!” Liu Han pointed to him. “The foreign devil juggles without using his hands!”

A spattering of applause came from the crowd. Three or four people tossed coins into the bowl that lay by Liu Han’s feet. Some others set rice cakes and vegetables on the mat next to the bowl. Everyone understood that entertainers had to eat or they wouldn’t be able to entertain.

When no donations came for a minute or so, Bobby Fiore tapped the ball up one last time, caught it in his free hand, and glanced toward Liu Han. She looked out into the crowd and said, “Who will play a game where, if he wins, the foreign devil will look

ridiculous? Who will try this simple game?"

Several men shouted and stepped toward her. Nothing delighted Chinese more than making a European or American into an object of ridicule. Liu Han pointed toward the bowl and the mat: if they wanted to play, they had to pay. A couple of them made their offerings without a word, but one asked belligerently, "What is this game?"

Bobby Fiore handed her the ball. She held it up in one hand, bent to pick up a flat canvas bag stuffed with rags which she displayed in the other. Then she put the bag back on the ground, gave the ball to the belligerent man. "A simple game, an easy game," she said. "The foreign devil will stand well back and then run toward the bag. All you have to do is stand in front of it and touch him with the ball before he reaches it. Win and you get back your stake and twice as much besides."

"That is easy." The man with the ball puffed out his chest and tossed a silver trade dollar into the bowl. It rang sweetly. "I will put the ball on him, no matter what he does."

Liu Han turned to the crowd. "Clear a path, please. Clear a path so the foreign devil can run." Chattering among themselves, the people moved aside to form a narrow lane. Bobby Fiore walked down it. When he was almost a hundred feet from the man with the ball, he turned and bowed to him. The arrogant fellow did not return his courtesy. A couple of people clucked reproachfully at that, but most didn't think a foreign devil deserved much courtesy.

Bobby Fiore bowed again, then ran straight at the man with the ball. The Chinese man clutched it in both hands, as if it were a rock. He set himself for a collision as Fiore bore down on him.

But the collision never came. At the last instant, Fiore threw himself to the ground on his hip and thigh and hooked around the clumsy lunge the man made with the ball. His foot came down on the stuffed bag. "*Safe!*" he yelled in his own language.

Liu Han didn't quite know what *safe* meant, but she knew it meant he'd won. "Who's next?" she called, taking the ball from the disgruntled Chinese man.

"Wait!" he said angrily, then turned and played to the crowd: "You all saw that! The foreign devil cheated me!"

Fear coursed through Liu Han. She called Bobby Fiore *yang kwei-tse*—foreign devil—herself, but only to identify him. In the angry man's mouth, it was a cry to turn an audience into a mob.

Before she could answer, Fiore spoke for himself in clumsy Chinese: "Not cheat. Not say let win. He quick, he win. He slooow." He stretched the last word out in a way no native Chinese would have used, but one insultingly effective.

"He's right, Wu—you missed him by a *li*," someone yelled from the crowd. The miss hadn't really been a third of a mile, but it hadn't been close, either.

"Here, give *me* the ball now," someone else said. "I'll put it on the foreign devil." He said *yang kwei-tse* the same way Liu Han did, to name Bobby Fiore, not to revile him.

Liu Han pointed to the bowl. As Wu stamped away, the next player tossed in some paper money from Manchukuo. It wasn't worth as much as silver, and Liu Han did not like it because of what Manchukuo's Japanese puppet masters had done to China—and to her own family, just before the Lizards came. But the Japanese were still fighting hard against the Lizards, which gave them prestige they hadn't had before. She let the bills lay, handed the man the ball.

Bobby Fiore brushed dirt off his pants, shooed the spectators back so he could take his running start. The Chinese man stood in front of the bag, holding the ball in his left hand and leaning left, as if to make sure Fiore wouldn't use on him the trick that had fooled the first player.

Bobby Fiore ran down the aisle of chattering Chinese, as before. When he got within a couple of strides of the waiting Chinese, he took a small step in the direction the fellow was leaning. "Ha!" the man cried in triumph, and brought the ball down.

But Bobby Fiore was not there to be tagged. After that small step made the man commit himself, Fiore took a long, hard stride on his other leg, changing directions as nimbly as any acrobat Liu Han had ever seen. The man tagged to the left; Bobby Fiore slid to the right. "*Safe!*" he yelled again.

The man with the ball ruefully flipped it to Liu Han. His sheepish grin said he knew he'd been outsmarted. "Let's see if this fellow can put the ball on the foreign devil," he said, now using the label almost in admiration. "If I couldn't, I'll make a side bet he can't, either."

Another man set down a meaty slab of pork ribs to pay for the privilege of trying to tag Bobby Fiore. The fellow making side bets did a brisk business: now that Fiore had gone one way and then the other, what tricks could he have left?

He promptly demonstrated a new one. Instead of going right or left, he dove straight toward the bag on his belly, snaked a hand through his opponent's legs, and grabbed the bag before the ball touched his back. "*Safe!*" Now a couple of people in the crowd raised the victory cry with him.

He kept running and sliding as long as men were willing to pay to try to put the ball on him. Sometimes he'd hook one way, sometimes the other, and once in a while he'd dive straight in. A couple of people did manage to guess right and tag him, but Liu Han watched the bowl fill with money and the mat with food. They were doing well.

When the sport began to seem routine rather than novel, Liu Han called, "Who wants revenge?" She tossed the ball up and down in her hand. "You can throw at the foreign devil now. He will not dodge, but if you hit him anywhere but his two hands, you win three times what you wager. Who will try?"

While she warmed up the crowd, Bobby Fiore put on the padded leather glove he'd had made along with the ball. He stood in front of the wall of a shack, then made a fist with his other hand and pounded it into the glove, as if confident no one would be able to touch him.

“From how close do we get to throw?” asked the man who’d been making side bets.

Liu Han paced off about forty feet. Bobby Fiore grinned at her. “Do you want to try?” she asked the man.

“Yes, I’ll fling at him,” he answered, dropping more money into the bowl. “I’ll put it right between his ugly round eyes, you see if I don’t.”

He tossed the ball into the air once or twice, as if to get the feel of it in his hand, and then, as he’d said, threw it right at Bobby Fiore’s head. *Whack!* The noise it made striking that peculiar leather glove was like a gunshot. It startled Liu Han, and startled the people in the crowd even more. A couple of them let out frightened squawks. Bobby Fiore rolled the ball back to Liu Han.

She stooped to pick it up. Before long, that wouldn’t be easy, not with her belly growing. “Who’s next?” she asked.

“Whoever it is, he can wager with me that he misses, too,” said the fellow who liked to make side bets. “I’ll pay five to one if he hits.” If he couldn’t beat Bobby Fiore, he was convinced nobody could.

The next gambler paid Liu Han and let fly. *Wham!* That wasn’t ball hitting glove, that was ball banging against the side of the shack—the man had thrown too wildly for Bobby Fiore to catch his offering. Fiore picked up the ball and tossed it gently back to him. “You try again,” he said; he’d practiced the phrase with Liu Han.

Before the fellow could take another throw at him, the old woman who lived in the shack came out and screamed at Liu Han: “What are you doing? Are you trying to frighten me out of my wits? Stop hitting my poor house with a club. I thought a bomb landed on it.”

“No bomb, grandmother,” Liu Han said politely. “We are only playing a gambling game.” The old woman kept on screaming until Liu Han gave her three trade dollars. Then she disappeared back into her shack, obviously not caring what happened to it after that.

The fellow who hadn’t thrown straight took another shot at Bobby Fiore. This time he was on target, but Fiore caught the ball. The man squalled curses like a scalded cat.

If the old woman had thought that first ball was like a bomb landing, she must have figured the Lizards had singled out her house for bombardment practice by the time the next hour had passed. One of the things Liu Han discovered about her countrymen during that time was that they didn’t throw very well. A couple of them missed the shack altogether. That sent boys chasing wildly after the runaway ball, and meant Liu Han had to pay small bribes to get it back.

When no one else felt like trying to hit the quick-handed foreign devil, Liu Han said, “Who has a bottle or clay pot he doesn’t mind losing?”

A tall man took a last swig from a bottle of plum brandy, then handed it to her. “Now I do,” he said thickly, breathing plummy fumes into her face.

She gave the bottle to Bobby Fiore, who set it on an upside-down bucket in front of the wall. He walked back farther than the spot from which the Chinese had taken aim at him.

“The foreign devil will show you how to throw properly,” Liu Han said. This last stunt made her nervous. The bottle looked very small. Bobby Fiore could easily miss, and if he did he’d lose face.

His features were set and tight—he knew he could miss, too. His arm went back, then snapped forward in a motion longer and smoother than the Chinese had used. The ball flew, almost invisibly fast. The bottle shattered. Green glass flew every which way. Chatter from the crowd rose to an impressed peak. Several people clapped their hands. Bobby Fiore bowed, as if he were Chinese himself.

“That’s all for today,” Liu Han said. “We will present our show again in a day or two. I hope you enjoyed it.”

She picked up all the food the show had earned them. Bobby Fiore carried the money. He also hung onto ball and bat and glove. That made him different from all the Chinese men Liu Han had known: they would have added to her burden without a second thought. She’d already seen up in the plane that never came down that he had the strange ways ascribed to foreign devils. Some of them, such as his taste in food, annoyed her; this one she found endearing.

“Show good?” he asked, tacking on the Lizards’ interrogative cough.

“The show was very good.” Liu Han used the emphatic cough to underline that, adding, “You were very good too there, especially at the end—you took a chance with the bottle, but it worked, so all the better.”

Of necessity, she spoke mostly in Chinese, which meant she had to repeat herself several times and go back to use simpler words. When Fiore understood, he grinned and slipped an arm around her thickening waist. She dropped an onion so she could break away to pick it up. Showing affection in public was one foreign devil way she wished he would forget in a hurry. It not only embarrassed her, but lowered her status in the eyes of everyone who saw her.

As they approached the hut they shared, she stopped fretting over such relatively trivial concerns. Several little scaly devils stood outside, two with fancy body paint and the rest with guns. Their unnerving turreted eyes swung toward Liu Han and Bobby Fiore.

One of the little devils with fancy paint spoke in hissing but decent Chinese: “You are the human beings who live in this house, the human beings brought down from the ship *29th Emperor Fessoj*?” The last three words were in his own language.

“Yes, superior sir,” Liu Han said; by his perplexed look, Bobby Fiore hadn’t understood the question. Even though the scaly devil used words that were individually intelligible, she had trouble following him, too. Imagine calling the airplane that never came down a ship!

“Which of you is carrying the growing thing that will become a human being in her belly?” the devil with the fancy paint asked.

“I am, superior sir.” Not for the first time, Liu Han felt a flash of contempt for the little scaly devils. They not only couldn’t tell people apart, they couldn’t even tell the sexes apart. And Bobby Fiore, with his tall nose and round eyes, was unique in this camp, yet the little devils didn’t recognize him as a foreign devil.

One of the gun-carrying little devils pointed at Liu Han and hissed something to a companion. The other devil’s mouth fell open in a devilish laugh. They found people preposterous, too.

The little devil who spoke Chinese said, “Go in this little house, the two of you. We have things to say to you, things to ask of you.”

Liu Han and Bobby Fiore went into the hut. So did the two little devils with elaborate paint on their scaly hides, and so did one of the more drably marked guards. The two higher-ranking little devils skittered past Liu Han so they could sit on the hearth that also supported the hut’s bedding. They sank down on the warm clay with rapturous sighs—Liu Han had seen they didn’t like cold weather. The guard, who liked it no better, had to stand where he could keep his eyes on the obviously vicious and dangerous humans.

“I am Ttomalss,” the scaly devil who spoke Chinese said—a stutter at the front of his name and a hiss at the end. “First I ask you what you were doing with these strange things.” He turned his eye turrets toward the ball and bat and glove Bobby Fiore held, and pointed at them as well.

“Do you speak English?” Fiore asked in that language when Liu Han had put the question into their peculiar jargon. When neither little scaly devil answered, he muttered, “Shit,” and turned back to her, saying, “You better answer. They won’t follow me any more than I follow them.”

“Superior sir,” Liu Han began, bowing to Ttomalss as if he were her village headman back in the days (was it really less than a year before?) when she’d had a headman ... or a village, “we use these things to put on a show to entertain people here in this camp and earn money and food for ourselves.”

Ttomalss hissed to translate that to his companion, who might not have known any human language. The other scaly devil hissed back. Ttomalss turned his words into Chinese: “Why do you need these things? We give you this house, we give you enough to get food you need. Why do you want more? Do you not have enough?”

Liu Han thought about that. It was a question that went straight to the heart of the *Tao*, the way a person should live. Having too much—or caring in excess about having too much—was reckoned bad (though she’d noticed that few people who had a lot were inclined to give up any of it). Cautiously, she answered, “Superior sir, we seek to save what we can so we will not be at want if hunger comes to this camp. And we want money for the same reason, and to make our lives more comfortable. Can this be

wrong?”

The scaly devil did not reply directly. Instead, he said, “What sort of show is this? It had better not be one that endangers the hatchling growing inside you.”

“It does not, superior sir,” she assured him. She would have been happier for his concern had it meant he cared for her and the baby as persons. She knew it didn’t. The only value she, the baby, and Bobby Fiore had to the little devils was as parts of their experiment.

That worried her, too. What would they do when she’d had the child? Snatch it away from her as they’d snatched her away from her village? Force her to find out how fast she could get pregnant again? The unpleasant possibilities were countless.

“What do you do, then?” Ttomalss demanded suspiciously.

“Mostly I speak for Bobby Fiore, who does not speak Chinese well,” she said. “I tell the audience how he will hit and catch and throw the ball. This is an art he brings with him from his own country, and not one with which we Chinese are familiar. Things that are new and strange entertain us, help us pass the time.”

“This is foolishness,” the little devil said. “The old, the familiar, should be what entertains. The new and strange—how could they be interesting? You will not be—what is the word?—familiar with them. Is this not frightening to you?”

He was even more conservative than a Chinese, Liu Han realized. That rocked her. The little scaly devils had torn up her life, to say nothing of turning China and the whole world on their ear. Moreover, the little devils had their vast array of astonishing machines, everything from the cameras that took pictures in three dimensions to the dragonfly planes that could hover in the sky. She’d thought of them as flighty gadgeteers, as if they were Americans or other foreign devils with scales and body paint.

But it wasn’t so. Bobby Fiore had almost burst with excitement at the idea of bringing something new into the prison camp and making a profit from it. She’d liked the notion, too. To the scaly devil, it seemed as alien and menacing as the devil did to her.

Her wool-gathering irritated Ttomalss. “Answer me,” he snapped.

“I’m sorry, superior sir,” she said quickly. She didn’t want to get the little devils annoyed at her. They might cast her and Bobby Fiore out of this home, they might take her back to the plane that never came down and turn her into a whore again, they might take her baby away as soon as it was born ... or they might do any number of appalling things she couldn’t imagine now. She went on, “I was just thinking that human beings like new things.”

“I know that.” Ttomalss did not approve of it; his blunt little stump of a tail switched back and forth, like an angry cat’s. “It is the great curse of you Big Ugliers.” The last two words were in his own language. Liu Han had heard the little scaly devils use them often enough to know what they meant. Ttomalss resumed, “Were it not for the mad curiosity of your kind, the Race would have brought your world under our sway long ago.”

“I am sorry, but I do not follow you, superior sir,” Liu Han said. “What does this have



to do with preferring new entertainments to old? When we see the same old thing over and over, we grow bored.” How getting bored at old shows was tied to the devils’ not conquering the world was beyond her.

“The Race also has this thing you call growing bored,” Ttomalss admitted, “but with us it comes on more slowly, and over a long, long time. We are more content with what we already have than is true of your kind. So are the other two races we know. You Big Ugliers break the pattern.”

Liu Han did not worry about breaking patterns. She did wonder if she’d understood the scaly devil aright. Were there other kinds of weird creatures besides his own? She found it hard to believe, but she wouldn’t have believed in the scaly devils a year earlier.

Ttomalss stepped forward, squeezed at her left breast with his clawed fingers. “Hey!” Bobby Fiore said, and started to get to his feet. The scaly devil with a gun turned it his way.

“It’s all right,” Liu Han said quickly. “He’s not hurting me.” That was true. His touch was gentle; although his claws penetrated her cotton tunic and pricked against her skin, they did not break it.

“You will give the hatchling liquid from your body out of these for it to eat?” Ttomalss asked, his Chinese becoming awkward as he spoke of matters and bodily functions unfamiliar to his kind.

“Milk, yes,” Liu Han said, giving him the word he lacked.

“Milk.” The scaly devil repeated the word to fix it in his memory, just as Liu Han did when she picked up something in English. Ttomalss continued, “When you mate, this male”—he pointed at Bobby Fiore—“chews there, too. Does he get milk as well?”

“No, no.” Liu Han had all she could do not to laugh.

“Then why do this?” Ttomalss demanded. “What is its—function, is that the proper word?”

“That is the proper word, yes, superior sir.” Liu Han sighed. The little devils talked so openly about mating that her own sense of shame and reticence had eroded. “But he does not draw milk from them. He does it to give me pleasure and to arouse himself.”

Ttomalss gave a one-word verdict: “Disgusting.” He spoke in his own language to the other little devil with fancy paint. That one and the guard both swung their eyes from Liu Han to Bobby Fiore and back again.

“What’s going on?” Fiore demanded. “Honey, they asking filthy questions again?” Though he liked publicly showing affection in a way in which no Chinese would have felt easy, he was and had stayed far more reticent than Liu Han in speaking of intimate matters.

“Yes,” she answered resignedly.

The scaly devil with fancy paint who didn’t speak Chinese sent several excited

sentences at Ttomalss, who turned to Liu Han. “You use the *kee-kreek*? This is our speech, not yours.”

“I am sorry, superior sir, but I do not know what the *kee-kreek* is,” Liu Han said.

“The—” Ttomalss made the little devils’ interrogative cough. “Do you understand now?”

“Yes, superior sir,” Liu Han said. “Now I understand. Bobby Fiore is a foreign devil from a country far away. His words and my words are not the same. When we were up in the plane that never came down—”

“The what?” Ttomalss interrupted. When Liu Han explained, the little devil said, “Oh, you mean the ship.”

Liu Han still wondered how it could be a ship if it never touched water, but the little devil seemed insistent about the point, so she said, “When we were up in the ship, then, superior sir, we had to learn each other’s words. Since we both knew some of yours, we used those, too, and we still do.”

Ttomalss translated for the other little scaly devil, who spoke volubly in reply. “Starraf”—Ttomalss finally named the other devil—“says you could do without all this moving back and forth between languages if you spoke only one, as we do. When your world is all ours, all you Big Ugliers who survive will use our language, just as the Rabotevs and Halessi, the other races in the Empire, do now.”

Liu Han could see that having everyone speak the same language would be simpler: even other dialects of Chinese were beyond her easy comprehension. But the unspoken assumptions in the scaly devil’s words chilled her. Ttomalss seemed very sure his kind would conquer the world, and also that they would be able to do as they pleased with its people (or as many of them as were left when the conquest was complete).

Starraf spoke again, and Ttomalss translated: “You have shown, and we have seen at other places, that you Big Ugliers are not too stupid to learn the tongue of the Race. Maybe we should begin to teach it in this camp and others, so that you can begin to be joined to the Empire.”

“Now what?” Bobby Fiore asked.

“They want to teach everyone how to talk the way we do,” Liu Han answered. She’d known the scaly devils were overwhelmingly powerful from the moment they first descended on her village. Somehow, though, she’d never thought much about what they were doing to the rest of the world. She was only a villager, after all, and didn’t worry about the wider world unless some part of it impinged on her life. All at once, she realized the little devils didn’t just want to conquer mankind; they aimed to make people as much like themselves as they could.

She hated that even more than she hated anything else about the little scaly devils, but she hadn’t the slightest idea how to stop it.

Mordechai Anielewicz stood at attention in Zolraag’s office as the Lizard governor of

Poland chewed him out. “The situation in Warsaw grows more unsatisfactory with each passing day,” Zolraag said in pretty good German. “The cooperation between you Jews and the Race which formerly existed seems to have disappeared.”

Anielewicz scowled; after what the Nazis had done to the Warsaw ghetto, hearing the word “Jews” in German was plenty to set his teeth on edge all by itself. And Zolraag used it with arrogance of a sort not far removed from that of the Germans. The only difference Anielewicz could see was that the Lizards thought of all humans, not just Jews, as *Untermenschen*.

“Whose fault is that?” he demanded, not wanting Zolraag to know he was concerned. “We welcomed you as liberators; we shed our blood to help you take this city, if you remember, superior sir. And what thanks do we get? To be treated almost as badly under your thumb as we were under the Nazis.”

“That is not true,” Zolraag said. “We have given you enough guns to make your fighters the equal of the *Armija Krajowa*, the Polish Home Army. Where you were below them, we set you above. How do you say we treat you badly?”

“I say it because you care nothing for our freedom,” the Jewish fighting leader answered. “You use us for your own purposes and to help make slaves of other people. We have been slaves ourselves. We didn’t like it. We don’t see any reason to think other people like it, either.”

“The Race *will* rule this world and all its people,” Zolraag said, as confidently as if he’d remarked, *The sun will come up tomorrow*. “Those who work with us will have higher place than those who do not.”

Before the war, Anielewicz had been a largely secularized Jew. He’d gone to a Polish *Gymnasium* and university, and studied Latin. He knew what the Latin equivalent of *work together* was, too: collaborate. He also knew what he’d thought of the Estonian, Latvian, and Ukrainian jackals who helped the German wolves patrol the Warsaw ghetto—and what he’d thought of the Jewish police who betrayed their own people for a crust of bread.

“Superior sir,” he said earnestly, “with the guns we have from you, we can protect ourselves from the Poles, and that is very good. But most of us would rather die than help you in the way you mean.”

“This I have seen, and this I do not understand,” Zolraag said. “Why would you forgo such advantage?”

“Because of what we would have to do to get it,” Anielewicz answered. “Poor Moishe Russie wouldn’t speak your lies, so you had to play tricks with his words to make them come out the way you wanted them. No wonder he disappeared after that, and no wonder he made you out to be liars the first chance he got.”

Zolraag’s eye turrets swung toward him. That slow, deliberate motion held as much menace as if they’d contained 38-centimeter battleship guns rather than organs of vision. “We are still seeking to learn more of these events ourselves,” he said. “*Herr*

Russie was an associate, even a friend, of yours. We wonder how and if you helped him.”

“You questioned me under your truth drug,” Anielewicz reminded him.

“We have not learned as much with it as we hoped from early tests,” Zolraag said. “Some early experimental subjects may have deceived us as to their reactions. You Tosevites have a gift for being difficult in unusual ways.”

“Thank you,” Anielewicz said, grinning.

“I did not mean it as a compliment,” Zolraag snapped.

Anielewicz knew that. Since he’d been up to his eyebrows in getting Russie away and in making the recording in which Russie blasted the Lizards, he was less than delighted to learn the Lizards had found their drug was worthless.

Zolraag resumed, “I did not summon you here, *Herr* Anielewicz, to listen to your Tosevite foolishness. I summoned you here to warn you that the uncooperative attitude of you Jews must stop. If it does not, we will disarm you and put you back in the place where you were when we came to Tosev 3.”

Anielewicz gave the Lizard a long, slow, measuring stare. “It comes to that, does it?” he said at last.

“It does.”

“You will not disarm us without a fight,” Anielewicz said flatly.

“We beat the Germans. Do you think we cannot beat you?”

“I am sure you can,” Anielewicz said. “Superior sir, we will fight anyhow. Now that we have guns, we will not give them up. You will beat us, but one way or another we will manage to hurt you. You will probably set off the Poles, too. If you take our guns away, they’ll fear you’ll take theirs, too.”

Zolraag didn’t answer right away. Anielewicz hoped he’d managed to distress the Lizard. The Race was good at war, or at least had machines of almost invincible power. When it came to diplomacy, though, they were as children; they had no feel for the likely effects of their actions.

The Lizard governor said, “You do not seem to understand, *Herr* Anielewicz. We can hold your people hostage to make sure you turn in your rifles and other weapons.”

“Superior sir, you are the one who does not understand,” Anielewicz answered. “Whatever you want to do to us, we went through worse before you came. We will fight to keep that from happening again. Will you start up Auschwitz and Treblinka and Chelmno and the rest again?”

“Do not make disgusting suggestions.” The German death camps had revolted all the Lizards, Zolraag included. They’d gotten good propaganda mileage out of them. There, Russie and Anielewicz and other Jews had felt no compunctions about helping the Lizards tell the world the story.

“Well, then, in that case we have nothing to lose by fighting,” Anielewicz said. “We

were getting ready to fight the Nazis even though we had next to nothing. Now we have guns. If you are going to treat us the way the Nazis did, do you think we'd not fight you? What would we have to lose?"

"Your lives," Zolraag said.

Anielewicz spat on the floor of the governor's office. He didn't know whether Zolraag knew how much scorn the gesture showed, but he hoped so. He said, "What good are our lives if you push us back into the ghetto and starve us once more? No one will do that to us again, superior sir, no one. Do what you like with me. The next Jew you pick as puppet leader will tell you the same—or his own people will deal with him."

"You are serious in this matter," Zolraag said in tones of wonder.

"Of course I am," Anielewicz answered. "Have you talked with General Bor-Komorowski about taking guns away from the Home Army?"

"He did not seem pleased with the idea, but he did not reject it in the way you have," Zolraag said.

"He's politer than I am," Anielewicz said, adding *the alter kacker* to himself. Aloud, he went on, "That doesn't mean you'll get any real cooperation from him."

"We get no real cooperation from any Tosevites," Zolraag said mournfully. "We thought you Jews were an exception, but I see it is not so."

"We owed you a lot for throwing out the Nazis and saving us from the death camps," Anielewicz said. "If you'd treated us as free people who deserved respect, we would have worked with you. But you just want to be another set of masters and treat everyone on Earth the way the Nazis treated us."

"We would not kill the way the Germans did," Zolraag protested.

"No, but you would enslave. When you were through, not a human being on this world would be free."

"I do not see that this matters," Zolraag said.

"I know you don't," Anielewicz said—sadly, for Zolraag was, given the limits of his position, a decent enough being. Some of the Germans had been that way, too; not all by any means enjoyed exterminating Jews for the sake of extermination. But enjoy it or not, they'd done it, as Zolraag resented freedom now.

That ate at Anielewicz's. Nineteen hundred years before, Tacitus had remarked with pride that good men—the one in particular he had in mind was his father-in-law—could serve a bad Roman emperor. But when a bad ruler required good men to do monstrous things, how could they obey and remain good? He'd asked himself the question more times than he could count, but never yet found an answer.

Zolraag said, "You claim we cannot make you obey by force. I do not believe this, but you say it. Let us think ... does this language have a word for thinking of something so as to examine it?"

"'Assume' is the word you want," Anielewicz said.

“Assume. Thank you. Let us assume, then, that what you say is true. How in this case are we to rule you Jews and have you obey our requirements?”

“I wish you would have asked that before events drove a wedge between you and us,” Anielewicz answered. “The best way, I think, is not to force us to do anything that would damage the rest of mankind.”

“Even the Germans?” Zolraag asked.

The Jewish fighting leader’s lips curled in what was not a smile. Zolraag knew his business, sure enough. What the Nazis had done to the Jews in Poland—all over Europe—cried out for vengeance. But if the Jews collaborated with the Lizards against the Germans, how could they say no to collaborating with them against other peoples as well? That dilemma had sent Moishe Russie first into hiding and then into flight.

“Don’t use us as your propaganda front.” Anielewicz knew he wasn’t answering directly, but he could not force himself to say yes or no. “Whether you win your war or lose it, you make the rest of the world hate us by doing that.”

“Why should we care?” Zolraag asked.

The trouble was, he sounded curious, not vindictive. Sighing, Anielewicz replied, “Because that would give you your best chance of ruling here quietly. If you make other people hate us, you’ll also make us hate you.”

“We gave you privileges early on, because you did help us against the Germans,” Zolraag said. “By our way of thinking, you abused them. Issuing threats will not make us want to give you more. You may go, *Herr* Anielewicz.”

“As you say, superior sir,” Anielewicz answered woodenly. *Trouble coming*, he thought as he left the Lizard governor’s office. He’d managed to get Zolraag to hold off on trying to disarm the Jews, or at least he thought he had, but that wasn’t concession enough.

He sighed. He’d found a hiding place for Russie. Now he was liable to need one himself.

## ☆ VII ☆

“I wish we were in Denver,” Barbara said.

“Well, so do I,” Sam Yeager answered as he helped her out of the wagon. “The weather can’t be helped, though.” Late-season snowstorms had held them up as they made their way into Colorado. “Fort Collins is a pretty enough little place.”

Lincoln Park, in which several Met Lab wagons were drawn up, was a study in contrasts. In the center of the square stood a log cabin, the first building that had gone up on the Poudre River. The big gray sandstone mass of the Carnegie Public Library showed how far the area had come in just over eighty years.

But Barbara said, “That’s not what I mean.” She took his arm and steered him away from the wagon. He looked back toward Ulhass and Ristin, decided the Lizard POWs weren’t going anywhere, and let her guide him.

She led him over to a tree stump out of earshot of anybody else. “What’s up?” he asked, checking the Lizards again. They hadn’t poked their heads out of the wagon; they were staying down in the straw where it was warmer. He was as sure as sure could be that they wouldn’t pick this moment to make a break, but ingrained duty made him keep an eye on them anyhow.

Then Barbara asked him something that sounded as if it came out of the blue: “Remember our wedding night?”

“Huh? I’m not likely to forget it.” As Sam remembered, a broad smile spread over his face.

Barbara didn’t smile back. “Remember what we didn’t do on our wedding night?” she persisted.

“There wasn’t a whole lot we didn’t do on our wedding night. We—” Yeager stopped when he took a close look at Barbara’s half-worried, half-smiling expression. A light went on inside his head. Slowly, he said, “We didn’t use a rubber.”

“That’s right,” she said. “I thought it would be safe enough, and even if it wasn’t—” Her smile grew broader, but still had a twist in it. “My time of the month should have started a week ago. It didn’t, and I’ve always been very steady. So I think I’m expecting a baby, Sam.”

Had it been a normal marriage in a normal time, he would have shouted, *That’s wonderful!* The time was anything but normal, the marriage very new. Yeager knew Barbara hadn’t wanted to get pregnant. He set down his rifle, took her in his arms. They clung to each other for a couple of minutes. “It’ll work out,” he said at last. “One way or another, we’ll take care of it, and it’ll be okay.”

“I’m scared,” she said. “Not many doctors, or equipment, and us in the middle of the war—”

“Denver’s supposed to be better off than most places,” he said. “It’ll be all right, honey.” *Please, God, make it all right*, he thought, something that would have been closer to a real prayer if God had given any signs lately of listening. After another few seconds, he went on, “I hope it’s a girl.”

“You do? Why?”

“Because she’d probably look just like you.”

Her eyes widened. She stood up on tiptoe to give him a quick kiss. “You’re sweet, Sam. It wasn’t what I expected, but—” She kicked at the dirty snow and at the mud that showed through it. “What can you do?”

For a career minor leaguer, *What can you do?* was an article of faith that ranked right alongside the commandments Moses had brought down from the mountain. Actually, Yeager knew there was something you could do if you wanted to. But finding an abortionist wouldn’t be easy, and the procedure was liable to be more dangerous than having the baby. If Barbara brought it up, he’d think about it then. Otherwise, he’d keep his mouth shut.

She said, “We’ll just do the best we can, that’s all. Right?”

“Sure, honey,” Sam said. “Like I said, we’ll manage. The idea kind of grows on me, you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do.” Barbara nodded. “I didn’t want this to happen, but now that it has ... I’m scared, as I said, but I’m excited, too. Something of ours, to go on after we’re gone—that’s something special, and something wonderful.” “Yeah.” Yeager saw himself tying a little girl’s shoes, or maybe playing catch with a boy and teaching him to hit well enough to get all the way to the top in pro ball. What the father might have done, the son *would*. He would, anyhow, if the Lizards were beaten and there ever was pro ball again. Sam should have been in spring training, getting ready for yet another season on the road, hoping to move up as better players got drafted, still with a ghostly chance at a big-league slot and glory. As it was ...

Someone shouted, “Back to the wagons, everybody. They’re going to billet us at the college on the south edge of town.”

Yeager hadn’t thought Fort Collins big enough to boast a college. “You never can tell,” he muttered, which would have been a good handle for the whole past year. Hand in hand, he and Barbara walked back toward Ullhass and Ristin. “Careful getting up there,” he warned as she scrambled in.

She made a face at him. “For God’s sake, Sam, I’m not made out of cut glass. If you start treating me as if I were going to fall to pieces any minute now, we’ll have trouble.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ve never had to worry about anybody expecting before.”

The wagon driver’s head whipped around. “You gonna have a baby? That’s great. Congratulations!”



“Thanks,” she said. As the wagon rattled forward, she shook her head wryly. Yeager knew she wasn’t as delighted as she might have been. He wasn’t, either. He couldn’t imagine a worse time to try to raise a kid. But all they could do now was give it their best shot.

Sure enough, the Colorado State College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts sat on the southern border of Fort Collins. Its red and gray brick buildings clustered along an oval drive that ran through the heart of the campus. The cafeteria wasn’t far from the south end of the drive. Women in surprisingly clean white dished out fried chicken and biscuits. That was good, but the burnt-grain brew they called coffee tried to bite off Yeager’s tongue.

“Where do we sleep tonight?” he asked as he walked out of the cafeteria.

“Girls’ dormitory,” a soldier answered, pointing northward. Grinning, he went on, “Jeez, I dreamed for years of getting into one o’ those, but it just ain’t the same this way.”

The only rooms in the dorm with doors that locked from the outside were the rest rooms. Fortunately, it had three, so Sam didn’t feel guilty about commandeering one for the Lizard prisoners to use during the night. He and Barbara had a two-coed room for themselves. Looking at the steel-framed cots, he said, “I think I’d sooner have been quartered with some nice, friendly people back in town.”

“It’ll be all right for one night,” she said. “It’s easier for them to keep track of us if we’re together here instead of scattered around Fort Collins.”

“I suppose so,” he said, unenthusiastic still. But then, as he set his rifle down, he exclaimed, “I’m going to be a father! How about that?”

“How about that?” Barbara echoed.

Only one candle lit the room. Her face was hard to read. Electricity had taken the mystery out of night, turned it bright and certain as day. Now mystery was back, with a vengeance. Yeager studied the shifting shadows. “We’ll do the best we can, that’s all,” he said, as he had when she first gave him the news.

“I know,” she answered. “What else can we do? And,” she added, “if anyone can take care of me and help me take care of a baby, I know it’s you, Sam. I do love you. You know that.”

“Yeah. I love you, too, hon.”

She sat down on one of the cots, smiled over at him. “How shall we celebrate the news?”

“No booze around. No firecrackers ... I guess we’ll just have to make our own fireworks. How does that sound?”

“It sounds good to me.” Barbara took off her shoes, then stood up for a moment so she could slide out of her slacks and panties. When she sat down again, she made a face and bounced back to her feet. “That wool blanket *scratches*. Wait a second; let me turn down

the sheet.”

Some happy time later, Sam asked, “Do you want me to put on a rubber in case you’re wrong?”

“Don’t bother,” she said. “I’m regular as clockwork; even getting sick doesn’t throw me off. And I haven’t been sick. The only thing that could make me this late is a bun in the oven. And since there’s one in there, we don’t need to worry about keeping the oven door closed.”

“Okay.” Sam poised himself over her. She tilted her hips up to ease his way, locked her legs and arms around him. Afterwards, he rubbed at his back; she’d clawed him pretty hard. “Maybe you should get knocked up more often,” he said.

Barbara snorted and poked him in the ribs, which almost made him fall off the narrow cot. Then she leaned over and kissed him on the tip of his nose. “I love you. You’re crazy.”

“I’m happy, is what I am.” He squeezed her against him, tight enough to make her squeak. She was all the woman he’d ever wanted and then some: pretty, bright, sensible, and, as he’d just delightedly found out again, a handful and a half in bed. And now she was going to have his baby. He stroked her hair. “I don’t know how I could be any happier.”

“That’s a sweet thing to say. I’m happy with you, too.” She took his hand, set it on her belly. “That’s ours in there. I wasn’t expecting it, I wasn’t quite ready for it, but”—she shrugged—“it’s here. I know you’ll make a good father.”

“A father. I don’t feel like a father right now.” He let his hand slide lower, through her little nest of hair to the softness it concealed. His fingertip traced small, slow circles.

“What *do* you feel like?” she whispered. The candle burned out about then. They didn’t need it.

The next morning, Yeager woke still a little worn. *Feels like I played a doubleheader yesterday.* He grinned. *I did.*

The cot squeaked when he sat up. The noise woke Barbara. Her cot squeaked, too. He wondered how much racket they’d made the night before. At the time, he hadn’t noticed.

Barbara rubbed her eyes, yawned, stretched, looked over at him and started to laugh. “What’s so funny?” he asked. He didn’t sound as grumpy as he would have a few months before; he’d finally got used—or resigned—to facing the day without coffee.

She said, “You have a large male leer pasted all over your face. That’s what’s funny.”

“Oh.” Now that he thought about it, that *was* funny. “Okay.” He put his corporal’s uniform back on. The last time it had been washed was in Cheyenne. He’d got used—or resigned—to dirty clothes, too. Just about everybody’s clothes were dirty these days; it wasn’t as if Corporal Sam Yeager stood out as a special slob. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and said, “I’m going downstairs to turn Ristin and Ullhass loose. They’ll be glad to see the light of day, I expect.”

“Probably. It seems mean to keep them locked up all night long.” Barbara laughed again, this time at herself. “I’ve been with them so long now that I think of them as people, not as Lizards.”

“I know what you mean. I do the same thing myself.” Yeager considered, then said, “Come on, you get dressed, too. Then we can go over to the cafeteria with them and we’ll have breakfast.”

Breakfast was bacon and eggs. The bacon came in great thick slices and was obviously home-cured; it took Yeager back to the smokehouse on the Nebraska farm where he’d grown up. The stuff that came in packages of cardboard and waxed paper just didn’t have the same flavor.

The Lizard POWs wouldn’t touch eggs, maybe because they were hatched themselves. But they loved bacon. Ristin ran his long, lizardy tongue around the edges of his mouth to get rid of grease. “That is so good,” he said, adding the emphatic cough. “It reminds me of aasson back on Home.”

“Not salty enough for *aasson*,” Ullhass said. He reached for the salt shaker, poured some onto the bacon, took another bite. “Ah—better.” Ristin held out his hand for the salt shaker. He, too, hissed with pleasure after he’d sprinkled the bacon.

Sam and Barbara exchanged glances: the bacon had salt enough for any human palate. In the manner of an *Astounding* reader, Yeager tried to figure out why the Lizards wanted it with even more. They’d said Home was hotter than Earth, and its seas smaller. Maybe that meant they were saltier, too, the way Salt Lake was. When he got to Denver, he’d have to ask somebody about that.

Back to the wagons. Ullhass and Ristin scrambled aboard theirs, then all but disappeared under the straw and blankets they used to fight the cold. Yeager was about to help Barbara up—no matter what she said, he wanted to make sure she took extra care of herself—when a fellow on horseback came trotting up the oval drive toward them. He was dressed in olive drab and wore a helmet instead of a cavalryman’s hat, but he put Yeager in mind of the Old West just the same.

Most of the Met Lab wagons were untenanted. Some didn’t even have their teams hitched to them yet: a lot of people were still eating breakfast. The rider reined in when he saw Yeager and Barbara. He called to her, “Ma’am, you wouldn’t by any chance know where to find Barbara Larssen, would you?”

“I am—I was—I am Barbara Larssen,” she said. “What do you want?”

“Right the first time,” the cavalryman exclaimed happily. “Talk about your luck.” He swung down from his horse, walked over to Barbara. *Maybe it’s his boots that make him look that way*, Yeager thought. They were tall and black and shiny and looked as if they’d hurt like hell if he had to walk more than a few feet in them. He reached inside his coat, pulled out an envelope, handed it to Barbara and said, “This here is for you, ma’am.” Then he stumped back to his horse, remounted, and rode off, trappings jingling, without a backward glance.

Yeager watched him go before he turned back to Barbara. “What do you suppose that’s all about?” he said.

She didn’t answer right away. She was staring down at the envelope. Sam took a look at it, too. It didn’t have a stamp or a return address, just Barbara’s name scrawled hastily across it. Her face was dead pale when she lifted it to him. “That’s Jens’ handwriting,” she whispered.

For a couple of seconds, it didn’t mean anything to Yeager. Then it did. “Oh, Jesus,” he muttered. He felt as if a Lizard shell had just landed next to where he was standing. Through stunned numbness, he heard himself say, “You’d better open it.”

Barbara nodded jerkily. She almost tore the letter along with the envelope. Her hands shook as she unfolded the sheet of paper. The note inside was in the same handwriting as her name had been. Yeager read over her shoulder:

*Dear Barbara, I had to twist arms to get them to let me write this and send it to you, but I finally managed to do it. As you’ll gather, I’m already in the town you’re going toward. I had some interesting (!!) times getting back to the town from which we both left, but came through them all right. I hope you’re OK, too. I’m so glad you’ll be here soon—I miss you more than I can say. With all the love there is, Jens.* There was a row of X’s under the signature.

Barbara looked at the letter, then at Yeager, then at the letter again. She held it in her right hand. Her left hand, which didn’t seem to know what her right was doing, pressed at her belly through the ratty wool sweater she was wearing.

“Oh my God,” she said, maybe to herself, maybe to Yeager, and maybe to God, “what am I supposed to do now?”

“What are we supposed to do now?” Yeager echoed.

She stared at him, as if consciously reminded of his presence for the first time. Then she noticed her hand, fingers spread fan-fashion, stretched over her belly. She jerked it away.

He flinched as if she’d hit him. Her face twisted when she saw that. “Oh, Sam, I’m sorry,” she exclaimed. “I didn’t mean—” She started to cry. “I don’t know what I meant. Everything’s just turned upside down.”

“Yeah,” he said laconically. He startled himself by laughing.

Barbara glared through tears. “What could possibly be funny about this, this—” She gave up in the middle of the sentence. Yeager didn’t blame her. No words were strong enough to fit the mess they’d just landed in.

He said, “Last night I found out I was going to be a father, and now I don’t even know if I’m a husband any more. If that isn’t funny, what is?”

He wondered if it would be too risqué for Hollywood to touch. Probably. Too bad. He could all but see Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant and somebody else—Robert Young, maybe—to play the guy who didn’t get her, all of them going through their antics bigger than life up on the screen. It would be a great way to kill a couple of hours, and you’d

come out of the theater holding your sides.

But it wasn't the same when it really happened to you, not when you were wondering whether you had the Cary Grant part or the Robert Young one ... and when you were afraid you knew the answer.

Barbara's small smile was the sun coming out from behind rain clouds. "That is funny. Like something out of a silly movie—"

"I just thought the very same thing," he said eagerly. Any sign that they were on the same wavelength felt doubly welcome.

The clouds covered the sun again. Barbara said, "Somebody's going to get hurt, Sam; I'm going to have to hurt somebody I love. That's the last thing in the world I want, but I don't see how I can help it."

"I don't, either," Yeager said. He did his best not to show his worry, his fear. It wouldn't help, any more than it would have at the tryout for his first pro team half a lifetime ago. Would he make it or wouldn't he?

Show them or not, the worry and fear were there. How could Barbara pick him? She'd been married to Jens for years and years, while she'd only known him a matter of months, and they hadn't even been lovers for most of that time. And besides, with a choice between a nuclear physicist and a minor league outfielder with an ankle that told him when it was gonna rain, whom would she take?

But she was carrying his kid. That had to count for something. Didn't it? Lord, if this was any kind of normal time, lawyers would be coming out of the woodwork like cockroaches. Maybe cops, too. Bigamy, adultery ... Maybe the chaos the Lizard invasion had brought wasn't such a bad thing after all.

He sucked in a deep breath. "Honey?"

"What is it?" Barbara asked warily. She'd been reading the letter again. He couldn't blame her for that, either, but just the same he wished she hadn't been.

He took her hands in his. She let him do it, but she didn't grab hold of him back the way she usually did. The edge of the sheet of paper scraped against the side of his palm. He made himself ignore it, concentrated on what he had to do as if he were trying to pick up the spin of a curveball right out of the pitcher's hand.

"Honey," he said again, and then paused to feel for the perfect words even though Barbara knew a thousand times more about words than he'd learn if he lived to be a hundred. He went on, one tough phrase at a time, "Honey, the most important thing in the whole world for me—is for you to be happy. So you—go ahead and do—whatever it is you've got to do—and that'll be all right with me. Because I love you and—like I said—I want you to be happy."

She started crying again, hard this time, and buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "What am I supposed to do, Sam?" she said between sobs, her voice so small and broken he could hardly understand her. "I love you, too, and Jens. And the baby—"

He kept his arms around her. He wasn't more than an inch from breaking down and blubbering himself, either. Enrico Fermi picked that precise moment to walk up, hand in hand with his wife Laura. "Is something wrong?" he asked, concern in his accented voice.

"You might say so, sir," Yeager answered. Then he remembered the physicist needed to know Jens Larssen was alive, too. He patted Barbara on the back and said, "Honey, you'd better show Dr. Fermi the letter."

She handed it to Fermi. The physicist put on reading glasses, peered owlishly through them at the sheet of paper. "But this is wonderful news!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up in a smile. He spoke rapidly in Italian to his wife. She answered more hesitantly. Fermi's smile went out. "Oh," he said. "It is, ah, complicated." He nodded to himself, pleased at finding the right word. "Sì, complicated."

"It sure is," Yeager said bleakly.

"It's more than just complicated," Barbara added. "I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh," Fermi said again, this time echoed by Laura. He tried again: "Oh, my." He was completely at home in abstruse realms of thought which Sam Yeager knew he could never enter. But when it came to merely human ways of messing up your life, the Nobel laureate was just as lost as anybody else. Somehow that heartened Sam.

"We like to say congratulations." Laura Fermi's accent was thicker than her husband's. She spread her hands helplessly. "But—"

"Yeah," Yeager said. "But—"

Fermi handed the letter back to Barbara. He said, "You are good people. One way or another, I am sure you will work this out in the fashion that is best for all of you." He touched a hand to the brim of his hat and walked on with his wife.

At first, Yeager was touched at the physicist's compliment. Then he realized Fermi had just said, *It's not my problem, Jack*. He started to get angry. But what was the point of that? The man was right. One way or another, he and Barbara and Jens would work it out.

The only trouble was, he had no idea what that way might be.

They made about thirteen miles that day, almost all of them in silence. Barbara seemed lost in her own thoughts, and Sam didn't want to break in. He had plenty on his mind, too; maybe she also avoided intruding on him. Ullhass and Ristin, oblivious to what was going on around them, chattered with each other, but whenever they ventured into English, the answers they got were so monosyllabic, they soon gave up.

The St. Louis Hotel on St. Louis Avenue in Loveland had seen better days. The food wasn't up to college cafeteria standards, and the room Sam and Barbara got wasn't much bigger than the one at the college dorm. It wasn't very clean, either.

It had a double bed. At first Sam was glad to see that; sleeping with Barbara warm and soft beside him was one of the joys of his life. Doing other things on a roomy

mattress was wonderful, too. Or it had been, anyhow.

Barbara looked at the bed, at him, back again. He could see the same set of thoughts going through her mind as were in his. He didn't say anything. It wasn't really up to him.

Barbara quickly scanned the rest of the room. Other than the bed, it held only a night table, a couple of rickety chairs, and a chamber pot—the plumbing didn't work, then. She shook her head. "I'm not going to put you on the floor, Sam," she said. "That wouldn't be right."

"Thank you, hon." He'd slept hard while he was out in the field against the Lizards. He knew he could do it ... but doing it with his wife in the room would have been unbearably lonely.

"This is even more complicated than I thought it was going to be," Barbara said. She managed a shaky laugh. "They said it couldn't be done."

"Yeah—tell me about it." Sam sat down on one of the chairs, pulled off his shoes and let them fall to the threadbare carpet with two loud clunks.

Barbara peeled back the bedspread. The blankets underneath were the best thing about the room; there were lots of them and they were nice and thick. She clucked approvingly, opened her suitcase and took out a long cotton flannel nightgown. "We won't have to sleep in all our clothes tonight," she said. She reached up to her neck to pull off her sweater, then froze, her eyes on Sam.

"Do you want me to turn my back?" he asked, though every word hurt.

He watched her think about it. That hurt, too. But finally she shook her head. "No, never mind, don't be silly," she said. "I mean, we're married, after all—kind of married, anyway."

*Kind of married, indeed*, Yeager thought, and had another vision of swarming lawyers. He got out of his shirt and chinos while she was taking off the sweater and slacks. The flannel nightgown rustled as it slid down over her smooth skin. He liked to sleep with as few clothes as the weather would allow. Tonight, with all those heavy blankets, that meant socks and boxer shorts and undershirt. He dove under the covers in a hurry; the room itself was cold.

Barbara slipped in beside him. She blew out the candle on the night table. Darkness enfolded them; with the blinds closed and the curtains drawn, it was almost absolute. "Good night, honey," he said, and without thinking, leaned over for a kiss. He got it, but her lips didn't welcome his the way they had before.

He got back to his own side of the bed in a hurry. They lay together on the same mattress, but a Maginot Line might have sprung up between them. He sighed and wondered if he'd ever go to sleep. He tossed and turned and turned and tossed and felt Barbara doing the same, but they were both careful not to bump into each other. After some time that seemed forever but probably was before midnight, he drifted off.

He woke in the wee small hours, needing to use the chamber pot. Regardless of how

he and Barbara had kept apart from each other awake, they'd come together in sleep, maybe for warmth, maybe for no real reason at all. Her nightgown had ridden up a lot; her bare thigh sprawled across his legs.

He cherished the feeling, wondering if he'd ever know it again, wondering if he was just sticking pins in himself for staying with her now when he didn't think she'd end up picking him. But what the hell? He'd played umpteen seasons of ball, stubbornly hoping he'd catch a break. Why be different here?

And he did have to use the pot. He slid away as gently as he could, hoping not to wake her. But he did; the mattress shifted as her head came off the pillow. "Sorry, hon," he whispered. "I need to get up for a second."

"It's okay," she whispered back. "I have to do the same thing. Go ahead and go first." She rolled over to her own side, but not, this time, as if she thought she'd get leprosy from touching him. He groped around by the bed, found the chamber pot, did what he had to do, and handed the pot to her.

The flannel nightgown rustled again as she hiked it up. She used the pot, too, then slid it out of the way and got back into bed. Yeager did, too. "Good night again," he said.

"Good night, Sam." To his surprise and delight, Barbara slid across to his side of the bed and gave him a hug. His arms slid around her, squeezed her to him. She was good to hang on to in the middle of the night. Too soon, though, she slipped away, and he knew that if he tried to hold her there, he was liable to lose her forever.

He tossed and turned for another long while before he went back to sleep. He wondered what that hug meant for his future, trying to read it the same way he'd tried to gauge managers' oracular pronouncements in years gone by to see whether he was liable to get promoted or shipped down.

As with a lot of those pronouncements, he couldn't figure out exactly what the hug foretold. He just knew he was gladder with it than he would have been without it. He also knew this mess wouldn't unravel quickly, no matter what. More than the other, that thought calmed him and helped him fall asleep at last.

Heinrich Jäger set a hand on the stowage compartment that rode atop the track assembly of his Panther. The steel was warm against his palm—spring came to France more quickly than to Germany, and far more quickly than to the Soviet Union, where he'd waited out last winter.

The panzer crews stood by their machines, waiting for him to speak. Sunlight dappled down through trees in new leaf. With their black coveralls, the tankers looked like splotches of shadow. Their panzers were painted in what the camouflage experts called ambush pattern—red-brown and green splotches over ocher, and then smaller ocher patches over the red-brown and green. It was the best scheme the *Wehrmacht* had come up with for making its vehicles invisible from the air. Whether it was good enough—they were about to find out.



“Fuel pump aside,” Jäger said, giving his Panther an affectionate thwack, “this is the best human-made panzer in the world.” The crewmen of the Tigers attached to his unit glared at him, as he’d known they would. They liked their massive beasts’ 88mm gun better than the Panther’s 75, even if the Panther was more maneuverable and had its armor properly sloped.

“But,” Jäger went on, and let the word hang in the air, “if you try to fight the Lizards straight up with your machines, the only thing you’ll do is get yourselves killed. The Fatherland can’t afford that. Remember it. Think of yourselves as going up against T-34s in a Panzer II.”

That got their attention in the way he wanted. Next to one of the tough Soviet machines, a Panzer II, with its 20mm cannon and cardboard-thin protection, was a crew’s worth of “sad duty to inform you” letters waiting to happen. And yet, despite technical shortcomings, the *Wehrmacht* had advanced deep into Russia.

“We’ll try to hit them from ambush, then,” Jäger said. “We’ll lure them, put some of our panzers where we can get a shot at them from flank or rear. You all know how to do that; you’ve most of you done it on the Eastern Front.” He was glad he had picked crews here. Sending new fish against the Lizards would have been an invitation to slaughter. Casualties would be bad enough as things were.

“Their equipment will be better than ours,” he emphasized. “Their tactics and doctrine won’t. From what I saw in the Ukraine last year, they’re even more stereotyped than the Bolsheviks, but their equipment is so good, they’ll hurt you if you make any mistakes at all. In fact, they’ll hurt you even if you don’t make any mistakes. As tankers they’re nothing much, but if I had a chance to capture one of their panzers, I’d give up a lot to do it. Questions?”

“Will we have any air support?” one of the Tiger crewmen asked.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath,” Jäger answered dryly. “Anything we put up, they knock down.” He thought about Ludmila Gorbunova in her little flying sewing machine. He hadn’t had any reply to the latest letter he’d posted. With the state of the mails these days, that meant nothing, but he worried all the same. Going into the air against the Lizards was more nearly suicidal than fighting them in panzers.

The same tanker asked, “We’ll see their helicopters, though, won’t we?”

“If you already know the answer, why ask the question?” Jäger said. “Yes, we probably will. If you hear one and it hasn’t spied you, get under tree cover as fast as you can. If a panzer in your squad blows up and you don’t think you’re in contact with the enemy, you’d better do the same. Anything else? No? Let’s go, then. *Heil Hitler!*”

“*Heil Hitler!*” the panzer crews chorused. They piled into their machines. Jäger tried to gauge their attitude. They weren’t confident of victory any more, the way they had been before the blows against the Poles or the French or the Russians. They all knew what the Lizards could do.

But no one hung back or hesitated. Better to hold the Lizards as far from the

Fatherland as possible: they all knew that. Without much hope and without fear, they'd try to accomplish it.

Jäger climbed up onto the turret of his Panther, slid down inside through the open cupola. Beneath and behind him, the big Maybach engine thundered into life. He wished it were a diesel like the ones the Russians used; a petrol power plant didn't just burn when it got hit—it exploded.

“Down the road southwest,” he told the driver over the intercom. “We're looking for good defensive positions, remember. We want to be in ambush before we run into the Lizards nosing north from Besançon.”

As seemed their habit since the blitzkrieg that followed their arrival on Earth, the Lizards were moving on Belfort slowly and methodically—with luck, even more slowly than they'd planned, because they had a way of overreacting to harassment fire from German infantry and French guerrillas. With more luck, Jäger's panzer regiment—panzer combat group was a better name for it, given the mixed and mixed-up nature of his command—would slow them further. With a whole lot more luck, he might even stop them.

The Panther had a much smoother ride than the Panzer III in which he'd advanced into Russia. The interleaved road wheels had a lot to do with that. Not feeling as if his kidneys were shaking loose was a pleasant novelty. Now if the damned fuel pump wouldn't keep breaking down ...

In spite of the engine's rumble and the rattle and squeak and grind of the treads, riding with his head and shoulders out of the cupola was pleasant on a bright spring day. New grass sprouted in meadows and in cracks in the macadam of the road. In a normal year, traffic would have smashed that latter hopeful growth flat, but the column of German panzers might have been the first motorized traffic the road had known in months. Here and there in the grass, wildflowers made bright splashes of red and yellow and blue. The air itself smelled green and growing.

To Jäger's right, Klaus Meinecke sneezed sharply, once, twice, three times. The gunner pulled a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his tunic, and let out a long, mournful honk. “I hate springtime,” he mumbled. His eyes were puffy and tracked with red. “Miserable hay fever kills me every year.”

*Nothing makes everybody happy*, Jäger thought. They ran through Montbéliard, where the big Peugeot works stood idle for want of fuel and raw materials, then followed the road that paralleled the Doubs River southwest toward Besançon—and toward the Lizards surely on the way up toward Belfort.

Jäger's head swiveled up and down, back and forth, watching every moment for the airplane or helicopter that could turn his panzer into a funeral pyre. Meinecke chuckled. “You've got the *deutsche Blick* all right, Colonel,” he said.

“The German glance?” Jäger echoed, puzzled. “What's that?”

“They recruited me for Panthers out of the Afrika Korps, not the Russian war,” the

gunner explained. “It was a joke we made there, a takeoff on the *deutsche Gruss*, the German salute. We were always on the lookout for aircraft, first British, then from the Lizards. Spot one and it was time to find a hole in the ground.”

Before the Lizards came, Jäger had envied the tankers who fought in North Africa. The war against the British there was clean, gentlemanly—*war as it should be*, he thought. Both sides in Russia had fought as viciously as they could. Jäger thought of the massacres of Jews at Babi Yar and other places. A miracle the Polish Jews hadn’t killed him on his way back to Germany.

He didn’t care to brood on that too long; it made him wonder about what his country had been doing in the lands it had conquered. Instead he said, “So what was it like in the desert after the Lizards came?”

“Bad,” Meinecke answered. “We’d been beating the British, they were brave, but their panzers didn’t match up to ours, and their tactics were pretty bad. If we’d had proper supplies, we’d have mopped them up, but everything kept going to the Eastern Front.”

“We never had enough, either,” Jäger put in.

“Maybe not, Colonel, but a lot even of what was supposed to go to us ended up on the bottom of the Mediterranean. But you asked about the Lizards. They mopped up the Tommies and us both. They *liked* the desert, and we couldn’t hide from their planes there. Talk about *the deutsche Blick*—*Gott in Himmel!* The Tommies had it, too.”

“Misery loves company,” Jäger said. Then, still looking around, he suddenly called “Halt!” to the Panther’s driver.

The big battle tank slowed, stopped. Jäger stood tall in the cupola, waving the column to a halt behind him. He studied the little ridge that rose off to one side of the road. It was covered with old brush and saplings, and its crest could have been more than four hundred meters from the roadway. He’d have to scout out what lay behind, check his line of retreat—the one thing you couldn’t do was stand toe-to-toe with the Lizards, or before long you wouldn’t have any toes left.

He ordered the Panther up the rise to the crest. The longer he looked at the setup, the better he liked it. He didn’t think he’d come across a better defensive position, anyhow.

At his command, most of the German panzers deployed hull down on the reverse slope of the ridge line. He sent three or four Panzer IVs and a Tiger forward to meet the Lizards ahead of his main position and, with luck, bring them back all unsuspecting into the ambush he’d set up.

That left nothing to do but wait and stay alert. In back of the ridge lay a pond fed by a small stream. A fish leaped out of the water after a fly, fell back with a splash. Somewhere in his gear, Jäger had a couple of hooks and a length of light line. Pan-fried trout or pike sounded a lot better to him than the miserable rations he’d been eating.

A Frenchman in civilian clothes came out of the bushes on the far side of the pond. Jäger wasn’t surprised to see he had a rifle on his back. He waved to the Frenchman, who returned the gesture before stepping back into the undergrowth. Before the Lizards

came, the French underground had nipped at the Germans who occupied their country. Now they worked together against the new invaders: in French eyes, the Germans were the lesser of two evils.

*That's something, anyhow,* Jäger thought. In Poland, the Lizards had seemed the lesser of two evils to the Jews. From what he'd learned, he couldn't blame them for feeling that way.

A couple of times, he'd tried talking with officers he trusted about what Germany had done in the east. It hadn't worked: he'd been met by a refusal to listen that almost amounted to saying, *I don't want to know.* He hadn't brought up the subject now for some time.

Away in the distance, he heard the harsh, abrupt bark of a panzer cannon. At the same time, a shout sounded in his earphones: "Engaging lead element of enemy panzer column! Will attempt to carry out plan as outlined. Will—" The transmission cut off abruptly; Jäger feared he knew why.

More booms: from the Panzer IV's 75mm guns; heavier, deeper ones from the Tiger's 88; and, sharp as thunderclaps, from the Lizards' cannon. Then another sort of roar, lower and more diffuse, with smaller blasts and cheery *pop-pops* all mixed in with it. That was the sound of a panzer brewing up.

"Armor-piercing," Jäger said quietly. The loader slammed a black-nosed shell into the breech of the cannon. Out of sight down the road, another panzer exploded. Jäger bit his lip; those were men, comrades-in-arms, dying nastily. And, the officer part of him whispered, *if all my panzers get killed before any make it back here, what good is my ambush?* He was inured to sacrificing men; throwing them away was something else again.

He stood up in the cupola, made a hand sign: *be ready.* Panzer commanders passed it down the line. He didn't want to use radio, not now. The Lizards were too good at picking up their foes' signals. As if from very far away, he felt his heart thudding in his chest, his bowels loosening. That was what fear did to your body. It didn't have to rule you if you didn't let it.

Up the road, motor going flat out, men inside probably shaken to blood pudding, raced a Panzer IV. It sounded like an explosion in a smithy, roaring and clattering and clanking as if it were about to fall to pieces.

Behind it, almost silent by comparison, glided a Lizard panzer, then another and another and another. Jäger knew they were toying with the Panzer IV. They had a way of stabilizing their guns so they shot accurately even on the move, but they were enjoying the chase for a while before they ended it.

*Let's see how they enjoy this,* he thought, and yelled, "Fire!"

Because his head was outside the cupola, the bellow of the cannon half stunned him. Flame and smoke spurted from the gun's muzzle. "Hit!" he cried in delight. It was a solid hit, too, right at the join between the turret and body of the Lizard panzer. The turret

tilted, almost torn out of its ring; Jäger wouldn't have wanted to be inside when that 6.8-kilo round came knocking.

But the Lizards made their panzers tough. That shell would have torn the turret right off a British tank or a Soviet T-34, and turned either of them into an inferno on the instant. Not only did this one not catch fire, its driver threw it into reverse and did his best to escape the trap in which he found himself. "Hit him again!" Jäger shouted. His gunner required no urging—the second shot punctuated Jäger's sentence.

All the rest of the hull-down German panzers along the ridge line opened up, too. The Lizards offered them a target tankers dream about: the less heavily armored flanks and engine compartments of their vehicles. One of those vehicles brewed up in a flash of orange and blue flame—somebody's round had penetrated to something vital. Jäger wondered if that had been a Panther's kill or a Tiger's: the heavier panzer's 88 fired a correspondingly more massive shell, but the Panther's gun had a higher muzzle velocity and would pierce just as much armor, maybe more.

The Lizards did not react well to being taken in flank. Jäger had counted on that: they were even more vulnerable to the unexpected than Soviet troops. For a crucial few seconds, they either tried to back out of trouble like the panzer Jäger had hit or traversed their turrets toward the concealed German armor without shifting the tanks themselves. That let the Germans keep pounding away at their more vulnerable sides and rears. Another Lizard panzer turned into a fireball, then another.

But the Lizards did not stay stupid forever. One by one, they turned toward the Germans' fire. No German panzer gun could beat their front glacis plates. Jäger's gunner tried. His shell buried itself almost to the drive bands, but did no damage anyone could find.

Then the aliens started shooting back. They had only small targets at which to aim, but they didn't need anything big: their fire-control arrangements were even better than the ones the new Panthers boasted. And while a Panther shell couldn't quite shift one of their turrets, the Lizards' projectiles smashed German panzer turrets as if they were anvils dropping on cockroaches.

Two tanks down from Jäger, a Panzer IV was abruptly beheaded. Shells cooking off inside, its turret smashed down the rear slope of the ridge and skidded into the pond. The hull exploded in flames, too, and started a fire in the brush.

Then a Tiger got hit. Its turret flew off, too, which rocked Jäger; he'd hoped the 100mm of armor there might be proof against anything the Lizards could throw at it. No such luck, though. Now he got on the radio. "Fall back!" he ordered. Keep things moving, keep them confused: that was how you got whatever chance you had against the Lizards. In a set-piece battle, you were dead.

As if he were back on the other side of the rise, Jäger saw what the Lizard panzer commander would be thinking: if they came straight up the slope and charged after the retreating Germans, they'd keep presenting their invulnerable frontal armor to his comrades and him. Then they could destroy the panzer force at their convenience and

press on up the road toward Belfort

He got on the command frequency again: “Peel off to either side as you retreat We’ll want to get some decent shots at their flanks when they come after us.”

His Panther backed through the little stream that fed the pond; water sprayed up on either side. Sure enough, just as he’d guessed, a couple of Lizard panzers breasted the rise and advanced on the Germans. They were too confident of their own invincibility; had he been an instructor on a training ground, he would have lowered their mark. The proper tactical solution was to stay hull down on the reverse slope and pound the Germans while exposing as little of themselves as possible.

He remembered his first big fight with the Lizard panzers, in the Ukraine. They’d made the same mistake then, and he’d killed one of their tanks with a Panzer III—he was one of a bare handful of German tankers who could say that.

This time, though, he didn’t get a chance to put a shell into the enemy’s belly, where his armor was thinnest. One of the Lizards fired. A Panzer IV went up in goutts of flame. But the Germans were hitting back, too, and their high-velocity armor-piercing shells could hurt the Lizards when they hit the right spot. One of the Lizard panzers slewed to a halt, road wheels wrecked by a shell. That made the machine only marginally less dangerous; its main armament still worked, and its turret swung toward a Panther. It took the German panzer out with one shell straight through the sloped front plate that was supposed to deflect enemy fire.

More rounds slammed into the disabled Lizard panzer. Hatches popped open in the turret and at the driver’s position in the front of the hull. Lizards jumped out Machine guns chattered. The Lizards went down. Jäger felt some sympathy for them—they’d fought bravely, if not with a lot of brains. That didn’t keep him from yelling like a wild-west Indian when they fell.

A moment after the last Lizard bailed out and was shot down, the disabled panzer brewed up. A smoke ring, perfect as any an old man with a cigar in his mouth might make but twenty times as big, blew out of the commander’s open cupola. Then all the ammunition stowed in there must have cooked off at once, for the panzer went up in a fireball that sent blazing debris flying for a hundred meters.

A Lizard helicopter fluttered over the ridge just then, rockets stabbing out from it like knives of fire. Machine gunners opened up on it, but it was armed against their fire. But a Panzer IV, traversing its cannon toward the second Lizard tank, happened to line up on the flying machine. Jäger never knew whether the commander gave the order or the gunner acted on his own initiative. Either way, the 75mm shell tore through the helicopter’s belly and swatted it out of the air in flames. Jäger screamed with delight.

The commander of the other Lizard panzer that had come over the ridge should have pulled back then. The panzer’s turret swung back and forth, as if the Lizards inside couldn’t make up their minds on a target. The Germans had no such hesitation—and Panthers and Tigers, though far from a match for the Lizard machine, could hurt it when they got a chance like this one. Even the new Panzer IVs, though hideously vulnerable to

return fire, had in their long 75s main armament little inferior to what the Panthers carried.

When the Lizard did decide to go back, it was too late. Smoke and almost transparent blue flames boiled from the enemy panzer's engine compartment. That crew bailed out, too. Jäger didn't know if they all perished; the smoke was too thick for him to be sure. If they didn't, though, it wasn't for lack of effort.

"Forward the Panthers," he ordered. "Tigers and IVs lay back to support."

"How many Panthers are still running?" Klaus Meinecke asked. Jäger blinked; the gunner's question hadn't occurred to him, but it was a damn good one. It would be a hell of a thing to go swarming over the ridge to confront the Lizards ... alone. But no. At least two other machines rumbled past the flaming hulks of friends and foes to renew the fight against the Lizards on the Belfort road.

The smartest thing the Lizards could have done was to keep right on moving toward Belfort, make the Germans react to them. With their rotten fuel pumps, the Panthers would surely have broken down if pushed hard. And the Lizard panzers were faster than the ones Jäger commanded, anyhow. Guderian and Manstein had invented the drill: first force your opening, then worry about what happens next.

But the Lizards in this column didn't have a Guderian leading them. Jäger stuck his head and torso out of the cupola to see what they were about. They still waited on the road, face-on toward the ridge line. "Halt hull down," he called to his comrades. He also ordered his own panzer to halt; no sense in exposing more of it to enemy fire than he had to.

For the moment, standoff. Jäger saw no point in firing from his present position. He'd just waste ammunition and announce to the Lizards where he was. About the only way he could hurt them from here would be to put one right down a cannon barrel. He laughed at that and muttered, "If I want a miracle, I'll ask for it in church."

The Lizards weren't eager to swarm up the ridge any more, though, not when the two that had tried it didn't come back. They weren't used to armor fights where their foes had a decent chance of doing them in. Jäger didn't think they were afraid; he'd stopped underestimating enemies after his first couple of weeks in Russia. He did think he'd made the Lizards thoughtful.

He was about to order his reserves to try a flanking maneuver using the ridge for cover when a shell slammed into the side of the northernmost Lizard panzer. Another followed a few seconds later and set the armored vehicle ablaze. Jäger was still trying to figure out who was doing the shooting when the Lizard crew bailed out of their panzer and ran for the brush. Machine-gun fire cut them down.

Jäger whooped. "It's that Panzer IV!" he yelled. "They should have chased it down and killed it, but they got busy with us and forgot all about it." He'd forgotten all about it, too, but he didn't have to admit that, even to himself.

The Lizards certainly had left it out of their plans. Its unexpected return to action did

the same thing to them that the unexpected in combat often did to the Russians: it panicked them and sent them into a retreat they didn't have to make. Jäger fired a couple of rounds at them from the ridge line, just to remind them he was there, but didn't pursue—coming out into the open against them was asking to get shot up.

Klaus Meinecke looked up from his gunsight, a grin stretched wide across his face. “By God, Colonel, they're as sensitive about their flanks as any virgin I ever tried to lay,” he exclaimed.

“So they are.” Jäger laughed, too, but under the coarse joke lay a grain of truth. He had seen the same thing fighting the Red Army. Come straight at them and they'd die in place by thousands sooner than yielding a meter of ground. Flank them out—or even threaten to flank them out—and they were liable to run like rabbits. Half to himself, he said, “They aren't quick to adapt, not even a little.”

“No, sir,” the gunner agreed. “And they've paid for being slow, that they have.”

“You're right.” Jäger sounded wondering, even to himself. His men had killed at least five Lizard panzers—to say nothing of a helicopter—in this fight. They'd lost more than that—Tigers, Panthers, Panzer IVs—but they'd done the enemy some real damage. He wondered how long it had taken the *Wehrmacht's* armor to kill five Lizard panzers last year. Weeks probably, maybe months. Panzer IIs, Panzer IIIs, Czech machines impressed into action, Panzer IVs with the stubby 75mm guns for infantry support—they were all toys, set against the Lizards' tanks.

He must have said that aloud, for Meinecke answered, “That was last year. This is now. And who knows what they'll come up with next? Maybe a Tiger with sloped armor and a really long-barreled 88. That'd make the Lizards sit up and think.”

It made Jäger sit up and think, too. He liked the idea. Then he looked around again. Now he didn't see smoke and flame and shattered flesh and metal. He saw that his comrades were still here and the Lizards had fled. “We held the position,” he exclaimed.

“We did, by God!” The gunner sounded as surprised—almost dazed—as Jäger felt. “I'm not used to that.”

“Nor I,” Jäger said. “I've been part of a partisan raid that stung them, but every time I went up against them in regular combat, I always ended up retreating ... till now.” He started thinking about what needed to happen next. “Now we can bring some infantry forward, send 'em down the road to screen for us.”

“Infantry!” Meinecke spoke the word with a tanker's ingrained scorn. “What's infantry going to do against panzers?”

“Give us warning when they're on the move, if nothing else,” Jäger answered. “Snipers may pick off a commander or two; the Lizards come out of their cupolas when they think it's safe, same as we do. Maybe even an unbuttoned driver. And I hear they're going to get some sort of antipanzer rocket the Americans have passed on to us.”

“That'd be something, if it works,” the gunner said. “The Lizards have hurt us plenty with rockets.”



“I know. They’ve hurt us with their panzers, too, a lot worse than they did today.” Jäger scratched his head. His hair was matted with greasy sweat. “I haven’t seen them foolish that way before—those couple that charged straight at us. They should have known better. I wonder why they didn’t.”

“Don’t know that, sir,” Meinecke said, “but I’m not going to complain about it. You?”

“No,” Jäger said.

Ussmak desperately wanted a taste of ginger. He needed to feel strong and bright and in control of things, even if he knew he wasn’t. Back in the turret of the landcruiser, Hessef and Tvenkel were undoubtedly dipping their tongues into the supply of the drug they’d brought along. Undoubtedly, too, it made them see the fight from which they’d just retreated as a small thing, hardly more than some cracked pavement on the path to the Race’s inevitable victory.

Ussmak wished he could feel the same way. But no matter how much he craved ginger, he didn’t trust it any more. Ginger could make you do stupid things, things stupid enough to get you killed. Two landcruisers had swarmed over that rise after the Deutsche. Neither one had come back.

Everything had seemed so easy when he started out on the plains of the SSSR: easier even than the training simulators, for those had assumed an opposition of a quality to match his own, and the Soviets’ machines didn’t come close, while their tactics weren’t anything special, either.

When he’d got into Besançon, the males had warned him the Deutsche were better at armored warfare. Now he knew what they’d meant. Nobody’d paid any attention to that rise until the Deutsche started shooting from it. They’d lured the Race’s landcruisers right into an ambush, he realized. They were just Big Ugliers—they shouldn’t have been able to trick males of the Race like that.

And their landcruisers weren’t just inflammable targets any more. These were a lot bigger and heavier than the Soviet tanks he’d faced in the SSSR, let alone the little Deutsch models. Their guns could hurt, too.

Hessef’s voice came over the audio button taped to Ussmak’s hearing diaphragm: “Come on back here. We’ve got enough herb to share with you, even if you didn’t bring any of your own.”

“I’ll be there soon, superior sir,” Ussmak answered. Just blind luck, he thought, that Hessef hadn’t gone charging after the Big Ugliers himself and gotten his landcruiser—and Ussmak with it—blown to bits.

He wanted to pop the hatch above his reclining seat and get a little fresh if chilly air, but he knew that wasn’t a good idea. The side of the road closer to the river offered no cover for Big Ugliers with guns, but any number of Tosevite raiders might be lurking in the woods that led up onto the mountain slopes to the west, just waiting for a male to show himself, even for a moment.

As with landcruisers, the Big Ugliers' personal weapons were less effective than those of the Race: most of their individual firearms could shoot only one bullet at a time, while their machine guns were too heavy and clumsy to be easily portable. As with the landcruisers again, though, you didn't want to make a mistake or you'd find that one of those inferior weapons was plenty good enough to kill you.

Ussmak crawled back through the fighting compartment, then, and stuck his head up through the opening in the bottom of the turret. "Here you are, just another shell to be expended," Tvenkel exclaimed. "Well, as long as you are here, you might as well have a taste."

Before Ussmak could say no as he'd intended, his tongue shot out and licked the little mound of ginger from the palm of the gunner's hand. He opened and closed his jaws several times, gulped the powder down his throat.

"That's *good*," he exclaimed. With the herb buzzing through him, he felt like a brand-new male. All his worries, all his fears, ebbed away. "I wish we had the Big Ugliers in our sights again." Part of him knew that was just the ginger talking, but none of him cared.

"So do I," Tvenkel said fiercely. "If they think I'd miss 'em again at that range, I tell you they're wrong."

So Tvenkel had missed when he should have hit, had he? Under the influence of the ginger, Ussmak felt almost as much contempt for him as he did for the Big Ugliers. *The bungling incompetent couldn't hit a city if he was in the middle of it*, he thought.

Hessef said, "We didn't do as well as we should have." His voice held melancholy uncertainty; the drug was wearing off, leaving crushing sadness and emptiness behind. He also sounded more thoughtful than usual as he continued, "Maybe Ussmak is right: maybe we should go into combat without tasting first."

"I think that would be a good idea, superior sir," Ussmak said. At the moment, he would have thought any ideas good that agreed with his own. He went on, "We may think we do well when we taste the herb, but in fact we don't." The contrast between belief and reality hit him with stunning force, almost as if his own words came not from his mouth but from one of the great departed Emperors of the past.

"It may be so," Hessef agreed mournfully. He was sliding down from his peak of omnipotent euphoria, sure enough.

"Nonsense, superior sir." Tvenkel must have had another taste just before he gave one to Ussmak, for he still sounded ginger-certain about things. "Just bad luck, that's all. Can't hit everything all the time—and these Big Ugliers had the advantage of position on us."

"Yes, and how did they get it?" Ussmak answered his own question: "They got it because we rushed ahead without taking proper notice of our surroundings and we did that because too many of us were tasting." His mouth fell open. Here he was complaining about tasting while he had a head full of ginger. The irony struck him as deliciously funny.

“We should smash them anyhow,” Tvenkel declared.

“When we first landed, we would have, I think,” Hessef said. “Now we face tougher landcruisers ... and ours remain the same.”

“Still better by far than anything the Big Uglies have,” Tvenkel said with an angry hiss; the herb was making him confident to the point of being combative. “Even these new machines are slow and weak next to ours.”

“That’s so,” Hessef said, “but they’re not as slow or as weak as the ones we met before. And who can say what the Tosevites will build next?” He shivered a little. Just as Tvenkel was arrogant under the influence of ginger and ignored real problems, Hessef saw those problems magnified in the depression that came when the drug wore off.

“If we conquer them, they won’t build anything next,” Tvenkel said.

Ussmak liked that idea. Since he was riding his taste of ginger up to the heights, he felt as Tvenkel did: that the Race could accomplish whatever it desired, and that nothing would be allowed to stand in its way. But he had learned that what he felt when he tasted was not to be relied upon, which was something few other ginger tasters seemed to have realized. He tried to stand outside himself, to look at what the ginger did to him as if it were happening to someone else.

He said, “We had better conquer them soon, or they will build their new machines. And every one they do build makes them that much harder to overcome.”

“Retreating from their landcruisers isn’t going to make conquering them any easier,” Hessef said, almost moaning. “But losing five machines in battle against them doesn’t get the job done, either. The Emperor only knows what they’re saying about that back in Besançon.” He cast down his eyes at the mention of the Race’s sovereign, and didn’t raise them again right away. Sure enough, after-ginger depression held him in its claws.

“Superior sir, what you need is another taste,” Tvenkel said. He took out a vial of ginger, poured some into his hand, offered it to Hessef. The landcruiser commander’s tongue flicked out. The powdered drug disappeared.

“Ah, that’s better,” Hessef said as the ginger began to take hold of him once more.

“Why is it better?” Ussmak wondered aloud. “The world is still the same as it was before you tasted, so how have things really changed?”

“They’ve changed because now I have this lovely powder inside of me. No matter how ugly the Big Uglies outside the landcruiser are, I don’t have to worry about it. All I have to do is sit here in my seat and not think about a thing.”

*And if some Tosevite chooses this moment to sneak up on us with a satchel charge, we’re all liable to die because you’re not thinking.* Ussmak held that to himself. Despite all he’d been through, despite the herb coursing through him, the subordination drilled into him since his hatchling days remained strong.

In any case, he didn’t think the Big Uglies had pursued the Race’s retreating landcruisers. Why should they have? They’d kept the Race from pushing north, which

was what they'd had in mind. They didn't have to conquer, they just had to resist. *For how long?* Ussmak wondered. The answer slammed into him like a cannon shell: *till we have no equipment left.*

Five landcruisers gone today in this engagement alone. Hessef was right: they would be gnashing their teeth in Besançon over that news. Ussmak wondered how many landcruisers the Race had left, all over Tosev 3. In the first heady days of the invasion, it hadn't seemed to matter. They advanced as they would, and swept all before them. They didn't sweep any more; they had to fight. And when they fought, they got hurt.

Oh, so did the Tosevites. Though his ginger euphoria was starting to ebb, Ussmak still acknowledged that. Even in the botched engagement from which the Race's landcruisers had just retreated, they'd killed many more enemy vehicles than they'd lost themselves. When transcribing his after-action report onto disk, the unit commander would probably be able to present the engagement as a victory.

But it wasn't a victory. The clarity of thought the drug brought to Ussmak let him see that only too well. The Big Ugliers were losing landcruisers at a prodigal rate, yes, but they were still making them, too, and making them better than they had before. Ussmak wondered how many landcruisers remained aboard the freighters that had fetched them from Home. Even more than that, he wondered what the Race would do when no more landcruisers were left on those freighters.

When he said that aloud, Hessef answered, "That's why we'd better conquer quickly: if we don't, we'll have nothing left to do the job with." Even the landcruiser commander's new taste of ginger didn't keep him from seeing as much for himself.

"We'll beat them. It's our destiny—we are the Race," Tvenkel said. The herb left him confident still. He gave his gun's autoloader an affectionate slap.

Thus reminded of the device, Hessef said, "We ought to perform maintenance on that gadget. We expended a lot of rounds today. It goes out of adjustment easily, and then we're left with main armament that won't shoot."

"It'll be all right, superior sir," Tvenkel said. "If it hasn't gone wrong, odds are it won't."

Ussmak expected Hessef to come down angrily on the gunner for that: maintenance was as much a part of a landcruiser crew's routine as eating. But Hessef kept quiet—the ginger made him more confident than he should have been, too. Ussmak didn't like that. If the autoloader wouldn't feed shells into the cannon, what good was the landcruiser? Good for getting him killed, that was all.

Though the gunner outranked him, Ussmak said, "I think you ought to service the autoloader, too."

"It's working fine, I tell you," Tvenkel said angrily. "All we need is to top up on ammunition and we'll be ready to go out and fight some more."

As if on cue, a couple of ammunition carriers rolled up to the landcruisers. One was a purpose-built vehicle made by the Race, but the other sounded like a Tosevite rattletrap.

Ussmak went back to the driver's position, undogged the hatch, and peered out. Sure enough, it was a petroleum-burning truck; its acrid exhaust made him cough. When the driver—a male of the Race—got out, Ussmak saw he had wooden blocks taped to the bottoms of his feet to let him reach the pedals from a seat designed for bigger beings.

Tvenkel climbed out through the turret, hurried over to the ammunition carriers. So did the gunners from the rest of the landcruisers in the unit. After a low-voiced comment from one of the resupply drivers, one of them shouted, "What do you mean, only twenty rounds per vehicle? That'll leave me less than half full!"

"And me!" Tvenkel said. The rest of the gunners echoed him, loudly and emphatically.

"Sorry, my friends, but it can't be helped," the male driving the Tosevite truck said. His foot blocks made him tower over the angry gunners but, instead of dominating them, he just became the chief target of their wrath. He went on, "We're a little short all over the planet right now. We'll share what we have evenly, and it'll come out well in the end."

"No, it won't," Tvenkel shouted. "We're facing real landcruisers here, don't you see that, with better guns and tougher armor than anybody else has to worry about. We need more ammunition to make sure we take them out."

"I can't give you what I don't have," the truck driver answered "Orders were to bring up twenty rounds per land-cruiser and that's what we brought, no more, no less."

The Race didn't need to run out of landcruisers to find itself in trouble against the Big Uglies, Ussmak realized. Running out of supplies for the landcruisers it had was less dramatic, but would do the job just fine.

## ☆ VIII ☆

After darkness, light. After winter, spring. As Jens Larssen peered north from the third floor of Science Hall, he thought that light and spring had overtaken Denver all at once. A week before, the ground had been white with snow. Now the sun blazed down from a bright blue sky, men bustled across the University of Denver campus in shirtsleeves and without hats, and the first new leaves and grass were beginning to show their bright green faces. Winter might come again, but no one paid the possibility any mind—least of all Jens.

Spring sang in his heart, not because of the warm weather, not for the new growth on lawns and trees, not even because of early arriving birds warbling in those trees. What fired joy in him was at first sight much more prosaic: a long stream of horse-drawn wagons making their slow way down University Boulevard toward the campus.

He could wait up here no longer. He dashed down the stairs, his Army guard, Oscar, right behind him. When he got to the bottom, his heart pounded in his chest and his breath came short with exercise and anticipation.

Jens started over to his bicycle. Oscar said, “Why don’t you just wait for them to get here, sir?”

“Dammit, my wife is in one of those wagons, and I haven’t seen her since last summer,” Jens said angrily. Maybe Oscar didn’t breathe hard even in bed.

“I understand that, sir,” Oscar said patiently, “but you don’t know *which* one she’s in. For that matter, you don’t even know if she’s in any of the ones coming in today. Isn’t the convoy broken into several units to keep the Lizards from paying too much attention to it?”

*The right way, the wrong way, and the Army way*, Jens thought. This once, the Army way seemed to have something going for it. “Okay,” he said, stopping. “Maybe you’re smarter than I am.”

Oscar shook his head. “No, sir. But my wife isn’t on one of those wagons, so I can still think straight.”

“Hmm.” Aware he’d lost the exchange, Larssen turned toward the wagons, the first of which had turned off University onto East Evans and was now approaching Science Hall. *I’ll have the best excuse in the world for getting out of BOQ now*, he thought.

He didn’t recognize the only man aboard the lead wagon: just a driver, wearing olive drab. Oscar *had* had a point, he reluctantly admitted to himself. A lot of these wagons would just be carrying equipment, and the only people aboard them would be soldiers. He’d have felt a proper fool if he’d pedaled up and down the whole length of the wagon train without setting eyes on Barbara.

Then he saw Leo Szilard sitting up alongside another driver. He waved like a man possessed. Szilard returned the gesture in a more restrained way: so restrained, in fact,

that Jens wondered a little. The Hungarian physicist was usually as open and forthright a man as anyone ever born.

Larssen shrugged. If he was going to read that much into a wave, maybe he should have chosen psychiatry instead of physics.

A couple of more wagons pulled up in front of Science Hall before he saw more people he knew: Enrico and Laura Fermi, looking incongruous on a tarp-covered hay wagon. “Dr. Fermi!” he called. “Have you seen Barbara? Is she all right?”

Fermi and his wife exchanged glances. Finally he said, “She is not that far behind us. Soon you will see her for yourself.”

Now what the devil was that supposed to mean? “Is she all right?” Larssen repeated. “Is she hurt? Is she sick?”

The Fermis looked at each other again. “She is neither injured nor ill,” Enrico Fermi answered, and then shut up.

Jens scratched his head. Something was going on, but he didn’t know what. Well, if Barbara was just a few wagons behind the Fermis, he’d find out pretty soon. He walked up the stream of incoming wagons, then stopped dead in his tracks. Ice ran up his spine—what were two Lizards doing here attached to the Met Lab crew?

He relaxed a bit when he saw the rifle-toting corporal in the wagon with the Lizards. Prisoners might be useful; the Lizards certainly knew how to get energy out of the atomic nucleus. Then all such merely practical thoughts blew out of his head. Sitting next to the corporal was—

“Barbara!” he yelled, and sprinted toward the wagon. Oscar the guard followed more sedately.

Barbara waved and smiled, but she didn’t jump down and run to him. He noticed that, but didn’t think much of it. Just seeing her again after so long made the fine spring day ten degrees warmer.

When he fell into step beside the wagon, she did get out. “Hi, babe, I love you,” he said, and took her in his arms. Squeezing her, kissing her, made him forget about everything else.

“Jens, wait,” she said when lack of oxygen forced him to take his mouth away from hers for a moment.

“The only thing I want to wait for is to get us alone,” he said, and kissed her again.

She didn’t respond quite the way she had the first time. That distracted him enough to let him notice the corporal saying, “Ullhass, Ristin, you two just go on along. I’ll catch up with you later,” and then getting down from the wagon himself. His Army boots clumped on the pavement as he walked back toward Jens and Barbara.

Jens broke off the second kiss in annoyance that headed rapidly toward anger. Oscar had enough sense to keep his distance and let a man properly greet his wife. Why couldn’t this clodhopper do the same?

Barbara said, "Jens, this is someone you have to know. His name is Sam Yeager. Sam, this is Jens Larssen."

*Not, my husband, Jens Larssen?* Jens wondered, but, trapped in the rituals of politeness, he grudgingly stuck out a hand. "Pleased to meet you," Yeager said, though a dark blond eyebrow quirked up as he spoke. He was a handful of years older than Larssen, but considerably more weathered, as if he'd always spent a lot of time outdoors. *Gary Cooper type*, Jens thought, not that the corporal was anywhere near so good-looking.

"Pleased to meet you, too, pal," he said. "Now if you'll excuse us—" He started to steer Barbara away.

"Wait," she said again. He stared at her, startled. She was looking down at the ground. When she raised her eyes, she looked not to him but to this Yeager character, which not only startled Jens but made him mad. The corporal nodded. Now Barbara turned toward Jens. In a low voice, she went on, "There's something you have to know. You and Sam have—something in common."

"Huh?" Jens gave Yeager another look. The soldier was human, male, white, and, by the way he talked, might well have sprung from the Midwest. Past that, Larssen couldn't see any resemblance between them. "What is it?" he asked Barbara.

"Me."

At first, he didn't understand. That lasted only a heartbeat, maybe two; the way she said it didn't leave much room to doubt what she meant. Numbness filled him, to be replaced in an instant by all-consuming rage.

He almost threw himself blindly at Sam Yeager. He'd always been a peaceable man, but he wasn't afraid of a fight. After attacking a Lizard tank when Patton's troops drove the aliens back from Chicago, the idea of taking on somebody carrying a rifle didn't faze him.

Then he took another look at Yeager's face. The corporal wasn't toting that rifle just for show. Somewhere or other, he'd done some work with it. The way his eyes narrowed as he watched Jens said that louder than words. Jens hesitated.

"It wasn't the way it sounds," Barbara said. "I thought you were dead; I was sure you had to be dead. If I hadn't been, I never would have—"

"Neither would I," Yeager put in. "There's names for people who do stuff like that. I don't like 'em."

"But you did," Jens said.

"We did it the right way, or the best way we knew how." Yeager's mouth twisted; those weren't the same, not here. He went on, "Up in Wyoming a little while back, we got married."

"Oh, Lord." Larssen's eyes went to Barbara, as if begging her to tell him it was all some dreadful joke. But she bit her lip and nodded. Something new washed over Jens



then: fear. She wasn't just telling him she'd made a mistake with this miserable two-striper. She really had a thing for him.

"There's more," Yeager said grimly.

"How could there be more?" Jens demanded.

Barbara held up a hand. "Sam—" she began.

Yeager cut her off. "Hon, he's gotta know. The sooner all the cards are on the table, the sooner we can start figuring out what the hand looks like. Are you gonna tell him, or shall I?"

"I'll do it," Barbara said, which surprised Jens not at all: she'd always been one to take care of her own business. Still, she had to gather herself before she brought out a blurted whisper: "I'm going to have a baby, Jens."

He started to say, "Oh, Lord," again, but that wasn't strong enough. The only things that were, he didn't want to say in front of Barbara. He thought he'd been afraid before. Now—how could Barbara possibly want to come back to him if she was carrying this other guy's child? She was the best thing he'd ever known, most of the reason he'd kept going across Lizard-held Ohio and Indiana ... and now this.

He wished they'd started their family before the Lizards came. They'd talked about it, but he kept reaching for the rubbers in the nightstand drawer—and times he hadn't (there were some), nothing happened. Maybe he was shooting blanks. Yeager sure as hell wasn't.

Jens also wished, suddenly, savagely, that he'd screwed the ears off the brassy blond waitress named Sal when the Lizards held them and a bunch of other people in that church in Fiat, Indiana. She'd done everything but send up a flare to let him know she was interested. He'd stayed aloof, figuring he'd be back with Barbara soon, but when he finally got back to Chicago, she was already gone, and now that he'd finally caught up with her—she was pregnant by somebody else. Wasn't that a kick in the nuts? It sure was. And he'd gone and wasted his chance.

"Jens—Professor Larssen, I guess I mean—what *are* we gonna do about this?" Sam Yeager asked.

He was being as decent as he could. Somehow, that made things worse, not better. Worse or better, though, he'd sure found the sixty-four-dollar question. "I don't know," Jens muttered with a helplessness he'd never felt while confronting the abstruse equations of quantum mechanics.

Barbara said, "Jens, I guess you've been here a while." She waited for him to nod before she went on, "Do you have some place where we could talk for a while, just the two of us?"

"Yeah." He pointed back toward Science Hall. "I've got an office on the third floor there."

"Okay, let's go." He wished she'd headed off with him without a backwards glance,

but she didn't. She turned back to Sam Yeager and said, "I'll see you later."

Yeager looked as unhappy about her going with Jens as Jens felt about her looking back at the corporal, which oddly made him feel a little better. But Yeager shrugged—what else could he do? "Okay, hon," he said. "You'll probably find me riding herd on the Lizards." He mooched after the wagon that had held him and Barbara and the aliens.

"Come on," Jens said to Barbara. She fell into step beside him, their strides matching as automatically as they always did. Now, though, as he watched her legs move, all he could think of was them locked around Sam Yeager's back. That scene played over and over in his mind, in vivid Technicolor—and brought pain just as vivid.

Neither of them said much as they walked back to Science Hall, nor as they climbed the stairs. Jens sat down behind his cluttered desk, waved Barbara to a chair. The minute he did that, he knew it was a mistake: it felt more as if he was having a conference with a colleague than talking with his wife. But getting up and coming back around the desk would have made him look foolish, so he stayed where he was.

"So how did this happen?" he asked.

Barbara looked at her hands. Her hair tumbled over her face and down past her shoulders. He wasn't used to it so long and straight; it made her look different. Well, a lot of things had suddenly turned different.

"I thought you were dead," she said quietly. "You went off across country, you never wrote, you never telegraphed, you never called—not that the phones or anything else worked very well. I tried and tried not to believe it, but in the end—what was I supposed to think, Jens?"

"They wouldn't let me get hold of you." His voice shook with fury ready to burst free, like a U-235 nucleus waiting for a neutron. "First off, General Patton wouldn't let me send a message into Chicago because he was afraid it would foul up his attack on the Lizards. Then they wouldn't let me do anything to draw attention to the Met Lab. I went along. I thought it made sense; if we don't make ourselves an atomic bomb, our goose is probably cooked. But, Jesus—"

"I know," she said. She still would not look at him.

"What about Yeager?" he demanded.

More rage came out in his voice. Another mistake: now Barbara did look up, angrily. If he attacked the bum, she was going to defend him. *Why shouldn't she?* Larssen asked himself bitterly. If she hadn't had a feel for him, she wouldn't have married him (God), wouldn't have let him get her pregnant (God oh God).

"After you—went away, I got a job typing for a psychology professor at the university," Barbara said. "He was studying Lizard prisoners, trying to figure out what makes them tick. Sam would bring them around—he helped capture them, and he's sort of their keeper, I guess you'd say. He's very good with them."

"So you got friendly," Jens said.

“So we got friendly,” Barbara agreed.

“How did you get—more than friendly?” With an effort, Larssen kept his voice steady, neutral.

She looked down at her hands again. “A Lizard plane strafed the ship that was taking us out of Chicago.” She gulped. “A sailor got killed—horribly killed—right in front of us. I guess we were both so glad just to be alive that—that—one thing led to another.”

Jens nodded heavily. Things like that could happen. *Why do they have to happen to me, God?* he asked, and got no answer. As if twisting the knife in his own flesh, he asked, “And when did you get married to him?”

“Not even three weeks ago, up in Wyoming,” Barbara answered. “I needed to be as sure as I could that that was something I really wanted to do. I figured out I was expecting the evening we got into Fort Collins.” Her face twisted. “A soldier on horseback brought your letter the next morning.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Jens groaned.

“What’s the matter?” Barbara asked, worry in her voice.

“Nothing anybody can help now,” he said, though he wanted to twist a knife, not in his own flesh, but in Colonel Hexham’s. If the miserable blunder-brained, brass-bound, regulation-and security-crazy son of a bitch had let him write a letter when he first asked, most of this mess never would have happened.

Yeah, she and Yeager still would have had their fling, but he could deal with that—she’d thought he was dead, and so had Yeager. She wouldn’t have married the guy, or got pregnant by him. Life would have been a hell of a lot simpler.

Jens asked himself a new and unsettling question: how would things go between Barbara and him if she decided to give Yeager the brush and come back to him forever? How would he handle her giving birth to the other man’s kid and then raising it? It wouldn’t be easy; he could see that much.

He sighed. So did Barbara, at almost the same moment. She smiled. Jens stayed stony-faced. He asked, “Have the two of you been sleeping together since you found out?”

“In the same bed, you mean?” she said. “Of course we have. We traveled all the way across the Great Plains like that—and it still gets cold at night.”

Though he habitually worked with abstractions, he wasn’t deaf to what people said, and he sure as hell knew evasion when he heard it. “That’s not what I meant,” he told her.

“Do you really want to know?” Her chin went up defiantly. Pushing her made her angry, all right; he’d been afraid it would, and he was right. Before he could answer what might have been a rhetorical question, she went on, “As a matter of fact, we did, night before last. And so?”

Jens didn’t know *and so*. Everything he’d looked forward to—everything except work, anyhow—had crumbled to pieces inside the last half hour. He didn’t know whether he

wanted to pick up those pieces and try to put them together again. But if he didn't, what did he have left? The answer to that was painfully obvious: nothing.

Barbara was still waiting for her answer. He said, "I wish to God it had been me instead."

"I know," she said, which was not the same as *I wish it had, too*. But something—maybe the naked longing in his voice—seemed to soften her. She continued, "It's not that I don't love you, Jens—don't ever think that. But when I thought you were ... gone forever, I told myself life went on, and I had to go on with it. I can't turn off what I feel about Sam as if it were a light switch."

"Obviously," he said, which made her angry again. "I'm sorry," he added quickly, though he wasn't sure he meant it. "The whole thing is just fubar."

"Fubar? What's that?" Barbara's eyes lit up. She lived for words. When she found one she didn't know, she pounced.

"I picked it up from the Army guys I was with for a while," he answered. "It stands for 'fouled'—but that's not what they usually say—'up beyond all recognition.'"

"Oh, like snafu," she said, neatly cataloging it.

After that, silence stretched between them. Jens wanted to ask the one question he hadn't put to her—"Will you come back to me?"—but he didn't. Part of him was afraid she'd say no. A different part was just as much afraid she'd say yes.

When he didn't say anything, Barbara said: "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," he answered, which was honest enough to make her nod soberly. He went on, "In the end, it's more or less up to you, isn't it?"

"Not altogether." Her left hand spread over her belly; he wondered if she knew it had moved. "For instance, do you want me back—under the circumstances?"

Since he'd been asking himself the same thing, he couldn't exclaim *Yes!* the way he probably should have. When a couple of seconds passed without his saying anything, Barbara looked away. That frightened him. He didn't want to throw her out, either. He said, "I'm sorry, dear. Too much landing on me all at once."

"Isn't that the sad and sorry truth?" She shook her head wearily, then got to her feet. "I'd better get downstairs and help with the work, Jens. I've sort of turned into assistant Lizard liaison person."

"Wait." He had work, too, a load that was going to quadruple now that the Met Lab was finally here. But that didn't have to start at this precise instant. He got up, too, hurried around the desk and took her in his arms. She held him tight; her body molded itself to his. It felt so familiar, so right. He wished he'd had the sense to lock his office door: he might have tried to drag her down to the floor then and there. It had been so long ... He remembered the last time they'd made love on the floor, with Lizard bombs falling all over Chicago.

She tilted her face up, kissed him with more warmth than she'd shown down on East

Evans. But before he could try dragging her down to the floor even with the door unlocked, she pulled away and said, "I really should go."

"Where will you stay tonight?" he asked. There. That brought it out in the open. If she said she'd stay with him, he didn't know what *he'd* do—not go back to the BOQ, that was for sure.

But she just shook her head and answered, "Don't ask me that yet, please. Right now I don't even know which end is up."

"All right," he said reluctantly; *he'd* been up when they held each other.

Barbara walked out of the office. He listened to her footsteps receding down the hallway and then in the stairwell. He went back to his desk, looked out the window behind it. There she came, out of Science Hall.

And there she went, over to Sam Yeager. No doubt who he was, even from three floors up: plenty of men in Army uniforms standing around, but only one of them stayed by the two Lizard prisoners. Jens felt like a Peeping Tom as he watched his wife hug and kiss the tall soldier, but he couldn't make himself tear his eyes away. When he compared the way she held Yeager to how she'd embraced him, a cold, inescapable conclusion formed in his mind: wherever she slept tonight, it wouldn't be with him.

At last Barbara broke free of the other man, but her hand lingered affectionately at his waist for an extra few seconds. Jens made himself turn away from the window and look at his desk. *No matter what happens to the rest of my life, there's still a war on and I have a ton of work to do*, he told himself.

He could make himself lean forward in the chair. He could make himself pull a report from the varnished pine IN basket and set it on the blotter in front of him. But, try as he would, he couldn't make the words mean anything. Misery and rage strangled his brains.

If that was bad, pedaling back to the BOQ with a silent Oscar right behind him felt ten times worse. "I won't take it," he whispered again and again, not wanting the guard to hear. "I won't."

Normal life. Moishe Russie had almost forgotten such a thing could exist. Certainly he'd known nothing of the sort for the past three and a half years, since the Stukas and broad-winged Heinkel 111s and other planes of the Nazi war machine began dropping death on Warsaw.

First the bombardment. Then the ghetto: insane crowding, disease, starvation, overwork—death for tens of thousands, served up a centimeter at a time. Then another spasm of war as the Lizards drove the Germans from Warsaw. And then that strange time as the Lizards' mouthpiece. He'd thought that was close to normal; at least he and his family had had food on the table.

But the Lizards were as eager to put shackles on his spirit as the Nazis had been to squeeze work out of his body and then let it die ... or to ship him away and just kill him,

regardless of how much work was left in him.

Then God only knew how long underground in a dark sardine tin, and then the flight to Lodz. None of that had been even remotely normal. But now here he was, with Rivka and Reuven, in a flat with water and electricity (most of the time, at least), and with no sign the Lizards knew where he'd gone.

It wasn't paradise—but what was? It was a chance to live like a human being instead of a starving draft horse or a hunted rabbit. *This, by now, is my definition of normal?* Russie asked himself as he strode down Zgierska Street to see what the market had to offer.

He shook his head. "Not normal," he insisted aloud, as if someone had disagreed with him. *Normal* would have meant going back to medical school, where the worst he would have had to endure was hostility from the Polish students. He itched to be able to start learning again, and to start practicing what he'd learned.

Instead, here he came, ambling along down a street in a town not his own, clean-shaven, doing his best to act like a man who'd never had a thought in his life. This was safer than the way he'd been living, but ... normal? No.

As usual, the Balut Market square was packed. Some new posters had gone up on the dirty brick walls of the buildings surrounding the square. Bigger than life, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski looked down on the ragged men and women gathered there, his arms and hands outstretched in exhortation. WORK MEANS FREEDOM! the poster cried in Yiddish, Polish, and German.

ARBEIT MACHT FREI. A shiver ran down Russie's back when he saw that in German. The Nazis had put the same legend above the gates of their extermination camp at Auschwitz. He wondered if Rumkowski knew.

He got in line to buy cabbage. More of Rumkowski's posters stood behind the peddler's cart. So did other, smaller ones with big red letters that announced WANTED FOR THE RAPE AND MURDER OF A LITTLE GIRL in the three most widely spoken languages of Lizard-held Poland.

*Who could be such a monster?* Russie thought. His eyes, drawn by those screaming red letters, looked to the picture on the poster. It was one of the fancy photographs the Lizards took, in full color and giving the effect of three dimensions. Moishe noticed that before he realized with horror that he recognized the face on the poster. It was his own.

The poster didn't call him by his proper name—that would have given the game away. Instead, it styled him Israel Gottlieb. It said he'd committed his ghastly crimes in Warsaw and was being sought all over Poland, and it offered a large reward for his capture.

His head whipped wildly back and forth. Were people staring at him, at the poster, getting ready to shout at him or grab him and drag him to the cobblestones? He'd never imagined the Lizards would come up with such a devilish way of trying to bring him back into their hands. He felt as if they'd set the mark of Cain on his forehead.

But none of the men in hats or caps, none of the women in head scarves, acted as if the mark were visible. Few even glanced at the poster; of those who did, none looked from it to Russie.

His eyes went to it once more. On that second examination, he began to understand. The Lizards' photo showed him as he had been when he was speaking on the radio for Zolraag: in other words, bearded and in a dark homburg rather than clean-shaven and with a flat gray cloth cap of the sort he wore these days. To him, the difference seemed minuscule: it was, after all, his own face. But nobody else seemed to have the faintest suspicion he was the alleged monster whose visage would undoubtedly be used to frighten children.

Bristles rasped under his fingers as he rubbed his chin. He needed a shave. From here on out, he'd shave every day, no matter what: putting it off till tomorrow was liable to make him resemble himself too much.

He finally reached the head of the line, bought a couple of cabbages, and asked the price of some green onions the peddler had in a little wicker basket on his cart. When the fellow told him, he clapped a hand to his forehead and exclaimed, "*Ganef!* You should grow like an onion—with your head in the ground."

"An onion should grow from your *pippuk*," the vegetable seller retorted, answering one Yiddish execration with another. "Then it would be cheaper."

They haggled for a while, but Russie couldn't beat the man down to a price that wouldn't leave Rivka furious at him, so he gave up and left, carrying his cabbages in a canvas bag. He thought about stopping to buy a cup of tea from a fellow with a battered tin samovar, but decided that would be tempting fate. The sooner he got out of the square, the fewer eyes would have a chance to light on him.

Going out, though, was swimming against the tide. The Balut Market square had filled even fuller when he stood in line. Then, abruptly, the swarm of people coming in slowed. Russie looked up just in time to keep from being run over by Chaim Rumkowski's coach.

The horse that drew the four-wheeled carriage snorted in annoyance as the driver, a hard-faced man in a gray greatcoat and quasimilitary cap, hauled back on the reins to stop it. The driver looked annoyed, too. Russie touched the brim of his own cap and mumbled, "Sorry, sir." He'd had plenty of practice fawning on the Germans, but doing it for one of his own people grated even harder on him.

Mollified, the driver dipped his head, but from behind him came the querulous voice of an elderly man:

"You up there—come here." Heart sinking, Russie obeyed. As he walked back toward Rumkowski, he saw that the driver's bench still sported a neat sign left over from the days of German domination: *WAGEN DES AELTESTEN DER JUDEN* (coach of the Eldest of the Jews), with the same in smaller letters in Yiddish below.

He wondered if the Eldest still wore a yellow Star of David on his right breast, as the

Nazis had required the ghetto Jews to do. No, he found to his relief, although he could still see where the star had been sewn onto Rumkowski's herringbone tweed overcoat.

Then Moishe stopped worrying about small things, for sitting beside Rumkowski, almost hidden by his bulk, was a Lizard. Russie didn't think he had ever seen this particular alien, but he couldn't be sure. He felt as if all the posters with his picture on them were growing hands and pointing straight at him.

Rumkowski pointed straight at him, too, with a stubby forefinger. "You should be careful. You were almost badly hurt."

"Yes, Eldest. I'm sorry, Eldest." Russie looked down at the ground, both to show humility and to keep Rumkowski and the Lizard from getting a good look at him. The aliens had as much trouble telling people apart as people did with their kind, but he did not want to find himself an exception to the rule.

The Lizard leaned forward to see him without being blocked by Rumkowski's body. Its eye turrets swiveled in a way Russie knew well. In fair German, it asked him, "What do you have in that bag?"

"Only a couple of cabbages." Russie had the presence of mind not to add *superior sir*, as he had learned to do back in Warsaw. That would just let the Lizard know he was familiar with the usages of its kind.

"How much did you pay for these cabbages?" Rumkowski asked.

"Ten zlotys, Eldest," Moishe said.

Rumkowski turned to the Lizard and said, "You see, Bunim, how we have flourished under your rule. A few months ago, these cabbages would have been many times as dear. We are always grateful for your aid, and will do whatever we can to continue deserving your favor."

"Yes, of course," Bunim said. Had he been a human, Russie would have thought his voice full of contempt: how could one not feel contemptuous of such an abject thing as Rumkowski had become? Yet the Lizards, even more than the Germans, assumed themselves to be the *Herrenvolk*, the master race. Perhaps Bunim accepted sycophancy from the Eldest simply as his due.

Rumkowski pointed to his own propaganda posters on the walls of the market square. "We know our debt, Bunim, and we work hard to repay it."

Bunim swung one eye toward the posters while keeping the other on Russie. Moishe made ready to fling the cabbages at his scaly face and flee. But the Lizard just said, "Continue on this course and all will be well."

"It shall be done, superior sir," Rumkowski said in the hissing language of the Race. Moishe had all he could do to keep his face blank and stupid; if he was just an ordinary *shlemiel* on the street, he had no business understanding the Lizards' speech. The Eldest seemed to remember he was there. "Take your food home to your family," he said, dropping back into Yiddish. "We may not be so hungry as we once were, but I know the memory lingers."



“You’re right about that.” Russie touched the brim of his cap. “Thank you, Eldest.” He scuttled away from the carriage as fast as he could without seeming to be running for his life. Acrid sweat dripped from his armpits and down his back.

Along with the fear came anger. Rumkowski had *chutzpah* and to spare, if he thought to impress anyone by talking about how hungry “we” had been. His fleshy frame didn’t look to have missed many meals under German control of the ghetto, and he’d earned his food with the sweat and the blood of his fellow Jews.

But that, dreadful as it was, was also by the way. For now, the only thing that truly mattered to Russie was that he’d got away with the toughest test his flimsy disguise was ever likely to face. He wasn’t surprised the Lizard had failed to recognize him; the Lizard might not have known who he was even if he’d still had his beard.

But Chaim Rumkowski ... Rumkowski was a Lizard puppet as Moishe had been a puppet. It wouldn’t have been too surprising if he’d seen Moishe’s face in a Lizard photograph or in one of the propaganda films Zolraag and his minions had taken back when he and Russie got along. But if he had, he didn’t associate it with a shabby Jew carrying cabbages home to his wife.

“And a good thing, too,” Moishe said.

When he got back to his block of flats, he waved to Reuven, who was kicking a ball around with a couple of other boys and dodging in and out amongst passersby on the street. That game would have been impossibly dangerous before the war, when whizzing motorcars killed children every week.

These days, even the Eldest of the Lodz ghetto rode in a carriage like a nineteenth-century physician on his rounds; the only motor vehicle in the ghetto that Moishe knew about was the fire engine. People got about on bicycles or in carts hauled by their fellow men, or most often, afoot. And so sport got safer for little boys. *Even the worst wind blows in a little good with it*, Russie thought.

He carried the cabbages upstairs to his apartment. Rivka pounced on them. She did no more than raise an eyebrow when he told her how much he’d paid, from which he concluded he hadn’t done too badly. “What else did they have down there?” she asked.

“*Tzibeles*—green onions—but I couldn’t get a decent price for them, so I didn’t buy any,” he said. Rivka positively beamed; by her expression, she’d expected him to spend all their money for one dried-up little onion. He went on, “That’s not all,” and told her about the posters.

“That’s terrible,” she said, before he even had a chance to let her know what they claimed he’d done. When he did, she clenched her fists and ground out, “It’s worse than terrible—it’s filthy.”

“So it is,” Moishe answered. “But the pictures show me the way I used to be, and I look different now. I proved it after I got these cabbages.”

“Oh? How?”

“Because the Eldest of the Jews and the Lizard he had in the carriage with him both

spoke to me, and neither one of them had the least idea who I was even though my picture was plastered all over the market square.” Russie spoke as if he’d been through something that happened every day, hoping not to alarm Rivka. He alarmed himself instead; all the fright he’d felt came back in a rush.

And he frightened his wife. “That’s it,” she said in a voice that brooked no argument. “From now on, you don’t go out of the flat unless it’s a matter of life or death—any time you do go out, it turns into a matter of life or death.”

He could not disagree with that. He did say, “I had been thinking of going to the hospital and offering my services there. Lodz—and especially its Jews—still has far too much sickness and not enough people trained in medicine.”

“If you were only putting your own neck in the noose, that would be one thing,” Rivka said. “But if they catch you, Moishe, they catch Reuven and me, too. They won’t be very happy with us, either; remember, we disappeared right under their snouts when we went into hiding.”

“I know,” he answered heavily. “But after being cooped up so long under Warsaw, the idea of having to stay here leaves me sick.”

“Better you should be left sick than left dead,” Rivka said, to which he had no good reply. She went on, “I’m a better shopper than you, anyhow, and you know it. We’ll save money with you at home.”

He knew that, too. Had he gone straight from the Warsaw bunker to close confinement in this flat, he could have borne it easily enough. But a taste of freedom left him hungry for more. It had been the same in Warsaw. If the Lizards had treated its Jews the same way the Germans had, people there might well have accepted it, simply because it was what they’d grown used to. After a spell of mild rule, though, tough strictures would have been hard to reimpose. He’d certainly rebelled when the Lizards tried to make him into nothing but their mouthpiece.

Rivka inspected the cabbages, peeled off a couple of wilted outer leaves, and threw them away. That was a measure of how far they’d come. In the days when the Nazis ruled the ghetto, wilted cabbage leaves would have been something to fight over. Their being just garbage again showed that the family wasn’t in the last stages of starving to death any more.

The rest of the cabbage, chopped, went into the soup pot with potatoes and a big white onion from a vegetable basket by the counter. Moishe wished for a roasted pullet or barley and beef soup with bones full of marrow. Cabbage and potatoes, though, you could live a long time on that, even without meat.

“It certainly seems like a long time, anyhow,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” Rivka asked.

“Nothing,” he answered loyally, thinking of all the vitamins and other nutrients in potatoes and cabbages and onions. But man did not live by nutrients alone, and the soup, however nourishing the medical part of him knew it to be, remained uninspiring

despite Rivka's best efforts.

She put a lid on the soup pot. The hot plate would eventually bring it to a boil. Moishe had given up on quickly cooked food—not that soup cooked quickly any which way. Rivka said, “I wonder how long Reuven will play outside.”

“Hmm.” Moishe sent her a speculative look. She smiled back. Just for a moment, the tip of her tongue appeared between her teeth. He did his best to sound severe: “I think you're just trying to butter me up.” He listened to himself. Severe? He sounded eager as a bridegroom.

As a matter of fact, he *was* eager as a bridegroom. He took a couple of quick steps across the kitchen. Rivka's arms went around him at the same time his went around her. After a few seconds, she said, “For this, I may even like you better clean-shaven. Your mustaches used to tickle my nose when we kissed.”

“If you like it so well—” he said, and resumed. His hand cupped her breast through the wool of her dress. She made a small noise deep in her throat and pressed herself tighter against him.

The door opened.

Moishe and Rivka jumped away from each other as if they had springs in their shoes. From the doorway, Reuven called, “Is there anything to eat? I'm hungry.”

“There's a heel of bread in here you can have, and I'm making soup,” Rivka answered. “Your father brought home a couple of lovely cabbages.” Her shrug to Moishe was full of humorous frustration.

He understood the feeling because he shared it. In the insanely overcrowded Warsaw ghetto, concerns about privacy had fallen to pieces, because so little was to be had. People did what they did, and the other people crammed into a flat with them, no matter how young, pretended not to notice. But decorum had returned to the family as soon as they were out of that desperate overcrowding.

Reuven wolfed down the bread his mother gave him, then sat on the kitchen floor to stare expectantly at the soup pot. Above him, Rivka said “Tonight” to Moishe.

He nodded. His son let out an indignant squawk: “The soup won't be ready till *tonight*?”

“No, I was talking about something else with your father,” Rivka said.

Partway appeased, Reuven resumed his pot watching. The idea of privacy had come back after they were no longer stuffed into a flat like sardines. But food ... they all still worried about food, even though they weren't starving any more. If they hadn't, Moishe wouldn't have noticed Rivka throwing out the wilted cabbage leaves, wouldn't have counted that as a sign of their relative affluence.

“Do you know,” he said out of the blue, “I think I understand Rumkowski better.”

“*Nu*?” Rivka said. “Tell me. How he could go on dealing with the Lizards, and with the Nazis before them—” She shivered.

Moishe explained his thoughts about the cabbage leaves, then went on, “I think Rumkowski’s the same way, only about power, not food. However he thought of it when this was a Nazis ghetto, he can’t change his mind now. He’s—fixated, that’s the word.” It came out in German; Yiddish didn’t have a term for the precise psychological concept Moishe was trying to get across. Rivka nodded to show she followed.

Reuven said, “You threw out some cabbage leaves, Mama?” He got up and went over to the garbage can. “May I eat them?”

“No, just leave them there,” Rivka said, and then again, louder, “Leave them there, I told you. You’re not going to starve to death before the soup is done.” She stopped with a bemused look on her face.

*Progress*, Moishe thought. He shook his head. To such had he been reduced that he measured progress by the existence of garbage.

*Rasputitsa*—the time of mud. Ludmila Gorbunova squelched across the airstrip, her boots making disgusting sucking and plopping noises at every step. Each time she lifted one, more mud clung to it, until she thought she was carrying half a *kolkhoz*’s worth on each foot.

The mud came to Russia and the Ukraine twice a year. In the fall, the rains brought it. The fall *rasputitsa* could be heavy or light, depending on how much rain fell for how long before it turned to snow and froze the ground.

The spring *rasputitsa* was different. When the spring sun melted the snow and ice that had accumulated since last fall, millions of square kilometers turned into a bog. That included roads, none of which was paved outside the big cities. For several weeks the only ways to get around were by *panje* wagons, which were almost boat-shaped and had wheels high enough to get down through the glop to solid ground, and by wide-tracked T-34 tanks.

That also meant most aviation came to a halt during the *rasputitsa*. The Red Air Force flew off dirt strips, and all the dirt was liquid for the time being. Taxiing for takeoffs and landings wasn’t practical; just keeping aircraft from sinking into the swamp wasn’t easy.

As usual, one model proved the exception: the U-2. With skis of the same sort the little biplane used to operate in heavy snow, it could skid along the surface of the mud until it gained enough speed to take off, and could also land in muck ... provided the pilot set it down as gently as if eggs were under the skis. Otherwise it dug its nose into the ground and sometimes flipped, with unfortunate results for all concerned.

The mud in the revetment that housed Ludmila’s U-2 was heavily strewn with straw, which meant she didn’t even sink to her ankles, let alone to midcalf as she had outside. She didn’t squelch as much, either.

Georg Schultz was adjusting one of the struts that joined the U-2’s upper and lower wings when she came into the revetment. “*Guten Tag*,” he said cautiously.

“Good day,” she returned, also in German, also cautiously. He hadn’t made any unwelcome advances since she’d rounded on him for trying it, and he had kept on maintaining her *Kukuruznik* with his usual fanatic attention to detail. They still weren’t easy around each other: she’d caught him watching her when he didn’t think she’d notice, while he had to be nervous she’d speak to her fellow Russians about what he’d done. A thoroughgoing fascist, he was tolerated only for his mechanical skills. If the Russians found a reason not to tolerate him, he wouldn’t last long.

He stuck a screwdriver into a pocket of his coveralls, came to attention so stiff it mocked the respect it was supposed to convey. “The aircraft is ready for flight, Comrade Pilot,” he reported.

“Thank you,” Ludmila answered. She did not call him “Comrade Mechanic” in return, not because it sounded unnatural to her in German, but because Schultz used for sarcasm what should have been a term of egalitarian respect. She wondered how he’d survived in Hitlerite Germany; in the Soviet Union that attitude would surely have seen him purged.

She checked the fuel level and the ammunition loads herself: no such thing as being too careful. When she was satisfied, she stepped out of the revetment and waved for groundcrew men. She, they, and Schultz manhandled the *Kukuruznik* out onto the runway. It stayed on top of the mud more easily than they did.

When Schultz yanked at the prop, the little Shvetsov five-cylinder radial began to buzz almost at once. The engine’s exhaust fumes made Ludmila cough, but she nodded approvingly at its note. Nazi and lecher though he was, Georg Schultz knew his work.

Ludmila released the brake, applied the throttle. The U-2 slid down the airstrip, mud splattering in its wake. When she’d built up the speed she needed (not much), she eased back on the stick and the biplane abandoned the boggy earth for the freedom of the sky.

With the *rasputitsa* below her, Ludmila could savor the beginnings of spring. The slipstream that slid over the windscreen no longer turned her nose and cheeks to lumps of ice. The sun shone cheerily out of a blue sky with only a few plump white clouds, and would not disappear below the horizon when later afternoon came. The air smelled of growing things, not of the mud in which they grew.

She wished she could fly higher to see more. This was a day when flying was a joy, not a duty. But just when, for a moment, she was on the verge of forgetting why she flew, she skimmed low over the rusting hulks of two T-34s, one with its turret lying upside down fifteen meters away from the hull. She wondered whether the Germans or Lizards had killed the Soviet tanks.

Either way, the melancholy sight reminded her someone would kill her, too, if she failed to remember she was in the middle of a war. With every second, Lizard-held territory drew closer.

After so many missions, flying into country the alien imperialist invaders controlled had begun to approach the routine. She’d dropped small bombs on them and shot at them, smuggled in weapons and propaganda for the partisans. Today’s mission was

different.

“You are to pick up a man,” Colonel Karpov had told her. “His name is Nikifor Sholudenko. He has information valuable to the Soviet Union. What this information is, I do not know, only its importance.”

“I understand, Comrade Colonel,” Ludmila had answered. The more one knew, the more one could be ... encouraged to tell if captured.

An apple orchard halfway between Konotop and Romni. That’s what he’d said, at any rate. It would have been easy if she’d been able to fly straight over Konotop on a course for Romni. Well, it would have been easier, anyhow. But the Lizards held Konotop in their little clawed hands. Flying over it would have resulted in the untimely demise she’d so far managed to forestall.

And so, as usual, she flew a track that reminded her of what she’d learned in biology of the twists of the intestines within the abdominal cavity, all performed less than fifty meters off the ground. If everything went perfectly, the last jink would put her right at the orchard. If things went as they usually did—*well*, she told herself, *I’ll manage somehow*.

Off to her left, she watched a Lizard tank struggling to pull three or four trucks from the morass into which they’d blundered. The tank wasn’t having a much easier time moving than the trucks, Ludmila’s lips skinned back from her teeth in a predator’s grin. If she hadn’t been under orders, she could have shot up the convoy. But deviating from the mission assigned would have caused her more grief than it was worth.

Another change of course and—if everything had gone right—the apple orchard should have been a couple of kilometers dead ahead. It wasn’t, of course. She began a search spiral, not something she was happy to do in broad daylight: too much chance of flying past Lizards who weren’t so preoccupied as that last bunch had been.

There! Bare-branched trees beginning to go green, with here and there the first white blossoms that before long would make the orchard look as if snow had fallen on it, though all the rest of the world was verdant with spring. A man waited in amongst the trees.

Ludmila looked around for the best place to land her plane. One stretch of boggy ground seemed no different from another. She’d hoped the partisans would have marked off a strip, but no such luck. After a moment, she realized no one had told her this Sholudenko was connected with the partisans. She’d assumed as much, but what were assumptions worth? Not a kopeck.

“As close to the orchard as I can,” she said, making the decision aloud. She’d landed on airfields which were just that—fields—so often that she took one more such landing for granted. Down she came, killing her airspeed and peering ahead to make sure she wasn’t about to go into a hole or anything of the sort.

She was down and sliding along before she saw the old gnarled roots sticking out of the ground. She realized then, too late, that the orchard had once been bigger than it

was now. She couldn't wrench back on the stick and take off again; she wasn't going fast enough.

The *Kukuruznik* didn't need much room to land. God willing (a thought that welled up unbidden through her Marxist-Leninist education and training), everything would be all right.

She almost made it. But just when she started to believe she would, the tip of her left ski caught under a root as thick as her arm. The U-2 tried to spin back around the way it had come. A wing dug into the ground; she heard a spar snap. The prop smacked the ground and snapped. One wooden blade whined past her head. Then the *Kukuruznik* flipped over onto its back, leaving Ludmila hanging upside down in the open pilot's cabin.

"*Bozhemoi*—my God," she said shakily. No, the dialectic somehow didn't spring to mind when she'd just done her best to kill herself.

Squelch, squelch, squelch. Someone, presumably the fellow who'd been standing in the apple orchard, was coming up to what had been her aircraft and was now just so much junk. In a dry voice, he said, "I've seen that done better."

"So have I," Ludmila admitted. "... Comrade Sholudenko?"

"The same," he said. "They didn't tell me you would be a woman. Are you all right? Do you need help getting out?"

Ludmila took mental inventory. She'd bitten her lip, she'd be bruised, but she didn't think she'd broken anything but her aircraft and her pride. "I'm not hurt," she muttered. "As for the other—" She released the catches of her safety harness, came down to earth with a wet splat, and, filthy, crawled out from under the U-2. "Here I am."

"Here you are," he agreed. His Russian, like hers, had a Ukrainian accent. He looked like a Ukrainian peasant, with a wide, high-cheekboned face, blue eyes, and blond hair that looked as if it had been cut under a bowl. He didn't talk like a peasant, though: not only did he sound educated, he sounded cynical and worldly-wise. He went on, "How do you propose to take me where I must go? Will another aircraft come to pick up both of us?"

It was a good question, one for which Ludmila lacked a good answer. Slowly, she said, "If they do, it won't be soon. I'm not due back for some hours, and my aircraft has no radio." No U-2 that she knew of had one; poor communications were the bane of all Soviet forces, ground and air alike.

"And when you do not land at your airstrip, they are more likely to think the Lizards shot you down than that you did it to yourself," Sholudenko said. "You must be a good pilot, or you would have been dead a long time ago."

"Till a few minutes ago, I thought so," Ludmila answered ruefully. "But yes, you have a point. How important is this information of yours?"

"I think it has weight," Sholudenko said. "Someone in authority must have agreed with me, or they would not have sent you to do tumbling routines for my amusement. How

large my news bulks in the world at large ... who can say?"

Ludmila slapped at the mud on her flying suit, which spread it around without getting much of it off. Tumbling routines ... she wanted to hit him for that. But he had influence, or he wouldn't have been able to get a plane sent after him. She contented herself with saying, "I don't think we should linger here. The Lizards are very good at spotting wreckage from the air and coming round to shoot it up."

"A distinct point," Sholudenko admitted. Without a backwards glance at the U-2, he started north across the fields.

Ludmila glumly tramped after him. She asked, "Do you have access to a radio yourself? Can you transmit the information that way?"

"Some, at need. Not all." He patted the pack on his back. "The rest is photographs." He paused, the first sign of uncertainty he'd shown. *Wondering whether to tell me anything*, Ludmila realized. At length he said, "Does the name Stepan Bandera mean anything to you?"

"The Ukrainian collaborator and nationalist? Yes, but nothing good." During the throes of the Soviet Revolution, the Ukraine had briefly been independent of Moscow and Leningrad. Bandera wanted to bring back those days. He was one of the Ukrainians who'd greeted the Nazis with open arms, only to have them throw him in jail a few months later. *No one loves a traitor*, Ludmila thought. *You may use him if that proves convenient, but no one loves him.*

"I know of nothing good to hear," Sholudenko said. "When the Lizards came, the Nazis set him free to promote solidarity between the workers and peasants of the occupied Ukraine and their German masters. He paid them back for their treatment of him, but not in a way to gladden our hearts."

Ludmila needed a few seconds to work through the implications of that. "He is collaborating with the Lizards?"

"He and most of the Banderists." Sholudenko spat on the ground to show what he thought of that. "They have a Committee of Ukrainian Liberation that has given our patriotic partisan bands a good deal of grief lately."

"What is the *rodina*, the motherland, coming to?" Ludmila said plaintively. "First we had to deal with those who would sooner have seen the Germans enslave our people than live under our Soviet government, and now the Banderists prefer the imperialist aliens to the Soviet Union and the Germans. Something must be dreadfully wrong, to make the people hate government so."

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she wished she had them back again. She did not know this Nikifor Sholudenko from a hole in the ground. Yes, he dressed like a peasant, but for all she knew, he might be NKVD. In fact, he probably *was* NKVD, if he had pictures of Banderists in his knapsack. And she'd just criticized the Soviet government in front of him.

Had she been so foolish in 1937, she'd likely have disappeared off the face of the



earth. Even in the best of times, she'd have worried about a show trial (or no trial) and a stretch of years in the *gulag*. She suspected the Soviet prison camp system still functioned at undiminished efficiency; most of it was in the far north, where Lizard control did not reach.

Sholudenko murmured, "You do like to live dangerously, don't you?"

With almost immeasurable relief, Ludmila realized the world wasn't going to fall in on her, at least not right away. "I guess I do," she mumbled, and resolved to watch her tongue more closely in the future.

"In the abstract, I could even agree with you," Sholudenko said. "As things are—" He spread his hands. That meant that, as far as he was concerned, this conversation was not taking place, and that he would deny anything she attributed to him if the matter came to the attention of an interrogator.

"May I speak—abstractly—too?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "The constitution of 1936 guarantees free expression to all citizens of the Soviet Union, as any schoolgirl knows." He spoke without apparent irony, yet his hypothetical schoolgirl had to know also that anyone trying to exercise her free speech (or any of the other rights guaranteed—or entombed—in the constitution) would discover she'd picked a short trip into big trouble.

Somehow, though, she did not think Sholudenko, for all his cynicism, would betray her after giving her leave to speak. Maybe that was naive on her part, but she'd already said enough to let him ruin her if that was what he had in mind, and so she said, "It's terrible that our own Soviet government has earned the hatred of so many of its people. Any ruling class will have those who work to betray it, but so many?"

"Terrible, yes," Sholudenko said. "Surprising, no." He ticked off points on his fingers like an academician or a political commissar. "Consider, Comrade Pilot: a hundred years ago, Russia was entirely mired in the feudal means of production. Even at the time of the October Revolution, capitalism was far less entrenched here than in Germany or England. Is this not so?"

"It is so," Ludmila said.

"Very well, then. Consider also the significance of that fact. Suddenly the revolution had occurred—in a world that hated it, a world that would crush it if it could. You are too young to remember the British, the Americans, the Japanese who invaded us, but you will have learned of them."

"Yes, but—"

Sholudenko held up a forefinger. "Let me finish, please. Comrade Stalin saw we would be destroyed if we could not match our enemies in the quantity of goods we turn out. Anything and anyone standing in the way of that had to go. Thus the pact with the Hitlerites: not only did it buy us almost two years' time, but also land from the Finns, on the Baltic, and from the Poles and Rumanians to serve as a shield when the fascist murderers did attack us."

All that shield had been lost within a few weeks of the Nazi invasion. Most of the people in the lands the Soviet Union had annexed joined the Hitlerites in casting out the Communist Party, which spoke volumes on how much they'd loved falling under Soviet control.

But did that matter? Sholudenko had a point. Without ruthless preparation, the revolution of the workers and peasants would surely have been crushed by reactionary forces, either during the civil war or at German hands.

“Unquestionably, the Soviet state has the right and duty to survive,” Ludmila said. Sholudenko nodded approvingly. But the pilot went on, “But does the state have a right to survive in such a way as to make so many of its people prefer the vicious Germans to its own representatives?”

If she hadn't still been shaky from flipping her airplane, she wouldn't have said anything so foolish to a probable NKVD man, even “abstractly.” She looked around the fields through which they were slogging. No one was in sight. If Sholudenko tried to place her under arrest ... well, she carried a 9mm Tokarev pistol in a holster on her belt. The comrade might have a tragic accident. If he did, she'd do her best to get his precious pictures back to the proper authorities.

If he contemplated arresting her, he gave no sign of it. Instead, he said, “You are to be congratulated, Comrade Pilot; this is a question most would not think to pose.” It was a question most would not dare to pose, but that was another matter. Sholudenko went on, “The answer is yes. Surely you have been trained in the historical use of the dialectic?”

“Of course,” Ludmila said indignantly. “Historical progress comes through the conflict of two opposing theses and their resulting synthesis, which eventually generates its own antithesis and causes the struggle to recur.”

“Congratulations again—you are well instructed. We stand in the historical process at the step before true communism. Do you doubt that Marx's ideal will be fulfilled in our children's time, or our grandchildren's at the latest?”

“If we survive, I do not doubt it,” Ludmila said.

“There is that,” Sholudenko agreed, dry as usual. “I believe we should have beaten the Hitlerites in the end. The Lizards are another matter; Party dialecticians still labor to put them into proper perspective. Comrade Stalin has yet to speak definitively on the subject. But that is beside the point—you might have asked the same question had the Lizards never come, *da?*”

“Yes,” Ludmila admitted, wishing she'd never asked the question at all.

Sholudenko said, “If we abandon the hope of our descendants' living under true communism, the historical synthesis will show that reactionary forces were stronger than those of progress and revolution. Whatever we do to prevent that is justified, no matter how hard it may be for some at present.”

By everything she'd learned in school, his logic was airtight, however much it went

against the grain. She knew she ought to shut up; he'd already shown more patience with her than she had any right to expect. But she said, "What if, in seeking to move the balance our way, we are so harsh that we tilt it against us?"

"This, too, is a risk which must be considered," he said. "Are you a Party member, Comrade Pilot? You argue most astutely."

"No," Ludmila answered. Then, having come so far, she took one step further: "And you, Comrade—could you be from the People's Commissariat for the Interior?"

"Yes, I could be from the NKVD," Sholudenko answered evenly. "I could be any number of things, but that one will do." He studied her. "You needed courage, to ask such a question of me."

That last step had almost been one step too far, he meant. Picking her words with care, Ludmila said, "Everything that's happened over the past year and a half—it makes one think about true meanings."

"This I cannot deny," Sholudenko said. "But—to get back to matters more important than my individual case—the dialectic makes me believe our cause will triumph in the end, even against the Lizards."

Faith in the future had kept the Soviets fighting even when things looked blackest, when Moscow seemed about to fall late in 1941. But against the Lizards—"We need more than the dialectic," Ludmila said. "We need more guns and planes and tanks and rockets, and better ones, too."

"This is also true," Sholudenko said. "Yet we also need the people to work and struggle for the Soviet state, not on behalf of imperialist invaders, whether from Germany or the depths of space. The dialectic predicts that on the whole we shall have their support."

Instead of answering, Ludmila stooped by the edge of a little pond that lay alongside the field through which she and Sholudenko were walking. She cupped her hands, scooped up water, and scrubbed mud from her face. She pulled up dead grass and did her best to scrape her leather flying suit clean, too, but that was a bigger job. Eventually the mud there would dry and she could knock most of it off. Till then she'd just have to put up with it. Plenty of foot soldiers had gone through worse.

She straightened up, pointed to the pack on Nikifor Sholudenko's back. "And for those who choose to ignore the teaching of the dialectic—"

"*Da*, Comrade Pilot. For those folk, we have people like me." Sholudenko smiled broadly. His teeth were small and white and even. They reminded Ludmila of a wolf's fangs just the same.

Mutt Daniels crouched in a foxhole on the edge of Randolph, Illinois, hoping and praying the Lizard bombardment would ease up before it smeared him across the small-town landscape.

He felt naked with just a hole in the ground for cover. Back in France during the Great War, he'd been able to dive into a deep dugout when German shells came calling. If you were unlucky, of course, a shell would come right in after you, but most of the time a dugout was pretty safe.

No dugouts here. No proper trench lines, either, not really. This war, unlike the last one, moved too fast to let people build elaborate field fortifications.

"Plenty of foxholes, though," Matt muttered. The local landscape looked like pictures of craters on the moon. The Lizards had taken Randolph last summer in their drive on Chicago. Patton's men had taken it back in the pincers movement that brought them into Bloomington, six or eight miles north. Now the Lizards were moving again. If Randolph fell, they'd be well positioned to drive back into Bloomington.

Yet another shell crashed into the ground, close enough to lift Daniels into the air and fling him back to earth as if body-slammed by a wrestler. Dirt pattered down on him. His lungs ached from the blast when he drew in a shaky breath.

"Might as well be between Washington and Richmond, the way we're goin' back and forth here," Daniels said. Both his grandfathers had fought for the South in the War Between the States; as a small boy, he'd listened avidly to the tales they told, tales that grew taller with each passing year. No matter how tall the tales got, though, France and now this convinced him his grandfathers hadn't had it as tough as they'd thought.

More shells whistled overhead, these southbound from Bloomington. Mutt hoped they were registered on the Lizard guns, but they probably weren't; the Lizards outranged American artillery. Giving Lizard infantry a taste of what he was going through wasn't the worst thing in the world, either. A flight of prop-driven fighters screamed by at treetop height. Mutt touched his helmet in salute to courage; pilots who flew against the Lizards didn't last long.

Once the planes zipped out of sight, he didn't spot them again. He hoped that meant they were returning to base by a different route instead of getting knocked down. "No way to find out for sure," he said.

He abruptly stopped being interested, too, because Lizard shelling picked up again. He embraced the ground like a lover, pressed his face against her cool, damp neck.

Some of the blasts that shook him where he lay were explosions of the same sort he'd known in France. Others had a sound he'd first met retreating toward Chicago: a smaller bang, followed by a pattering as of hail.

"Y'all want to look sharp," he called to the scattered members of his squad. "They're

throwin' out them goddamn little mines again." He hated those little baseball-sized blue explosives. Once a regular shell went off, at least it was gone. But the Lizards' fancy ammo scattered potential mutilation over what seemed like half an acre and left it sitting there waiting to happen. "Instant goddamn mine field," Mutt said resentfully.

After a while, the barrage let up. Daniels grabbed his tommy gun and took a cautious peek out of the foxhole. If the *Boches* had been doing that shelling, they'd follow up with an infantry attack just as sure as you were supposed to hit the cutoff man. But the Lizards didn't always play by the book Mutt knew. Sometimes they fooled him on account of that. *More often*, he thought, *they hurt themselves*.

So here: if they wanted to drive the Americans out of Randolph, they'd never have a better chance than now, while the shelling had stunned and disorganized their human foes. But they stayed back in their own lines south of town. The only sign of action from them was a single plane high overhead, its path through the sky marked by a silvery streak of condensation.

Mutt gave the aircraft a one-finger salute. "Gonna see how bad you beat on us before you send in the ground-pounders, are you?" he growled. "Mis'able cheap bastards." What was infantry for, after all, if not to pay the butcher's bill?

His battered eardrums made the quiet that followed the barrage seem even more intense than it was. The short, sharp *bang!* that punctuated it wouldn't have seemed worth noticing, save for the shriek right after.

"Oh, shit," Mutt exclaimed. "Somebody went and did somethin' dumb. Goddamn it to hell, why don't nobody never listen to me?" He'd thought minor-league ballplayers were bad at paying attention to what a manager told them. Well, they were, but they looked like Einsteins when you set 'em next to a bunch of soldiers.

He scrambled out of the foxhole. His body was skinnier and sprier than it had been while he was wearing his Decatur Commodores uniform, but he'd have cheerfully gone back to fat and flab if anybody offered him the choice.

No one did, of course. He crawled over battered ground and through ruined buildings toward where that shriek had come from. Memory wasn't his only guide; a low moaning kept him on course.

Kevin Donlan lay just outside a shell hole, clutching his left ankle. Below it, everything was red ruin. Mutt's stomach did a slow lurch. "Jesus Christ, kid, what did you do?" he said, though the answer to that was all too obvious.

"Sarge?" Donlan's voice was light and clear, as if his body hadn't really told him yet how bad he was hurt. "Sarge, I just got out to take a leak. I didn't want to piss in my hole, you know, and—"

Next to what he had, swimming a river of piss was nothing. No point telling him that, though, not now. "Miss Lucille!" Mutt bawled. While he waited for her, he got a wound bandage and a packet of sulfa powder out of a pouch on Donlan's belt. He dusted the powder onto the wound. He wondered if he ought to get the remains of Donlan's shoe

off his foot before he started bandaging it, but when he tried, the kid started screaming again, so he said the hell with it and wrapped the bandage over foot, shoe, and all.

Lucille Potter scrambled up a minute later, maybe less. In dirty fatigues and a helmet, she looked like a man except that she didn't need a shave. The helmet bore a Red Cross on a white circle; the Lizards had learned what that mark meant, and weren't any worse than people about respecting it.

She looked at the way blood was soaking through the bandage, clicked her tongue between her teeth. "We've got to get a tourniquet on that wound, Sergeant."

Mutt looked down at Donlan. The kid's eyes had rolled up in his head. Mutt said, "You do that, Miss Lucille, he's gonna lose the foot."

"I know," she said. "But if we don't do it, he's going to bleed to death. And he'd lose the foot anyhow; no way to save it with a wound like that." Her sharp stare dared him to argue. He couldn't; he'd seen enough wounds in France and Illinois to know she was right.

She cut Donlan's torn trousers, took out a length of bandage and a stick, and set the tourniquet. "Hell of a thing," Daniels said, to himself and her both: another young soldier on crutches for the rest of his life.

"It's hard, I know," Lucille Potter answered. "But would you rather have him dead? Ten years from now, if this war ever ends, would he rather we'd let him die?"

"I reckon not," Daniels said. In his younger days in Mississippi, a lot of the older white men he'd known were shy an arm or a leg or a foot from the States War. They weren't glad of it, naturally, but they got on better than you'd expect. When you got right down to it, people were pretty tough critters.

He sent a runner over to Captain Maczek. Where the captain was, the company field telephone would be, too. After that, there was nothing to do but wait. Donlan seemed pretty shocky. When Mutt remarked on it, Lucille Potter said, "It's probably a blessing in disguise—he won't feel that foot as much."

The forward aid station wasn't much more than a quarter of a mile back of the line. A four-man litter team got to Donlan in less than fifteen minutes. The boss of the team, a corporal, looked at the youngster's ruined foot and shook his head. "Nothing much we'll be able to do about that," he said. "They'll have to take him back into Bloomington, and I expect they'll chop it off there."

"You're almost certainly right," Lucille said. All the litter bearers stared when she spoke. She stared right back, daring them to make something out of it. None of them did. She went on, "The sooner he goes back, the sooner they can treat him."

The team got Donlan onto the stretcher and carried him away. "Too stinkin' bad," Mutt said. "He's a good kid. Ain't this war a—" He stopped, inhibited in his language by a woman's presence. After a sigh, he resumed, "Lord, I wish I had me a cigarette, or even a chaw."

"Filthy habits, both of them," Lucille Potter said, her voice so sharp he turned to give

her an irritated look. Then, with a wry chuckle, she added, "I wish I had a smoke, too. I ran out of tobacco months ago, and I miss it like anything."

"Might be some back in Bloomington," Mutt said. "We ever get a real lull, could be I'd send Szabo back there to see how the foraging is. You want to liberate somethin' from where it rightly belongs, ol' Dracula's the man for the job."

"He's certainly good at coming up with home brew and moonshine," Lucille said, "but people make those around here. Illinois isn't tobacco country, so we can't get hold of bootleg cigars."

"Can't get hold of much of anything these days," Mutt said. "I'm skinnier'n I've been for close to thirty years."

"It's good for you," she answered, which made him give her another resentful glance. She was on the lean side, and looked to have always been that way: not an ounce of excess flesh anywhere. What did she know about what felt comfortable and what didn't?

He wasn't in a mood to argue, though, so he said, "I just hope Donlan's gonna make out okay. He's a good kid. Hell of a thing to be crippled so young."

"Better than dying. I thought we already settled that," Lucille Potter answered. "I'm just glad the field telephone was working and the litter crew was on the ball. If they hadn't gotten here inside of about another ten minutes, I was going to take his foot off myself." She tapped her little black bag. "I've got some ether in here. He wouldn't have felt anything."

"You know how?" Daniels asked. Battlefield wounds were one thing, but cutting into a man on purpose ... He shook his head. He was sure he couldn't do it.

Lucille said, "I haven't had to do an amputation yet, but I've read up on the technique. I—"

"I know that," Mutt broke in. "Every time I see you, you got a doctor's book in your hand."

"I have to. Nurses don't operate, and I wasn't even a scrub nurse to watch doctors work. But a combat medic had better be able to do as much as she can, because we're not always going to have a lull like this one to get our casualties back to the aid station. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yeah," Daniels said. "You usually do—" Off to the left, small arms began to chatter on both sides of the line. Mutt interrupted himself to scramble into the shell hole from which unlucky Kevin Donlan had emerged to relieve himself. Lucille Potter jumped in beside him. Her only combat experience was what she'd had in the past few weeks, but *take cover* was a lesson you learned in a hurry, at least if you wanted to keep on living.

Then the artillery started up again, the Lizards firing steadily, the Americans in bursts of a few rounds here, a few rounds there, a few somewhere else. They'd learned the hard way that if their pieces stayed in one place for more than a short salvo, the Lizards would zero in on them and knock them out.

The ground began tossing like the stormy sea, though Mutt had never been in a natural storm that made such a god-awful racket. He pushed Lucille down flat on her belly, then lay on top of her to protect her from splinters as best he could. He didn't know whether he did it because she was a woman or because she was the medic. Either way, he figured, she needed to stay as safe as possible.

As suddenly as it had begun, the barrage stopped. Mutt stuck his head up right away. Sure as hell, Lizard ground troops were scurrying forward. He squeezed off a long burst with his tommy gun. The Lizards flattened out on the ground. He didn't know whether he'd hit any of them; the tommy gun wasn't accurate out past a couple of hundred yards.

He wished he had one of the automatic weapons the Lizards carried. Their effective range was something like double that of his submachine gun, and their cartridges packed a bigger kick, too. He'd heard of dogfaces who toted captured specimens, but keeping them in the right ammo was a bitch and a half. Most of the weapons the Lizards lost went straight back to the high-forehead boys in G-2. With luck, the Americans would get toys just as good one of these days.

That train of thought abruptly got derailed. He moaned, down deep in his throat. The Lizards had a tank with them. Now he understood what the poor damned Germans had felt like in France in 1918 when those monsters came clanking their way and they couldn't stop them or even do much to slow them down.

The tank and the Lizard infantry screening it slowly advanced together. The aliens had learned something since the winter before; they'd lost a lot of tanks then for lack of infantry support. Not any more.

Lucille Potter peered over the forward lip of the foxhole beside Mutt. "That's trouble," she said. He nodded. It was big trouble. If he ran, the tank's machine gun or the Lizard foot soldiers would pick him off. If he stayed, the tank would penetrate the position and then the Lizard infantry would get him.

Off to the right, somebody fired one of those new bazooka rockets at the Lizard tank. The rocket hit the tank right in the turret, but it didn't penetrate. "Damn fool," Mutt ground out. Doctrine said you were supposed to shoot a bazooka only at the rear or sides of a Lizard tank; the frontal armor on the aliens' machines was just too thick for you to kill one with a straight-on shot.

Being too eager cost the fellow who'd fired at the tank. It turned toward him and his buddies and opened up first with its machine gun and then its main armament. For good measure, the Lizard infantry moved in on the bazooka man, too—their job was to make sure nobody got a good shot at the armored fighting vehicle. By the time they were done, there probably wasn't enough of the American and his buddies left to bury.

Which meant they forgot about Mutt. For a second, he didn't think that would do him any good: if the line was overrun, he would be, too, in short order. Ever so cautiously, he raised his head again. There sat the tank, maybe a hundred feet away, ass end on to him, still pouring fire at a target more necessary to destroy than he was.



He ducked back down, turned to Lucille Potter. "Gimme that ether," he snapped.

"What? Why?" She took a protective grip on the black bag.

"The—stuff'll burn, won't it?" His pa's hard hand on his backside and across his face had taught him never to swear where a woman could hear, but he almost slipped that time. "Now gimme it!"

Lucille's eyes widened. She opened the bag, handed him the glass jar. It was about half full of a clear, oily-looking liquid. He hefted it thoughtfully. Yeah, it would throw just fine. His bat had kept him from having a decent big-league career, nobody'd ever complained about his arm. He'd been a good man with a grenade in France, too.

It wasn't even as if he had to throw all of a sudden, as he would have with a runner breaking for second. He could take a few moments, think through what he was going to do, see every step of it in his mind before it actually happened.

Doing that took longer than the throw itself. He popped up as if exploding out of his crouch behind a batter, fired the jar for all he was worth, and ducked back down again. Nobody who wasn't looking right at him would have known he'd appeared.

"Did you hit it?" Lucille demanded.

"Miss Lucille, I tell you for a fact, I didn't stay up long enough to find out. I tried to smash it off the back of the turret so it'd drip down into that nice, hot engine compartment." Mutt's shoulder twinged; he hadn't put that much into a snap throw in years. It had felt straight, but you never could tell. A little long, a little short, and he might as well not have bothered.

Then he heard hoarse yells from the Americans in other scattered foxholes. That encouraged him to take another cautious peek. When he did, he yelled himself, in sheer delight. Flames danced all over the engine compartment and were licking up the back of the turret. As he watched, an escape hatch popped open and a Lizard jumped onto the ground.

Mutt ducked down for his tommy gun. "Miss Lucille, that there is one Lizard tank that's out stealing."

She pounded him on the back as any other soldier would have. He wouldn't have tried to kiss another soldier, though. She let him do it, but she didn't do much in the way of kissing back. He didn't worry about that; he popped up out of the foxhole and started blazing away at the fleeing Lizard tank crew and the foot soldiers, who were much less terrifying without armor to back them up.

The Lizards fell back. The tank kept burning. A Sherman would have brewed up a hell of a lot faster than it did, but eventually its ammunition and its fuel tank went up in a spectacular blast.

Mutt felt as if he'd been hit over the head with a sledgehammer. "Lord!" he exclaimed. "You couldn't make a fancier explosion in the movies."

"No, probably not," Lucille Potter agreed, "nor one that did more for us. We'll hold

Randolph a while longer now, I expect. That was a wonderful throw; I've never seen a better one. You must have been a very fine baseball player."

"You don't make the majors unless you're pretty fair," he said, shrugging. "You don't stick there unless you're better'n that, and I wasn't." He brushed a hand across the front of his shirt, as if he'd been a pitcher shaking off a sign rather than a catcher; baseball wasn't what he wanted to talk about at the moment. After a couple of tentative coughs, he said, "Miss Lucille, I hope you don't think I was too forward there."

"When you kissed me, you mean? I didn't mind," she said, but not in a way that encouraged him to try it again; by her tone, once had been okay but twice wouldn't be. He kicked at the churned-up dirt inside the foxhole. Lucille added, "I'm not interested, Mutt, not that way. It's not you—you're a good man. But I'm just not."

"Okay," he said; he was too old to let his pecker do his thinking for him. But that didn't mean he'd forgotten he had one. He pushed up his helmet so he could scratch his head above one ear. "If you like me, why—" He broke off there. If she didn't want to talk about it, that was her business.

For the first time since he'd met her, he found her at a loss for words. She frowned, obviously not caring for that herself. Slowly, she said, "Mutt, it's not something I can easily explain, or care to. I—"

Easily or not, she didn't get the chance to explain. Following a cry of "Miss Lucille!" a soldier from another squad in the platoon came scrambling over to the foxhole and gasped out, "Miss Lucille, we've got two men down, one hit in the shoulder, the other in the chest. Peters—the guy with the chest wound—he's in bad shape."

"I'm coming," she said briskly, and climbed out of the hole she'd shared with Mutt. As she hurried away, he scratched his head again.

Even in these times, David Goldfarb had expected things to be handled with more ceremony. The Prime Minister, after all, did not visit the Bruntingthorpe Research and Development Test Flying Aerodrome every day.

But there was no line of RAF men in blue serge standing to attention for Winston Churchill to inspect, no flyby of a squadron of Pioneers or Meteors to impress him with what Fred Hipple and his team had accomplished in jet propulsion. In fact, up until an hour before Churchill got to Bruntingthorpe, no one knew he was coming.

Group Captain Hipple brought the news back from the administrative section's Nissen hut. It produced a brief, startled silence from his subordinates, who were laboring mightily to pull secrets from the wreckage of the Lizard fighter-bomber that had been brought down not far from the aerodrome.

Typically, Flight Officer Basil Roundbush was first to break that silence: "Generous of him to give us notice enough to make sure our flies are closed."

"I can't tell you how delighted I am to be confident yours is, dear boy," Hipple returned. Roundbush covered his face with his hands, acknowledging the hit. The group

captain might have been shorter than his subordinates, but gave away nothing in wit. He continued, "I gather no one knew until moments ago: quite a lot of security laid on, for reasons which should be plain enough."

"Wouldn't do for the Lizards to pay us a visit just now, would it, sir?" Goldfarb said.

"Yes, that would prove—embarrassing," Hipple said, an understatement Roundbush might have coveted.

And so, just as Goldfarb had, the Prime Minister came down from Leicester by bicycle, pedaling along on an elderly model like a grandfather out for a constitutional. He dismounted outside the meteorology hut, where Hipple and his team still labored after the latest Lizard bombing raid. When Goldfarb saw the round pink face and the familiar cigar through the window, he gulped. He'd never expected to meet the leader of the British Empire.

Wing Commander Julian Peary's reaction was more prosaic. In the big deep voice that went so oddly with his slight physique, he said, "I do hope he's not damaged any of the beets."

It was only half a joke. Like everyone else at Bruntingthorpe—like everyone else in Britain, or so it seemed—Hipple's team cultivated a garden. The British Isles held more people than they could easily feed, and shipments from America were down, not so much because the Lizards bombed them (they still took much less notice of ships than of air or rail or road transport) as because the Yanks, beset at home, had little to spare.

So, gardens. Beets, potatoes, peas, beans, turnips, parsnips, cabbages, maize ... whatever the climate would permit, people grew—and sometimes guarded with cricket bats, savage dogs, or shotguns against two-legged thieves too big to be frightened by scarecrows.

Everyone did come to attention when the Prime Minister, accompanied by a bodyguard who looked as if he never smiled, walked into the Nissen hut. "As you were, gentlemen, please," Churchill said. "After all, officially I am not here, but speaking over the BBC in London. Because I am in the habit of speaking live, I can occasionally use the subterfuge of sound recordings to let myself be in two places at once." He let out a conspiratorial chuckle. "I hope you won't give me away."

Automatically, Goldfarb shook his head. Hearing Churchill's voice without the static and distortion of a wireless set was to him even more intimate than seeing the Prime Minister in the tubby flesh rather than through photographs: pictures captured his image more accurately than the airwaves did his voice.

Churchill strode over to Fred Hipple, who was standing beside a wooden table on which lay pieces of the turbine from the crashed Lizard fighter's jet engine. Pointing to them, the Prime Minister asked, "How long before we shall be able to duplicate that engine, Group Captain?"

"Duplicate it, sir?" Hipple said. "It won't be soon; the Lizards are far ahead of us in control mechanisms for the engine, in machining techniques, and in the materials they

employ: they do things with titanium and ceramics we've never dreamt of, much less attempted. But in determining how and why they make things as they do, we learn how to do better ourselves."

"I see," Churchill said thoughtfully. "So even though you have the book in front of you"—he pointed to the disassembled chunks of turbine again—"you cannot simply read off what is on its pages, but must decode it as if it were written in a cipher."

"That's a good analogy, sir," Hipple said. "The facts of the engine are relatively straightforward, even if we can't yet produce one identical to it ourselves. When it comes to the radar from the same downed aircraft, I fear we are still missing a great many code groups, so to speak."

"So I have been given to understand," Churchill said, "although I do not fully grasp where the difficulty lies."

"Let me take you over to Radarman Goldfarb, then, sir," Hipple said. "He joined the team to help emplace a radar set in production Meteors, and has labored valiantly to unlock the secrets of the Lizard unit that fell into our hands."

As the group captain brought the Prime Minister over to his workbench, Goldfarb thought, not for the first time, that Fred Hipple was a good man to work for. A lot of superior officers would have done all the explaining to the brass themselves, and pretended their subordinates didn't exist. But Hipple introduced Goldfarb to Churchill, then stood back and let him speak for himself.

He didn't find it easy at first. When he stammered, the Prime Minister shifted the subject away from radar: "Goldfarb," he said musingly. "Was I not told you are the lad with a family connection to Mr. Russie, the former Lizard spokesman from Poland?"

"Yes, that's true, sir," Goldfarb answered. "We're cousins. When my father came to England before the Great War, he urged his sister and her husband to come with him, and he kept urging them to get out until the second war started in '39. They wouldn't listen to him, though. Moishe Russie is their son."

"So your family kept up the connection, then?"

"Till the war cut us off, yes, sir. After that, I didn't know what had happened to any of my relatives until Moishe began speaking on the wireless." He didn't tell Churchill most of his kinsfolk had died in the ghetto; the Prime Minister presumably knew that already. Besides, Goldfarb couldn't think about their fate without filling up with a terrible anger that made him wish England were still at war with the Nazis rather than the Lizards.

Churchill said, "I shan't forget this link. It may yet prove useful for us." Before Goldfarb could work up the nerve to ask him how, he swung back to radar: "Suppose you explain to me how and why this set is so different from ours, and so baffling."

"I'll try, sir," Goldfarb said. "One of our radars, like a wireless set, depends on valves—vacuum tubes, the Americans would say—for its operation. The Lizards don't use valves. Instead, they have these things." He pointed to the boards with little lumps and silvery spiderwebs of metal set across them.

“And so?” Churchill said. “Why should a mere substitution pose a problem?”

“Because we don’t know how the bloody things work,” Goldfarb blurted. Wishing the ground would open up and swallow him, he tried to make amends: “That is, we have no theory to explain how these little lumps of silicon—which is what they are, sir—can perform the function of valves. And, because they’re nothing like what we’re used to, we’re having to find out what each one does by cut and try, so to speak: we run power into it and see what happens. We don’t know how much power to use, either.”

Churchill fortunately took his strong language in stride. “And what have you learnt from your experiments?”

“That the Lizards know more about radar than we do, sir,” Goldfarb answered. “That’s the long and short of it, I’m afraid. We can’t begin to make parts to match these: a chemical engineer with whom I’ve spoken says our best silicon isn’t pure enough. And some of the little lumps, when you look at them under a microscope, are so finely etched that we can’t imagine how, let alone why, it’s been done.”

“How and why are for those with the luxury of time, which we have not got,” Churchill said. “We need to know what the device does, whether we can match it, and how to make it less useful to the foe.”

“Yes, sir,” Goldfarb said admiringly. Churchill was no boffin, but he had a firm grip on priorities. No one yet fully understood the theory of the magnetron, or how and why the narrow channels connecting its eight outer holes to the larger central one exponentially boosted the strength of the signal. That the device operated so, however, was undeniable fact, and had given the RAF a great lead over German radar—although not, worse luck, over what the Lizards used.

Group Captain Hipple said, “What *have* we learnt which is exploitable, Goldfarb?”

“Sorry, sir; I should have realized at once that was what the Prime Minister needed to know. We can copy the design of the Lizards’ magnetron; that, at least, we recognize. It gives a signal of shorter wavelength and hence more precise direction than any we’ve made ourselves. And the nose dish that receives returning pulses is a very fine bit of engineering which shouldn’t be impossible to incorporate into later marks of the Meteor.”

“Very good, Radarman Goldfarb,” Churchill said. “I shan’t keep you from your work any longer. With the aid of men like you and your comrades in this hut, we shall triumph over this adversity as we have over all others. And you, Radarman, you may yet have a role to play even more important than your work here.”

The Prime Minister looked uncommonly cherubic. Three years in the RAF had taught Goldfarb that rankers who wore that expression had more up their sleeves than their arms. They’d also taught him he couldn’t do anything about it, so he said what he had to say: “I’ll be happy to serve in any way I can, sir.”

Churchill nodded genially, then went back to Hipple and his colleagues for more talk about jet engines. After another few minutes, he put his hat back on, tipped it to Hipple,

and left the Nissen hut.

Basil Roundbush grinned at Goldfarb. “I say, old man, after Winnie makes you an MP, do remember the little people who knew you before you grew rich and famous.”

“An MP?” Goldfarb shook his head in mock dismay. “Lord, I hope that’s not what he had in mind. He said he had something important instead of this.”

That sally met with general approval. One of the meteorologists said, “Good job you didn’t tell him you’re a Labour supporter, Goldfarb.”

“It doesn’t matter, not now.” Goldfarb had backed Labour, yes, as offering more to the working man than the Tories could (and, as was true of a lot of Jewish immigrants and their progeny, his own politics had a slant to the left). But he also knew no one but Churchill could have rallied Britain against Hitler, and no one else could have kept her in the fight against the Lizards.

Thinking of the Nazis and the Lizards together made Goldfarb think of the invasion so many had feared in 1940. The Germans hadn’t been able to bring it off, not least because radar kept them from driving the RAF from the skies. If the Lizards came, no one could offer any such guarantee of success. Ironically, the Germans holding northern France served as England’s shield against invasion by the aliens.

But the shield was not perfect. The Lizards had control of the air when they chose to use it. They could leapfrog over northern France and the Channel both. Just because they hadn’t done it didn’t mean they wouldn’t or couldn’t.

Goldfarb snorted. The only thing he could do about that was try to make British radar more effective, which would in turn make the Lizards pay more if they decided to invade. It wasn’t as much as he’d have wanted to do in an ideal world, but it was more than most people could say, so he supposed it would do.

And he’d not only met Winston Churchill, but talked business with him! That wasn’t something everyone could say. He couldn’t write home to his family that the Prime Minister had been here—the censors would never pass it—but he could tell them if he ever got down to London. He’d almost given up on the notion of leave.

Fred Hipple said, “Churchill’s full of good ideas. The only difficulty is, he’s also full of bad ones, and sometimes telling the one from the other’s not easy till after the fact.”

“What he said about tackling the Lizards’ radar circuitry was first-rate,” Goldfarb said. “*What* is more important for us now than *how* or *why*; we can use what we learn without knowing why it works, just as some stupid clot can drive a motorcar without cluttering his head with the theory of internal combustion.”

“Ah, but someone must understand the theory, or your stupid clot would have no motorcar to drive,” Basil Roundbush said.

“That’s true only to a limited degree,” Hipple said. “Even now, theory takes you only so far in aircraft design; eventually, you just have to go out and see how the beast flies. That was much more the case during the Great War, when practically everything, from what the older engineers have told me, was cut and try. Yet the aircraft they

manufactured did fly.”

“Most of the time,” Roundbush said darkly. “I’m bloody glad I never had to go up in them.”

Goldfarb ignored that. Roundbush made wisecracks the same way other men fiddled with rosaries or cracked their knuckles or tugged at one particular lock of hair: it was a nervous tic, nothing more.

Clucking softly to himself, Goldfarb fixed a power source to one side of a Lizard circuit element and an ohmmeter to the other. He’d measure voltage and amperage next: with these strange components, you couldn’t tell what they were supposed to do to a current that ran through them except by experiment.

He turned on the power. The ohmmeter swung; the component did resist the current’s flow. Goldfarb grunted in satisfaction. He’d thought it would: it looked like others that had. He noted down the reading, as well as where the circuit element sat on its board and what it looked like. Then he turned off the power and hooked up the voltage meter. One tiny piece at a time, he added to the jigsaw puzzle.

As Vyacheslav Molotov turned the knob that led him into the antechamber in front of Stalin’s night office, he felt and suppressed a familiar nervousness. Elsewhere in the Soviet Union, his word went unchallenged. In negotiating with the capitalist states that hated the Soviet revolution, even in discussions with the Lizards, he was the unyielding representative of his nation. He knew he had a reputation for being inflexible, and did everything he could to play it up.

Not here, though. Anyone who was unyielding and inflexible with Stalin would soon know the stiffness of death. Then Molotov had no more time for such reflections, for Stalin’s orderly—oh, the fellow had a fancy title, but that was what he was—nodded to him and said, “Go on in. He expects you, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich.”

Molotov nodded and entered Stalin’s sanctum. This was not where the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was photographed with diplomats or soldiers. He had a fancy office upstairs for that. He worked here, at hours that suited him. It was one-thirty in the morning. Stalin would be at it for at least another couple of hours. Those who dealt with him had to adjust themselves accordingly.

Stalin looked up from the desk with the gooseneck lamp. “Good morning, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich,” he said with his throaty Georgian accent. His voice held no irony; morning it was, as far as he was concerned.

“Good morning, Iosef Vissarionovich,” Molotov replied. Whatever his feelings about the matter were, he had schooled himself not to reveal them. He found that important at any time, doubly so around the ruler of the Soviet Union.

Stalin waved Molotov to a chair, then stood up himself. Though well-proportioned, he was short, and did not like other men looming over him. What he did not like did not occur. He filled his pipe from a leather tobacco pouch, lit a match, and got the pipe

going.

The harsh smell of *makhorka*, cheap Russian tobacco, made Molotov's nose twitch in spite of himself. Under the iron-gray mustache, Stalin's lip curled. "I know it's vile, but it's all I can find these days. What shipping we get has no room aboard for luxuries."

That said as much as anything about the plight in which mankind found itself. When the leader of one of the three greatest nations on the planet could not get decent tobacco even for himself, the Lizards were the ones with the upper hand. Well, if he understood what was in Stalin's mind, this meeting was to be about how to tilt the balance back the other way.

Stalin sucked in more smoke, paced back and forth. At length he said, "So the Americans and Germans are pressing ahead with their programs to make bombs of this explosive metal?"

"So I have been given to understand, Iosef Vissarionovich," Molotov answered. "I am also told by our intelligence services that they had these programs in place before the Lizards began their invasion of the Earth."

"We also had such a program in place," Stalin answered placidly.

That relieved Molotov, who had heard of no such program. He wondered how far along Soviet scientists had been compared to those in the decadent capitalist and fascist countries. Faith in the strength of Marxist-Leninist precepts made him hope they might have been ahead; concern over how far the Soviet Union had had to come since the revolution made him fear they might have been behind. With hope and fear so commingled, he dared not ask Stalin which was the true state of affairs.

Stalin went on, "We now have an advantage over both the United States and the Hitlerites: in that raid against the Lizards last fall, we obtained a considerable supply of the explosive metal, as you know. I had hoped the German taking the metal back to the Hitlerites would be waylaid in Poland, and his share lost." Stalin looked unhappy.

So did Molotov, who said, "This much I did know, and how he had to give up half his share, though not all, to the Polish Jews, who then passed it on to the Americans."

"Yes," Stalin said. "Hitler is a fool, do you know that?"

"You have said it many times, Iosef Vissarionovich," Molotov answered. That was true, but it had not kept Stalin from making his nonaggression pact with Germany in 1939, or from living up to it for almost the next two years, or from being so confident Hitler would also live up to it that he'd ignored warnings of an impending Nazi attack, ignored them so completely that the Soviet state had almost crashed in ruins because of it. Since Molotov had supported Stalin in those choices, he could hardly bring them up now (if he hadn't supported him then, he would be in no position to bring them up now).

Stalin drew on his pipe again. His cheeks, pitted from a boyhood bout of smallpox, twitched with distaste. "Not even from so close as Turkey can I get decent tobacco. But do you know why I say Hitler is a fool?"



“For wantonly attacking the peace-loving people of the Soviet Union, who had done nothing to deserve it.” Molotov gave the obvious answer, and a true one, but it left him unhappy. Stalin was looking for something else.

Sure enough, he shook his head. But, to Molotov’s relief, he was only amused, not angry. “That is not what was in my mind, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich. I say he was a fool because, when his scientists discovered the uranium atom could be split, they published their findings for all the world to see.” Stalin chuckled rheumily. “Had we made that finding here ... Can you imagine such an article appearing in the Proceedings of the *Akademia Nauk*, the Soviet Academy of Sciences?”

“Hardly,” Molotov said, and he chuckled, too. He was normally the most mirthless of men, but when Stalin laughed, you laughed with him. Besides, this was the sort of thing he did find funny. Stalin was dead right here—Soviet secrecy would have kept such an important secret from leaking out where prying eyes could fasten on it.

“I will tell you something else that will amuse you,” Stalin said. “It takes a certain amount of explosive metal to explode, our scientists tell me. Below this amount, it will not go off no matter what you do. Do you understand? Oh, it is a lovely joke.” Stalin laughed again.

Molotov also laughed, but uncertainly. This time, he did not see the joke.

Stalin must have sensed that; his uncanny skill at scenting weakness in his subordinates was not least among the talents that had kept him in power for twenty years. Still in that jovial mood, he said, “Never fear, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich; I shall explain. I would far sooner the Germans and Americans had no explosive metal, but because the Polish Jews divided it between them, neither has enough for a bomb. Now do you see?”

“No,” Molotov confessed, but he reversed course a moment later: “Wait. Yes, perhaps I do. Do you mean that we, with an undivided share, have enough to make one of these bombs for ourselves?”

“That is exactly what I mean,” Stalin said. “See, you are a clever fellow after all. The Germans and the Americans will still have to do all the research they would have required anyhow, but we—we shall soon be ready to fight the Lizards fire against fire, so to speak.”

Just contemplating that felt good to Molotov. Like Stalin, like everyone, he had lived in dread of the day when Moscow, like Berlin and Washington, might suddenly cease to exist. To be able to retaliate in kind against the Lizards brought a glow of anticipation to his sallow features.

But his joy was not undiluted. He said, “Iosef Vissarionovich, we shall have the one bomb, with no immediate prospect for producing more, is that right? Once we have used the weapon in our hands, what is to keep the Lizards from dropping a great many such weapons on us?”

Stalin scowled. He did not care for anyone going against anything he said, even in the

slightest way. Nevertheless, he thought seriously before he answered; Molotov's question was to the point. At last he said, "First of all, our scientists will go on working to produce explosive metal for us. They will be strongly encouraged to succeed."

Stalin's smile reminded Molotov of that of a lion resting against a zebra carcass from which it had just finished feeding. Molotov had no trouble visualizing the sort of encouragement the Soviet nuclear physicists would get: *dachas*, cars, women if they wanted them, for success ... and the *gulag* or a bullet in the back of the neck if they failed. Probably a couple of them would be purged just to focus the minds of the others on what they were doing. Stalin's methods were ugly, but they got results.

"How long before the physicists can do this for us?" Molotov said.

"They babble about three or four years, as if this were not an emergency," Stalin said dismissively. "I have given them eighteen months. They shall do as the Party requires of them, or else suffer the consequences."

Molotov chose his words with care: "It might be better if they did not undergo the supreme penalty, Iosef Vissarionovich. Men of their technical training would be difficult to replace adequately."

"Yes, yes." Stalin sounded impatient, always a danger sign. "But they are the servants of the peasants and workers of the Soviet Union, not their masters; we must not let them get ideas above their station, or the virus of the bourgeoisie will infect us once again."

"No, that cannot be permitted," Molotov agreed. "Let us say that they do all they have promised. How do we protect the Soviet Union in the time between our using the bomb we have made from the Lizards' explosive metal and that in which we begin to manufacture it for ourselves?"

"For one thing, we do not use that one bomb immediately," Stalin answered. "We *cannot* use it immediately, for it is not yet made. But even if it were, I would wait to pick the proper moment. And besides, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich"—Stalin looked smug—"how will the Lizards be certain we have only the one bomb? Once we use it, they shall have to assume we can do it again, not so?"

"Unless they assume we used their explosive metal for the first one," Molotov said.

He wished he'd kept his mouth shut. Stalin didn't shout or bluster at him; that he would have withstood with ease. Instead, the General Secretary fixed him with a glare as cold and dark and silent as midwinter at Murmansk. That was Stalin's sign of ultimate displeasure; he ordered generals and commissars shot with just such an expression.

Here, though, Molotov's point was too manifestly true for Stalin to ignore. The glare softened, as winter's grip did at last even in Murmansk. Stalin said, "This is another good argument for carefully choosing the time and place we use the bomb. But you also must remember, if we face defeat without it, we shall surely use it against the invaders no matter what they do to us in return. They are more dangerous than the Germans, and

must be fought with whatever means come to hand.”

“True enough,” Molotov said. The Soviet Union had 190,000,000 people; throw twenty or thirty million on the fire, or even more, and it remained a going concern. Just getting rid of the kulaks and bringing in collectivized agriculture had killed millions through deliberate famine. If more deaths were what building socialism in the USSR required, more deaths there would be.

“I am glad you agreed, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich,” Stalin said silkily. Under the silk lay jagged steel; had Molotov persisted in disagreeing, something most disagreeable would have happened to him.

The Foreign Commissar of the Soviet Union was fearless before the leaders of the decadent capitalist states; he had even confronted Atvar, who led the Lizards. Before Stalin, Molotov quailed. Stalin genuinely terrified him, as he did every other Soviet citizen. Back in revolutionary days, the little mustachioed Georgian had not been so much, but since, oh, but since ...

Nevertheless, Molotov owed allegiance not just to Stalin, but to the Soviet Union as a whole. If he was to serve the USSR properly, he needed information. Getting it without angering his master was the trick. Carefully, he said, “The Lizards have taken a heavy toll on our bombing planes. Will we be able to deliver the bomb once we have it?”

“I am told the device will be too heavy and bulky to fit in any of our bombers,” Stalin said. Molotov admired the courage of the man who had told—had had to tell—that to Stalin. But the Soviet leader did not seem nearly so angry as Molotov would have guessed. Instead, his face assumed an expression of genial deviousness that made Molotov want to make sure he still had his wallet and watch. He went on, “If we can dispose of Trotsky in Mexico City, I expect we can find a way to put a bomb where we want it.”

“No doubt you are right, Iosef Vissarionovich,” Molotov said. Trotsky had thought he was safe enough to keep plotting against the Soviet Union, but several inches of tempered steel in his brain proved that a delusion.

“No doubt I am,” Stalin agreed complacently. As undisputed master of the Soviet Union, he had developed ways not altogether different from those of other undisputed masters. Molotov had once or twice thought of saying as much, but it remained just that—a thought.

He did ask, “How soon can the Germans and Americans begin producing their own explosive metal?” The Americans didn’t much worry him; they were far away and had worries closer to home. The Germans ... Hitler had talked about using the new bombs against the Lizards in Poland. The Soviet Union was an older enemy, and almost as close.

“We are working to learn this. I expect we shall be informed well in advance, whatever the answer proves to be,” Stalin answered, complacent still. Soviet espionage in capitalist countries continued to function well; many there devoted themselves to

furthering the cause of the socialist revolution.

Molotov cast about for other questions he might safely ask. Before he could come up with any, Stalin bent over the papers on his desk, a sure sign of dismissal. “Thank you for your time, Iosef Vissarionovich,” Molotov said as he stood to go.

Stalin grunted. His politeness was minimal, but then, so was Molotov’s with anyone but him. When Molotov closed the door behind him, he permitted himself the luxury of a small sigh. He’d survived another audience.

For getting his consignment of uranium or whatever it was safely from Boston to Denver, Leslie Groves had been promoted to brigadier general. He hadn’t yet bothered replacing his eagles with stars; he had more important things to worry about. His pay was accumulating at the new rate, not that that meant much, what with prices going straight through the roof.

At the moment what galled him worse than inflation was the lack of gratitude he was getting from the Metallurgical Laboratory scientists. Enrico Fermi looked at him with sorrowful Mediterranean eyes and said, “Valuable as this sample may be, it does not constitute a critical mass.”

“I’m sorry, that’s not a term I know,” Groves said. He knew nuclear energy could be released, but nobody had done much publishing on matters nuclear since Hahn and Strassmann split the uranium atom, and, to complicate things further, the Met Lab crew had developed a jargon all their own.

“It means you have not brought us enough with which to make a bomb,” Leo Szilard said bluntly. He and the other physicists round the table glared at Groves as if he were deliberately holding back another fifty kilos of priceless metal.

Since he wasn’t, he glared, too. “My escort and I risked our lives across a couple of thousand miles to get that package to you,” he growled. “If you’re telling me we wasted our time, smiling when you say it isn’t going to help.” Even relatively lean as the journey had left him, he was the biggest man at the conference table, and used to using his physical presence to get what he wanted.

“No, no, this is not what we mean,” Fermi said quickly. “You could not have known exactly what you had, and we could not, either, until you delivered it.”

“We did not even know *that* you had it until you delivered it,” Szilard said. “Security—pah!” He muttered something under his breath in what might have been Magyar. Whatever it was, it sounded pungent. Groves had seen his dossier. His politics had some radical leanings, but he was too brilliant for that to count against him.

Fermi added, “The material you brought will be invaluable in research, and in combining with what we eventually produce ourselves. But by itself, it is not sufficient.”

“All right, you’ll have to do here what you were going to do at Chicago,” Groves said. “How’s that coming?” He turned to the one man from the Met Lab crew he’d met before. “Dr. Larssen, what is the status of getting the project up and running again here in

Denver?”

“We were building the graphite pile under Stagg Field at the University of Chicago,” Jens Larssen answered. “Now we’re reassembling it under the football stadium here. The work goes—well enough.” He shrugged.

Groves gave Larssen a searching once-over. He didn’t seem to have the driving energy he’d shown in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, the summer before. Then, he’d passionately urged the federal government-in-hiding to do all it could to hold Chicago against the Lizards. But the Met Lab had had to move even though Chicago was held, and now—well, it just didn’t seem as if Larssen gave a damn. That kind of attitude wouldn’t do, not when the work at hand was so urgent.

The meeting with the physicists went on for another half hour, over lesser but still vital issues like keeping electricity coming into Denver and into the University of Denver in particular so the men could do their jobs. People in the United States had taken electricity for granted until the Lizards came. Now, over too much of the country, it was a vanished luxury. But if it vanished in Denver, the Met Lab would have to find somewhere else to go, and Groves didn’t think the country—or the world—could afford the delay.

Unlike nuclear physics, electricity was something with which, by God, he was intimately familiar. “We’ll keep it going for you,” he promised, and hoped he could make good on the vow. If the Lizards got the idea humans were experimenting with nuclear energy here, they’d have something to say about the matter. Keeping them from finding out, then, was going to be a sizable part of keeping the lights on.

When the meeting broke up, Groves fell into step with Larssen and ignored the physicist’s efforts to break away. “We need to talk, Dr. Larssen,” he said.

“No we don’t, Colonel—sorry, *General*—Groves,” Larssen said, loading the title with all the scorn he could. “The Army’s already done enough to screw up my life, thanks very much. I don’t need any more help from you.” He turned his back and started to stamp off.

Groves shot out a big, meaty hand and caught him by the arm. From the way Larssen whirled around, Groves thought he was going to swing on him. Decking a physicist wasn’t part of his own job description, but if that was what it took, that was what he’d do.

Maybe Larssen saw that in his eyes, for he didn’t throw the punch. Groves said, “Look, your life is your business. But when it makes you have trouble with your job, well, your particular job is too important to let that happen. So what’s eating you, and how come you think it’s the Army’s fault?”

“You want to know? You really want to know?” Larssen didn’t wait for an answer from Groves, but plowed ahead: “Well, why the hell shouldn’t I tell you? Somebody else will if I don’t. After I saw you last year, I managed to get all the way to western Indiana on my own. That’s when I ran into General Patton, who wouldn’t let me send my wife a

message so she'd know I was alive and okay.”

“Security—” Groves began.

“Yeah, security. So I couldn't get her a message then, and by the time I got to Chicago, it was too late—the Met Lab team had already taken off. And I couldn't get a message to Barbara after that—security again. So she figured I was dead. What was she supposed to think?”

“Oh,” Groves said. “I'm sorry. That must have been a shock when she came into Denver. But I'll bet you had quite a reunion.”

“It was great,” Larssen said, his voice deadly cold. “She thought I was dead, so she fell for this corporal who rides herd on Lizard POWs. She married him up in Wyoming. I was already in Denver, but Colonel Hexham, God bless him, still wouldn't let me write. Security one more time. Now she's gonna have the guy's baby. So as far as I'm concerned, General Groves, sir, the U.S. Army can go fuck itself. And if you don't like it, throw me in the brig.”

Groves opened his mouth, closed it again. He'd been through Chugwater just after that wedding in Wyoming. He'd known something was eating Larssen, but not what. No wonder the poor bastard was in a blue funk. Mahatma Gandhi wouldn't have stayed cool, calm, and collected with this landing on him.

“Maybe she'll come back to you,” he said at last. It sounded lame, even in his own ears.

Larssen laughed scornfully. “Doesn't look that way. She's still going to bed with Sam stinking Yeager, that's for sure. Women!” He clapped a hand to his forehead. “You can't live without 'em and they won't live with you.”

Groves hadn't seen his own wife in months, either, or sent her a note or anything else. He didn't worry about her running around, though; he just worried about her being all right. Maybe that just meant he was older and more settled than Larssen and his wife. Maybe it meant his marriage was in better shape. Or maybe (unsettling thought) it meant he didn't know what to worry about.

He fell back on his own training: “Dr. Larssen, you cannot let it get you down to the point where it affects your work. You cannot. More than just you and your wife depends on what you do here, more even than your country. I am not exaggerating when I say the fate of humanity rests on your shoulders.”

“I know that,” Larssen said. “But it's hard to give a damn about the fate of humanity when the one human being who really matters to you goes and does something like this.”

There Groves could not argue with him, nor did he try. He said, “You're not the only one in that boat. It happens all the time—maybe more in war than in peace, because things are more broken up nowadays—but all the time. You have to pick up the pieces and keep going.”

“You think I don't know that?” Larssen said. “I tell myself the same thing twenty

times a day. But it's damned hard when I keep seeing her there with that other guy. It hurts too much to stand."

Groves thought about shipping out the other guy—Yeager, Larssen had said his name was. With the war on, keeping a physicist happy counted for more than the feelings of a Lizard liaison man. But even if he did that, he had no guarantee it would bring Barbara back into Jens' arms, not if she was carrying Yeager's baby.

And she and Yeager wouldn't have got married if they hadn't thought Larssen was dead. They'd tried to make things right, the best way they knew how. It hadn't worked, but they hadn't had all the data they needed, and humans couldn't be engineered like electrons, anyhow.

Just the same, Groves wished he could order Barbara to go to bed with Jens for the good of the country. It would have made things a lot simpler. But, while a medieval baron might have gotten away with an order like that, a twentieth-century woman would spit in his eye if he tried it. That was what freedom was about. He believed in freedom ... no matter how inconvenient it was at the moment.

"Professor Larssen, you've got yourself a mess," he said heavily.

"Yeah. Now tell me one I haven't heard."

When Larssen broke away this time, Groves didn't try to stop him. He just stood and watched till the physicist turned a corner and disappeared. Then he shook his head. "That's trouble, waiting to happen," he muttered, and started slowly down the hall himself.

Atvar turned one eye turret to the left side of the audience chamber, the other to the right. The assembled shiplords stared back at him. He tried to gauge their temper. They'd been struggling for close to two years, almost one of Tosev 3's slow revolutions around its star, to bring the miserable world into the Empire. By all they'd known when they left from Home, the conquest should have been over in a matter of days—which only proved they hadn't known much.

"My fellow males, let us consider the status of our enterprise," he said.

"It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord," the shiplords chorused in a show of the perfect obedience the Race so esteemed. No virtue was more fundamental than obedience. So Atvar had been taught since he came from his egg; so he'd believed till he came to Tosev 3.

He still believed it, but not as he had back on Home. Tosev 3 corroded every assumption the Race made about how life should be lived. The only thing the Big Ugliers knew about obedience was that they weren't very good at it. They'd even overthrown and murdered emperors: to Atvar, whose ruling dynasty had held the throne for tens of thousands of years, a crime almost incomprehensibly heinous.

He said, "We do continue to make progress in our campaigns. Our counterattacks south of the Tosevite city known as Chicago on the smaller continental mass have

pushed back the enemy, and—”

Straha, shiplord of the *206th Emperor Yower*, raised a hand. Atvar wished he could ignore the male. Unfortunately, Straha was next most senior shiplord after Kirel, who commanded the bannership itself. Even more unfortunately, from Atvar’s point of view, Straha headed a loud and vocal faction of males whose principal amusement seemed to be carping about the way the war against the Tosevites was going.

Having been (reluctantly) recognized, Straha said, “May it please the exalted fleetlord, I would respectfully note that the campaign continues to have obvious shortcomings. I hope I shall not try his patience if I elucidate?”

“Proceed,” Atvar said. *Maybe, he thought hopefully, Straha will say something really unforgivable and give me the excuse I’ve been looking for to sack him.* It hadn’t happened yet, worse luck.

Straha stood a little straighter, the better to display his elaborate, punctiliously applied body paint. He had his own agenda, Atvar knew: if he could persuade enough males that the fleetlord was botching his leadership of the war, he might become fleetlord himself. It would be irregular, but everything about the conquest—the attempted conquest—of Tosev 3 was irregular. If Straha succeeded where Atvar had failed, the Emperor would turn his eye turrets away from the irregularity.

The fractious shiplord said, “First and most important is the increased punishment our armor is taking at the hands of the Big Ugliers. Loss rates are up significantly from last year’s fighting to this. Such a toll cannot continue indefinitely.”

There Atvar, try as he would, could not disagree with Straha. He made his voice sharp, though, as he answered, “I cannot produce landcruisers out of thin air, nor can the Big Ugliers under our control manufacture any that meet our needs. Meanwhile, those out of our control continue to improve their models, and to introduce new weapons such as antilandcruiser rockets. Thus our losses are higher of late.”

“The Tosevites out of our control always seem capable of more than those we have conquered,” Straha said acidly.

With an effort, the fleetlord ignored the sarcasm and replied to the literal sense of Straha’s words: “This is not surprising, Shiplord. The most technologically advanced regions of this inhomogeneous planet are precisely the ones most capable of extended resistance and, I suppose, of innovation.”

He spoke the last word with a certain amount of distaste. In the Empire, innovation came seldom, and its effects were tightly controlled. On Tosev 3, it ran wild, fueled by the endless squabbling among the Big Ugliers’ tiny empires. Atvar thought such quick change surely malignant for the long-term health of a civilization, but the Tosevites cared nothing for the long term. And in the short term, quick change made them more dangerous, not less.

“Let that be as you say, Exalted Fleetlord,” Straha answered. Atvar gave him a suspicious look; he’d yielded too easily. Sure enough, he, went on, “Some of our losses,



however, may be better explained by causes other than Tosevite technical progress. I speak in reference to the continued and growing use among our fighting males of the herb termed ginger.”

“I concede the problem, Shiplord,” Atvar said. He could hardly do otherwise, what with some of the after-action reports he’d seen from the landcruiser combats in France. Had things gone as planned, the Race would have been pushing into Deutschland. Instead, they’d taken a pounding almost as costly as the one that had held them out of Chicago, and without the excuse of winter.

Atvar continued, “Surely, though, you cannot hold me responsible for the effects of an unanticipated alien herb. We are making every effort to diminish its consequences on our operations. If you have any concrete suggestions in that regard, I would gratefully receive them.”

He’d hoped that would shut Straha up. It didn’t; nothing seemed to. But it did make the shiplord change the subject: “Exalted Fleetlord, what have we learned of the Big Ugliers’ efforts to produce their own nuclear weapons?”

Where Straha had been playing to his own faction before, now he seized the attention of all the assembled males. If the Tosevites got their clawless hands on nuclear weapons, the campaign stopped being a war of conquest and turned into a war of survival. And what would the onrushing colonization fleet do if, between them, the Big Ugliers and the Race rendered Tosev 3 uninhabitable?

Hating Straha, Atvar answered, “Though they did steal nuclear material from us, we have found no sign that they can yet produce a weapon with it.” The fleetlord had expected that question to arise, if not from Straha, then from someone else. He touched a recessed button on the podium. A holograph of one of the Race’s power plants appeared. Seeing the familiar egg-shaped protective dome over the reactor made him long bitterly for Home. Forcing down the emotion, he went on, “We have also detected no indications of any structures like this one, which would be required for them to utilize their own radioactive materials.”

Most of the shiplords relaxed when they heard that. Even Straha said, “So they won’t be able to use nuclear weapons against us for the next few years, eh? Well, there’s something, anyhow.” If that wasn’t praise, it wasn’t carping criticism, either. Atvar gratefully accepted it.

Loyal, steadfast Kirel raised a hand. Atvar was delighted to recognize him. Then Kirel said, “Excuse me, Exalted Fleetlord, but the Big Ugliers are good at camouflage. And besides, some of their primitive structures look very little like those of ours which perform equivalent functions. Are we truly as certain as we would like to be that their nuclear weapons programs are not progressing under our very snouts, to emerge as unexpectedly as some of their other weapons?”

Aside from the difficulty of proving a negative, Atvar had no answer prepared for that. The meeting did not dissolve on the note for which he’d hoped.

Teerts was coming to look forward to mealtimes. For one thing, the Nipponese had been feeding him better lately, with many more bits of meat and fish mixed in with the rice that made up the greater part of his diet. For another, they'd also taken to spicing his food instead of leaving it bland and boring; his tongue tingled pleasantly when he ate now. The spices weren't the same as the ones cooks back on Home would have used, but they livened up meals in a similar way.

And for a third, food these days gave him a lift that carried him altogether out of the depression that had gripped him since his killercraft went down near Harbin. For a while after he ate, he felt bright and strong and ever so wise. The feeling never lasted as long as he wished it would, but having it even for a little while was welcome.

The Nipponese seemed to notice his changed attitude, too. They'd developed the habit of interrogating him right after he ate. He didn't mind. Food made him seem so omniscient that he dealt with their questions with effortless ease.

He heard a squeak and a rattle down the hall: the food cart. He sprang to his feet, waited eagerly by the bars of his cell for the cart to arrive. One guard unlocked the cell. Another stood watch with a knife-tipped rifle. The fellow who actually served the food handed Teerts his bowl.

"Thank you, superior sir," he said in Nipponese, bowing as he did so. The guard locked the cell door again. The cart clattered away.

Out of necessity, Teerts had become adept with the little paired sticks the Nipponese used to manipulate food. He brought a chunk of fish to his mouth, twisted his tongue around it. It didn't taste the way it had for a good many meals. It wasn't bad, though. *They've changed the herbs they're using*, he thought, and gulped it down.

He got to the bottom of the bowl in a hurry; although the Nipponese were feeding him better than they had, he wasn't any great threat to get fat. As he ran his tongue over his hard outer mouthparts to clean them, he waited for the wonderful feeling of well-being that had come to accompany each meal.

He didn't get it, not this time. He'd been more than unusually gloomy when the feeling passed away after a meal. Now, failing to find it at all, he felt desperate, betrayed; the iron bars of his cell seemed to be closing in around him. He paced restlessly back and forth, his tailstump jerking like a metronome.

He hadn't realized how much he'd depended on that mealtime burst of euphoria till it was denied him. He opened his mouth, displaying his full set of small, sharp teeth. If Major Okamoto came by, he'd gnaw a chunk off him. *That* would give him a good feeling, by the Emperor!

Not much later, Major Okamoto did come down the hallway. He stopped in front of Teerts' cell. The captured killer-craft pilot's dreams of vengeance turned to fear at the

sight of the Big Ugly, as they always did.

“Good day,” Okamoto said in the language of the Race. He’d become quite fluent, much more so than Teerts was in Nipponese. “How are you feeling today?”

“Superior sir, I am not so well as I would like,” Teerts answered; among the Race, that question was taken literally.

Okamoto’s rubbery face twisted into what Teerts had come to recognize as an expression of amusement. That worried the male; Okamoto’s amusement often came at his expense. But the Big Ugly’s words were mild enough: “I may know what is troubling you, and may even have a medicine to cure your trouble.”

“*Honto?*—Really?” Teerts asked suspiciously: From all he’d seen of what the Big Uglies called medicine, he’d sooner have taken his chances on being sick.

“*Hai, honto,*” Okamoto answered, also falling back into Nipponese. From a pocket of his uniform, he pulled out a small waxed-paper bag. He poured a little of the brown powder it held into the palm of his hand, then held the hand out to Teerts through the bars. “Here, put your tongue on this.”

Teerts sniffed first. The powder had a pungent, spicy odor that seemed familiar, though he could not place it at once. He reflected that the Tosevites could kill him any time they chose; they did not need to put on an elaborate charade if they wanted him dead. Therefore he flicked out his tongue and licked up the powder.

As soon as he tasted it, he knew what it was: the flavor that had been missing from his latest bowl of food. A moment later, he realized the Nipponese must have been feeding it to him in tiny doses till now. He didn’t just feel good; he felt as if the sacred Emperor were some sort of lowly cousin of his. Ruling the Race would have been too small a job for him; keeping track of all the planets in all the galaxies seemed about right.

Through the omnipotence that blazed in him, he saw Okamoto’s face contort again. “You like that, *neh?*” the Big Ugly asked, all but the last word in Teerts’ tongue.

“Yes,” Teerts said, as if from very far away. He wished Okamoto were very far away, so he would not pester him at this transcendent moment.

But the interrogator and interpreter did not pester him. The Big Ugly just leaned back against the bars of the empty cell across from Teerts’ and waited. For a while, Teerts ignored him as being beneath notice, let alone contempt. The glorious feeling from the powder he’d licked up, though, didn’t last as long as he’d hoped it would. And when it was gone ...

When it was gone, Teerts crashed into depths deeper than the heights he had scaled. The weight of all the worlds he’d so blithely imagined he could oversee came down on his narrow shoulders and crushed him. Now he ignored Okamoto because the Big Ugly was outside his sphere of intensely personal misery. Nothing the Nipponese did to him could be worse than what his own body and brain were doing. He huddled in a corner of the cell and wished he could die.

Okamoto’s voice pursued him: “Not so good? Want another taste?” The Big Ugly held

out his broad, fleshy hand, a small mound of powder in the middle of the palm.

Even before his conscious mind willed him to action, Teerts was on his feet and bounding toward the bars between which that hand so temptingly protruded. But before his tongue could touch that precious powder, Okamoto jerked the hand back. Teerts almost slammed his muzzle against the cold, unyielding iron that caged him. Careless of his own safety, he cursed Okamoto as vilely as he knew how.

The Tosevite threw back his head and let out several of the loud barking noises his kind used for laughter. “So you want more ginger, do you? I thought you might. We have learned males of the Race are—how do you say it?—very fond of this herb.”

Ginger. Now Teerts had a name for what he craved. For some reason, that only made him crave it more. His fury collapsed into depression once again. Instead of hissing at Okamoto, he pleaded with him: “Give it to me, I beg. How can you hold it away from me if you know how badly I need it?”

Okamoto laughed again. “One who lets himself be captured does not deserve to have anything *given* to him.” When it came to prisoners of war, the Nipponese knew only scorn. Okamoto went on, “Maybe, though, just maybe, you can *earn* more ginger for yourself. Do you understand?”

Teerts understood too miserably well. The trap’s teeth were sharp, sharp. His captors had given him a taste for ginger in his food, withheld it, shown him exactly what he craved, and now were withholding it again. They expected that would make him submit. They were, he admitted to himself, dead right. Hating the cringing whine he heard in his own voice, he said, “What do you want me to do, superior sir?”

“More exact answers to the questions we have been putting to you on explosive metals might make us more pleased with you,” Okamoto said.

Teerts knew that was a lie. Because he’d let himself be taken prisoner, the Nipponese would never be happy with him, no matter what he did. But they might find him more useful; he’d already seen how his treatment varied with their perception of his value. If he satisfied them, they would give him ginger. The thought tolled in his head like the reverberations from a big bass drum.

Despite it, he had to say, “I have already given you the best and truest answers I can.”

“So you claim now,” Okamoto answered. “We shall see how you reply when you want ginger more than you can imagine now. Maybe then you will remember better than you do today.”

The teeth of the trap were not only sharp, they were jagged as well. The Nipponese didn’t just want Teerts to be their prisoner; they wanted him to be their slave. Slavery had vanished from the culture of the Race long before Home was unified, but the Rabotevs (or was it the Hallessi?—Teerts had always dozed through history lessons) practiced it whenever their world, whichever it was, came into the Empire. They returned the concept, if not the institution, to the notice of the Race. Teerts feared it wasn’t just a concept on Tosev 3.

He also feared that if he went without ginger, he would go mad. The craving ate at him like acid dripping on his scaly skin. "Please, let me taste it now," he begged.

Some of his Nipponese captors had been wantonly cruel, and exulted in their cruelty in the exact proportion that they enjoyed power over his helplessness. They would have refused, merely to experience the pleasure they took from watching him suffer. Okamoto, to give him his limited due, did not daub on that pattern of body paint. Having shown Teerts he was indeed trapped, the Big Ugly let him sample the bait once more.

The feeling of power and wisdom flooded through Teerts again. While he reached that ecstatic, exalted peak, he did his best to come up with a way to escape the prison where the Nipponese held him. For an all but omnipotent genius, it should have been easy.

But no brilliant ideas came. Maybe the ginger did sharpen his analytical faculty a little: he swiftly concluded the feeling of brilliance it gave him was just that, a feeling, and nothing more. Had the powder not been coursing through his veins, he would have been bitterly disappointed. As things were, he noted the problem, then dismissed it.

Tosevites were impetuous, hot-blooded, always *doing things*. The Race's virtues were study, patience, careful planning. So Teerts had been indoctrinated, and little he had seen inclined him to doubt what his killercraft squadron's briefing officers had said. But now, out in the hallway, Okamoto stood quietly and waited as patiently as any male of the Race.

And Teerts? As the joy from the ginger ebbed in him, leaving only a memory of sensation, Teerts became a veritable parody of a Big Ugly, grabbing at the bars of his cell, shouting curses, reaching uselessly for Okamoto in a foredoomed effort to get more ginger onto his tongue: in short, he acted blindly, without the slightest concern for consequences. He should have been ashamed of himself. He was ashamed of himself—but not enough to stop.

Okamoto waited until his blustering had died away, swallowed in the crushing depression that followed ginger euphoria. Then, at just the right instant, the Nipponese said, "Tell me everything you know about the process that transforms element 92 to element 94."

"The special word for this in our language is 'transmutes,'" Teerts said. "It takes place in several steps. First—" He wondered how much Okamoto would make him talk before he got another taste.

Bobby Fiore threw an easy peg to the young Chinese man who stood waiting to catch the ball. The fellow actually did catch it, too; it slapped into the leather glove (a duplicate of Fiore's) he wore, and he covered it with his bare hand.

"Good job!" Fiore said, using tone and expression and dumb show to get across what he still had trouble saying in Chinese. "Now throw it back." Again, gesture showed what he wanted.

The Chinese, whose name was Lo, threw high. Fiore sprang and caught the ball. He landed lightly, ready to throw again himself: after so many years on so many infields, he could probably do that in his sleep. Drop a ball anywhere near him and he'd be on it like a cat.

“Don't throw like a girl,” he told Lo; this once, it was just as well that his pupil didn't understand exactly what he had to say. He demonstrated, exaggerating the from-the-elbow style the Chinese had used and shaking his head violently to show it wasn't the best way to do the job. Then he showed the full-arm motion American kids picked up on farmyards, parks, and vacant lots.

Lo didn't seem to think one better than the other. Instead of using his handmade, expensive baseball to prove the point, Bobby Fiore bent down to get an egg-sized rock. He and Lo were not far from the razor-wire fence around the Lizards' camp. He turned and threw the rock as far as he could into the green fields beyond the perimeter.

He found another rock, tossed it underhand to Lo. “Let's see you top that, throwing like you do,” he said. Again, gestures eked out meaning. Lo nodded and let fly, grunting with effort. His rock flew barely half as far as Fiore's had. He looked at the American, nodded thoughtfully, and tried the full-arm motion. Fiore clapped his hands. “That's the idea!”

The truth was, he couldn't antagonize a cash customer. He and Liu Han still put on their baseball show, but it didn't pull in as much as it had when it was new. A few Chinese had been interested enough to pay to learn more, so he was teaching them to hit and catch and throw. Had the camp had enough open space, they could have put on a real game.

He didn't care to kowtow to Chinamen, but he'd grown used to the little luxuries spare cash allowed him to buy. And it wasn't as if he was selling something they had to have. If he got 'em mad at him, they'd just leave. So he did his best to stay on good behavior.

“Come on, try it with the ball,” he said, and tossed it to Lo. The Chinese threw it back, still not too straight but with a better motion. “That's the way to do it!” Fiore said, clapping his hands in encouragement.

After several more throws that showed he was starting to get the idea, Lo picked up another rock and flung it out over the razor wire into the field. Throwing with his whole arm, he made it go a good deal farther than he'd managed before, but still not as far as Fiore had flung it. The ballplayer puffed out his chest, thinking no Chink was going to get the better of him.

Maybe Lo thought the same thing, for he bowed to Fiore and spoke several sharp sentences. Almost in spite of himself, Fiore was starting to understand Chinese. He didn't follow all of this, but got the idea that Lo was praising his arm and wanted to bring by some friends who would also be interested in the way he threw.

“Yeah, sure, that'd be fine,” Fiore answered in English, and then did his best to turn it into Chinese. Evidently Lo got the idea, because he bowed again and nodded, then gave

the glove back to Fiore and went on his way.

Well enough pleased with how the afternoon had gone, Fiore headed back toward the house he shared with Liu Han. He started whistling “Begin the Beguine” to himself as he walked along, but had to cut it out when the Chinese he walked past stared at him. As far as he was concerned, Chinese music sounded as if it were made by stepping on cats’ tails—out-of-tune cats, at that. The locals returned the sentiment when he made melodies he liked. Since there were lots of them and one of him, he shut up.

When he opened the door to the hut the Lizards had given him and Liu Han, his nostrils twitched appreciatively. Something tasty was cooking, even if the vegetables that went with it would be strange and underdone for his taste. “Smells good,” he said, and added the Lizards’ emphatic cough.

Liu Han looked up from the pan in which she was cooking. It was, to Fiore’s way of thinking, a funny kind of pan, being shaped like the wide, conical hats a lot of Chinese wore. It had a funny name, too: she called it a *walk*. Whenever he heard that, he pictured the pan tossing away its bat and trotting down to first base.

Liu Han tilted the *walk* on its stand so he could see the bite-sized pieces of chicken in it. “Cooked with five spices,” she said. He nodded, smiling. He didn’t know what all five spices were, but they made for mighty tasty cooking.

After supper, he gave her the trade dollars Lo had paid him for learning the art of throwing straight. “He has other people he may want me to teach, too,” he said. “If they all pay as well as he did, that should keep us in groceries a good long while.”

He said it first in English, then added Chinese and Lizard words till he was sure she’d got the idea. When she talked to him, she used a Chinese frame padded with English and Lizard. As time passed, they gained more and more words in common.

She said, “If they pay silver like this Lo, I be fat even without baby.” She was starting to show now, her belly pressing against the cotton tunic that had been loose.

“Babe, you still look good to me,” he said, which made her smile. He got the idea she was surprised he kept wanting her even though she was pregnant. He hadn’t been sure he would, either, but the growing mound of her belly didn’t bother him. It meant he couldn’t just climb on top all the time, but doing it other ways was broadening his horizons.

Thinking about it made him want to do it. One nice thing about the way Liu Han cooked was that it didn’t leave him feeling as if he’d swallowed an anvil, the way pasta did sometimes. If you got too full, you had trouble staying interested in other things. As it was ...

Before he could get up and head for the blankets on the *kang*, somebody knocked on the door. He made a sour face. Liu Han giggled; she must have known what was on his mind. “Whoever it is, I’ll get rid of him in a hurry,” he said, climbing to his feet.

But when he opened the door, there stood Lo with several other men behind him. *Business*, Fiore thought. He waved them in. Business counted, too, and Liu Han would

still be there after they'd gone. Now she'd be hostess and interpreter. She offered the newcomers tea. Fiore still missed his coffee, thick with cream and sugar, but tea, he'd decided, would do in a pinch.

The last of the newcomers shut the door behind him. Lo and his friends—six men in all—crowded the hut. They sat quietly and seemed polite, but the longer Fiore looked at them, the more he wished he hadn't let them all in at once. They were all young and on the hard side and, with their silence, more disciplined than the usually voluble Chinese of the camp. He carefully didn't glance over to the corner where he'd leaned his bat against the wall, but he didn't let them get between him and it.

He knew about shakedowns. His uncle Giuseppe, a baker, had paid protection money for a while for the privilege of going to work every day without getting his arms broken. He wasn't going to let that happen to him, not from a bunch of Chinamen. They could do their stuff on him tonight, but he'd have the Lizards on them tomorrow.

Then he realized the only one whose name he knew was Lo, and even Lo was only half a name. The rest—would he recognize them again? Maybe. Maybe not.

He grabbed the bull by the horns, asking, "What can I do for you guys? You're interested in learning to throw the right way, yeah?" He made a proper, full-arm throwing motion without any ball.

"We are interested in throwing, yes," Lo answered through Liu Han. Then he asked a question of his own: "Are you and your woman lackeys and running dogs of the little scaly devils or just their prisoners?"

Bobby Fiore and Liu Han looked at each other. Though he had been thinking of siccing the Lizards on these guys if they turned out to be hoodlums, that question had only one possible answer. "Prisoners," he said, and mimed holding his hands up to the bars of a cell.

Lo smiled. So did two or three of his buddies. The others just sat, still and watchful. Lo said, "If you are prisoners, you must want to help the oppressed peasants and workers strike a blow for freedom."

Liu Han's translation wasn't anywhere near as smooth as that. Fiore cocked his head to one side anyway. Traveling through small and medium-sized towns in an America staggered by the Depression, he'd heard plenty of guys standing on crates at street corners who talked like that. He pointed a finger at Lo. "You're a Red, that's what you are—a Communist, a Bolshevik."

Liu Han didn't recognize any of the English (or Russian). She stared and spread her hands, at a loss to interpret. But one of the terms made sense to Lo. He nodded soberly to Bobby Fiore, as if to say he was smarter than the Chinese had figured. Then he spoke to Liu Han, letting her know what was going on.

She didn't gasp as if she'd just seen a rat scurry across the floor, the way a lot of American women would have. She just nodded and tried to explain to Fiore, then fell silent when she realized he already understood. "They not bad," she told him. "They



fight Japanese, more than Kuomintang does.”

“Okay,” he said. “The Reds were on our side before the Lizards came, sure. And everybody wants to give *them* a good swift kick. But what do these guys want with me?”

Lo didn’t answer, not with words. Instead, he nudged one of his comrades. The young man reached under his tunic and pulled out a grenade. He didn’t say anything, either. He just let it sit in the palm of his hand.

Bobby didn’t need more than a heartbeat before the light went on in his head. He started to laugh. “So you want me to do your pitching for you, huh?” he said, not caring that neither Lo nor Liu Han understood what he was talking about. “I wish Sam Yeager was here. You think my arm’s hot stuff, you oughta see his.”

Lo politely waited till he was done before speaking. Liu Han hesitantly translated: “They want you—” She forgot the English for *throw*, but made a gesture to show what she meant. Fiore nodded. Then she pointed at the grenade.

“Yeah, I already worked that out,” Fiore said. He’d worked out some other things, too: if he said no, for instance, he and Liu Han were liable to end up wearing whatever Chinamen used for concrete overshoes. This wasn’t just a shakedown. If he said no, he was a big danger to these people. From everything he’d ever heard, Bolsheviks didn’t let people who were dangerous to them keep walking and breathing.

And besides, he didn’t want to say no. He wished he could have chucked some grenades at the Lizards back in Cairo, Illinois, after they caught him the first time. That would have kept him out of this whole mess. Even though he did care for Liu Han, he would have given a lot to be back in the good old U.S. of A.

Since he couldn’t have that, giving the little scaly bastards a hard time here on the other side of the world would have to do. “So what do you want me to blow up?” he asked Lo.

Maybe the Red hadn’t expected such enthusiastic cooperation. He talked in low tones with his friends before he turned back to Liu Han. She sounded worried as she told Fiore, “They want you to go with them. No say where.”

He wondered if he ought to insist that Lo tell Liu Han where he’d be. After a second’s doubt, he decided that would be stupid. If she didn’t know, she couldn’t tell anybody, especially the Lizards ... and, if she didn’t know, the Reds would have less reason to come after her to shut her up in case things went wrong.

He got to his feet. “Let’s go take care of it,” he said to Lo.

He felt edgy, almost bouncy, as he walked, as if Mutt Daniels (and he wondered what had happened to old Mutt) had flashed him the sign to steal home on the next pitch. Well, why not? He wasn’t just trying to steal home. He was going into combat.

Sooner or later, he was sure, he would have volunteered for the Army. But even then, he would have trained for months before he got the chance to see action. Now—it was as if he’d got his rifle and headed up to the front line one right after the other. No wonder he felt all loosey-goosey.

He blew Liu Han a kiss. Lo and his fellow Bolsheviks snickered and said things that were probably rude to one another: Chinese men weren't in the habit of showing they gave a damn about their women. *Well, to hell with them*, too, he thought. Liu Han managed a return smile, but he could see she was frightened about this whole business.

Night in the prison camp was darker than anything Fiore had known back in the States, even in the panicky blackouts that had followed Pearl Harbor. Few of the huts had any windows, and few of what windows there were had lights showing through them. If the moon was up in the sky, a thick layer of clouds made sure nobody could see it. Though that made Fiore stumble along, he didn't bellyache, not even to himself: darkness would give the Lizards a harder time spotting him. That he liked.

The Chinese picked their way through the black as if they had headlights. A couple of times, Bobby Fiore heard people getting out of their way in a hurry. A large group of disciplined men traveling confidently was something few wanted to mess with. He liked that, too.

Before long, he had no idea where in the camp Lo was taking him. *It all looks alike to me*, he thought, and stifled a nervous giggle. He didn't know if the Bolsheviks were walking him around in circles to get him lost or if it just worked out that way, but lost he undoubtedly was.

Lo opened the door of a shabby little hut, gestured for his companions and Fiore to go in. The inside of the hut was darker than the alley had been. That didn't stop Lo. He shoved aside a heavy wooden chest—by all appearances, the only furniture in the place—and pulled up a square piece of board underneath it. He and two of his friends dropped down into the tunnel the board concealed.

One of the remaining Reds nudged Fiore and pointed to the round mouth of the tunnel. He went into it with all the eagerness of a man walking to the electric chair. As he had when he left the hut he shared with Liu Han, he learned new lessons about how dark darkness could be. As far as his eyes were concerned, he'd just gone blind. But with Chinese ahead and Chinese pushing him on from behind, he could have no doubt about which direction to go.

The tunnel wasn't tall enough for him to stand upright, or even to crouch. He had to crawl along on hands and knees, and even then the top of his head kept bumping on the roof and showering clods of dirt down onto his neck. The air in the tunnel smelled like moist earth, dank and musty, and felt dead, as if nobody had any business breathing down here.

He had no idea how long he crawled, either in time or distance. It seemed forever, either way. He imagined the tunnel was sloping up several times, but each one proved to be just that: imaginary. Without eyes to help it, his sense of balance played tricks on him.

At last, though, he smelled fresh air. He hurried forward, and now found himself going unmistakably upward as well. He scrambled out and lay gasping in relief in a hollow in a field. After the tunnel, that seemed a wonderful luxury. It also seemed almost bright as

day. The other three Chinese Reds came out of the hole just as eagerly as he had. That made him feel better.

Lo cautiously raised his head. He turned to Bobby Fiore, pointed. Fiore raised his head, too. Off in the distance sat a Lizard guard station on the camp perimeter. Fiore mimed lobbing a grenade in that direction. Lo smiled, his teeth startlingly white in the darkness. Then he reached out and thumped Fiore on the shoulder, as if to say, *You're okay, Mac.*

He whispered something to one of the other young men, who handed Bobby Fiore a grenade. He felt for the pin, found it. Lo held up fingers close to his face—one, two, three. Then he, too, mimed throwing. “Yeah, I know I gotta get rid of it,” Fiore said laconically.

The fellow who'd given him the grenade proved to have three more, which he also passed on. Fiore took them, but less enthusiastically each time. He figured he could throw one, maybe two, and get away in the confusion, but anything after that and he'd be asking to get blown to pieces.

But the Reds weren't asking him to do anything they weren't game for themselves. Some of them pulled out pistols from the waistbands of their trousers; Lo and one other fellow had submachine guns instead—not tommy guns like gangsters, but stubbier, lighter weapons of a make Fiore didn't recognize. He wondered if they were Russian. Any which way, he was glad he hadn't tried using that baseball bat back in his hut.

Lo started crawling through the field—beans were growing in it, Fiore discovered—toward the Lizard outpost. The other raiders and Fiore trailed after him. The reek of night soil (as poetic a way of saying shit as he'd ever heard) filled his nostrils; the Chinese used it for fertilizer.

The Lizards obviously weren't expecting trouble from the outside. The humans easily got within fifty yards of their perimeter. Lo looked a question to Bobby Fiore: was this close enough? He nodded. Lo nodded back and thumped him on the shoulder again. For a Chinaman and a Communist, Lo was all right.

The raiders slithered out into a rough skirmish line. Lo stayed close by Fiore. He gave his comrades maybe a minute and a half to find firing positions, then pointed first to Fiore and then to the guard station.

*I get to open the show, huh?* It was an honor Fiore could have done without, but nobody'd asked his opinion. He yanked the pin out of one of the grenades, hurled it as if he'd just taken a relay in short right and was trying to nail a runner at the plate. Then he flung himself flat on the stinking ground.

*Bang!* The blast was oddly disappointing; he'd expected more. But it did what it was supposed to do: it got the Lizards' attention. Fiore heard hissing shouts, saw motion in and around the guard post.

That was what the Chinese had been waiting for. Their guns opened up with a roar quite satisfyingly loud. Lo went through a whole magazine in what seemed no more

than a heartbeat; his submachine gun spat a flame bright and searingly yellow as the sun. He rammed in another clip and started shooting again.

Did the hisses turn to screams? Did Lizards fall, pierced by bullets? Fiore didn't know for sure. He jumped up and threw another grenade. Its boom added to the cacophony all around.

For somebody who'd never seen action till that moment, he'd gauged it pretty well. No sooner had he hit the dirt again than the Lizards woke up. Searchlights came on. If the muzzle flash from Lo's submachine gun had been sun-bright, they were like looking at the naked face of God. And the machine guns they opened up with reminded Fiore of God, too, or at least of His wrath. Bobby even wished he were back in the tunnel.

Off to his left, one of the Chinese raiders started screaming and wouldn't stop. Off to his right, fire from the second submachine gun cut off in the middle of a burst and didn't start up again. Just over his head, bullets clipped off the tops of growing bean plants like a harvester from hell.

Lo kept right on shooting, which made him either brave or out of his ever-loving mind. Two searchlights swung toward him, which meant that for a moment none was pointing at Bobby Fiore. He threw his third grenade, got down, and started rolling away from where he had been. The location didn't seem healthy any more.

Lo's weapon fell silent. Fiore didn't know whether he was dead or also moving. He kept rolling himself until he fetched up against a long obstruction: a dead Chinese, pistol still in hand. Fiore took it and scuttled away from the Lizard guns. He'd done all the fighting he intended to do today.

He put all the distance he could between himself and that terrible fire. Bullets lashed the plants all around him, kicking up dirt that splattered his hands, his feet, his neck. Somehow, none of the bullets hit him. If Lizard infantry came out after him, he knew he was dead. But the aliens relied on firepower instead, and however awesome it was, it wasn't perfect—not quite. The last Chinaman stopped shooting and started shrieking.

Alternating Hail Marys with under-his-breath mutters of "Where the fuck's that tunnel?" Fiore slithered back toward where he thought it was. After a while, he realized he must have gone too far. At the same instant, he also realized he couldn't possibly go back, not if he wanted to keep on breathing.

"If I can't get back into camp, that means I better get my ass outta here," he mumbled. He crawled and scuttled as fast as he could. No searchlights picked him up as he dodged between rows of beans. Then he tumbled into a muddy ditch or tiny creekbed in the poorly tended field that providentially ran diagonally away from the Lizard guard post. He hoped the Chinese Reds had done some damage there, but was whatever they'd done worth six lives?

He didn't know. He was damned sure it wasn't worth seven, though.

After an eternity that might have lasted fifteen minutes, the beans on either side of the ditch gave way to bushes and saplings. About then, a helicopter came rattling over

the field and raked it with fire. Dust and pulverized bean plants flew into the sky. The noise was like the end of the world. Bobby Fiore's teeth chattered in terror. The same sort of flying gunships had strafed his train and the fields around it back in Illinois.

After a while, the gunship flew away. It hadn't lashed the place where Fiore lay trembling. That still didn't mean he was safe. The farther out of there he got, the better off he'd be. He made himself move even though he shook. He didn't feel as if he were in a tight baseball game any more. Combat against the Lizards was more like the fly taking on the swatter.

He was altogether alone and on his own. He counted up his assets: he had one grenade, a pistol with an uncertain number of cartridges, and a tiny smattering of Chinese. It didn't seem like enough.

"Mild bloody climate," George Bagnall muttered, stamping snow from his boots and brushing it from his shoulders. "Sod Jerome bloody Jones."

"Not so bad in here," Ken Embry answered. "Shut the door. You're letting in the bloody spring."

"Right." Bagnall slammed the door with a satisfying crash. He promptly started to sweat, and divested himself of fur cap and leather-and-fur flying suit. As far as he could tell, the Soviet Union in general and Pskov in particular had only two temperatures, too cold and too hot. The wood-burning stove in the corner of the house he and Embry had been assigned was more than capable of keeping it warm: too much more than capable. But none of the windows opened (the notion seemed alien to the Russian mind), and if you let the fire go out, you were facing chilblains again within the hour.

"Want some tea?" Embry asked, pointing to a dented samovar that added its quotient of warmth to the close, tropical air.

"Real tea, by God?" Bagnall demanded eagerly.

"Not likely," the pilot answered with a sneer. "Same sort of leaves and roots and muck the Bolshies are drinking these days. No milk, either, and no cups, same as always." The Russians drank tea—and their ersatz, too—from glasses, and used sugar but no milk. Considering that at the moment there was no milk in Pskov, save from nursing mothers and a few officers' closely guarded cows and goats, the Englishmen had had to get used to it that way, too. Bagnall consoled himself by thinking he was less likely to catch tuberculosis without milk in his tea; the Reds didn't fret over attestation.

He poured himself a glass of the murky brown brew, stirred in sugar (plenty of beets around Pskov), and tasted. "I've had worse," he admitted. "Where'd you come by it?"

"Bought it from a *babushka*," Embry answered. "God knows where she got it—probably grew the herbs herself, then fixed them up to sell. Not what you'd call perfect communism, but then not much here seems to be."

"No, hardly," Bagnall agreed. "I wonder if it has to do with the Germans' having been here most of a year before the Lizards arrived."

“I have my doubts,” Embry said. “From all I’ve seen, my guess is that the Russians did what they had to do for the collective farm and the factory and then turned around and did all they could for themselves.”

“Mm—you’re likely right.” Even after some weeks in Pskov, Bagnall did not know what to make of the Russians. He admired their courage and resilience. About everything else he had doubts. Had Englishmen so tamely submitted to those above them, no one would ever have questioned the divine right of kings. Only their resilience had let the Russians survive the string of incompetents and tyrants who ruled them.

“And what is the news of the day?” Embry asked.

“I was just thinking I find Russians difficult to fathom,” Bagnall said, “but in one regard they are perfectly comprehensible: they still hate the Germans. And, I assure you, the sentiment is most generously returned.”

Ken Embry rolled his eyes. “Oh, God, what now?”

“Here, wait, let me get some more of this. It isn’t tea, but it isn’t too bad, either.” Bagnall poured his glass full, sipped, and went on, “One of the things we shall have to do, on the unlikely assumption the ground ever unthaws, is build miles upon miles of antitank ditches. Let me merely state that where to site these ditches, the personnel to excavate them, and the troops to defend them once dug are matters which remain in dispute.”

“Do you care to give me the particulars?” Embry asked, with an expression that said he wasn’t particularly eager to hear them but felt he should. Bagnall understood that expression; he suspected his own matched it.

He said, “General Chill is willing to have his Wehrmacht lads do some of the digging, but feels the rest should fall on the shoulders of what he terms the ‘otherwise useless population.’ Typical German tact there, what?”

“I am certain his Soviet colleagues received that in the spirit in which it was intended,” Embry said.

“No doubt,” Bagnall said dryly. “They were also particularly pleased with his proposal that Russian soldiers and partisans be those particularly concerned with stopping the Lizards’ tanks once they traverse said ditches.”

“I can see that they would be. How generous of the distinguished German officer to offer his Soviet allies the opportunity to commit suicide under such distinguished circumstances.”

“If you stick that tongue any farther into your cheek, you’re liable to bite it off,” Bagnall said. As long as he’d known Embry, he and the pilot had dueled to see which of them could wield the twin scalpels of irony and understatement more effectively. He feared Embry had just taken the lead on points.

The pilot asked, “And why has General Chill been so extraordinarily gracious?”

“His justification is that the Nazis, with their heavier weapons, would be better used

as a reserve to meet any possible Lizard breakthroughs.”

“Oh,” Embry said in a slightly different tone.

“Just what I thought,” Bagnall answered. The rationale made just enough military sense to force one to wonder whether Chill’s plan shouldn’t be carried out as proposed. The flight engineer added, “Germans are bloody good at coming up with plausible reasons for things that are to their advantage.”

“To their short-term advantage,” Embry amended. “Setting the Russians up to be massacred will not endear Chill to them.”

Bagnall snorted. “Somehow I doubt that will cause him to lose any great quantity of sleep. He wants to keep his own forces intact first.”

“He also wants to hold Pskov,” Embry said. “He won’t do that without the Russians’ help—nor will they, without his. A lovely muddle, wouldn’t you say?”

“If you want my opinion, it would be even lovelier if viewed from a distance—say from a London pub—than when we’re caught in the middle of it.”

“Something to that,” Embry sighed. “Real springtime ... leaves ... flowers ... birds ... a pint pot of best bitter ... perhaps even Scotch.”

The pain of longing pierced Bagnall like a stiletto. He feared he’d never see England or its loveliness again. As for Scotch ... well, the spirit the Russians brewed from potatoes would warm a man, or send him to sleep if he drank enough of it, but it didn’t taste like anything. He’d also heard that drinking neutral spirits kept you from feeling the effects the next morning. He shook his head. He’d shot that theory right behind the ear more often than he cared to remember.

Embry said, “Speaking of getting stuck in the middle, is there more talk of turning us into infantrymen again?”

Bagnall didn’t blame him for sounding anxious; their one foray against the Lizard outpost south of Pskov had been plenty to put the flight engineer off the life of a foot soldier forever. The choice, unfortunately, did not rest with him. He said, “They didn’t say anything about that when I was in the *Krom*. But then, they might not have wanted to, either.”

“For fear we’d bugger off, you mean?” Embry said. Bagnall nodded. The pilot went on, “Nothing I’d like better. Only—where would we go?”

It was a good question. The short answer, unfortunately for both of them, was *nowhere*, not with the woods full of partisan bands, German patrols, and just plain bandits. Next to some of them, the prospect of facing the Lizards seemed less disastrous. The Lizards wouldn’t do anything worse than killing you. Bagnall said, “You don’t really believe those stories about the cannibals in the forest, do you?”

“Let’s just say it’s something I’d sooner not find out by experiment.”

“Too right there.”

Before Bagnall could go on, someone knocked at the door. The plaintive voice that

came through the thick boards was London-accented: “Can you let me in? I’m fair frozen.”

“Radarman Jones!” Bagnall threw the door wide. Jerome Jones came in. Bagnall quickly shut the door after him, and waved him over to the samovar. “Drink some of that. It’s fairly good.”

“Where’s the beautiful Tatiana?” Ken Embry asked Jones as he poured himself a glass of herb tea. Embry sounded jealous. Bagnall didn’t blame him. Somehow Jones had managed to connect with a Russian sniper who was even more decorative than she was deadly.

“She’s off trying to kill things, I suppose,” the radarman answered. He sipped the tea, made a face. “Maybe not bad, but it could be better.”

“Being all alone, then, you deigned to honor us with a visit, eh?” Bagnall said.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Jones muttered, then hastily added, “sir.” His position in Pskov was, to put it mildly, irregular. While Bagnall and Embry were both officers and he very much from the other ranks, he had the specialization in which the Russians—and the Nazis—were interested.

Ken Embry said, “It’s all right, Jones. We know they treat you like a field marshal everywhere else in town. Decent of you to remember your military manners around low cannon-fodder types like ourselves.”

The radarman winced. Even Bagnall, used to such sarcastic sallies, had trouble being sure how much was intended as wit and how much fired with intent to wound. A spell as an infantryman in an attack that got crushed was enough to jaundice anyone’s outlook.

Giving the pilot the benefit of the doubt, Bagnall said, “Don’t let him faze you, Jones. Our mission was to get you here, and that we’ve done. What came afterwards, the Lanc getting bombed—well, *nichevo*.”

“There’s a useful word, eh, sir?” Jones said, anxious to change the subject. “Can’t be helped, nothing to be done about it—that the Russians pack it all into one word says a lot about them, I think.”

“Yes, and not all of it good, either,” Embry said, evidently willing to drop his bitterness. “These people have spent their entire history being stepped on. Tsars, commissars, what have you—it’d be a miracle indeed if that didn’t show in the language.”

“Shall we put Mr. Jones’ knowledge of Russian to more practical use?” Bagnall said. Without waiting for a reply from Embry, he asked the radarman, “What do you hear, going up and down in the city?”

“The name is Jones, sir, as you noted, not Job,” Jones replied with a grin which rapidly slipped. “People are hungry, people are battered. They don’t love the Germans or the Bolsheviks. If they thought the Lizards would feed them and leave them alone otherwise, a lot would just as soon see them as top dogs.”



“If I’d stayed safe at home in England, I’d have trouble imagining that,” Bagnall said. Of course, flying bomber missions first against the Germans and then against the Lizards had been anything but safe, but Jones and Embry both nodded, understanding what he meant. He went on, “After the Jews rose for the Lizards and against the Nazis, I thought they were the blackest traitors in the history of the world—until their story started coming out. If a tenth part of what they say is true, Germany has more blood on her hands than a thousand years of Hitler’s *Reich* can wash away.”

“And they and we are allies,” Embry said heavily.

“And they and we are allies, yes,” Bagnall agreed. “And so are they and the Russians, and so are we and the Russians, and Stalin, by all that’s said, matches Hitler for butchery any day of the week, even if he’s not so showy about it.”

“It’s a rum old world,” Embry said.

Not far away, somebody fired a rifle in the street. Somebody else fired another one, with a report that sounded different: one weapon was German, the other Soviet. Another handful of shots followed, then silence. Bagnall waited tensely, wondering if the shooting would start up again. That would be all anyone needed—war inside Pskov between alleged allies to accompany war outside against foes. But silence held for a couple of minutes.

Then the shooting started again, worse than ever—one of those new German machine guns, the ones with the terrifyingly high cyclic rate that made them sound even more dreadful than they really were, added to the chaos. Several Russian submachine guns gave answer. Through the raucous racket of gunfire came hoarse screams. Bagnall couldn’t tell if they were Russian or German.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Jerome Jones said.

Embry took hold of one end of a chest of drawers and started pushing it toward the front door, saying, “Best we put up something of a barricade, wouldn’t you say?”

Bagnall didn’t say anything, but did put his back into helping the pilot manhandle the heavy wooden chest into place. Then he picked up a chair and, grunting, set it on top of the low chest. Together, he and Embry leaned a table against the window by the doorway.

“Jones, you have your pistol with you?” Bagnall asked, then answered himself: “Yes, I see you do. Good.” He went into the bedroom and returned with his Mauser, Ken Embry’s, and as much ammunition as they had left from the raid on the Lizard base. “I hope we shan’t have to use these, but—”

“Quite,” Embry said. He glanced over at Jones. “No offense, old man, but I’d sooner Tatiana were here than you. She’d be likelier to keep us safe.”

“No offense taken, sir,” the radarman answered. “I’d sooner Tatiana were here, too. Given any choice at all, I’d sooner be back in Dover, or better yet, London.”

Since Bagnall had had almost the same thought not long before, he could only nod. Embry went into the bedroom. He came back with their pair of coal-scuttle helmets. “I

don't know whether we ought to put these on. They'll keep out splinters or glancing bullets, but they'll also make the Russians take us for Jerries, which might prove less than ideal under the circumstances."

A random bullet smashed through the wooden front wall, just missed Jones and Bagnall, and buried itself in plaster next to the samovar. "I'll wear a helmet," Bagnall said. "The Russians may ask questions about who we are and whose side we're on, but their ammunition doesn't."

He heard the pop of a mortar and, a moment later, the much louder bang as its bomb went off. He found cover behind another chair and aimed his rifle at the doorway. "The Lizards may not need to take Pskov," he said. "Seems to me more as if the Russians and Germans want to give it to them."

A tracked Lizard troop carrier rattled down the wet dirt road, splattering mud in all directions. Some of it splashed Mordechai Anielewicz as he trudged along on the soft shoulder. The Lizards in the tracked carrier took no special notice of him: to them, he was just another gun-toting Big Ugly on the move.

His lips skinned back from his teeth in a humorless smile. The motion set his whole face itching. Moishe Russie, when he fled the Lizards, had been able to get rid of his beard in one fell swoop. Growing one took longer and, as far as Anielewicz was concerned, was a lot less comfortable.

Also uncomfortable was the *Gewehr 98* slung across his back. He valued the rifle all the same: he'd promised himself Zolraag and his minions would not take him alive, and it was the means by which he could keep that promise. He'd also had the sense to take German marching boots a size too large when the time came to disappear from Warsaw. His feet had swollen in them, yes, but he could still take them off and put them on without trouble.

He'd sent Russie west to Lodz. Now that it was his turn to escape the Lizards, he was walking south and east, into the part of Poland the Russians had occupied in 1939 before the Germans ran them out less than two years later. His chuckle sounded anything but mirthful. "Sooner or later, the people who used to work with the Lizards are going to be scattered all over the countryside," he said, and waved his arms to show what he meant. The motion startled a magpie, which flew away, chattering angrily.

He sympathized with the bird. Till he'd moved suddenly, it had taken him as harmless. He'd thought the same about the Lizards, or at least that they were a better bargain than the Nazis. For the Jews of Poland, he still thought them a better bargain than the Nazis; had they not come, Poland would have been *Judenfrei*—without Jews—by now.

But he was coming to see that the world was a wider place than Poland. The Lizards might not be out to exterminate mankind, as the Nazis aimed to exterminate Polish Jewry, but they intended to do to humanity as the Germans had done to the Poles themselves: turn them into hewers of wood and drawers of water forever. Anielewicz couldn't stomach that.

A Pole came up the road, heading toward Warsaw with a wheelbarrow full of turnips. The wheel of the wheelbarrow got stuck in a patch the Lizards' troop carrier had chewed to slime. Anielewicz helped the Pole free it from the clinging ooze. It was quite a fight; the wheelbarrow seemed to think it ought to be a submarine.

Finally, though, the two men wrestled it up onto firmer ground. "God and the Black Virgin of Czestochowa, that was tough," the Pole said, shedding his tweed cap so he could wipe his forehead with a frayed sleeve. "Thank you, friend."

"Any time," Anielewicz answered. Back before the war, he'd been much more fluent in Polish than Yiddish. He'd thought himself secular then, not so much denying his Judaism as ignoring it, until the Nazis showed him it couldn't be ignored. "Those are good fat turnips you've got there."

"Take a couple for yourself. You hadn't been here, I might have lost the whole load," the fellow said. His grin showed a couple of missing front teeth. "Besides, you've got a rifle. How am I supposed to stop you?"

"I don't steal," Anielewicz answered. *Not now I don't, anyway. I'm not starving at the moment. When the Nazis ran the Warsaw ghetto, though...*

The Pole's grin got wider. "*Armija Krajowa* fighter, are you?" It was a reasonable guess; Anielewicz's looks were more Polish than Jewish, too. Without waiting for an answer, the man went on, "Better I should give you the turnips than sell 'em to the damned Yids in Warsaw, anyhow, eh?"

He had no way of knowing how close he came to dying in the middle of the muddy road without ever learning why. Mordechai Anielewicz took a tight grip on his temper; it wasn't as if he hadn't known plenty of Poles were anti-Semites—and a murder here was liable to make it easier for pursuers to trace him. So he just said, "They're still hungry in there. I expect you'll get a good price."

"Hungry? Why should the Jews be hungry? They've got their mouths pressed to the Lizards' backsides, and they eat their—" The Pole spat into the roadway in lieu of finishing, but left no doubt about what he'd meant.

Again Anielewicz forced himself to coolness. If the Pole thought he was a countryman rather than a Jew on the dodge, his presence here would attract no notice. So he told himself. But oh, the temptation—

"Here, wait," The turnip seller undid a Polish Army canteen from his belt, yanked out the cork which had replaced the proper stopper. "Have a belt of this to help you on your way."

*This* was vodka, obviously homemade and strong enough to scar the lining of Anielewicz's throat as it went down. After a small nip, he handed the canteen back to the Pole. "Thank you," he said, wheezing a little.

"Any time, pal." The Pole tilted his head back for a couple of long swallows. "Ahh! Jesus, that's good. Us Catholics got to hang together. Ain't nobody gonna do it for us, am I right? Not the damned Jews, not the godless Russians, not the stinking Germans,

and sure as hell not the Lizards. Am I right?”

Anielewicz made himself nod. The worst thing was that the Pole *was* right, at least from his parochial perspective. No one would give his people any special help, so they'd have to help themselves. But if every people helped itself at the expense of its neighbors, how would any people—or all the peoples together—withstand the Lizards?

With a wave, Anielewicz headed down the road, leaving the Pole to trundle his turnips on toward Warsaw. The Jewish fighting leader (*Jewish refugee*, he corrected himself—someone new would head the fighters now) wondered what the peddler would have done, knowing he was a Jew. Probably nothing much, since he had a gun and the Pole didn't, but he didn't think he would have got the turnips, let alone the belt of vodka.

A Lizard jet flew by, high overhead. Its vapor trail caught Anielewicz's eye before he heard the thin, attenuated bellow of its engines. It probably carried a load of destruction. He hoped someone would shoot it down ... after it had dropped the load of destruction on a Nazi's head.

The road ran through fields of barley, potatoes, and beets. Peasants and their animals plowed those fields as they had every spring for the past thousand years. No tractors snorted or chuffed alongside the horses and mules—gasoline was next to impossible to come by. That had been true under the Germans and was even truer under the Lizards.

Overall, though, the aliens' rule lay lightly on the land. After that armored troop carrier splattered past him, Anielewicz didn't see another Lizard vehicle for the rest of the day. The Lizards garrisoned Warsaw and other towns like Lublin (to which Anielewicz intended to give a wide berth, for just that reason), but used the threat of their power rather than the power itself to hold down the countryside.

“I wonder how many Lizards there are altogether, not just in Poland, but all over the world,” he mused aloud. Few enough so that they were stretched thin trying to hold it down and run it, that seemed clear.

He wondered how humanity could best exploit such a weakness. That musing quickly turned to one more practical: he wondered what he was going to do about supper and a place to sleep. Sure, he had hard bread and cheese in his pack to go with the turnips, but none of that was inspiring fare. Similarly, he could roll himself in a blanket on the ground, but he didn't want to unless he had to.

The problem soon solved itself: a farmer coming in from the fields waved to him and called, “Are you hungry, friend? Always happy to feed an *Armija Krajowa* man. Besides, I killed a pig yesterday, and I've got more meat than my family can eat. Join us, if you care to.”

Anielewicz hadn't touched pork since the ghetto walls came down, but to decline such a feast would only have made the farmer suspicious. “Thank you very much,” he said. “You're sure it's no trouble?”

“Not a bit. Come in, wash up, sit and rest your feet.”

The farmhouse stood between two thatch-roofed outbuildings. The farmer shooed some chickens away from the woodpile and into a henhouse in one of those outbuildings, then slammed the door on them. At the fellow's urging, Anielewicz clumped up the wooden stairs and into the foyer.

A big brass basin there served for a sink. He washed his hands and face, dried them on a linen towel hung on a nail above the basin. The farmer courteously waited for him to use the water first, then cleaned himself off. After that, introductions were in order: the farmer gave his own name as Wladyslaw Sawatski; his wife was Emilia (a pleasant-looking woman who wore a kerchief over her hair), his teenage son Jozef, and his daughters Maria and Ewa (one older than Jozef, one younger).

Anielewicz said he was Janusz Borwicz, giving himself a good Polish name to go with his Polish looks. Everyone made much of him. He got the seat at the head of the table in the parlor, he got a mug of apple brandy big enough to make three people *shikker*, and he got the family's undivided attention. He gave them all the Warsaw gossip he had, especially the part pertaining to the Polish majority.

"Did you fight the Germans when the Lizards came?" Jozef Sawatski asked. He and his father—and both his sisters, too—leaned forward at that.

They wanted war stories, Mordechai realized. Well, he could give them some. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I did," he said truthfully. Again, he edited the tales to disguise his Jewishness.

Wladyslaw Sawatski, who had a brandy mug the size of Anielewicz's, slammed it down on the table with a roar of approval. "Well done, by God!" he exclaimed. "If we'd fought like that in '39, we wouldn't have needed these—creatures—to get the Nazis off our backs."

Anielewicz doubted that. Sandwiched between Germany and Russia, Poland was going to get walloped every so often. Before he could come up with a polite way to disagree with his host, Emilia Sawatski turned to her daughters and said, "Why don't you go and bring in the food now?" Alone in the family, she hadn't cared about tales of conflict.

In came supper, mountains of it: boiled potatoes, boiled *kielbasa* sausage, big pork steaks, headcheese, fresh-baked bread. Warsaw might be hungry, but the countryside seemed to be doing pretty well for itself.

As Maria, the older girl, plopped a length of sausage onto Anielewicz's plate, she gave him a sidelong glance, then spoke in silky tones to her father. "You're not going to send a hero like Janusz out onto the road after supper, are you, Papa? He'll sleep here tonight, won't he?"

*She wants to go to bed with me*, Anielewicz realized with some alarm. That alarm had nothing to do with Maria's person: she was eighteen or nineteen, and quite pretty in a wide-faced, blue-eyed way. Anielewicz didn't particularly worry about angering her father, either. But if he took off his trousers for her, he wouldn't be able to hide being a Jew.

Wladyslaw Sawatski looked from Maria to Mordechai and back again. The glance was full of understanding: whatever else he might be, Sawatski was no fool. He said, "I was going to let him rest in the barn, Maria, but as you say, he is a hero, and too good for straw. He can sleep on the sofa in the front room there."

He pointed to show Anielewicz where that was. Mordechai was not surprised to discover it lay right outside the doorway to a bedroom that would surely be Wladyslaw's. You'd have to be crazy to try to screw there.

He said, "Thank you, sir. That will be excellent." Sawatski might figure he was lying, but he meant every word of it. Maria had to nod—after all, her father had given her just what she'd said she wanted. Anielewicz hadn't expected to find rabbinic wisdom in a Polish farmer, but there it was.

The meat on his plate smelled delicious. Then Ewa Sawatski asked, "Don't you want any butter on your potatoes?"

He stared at her. Mixing meat and dairy products in the same meal—? Then he remembered the meat was pork. If he was eating pork, how could another violation of dietary law matter? "Thank you," he said, and took some butter.

Wladyslaw filled his mug when it got empty. The farmer gave himself a refill, too. His cheeks were red as if he'd rouged them, but that was all the brandy did to him. Mordechai's head was starting to swim, but he didn't think he could decline the drink. Poles poured it down till they couldn't see, didn't they?

The women went into the kitchen to clean up. Wladyslaw sent Jozef off to bed, saying, "We have plenty of work tomorrow." But he still lingered at the table, politely ready to talk as long as Anielewicz felt like it.

That wasn't long. When Mordechai yawned and couldn't stop, Sawatski got him a pillow and a blanket and settled him on the sofa. It was hard and lumpy, but he'd slept on worse in the ghetto and during the fighting afterwards. No sooner had he taken off his boots and stretched himself out at full length than he was asleep. If Maria sneaked out bent on seduction in the night, he didn't wake up for her.

Breakfast the next morning was an enormous bowl of oatmeal flavored with butter and coarse salt. Emilia Sawatski waved away Mordechai's thanks and wouldn't even take the turnips he tried to give her. "We have enough here, and you may need them in your travel," she said. "God keep you as you go."

Wladyslaw walked out to the road with Anielewicz. He too said, "God keep you," then added quietly, "Friend Janusz, you do a good job of pretending to be a Pole rather than a Jew, but not always good enough. You're awkward when you cross yourself, for instance"—in a single swift motion, the farmer showed how it should be done—"and you don't always do it at quite the right time. At another man's house, you might put yourself in danger."

Mordechai stared at him. Finally, he managed, "You knew, yet you took me in anyway?"

“You looked like a man who needed taking in.” Sawatski slapped Anielewicz on the back. “Now go on. I hope you stay safe to wherever you’re headed.”

He asked no questions about that; Anielewicz noticed so much. Still dazed (no man, and especially no young man, cares to be shown he is not as clever as he thought he was), he started down the road away from Warsaw. He’d had so much bitter experience with anti-Semitic Poles that he’d come to think the whole nation hated its Jews. Being reminded that wasn’t so made him feel good all the rest of the day.

Ussmak hated the barracks at Besançon. Because they'd been made for Big Ugliers, they were by his standards dark and dank and cold. But even if they'd been a section of Home miraculously transplanted to Tosev 3, he would not have been happy in them, not now. To him, they stank of failure.

Landcruisers, after all, were supposed to go forward, pounding the enemy into submission and paving the way for new advances. Instead, after the debacle against the Deutsche, his crew and the others who survived were pulled back here so officers could investigate what had gone wrong.

Hessef and Tvenkel had only two concerns: to keep the investigators from learning they had a ginger habit, and to do as much tasting as they could. Those concerns were in Ussmak's mind, too, but not as intensely; he'd done a better job of coming to terms with ginger than his commander or gunner.

But if the investigating officers didn't figure out ginger had played a big part in the landcruisers' lackluster performance, what was their report good for? *Wastepaper*, Ussmak thought.

A new male with a sack full of gear came into the barracks. His toeclaws clicked on the hard tile floor. Ussmak idly turned one eye turret toward the fellow, but gave him both eyes when he'd read his body paint. "By the Emperor, you're a driver, too."

The newcomer cast down his eyes. So did Ussmak. The new male said, "Good to see someone who shares my specialization." He tossed his stuff onto a vacant cot. "What are you called, friend?"

"Ussmak. And you?"

"Drefsab." The new driver swiveled both eye turrets. "What a dismal, ugly hole this is."

"Too right," Ussmak said. "Even for the Big Ugliers who used to live here, it was nothing to boast about. For properly civilized males—" He let that hang. "Where did they transfer you from?"

"I've been serving in the far east of this continent, against the Chinese and Nipponese," Drefsab answered.

"You must have come out of your eggshell lucky," Ussmak said enviously. "That's easy duty, from all I've heard."

"The Chinese don't have much in the way of landcruisers at all," Drefsab agreed. "The Nipponese have some, but they aren't very tough. Hit them and they're guaranteed to brew up—one-shot firestarters, we call them." The new male let his mouth fall open at the joke.

Ussmak laughed, too, but said, "Don't get overconfident here or you'll pay for it. I was



in the SSSR just after the invasion, and the Soviets, while their landcruisers weren't too bad, didn't have the faintest idea how to use them. Then I got hurt, and then I came here. I didn't believe what the males told me about the Deutsche, but I've been in action against them now, and it's true."

"I listen," Drefsab said. "Tell me more."

"Their new landcruisers have guns heavy enough to hurt us with a side or rear deck shot, and front armor thick enough to turn a glancing shot from one of our guns. You can forget about the one-shot firestarter business here. And they use their machines well: reverse slopes, ambushes, any trick you can think of and too many you've never imagined in your worst nightmares."

Drefsab looked thoughtful. "As bad as that? I've heard of some of the things you're talking about, but I figured half of that, maybe more, was males shooting off steam to haze the new fellow."

"Listen, my friend, we were rolling north from here not long ago when we got our eye turrets handed to us." Ussmak told Drefsab about the push that had started for Belfort and ended up back here at the Besançon barracks.

"We were held—by Big Ugliers?" The new driver sounded as if he couldn't believe it. Ussmak didn't blame him. When the Race tried to go somewhere on Tosev 3, it generally got there. In lower tones, Drefsab went on, "What happened? Were all the landcruisers tongue-deep in the ginger jar?"

Although Drefsab had spoken quietly, Ussmak scanned the barracks before he answered. No one was paying any particular attention. Good. Almost whispering, Ussmak said, "As a matter of fact, that might have had something to do with it. Have you been assigned to a landcruiser crew yet?"

"No," Drefsab said.

"I'll give you a few names to try to stay away from, then."

"Thank you, superior sir." By their paint, Drefsab and Ussmak were of virtually identical rank, but Drefsab honored him not only for the favor but also because of his longer service at this post. Now the new male glanced around the barracks. He too whispered: "Not that I have anything against a taste now and again, you understand—but not in combat, by the Emperor."

After he'd raised his eyes from the ritual gesture of respect for the sovereign, Ussmak said cautiously, "No, that's not so bad." It was what he tried to do himself. But if Drefsab had asked him for a taste, he would have denied keeping any ginger. He had no reason to trust the other male.

Instead, though, Drefsab produced a tiny glass vial from one of the pockets of his equipment bag. "Want some of the herb?" he murmured. "We're not in combat now."

Ussmak's suspicions flickered and blew out. When Drefsab poured a little ginger into his hand, Ussmak bent his head down and flicked it off the scales with his tongue. The new driver tasted, too. They sat companionably together, enjoying the surge of pleasure

the powdered herb gave them.

“Very fine,” Ussmak said. “It makes me want to go out and kill all the Deutsche I can find—or maybe Hessef instead.” He had to explain that: “Hessef is *my* landcruiser commander. If ginger truly made you as smart as it makes you think you are, Hessef would be the greatest genius the Race ever produced. Barracks, battle, it’s all the same to him: a good enough time for a taste. And Tvenkel the gunner tastes enough to make him shoot before he takes proper aim. I’ve seen him do it.”

“That doesn’t strike me as smart, not if the Deutsche are as good as you make them out to be,” Drefsab said.

“They are,” Ussmak answered. “When we got to this miserable iceball of a planet, we had equipment and training simulations. The Deutsche had experience in real combat, and their equipment keeps getting better, while ours doesn’t. Let them choose the terms of the fight and they can be a handful.”

Drefsab made the vial disappear. “You don’t taste before you’re going into action?”

“I try not to.” Ussmak moved his eye turrets in a way that said he was ashamed of his own weakness. “When the hunger for ginger comes on a male—but you know about that.”

“Yes, I know about that,” Drefsab agreed soberly. “The way I look on it is this: a male can yield himself up to the herb and let it be all he lives for, or he can taste the herb as it suits him and go on with the rest of his life as best he can. That’s the road I try to follow, and if it has some bumps and rocky places in it—well, what road on Tosev 3 doesn’t?”

Ussmak stared at him in admiration. Here was a philosophy for a ginger taster—no, after hearing such words, he needed to be honest with himself: a ginger addict—who nonetheless tried to remember he was a male of the Race, obedient to orders, attentive to duty. He said to Drefsab, “Superior sir, I envy you your wisdom.”

Drefsab made a gesture of dismissal. “Wisdom? For all I know, I may well be fooling myself, and now you. Whatever it is, the price I paid to win it is much too high. Better by far the herb had never set its claws in me.”

“I don’t know,” Ussmak said. “After I’ve tasted, I feel as if ginger were the only worthwhile thing this miserable world produces.”

“*After* I’ve tasted, so do I,” Drefsab said. “But before, or when I need a taste badly and there’s none to be had ... times like those, Ussmak, I’m certain ginger is worst for the Race, not best.”

Times like those, Ussmak had the same feeling. He’d heard stories that some males, if they got desperate enough for ginger, traded pieces of the Race’s military hardware for the herb. He’d never done anything like that himself, but he understood the temptation.

Before he found a safe way to tell that to Drefsab (some things you didn’t say directly even to a male who’d given you a taste of ginger, not until you were positive you could trust him with your life as well as with the herb), he heard a brief, shrill whistle in the

air, followed by a loud *crummp!* The glass from a couple of windows in the barracks blew inward in a shower of tinkling shards.

Ussmak sprang to his feet. As he did so, a loudspeaker blared, “Mortars incoming from forest patch grid 27-Red. Pursuit in force—”

Ussmak didn’t wait to hear any more, not with a good taste of ginger running through him. “Come on,” he shouted to Drefsab. “Out to the landcruiser park.”

Another mortar bomb hit in the yard in front of the barracks. His words punctuated by the blast, Drefsab said, “But I’ve been assigned to no crew.”

“So what? Some commander and gunner won’t want to wait for their own driver.” Ussmak was as sure of that as of his own name. Ginger ran rampant through the base at Besançon; some commander or other would be feeling more intrepid than patient.

The two males ran side by side down the stairs to the yard. Ussmak almost stumbled; the risers were built for Big Ugliers, not the smaller Race. Then he almost stumbled again, this time because a blast from a mortar bomb nearly hurled him off his feet. Fragments whistled by; he knew only luck kept them from carving him into jagged, bloody bits.

Off to one side of the barracks, guns opened up, flinging blast and sharp-edged bits of hot brass back at the Tosevites who were hurling them at the Race’s bastion in Besançon. With luck, artillery would take care of the raiders before landcruisers had to go in after them.

When no more mortar bombs fell for a little while, Ussmak hoped that had happened. But then the bombs started coming in again. The Big Ugliers didn’t have antiartillery radar, but they’d learned they had to shift their guns to keep the Race from pounding them to bits. That was the trouble with the Big Ugliers: they learned too fast.

Hessef and Tvenkel came dashing up from wherever the investigation team had been questioning them. “Come on!” they shouted together. Ussmak scrambled into his landcruiser the instant he got to it; unless a mortar bomb landed on top of the turret or in the engine compartment, it was the safest place he could be.

The familiar vibration of the big hydrogen-burning engine starting up made him feel this was the purpose for which he’d been hatched. He noted with sober pride that his was the third landcruiser to move out of its revetment. Sometimes the energetic aggression ginger brought wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

With the intercom button taped to one hearing diaphragm, he listened to Hessef telling Tvenkel, “Quick, another taste. I want to be all razor wire when we go after those Deutsche or Français or whoever’s trifling with us.”

“Here you go, superior sir,” the gunner answered. “And wouldn’t the egg-addled snoops who were just grilling us pitch a fit if they knew what we were doing now?”

“Who cares about them?” Hessef said. “They’re probably hiding under their desks or else wishing they were back in those addled eggs.” Silence followed—likely the silence of the two males laughing together.

Ussmak laughed, too, a little. What the other crewmates said was true, but that didn't mean he was happy about their going into action with heads full of ginger, even if he was doing the same thing himself. *It's not my fault*, he thought virtuously. *I didn't know the Big Ugliers would sneak a mortar into range.*

Square 27-Red was northeast of the fortress, and east of the river that wound through Besançon. Following the two landcruiser crews that had managed to get moving ahead of him, Ussmak roared down the hill on which the fortress sat and toward the nearest bridge. Big Ugliers stared at the landcruisers as they went by. Ussmak was sure they wished one of those mortar bombs had blown him to bits.

Sometimes when he rumbled through town, he drove unbuttoned and noticed the fancy wrought-iron grillwork that decorated so many of the local buildings. Not today; today action was liable to be immediate, so he had only his vision slits and periscopes to peer through. The streets, even the big ones, were none too wide for landcruisers. He had to drive carefully to keep from mashing a pedestrian or two and making the Français love the Race even less than they did already.

He felt the explosion ahead as much as he heard it; for a moment, he thought it was an earthquake. Then gouts of flame shot from the lead landcruiser, which lay on its side. He slammed on the brakes as hard as he could. The murdered landcruiser's ammunition load began cooking off, adding fireworks to the funeral pyre. Ussmak shivered in horror. *If I'd been just a clawtip faster out of the revetment, I'd have driven over that bomb in the street*, he thought. The Big Ugliers must have figured out just how the Race would respond to a mortar attack and set their ambush accordingly.

"Reverse!" Hessef yelled into Ussmak's hearing diaphragm. "Get out of here!" The order was sensible, and Ussmak obeyed it. But the commander of the landcruiser behind him didn't have reflexes as fast as Hessef's (maybe they weren't gingerenhanced). With a loud crunch, the rear of Ussmak's machine slammed into the front of that one. A moment later, the landcruiser in front of Ussmak backed into him.

Had the terrorists who planted the explosive under the road stayed around, they might have had a field day attacking stuck landcruisers with firebombs. Perhaps they hadn't realized how well their plan would work: the multiple accident of which Ussmak found himself a part was far from the only one in the line of landcruisers. The machines, fortunately, were tough, and suffered little damage.

The same could not be said about the Big Ugliers who'd been standing anywhere near where the bomb went off. Ussmak watched other Tosevites carry away broken, bleeding bodies. They were only aliens, and aliens who hated him at that, but Ussmak wanted to turn his eye turrets away from them anyhow. They reminded him how easily he could have been broken and bleeding and dead.

With patience, which the Race did have in full measure, the snarls unkinked and the landcruisers chose the next best route out of Besançon. This time a special antiexplosives unit preceded the lead machine. Near the bridge over the River Doubs, everybody halted: the unit found another bomb buried under a new patch of pavement.

Even though air conditioning kept the interior of the landcruiser's fighting compartment comfortably warm, Ussmak shivered. The Big Ugliers had known what the males of the Race would do, and done their best to hurt them not just once but twice—and their best had been pretty good.

Eventually, the landcruisers did reach square 27-Red. By then, of course, the raiders and their mortar were long gone.

Back at the barracks that evening, Ussmak said to Drefsab, "They made idiots of us today."

"Not altogether," Drefsab said. Ussmak wagged one eye turret slightly in a gesture of curiosity. The other male amplified: "We did a good job of making idiots of ourselves." With that Ussmak could not disagree. It was, however, an opinion to be shared only among those of inconsequential rank—or so he thought.

But he was wrong. Three days later, inspectors of a sort altogether different from the first lot descended on Besançon. Most of the males whom Ussmak knew to be ginger tasters (and especially ginger tasters who'd let their habits get the better of them) disappeared from the base: Hessef and Tvenkel among them.

Drefsab wasn't seen at Besançon any more after that, either. Ussmak wondered at the connection; before long, wonder hardened into near certainty. He knew more than a little relief that the inspectors hadn't swept him up along with his crewmales.

*If I ever see Drefsab again, I'll have to thank him,* he thought.

"Jesus Christ, Jäger, you're still alive?" The big, deep voice boomed through the German encampment.

Heinrich Jäger looked up from the pot of extremely ersatz coffee he was brewing over a tiny cookfire. He jumped to his feet. "Skorzeny!" He shook his head in bemusement. "And you wonder that *I'm* alive, after the madcap stunts you've pulled off?" He hurried over to shake the SS man's hand.

Otto Skorzeny said, "Pooh. Yes, my stunts, if that's what you want to call them, are maybe more dangerous than what you do for a living, but I spend weeks between them planning. You're in action all the time, and going up against Lizard panzers isn't a child's game, either." He glanced at Jäger's collar tabs. "And a colonel, too. You've stayed up with me." His rank badges these days also had three pips.

Jäger said, "That's your fault. That madman raid on the Lizards in the Ukraine—" He shuddered. He hadn't had a tank wrapped around him like an armored skin then.

"Ah, but you brought home the bacon, or half the rashers, anyhow," Skorzeny said. "For that, you deserve everything you got."

"Then you should be a colonel-general by now," Jäger retorted. Skorzeny grinned; the jagged scar that ran from the corner of his mouth toward his left ear pulled up with the motion of his cheek. Jäger went on, "Here, do you have a cup? Drink some coffee with me. It's vile, but it's hot."

Skorzeny pulled the tin cup from his messkit. As he held it out, he clicked his heels with mocking formality. “*Danke sehr, Herr Oberst!*”

“Thank me after you’ve tasted it,” Jäger said. The advice proved good; Skorzeny’s scar made the face he pulled seem only more hideous. Jäger chuckled under his breath—wherever he’d seen Skorzeny, in Moscow, in the Ukraine, and now here, the man hadn’t cared a fig for military discipline. And now here—Jäger’s gaze sharpened. “What *does* bring you here, *Standartenführer* Skorzeny?” He used the formal SS title with less irony than he would have aimed at any other soldier of Hitler’s elite.

“I am going to get into Besançon,” Skorzeny announced, as if entering the Lizard-held city were as easy as a stroll around the block.

“Are you?” Jäger said noncommittally. Then he brightened. “Did you have anything to do with that bomb last week? I hear it took out one of their panzers, maybe two.”

“Petty sabotage has its place, but I do not engage in it.” Skorzeny grinned again, this time like a predator. “My sabotage is on the grand scale. I aim to buy something of value which one of our little scaly friends is interested in selling. I have the payment here.” He reached over his shoulder, patted his knapsack.

Jäger jabbed: “They trust you to carry gold without disappearing?”

“O ye of little faith.” Skorzeny sipped the not-quite-coffee again. “That is without a doubt the worst muck I have ever drunk in my life. No, the Lizards care nothing for gold. I have a kilo and a half of ginger in there, Jäger.”

“Ginger?” Jäger scratched his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Think of it as morphine, if you like, then, or perhaps cocaine,” Skorzeny said. “Once the Lizards get a taste for it, they’ll do anything to get more, and *anything* includes, in this case, one of the rangefinders that make their panzers so deadly accurate.”

“Better than what we have in the Panther?” Jäger set an affectionate hand on the road wheel of the brush-covered machine parked by the fire. “It’s a big step up from what they put into my old Panzer III.”

“Get ready for a bigger step, old son,” Skorzeny said. “I don’t know all the details, but I do know it’s a whole new principle.”

“Can we use it if you get it?” Jäger asked. “Some of the things the Lizards use seem good only for driving our own scientists mad.” He thought of his own brief and unhappy stay with the physicists who were trying to turn the explosive metal he and Skorzeny had stolen into a bomb.

If Skorzeny had that same thought, he didn’t show it. “I don’t worry about such things. That’s not my job, no more than setting foreign policy for the *Reich*. My job is getting the toys so other people can play with them.”

“That is a sensible way for a soldier to look at the world.” After a couple of seconds, Jäger wished he hadn’t said that. He’d believed it wholeheartedly until he found out how the SS went about massacring Jews: someone had given them that job, and they went

ahead and did it without worrying about anything else. He changed the subject: “All right, you’re going into Besançon to get this fancy new rangefinder. How do you expect me to help? We’re still close to eighty kilometers north of it, and if I roll out my panzers for an attack, they’ll all be scrap metal before I get a quarter of the way there. Or have you arranged for your Lizard who likes ginger so well to sell you all their rangefinders instead of just one?”

“That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Skorzeny slugged back the rest of his coffee, made a horrible face. “This *Dreck* is even worse after it cools down. Damn, Jäger, you disappoint me. I expected you to run me right down the Grande Rue in Besançon and on to the citadel, cannon blazing.”

“Good luck,” Jäger blurted before he realized the other man was joking.

“How’s this, then?” Skorzeny said, chuckling still. “Suppose you lay on an attack—a few panzers, artillery, infantry, whatever you can afford to expend and seem convincingly aggressive without hurting your defense too much—on the eastern half of the front. I want you to draw as much attention as you can away from the western section, where I, a simple peasant, shall pedal my bicycle—you do have a bicycle around here for me to pedal, don’t you?—into Lizard-held territory and on down to Besançon. I have a way to get word to you when I shall require a similar diversion to aid my return.”

Jäger thought about the men and equipment he would lose in a pair of diversionary assaults. “The rangefinder is as good as all that?” he asked.

“So I’ve been told.” Skorzeny gave him a fishy stare. “Would you prefer formal written orders, Colonel? I assure you, that can be arranged. I’d hoped to rely more on our previous acquaintance.”

“No, I don’t need formal orders,” Jäger said, sighing. “I shall do as you say, of course. I only hope this rangefinder is worth the blood it will cost.”

“I hope the same thing. But we won’t find out unless I get the gadget, will we?”

“No.” Jäger sighed again. “When do you want us to put in the diversionary attack, *Herr Standartenführer*?”

“Do what you need to do, *Herr Oberst*,” Skorzeny answered. “I don’t want you to go out there and get slaughtered because you hadn’t shifted enough artillery and armor. Will three days give you enough time to prepare?”

“I suppose so. The front is narrow, and units won’t have far to travel.” Jäger also knew, but could not mention, that the more men and machines he fed into the assault, the more would be expended. War assumed expending soldiers. The trick was to keep from expending them on things that weren’t worth the price.

He moved men, panzers, and artillery mostly by night, to keep the Lizards from noticing what he was up to. He didn’t completely fool them; their artillery picked up on the eastern sector of the front, and an air strike incinerated a couple of trucks towing 88mm antitank guns caught out in the open. But most of the shift went through without

a hitch.

At 0500 on the morning of the appointed day, with dawn staining the eastern sky, artillery began flinging shells at the Lizards' positions near the Château de Belvoir. Rifle-carrying men in field gray loped forward. Jäger, standing up in the cupola as a good panzer commander should, braced himself as his Panther rumbled ahead.

The Lizards' advance positions, being lightly held, were soon overrun, though not before one of the aliens turned a Panzer IV to Jäger's right to a funeral pyre with a rocket. He didn't see any enemy panzers, for which he thanked God; intelligence said they'd pulled back toward Besançon after the rough time he'd given them in their latest attack.

But even without armor, the Lizards were a handful. Jäger hadn't pushed forward more than a couple of kilometers before a helicopter rose into the sky and peppered his force with rockets and machine-gun fire. Another panzer, this one a Tiger, brewed up. He winced—not only a powerful new machine, but also a veteran crew, gone forever. A lot of foot soldiers were down, too.

He got in sight of the main Lizard position outside the Château de Belvoir, lobbed a couple of high-explosive shells at the château itself (not without an inward pang at destroying old monuments; he'd thought of archaeology as a career until World War I sucked him into the army for good), and, having taken enough casualties to provide the diversion Skorzeny wanted, withdrew to lick his wounds and wait to be called on to sacrifice again.

"I hope the Lizards don't follow us home," Klaus Meinecke said as the Panther made its way back to the start line. "If they do, they're liable to catch us with our pants down around our ankles."

"Too true," Jäger said; the gunner had found an uncomfortably vivid way to put words to his own fears.

Maybe the Lizards suspected the Germans of trying to lure them into a trap. Whatever their reasons, they didn't pursue. Jäger gratefully seized the time they gave him to rebuild his defensive position. After that, he went back to watchful waiting, all the while wondering how Skorzeny was going to get word to him that he needed more strong young men thrown into the fire.

A week after the diversionary attack, a Frenchman in a tweed jacket, a dirty white shirt, and baggy black wool trousers came up to him, sketched a salute, and said, in bad German, "Our friend with the"—his finger traced a scar on his left cheek—"he needs the help you promise. Tomorrow morning, he say, is the good time. You understand?"

"*Oui, monsieur. Merci,*" Jäger answered. The Frenchman's thin, intelligent face did not yield to a smile, but one eyebrow rose. He accepted a chunk of black bread, offering in exchange a swig of red wine from the flask on his belt. Then, without another word, he vanished back into the woods.

Jäger got on the field telephone to the nearest *Luftwaffe* base. "Can you give me air



support?” he asked. “When their damned helicopter gunships show up, I lose panzers I can’t spare.”

“When I go after those gunships, I lose aircraft I can’t spare,” the *Luftwaffe* man retorted, “and aircraft are just as vital to the defense of the *Reich* as panzers. *Guten Tag*.” The phone line went dead. Jäger concluded he was not going to get his air support.

He didn’t. The attack went on nonetheless. It even had a moment of triumph, when Meinecke incinerated a Lizard infantry fighting vehicle with a well-placed round from the Panther’s long 75mm gun. But, on the whole, the Germans suffered worse than they had in the first diversionary assault. That had put the Lizards’ wind up, and they were ready and waiting this time. Maybe that meant they’d pulled some troops from the western section of their line. Jäger hoped so; it would mean he was doing what he was supposed to.

When he’d soaked up enough casualties and damage to make the Lizards believe (with luck) he’d really tried to accomplish something, he retreated once more. No sooner had he returned to the jumping-off point than a runner came panting up and said, “Sir, there’s a Lizard panzer advancing on our front line about five kilometers west of here.”

“A Lizard panzer?” Jäger said. The messenger nodded. Jäger frowned. That wasn’t as bad as it might have been, but even one Lizard panzer made a formidable foe. *Poor Skorzeny*, he thought: *they must have caught on to his scheme this time*. Then anger surged through him at having to mount diversionary attacks in support of a plan that hadn’t been likely to succeed anyhow.

“Sir, that’s not all,” the messenger said.

“What else, then?” Jäger asked.

“The panzer has a white flag flying from above the driver’s station, sir,” the fellow answered, with the air of a man reporting something he doesn’t expect to be believed. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“This I must see with my own eyes,” Jäger said. He hopped into a little *Volkswagen* light army car, waved the messenger in beside him as a guide, and headed west. He hoped he had enough petrol to get where he was going. The light army car’s engine put out less than twenty-five horsepower and didn’t use much petrol, but the *Wehrmacht* had little to spare, either.

As Jäger drove, a suspicion began to form in the back of his mind. He shook his head. *No*, he told himself. *Impossible. Not even Skorzeny could—*

But Skorzeny had. When Jäger and the messenger pulled up in front of the Lizard panzer, the driver’s hatch came open and the SS man squeezed out, wriggling and twisting like a circus elephant inching through a narrow doorway.

Jäger gave him a formal military salute. That didn’t seem good enough, so he also took off his cap, which made Skorzeny grin his frightening grin. “I give up,” Jäger said. “How the devil did you manage *this*?” Just standing in front of the Lizard panzer was

frightening to a man who'd faced its like in battle. Its smooth lines and beautifully sloped armor made every German panzer save possibly the Panther seem not merely archaic but ugly to boot. Staring down the barrel of its big main armament was like looking into a tunnel of death.

Before answering, Skorzeny writhed and twisted; Jäger heard his back and shoulders crunch. "Better," he said. "By God, I felt like a tinned sardine cooped up in there, except they don't have to bend sardines to get 'em into the tin. How did I get it? I tell you, Jäger, I didn't think I was going to get anything in Besançon. The Lizards just cleaned out every ginger-fresser they could catch."

"I gather they didn't catch them all," Jäger said, pointing to the panzer.

"Nobody ever does." Skorzeny grinned again. "I made contact with one they'd missed. When I showed him all the ginger I had, he said, 'You just want a rangefinder? I'd give you a whole panzer for that.' So I took him up on it."

"But how did you get it out of the city?" Jäger asked plaintively.

"There were only two dicey bits," Skorzeny said with an airy wave. "First was getting me into the vehicle park. We did that in dead of night. Second was seeing if I'd fit into the driver's compartment. I do, but just barely. After that, I up and drove it away. It steers on the same principles as our machines, but it's a lot easier to drive: the steering is power assisted and the gearbox shifts automatically."

"Didn't any of them challenge you?" Jäger said.

"Why should they? If you were a Lizard, you'd never think a human could take off in one of your panzers, now would you?"

"God in heaven, no," Jäger answered honestly. "You'd have to be out of your mind even to dream such a thing."

"Just what I thought," Skorzeny agreed. "And just what the Lizards thought, too, evidently. Since they weren't looking for me to try any such thing, I was able to bring it off right under their snouts. You couldn't pay me enough to try it twice, though. Next time, they'll be watching and—" He made a chopping motion with his right hand.

Jäger still couldn't believe the axe hadn't fallen during this first mad escapade. He nervously glanced up at the sky. If a Lizard plane spotted them now, gunships and fighter-bombers would be on the way here in bare minutes to destroy their own panzer.

As if picking the thought from his head, Skorzeny said, "I'd better move along. I need to get this beast under cover as quick as I can, then arrange to ship it back to Germany so the lads with the high foreheads and the thick glasses can figure out what makes it tick."

"Can you wait long enough for me to look inside?" Without waiting for an answer, Jäger scrambled up onto the upper deck of the fighting compartment and stuck his head through the driver's hatch. He envied the Lizards the compactness their smaller body size allowed; Skorzeny must have been bent almost double in there.

The driver's controls and instruments were a curious mix of the familiar and the strange. The wheel, the foot pedals (though there was no clutch), and the shift lever might have come from a German panzer. But the driver's instrument panel, with screens and dials full of unfamiliar curlicues that had to be Lizard letters and numbers, looked complicated enough to have belonged in the cockpit of a Focke-Wulf 190.

In spite of that, the space wasn't cluttered: very much on the contrary. *Refined* was the word that crossed Jäger's mind as he contemplated the layout. In any German panzer—any human panzer—not everything was exactly where it would most efficiently belong. Sometimes you couldn't see a dial without moving your head, or reach for your submachine gun without banging your wrist against a projecting piece of metal. None of that here—all such tiny flaws had been designed out of the area. He wondered how long the Lizards had been making little progressive changes to get everything both perfect and perfectly finished. A long time, he suspected.

He climbed up onto the top of the turret, undogged the commander's cupola. Ignoring Skorzeny's impatient growl, he slithered down into the turret. This was where he belonged in a panzer, where he could most easily judge what was similar and what was different about the way the Lizards did things.

Again, he noticed refinement. No sharp edges, no outthrust chunks of metal anywhere. You could, if you were Lizard-sized, move around without fear of banging your head. Then he noticed the turret had no loader's seat, just as there'd been no hull gunner's position in the Lizard panzer's forward compartment. Did the gunner or commander have to load shells, then? He couldn't believe it. That would badly slow the panzer's rate of fire, and he knew from bitter experience the Lizards could shoot quicker than their German counterparts.

Some of the gadgetry that filled the turret without crowding it had to be an automatic loader, then. He wondered how it worked. No time to wonder, not now, except to hope German engineers could copy it. The gunner's station, like the driver's instrument panel, was a lot more complex than he was used to. He wondered how the Lizard who sat there could figure out what he needed to do in time to do it. Pilots managed, so maybe the gunner could, too. No—again from experience, certainly the gunner could, too.

Skorzeny's voice, peremptory now, came down through the open cupola: "Get your arse out of there, Jäger. I'm going to drive this beast away right now."

Regretfully—he hadn't seen all he wanted—Jäger slithered out and dropped down to the ground. The SS man climbed up onto the deck of the Lizard panzer and got back into the forward compartment. He was thicker through the waist than Jäger and had a devil of a time squeezing in, but he managed.

Back when the *Wehrmacht* first ran into the Russian T-34, there'd been talk of building an exact copy. In the end, the Germans didn't do that, although the Panther incorporated a lot of the T-34's best features. *If the Reich copied this Lizard panzer*, Jäger thought, *they'd have to train ten-year-olds to crew it*. Nobody else really fit.

Skorzeny started up the motor. It was amazingly quiet, and didn't belch clouds of

stinking fumes—refinement again. Jäger wondered what it used for-fuel. Skorzeny put it in gear and drove off. Jäger stared after him, shaking his head. The man was an arrogant bastard, but he accomplished things nobody in his right mind would dream of trying, let alone pulling off.

Atvar glowered at the male who stood stiffly in front of his desk. “You did not clean out that clutch of ginger-lickers as thoroughly as you should have,” he said.

“The exalted fleetlord is correct,” Drefsab replied tonelessly. “He may of course punish me as he sees fit.”

Some of Atvar’s anger evaporated. Drefsab had himself been trapped in ginger addiction; that he worked at all against his corrupted colleagues gave the fleetlord a weapon he would otherwise have had to do without. Nevertheless, he snapped, “A landcruiser disappearing! I never would have thought it possible.”

“Which is probably just how it happened, Exalted Fleetlord,” Drefsab said: “No one else thought it was possible, either, and so no one took the precautions that would have kept it from happening.”

“That Big Ugly with the scar again,” Atvar said. “They all look alike, but that male’s disfigurement makes him stand out. He has given us nothing but grief—the landcruiser now, and spiriting Mussolini away from right under our muzzles ... and I have some reason to believe he was involved in the raid where the Big Ugliers hijacked our scattered nuclear material.”

“Skorzeny.” Drefsab turned the sibilants at the beginning and middle of the name into long hisses.

“That is what Deutsch propaganda called him after the Mussolini fiasco, yes,” Atvar said. “In spite of your unfortunate taste for ginger, Drefsab, you remain, I believe, the most effective operative I have available to me.”

“The exalted fleetlord is gracious enough to overestimate my capacities,” Drefsab murmured.

“I had better not be overestimating them,” Atvar said. “My orders for you are simple: I want you to rid Tosev 3 of this Skorzeny, by whatever means become necessary. Losing him will hurt the Deutsche more than losing a hundred landcruisers. And the Deutsche, along with the British and the Americans, are the most troublesome and ingeniously obstreperous Big Ugliers there are, which, considering the nature of the Big Ugliers, is saying a great deal. He must be eliminated, and you are the male to do it.”

Drefsab saluted. “Exalted Fleetlord, it shall be done.”

After several months’ living and travel in places mostly without electricity, Sam Yeager had all but forgotten how wonderful having the stuff could be. The reasons weren’t always the obvious ones, either. Keeping food fresh was great, sure. So was having light at night, even if you did need blackout curtains so the Lizards wouldn’t spot

it. But he hadn't realized how much he missed the movies till he got to see one again.

Part of the feeling sprang from the company he kept. Having Barbara on the plush seat beside him, her hand warm in his, would have put a warm glow on anything this side of going to the dentist (not a major concern for Yeager anyhow, not with his store-bought teeth). Later, his hand would probably drop to her thigh. In the dim cavern of the movie theater, nobody was likely to notice, or to care if he did notice.

But part of what Sam got from the movies had nothing to do with Barbara. For a couple of hours, he could forget how miserable the world outside this haven on Sixteenth Street looked and pretend what happened on the screen was what mattered.

"Funny," he whispered to Barbara as they waited for the projectionist to start the newsreel: "I can get out of myself with a good story in a magazine or a book, but watching a show is more special somehow."

"Reading lets me get away from things, too," she answered, "but a lot of people can't escape that way. I feel sorry for them, but I know it's true. The other thing is, when you're reading, you're by yourself. Here you're with lots of other people looking for the same release you're after. It makes a difference."

"I found what I was after," Sam said, and squeezed her hand. She turned to smile at him. Before she could say anything, the lights dimmed and the big screen at the front of the theater came to sparkling life.

The newsreel wasn't the smoothly professional production it would have been before the Lizards came. Yeager didn't know whether the aliens held Hollywood itself, but the distribution system for new films coming out of California had completely broken down.

What the moviegoers got instead was a U.S. Army production, probably put together right here in Denver. Some of the bits had sound added; some used cards with words on them, something Sam remembered from silent film days but had thought to be gone for good.

EASTERN FRANCE, one of those cards announced. The camera panned slowly, lovingly, across burned-out Lizard tanks. A tough-looking fellow in German uniform walked among the wreckage.

People cheered wildly. Barbara murmured, "Has everyone forgotten the Nazis were our worst enemies a year ago?"

"Yes," Yeager whispered back. He had no love for the Nazis, but if they were hurting the Lizards, more power to 'em. He hadn't loved the Russian Reds last year, either, but he'd been damn glad they were in the fight against Hitler.

Another card flashed: MOSCOW. There stood Stalin, shaking hands with a factory worker in a cloth cap. Behind them, a row of almost-completed airplanes stretched as far as the eye—or the camera—could see. Yet another card said, THE SOVIET UNION STAYS IN THE FIGHT. More cheers echoed through the movie theater.

The next segment had sound; a fellow with a flat midwestern accent said, "Outside of

Bloomington, the Lizards banged their snouts into tough American resistance as they tried to push north toward Chicago again.” Another picture of a wrecked Lizard tank was followed by shots of tired-looking but happy GIs around a campfire.

Yeager almost bounced out of his chair. “There’s Mutt, by God!” he told Barbara. “My old manager, I mean. Jesus, I wonder how he lived through all the fighting. He’s got sergeant’s stripes, too—did you see?”

“I wouldn’t have recognized him, Sam. He wasn’t *my* manager,” she answered, which made him feel foolish. She added, “I’m glad he’s all right.”

“Boy, so am I,” he said, “I’ve played for some real hard cases in my day, but he was one of the other kind, the good ones. He—” People to either side and behind made shushing noises. Yeager subsided, abashed.

The newsreel cut to a card that said, SOMEWHERE IN THE U.S.A. “Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States!” the announcer said.

In the black-and-white film, Franklin D. Roosevelt sat behind a desk in what looked like a hotel room. The drapes were drawn behind him, perhaps merely to give him a backdrop, perhaps to keep the Lizards from figuring out where he was by what the camera showed out the window.

Roosevelt was in his shirtsleeves, his collar unbuttoned and his tie loose. He looked tired and worn, but kept the cigarette holder at a jaunty angle in his mouth. He still had cigarettes, Yeager noted without resentment: FDR was working hard enough to be entitled to them.

The President took the holder from his mouth, stubbed out the cigarette instead of letting it smolder to add a picturesque plume of smoke to the scene. He leaned toward the microphone in front of him. “My friends,” he said (and Yeager felt Roosevelt was speaking straight to him), “the fight goes on.”

Applause rippled through the theater, then quickly faded so people could listen to what the President had to say. Even his first half-dozen words gave Sam fresh hope. FDR had always had that gift. He hadn’t always made things better, but he’d always made people feel they *would* get better, which was half the battle by itself—it made people go to work to improve their own lot instead of moaning about how dreadful everything was.

Roosevelt said, “The enemy is on our soil and in the air above our homes. These creatures from another world believe they can frighten us into surrender by raining destruction down on our heads. As our gallant British allies did with the Germans in 1940, we shall prove them wrong.

“Every day we have more new weapons to hurl against the Lizards. Every day they have less with which to resist. Those of you who still live free, everything you do to help the war effort helps ensure that your children, and your children’s children, will grow up in freedom, too. And to those of you in occupied territory who may see this, I say: do not collaborate with the enemy in any way. Do not work in his factories, do not grow

crops for him, do nothing you can possibly avoid. Without human beings to be his slaves, sooner or later he will be helpless.

“For we have hurt him, in America, in Europe, and in Asia as well. He is not superhuman, he is merely inhuman. Our united nations—now all the nations on this planet—will surely triumph in the end. Thank you and God bless you.”

The next news segment showed ways to conserve scrap metal. It had a soundtrack, but Yeager didn't pay much attention to it. He didn't think anyone else did, either. Just hearing FDR's voice was a tonic. Roosevelt made you think everything would turn out okay, one way or another.

The newsreel ended with a burst of patriotic music. Sam sighed; now he'd have “The Stars and Stripes Forever” noisily going around in his head for the next several days. It happened every time he heard the song.

“Here comes the real movie,” somebody near him said as the opening credits for *You're in the Army Now* filled the screen. Yeager had seen it four or five times since it came out in 1941. New movies just weren't getting out these days, and even if they did, they often couldn't have been shown, because electricity was lost in so many places.

When he'd seen the antics of Phil Silvers and Jimmy Durante and the horrified reactions of their superior officers before, they'd left him limp with laughter. Now that he was in the Army himself, they didn't seem so funny any more. Soldiers like that would have endangered their buddies. He wanted to give both comics a swift kick in the rear.

Beside him, though, Barbara laughed at the capers they cut. Sam tried to enjoy the escape with her. The musical numbers helped: they reminded him this was Hollywood, not anything real. Getting angry at the actors for doing what was in the script didn't do him any good. Once he'd figured that out, he was able to lean back and enjoy the movie again.

The house lights came up. Barbara let out a long sigh, as if she didn't feel like coming back to the real world. Given its complications, Yeager didn't much blame her. But the world was there, and you had to deal with it whether you wanted to or not.

“Come on,” he said. “Let's pick up our bikes and head back to the university.”

Barbara sighed again, then yawned. “I suppose so. When we get back there, I think I want to lie down for a while. I'm so tired all the time these days.” She managed a wan smile. “I've heard this is what being expecting is supposed to do to you, and boy, it sure does.”

“We'll take it nice and easy on the way back,” said Yeager, who was still inclined to treat Barbara as if she were made of cut glass and liable to break if jostled. “You rest, and I'll go round up Ullhass and Ristin.”

“Okay, Sam.”

Outside the theater, a herd of bicycles covered the sidewalk and the street by the curb. Keeping an eye on them, in lieu of a sheepdog, was a large, burly fellow with a .45 on

his hip. With no gas available for private cars, bikes had become the way of choice to get around, and stealing them as big a problem as horse theft in Denver's younger days. As many people packed a gun now as they had in the old days, too; an unarmed guard wouldn't have done much good.

Most of Denver was laid out on a north-south, east-west grid. The downtown area, though, nestled into the angle of the Platte River and Cherry Creek, turned that grid at a fortyfive-degree angle. Yeager and Barbara pedaled southeast down Sixteenth Street to Broadway, one of the main north-south thoroughfares.

The Pioneer Monument at the corner of Broadway and Colfax caught Sam's eye. Around the fountain were three reclining bronzes: a prospector, a hunter, and a pioneer mother. At the top of the monument stood a mounted scout.

On him Yeager turned a critical gaze. "I've seen statues that looked realer," he remarked, pointing.

"He does look more like an oversized mantelpiece ornament than a pioneer, doesn't he?" Barbara said. They both laughed.

They turned left onto Colfax. Bicycles, people on foot, horse- and mule-drawn wagons, and quite a few folks riding horses made traffic, if anything, dicier than it had been when cars and trucks dominated. Then everything had moved more or less at the same speed. Now the ponderous wagons were almost like ambulatory roadblocks, but you went around them at your peril, too, because a lot of them were big enough to hide what was alongside till too late.

The gilded dome of the three-story granite State Capitol on Colfax dominated the city skyline. On the west lawn of the capitol building stood a Union soldier in bronze, flanked by two Civil War brass cannon.

Yeager pointed to the statue. He said, "Going up against the Lizards, sometimes I felt the way he would if he had to fight today's Germans or Japs with his muzzle-loader and those guns."

"There's an unpleasant thought," Barbara said. They pedaled along; on the east lawn of the capitol stood an Indian, also in bronze. She nodded to that statue. "I suppose he felt the same way when he had to fight the white man's guns with nothing better than a bow and arrow."

"Yeah, he probably did at that," said Sam, who'd never thought to look at it from the Indian's perspective. "He got guns of his own, though, and he hit us some pretty good licks, too—at least, I wouldn't have wanted to be in General Custer's boots."

"You're right." But instead of cheering up, Barbara looked glum. "Even though the Indians hit us some good licks, they lost—look at the United States now, or the way it was before the Lizards came, anyway. Does that mean we'll lose to the Lizards, even if we do hurt them in the fight?"

"I don't know." Sam chewed on that for the next block or so. "Not necessarily," he said at last. "The Indians never did figure out how to make their own guns and



gunpowder; they always had to get 'em from white men.” He looked around to make sure nobody was paying undue attention to their conversation before he went on, “But we’re well on our way to making bombs to match the ones the Lizards have.”

“That’s true.” Barbara did cheer up, but only for a moment. She said, “I wonder if there’ll be anything left of the world by the time we’re done fighting the Lizards.”

The science-fiction pulps had printed plenty of stories about worlds ruined one way or another, but Sam hadn’t really thought about living (or more likely dying) in one. Slowly, he said, “If the choice is wrecking the Earth or living under the Lizards, I’d vote for wrecking it. From what Ullhass and Ristin say, the Race has kept two other sets of aliens under their thumbs for thousands of years. I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.”

“No, neither would I,” Barbara said. “But we sure do remind me of a couple of little kids quarreling over a toy: If I can’t have it, you can’t either!”—and *smash!* If we end up smashing a whole world ... but what else can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Yeager answered. He did his best to think about something else. The end of the world wasn’t something he wanted to talk about with the woman he loved.

They turned right off Colfax onto University Boulevard. Traffic there was thinner and moved faster than it had in the center of town. Yeager looked around, enjoying the scenery. He’d been up at altitude now, in Wyoming and Colorado, that he could pedal along as readily as he had at sea level.

Just past Exposition Avenue, he saw a couple of cyclists speeding north up University: a skinny blond fellow in civvies followed closely by a burly man in uniform with a Springfield on his back. The skinny guy saw Sam and Barbara, too. He scowled as he whizzed by.

“Oh, dear,” Barbara said. “That was Jens.” She shook her head back and forth, hard enough to make her bike wobble. “He hates me now, I think.” Her voice had tears in it.

“He’s a fool if he does,” Sam said. “You had to choose somebody, honey. I wouldn’t have hated you if you’d gone back to him. I just thank God every day that you decided to pick me.” That she had still surprised and delighted him.

“I’m going to have your baby, Sam,” she said. “That changes everything. If it weren’t for the baby—oh, I don’t know what I’d do. But with things the way they are, I didn’t see that I had any other choice.”

They rode along in silence for a while. *If I hadn’t knocked her up, she’d have gone back to Larssen*, Sam thought. It made sense to him: she’d known Jens a lot longer, and he was, on paper, more her type. She was a brain and, while Yeager didn’t think of himself as stupid, he knew damn well he’d never make an intellectual.

Not quite out of the blue, Barbara said, “Both of you always treated me well—till now. If I’d chosen Jens, I don’t think you’d act the way he is.”

“I just said that,” he answered. “The thing of it is, I’ve had enough things go wrong in my life that I’ve sort of learned to roll with the punches. That one would have been a Joe Louis right, but I would’ve gotten back on my feet and gone on the best I could.” He

paused again; speaking ill of Larssen was liable to make Barbara spring to his defense. Picking his words carefully, he went on, "I'm not sure Jens ever had anything really tough happen to him before."

"I think you're right," Barbara said. "That's very perceptive of you. Even all his grandparents are still alive, or they were before the Lizards came—now, who can say? But he sailed through college, sailed through his graduate work, and had a job waiting for him at Berkeley when he finished. Then he got recruited for the Metallurgical Laboratory—"

"—which was every physicist's dream," Yeager finished for her. "Yeah." Not a lot of people had jobs waiting for them when they finished school, not in the Depression they didn't. So Larssen's family had all been healthy, too? And he'd found this wonderful girl. Maybe he'd started getting the idea he was fireproof. "Nobody's fireproof," Yeager muttered with the conviction of a man who'd had to hustle for work every spring training since he turned eighteen.

"What did you say, honey?" Barbara asked.

The casual endearment warmed him. He said, "I was just thinking things go wrong for everybody sooner or later."

"Count no man lucky before the end," Barbara said. It sounded like a quotation, but Yeager didn't know where it was from. She continued, "I don't think Jens has ever had to deal with anything like this before, and I don't think he's dealing with it very well." Again Sam heard unshed tears. "I wish he were."

"I know, hon. I do, too. It would make everything a lot easier." But Sam didn't expect things would always be easy. He was, as he'd said, ready to ride them out when they got tough. And if Jens Larssen wasn't, that was his lookout.

Yeager carried his bicycle upstairs to the apartment he and Barbara had taken across the street from the University of Denver campus. Then he went down and carried hers up, too.

"I'm going to go take my little hissing chums off Smitty's hands," he said. "Have to see what he'll want from me later on for baby-sitting them so I could get free for my Saturday matinee with you."

Barbara glanced at the electric clock on the mantel. It showed a quarter to four. So did Sam's watch; he was having to get reused to the idea of clocks that kept good time. She said, "It'll still be afternoon for a little while longer, won't it?"

As he took her in his arms, Yeager wondered if she just needed reassurance after the brief, wordless, but unpleasant encounter with Jens Larssen. If she did, he was ready to give it. If you couldn't do that, you didn't have much business being a husband, as far as he was concerned.

Liu Han felt like a trapped animal with the little scaly devils staring at her from all sides. "No, superior sirs, I don't know where Bobby Fiore went that night," she said in a

mixture of the little devils' language and Chinese. "These men wanted him to teach them to throw, and he went with them to do that. He didn't come back."

One of the scaly devils showed her a photograph. It was not a plain black-and-white image, she'd seen those before, and even the color pictures the foreign devils printed in some of their fancy magazines. But this photograph was of the sort the little scaly devils made: not only more real than any human could match, but also with the depth the scaly devils put into their moving pictures. It made her feel as if she could reach in and touch the man it showed.

"Have you seen this male before?" the scaly devil holding the picture demanded in vile but understandable Chinese.

"I—may have, superior sir," Liu Han said, gulping. Just because she felt she could reach into the picture didn't mean she wanted to. The man it showed was obviously dead, lying in a bean field with his blood and brains splashing the plants and ground around his head. He had a neat hole just above his left eye.

"What do you mean, you may have?" another scaly devil shouted. "Either you have or you have not. We think you have. Now answer me!"

"Please, superior sir," Liu Han said desperately. "People dead look different from people alive. I cannot be certain. I am sorry, superior sir." She was sorry Lo—for the dead man in the picture was undoubtedly he—had ever wanted Bobby Fiore to show him how to throw. She was even sorrier he and his henchmen had come to the hut and taken Bobby Fiore away.

But she was not going to tell the little scaly devils anything she didn't have to. She knew they were dangerous, yes, and they had her in their power. But she also had a very healthy respect—fear was not too strong a word—for the Communists. If she spilled her guts to the little devils, she knew she would pay: maybe not right now, but before too long.

The scaly devil holding the picture let his mouth hang open: he was laughing at her. "To you, maybe. To us, all Big Ugliers look alike, alive or dead." He translated the joke into his own language for the benefit of his comrades. They laughed, too.

But the little devil who had shouted at Liu Han said, "This is no joke. These bandits injured males of the Race. Only through the mercy of the watchful Emperor"—he cast down his eyes, as did the other little devils—"was no one killed."

*No one killed?* Liu Han thought. *What of Lo and his friends?* She was reminded of signs the European devils were said to have put up in their parks in Shanghai: NO DOGS OR CHINESE ALLOWED. To the little scaly devils, all human beings might as well have been dogs.

"We should give her the drug that makes her tell the truth," the scaly devil with the picture said. "Then we will find out what she really knows."

Liu Han shivered. She was ready to believe the scaly devils had such a drug. They were devils, after all, with powers effectively unlimited. If they gave it to her, they would find out she hadn't told them everything, and then ... then they would do

something horrible to her. She didn't care to think about that.

But then Ttomalss spoke up. The—what had Bobby Fiore named his calling?—the psychologist, that was it, said, “No, Ssamraff, for two reasons. No first because the drug is not as effective as we believed it would be when we first made it. And no second because this female Big Ugly has a hatchling growing inside her.”

Most of that was in Chinese, so Liu Han could follow it. Ssamraff replied in the same language: “Who cares what she has growing inside her?”

“This growth is disgusting, yes, but it is part of a research study,” Ttomalss insisted. “Having the Big Ugly male who sired it disappear is bad enough. But drugs could do to Big Ugly hatchlings what they sometimes do to our own as they grow in the egg before the female lays it. We do not want this hatchling to emerge defective if we can avoid it. Therefore I say no to this drug.”

“And I say we need to learn who is trying to foully murder males of the Race,” Ssamraff retorted. “This, to me, is more important.” But he spoke weakly; his body paint was less ornate than Ttomalss', which, Liu Han had gathered, meant he was of lower rank.

The little devils had made her give her body to strange men in their experiments. They had watched her pregnancy with the same interest she would have given to a farrowing sow, and no more. Now, though, because she was pregnant, they wouldn't give her the drug that might have made her betray Lo and the other Reds. *About time I got some good out of being only an animal to them*, she thought.

Ssamraff said, “If we cannot drug the female, how can we properly question her, then?” He swung his turreted eyes toward Liu Han. She still had trouble reading the scaly devils' expressions, but if that wasn't a venomous stare, she'd never seen one. “I am sure she is telling less than she knows.”

“No, superior sir,” Liu Han protested, and then stopped in some confusion: not only Ssamraff, but all the devils were staring at her. She realized he'd spoken in his tongue—as had she when she answered.

“You know more of our words than I thought,” Ttomalss said in Chinese.

Liu Han gratefully returned to the same language: “I am very sorry, superior sir, but I did not realize I was not supposed to learn.”

“I did not say that,” the psychologist answered. “But because you know, we have to be more careful with what we say around you.”

“Because she knows, we should be trying to find out what she knows,” Ssamraff insisted. “This male she was mating with had something to do with the attack on our guard station. I think she is lying when she says she knows nothing of these other males we killed. They are dead, and the one she mates with is missing. Is this not a connection that hisses to be explored?”

“We are exploring it,” Ttomalss answered. “But, as I said, we shall not use drugs.”

Ssamraff turned one eye turret toward Liu Han to see how she would react as he spoke in his own language: “What about pain, then? The Big Ugliers are very good at using pain when they have questions to ask. Maybe this once we should imitate them.”

A lump of ice formed in Liu Han’s belly. The Communists and the Kuomintang—to say nothing of local bandit chiefs—routinely used torture. She had no reason to doubt the little scaly devils would be devilishly good at it.

But Ttomalss said, “No, not while the hatchling grows inside her. I told you, you may not disturb the conditions under which this experiment is being conducted.”

This time, even the little devil who’d shouted at Liu Han supported Ttomalss: “Using pain to force our will even on a Big Ugly is—” Liu Han didn’t understand the last word he used, but Ssamraff sputtered in indignation almost laughably obvious, so it must have been one he didn’t care for.

When he could speak instead of sputtering, he said, “I shall protest this interference with an important military investigation.”

“Go ahead,” Ttomalss said. “And I shall protest your interference with an important scientific investigation. You have no sense of the long term, Ssamraff. We are going to rule the Big Ugliers for the next hundred thousand years. We need to learn how they work. Don’t you see you are making that harder?”

“If we don’t root out the ones who keep shooting at us, we may never rule them at all,” Ssamraff said.

To Liu Han’s way of thinking, he had a point, but the other little scaly devils recoiled as if he’d just said something much worse than suggesting that they torture her to find out what she knew of Lo and the Communists. Ttomalss said, “Will you add that to your report? I hope you do; it will show you up as the shortsighted male you are. I shall certainly make a note of your statement when I file my own protest. You were rash to be so foolish in front of a witness.” His eye turrets swung toward the little devil who’d yelled at Liu Han.

Ssamraff looked at that little devil, too. He must not have liked what he saw, for he said, “I shall make no protest in this matter. By the Emperor I pledge it.” He flicked his glance down at the floor for a moment.

So did the other little scaly devils. Then Ttomalss said, “I knew you were a male of sense, Ssamraff. No one wants to have a charge of shortsightedness down on his record, not if he hopes to improve the design of his body paint.”

“That is so,” Ssamraff admitted. “But this I also tell you: to view in the long term on Tosev 3 is also dangerous. The Big Ugliers change too fast to make projections reliable—or else we would have conquered them long since.” He turned and skittered out of Liu Han’s hut. Had he been a man instead of a scaly devil, she thought he would have stomped away.

Ttomalss and the devil who’d shouted at her both laughed as if he’d been funny. Liu Han didn’t see the joke.

Sometimes, in the Warsaw ghetto, Moishe Russie had developed a feeling that something was wrong, that trouble (*worse* trouble, he amended to himself: just being in the ghetto was *tsuris* aplenty) would land on him if he didn't do something right away. He'd learned to act on that feeling. He was still alive, so he supposed following it had done him some good. Now, here in Lodz, he had it again.

It wasn't the usual fears he'd known, not the heart-clutching spasm of alarm he'd had, for instance, when he'd seen his face on the wall in the Balut Market square with warnings that he raped and murdered little girls. *You'd have to be meshuggeh*, he thought, *not to be frightened over something like that*.

But what he felt now was different, smaller—just a tickling at the back of his neck and the skin over his spine that something wasn't quite right somewhere. The first day it was there, he tried to make believe he didn't notice it. The second day, he knew it was there, but he didn't tell Rivka. *I could be wrong*, he thought.

The third day—or rather the evening, after Reuven had gone to bed—he said out of the blue, “I think we should move someplace else.”

Rivka looked up from the sock she was darning. “Why?” she asked. “What's wrong here?”

“I don't know,” he admitted. “Maybe nothing. But maybe something, too.”

“If you were a woman, they'd call that the vapors,” Rivka said. But instead of laughing at him as she had every right to do, she grew serious. “Someplace else where? A different flat in Lodz? A different town? A different country?”

“I'd say a different planet, but the Lizards seem to be using the others, too.” Now he laughed, but it wasn't funny.

“*Nu*, if you think we should go, we'll go,” Rivka said. “Better we should move and not need to than need to and not move. Why don't you start looking for a new flat tomorrow, if you think that will be good enough.”

“I just don't know,” he said. “I wish I could tune the feeling like a wireless set, but it doesn't work that way.”

“No, it doesn't,” she agreed gravely. “What do you want to do? Do you want to go to Zgierz, for instance? That's not far, but it would probably mean leaving things behind. Still, we've left enough things behind by now that a few more won't matter. So long as the three of us are together, nothing else counts. If the war has taught us anything, that's it.”

“You're right.” Russie got up from his battered chair, walked over to the bare light bulb by which Rivka sat. He let his hand rest on her shoulder. “But we shouldn't need a war to remind us of that.”

She set down the sock and put her hand on top of his. “We don’t, not really. But it has shown us we don’t need things to get by in the world, just people we love.”

“A good thing, too, because we don’t have many things.” Moishe stopped, afraid his attempt at a joke had wounded his wife. Not only had they left things behind, they’d left people as well: a little daughter, other loved ones dead in the ghetto. And unlike things, you could not get a new set of people.

If she noticed the catch in Moishe’s voice, Rivka gave no sign. She stayed resolutely practical, saying, “You never did answer me. Do you want to get out of Lodz, or shall we stay here?”

“The towns around here, most of them are *Judenfrei*,” he said. “We’d stick out. We don’t look Polish. We can’t look Polish, I don’t think.” He sighed. “Litzmannstadt”—the name the Germans gave Lodz—“would have been *Judenfrei*, too, if the Lizards hadn’t come.”

“All right, we’ll stay here, then,” Rivka said, accepting his oblique answer.

He didn’t know if he was doing the right thing. Maybe they would be wiser to flee far from Lodz, even if that meant taking to the road to go to the eastern parts of Lizard-held Poland where the Nazis had not had time to rout out all the Jews. But he couldn’t make himself flee like that for what might have been, as Rivka said, a case of the vapors.

To make himself feel he was doing something, he said, “I’ll start looking for a new flat tomorrow over by Mostowski Street.” That was about as far from where they were as one could go and remain in the Lodz ghetto.

“All right,” Rivka said again. She picked up the sock and put another few stitches in it. After a moment, though, she added meditatively, “We’ll have to keep on shopping in the Balut Market square, though.”

“That’s true.” Moishe started to pace back and forth. To go? To stay? He still couldn’t make up his mind.

“It will be all right,” Rivka said. “God has protected us for this long; would He abandon us now?”

*That argument would have been more persuasive*, Moishe thought, *before 1939*. Since then, how many of His people had God allowed to die? Moishe didn’t say that to his wife; he didn’t even care to think it himself. His own faith was shakier these days than he wished it were, and he didn’t want to be guilty of troubling hers.

Instead, he yawned and said, “Let’s go to bed.”

Rivka put down the sock again. She hesitated, then said, “Do you want me to look for the flat? The fewer people who see you, the smaller the risk we run.”

Moishe knew that was true. Nonetheless, his pride revolted at hiding behind Rivka every day—and he had no evidence whatever to back up his hunch. So he said, “It shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll be only a moment crossing the Balut, and I don’t look like my poster picture anyhow, not clean-shaven.”

Rivka gave him her best dubious look, but didn't say anything. He reckoned that a victory.

And, indeed, no one paid him any mind as he crossed the market square and turned east into the heart of the ghetto. The shabby brick buildings cast the narrow streets into shadow. Though the Lizards had driven the Germans out of Lodz nearly a year before, the atmosphere of the hellishly crowded ghetto still clung to the place, maybe more strongly than in Warsaw.

*Maybe it's the smell*, Russie thought. It was a smell of despair and stale cabbage and unwashed bodies and more garbage and sewage than the trash collectors and sewers could handle. Not all the people the Nazis had crammed into Lodz had been able to go home. Some had no homes, not after the Germans had fought Poles and Russians, and the Lizards fought the Germans. Some, carried into the ghetto in cattle cars from Germany and Austria, had homes outside Lizard-held territory. Even now, the ghetto was a desperately crowded place.

Posters of Chaim Rumkowski shouted at people from every blank wall surface. As far as Moishe could tell, people weren't doing much in the way of listening. In all those teeming streets, he saw only a couple of persons glance up at the posters, and one of those, an old woman, shook her head and laughed after she did. Somehow that made Russie feel a little better about mankind.

His own poster still appeared here and there, too, now beginning to fray and tatter a bit. No one looked up at that any more, either, to his relief.

When he got to Mostowski Street, he started poking his nose into blocks of flats and asking if they had any rooms to let. At first he thought he would have no choice but to stay where he was or else leave town. But at the fourth building he visited, the fellow who ran the place said, "You are a lucky man, my friend, do you know that? I just had a family move out not an hour ago."

"Why?" Moishe asked in a challenging voice. "Were you charging them a thousand zlotys a day, or did the cockroaches and rats make alliance and drive them out? It's probably a pigsty you're going to show me."

From one Jew to another, that hit hard a couple of ways. The landlord, or manager, or whatever he was, clapped a hand to his forehead in a theatrical display of injured innocence. "A pigsty? I should kick you out of here on your *tokhus* to talk like that. One look at this flat and you'll be down on your knees begging to rent."

"I don't get down on my knees for God and I should do it for you? You should live so long," Moishe said. "Besides, you still haven't said what ridiculous price you want."

"You shouldn't even see it, with a mouth like yours." But the landlord was already walking back toward the stairway, Moishe at his heels. "Besides, such a deadbeat couldn't pay four hundred zlotys a month."

"If he lived in Lodz, King Solomon couldn't pay four hundred zlotys a month, you *ganef*." Moishe stopped. "I'm sorry I wasted my time. Good day." He didn't leave. "A



hundred fifty I might manage.”

The landlord had one foot on the stairs. He didn't put the other one with it. “I might manage to starve, if I didn't have better sense than to listen to an obvious *shlemiel* like you. I would be giving this lovely flat away at 350 zlotys.”

“Then give it away, but not to me. I have better ways to spend my money, thank you very much. A hundred seventy-five would be too much, let alone twice that.”

“Definitely a *shlemiel*, and you think I'm one, too.” But the landlord started climbing the stairs, and Moishe climbed with him. The stairwell reeked of stale piss. Moishe didn't know a stairwell in the ghetto that didn't.

By the time they got to the flat, they were only a hundred zlotys apart. There they stuck, because Moishe refused to haggle any further until he saw what he might be renting. The landlord chose a key from the fat ring on his belt, opened the door with a flourish. Moishe stuck in his head. The place was cut from the same mold as the one he was living in: a main room, with a kitchen to one side and a bedroom to the other. It was a little smaller than his present flat, but not enough to matter. “The electricity works?” he asked.

The manager pulled the chain that hung down from the ceiling lamp in the living room. The light came on. “The electricity works,” he said unnecessarily.

Moishe went into the kitchen. Water ran when he turned the faucet handle. “How is the plumbing?”

“*Verkakte*,” the landlord answered, which made Russie suspect he might have some honesty lurking in him. “But for Lodz, for now, it's not bad. Two seventy-five is about as low as I can go, pal.”

“It's not that bad,” Moishe said grudgingly. “If I let my little boy go hungry, I might make two twenty-five.”

“You give me two twenty-five and my little boy will starve. Shall we split the difference? Two fifty?”

“Two forty,” Moishe said.

“Two forty-five.”

“Done.”

“And you call me a *ganef*.” The landlord shook his head. “*Gottenyu*, you're the toughest haggler I've run into in a while. If I told you how much more money I was getting out of the last people in here, you'd cry for me. So when are you and your family coming in?”

“We could start bringing our things in today,” Moishe answered. “It's not that we have a lot to move, believe me.”

“This I do believe,” the landlord said. “The Germans stole, the Poles stole, people stole from each other—and the ones who didn't had to burn their furniture to cook food or keep from freezing to death last winter or the one before or the one before that. So fetch in whatever you've got, *nu*? But before one stick of it goes in there, you put your first

month's rent right here." He held out his hand, palm up.

"You'll have it," Moishe promised, "Mister, uh—"

"Stefan Berkowicz. And you are who, so I can tell my wife the name of the man who cheated me?"

"Emmanuel Lajfuner," Russie answered without hesitation, inventing an easily memorable name so he wouldn't forget it before he got home. He and Berkowicz parted on good terms.

When he described the haggle to Rivka, he proudly repeated the landlord's praise for his skill and tenacity. She shrugged and said, "If he's like most landlords, he says that to all the people who take a flat in his building, just to make them feel good. But you could have done worse; you have, often enough."

Praise with that faint damn left Moishe feeling vaguely punctured. He let Rivka go downstairs and hire a pushcart in which to haul their belongings. Then it was just carrying things down to the cart till it was full, manhandling it over to the new building, and lugging them up to the flat (Berkowicz got his zlotys first). Except for the bedraggled sofa, there wasn't anything one man couldn't handle by himself.

Two small sets of dishes and pans, moved in different loads; some rickety chairs; a pile of clothes, not very clean, not very fine; a few toys; a handful of books Moishe had picked up now here, now there; a mattress, some blankets; and a wooden frame. *Not much to make up a life*, Moishe thought. But while he was alive, he could hope to gain more.

"It will do," Rivka said when she first set foot in the new flat. Having expected worse sarcasm than that, Moishe grinned in foolish relief. Rivka stalked into the bedroom, prowled the tiny kitchen. She came back nodding in acceptance if not approval. "Yes, it will do."

Without talking about it, they arranged such furniture as they owned in about the same places it had occupied in the flat they were leaving. Moishe looked around the new place. Yes, that helped give it the feeling of home.

"Almost done," he said late that afternoon. He was sweaty and filthy and as tired as he'd ever been, but one of the good things (one of the few good things) about moving was that you could see you were making progress.

"What's left?" Rivka asked. "I thought this was just about everything."

"Just about. But there's still one more stool, and a couple of old blankets that went up on the high shelf when spring finally got here, and that sack of canned goods we hid under them for whenever, God forbid, we might be really hungry again." As Moishe knew only too well, he was imperfectly organized. But he had a catchall memory which helped make up for that: he might not put papers, say, in the pile where they were supposed to go, but he never forgot where he *had* put them. So now he knew exactly what had been moved and what still remained in the old flat.

"If it weren't for the food, I'd tell you not to bother," Rivka said. "But you're right—"

we've been hungry too much. I never want to have to go through that again. Come back as fast as you can."

"I will," Moishe promised. Straightening his cap, he trudged down the stairs. His arms and shoulders twinged aching protest as he picked up the handles of the pushcart. Ignoring the aches as best he could, he made his slow way through the crowded streets and back to the old flat.

He was just pulling the sack of cans down from the shelf in the bedroom when someone rapped on the open front door. He muttered under his breath and put the sack back as quietly as he could, so the cans didn't clank together—letting people know you had food squirreled away invited it to disappear. He wondered whether it would be one of his neighbors coming to say good-bye or the landlord with a prospective tenant for the flat.

He'd be polite to whoever it was and send him on his way. Then he'd be able to get on his own way. Fixing a polite smile on his face, he walked into the living room.

In the doorway stood two burly Order Service men, both still wearing the red-and-white armbands with black *Magen Davids* left over from the days of Nazi rule in the Lodz ghetto. They carried stout truncheons. Behind them were two Lizards armed with weapons a great deal worse.

"You Moishe Russie?" the uglier Order Service ruffian asked. Without waiting for an answer, he raised his club. "You better come with us."

Flying over the Russian steppe, traveling across it by train, Ludmila Gorbunova had of course known how vast it was. But nothing had prepared her for walking over what seemed an improbably large chunk of it to get where she was going.

"I'll have to draw new boots when we get back to the airstrip," she told Nikifor Sholudenko.

His mobile features assumed what she had come to think of as an NKVD sneer. "So long as you are in a position to draw them, all will be well. Even if you are in a position to draw them with none to be had, all will be well enough."

She nodded; Sholudenko was undoubtedly right. Then one of her legs sank almost knee-deep into a patch of ooze she hadn't noticed. It was almost like going into quicksand. She had to work her way out a little at a time. When, slimy and dripping, she was on the move again, she muttered, "Too bad nobody would be able to issue me a new pair of feet."

Sholudenko pointed to water glinting from behind an apple orchard. "That looks like a pond. Do you want to clean off?"

"All right," Ludmila said. Since she'd flipped her U-2, the time when they returned to the airstrip, formerly so urgent, had taken on an atmosphere of *nichevo*. When she and Sholudenko weren't sure of the day on which they'd arrive, an hour or two one way or the other ceased to mean anything.

They walked over to the orchard, which did lie in front of a pond. Ludmila yanked off her filthy boot. The water was bitterly cold, but the mud came off her foot and leg. She'd coated both feet with a thick layer of goose grease she'd begged from a *babushka*. If you were going to get wet, as anyone who traveled during the *rasputitsa* surely would, the grease helped keep rot from starting between your toes.

She washed the boot inside and out, using a scrap of cloth from inside her pack to dry it as well as she could. Then she splashed more water on her face: she knew how dirty she was, and had in full measure the Russian love of personal cleanliness. "I wish this were a proper steam bath," she said. "Without the heat first, I don't want to take a cold plunge."

"No, that would be asking for pneumonia," Sholudenko agreed. "Can't take the risk, not out in the field."

He spoke like a soldier, not like someone who'd surely enjoyed a comfortable billet in a town until the Nazis invaded the SSSR, and maybe till the Lizards came. Ludmila had to admit he performed the same way: he marched and camped capably and without complaint. She'd viewed the secret police as birds were supposed to view snakes—as hunters almost fascinating in their deadliness and power, men whose attention it was far better never to attract. But as the days went by, Sholudenko seemed more and more just another man to her. She didn't know how far she could trust that.

He knelt by the side of the pond and splashed his face, too. While he washed, Ludmila stood watch. What with Lizards and collaborators and bandits who robbed indiscriminately, not a kilometer of Ukrainian territory was liable to be safe.

As if to drive that point home, a column of half a dozen Lizard tanks rolled up the road the pilot and NKVD man had just left. "I'm glad they didn't see us carrying firearms," Ludmila said.

"Yes, that could have proved embarrassing," Sholudenko said. "For some reason, they've developed the habit of firing machine-gun bursts first and asking questions later. A wasteful way to conduct interrogations, not that they asked my opinion of it."

The casual way he talked about such things made the hair prickle up on Ludmila's arms, as if she were a wild animal fluffing out its fur to make itself look bigger and fiercer. She wondered what sort of interrogations he'd conducted. Once or twice she'd almost asked him things like that, but at the last minute she always held back. Even though he was NKVD, he seemed decent enough. If she knew what he'd done instead of having to guess, she might not be able to stomach him any more.

He said, "I wouldn't mind following those tanks to find out where they're going ... if I could keep up with them, and if I had a radio to get the information to someone who could use it." He wiped his face with his sleeve and grinned wryly. "And I might as well wish for buried treasure while I'm about it, eh?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Ludmila said, which made Sholudenko laugh. She went on, "Those tanks may not be going anywhere. If they hit some really thick mud, they'll bog

down. I saw that happen more than once last fall.”

“Yes, I’ve seen the same thing,” he agreed. “Doesn’t do to Count on it, though. They’ve swallowed up too much of the *rodina* without bogging down.”

Ludmila nodded. *Strange*, she thought, *that an NKVD man should talk about the rodina*. From the day the Germans invaded, the Soviet government had started trotting out all the ancient symbols of Holy Mother Russia. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviki had scorned such symbols as reminders of the decadent, nationalistic past—until they needed them, to rally the Soviet people against the Nazis. Stalin had even made his peace with the Patriarch of Moscow, although the government remained resolutely atheist.

Sholudenko said, “I think we can get moving again. I don’t hear the tanks any more.”

“No, nor I,” Ludmila said after cocking her head and listening carefully. “But you have to be careful: their machines aren’t as noisy as ours, and could be lying in wait.”

“I assure you, Senior Lieutenant Gorbunova, I have discovered this for myself,” Sholudenko said with sarcastic formality. Ludmila chewed on her lower lip. She had that coming—the NKVD man, having to serve on the ground, had earned the unlucky privilege of becoming intimately acquainted with Lizard hardware at ranges closer than she cared to think about. He went on, “It is, even so, a lesson which bears repeating: this I do not deny.”

Mollified by the half apology (which was, by that one half, more than she’d ever imagined getting from the NKVD), Ludmila slid the boot back onto her foot. She and Sholudenko left the grove together and headed back toward the road. One glance was plenty to keep them walking on the verge; the column of Lizard tanks had chewed the roadbed to slimy pulp worse than the patch into which Ludmila had stumbled before. This muck, though, went on for kilometers.

Tramping along by the road wasn’t easy, either. The ground was still squashy and slippery, and the year’s new weeds and bushes, growing frantically now that warm weather and long stretches of sunlight were here at last, reached out with branches and shoots to try to trip up the travelers.

So it seemed to Ludmila, at any rate, after she picked herself up for the fourth time in a couple of hours. She snarled out something so full of guttural hatred that Sholudenko clapped his hands and said, “I’ve never had a *kulak* call me worse than you just gave that burdock. It certainly had it coming, I must say.”

Ludmila’s face turned incandescent. By Sholudenko’s snicker, the blush was quite visible, too. What would her mother have said if she heard her cursing like—like ... she couldn’t think of any comparison dreadful enough. Going on two years in the Red Air Force had so coarsened her that she wondered if she would be fit for anything decent when peace returned.

When she said that aloud, Sholudenko waved his arms to encompass the entire scene around them. Then he pointed at the deep ruts, already filling with water, the treads the Lizard tanks had carved in the road. “First worry if peace will ever return,” he said.

“After that you can concern yourself with trifles.”

“You’re right,” she said. “From where we stand, this war is liable to go on forever.”

“History is always a struggle—such is the nature of the dialectic,” the NKVD man said: standard Marxist doctrine. All at once, though, he turned human again: “I wouldn’t mind if the struggle were a little less overt.”

Ludmila pointed ahead. “There’s a village. With luck, we’ll be able to lay up for a while. With a lot of luck, we’ll even find some food.”

As they drew closer, Ludmila saw the village looked deserted. Some of the cottages had been burned; others showed bare spots in their thatches, as if they were balding old men. A dog’s skeleton, beginning to fall apart into separate bones, lay in the middle of the street.

That was the last thing Ludmila noticed before a shot rang out and kicked up mud a couple of meters in front of her. Her reflexes were good—she was down on her belly and yanking her own pistol out of the holster before she had time for conscious thought.

Another shot—she still didn’t see the flash. Her head swiveled as if on a pivot. Where was cover? Where was Sholudenko? He’d hit the dirt as fast as she had. She rolled through muck toward a wooden fence. It wasn’t much in the way of shelter, but it was a lot better than nothing.

“Who’s shooting at us? And why?” she called to Sholudenko.

“The devil’s uncle may know, but I don’t,” the NKVD man answered. He crouched behind a well, whose stones warded him better than the fence shielded Ludmila. He raised his voice: “Hold fire! We’re friends!”

“Liar!” The shout was punctuated by a burst of submachine-gun fire from another cottage. Bullets sparked off the stone facing of the well. Whoever was in there yelled, “You can’t fool us. You’re from Tolokonnikov’s faction, come to run us out.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea who Tolokonnikov is, you maniac,” Sholudenko said. All he got for an answer was another shout of “Liar!” and a fresh hail of bullets from that submachine gun. Whomever the anti-Tolokonnikovites did favor, he gave them plenty of ammunition.

Ludmila spied the flame the weapon spat. She was seventy or eighty meters away, very long range for a pistol, but she squeezed off a couple of shots anyway, to take the heat off Sholudenko. Then, quick as she could, she rolled away. The relentless submachine gun chewed up the place where she’d been.

The NKVD man fired, too, and was rewarded by a scream and sudden silence from the submachine gun. *Don’t get up*, Ludmila willed at him, suspecting a trap. He didn’t. Sure enough, in a couple of minutes the gunner opened up again.

By then, Ludmila had found a boulder behind which to shelter. From that more secure position, she called, “Who is this Tolokonnikov, and what do you have against him?” If the people who didn’t like him acted this way, her guess was that he probably had

something going for him.

She got no coherent answer out of the anti-Tolokonnikovites, only another magazine's worth of bullets from the submachine gun and a yell of, "Shut up, you treacherous bitch!" Deadly as shell fragments, rock splinters knocked free by the gunfire flew just above her head.

She wondered how long the stalemate could go on. The answer she came up with was glum: *indefinitely*. There wasn't enough cover for either side to have much hope of moving to outflank the other. She and Sholudenko couldn't very well retreat, either. That left sitting tight, shooting every so often, and hoping you got lucky.

Then the equation suddenly grew another variable. Somebody showed himself for a moment: just long enough to chuck a grenade through the window from which the fellow with the submachine gun had been firing. A moment after it went off, he jumped in the window himself. Ludmila heard a rifle shot, then silence.

The grenade chucker came out by way of the window, too, and vanished from her sight. "Whose side is *he* on?" she called to Sholudenko.

"I keep telling you, ask the devil's uncle," he answered. "Maybe Tolokonnikov's, maybe his own, maybe even ours, though I wouldn't bet my life on that."

The anti-Tolokonnikovite with the pistol, the one who'd fired first, took a fatal moment too long to realize his comrade had been disposed of. Ludmila wasn't sure what was happening because she couldn't see, but she heard another grenade, a rifle shot, a pistol shot, and then two rifle shots closer together. After that came silence all the more deafening because of the clamor that had gone before.

"Now what?" Ludmila asked.

"I think we wait some more," Sholudenko answered. "After they got cute when I fired at them, I don't fancy taking any more chances, thank you very much."

The highly charged silence persisted. At last, from out of the village, came a cautious call: "*Ludmila, bist du da?*"

She shook her head. "Someone here knows you?" Sholudenko asked quietly. "Someone *German* here knows you?" That was not a good thing to admit to an NKVD man, but she did not see she had much choice.

"Georg, is that you?" she asked, also in German. If Sholudenko spoke it, well and good. If he didn't, she'd already become an object of suspicion in his eyes, and so had little more to lose.

"*Ja*," he answered, still not showing himself. "Tell me the name of the general who commands our base, so I can be sure it is truly you."

"*Tovarishch* Feofan Karpov is a colonel, as you know perfectly well," she said. "He is also certain to be furious with you for leaving the base without his leave, as I guess you did—you're the best mechanic he has."

"I begin to see," Sholudenko said—so he did understand German, then. "Is he your,

ah, special friend?”

“No,” Ludmila answered angrily. “But he wishes he were, which sometimes makes him a nuisance.” Then, as if she were reading the NKVD man’s mind, she added hastily, “Don’t harm him for that. He is an excellent mechanic, and has given the Red Air Force good service even if he is a fascist.”

“This I will hear,” Sholudenko said. “Had you been sentimental—” He let the sentence hang, but Ludmila had no trouble completing it for herself.

Through the front window of the hut where Schultz had disposed of the second anti-Tolokonnikovite, Ludmila spied something move. She couldn’t quite tell what it was. A few seconds later Georg Schultz came out, still holding an old rag on the end of a stick. Ludmila realized that was what she’d seen. Had anyone fired at it, Schultz would have sat tight. *Yes, he’s been through combat once or twice, hasn’t he?* she thought with reluctant admiration.

Schultz certainly looked like a veteran. He wore his usual mixture of Russian and German gear, though the Nazi helmet on his head gave his nonuniform uniform a Germanic cast. Stuffed into his belt, along with a couple of potato-masher grenades, was a pistol. He held a Soviet PPSH-41 submachine gun, and had slung his rifle over his back.

The panzer gunner’s teeth showed in a grin that seemed all the whiter because of the beard surrounding it—a beard that did nothing to hinder his piratical aspect. “Who’s your *Kamerad*?” he asked Ludmila.

Sholudenko answered for himself, giving his name and patronymic but not announcing he was NKVD (Ludmila would have been astonished had he admitted it). He went on in German: “So what’s this? Did you desert your post to seek the fair maiden here? Your colonel will not be happy with you.”

Shultz shrugged. “Fuck him. It’s not my army, or even my air force, if you know what I mean. And when I get back with her”—he jerked a thumb at Ludmila—“old man Karpov’ll be glad enough to see both of us that he won’t bellyache all that much. You should have heard him—‘My best pilot gone. Whatever shall I do?’” He raised his voice to a falsetto nothing like the colonel’s but comically effective all the same.

“How did you know where to look for me?” Ludmila asked.

“I can follow a compass bearing, and I figured you were smart enough to be doing the same if you were able.” Schultz sounded affronted. Then his face cleared. “You mean, how did I find out which bearing to follow?” He set a finger alongside his nose. “Believe me, there are ways.”

Ludmila glanced over at Sholudenko, who was undoubtedly taking all that in. But the NKVD man just asked, “How far from the airstrip are we?”

“Eighty, ninety kilometers, something like that.” Schultz looked from him to Ludmila and back again before asking her, “Who is this fellow?”

“The man I was supposed to meet. Instead of bringing back the information he had, I find I’m bringing him, too.”



By way of reply, Schultz just grunted. Ludmila felt like laughing at him. If he'd found her alone on the steppe, as he'd probably figured he would, he'd have had several days to try to seduce her or, failing that, just to rape her. Now he had to be wondering if she'd slept with Sholudenko.

*None of your business, Nazi*, she thought. With the first smile of genuine amusement she'd worn since she flipped her aircraft, she said, "Shall we be off, comrades?" The rest of the trek back to the airstrip was liable to be interesting.

Along with the rest of the physicists, Jens Larssen watched tensely as Enrico Fermi manipulated the levers that raised the cadmium control rods from the heart of the rebuilt atomic pile under the University of Denver football stadium.

"If we have the design correct, this time the  $k$ -factor will be greater than one," Fermi said quietly. "We will have our self-sustaining chain reaction."

Beside him, Leslie Groves grunted. "We should have reached this point months ago. We would have, if the damned Lizards hadn't come."

"This is true, General," Fermi said, though Groves still wore colonel's eagles. "But from now on work will be much faster, partly because of the radioactives we have stolen from the Lizards and partly because they have shown us that what we seek is possible."

Larssen thought about Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and bringing it down to mankind. He thought about what happened to Prometheus afterwards too: chained to a rock somewhere, with an eagle gnawing his liver forever. He suspected a lot of his colleagues had had that image at one time or another.

Unlike most of them, of course, he didn't need the Met Lab to have a feel for the myth of Prometheus. Every time he saw Barbara hand in hand with that Sam Yeager, the eagle took another peck at his liver.

The project was an anodyne of sorts, though the pain never left him, not entirely. He watched the instruments, listened to the growing chatter and then the steady roar of the Geiger counter as it let the world know about the growing cloud of neutrons down in the heart of the pile. "Any second now," he breathed, more than half to himself.

Fermi drew out the rods another couple of centimeters. He too glanced at the dials, worked his slide rule, scrawled a quick calculation on a scrap of paper. "Gentlemen, I make the  $k$ -factor here to be 1.0005. This pile produces more free neutrons than it consumes."

A few of the physicists clapped their hands. More just nodded soberly. This was what the numbers predicted. All the same, it remained a solemn moment. Arthur Compton said, "The Italian navigator has discovered the New World."

"Gentlemen, this means you can now produce the explosive metal we need to make bombs like the ones the Lizards use?" Groves said.

"It means we are a long step closer," Fermi said. With that, he lowered the control

rods back into the pile. Needles swung to the left on the instrument board beside him; the rhythm of the Geiger counter's clicks slowed. Fermi let out a small sigh of relief. "And, it seems, we can control the intensity of the reaction. This is also of some considerable importance."

Most of the scientists smiled; Leo Szilard laughed out loud. Larssen had the urge to yank the cadmium rods all the way out of the pile and leave them out until the uranium spat radiation all over the stadium, all over the university, all over Denver. He fought it down, as he had other lethal, but less spectacular, impulses over the past weeks.

"What do we do next?" Groves demanded. "What exactly do we have to accomplish to turn what we've got here into a bomb?" The big man was not a nuclear physicist, but he had more determination than any four Nobel Prize winners Jens could think of. If anybody could drive the project to success by sheer force of will, Groves was probably the one.

Leo Szilard, on the other hand, had his own sort of practicality. "There is in my office a bottle of good whiskey," he remarked. "What we do next, I say, is to have a drink."

The motion passed by acclamation. Jens trooped over to the science building with everyone else. It was good whiskey; it filled his mouth with the taste of smoke and left a smooth, warm trail down to his stomach. The only thing it couldn't do was make him feel good, which was why people had started distilling whiskey in the first place.

Szilard raised the bottle. A couple of fingers' worth, coppery bright like a new penny, still sloshed there. Jens held out his glass (actually, a hundred-milliliter Erlenmeyer flask he devoutly hoped had never held anything radioactive) for a refill.

"You have earned it," Szilard said, pouring. "All that work on the pile—"

Jens knocked back the second shot. It hit hard, reminding him he hadn't had any lunch. It also reminded him he didn't have any business celebrating; no matter how well his work was doing, his life was strictly from nowhere.

"Good booze," said one of the engineers who'd worked under him. "Now we all oughtta go out and get laid."

Larssen set the flask on a bookshelf and slithered out of the crowded office. His eyes filled with tears which he knew came out of the whiskey bottle but which humiliated him all the same. A week before, he'd picked up a floozy in Denver. He'd been drunk then, not two drinks tiddly but plastered. He wasn't able to get it up. The girl had been kind about it, which only made things worse. He wondered when he'd have the nerve to try that again. Failure once was bad enough. Failure twice? Why go on living?

With that cheerful thought echoing in his head, he went downstairs to reclaim his bicycle. Oscar the guard stood by the newly built wooden bike rack to make sure none of the machines walked with Jesus. He nodded when he saw Jens. "Back to BOQ, sir?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jens said through clenched teeth. He hated his Army cot, he hated the base, he hated having to go to the base and sleep on the cot, and he hated Colonel Hexham with

a deep and abiding loathing that matured like a fine burgundy as the days went by. He wished he could have used Hexham as a control rod in the nuclear pile. If only the man had a neutron capture cross-section like cadmium's ...

And then, to make his day complete, Barbara came strolling up the walk toward the apartment she and Sam Yeager were using. Sometimes she just ignored him; that his own behavior might have had something to do with that hadn't crossed his mind. But Barbara wasn't the sort to be rude in public. She nodded to him and slowed down a little.

He walked over to her. Oscar was good at sticking with him—all the physicists had bodyguards these days—but knew better than to follow real close this time. A small voice inside Jens warned him he'd only end up bruising himself, but two nips of Szilard's good hooch made him selectively deaf. "Hello, dear," he said.

"Hello," Barbara answered—the lack of a return endearment set a fire under his temper. "How are you today?"

"About the same as usual," he said: "not so good. I want you back."

"Jens, we've been over this a hundred times," she said, her voice tired. "It wouldn't work. Even if it might have right after I got to Denver, it wouldn't any more. It's too late."

"What the devil is that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Her eyes narrowed; she took half a step back from him. Instead of answering, she said, "You've been drinking."

He didn't explain that they were drinks of triumph. "What if I have?" he said. "You going to tell me Mr. Sam Walk-on-Water Yeager never takes a drink?"

He knew the words were a mistake as soon as he said them. That, of course, did him no good. Barbara's face froze. "Goodbye," she said. "I'll see you some other time." She started walking again.

He reached out and grabbed her arm. "Barbara, you've got to listen to me—"

"Let me go!" she said angrily. She tried to twist away. He held on.

As if by malign magic, Oscar appeared. He stepped between Jens and Barbara. "Sir, the lady asked you to let go," he said, quietly as usual, and detached Larssen's hand from Barbara's forearm. He wasn't what you'd call gentle, but Jens got the feeling he could have been a lot rougher if he felt like it.

Sober, he never would have swung on Oscar. With two whiskeys in him, he didn't give a damn any more. He'd seen some action himself, by God—and, by God, Barbara was his *wife* ... wasn't she?

Oscar knocked his fist aside and hit him in the pit of the stomach. Jens folded up like a fan, trying to breathe and not having much luck, trying not to puke and doing a little better with that. Even as he went down on his knees, he was pretty sure Oscar had pulled that punch, too; with arms like those, Oscar could have ruptured his spleen if he

really got annoyed.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” Oscar asked Barbara.

“Yes,” she said, and then, a moment later, “Thank you. This has been hell on everybody, and on Jens especially. I know that, and I’m sorry, but I’ve done what I have to do.” Only then did her voice change: “You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

“No, ma’am, not like you mean. He’ll be okay in a minute or two. Why don’t you go on back to your place?” Jens kept his eyes on the pavement in front of him, but he couldn’t help listening to Barbara’s receding—rapidly receding—footsteps. Oscar hauled him to his feet with the same emotionless strength he’d shown before. “Let me dust you off, sir,” he said, and started to do just that.

Jens knocked his hands away. “Fuck you,” he gasped with all the air he had in him. He didn’t care if he turned blue and died after that, and what with the way he still couldn’t breathe, he thought he just might.

“Yes, sir,” Oscar said, tonelessly still. Just then, Jens’ motor finally turned over, and he managed a long, wonderful mouthful of air. Oscar nodded in approval. “There you go, sir. Not too bad. When you get on that bike, I’ll ride with you to BOQ, and tomorrow you can see about getting yourself a new guard.”

“Won’t be soon enough,” Jens said, louder now that his lungs were following orders again.

“If you’ll forgive me, sir, I feel the same way,” Oscar replied.

Snarling, Jens stalked back to his bicycle, Oscar right on his heels. Jens rocketed away from the university. Oscar stuck with him; he’d already found out he couldn’t shake the guard. He wasn’t really trying—he was just doing his best to get rid of his own rage.

Gravel kicked up under his wheels as he banked his weight to the side for the right turn from University to Alameda and on to Lowry Field. Of all the places in the world, Lowry Field BOQ was the last one he wanted to go. But where else was he supposed to sleep tonight?

For a moment, he didn’t care about that, either. As the air base approached, all he wanted to do was keep on going, past the BOQ, past the endlessly cratered, endlessly repaired runways, past everything—keep on going to somewhere better than this stinking place, this stinking life.

*You keep on going the direction you’re headed in, you’ll end up in Lizard country,* an interior voice reminded him. That was enough, for now, to make him swing the bike up toward BOQ like a good little boy.

But even as he and Oscar parked their bicycles side by side, he was looking east again.

“Come on, you mis’able lugs—get movin’,” Mutt Daniels growled. Rain ran off his helmet and down the back of his neck. *That never would’ve happened with an old limey-*

*style tin hat*, he thought resentfully. The anger put an extra snap in his voice as he added, "We ain't on the newsreels today."

"We ain't south o' Bloomington no more, neither," Dracula Szabo put in.

"You are painfully correct, Private Szabo," Lucille Potter said in her precise, schoolmarmish voice. She pointed ahead to the complex of low, stout buildings just coming into view through the curtains of rain. "That looks to be Pontiac State Penitentiary up there."

When they got a little closer, Szabo grunted. "Looks like somebody kicked the sh—uh, the tar out of it, too."

"Us 'n' the Lizards must have done fought over this stretch of ground last year," Mutt said. The penitentiary complex looked like any fortified area that had been a battleground a few times, which is to say, not a whole lot of it was left standing. A bullet-pocked wall here, half a building a hundred yards over that way, another wall somewhere else—the rest was rubble.

Bloomington lay thirty-five bloody miles behind Mutt now. Most of it was rubble, too, now that the Lizards had run the Army out again. That made three times the town had changed hands in the past year. *Even if the Lizards went home and the war ended tomorrow*, Mutt thought, *the U.S.A. would be years pulling itself back up on its pins*. He'd never imagined his own country turning into something that looked like the worst he'd seen in France in 1918.

He did his best not to think about that. A sergeant, like a manager, had to keep his mind on what was happening now—you could lose the trees for the forest if you weren't careful. Officers got paid to worry about forests. Mutt said, "Any place better'n this we can camp?"

From behind him, somebody said, "It's got good protection, Sarge."

"I know it does, from the ground, anyway," Daniels said. "But if the Lizards bomb us, we're sittin' ducks."

"There's a park—Riverview Park, I think the name of it is," Lucille Potter said. "I've been there once or twice. The Vermilion River winds around three sides of it. Plenty of trees there, and benches, and an auditorium, too, if anything is left of it. It's not far."

"You know how to get there from here?" Mutt asked. When Lucille nodded, he said, "Okay, Riverview Park it is." He raised his voice: "Hey, Freddie, look alive up there. Miss Lucille's comin' up on point with you. She knows where a decent place for us to lay our bodies down is at." *I hope*, he added to himself.

He'd seen a lot of parks in Illinois, and knew what to expect: rolling grass, plenty of trees, places where you could start a fire for a cookout, probably a place to rent a fishing boat, too, since the park was on a river. The grass would be hay length now, most likely; he didn't figure anybody would have mowed it since the Lizards came.

Lucille Potter found Riverview Park without any trouble. Whether it was worth finding was another question. Once, in one of those crazy magazines Sam Yeager used

to read, Mutt had seen a picture of the craters of the moon. Add in mud and the occasional tree that hadn't been blown to pieces and you'd have a pretty good idea of what the park was like.

Daniels wondered if enough trees still stood to offer his squad decent cover from Lizard air attack. The rain wouldn't stop the scaly sons of bitches; he'd already seen that. They weren't a whole lot less accurate in bad weather than in good, either. He didn't know how they managed that. He just wished to the dripping heavens that they weren't able to do it.

From up ahead Freddie Laplace called, "There's bones stickin' up outta the ground."

"Yeah? So what?" Mutt answered. "This here place been fought over two-three times, in case you didn't notice."

"I know that, Sarge," Laplace answered in an injured voice. "Thing of it is, some of 'em look like they're Lizard bones." He sounded half intrigued, half sick.

"What's that?" Lucille Potter said sharply. "Let me see those, Frederick."

Mutt went over to have a look at what Freddie had found, too. Lizard bones were the most interesting thing Riverview Park had to offer, as far as he was concerned. If he didn't take a gander at them, he'd have to get out his entrenching tool and start digging himself a hole in the torn-up mud.

*Squelch, squelch, squelch.* His boots threatened to come off at every step. The rain kept pattering down. Mutt sighed. Too damn bad you couldn't call a war on account of rain. Or on second thought, maybe not. On the ground if not in the air, the storm probably slowed down the Lizards worse than it did the Americans. "Course, we were slower to start with," he muttered under his breath.

Freddie Laplace, a skinny little guy with a highly developed sense of self-preservation, pointed down into a shell hole that was rapidly turning into a pond. Sure enough, white bones stuck out of the dirt. "Those never came from no human bein', Sarge," Freddie said.

"You're right," Lucille Potter answered. "Those never came from any creature on Earth."

"Just look like arm bones to me," Mutt said. "Yeah, they got claws 'stead of fingers, but so what?" He wrinkled his nose. "Still got some old meat on 'em, too." The rain banished the worst of the after-the-battle stench, but not all of it.

Lucille let out an impatient sniff. "Use your eyes, Mutt. You must know that people have two long bones in their forearms and one in their upper arms. See for yourself—with the Lizards it's just the opposite."

"Well, I'll be a—" The memory of his father's callused hand kept Mutt from saying what he'd be. Now that Lucille pointed it out, though, he saw she was right. His knowledge of anatomy came from no formal study, but from farming and from dealing with players who hurt themselves on the field—and with his own injuries, back when he was playing himself. Now that his attention was focused, he added, "I never seen any

wrist bones like those, neither.”

“They have to be different from ours,” Lucille said. “A human wrist pivots the hand off two bones, these off only one. The muscle attachments would be very different, too, but we can’t see much of them any more.”

Freddie Laplace worked at the mud with his entrenching tool, not to dig in but to expose more of the dead Lizard’s skeleton. In spite of the rain, the dead-meat stink grew bad enough to make Mutt cough. He’d already seen that Lizards bled red. Now he learned they had no more dignity in death than men slain the same way.

“Lord, I wonder what happens to ’em come Judgment Day?” he said, very much as if he were asking the Deity. He’d been raised a hardshell Baptist, and never bothered to question his childhood faith after he grew to manhood. But if God had made the Lizards at some time or other during Creation (and on which day would that have been?), would He resurrect them in the body come the Last Day? Mutt figured preachers somewhere were getting hot and bothered about that.

Freddie exposed some of the alien corpse’s ribcage. “Ain’t that peculiar?” he said. “More like latticework than a proper cage.”

“How come you know so much about it?” Mutt asked him.

“My old man, he runs a butcher shop up in Bangor, Maine,” Laplace answered. “There’s one thing I seen a lot of, Sarge, it’s bones.”

Mutt nodded, conceding the point. Lucille Potter said, “That latticework arrangement is very strong—the English used it for the skeletons of their Blenheim and Wellington bombers.”

“Is that a fact?” Daniels said. He was just making talk, though; if Miss Lucille said something was so, you could take it to the bank.

She asked Freddie, “Do you think you can dig out his skull for me?”

“I’ll give it a try, ma’am,” Laplace said, as if she’d asked him up to the blackboard for a tough multiplication problem he thought he could do. He started scraping away more mud with the folding shovel. Lucille Potter made little eager noises, as if he were digging up a brand-new Chevy (not that there were any brand-new Chevies) and enough gas to run it for a year.

*Try and figure women*, Mutt thought as he watched Lucille take a scalpel from her little case of instruments. A dead Lizard interested her ... but a live sergeant didn’t.

Mutt sighed. He thought Lucille liked him well enough. He knew he liked her well enough, and then some. He knew she knew that, too; she could hardly have doubted it after the kiss he’d given her when he used her bottle of ether to take out the Lizard tank. But the spark that jumped one way didn’t come back the other.

He wondered if she’d left a sweetheart behind when she signed up as an Army nurse. He had his doubts about that; she had *maiden lady* written all over her. *Just my luck*, he thought.

He was not a man to spend a lot of time brooding over what he couldn't help. If he had been that sort of man, years of catching and then of managing would have changed him into a different sort: too many decisions to let any one reach earth-shaking proportions, even if it didn't work. If you couldn't understand that down in your guts, you were liable to end up like Willard Hershberger, the Reds' catcher who'd cut his throat in a New York hotel room after he called the pitch Mel Ott hit into the Polo Grounds stands for a ninth-inning game-winning homer.

And so Mutt went around to see that the rest of his squad was well dug in and that Dracula Szabo had picked a spot with a good field of fire for his BAR. Daniels didn't expect to be attacked here, but you never could tell.

"We got anything decent for chow tonight, Sarge?" Szabo asked.

"C-rations, I expect, and damn lucky to have those," Mutt answered. "Better'n what we ever saw in France; you can believe that." The only real thing Daniels had against the canned rations was that the supply boys had trouble getting enough of them into the field to keep him from being hungry more than he liked. With the Lizards controlling the air, logistics got real sticky.

Szabo had what Mutt thought of as a city slicker's face: controlled, knowing, often with an expression that seemed to say he'd be laughing at you if only you were worth laughing at. It was a face that ached for a slap. Whether it did or whether it didn't, though, Dracula had his uses. Now he reached under his poncho and showed Mutt three dead chickens. "Reckon we can do some better than C-rats," he said smugly, grinning like a fox who'd just raided the hen coop.

*That was probably just what he was, too,* Mutt thought. He said, "We ain't supposed to forage on our own people," but his heart wasn't in it. Roast chicken did go down better than canned stew.

"Aw, Sarge, they were just struttin' around, no people anywhere close," Szabo said, as innocently as if he were telling the truth. Maybe more innocently.

But he knew as well as Mutt that Mutt wasn't going to call him on it. "I'm right glad o' that," Daniels said. "You go, ah, findin' chickens where there is people around, you'll have Miss Lucille diggin' pellets outta your ass. Birdshot if you're lucky, buckshot if you ain't."

"Not while I'm luggin' a BAR," Szabo said with quiet assurance. "Didn't Miss Lucille say something about an auditorium somewhere in this park? If there's any roof at all, cooking these birds gets a lot easier."

Mutt looked around. Riverview Park was good-sized, and with the rain coming down in curtains he couldn't see anything that looked like a building. "I'll ask her where it's at," he said, and sloshed back to where she was playing mad scientist with the late, unlamented Lizard's remains.

"Look at this, Mutt," Lucille said when he came up. She used her scalpel to point enthusiastically at the Lizard's jaws. "Lots of little teeth, all pretty much the same, not



specialized like ours.”

“Yeah, I seen that when I captured a couple live ones not long after they invaded us,” Mutt answered, averting his eyes; the skull had enough rotting meat still on it to threaten to kill his appetite.

“You captured Lizards, Sarge?” Freddie Laplace sounded impressed as all get-out. Lucille just took it in stride, the way she did most things. Mutt would have been happier had it been the other way around.

Nothing he could do about it, though. He asked her where the auditorium was; she pointed eastward. He slogged in that direction, hoping some of the place was still intact. Sure enough, he discovered that, although it had taken a shell hit that left one wall only a baby brickyard, the rest seemed sound enough.

In the rain, finding anything more than fifty yards away wasn't easy. Mud thin as bad diarrhea slopped over his boot tops and soaked his socks. He hoped he wouldn't come down with pneumonia or the grippe.

“Halt! Who goes?” Szabo's voice came out of the water, as if from behind a falls. Daniels couldn't see him at all. Dracula might be a chicken thief, but he made a pretty fair soldier.

“It's me,” Mutt called. “Found that auditorium place. You want to give me them birds, I'll cook 'em for you. I grew up on a farm; reckon I'll do a better job than you would anyways.”

“Yeah, okay. Come on this way.” Szabo stood up so Mutt could spot him. “Not gonna be any Lizards around for a while, though, Sarge—is it okay if I wander over there in an hour or so, and you'll make sure there's some dark meat left for me?”

“I think maybe we can do that,” Daniels said. “You put somebody here on your weapon before you go wandering, though, you hear me? In case we do have trouble, we're gonna need all the firepower we can get our hands on.”

“Don't you worry about that, Sarge,” Szabo said. “Even roast chicken ain't worth gettin' my ass shot off for.” He spoke with great conviction. From any other dogface in the squad, Daniels would have found that convincing. With Szabo, you never could tell.

He took the chickens back to the auditorium. Whoever had been there last, Americans or Lizards, had chopped up a lot of the folding wooden seats that faced the stage: more than they'd used for their fires. Taking advantage of the free lumber, Mutt built his blaze on the concrete floor where others had made theirs before him.

He pulled out his trusty Zippo. He wondered how long it would stay trusty. He had a package of flints in his shirt pocket, but the Zippo was burning kerosene these days, not lighter fluid, and he didn't know when he'd come across any more kerosene, either. For now, it still gave him a flame on the first try.

He quickly found out why the previous occupants of the auditorium had been so eager to use the seats for fuel: the varnish that made them shiny also made them catch fire with the greatest of ease. He went back out into the rain to throw away the chicken guts

and to get some sticks on which to skewer the pieces of chicken he was going to cook.

His belly growled when the savory smell of roasting meat came through the smoke from the fire. His grandfathers would have done their cooking in the War Between the States the same way he was now, except they'd have used lucifer matches instead of the Zippo to get the fire going.

"Chow!" he yelled when he had a fair number of pieces finished. Men straggled in by ones and twos, ate quickly, and went back out into the rain. When Lucille Potter came in for hers, Mutt asked jokingly, "You wash your hands before supper?"

"You'd best believe I did—and with soap, too." Being a nurse, Lucille was in dead earnest about cleanliness. "Did you wash yours before you cleaned these birds and cut them up?"

"Well, you might say so," Mutt answered; his hands had certainly been wet, anyhow. "Didn't use soap, though."

Had Lucille Potter's stare been any fishier, she'd have grown fins. Before she could say anything, Szabo strolled into the auditorium. "You save me a drumstick, Sarge?"

"Here's a whole leg, kid," Mutt said. The BAR man blissfully started gnawing away. Daniels took half a breast off the fire, waved it in the air to cool it down, and also began to eat. He had to pause a couple of times to spit out burnt bits of feather; he'd done a lousy job of plucking the chickens.

Then he paused again, this time with the hunk of white meat nowhere near his mouth. Through the splashing rain came deep-throated engine rumblings and the mucky grinding noise of caterpillar tracks working hard to propel their burden over bad ground. The chicken Mutt had already swallowed turned to a small lump of lead in his stomach.

"Tanks." The word came out as hardly more than a whisper, as if he didn't want to believe it himself. Then he bellowed it with all the fear and force he had in him: "*Tanks!*"

Dracula Szabo dropped the mostly bare drumstick and thigh and sprinted back toward his BAR. What good it would do against Lizard armor, Mutt couldn't imagine. He also didn't think the rain would give him another chance to take out a Lizard tank with a bottle of ether—even assuming Lucille had any more, which wasn't obvious.

He threw down his own piece of meat, grabbed his submachine gun, and peered out ever so cautiously through the gaping hole in the auditorium wall. The tanks were out there somewhere not far away, but he couldn't see them. They weren't firing; maybe they didn't know his squad was in the park.

"That's great," he muttered. "Gettin' trapped behind enemy lines is just what I had in mind."

"Enemy lines?" All his attention on the noises coming from the dripping gloom outside, Mutt hadn't noticed Lucille Potter coming up behind him. She went on, "Those are *our* tanks, Mutt. They're coming down from the north—either the Lizards haven't

taken out the bridges over the Vermilion or else we've repaired them—and they make a lot more racket than the machines the Lizards use.”

Mutt listened again, this time without panic blinding his ears. After a two-beat pause he used around Lucille to replace a useful seven-letter word, he said, “You're right. Lord, I was ready to start shooting at my own side.”

“Some of the men are still liable to do that,” Lucille said.

“Yeah.” Mutt stepped outside, shouted into the rain: “Hold your fire! American tanks comin' south. Hold fire!”

One of the granting, snorting machines rumbled by close enough for the commander to hear that cry. To Mutt, he was just a vague shape sticking up from the top of the turret. He called back in unmistakable New England accents, “We're friendly all right, buddy. We're usin' the rain to move up without the Lizards spotting us—give the little scaly sons of bitches a surprise if they come after you guys.”

“Sounds right good, pal,” Daniels answered, waving. The tank—he could tell it was a Sherman; the turret was too big for a Lee—rattled on toward the south edge of Riverview Park. In a way, Mutt envied the crew for having inches of hardened steel between them and the foe. In another way, he was happy enough to be just an infantryman. The Lizards didn't particularly notice him. Tanks, though, drew their special fire. They had some fancy can openers, too.

The tank commander had to know that better than Mutt did. He kept heading south anyhow. Mutt wondered how many times he'd been in action, and if this one would be the last. With a wave to the departing tank that was half salute, he went back into the ruined auditorium to finish his chicken.

Vyacheslav Molotov jounced along toward the farm outside Moscow in a *panje* wagon, as if he were a peasant with a couple of sacks of radishes he hadn't been able to sell. From the way the NKVD man driving the wagon behaved, Molotov might have been a sack of radishes himself. The Soviet foreign commissar didn't mind. He was rarely in the mood for idle chitchat, with today no exception to the rule.

All around him, the land burgeoned with Russian spring. The sun rose early now, and set late, and everything that had lain dormant through winter flourished in the long hours of daylight. Fresh green grass pushed up through and hid last year's growth, now gray-brown and dead. The willows and birches by the Moscow River wore new bright leafy coats. Concealed by those new leaves, birds chirped and warbled. Molotov did not know which bird went with which song. He could barely tell a titmouse from a toucan, not that you were likely to find a toucan in a Russian treetop even in springtime.

Ducks stuck their behinds in the air as they tipped up for food in the river. The driver looked at them and murmured, "I wish I had a shotgun." Molotov saw reply as unnecessary; the driver would likely have said the same thing had he been alone in the wagon.

Molotov wished not for a shotgun but a car. Yes, gasoline was in short supply, with almost all of it earmarked for the front. But as the number two man in the Soviet Union behind Stalin, he could have arranged for a limousine had he wanted one. The Lizards, however, were more likely to shoot up motor vehicles than horse-drawn wagons. Molotov played it safe.

When the driver pulled off the road and onto a meandering path, Molotov thought the fellow had lost his way. The farm ahead looked like an archetypical *kolkhoz*, maybe a little smaller than most of its ilk. Chickens ran around clucking and pecking, fat pigs wallowed in mud. In the fields, men walked behind mules. The only buildings were row houses for the *kolkhozniks* and barns for the animals.

Then one of the men, dressed like any farmer in boots, baggy trousers, collarless tunic, and cloth cap, opened the door to a barn and went inside. Before he closed it after himself, the foreign commissar saw that the inside was brightly lit by electric light. Even before the Germans and the Lizards came, that would have been unusual for a *kolkhoz*. Now it was inconceivable.

His smile came broader and more fulsome than most who knew him would have imagined his face could form. "A splendid job of *maskirovka*," he said enthusiastically. "Whoever designed and implemented the deception plan, he deserves to be promoted."

"Comrade Foreign Commissar, I am given to understand the responsible parties have been recognized," the driver said. He looked like a peasant—he looked like a drunk—but he talked like an educated man. *Maskirovka again*, Molotov thought. He knew intellectually he would not have a drunken peasant taking him to arguably the most

important place in the Soviet Union, but the man played his role well.

Molotov pointed to the barn. “That is where they do their research?”

“Comrade, all I know is that that is where I was told to deliver you,” the driver answered. “What they do in there I could not tell you, and I do not want to know.”

He pulled back on the reins. The horse drawing the highwheeled *panje* wagon obediently stopped. Molotov, who was not a large man (even if he was taller than Stalin), scrambled down without grace but also without falling. As he headed for the barn door, the driver took a flask from his hip pocket and swigged from it. Maybe he was an educated drunk.

The barn door looked like a barn door. After that, though, the *maskirovka* failed: the air that came out of the barn did not smell as it should. Molotov supposed that didn't matter; if the Lizards got close enough to go sniffing around, the Soviet Union was likely to be finished, anyhow.

He opened the door, closed it behind him as quickly as the fellow who looked like a farmer had done. Inside, the wooden building was uncompromisingly clean and uncompromisingly scientific. Even the “farmer's” costume, when seen close up, was spotless.

The fellow hurried up to Molotov. “Comrade Foreign Commissar, I am delighted to see you here,” he said, extending a hand. He was a broad-shouldered man of about forty, with a chin beard and alert eyes in a tired face. “I am Igor Ivanovich Kurchatov, director of the explosive metal project.” He brushed back a lock of hair that drooped (*Hitlerlike*, Molotov thought irrelevantly) onto his forehead.

“I have questions on two fronts, Igor Ivanovich,” Molotov said. “First, how soon will you finish the bomb built from the captured Lizard explosive metal? And second, how soon will this facility begin producing more of this metal for us to use?”

Kurchatov's eyes widened slightly. “You come straight to the point.”

“Time-wasting formalities are for the bourgeoisie,” Molotov replied. “Tell me what I need to know so I can report it to Comrade Stalin.”

Stalin, of course, received regular reports from the project. Beria had been here to see how things went, too. But Molotov, along with being foreign commissar, also served as deputy chairman to Stalin on the State Committee on Defense. Kurchatov licked his lips before he answered; he was well aware of that. He said, “In the first area, we have made great progress. We are almost ready to begin fabricating the components for the bomb.”

“That is good news,” Molotov agreed.

“Yes, Comrade,” Kurchatov said. “Since we have the explosive metal in place, it becomes a straightforward engineering matter of putting two masses of it, neither explosive alone, together so they exceed what is called the critical mass, the amount required for an explosion.”

“I see,” Molotov said, though he really didn’t. If something was explosive, it seemed to him, the only difference between a little and a lot should have been the size of the boom. But all the Soviet physicists and other academicians insisted this strange metal did not work that way. If they achieved the results they claimed, he supposed that would prove them right. He asked, “And how have you decided to join the pieces together?”

“The simplest way we could think of was to shape one into a cylinder with a hole through the center and the other into a smaller cylinder that would fit precisely into the hole. An explosive charge will propel it into the proper position. We shall take great care that it does not go awry.”

“Such care is well-advised, Comrade Director,” Molotov said. But although he kept his voice icy, he intuitively liked the design Kurchatov had described. It had a Russian simplicity to it: slam the one into the other and *bang!* Molotov knew his own people well enough to know also that they had more trouble keeping complicated plans on track than did, say, the Germans; Russians had a way of substituting brute force for sophistication. They’d held the Nazis outside Moscow and Leningrad that way. Now they were on the edge of striking a mighty blow against the Lizards, more deadly invaders still.

A mighty blow ... “After we use up our stock of explosive metal, we have no more—is that correct?” Molotov asked.

“Yes, Comrade Foreign Commissar.” Kurchatov licked his lips and went no further.

Molotov frowned. He had been afraid this would happen. The academicians had a habit of promising Stalin the moon, whether they could deliver or not. *Maybe the horse will learn to sing*, he thought, an echo from some ancient history read in his student days. He shook his head, banishing the memory. The here and now was what counted.

He knew the dilemma the scientists faced. If they told Stalin they could not give him something he wanted, they’d head for the *gulag* ... unless they got a bullet in the back of the neck instead. But if, after promising, they failed to come through, the same applied again.

And the Soviet Union desperately needed a continuous supply of explosive metal. In that Molotov agreed with Stalin. (He tried to remember the last time he had disagreed with Stalin. He couldn’t. It was too long ago.) He said, “What are the difficulties in production, Igor Ivanovich, and how are you working to overcome them?”

As if on cue, another man in farmer’s clothes came up. Kurchatov said, “Comrade Foreign Commissar, let me present to you Georgi Aleksandrovich Flerov, who recently discovered the spontaneous fission of the uranium nucleus and who is in charge of the team investigating these difficulties.”

Flerov was younger than Kurchatov; even in the clothes of a peasant, he looked like a scholar. He also looked nervous. Because he was in charge, he was responsible for what his team did—and for what it didn’t do.

“Comrade Foreign Commissar, the answer to your first question, or to the first part of

it, is simple,” he said, trying to hold his rather light voice steady. “The chief difficulty in production is that we do not yet know how to produce. Our techniques in nuclear research are several years behind those of the capitalists and fascists, and we are having to learn what they already know.”

Molotov gave him a baleful stare. “Comrade Stalin will not be pleased to hear this.”

Kurchatov blanched. So did Flerov, but he said, “If Comrade Stalin chooses to liquidate this team, no one in the Soviet Union will be able to produce these explosives for him. Everyone with that expertise who is still alive is here. We are what the *rodina* has, for better or worse.”

Molotov was not used to defiance, even frightened, deferential defiance. He harshened his voice as he replied, “We were promised full-scale production of explosive metal within eighteen months. If the team assembled here cannot accomplish this—”

“The Germans are not likely to have that within eighteen months, Comrade Foreign Commissar,” Flerov said. “Neither are the Americans, though the breakdown in travel has left us less well-informed about their doings.”

*Has played hob with espionage, you mean*, Molotov thought: Flerov had a little diplomat in him after all. That, however, was a side issue. Molotov said, “If you cannot produce as promised, we will remove you and bring in those who can.”

“Good luck to you and good-bye to the *rodina*,” Flerov said. “You may find charlatans who tell you worse lies than we could ever imagine. You will not find capable physicists—and if you dispose of us, you may never see uranium or plutonium produced in the Soviet Union.”

He was not bluffing. Molotov had watched too many men trying to lie for their lives; he knew nonsense and bluff when he heard them. He didn’t hear them from Flerov. Rounding on Kurchatov, he said, “You direct this project. Why have you not kept us informed about your trouble in holding to the schedule?”

“Comrade Foreign Commissar, we are ahead of schedule in preparing the first bomb,” Kurchatov said. “That ought to count in our favor, even if the other half of the project is going more slowly than we thought it would. We can rock the Lizards back on their heels with one explosion.”

“Igor Ivanovich—” Flerov began urgently.

Molotov raised a hand to cut him off. He glared at Kurchatov. “You may be an excellent physicist, Comrade, but you are politically naive. If we rock the Lizards with one explosion, with how many will they rock us?”

Under the harsh electric lights, Kurchatov’s face went an ugly yellowish-gray. Flerov said, “Comrade Foreign Commissar, this has been a matter of only theoretical discussion.”

“You need to make it one of the theses of your dialectic,” Molotov said. He was convinced Stalin had the right of that: the Lizards would hit back hard at any nation that used the explosive metal against them.

“We shall do as you say,” Kurchatov said.

“See that you do,” Molotov answered. “Meanwhile, the Soviet Union—to say nothing of all mankind—requires a supply of explosive metal. You cannot make it within eighteen months, you say. How long, then?” Molotov was not large, nor physically imposing. But when he spoke with the authority of the Soviet Union in his voice, he might have been a giant.

Kurchatov and Flerov looked at each other. “If things go well, four years,” Flerov said.

“If things go very well, three and a half,” Kurchatov said. The younger man gave him a dubious look, but finally spread his hands, conceding the point.

Three and a half years? More likely four? Molotov felt as if he’d been kicked in the belly. The Soviet Union would have its one weapon, which it could hardly use for fear of bringing hideous retaliation down on its head? And the Germans and the Americans—and, for all he knew, maybe the English and the Japanese, too—ahead in the race to make bombs of their own?

“How am I to tell this to Comrade Stalin?” he asked. The question hung in the air. Not only would the scientists incur Stalin’s wrath for being too optimistic, but it might fall on Molotov as well, as the bearer of bad news.

If the academicians were as irreplaceable as they thought, the odds were good that Stalin wouldn’t do anything to them. Over the years, Molotov had done his best to make himself indispensable to Stalin, but indispensable wasn’t the same as irreplaceable, and he knew it.

He asked, “Can I tell the General Secretary you will succeed within two and a half to three years?” If he could arrange to present a small disappointment rather than a big one, he might yet deflect Stalin’s anger.

“Comrade Foreign Commissar, you can of course tell the Great Stalin whatever you please, but that will not be the truth,” Kurchatov said. “When the time passes and we do not succeed, you will have to explain why.”

“If the Lizards give us so much time for research and engineering,” Flerov added; he looked to be enjoying Molotov’s discomfiture.

“If the Lizards overrun this place, Comrades, I assure you that you will have no more joy from it than I,” Molotov said stonily. Had the Germans defeated the Soviet Union, Molotov would have gone up against a wall (with a blindfold if he was lucky), but nuclear physicists might have been useful enough to save their skins by turning their coats. The Lizards, however, would not want human beings to know atoms existed, let alone that they could be split. Driving that home, Molotov added, “And if the Lizards overrun this place, it will be in large measure because you and your team have failed to give the workers and people of the Soviet Union the weapons they need to carry on the fight.”

“We are doing everything men can do,” Flerov protested. “There are too many things we simply do not know.”



Now he was the one who sounded uncertain, querulous. That was how Molotov wanted it. He snapped, "You had better learn, then."

Softly, Igor Kurchatov said, "It is easier to give orders to generals, Comrade Foreign Commissar, than to nature. She reveals her secrets at a pace she chooses."

"She has revealed altogether too many of them to the Lizards," Molotov said. "If they can find them, so can you." He turned his back to show the interview was over. He thought he'd recovered well from the shocking news the academicians had given him. How well he would recover after he gave Stalin that news was, unfortunately, another question.

\* \* \*

The peddler smiled in appreciation as David Goldfarb handed him a silver one-mark piece with Kaiser Wilhelm's mustachioed image stamped on it. "That's good money, friend," he said. Along with the baked apple on a stick that Goldfarb had bought, he gave back a fistful of copper and potmetal coins by way of change. His expression turned sly. "You have money that good, it doesn't matter how funny your Yiddish sounds."

"*Geh kak afen yam,*" Goldfarb said genially, doing his best to hide the sudden pounding of his heart. "Where I come from, everybody talks like me."

"What a miserable, ignorant place that must be," the peddler retorted. "At first, I thought you had a nice Warsaw accent. The more I listen to you, though, the more I figure you're from Chelm."

Goldfarb snorted. The legendary town was full of *shlemiels*. What he really spoke, of course, was Yiddish with a Warsaw accent corrupted by living his whole life in England. He hadn't thought it was corrupted till the British sub dropped him on the flat, muddy coast of Poland. Now, comparing the way he spoke to the Yiddish of people who used it every day of their lives, he counted himself lucky that they understood him at all.

As an excuse not to say where he really did come from, he bit into the apple. Hot, sweet juice flooded into his mouth. "Mmm," he said, a wordless, happy sound.

"It would be really good if I could get some cinnamon," the peddler said. "But there's none to be had, not for love nor money."

"Good anyhow," Goldfarb mumbled, his full mouth muffling whatever odd accent the King's English gave him. With a nod to the peddler, he walked south down the dirt track toward Lodz. He was, he thought, just a couple of hours away. He hoped that wouldn't be too late. From what he'd heard just before he sailed from England, his cousin Moishe was in jail somewhere in Lodz. He wondered how he was supposed to get Moishe out.

With a noncom's fatalism, he put that out of his mind. He'd worry about it when the time came. First he had to get to Lodz. He'd already discovered that a couple of years of fighting the war electronically had left his wind a shadow of what it was supposed to be. His physical-training sergeant would not have approved.

“Something to be said for not laying about puffing on fags all day long—it’d be even shorter if I’d had more to smoke,” he said in low-voiced English. “All the same, I miss ’em.”

He looked around. Just a glimpse of the endless flat farmland of the Polish plain had been plenty to tell him all he needed to know about that country’s unhappy history. Besides the shelter of the English Channel, the United Kingdom had mountains in the west and north in which to take refuge: witness the survival of Welsh and Scots Gaelic over the centuries.

Poland, now—all the Poles had was the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other, and nothing whatever to keep either one of them out except their own courage. And when the Germans outweighed them three to one and the Russians two or three times as badly as that, even suicidal courage too often wasn’t enough.

*No wonder they give their Jews a hard time*, he thought with a sudden burst of insight: *they’re sure they can beat the Jews*. After losing so many wars to their neighbors, having in their midst people they could trounce had to feel sweet. That didn’t make him love the people who had driven his parents from Poland, but it did help him understand them.

Goldfarb looked around again. Almost everywhere in England, he’d been able to see hills on the horizon. Here, it went on forever. The endless flat terrain made him feel insignificant and at the same time conspicuous, as if he were a fly crawling across a big china platter.

The green of Polish fields was different from what he’d known in England, too: duller somehow. Maybe it was the light, maybe the soil; whatever it was, he’d noticed it almost at once.

He’d noticed the workers in those fields, too. Englishmen who labored on the land were farmers. The Poles were inarguably peasants. He had trouble defining the difference but, as with the colors of the fields, it was unmistakable. Maybe part of it lay in the way the Polish farmers went about their work. By the standards Goldfarb was used to, they might as well have been moving in slow motion. Their attitude seemed to say that how hard they worked didn’t matter—they weren’t going to realize much from their labors, anyway.

A noise in the sky, like an angry cockchafer ... Goldfarb had heard that noise more times than he cared to remember, and his reaction to it was instinctive: he threw himself flat. Hugging the ground, a flight of German bombers roared by, heading east.

*Ju-88s*, Goldfarb thought, identifying them by sound and shape as automatically as he would have told his father from an uncle. He was used to praying for fighters and anti-aircraft guns to blow German bombers out of the sky. Now he found himself wishing them luck. That felt strange, wrong; the world had taken a lot of strange turns since the Lizards came.

He got to his feet and peered south. Smoke smudged the horizon there, the first mark

he'd seen. *That ought to be Lodz*, he thought. A little farther and he could start doing the job the British high command had, in their wisdom, decided he was right for.

Cloth cap, black jacket and wool trousers—they all shouted *I am a Jew!* He wondered why Hitler had bothered adding yellow stars to the getup; they struck him as hardly necessary. Even his underwear was different from what he'd worn in England, and chafed him in strange places.

He had to look like a Jew. He spoke Yiddish, but his Polish was fragmentary and mostly foul. In England, even before he went into uniform, he'd dressed and sounded like everyone else. Here in Poland, he felt isolated from a large majority of the people around him. "Get used to it," he muttered. "Most places, Jews *don't* fit in."

An ornate brass signpost said, LODZ, 5KM. Fastened above it was an angular wooden sign with angular black letters on a white background: LITZMANNSTADT, 5KM. Just seeing that sign pointing like an arrow at the heart of Lodz set Goldfarb's teeth on edge. Typical German arrogance, to slap a new name on the town once they'd conquered it.

He wondered if the Lizards called it something altogether different.

A little more than an hour brought him into the outskirts of Lodz. He'd been told the town had fallen to the Nazis almost undamaged. It wasn't undamaged now. The briefings he'd read on the submarine said the Germans had put up a hell of a scrap before the Lizards drove them out of town, and that they'd lobbed occasional rockets or flying bombs (the briefings weren't very clear about which) at it ever since.

Most of the people in the outer part of the city were Poles. If any German settlers remained from Lodz's brief spell as Litzmannstadt, they were lying low. Sneers from the Poles were bad enough. He didn't know what he would have done with Germans gaping at him. All at once, he regretted hoping the German bombers had a good mission. Then he got angry at himself for that regret. The Germans might not be much in the way of human beings, but against the Lizards they and England were on the same side.

He walked on down Lagiewnicka Street toward the ghetto. The wall the Nazis had built was still partly intact, although in the street itself it had been knocked down to allow traffic once more. As soon as he set foot on the Jewish side, he decided that while the Germans and England might be on the same side, the Germans and he would never be.

The smell and the crowding hit him twin sledgehammer blows. He'd lived his whole life with plumbing that worked. He'd never reckoned that a *mitzvah*, a blessing, but it was. The brown reek of sewage (or rather, slops), garbage, and unwashed humanity made him wish he could turn off his nose.

And the crowd! He'd heard men who'd been in India and China talk of ant heaps of people, but he hadn't understood what that meant. The streets were jammed with men, women, children, carts, wagons—a good-sized city was boiled down into a few square blocks, like bouillon made into a cube. People bought, sold, argued, pushed past one another, got, in each other's way, so that block after block of ghetto street felt like the

most crowded pub where Goldfarb had ever had a pint.

The people—the Jews—were dirty, skinny, many of them sickly-looking. After tramping down from the Polish coast, Goldfarb was none too clean himself, but whenever he saw someone eyeing him, he feared the flesh on his bones made him conspicuous.

And this misery, he realized, remained after the Nazis were the better part of a year out of Lodz. The Jews now were fed better and treated like human beings. What the ghetto had been like under German rule was—not unimaginable, for he imagined it all too vividly, but horrifying in a way he'd never imagined till now.

“Thank you, Father, for getting out when you did,” he said.

For a couple of blocks he simply let himself be washed along like a fish in a swift-flowing stream. Then he began moving against the current in a direction of his own choosing.

Posters of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski seemed to follow him wherever he went. Some were tattered and faded, some as new and bright as if they'd been put up yesterday, which they probably had. Rumkowski stared down at Goldfarb from a variety of poses, but always looked stern and commanding.

Goldfarb shook his head; the briefing papers had had considerable to say about Rumkowski and his regime in Lodz, but not much of that was good. In sum, he amounted to a pocket Jewish Hitler. *Just what we need*, Goldfarb thought.

A couple of times, he passed Order Service men with their armbands and truncheons. He noticed them not only for those, but also because they looked uncommonly well-fed. *A pocket Jewish SS, too. Wonderful.* Goldfarb kept his head down and did his best to pretend he was invisible.

But he had to look up from time to time to tell where he was going; studying a street map of Lodz didn't do enough to let him make his way through the town itself. Luckily, being one mote in a swirling crowd kept him from drawing special notice. After three wrong turns—about half as many as he'd expected—he walked into a block of flats on Mostowski Street and started climbing stairs.

He knocked on what he hoped was the right door. A woman a couple of years older than he was—she would have been pretty if she hadn't been so thin—opened it and stared at his unfamiliar face with fear-widened eyes. “Who are you?” she demanded.

Goldfarb got the idea something unpleasant would happen to him if he gave the wrong answer. He said, “I'm supposed to tell you even Job didn't suffer forever.”

“And I'm supposed to tell you it must have seemed that way to him.” The woman's whole body relaxed. “Come in. You must be Moishe's cousin from England.”

“That's right,” he said. She closed the door behind him. He went on, “And you're Rivka? Where's your son?”

“He's out playing. In the crowds on the street, the risk is small, and besides, someone

has an eye on him.”

“Good.” Goldfarb looked around. The flat was tiny, but so bare that it seemed larger. He shook his head in sympathy. “You must be sick to death of moving.”

Rivka Russie smiled for the first time, tiredly. “You have no idea. Reuven and I have moved three times since Moishe didn’t come back to the flat we’d just taken.” She shook her head. “He thought someone had known who he was. We must have been just too late getting out of the other place. If it hadn’t been for the underground, I don’t know what we would have done. Got caught, I suppose.”

“They got word to England, too,” Goldfarb said, “and orders eventually got to me.” He wondered if they would have, had Churchill not spent a while talking with him at Brunting-thorpe. “I’m supposed to help get Moishe out of here and take him—and you and the boy—back to England with me. If I can.”

“Can you do that?” Rivka asked eagerly.

“*Gott vays*—God knows,” he said. That won a startled laugh from her. He went on, “I’m no commando or hero or anything like that. I’ll work with your people and I’ll do the best I can, that’s all.”

“A better answer than I expected.” Her voice was judicious.

“Is he still in Lodz?” Goldfarb asked. “That’s the last information I had, but it’s not necessarily good any more.”

“As far as we know, yes. The Lizards aren’t in a lot of hurry about dealing with him. That doesn’t make sense to me, when he did such a good job of embarrassing them.”

“They’re more sure than quick,” Goldfarb said, remembering pages from the briefing book. “Very methodical, but not swift. What sort of charge do they have him up on?”

“Disobedience,” Rivka said. “From everything he ever said while he was on better terms with them, they couldn’t accuse him of anything much worse.”

That fit in with what Goldfarb had read, too. The Lizards seemed rank-, class-, and duty-conscious to a degree that made the English and even the Japanese look like wild-eyed, bomb-throwing anarchists. In that kind of society, disobedience had to be as heinous a sin as blasphemy in the Middle Ages.

“Still here in Lodz,” Goldfarb mused. “That’s good, I suppose. The Lizards’ main Polish headquarters is in Warsaw. Getting him out of there would be a lot tougher.” He grinned wryly. “Besides, I don’t fancy walking all that way east, not when I’ve just come here from the coast the same way.”

“Would you like some tea?” Rivka asked. A moment later, she added another, more indignant question: “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, really,” Goldfarb said, though he was still chuckling. “It’s only that any woman in my family would have asked exactly the same question.”

“I *am* a woman in your family,” Rivka said quietly.

“That’s true. You are.” They eyed each other across the gulf of lifetimes spent in very

different lands. Goldfarb's parents had escaped the ghetto; to him, this place was something medieval returned to malignant life, and Rivka in her long black dress almost as much a part of the past come again. He wondered how he seemed to her: exotic stranger from a land rich and peaceful compared to Poland, in spite of everything Hitler and the Lizards had done to England, or just an *apikoros*, someone who'd abandoned most of his Judaism to get along in the wider world? He didn't know how to ask, or even if it was his business.

"Do you want that cup of tea?" Rivka asked again. "It's not real tea, I'm afraid, only chopped-up herbs and leaves."

"Same sort of muck we've been drinking at home," Goldfarb said. "Yes, I'd like some, if it's not too much trouble."

Rivka Russie made the "tea" on an electric hot plate. She served it to him in a glass with sugar but no milk. That was how his parents drank it, but he'd come to prefer the way most Englishmen took theirs. Asking for milk here, though, didn't seem likely to produce anything but embarrassment. Cautiously, he sipped.

He raised an eyebrow. "Not bad at all. Better than most of what I've had lately, as a matter of fact." To prove he meant it, he quickly drained the glass. Then he said, "So you're still in touch with the underground?"

"Yes," Rivka answered. "If it weren't for them, the Order Service men would have taken Reuven and me along with Moishe by now."

"Can you let me know how to get hold of them? If nothing else, I'll need somewhere to sleep while I'm looking things over." *Can't very well stay in a flat with my cousin's wife, not when he's in gaol.*

"It's not as hard as you might think." Amusement shone in Rivka's eyes. "Go across the hall to flat number twenty-four. Knock on the door—twice, then once."

He'd used a password to identify himself to her. Now he had to trot out a secret knock? He'd always thought that sort of thing more the province of sensational novels than sober fact, but he was learning better in a hurry. If you wanted to keep going when every man's hand was raised against you, you had to figure out ways to keep from being noticed.

He went across the hall, found the battered door with a tarnished brass 24 on it. *Knock, knock ... knock.* He waited. The door opened. The big man standing in it said, "Nu?"

"Nu, the lady across the way sent me here," Goldfarb replied. With his shaggy beard and soldier's cap over civilian clothes, the big man looked like a bandit chief. He also looked like someone it would be wiser not to annoy. Goldfarb was glad he'd had the right code to introduce himself to Rivka Russie; without it, this fellow likely would have descended on him like a falling building. He'd been right to have his wind up.

But now the man grinned (showing bad teeth) and stuck out his hand. "So you're Russie's English cousin, are you? You can call me Leon."

“Right.” The fellow had a blacksmith’s grip, Goldfarb discovered. He also noted that while the local Jew had said he could call him Leon, that didn’t mean it was his name: another precaution out of the books, and probably as necessary as the rest.

“Don’t stand there—come in,” Leon said. “Never can tell who’s liable to be looking down the hall.” He closed the door behind Goldfarb. “Take your pack off if you like—it looks heavy.”

“Thanks.” Goldfarb did. The apartment was, if anything, barer than Rivka’s. Only mattresses on the floor said people lived, or at least slept, here. He said, “Moishe’s still in Lodz?” Leon, he figured, would know more surely than Rivka had.

The big man nodded. “He’s in Prison One on Franciszkanska Street—the Nazis called it Franzstrasse, just like they called Lodz Litzmannstadt. We call it Franzstrasse ourselves, sometimes, because there’s a big sign with that name right across from the prison that nobody’s ever bothered taking down.”

“Prison One, eh?” Goldfarb said. “How many are there?”

“Plenty,” Leon answered. “Along with being good at killing people, the Nazis were good at putting them away, too.”

“Do you know where in the prison he’s locked up?” Goldfarb asked. “For that matter, do you have plans for the building?”

“Who do you think turned it into a prison? The Germans should have dirtied their hands doing the work themselves?” Leon said. “Oh yes, we have the plans. And we know where your cousin is, too. The Lizards don’t let Jews anywhere near him—they’re learning—but they haven’t learned yet that some Poles are on our side, too.”

“This whole business must make you *meshuggeh* sometimes,” Goldfarb said. “The Lizards are better to Jews here than the Nazis ever were, but they’re bad for everybody else, so sometimes you find yourself working with the Germans. And the Poles don’t like Jews, either, but I guess they don’t like the Lizards any better.”

“It’s a mess, all right,” Leon agreed. “I’m just glad I don’t have to do much in the way of figuring out. You wanted plans, I’ll show you plans.” He went over to a cabinet, yanked out a roll of paper, and brought it over to Goldfarb. When Goldfarb opened it, he saw they weren’t just plans but Germanically meticulous engineering drawings. Leon pointed. “They have machine guns on the roof, here and here. We’ll have to do something about those.”

“Yes,” Goldfarb said in a small voice. “A machine gun we don’t do something about would put rather a hole in our scheme, wouldn’t it?”

That might have been Leon’s first taste of British understatement; he grunted laughter. “Put a hole in us, you mean—probably lots of holes. But let’s say we can take out the machine guns—”

“Because if we don’t, we can’t go on anyhow,” Goldfarb broke in.

“Exactly,” Leon said. “So let’s say we do. You’re supposed to be bringing some

presents with you. Have you got them?"

By way of answer, Goldfarb opened the battered Polish Army pack that had come from an exile in England. No one had paid any attention to it since he'd landed here. Close to half the people on the road wore one like it, and a lot of those who didn't had corresponding German or Russian gear instead.

Leon looked inside. His long exhalation puffed out his mustache. "They don't look like much," he said dubiously.

"They're bloody hell to load, but they'll do the job if I can't get close enough to use them. I've practiced with them. Believe me, they will," Goldfarb said.

"And what's all this mess?" Leon pointed into the pack, which held, along with the bombs he'd already disparaged, a motley assortment of metal tubes, levers, and a spring that might have come from the suspension of a lorry.

"The mechanism for shooting them," Goldfarb answered. "They built one in sections especially for me, lucky chap that I am, so the business end wouldn't keep sticking out the top of my pack. The whole bloody thing together is called a PIAT—Projector, Infantry, Antitank." The last four words were necessarily in English.

Leon, luckily, understood "tank." He shook his head anyhow. "No tanks"—he said *panzers*—"at the jail."

"There'd better not be," Goldfarb said. "But a bomb that will make a hole in the side of a tank will make a big hole in the side of a building."

He got the impression that that was the first thing he'd said which impressed Leon, even a little. The man from the underground (Goldfarb suppressed a picture of Leon coming up from a London tube station) plucked at his beard. "Maybe you have something there. How far will it shoot?"

"A couple of hundred yards—uh, meters." *Watch that*, Goldfarb told himself. *You can give yourself away if you don't think metric.*

"Should be far enough." Leon's sardonic smile said he'd caught the slip, too. "Do you want to look over the prison before you try cracking it?"

"I'd better. I'm supposed to know what I'm doing before I do it, right?"

"It helps, yes." Leon studied him. "You've seen some action, I think."

"In the air, yes. Not on the ground, not like you mean. On the ground, I've just been strafed like everybody else."

"Yes, I know about that, too," Leon said. "But even in the air—that'll do. You won't panic when things start going crazy. Why don't you leave your hardware here? We don't want to bring it around to the prison till it's time to use it."

"Makes sense to me, as long as you're sure nobody's going to steal it while we're gone."

Leon showed teeth in something that was not a smile. "Anyone who steals from us ... he's very sorry and he never, ever does it again. This happens once or twice and people



start to get the idea.”

That probably meant just what Goldfarb thought it did. He didn't want to know for sure. Goldfarb left the pack on the floor and walked out of the flat after Leon.

Franciszkanska Street was about ten minutes away. Again crowds and sights and smells buffeted Goldfarb. Again he reminded himself that this was how things were long after the Nazis had been driven away.

He stuck to Leon like a pair of socks; even though he'd memorized the local map, he didn't want to do much navigating on his own. Leon presently remarked, “We'll just walk by, casual as you please. Nobody will think anything about us looking as long as we don't stop and stare. The first rule is not to make yourself conspicuous.”

Goldfarb looked, turning his head as if to carry on a conversation with Leon. At first glance, the prison was a tough nut to crack: two machine guns on the roof, barred windows, razor wire around the perimeter. At second glance, he said quietly, “It's too close to everything else and it doesn't have enough guards.”

“They didn't send a blind man over,” Leon said, beaming. “Right both times. That gives us our chance.”

“And what do we do to take it?” Goldfarb asked as they left Prison One behind.

“For now, *you* don't do anything,” Leon said. “You sit tight and wait for the right time. Me, I have to go see some people and find out what I need to do to incite myself a riot.”

Bobby Fiore paced along a dirt track somewhere in China. His comrades said they weren't far from Shanghai. That meant little to him, because he couldn't have put Shanghai on the map to keep himself out of the electric chair. His guess was that it wasn't too far from the ocean: the air had the vaguely salty tang he'd known when he played in places like Washington State and Louisiana, anyhow.

The weight of the pistol on his hip was comforting, like an old friend. His baggy tunic hid the little gun. He'd acquired a new straw hat. If you ignored his nose and the five o'clock shadow on his cheeks, he made a pretty fair imitation peasant.

He still didn't know what to make of the rest of the band. Some of the men who trudged along in the loose column were Chinese Reds like Lo and the rest of the gang who had gotten him into this mess in the first place. They too looked like peasants, which was fair enough, because he gathered most of them were.

But the others ... He glanced over at the fellow nearest him, who carried a rifle and wore a ragged khaki uniform. “Hey, Yosh!” he called, and mimed pivoting at second base to turn a double play.

Yoshi Fukuoka grinned, exposing a couple of gold teeth. He dropped the rifle and went into a first baseman's stretch, scissoring himself into a split and reaching out with an imaginary mitt to snag the equally imaginary ball. “Out!” he yelled, the word perfectly comprehensible to Fiore, who lifted a clenched fist in the air, thumb pointing

up.

The Reds looked from one of them to the other. They didn't get it. To them, Fukuoka was an eastern devil and Fiore a foreign devil, and the only reason they were tagging along with the Japs was that they all hated the Lizards worse than they hated each other.

Fiore hadn't even counted on that much. When he stumbled into the Japanese camp—and when he figured out the soldiers there were Japs and not Chinamen, which took him a while—he wished he could find himself a priest for last rites, because roasting over a slow fire was the best he'd expected from them. They'd bombed Pearl Harbor, they'd butchered Liu Han's husband—what was he supposed to expect?

The Japs had taken a little while to figure out he was an American, too. Their Chinese—the only language they had in common with him—was almost as bad as his, and a good-sized honker and round eyes had counted for less at first than his outfit. When they did realize what he was, they'd seemed more alarmed than hostile.

“Doolittle?” Fukuoka had asked, flying bombers over the ground with his hand.

Even though he thought he'd get killed in the next couple of minutes, that had sent Bobby into laughter which, looking back on it, was probably close to hysterical. He knew a lot of the men from Jimmy Doolittle's raid on Tokyo had landed in China, but getting mistaken for one by a jittery Jap was too much.

“I ain't no bomber pilot,” he'd said in English. “I'm just a second baseman, and a lousy one, to boot.”

He hadn't expected that to mean a thing to his interrogator, but the Jap's eyes had widened as much as they could. “Second base?” he'd echoed, pointing at Fiore. “*Beisoboru?*”

When Fiore still didn't get it, Fukuoka had gone into an unmistakable hitting stance. The light went on in Fiore's head. “Baseball!” he yelled. “Son of a bitch, I don't believe it. You play ball, too?”

It hadn't been enough for him to win friends and influence people right off, but it had kept him from getting shot or bayoneted or suffering any of the other interesting things that could have happened to him. His questioning stayed questions, not torture. When, haltingly, he explained how he'd been part of the attack on the prison camp guard station, that got him promoted from prisoner to fellow fighter.

“You want kill ...?” One of the Japs had said a word in his own language. When he saw Fiore didn't get it, he'd amended it to, “Little scaly devils?”

“Yeah!” Bobby had said savagely. The Japanese might not have known English, but they understood that just fine.

And so he'd started marching with them. That still drove him crazy. They were the enemy, they'd kicked the U.S.A. in the balls at Pearl Harbor, jumped on the Philippines and Singapore and Burma and eight zillion little islands God knows where in the Pacific, and here he was eating rice out of the same bowl with them. It felt like treason. He had

uneasy visions of standing trial for treason if he ever got back to the States. But the Japs hated Lizards more than they hated Americans, and, he'd discovered, he hated Lizards worse than he hated Japs. He'd stayed.

The Reds had joined the band a couple of days after he did. They and the Japs hadn't seemed to have any trouble getting along. That puzzled Bobby—they'd been shooting at each other right up to the day the Lizards came, and probably for a while afterwards, too.

The leader of the Red detachment was a man of about his own age named Nieh Ho-T'ing. Fiore spent more time talking with the Chinese than he did with any of the Japs except Fukuoka the ballplayer; he had more words in common with them. When he asked why they didn't have any trouble making common cause with their recent foes, Nieh had looked at him as if he were a moron and replied, "The enemy of my enemy is a friend."

It seemed as simple as that to the Japs, too. They were looking for fighters, they knew the Reds could fight, and that was all she wrote. If they thought about anything else, they sure didn't show it.

Shanghai was in Lizard hands. The closer the band got to it, the more Bobby began to jitter. "What do we do if we see a Lizard tank?" he demanded of Nieh.

The Chinese officer shrugged, which infuriated Fiore. "Run," he answered placidly. "If we cannot run, we fight. If we must, we die. We hope to hurt the enemy as they kill us."

"Thanks a hell of a lot," Fiore muttered in English. He had no doubt Nieh Ho-T'ing meant just what he said, too. He had that do-or-die look Fiore had sometimes seen in the eyes of starting pitchers before a big game. It hadn't always meant victory, but it generally did mean a hell of an effort.

The Japs had that look, too. In his dreadful Chinese, Fukuoka told stories about pilots who'd flown their bombers right at landed Lizard spaceships, accepting the loss of their own lives as long as they could hurt the foe, too. Fiore shivered. Martyrs were all very well in church, but disconcerting when encountered in real life. He couldn't decide whether they were insanely brave or just plain insane.

They came to a road sign that said SHANGHAI 50 KM along with its incomprehensible Chinese chicken scratches. At last the band split into little groups of men to make their advance less obvious.

Bobby Fiore didn't know much about Shanghai, or care. He felt like a man who'd just got out of jail. In essence, he was a man who'd just got out of jail. After a year or so trapped first in Cairo, Illinois, then on the Lizard spaceship, and then in the Chinese prison camp, just being on his own and moving from place to place again felt wonderful.

He'd been a nomad for fifteen years, riding trains and buses across the United States from one rickety minor-league park, one middle-sized town, to the next, every April to September. He'd done his share of winter barnstorming, too. He wasn't used to being

cooped up in one place for weeks and months at a time.

He wondered how Liu Han was doing, and hoped the Lizards weren't giving her too hard a time because he'd gone grenade-chucking with Lo the Red. He shook his head. She was a sweet gal, no doubt about that—and he wondered what a kid who was half dago, half chink would look like. He rubbed his nose, laughing a little. He would have bet money the schnoz got passed on.

But no going back, not unless he wanted to stick his head in the noose. He wasn't a man to go back, anyhow. He looked ahead, toward whatever came next: the next series, the next train ride, the next broad. Liu Han had been fun—she'd been more than fun; that much he admitted to himself—but she was history. And history, somebody said, was bunk.

Peasants in their garden plots and rice paddies looked up when the armed band passed, then went back to work. They'd seen armed bands before: Chinese, Japanese, Lizards. As long as nobody shot at them, they worked. In the end, the armed bands couldn't do without them, not unless the people—and Lizards—wanted to quit eating.

Up ahead on the road, something stirred. Its approach was rapid, purposeful, mechanical—which meant it belonged to the Lizards. Bobby Fiore gulped. Seeing Lizards coming reminded him he wasn't marching along from place to place here. He'd signed up to fight, and the bill was about to come due.

The Japs ahead started jumping off the road, looking for cover. That suddenly struck Bobby as a real good idea. He remembered the little streambed that had cut across the field outside the prison camp. Better an idea should strike him than whatever the Lizards fired his way. He got behind a big bush by the side of the road. A moment later he wished he'd gone into a ditch instead, but by then it was too late to move.

He willed a thought at the Japs: *don't start shooting*. Attack right now would be suicidal—rifles against armor just didn't work. Through the thick, leafy branches of the bush, he couldn't see just what kind of armor it was, but the little band of fighters didn't have the tools to take on any kind.

Closer and closer the Lizard vehicles came, moving with the near silence that characterized the breed. Bobby pulled out his pistol, which all at once seemed a miserable little weapon indeed. Instead of squeezing the trigger, he squeezed off a couple of Hail Marys.

Somebody fired. "Oh, shit," Bobby said, in the same reverent tone he'd used a moment before to address the Mother of God. Now he could tell what the fighters were up against: not tanks, but what he thought the U.S. Army called half-tracks—soldier-haulers with machine guns of their own. Maybe a Lizard had been dumb enough to ride with his head sticking out so a Jap could try to blow it off.

Fiore didn't think that showed the kind of brains which would have taken the Jap very far on "The \$64,000 Question." Take a potshot at armor and the armor would chew you up—which it proceeded to do. The half-tracks stopped and began hosing down the area

with their automatic weapons. The bush behind which Bobby was hiding suffered herbicide as bullets amputated the top two-thirds. Flat on his belly behind it, Fiore didn't get hit.

He had his pistol out and his surviving grenade alongside him, but he couldn't make himself use the weapons. That would only have brought more fire down on him—and he wanted to live. He had trouble understanding how anybody in combat ever fired at anybody else. You could get killed like that.

The Japanese soldiers didn't seem to worry about it. They kept on blazing away at the Lizards' vehicles—those of them who hadn't got killed in the curtain of lead the half-tracks laid down, anyway. Bobby had no idea how much damage the Japs were doing, but he was pretty damn sure it wouldn't be enough.

It wasn't. Along with keeping up the machine-gun fire, the half-tracks lowered their rear doors. A couple of squads of Lizards skittered out, their personal automatic weapons blazing. They weren't just going to hurt the people who'd shot at them, they were going to wipe 'em off the face of the earth.

“Oh, shit,” Fiore said again, even more sincerely than he had before. If the Lizards caught him here with a pistol and a grenade, he was dead, no two ways about it. He didn't want to be dead, not even a little bit. He shoved the evidence under the chopped-off part of the bush and rolled backwards till he fell with a splash into a rice paddy.

He crouched down there as low as he could, huddling in the mud and doing his best to make like a farmer. Some of the real farmers were still in the knee-deep water. One or two weren't going to get out again; red stains spread around their bodies. Others, sensible chaps, ran for their lives.

The Japs didn't run, or Fiore-didn't see any who did. They held their ground and fought till they were all dead. The Lizards' superior firepower smashed them like a shoe coming down on a cockroach.

Then the shooting tapered off. Fiore fervently hoped that meant the Lizards would get back into their half-tracks and go away. Instead, some of them came prowling his way, making sure they hadn't missed anybody.

One of them pointed his rifle right at Bobby Fiore. “Who you?” he demanded in lousy Chinese. He was standing no more than a foot and a half from the weapons Bobby had stashed. Bobby was dreadfully aware he hadn't stashed them all that well, either. The Lizard repeated. “Who you?”

“Name is, uh, Nieh Ho-T'ing,” Fiore said, stealing a handle from the Red officer. “Just farmer. Like rice?” He pointed to the plants peeping out of the water all around him, hoping the Lizard wouldn't notice how bad his own Chinese was.

He might not have fooled another human being, with his accent, his nose, his eyes, and the stubble on his cheeks, but the Lizard wasn't trained to pick up the differences between one flavor of Big Ugliers and the next. He just hissed something in his own language, then switched back to Chinese: “You know these bad shooters?”

“No,” Fiore said, half bowed so he looked down into the murky water and didn’t show much of his face. “They eastern devils, I think. Me good Chinese man.”

The Lizard hissed again, then went off to ask questions of somebody else. Bobby Fiore didn’t move until all the males got back into the half-tracks and rolled away.

“Jesus,” he said when they were gone. “I lived through it.” He scrambled up out of the rice paddy and reclaimed the weapons he’d stashed. He’d started to feel naked without a pistol, even if it wasn’t any good against armor—and having a grenade around made you warm and comfortable, too.

He wasn’t the only one scuttling for guns, either. The Japs were all communing with their ancestors, but most of the Chinese Reds had played possum the same way he had. Now they came splashing from the paddies and grabbed their rifles and pistols and submachine guns.

They searched the corpses of the Japanese, too, but added little to what they already had. Nieh Ho-T’ing made a sour face as he walked over to Fiore. “Scaly devils are good soldiers,” he said disappointedly. “They don’t leave guns around for just anybody to pick up. Too bad.”

“Yeah, too bad,” Fiore echoed. Water dripped from his pants and formed little puddles and streams by his feet. Whenever he moved, the wet cotton made *shlup-shlup* noises right out of an animated cartoon.

Nieh nodded to him. “You did well. Unlike these imperialists”—he pointed to a couple of dead Japs not far away—“you understand that in guerrilla war the fighter is but one fish in a vast school of peasants. When danger too great to oppose confronts him, he disappears into the school. He does not call attention to himself.”

Fiore didn’t understand all of that, but he got the gist. “Look like farmer, they not shoot me,” he said.

“That’s what I was talking about,” Nieh answered impatiently. Bobby Fiore gave an absentminded emphatic cough to show he understood. Nieh had started to go off; his soaked pants went *shlup-shlup*, too. He spun back around, spraying small drops of water as he did so. “You speak the language of the little scaly devils?” he demanded.

“A bit.” Bobby held his hands close together to show how small a bit it was. “Speak more Chinese.” *And if that wouldn’t make my mama fall over in a faint, what would?* he thought, and then, *She’s gonna have a half-Chinese grandkid, even if she doesn’t know it. That oughta do the job.*

Nieh Ho-T’ing didn’t care about grandkids. “You speak some, though?” he persisted. “And you understand more than you speak?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Fiore said in English. Feeling himself flush, he did his best to turn it into Chinese.

Nieh nodded—he got the idea. He patted Bobby on the back. “Oh, yes, we will gladly take you to Shanghai. You will be very useful there. We do not have many who can follow what the little devils say.”

“Good,” Bobby answered, smiling to show how happy he was. And he was happy, too—the Reds could just as easily have shot him and left him here by the side of the road to make sure he didn’t make a nuisance of himself later on. But since he made a good tool, they’d keep him around and use him. Just like Lo, Nieh Ho-T’ing hadn’t asked how he felt about any of that. He had the feeling the Reds weren’t good at asking—they just took.

He started to laugh. Nieh gave him a curious look. He waved the Red away: it wasn’t a joke he knew how to translate into Chinese. But of all the things he’d never expected, getting shanghaied to Shanghai was right up at the top of the list.

“Exalted Fleetlord, here is a report that will please you,” the shiplord Kirel said as he summoned a new document onto the screen.

Atvar read intently for a little while, then stopped and stared at Kirel. “Major release of radioactivity in Deutschland?” he said. “This is supposed to *please* me? It means the Big Uglies there are a short step away from a nuclear bomb.”

“But they do not know how to take that next step,” Kirel replied. “If you please, Exalted Fleetlord, examine the analysis.”

Atvar did as his subordinate asked. As he read, his mouth fell open in a great chortle of glee. “Idiots, fools, maniacs! They achieved a self-sustaining pile *without proper damping?*”

“From the radiation that has been—is being—released, they seem to have done just that,” Kirel answered, also gleefully. “And it’s melted down on them, and contaminated the whole area, and, with any luck at all, killed off a whole great slew of their best scientists.”

“If these are their best—” Atvar’s hiss was full of amazement. “They’ve done almost as much damage to themselves as we did to them when we dropped the nuclear bomb on Berlin.”

“No doubt you are right, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said. “One of the main characteristics of the Tosevites is their tendency to leap headlong into any new technology which comes within their capabilities. Where we would study consequences first, they simply charge ahead. Because of that, no doubt, they went in the flick of an eye turret from spear-flinging savages to—”

“Industrialized savages,” Atvar put in.

“Exactly so,” Kirel agreed. “This time, though, in leaping they fell and smashed their snouts. Not all ventures into new technology come without risks.”

“Something went right,” Atvar said happily. “Ever since we came to Tosev 3, we’ve been nibbled to pieces here: two killercraft lost in one place, five landcruisers in another, deceitful diplomacy from the Big Uglies, the allies we’ve made among them who betrayed us—”

“That male in Poland who embarrassed us by recanting his friendship is back in our

claws,” Kirel said.

“So he is. I’d forgotten that,” Atvar said. “We’ll have to determine the most expedient means of punishing him, too: find some way to remind the Tosevites who have joined us that they would do well to remember who gives them their meat. No hurry there. He is not going anyplace save by our leave.”

“No indeed, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said. “We also need to consider the effect of stepping up our pressure on Deutschland in light of their failure with the atomic pile. We may find them discouraged and demoralized. Computer models suggest as much, at any rate.”

“Let me see.” Atvar punched up detail maps of the, northwestern section of Tosev 3’s main continental mass. He hissed as he checked them. “The guerrillas in Italia give us as much trouble as armies elsewhere ... and though the local king and his males loudly swear they are loyal to us, they do cooperate with the rebels. Our drives in eastern France have bogged down again—not surprising, when half the local landcruiser crews cared more about tasting ginger than fighting. We’re still reorganizing there. But from the east—something might be done.”

“I have taken the liberty of analyzing the forces we have available as well as those with which the Deutsche could oppose us,” Kirel said. “I believe we are in a position to make significant gains there, and perhaps, if all goes well, to come close to knocking the Deutsche out of the fight against us.”

“That would be excellent,” Atvar said. “Forcing them into submission would improve our logistics against both Britain and the SSSR—and they are dangerous in their own right. Their missiles, their jet planes, their new landcruisers are all variables I would like to see removed from the equation.”

“They are dangerous in more ways than that, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said quietly. “More even than the emperorslayers in the SSSR, they have industrialized murder. Eliminating them might also eliminate that idea from the planet.”

Atvar remembered the images and reports from the camp called Treblinka, and from the bigger one, just going into operation when the Race overran it, called Auschwitz. The Race had never invented any places like those. Neither had the Hallessi or the Rabotevs. So many things about Tosev 3 were unique; that was one piece of uniqueness he wished to the tip of his tailstump that the Big Ugliers had not come up with.

He said, “When we are through here, the Tosevites will not be able to do that to one another. And we will have no need to do it to them, for they will be our subjects. In obedience to the will of the Emperor, this *shall* be done.”

Along with Atvar, Kirel cast down his eyes. “So it shall. I hope two things, Exalted Fleetlord: that the other Big Ugliers working toward nuclear weapons make the same error as the Deutsche, and that the disaster permanently ended the Deutsch nuclear program. Given their viciousness, I would not want to see them of all Tosevites armed with atomic bombs.”



“Nor I,” Atvar said.

Heinrich Jäger gave his interrogator a dirty look. “I have told you over and over, Major, I don’t know one damned thing about nuclear physics and I wasn’t within a good many kilometers of Haigerloch when whatever happened there happened. How you expect to get any information out of me under those circumstances is a mystery.”

The *Gestapo* man said, “What happened at Haigerloch is a mystery, Colonel Jäger. We are interviewing everyone at all involved with that project in an effort to learn what went wrong. And you will not deny that you were involved.” He pointed to the German Cross in gold that Jäger wore.

Jäger had donned the garishly ugly medal when he was summoned to Berchtesgaden, to remind people like this needle-nosed snoop that the *Führer* had given it to him with his own hands: anyone who dared think him a traitor had better think again. Now he wished he’d left the miserable thing in its case.

He said, “I could better serve the *Reich* if I were returned to my combat unit. Professor Heisenberg was of the same opinion, and endorsed my application for transfer from Haigerloch months before this incident.”

“Professor Heisenberg is dead,” the *Gestapo* man said in a flat voice. Jäger winced; nobody had told him that before. Seeing the wince, the man on the safe side of the desk nodded. “You begin to understand the magnitude of the—problem now, perhaps?”

“Perhaps I do,” Jäger answered; unless he missed his guess, the interrogator had been on the point of saying something like “disaster,” but choked it back just in time. The fellow had a point. If Heisenberg was dead, the bomb program was a disaster.

“If you do understand, why are you not cooperating with us?” the *Gestapo* man demanded.

The brief sympathy Jäger had felt for him melted away like a panzer battalion under heavy Russian attack in the middle of winter. “Do you speak German?” he demanded. “I don’t know anything. How am I supposed to tell you something I don’t know?”

The secret policeman took that in stride. Jäger wondered what sort of interrogations he’d carried out, how many desperate denials, true and untrue, he’d heard. In a way, innocence might have been worse than guilt. If you were guilty, at least you had something to reveal at last, to make things stop. If you were innocent, they’d just keep coming after you.

Because he was a *Wehrmacht* colonel with his share and more of tin plate on his chest, Jäger didn’t face the full battery of techniques the *Gestapo* might have lavished on a Soviet officer, say, or a Jew. He had some notion of what those techniques were, and counted himself lucky not to make their intimate acquaintance.

“Very well, Colonel Jäger,” the *Gestapo* major said with a sigh; maybe he regretted not being able to use such forceful persuasion on someone from his own side, or maybe he

just didn't think he was as good an interrogator without it. "You may go, although you are not yet dismissed back to your unit. We may have more questions for you as we make progress on other related investigations."

"Thank you so much." Jäger rose from his chair. He feared irony was lost on the *Gestapo* man, who looked to prefer the bludgeon to the rapier, but made the effort nonetheless. *The bludgeon is for Russians*, he thought.

Waiting in the antechamber to the interrogation room—as if the *Gestapo* man inside were a dentist rather than a thug—sat Professor Kurt Diebner, leafing through a *Signals* old enough to show only Germany's human foes. He nodded to Jäger. "So they have vacuumed you up, too, Colonel?"

"So they have." He looked curiously at Diebner. "I would not have expected you—" He paused, unable to think of a tactful way to go on.

The physicist didn't bother with tact. "To be among the living? Only the luck of the draw, which does make a man thoughtful. Heisenberg chose to take the pile over critical when I was away visiting my sister. Maybe not all luck, after all—he might not have wanted me around to share in his moment of fame."

Jäger suspected Diebner was right. Heisenberg had shown nothing but scorn for him at Haigerloch, though to the panzer colonel's admittedly limited perspective, Diebner was accomplishing as much as anyone else and more than most people. Jäger said, "The Lizards must have ways to keep things from going wrong when they make explosive metal."

Diebner ran a hand through his thinning, slicked-back hair. "They have also been doing it rather longer than we have, Colonel. Haste was our undoing. You know the phrase *festina lente*?"

"Make haste slowly." In his *Gymnasium* days, Jäger had done his share of Latin.

"Just so. It's generally good advice, but not advice we can afford at this stage of the war. We must have those bombs to fight the Lizards. The hope was that, if the reaction got out of hand, throwing a lump of cadmium metal into the heavy water of the pile would bring it back under control. This evidently proved too optimistic. And also, if I remember the engineering drawings correctly, there was no plug to drain the heavy water out of the pile and so shut down the reaction that way. Most unfortunate."

"Especially to everyone who was working on the pile at the time," Jäger said. "If you know all this, Dr. Diebner, and you've told it to the authorities, why are they still questioning everyone else, too?"

"First, I suppose, to confirm what I say—and I do not know everything that led up to the disaster, because I was out of town. And also, more likely than not, to find someone on whom to lay the blame."

That made sense to Jäger; after all, he'd been trying to escape being that someone. The *Wehrmacht* played games with assigning responsibility for maneuvers that didn't work, too. Another old saying crossed his mind: "Victory has a hundred fathers, but

defeat is an orphan.” That wasn’t true any more; these days, the powers that be launched a paternity suit to pin a failure on somebody. The results weren’t always just, but he suspected they weren’t supposed to be.

The *Gestapo* major came out, probably to find out why Diebner hadn’t gone in. He scowled to discover two of his subjects talking with each other. Jäger felt guilty, then angry at the secret policeman for intimidating him. He stomped out of the waiting room—and almost bumped into a big man who was just coming in. “Skorzeny!” he exclaimed.

“So they dragged you into the net, too, did they?” the scarfaced SS colonel said. “They’re going to rake me over the coals even though, as far as I know, I’ve never been within a hundred kilometers of the little pissant town where the screw-up happened. Some major’s supposed to grill me in five minutes.”

“He’s running late,” Jäger said. “He just got done with me and started in on one of the physicists. Want to go someplace and drink some *schnapps*? Nothing much else to do around here.”

Skorzeny slapped him on the back. “First good idea I’ve heard since they hauled me back here, by God! Let’s go—even if the *schnapps* they’re making these days tastes like it’s cooked from potato peelings, it’ll put fire in your belly. And I was hoping I’d run into you, as a matter of fact. I’m working on a scheme where you just might fit in very nicely.”

“Really?” Jäger raised an eyebrow. “How generous of the SS to look kindly on a poor but honest *Wehrmacht* man—”

“Oh, can the shit,” Skorzeny said. “You happen to know things that would be useful to me. Now let’s go get those drinks you were talking about. After I ply you with liquor, I’ll try seducing you.” He leered at Jäger.

“Ahh, you only want me for my body,” the panzer man said.

“No, it’s your mind I crave,” Skorzeny insisted.

Laughing, the two men found a tavern down the street from *Gestapo* headquarters. The fellow behind the bar wore uniform, as did just about everyone in Berchtesgaden these days. “Even the whores here are all kitted out with field-gray panties,” Skorzeny grumbled as he and Jäger took a table in the dimly lit cave. He raised his snifter in salute, knocked back his *schnapps*, and made a horrible face. “God, that’s vile.”

Jäger also took a healthy nip. “It is, isn’t it?” But warmth did spread out from his belly. “It’s got the old antifreeze in it, though, no doubt about that.” He leaned forward. “Before you jump on me, I’m going to pick your brain: what sort of goodies are they fishing out of that tank you stole? I want to pretend I’m still a panzer man, you see, not a physicist or a bandit like you.”

Skorzeny chuckled. “Flattery gets you nowhere. But I’ll talk—why the hell not? Half of it I don’t understand. Half of it nobody understands, which is part of the problem: the Lizards build machines that are smarter than the people we have trying to figure out

what they do. But there'll be new ammunition coming down the line by and by, and new armor, too—layers of steel and ceramic bonded together the devil's uncle only knows how.”

“You served on the Russian front, all right,” Jäger said. “New ammunition, new armor—that's not bad. One day I may even get to use them. Probably not one day soon, though, eh?” Skorzeny did not deny it. Jäger sighed, finished his shot, went back to the bar for another round, and returned to the table. Skorzeny pounced on the fresh drink like a tiger. Jäger sat down, then asked, “So what is this scheme you have that involves me?”

“Ah, that. You were going to be an archaeologist before the first war sucked you into the Army, right?”

“You've been poking through my records,” Jäger said without much malice. He drank more *schnapps*. It didn't seem so bad now—maybe the first shot had stunned his taste buds. “What the devil does archaeology have to do with the price of potatoes?”

“You know the Lizards have Italy,” Skorzeny said. “They're not as happy there as they used to be, and the Italians aren't so happy with them, either. I had a little something to do with that, getting Mussolini out of the old castle where they'd tucked him away for safekeeping.” He looked smug. He'd earned the right, too.

“You're planning to go down there again, and you want me along?” the panzer colonel asked. “I'd stick out like a sore thumb—not just my looks, mind you, but I don't speak much Italian.”

But Skorzeny shook his massive head. “Not Italy. The Lizards are messing about on the eastern shore of the Adriatic, over in Croatia. I have trouble stomaching Ante Pavelic, but he's an ally, and we don't want the Lizards getting a toehold over there. You follow so far?”

“The strategy, yes.” Jäger didn't say that he marveled at an SS man's having trouble stomaching anything. Word had trickled through the *Wehrmacht* that the Croat allies, puppets, whatever you wanted to call them, took their fascism—to say nothing of their blood feuds—very seriously indeed. Maybe Skorzeny's admission was proof of that. Jäger went on, “I still don't see what it has to do with me, though.”

Skorzeny looked like a fisherman trying out a new lure. “Suppose I were to tell you—and I can, because it's true—the main Lizard base in Croatia is just outside Split. What would that mean to you?”

“Diocletian's palace,” Jäger answered without a moment's hesitation. “I even visited there once, on holiday eight or ten years ago. Hell of an impressive building, even after better than sixteen hundred years.”

“I know you visited; the report you wrote probably went into the operational planning for Operation *Strafgericht*. *Strafgericht* indeed; we punished the Yugoslavs properly for ducking out of their alliance with us. But that's by the way. What counts is that you know the area, and not just from that visit but from study as well. That's why I

say you could be very useful to me.”

“You’re not planning on blowing up the palace, are you?” Jäger asked with sudden anxiety. Monuments suffered in wartime; that couldn’t be helped. He’d seen enough Russian churches in flames during *Barbarossa*, but a Russian church didn’t carry the same weight for him as a Roman Emperor’s palace.

“I will if I have to,” Skorzeny said. “I understand what you’re saying, Jäger, but if you’re going to let that kind of attitude hold you back, then I’ve made a mistake and you’re the wrong fellow for the job.”

“I may be anyhow. I’ve got a regiment waiting for me south of Belfort, remember.”

“You’re a good panzer man, Jäger, but you’re not a genius panzer man,” Skorzeny said. “The regiment will do well enough under someone else. For me, though, your special knowledge would truly come in handy. Do I tempt you, or not?”

Jäger rubbed his chin. He had no doubt Skorzeny could cut through the chain of command and get him reassigned: he’d pulled off enough coups for the brass to listen to him. The question was, did he want to go on fighting the same old war himself or try something new?

“Buy me another *schnapps*,” he said to Skorzeny.

The SS colonel grinned. “You want me to get you drunk first, so you can say you didn’t know what I was doing when I had my way with you? All right, Jäger, I’ll play.” He strode to the bar.

Lieutenant General Kurt Chill turned a sardonic eye on his Soviet opposite numbers—or maybe, George Bagnall thought, it was just the effect the torches that blazed in the Pskov *Krom* created. But no, the general’s German was sardonic, too: “I trust, gentlemen, we can create a united front for the defense of Pleskau? This would have been desirable before, but cooperation has unfortunately proved limited.”

The two Russian partisan leaders, Nikolai Vasiliev and Aleksandr German, stirred in their seats. Aleksandr German spoke Yiddish as well as Russian, and so followed Chill’s words well enough. He said, “Call our city by its proper name, not the one you Nazis hung on it. Cooperation? Ha! You at least had that much courtesy before.”

Bagnall, whose German was imperfect, frowned as he tried to keep track of the Jewish partisan leader’s Yiddish. Vasiliev had no Yiddish or German; he had to wait until an interpreter finished murmuring in his ear. Then he boomed “*Da!*” and followed it up with a spate of incomprehensible Russian.

The interpreter performed his office: “Brigadier Vasiliev also rejects the use of the term ‘united front.’ It is properly applied to unions of progressive organizations, not associations with reactionary causes.”

Beside Bagnall, Jerome Jones whistled under his breath. “He shaded that translation. ‘Fascist jackals’ is really what Vasiliev called the Nazis.”

“Why does this not surprise me?” Bagnall whispered back. “If you want to know what I think, that they’ve come back to calling each other names instead of trying to kill each other is progress.”

“Something to that,” Jones said.

He started to add more, but Chill was speaking again: “If we do not join together now, whatever the name of that union may be, what we call this city will matter no more. The Lizards will give it their own name.”

“And how do we stop that?” As usual, German got his comment in a beat ahead of Vasiliev.

The Russian partisan leader amplified what his comrade had said: “Yes, how do we dare put our men on the same firing line as yours without fearing they’ll be shot in the back?”

“The same way I dare put *Wehrmacht* men into line alongside yours,” Chill said: “by remembering the enemy is worse. As for being shot in the back, how many Red Army units went into action with NKVD men behind them to make sure they were properly heroic?”

“Not our partisans,” German said. Then he fell silent, and Vasiliev had nothing to add, from which Bagnall inferred General Chill had scored a point.

Chill folded his arms across his chest. “Does either of you gentlemen propose to take overall command of the defenses of Pleskau—excuse me, Pskov?”

Aleksandr German and Vasiliev looked at each other. Neither seemed overjoyed at the prospect of doing as Chill had suggested. In their *valenki*, Bagnall wouldn’t have been overjoyed, either. Conducting hit-and-run raids from the forest wasn’t the same as fighting a stand-up campaign. The partisans knew well how to make nuisances of themselves. They also had to be uneasily aware that partisan warfare hadn’t kept the Germans from Pskov or driven them out of it.

Finally, Vasiliev said, “*Nyet*.” He went on through his interpreter. “You are best suited to lead the defense, provided you do it so that you are defending the town and the people and the Soviet fighters in the area as well as your own Nazis.”

“If I defend the area, I defend all of it, or as much as I can with the men and resources I have available,” Chill answered. “This also means that if I give an order to one of your units, I expect it to be obeyed.”

“Certainly,” Vasiliev answered, “so long as the unit’s commander and political commissar judge the order to be in the best interest of the cause as a whole, not just to the advantage of you Germans.”

“That is not good enough,” Chill replied coldly. “They must take the overall well-being as their governing assumption, and obey whether they see the need or not. One of the reasons for having an overall commander is to have a man in a position where he can see things his subordinates do not.”

“Nyet,” Vasiliev said again. Aleksandr German echoed him.

“Oh, bugger, here we go again,” Bagnall whispered to Jerome Jones. The radarman nodded. Bagnall went on, “We’ve got to do something, before we go through another round of the idiocy that had the Bolshies and Nazis blazing away at each other a few weeks ago. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy getting stuck between them again.”

“Nor I,” Jones whispered back. “If that’s what the ground-pounders call war, thank God for the RAF, is all I have to say.”

“You get no arguments from me,” Bagnall said. “Remember, I’d already found that out. You weren’t along for the raid on the Lizard base south of here.” *They thought you were too valuable to risk*, he thought without much rancor. *Ken and poor dead Alf and I, we were expendable, but not you—you know your radars too well.*

As if thinking along similar lines, Jones answered, “I tried to come along. The bloody Russians wouldn’t let me.”

“Did you? I didn’t know that.” Bagnall’s opinion of Jones went up a peg. To volunteer to get shot at when you didn’t have to took something special.

As most Englishmen would, Jones brushed that aside. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. We have to worry about now, as you said.” He got up and said loudly, “*Tovarishchi!*” Even Bagnall knew that one—it meant *Comrades!* Jones went on, in Russian and then in German, “If we want to hand Pskov to the Lizards on a silver platter, we can go on just as we are now.”

“Yes? And so?” Kurt Chill asked. “What is your solution? Shall we all place ourselves under *your* command?” His smile was hard and bright and sharp, like a shark’s.

Jones turned pale and sat down in a hurry. “I’ve got a picture of that, I do, bloody generals kowtowing to a radarman. Not flipping likely.”

“Why not?” Bagnall got to his feet. He had only German, and not all he wanted of that, but he gave it his best shot: “The Red Army doesn’t trust the *Wehrmacht*, and the *Wehrmacht* doesn’t trust the Red Army. But have we English done anything to make either side distrust us? Let General Chill command. If Russian units don’t like what he proposes, let them complain to us. If we think the orders are fair, let them obey as if the commands came from Stalin. Is that a fair arrangement?”

Silence followed, save for the murmur of Vasiliev’s interpreter as he translated Bagnall’s words. After a few seconds, Chill said, “In general, weakening command is a bad idea. A commander needs all the authority over his troops he can get. But in these special circumstances—”

“The Englishmen would have to decide quickly,” Aleksandr German said. “If they cannot make up their minds, orders may become irrelevant before they give their answer.”

“That would be part of the packet,” Bagnall agreed.



“The Englishmen would also have to remember that we are all allies together here against the Lizards, and that England is not specially aligned with the Russians against the *Reich*,” Lieutenant General Chill said. “Decisions which fail to show this evenhandedness would make the arrangement unworkable in short order—and we would start shooting at each other again.”

“Yes, yes,” Bagnall said impatiently. “If I didn’t think we could do that, I wouldn’t have advanced the idea. I might also say I’m not the only one in this room who has had trouble remembering we are all allies together and that plans should show us much.”

Chill glared at him, but so did German and Vasiliev. Jerome Jones whispered, “You did well there, not to single out either side. This way each of them can pretend to be sure you’re talking about the other chap. Downright byzantine of you, in fact.”

“Is that a compliment?” Bagnall asked.

“I meant it for one,” the radarman answered.

Chill spoke to the Russian partisan leaders. “Is this agreeable to you, gentlemen? Shall we let the Englishmen arbitrate between us?”

“He rides that ‘gentlemen’ hard,” Jones murmured. “Throws it right in the face of the comrades—just to irk ’em, unless I miss my guess. Gentlemen don’t fit into the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Bagnall listened with but half an ear. He was watching the two men who’d headed the “forest republic” before the Lizards arrived. They didn’t look happy as they muttered back and forth. Bagnall didn’t care whether they were happy. He just hoped they could live with the arrangement.

Finally, grudgingly, Nikolai Vasiliev turned to General Chill and spoke a single sentence of Russian. The translator turned it into German: “Better the English than you.”

“On that, if you reverse roles, we agree completely,” Chill said. He turned to Bagnall, gave him an ironic bow. “Congratulations. You and your British colleagues have just become a three-man board of field marshals. Shall I order your batons and have a tailor sew red stripes to your trouser seams?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Bagnall said. “What I need is assurance from you and from your Soviet counterparts that you’ll abide by whatever decisions we end up making. Without that, we might as well not start down this road.”

The German general gave him a long look, then slowly nodded. “You do have some understanding of the difficulties with which you are involving yourself. I wondered if this was so. Very well, let it be as you say. By my oath as a soldier and officer of the *Wehrmacht* and the German *Reich*, I swear that I shall accept without question your decision on cases brought before you for arbitration.”

“What about you?” Bagnall asked the two Soviet brigadiers.

Aleksandr German and Vasiliev seemed imperfectly delighted once more, but German said, “If in a dispute you rule against us, we shall accept your decision as if it came from

the Great Stalin himself. This I swear.”

“*Da*,” Vasiliev added after the interpreter had translated for him. “Stalin.” He spoke the Soviet leader’s name like a religious man invoking the Deity—or perhaps a powerful demon.

Kurt Chill said, “Enjoy the responsibility, my English friends.” He sent Bagnall and Jones a stiff-armed salute, then strode out of the meeting chamber in the *Krom*.

Bagnall felt the responsibility, too, as if the air had suddenly turned hard and heavy above his shoulders. He said, “Ken won’t be pleased with us for getting him into this when he wasn’t even at the meeting.”

“That’s what he gets for not coming,” Jones replied.

“Mm—maybe so.” Bagnall looked sidelong at the radarman. “Do you suppose the Germans will want you to give up the fair Tatiana, so as to have no reason to be biased toward the Soviet side?”

“They’d better not,” Jones said, “or I’ll bloody well have reason to be biased against them. The one good thing in this whole pestilential town—if anyone tries separating me from her, he’ll have a row on his hands, that I tell you.”

“What?” Bagnall raised an eyebrow. “You’re not enamored of spring in Pskov? You spoke so glowingly of it, I recall, when we were flying here in the Lanc.”

“Bugger spring in Pskov, too,” Jones retorted, and stomped off.

In fact, spring in Pskov was pretty enough. The Velikaya River, ice-free at last, boomed over the rapids as it neared Lake Pskov. Gray boulders, tinted with pink, stood out on steep hillsides against the dark green of the all-surrounding woods. Grass grew tall on the streets of deserted villages around the city.

The sky was a deep, luminous blue, with only a few puffy little white clouds slowly drifting across it from west to east. Along with those clouds, Bagnall saw three parallel lines of white, as straight as if drawn with a ruler. *Condensation trails from Lizard jets*, he thought, and his delight in the beauty of the day vanished. The Lizards might not be moving yet, but they were watching.

Mordechai Anielewicz looked up from the beet field at the sound of jet engines. Off to the north he saw three small silvery darts heading west. *They’ll be landing at Warsaw*, he thought with the automatic accuracy of one who’d been spotting Lizard planes for as long as there had been Lizard planes to spot—and German planes before that. *Wonder what they’ve been up to.*

Whoever headed the Jewish fighters these days would have someone at the airport fluent enough at the Lizards’ speech to answer that for him. So would General Bor-Komorowski of the Polish Home Army. Anielewicz missed getting information like that, being connected to a wider world. He hadn’t realized his horizons would contract so dramatically when he left Warsaw for Leczna.

Contract they had. The town had had several radios, but without electricity, what good were they? Poland's big cities had electricity, but nobody'd bothered repairing the lines out to all the country towns. Leczna probably hadn't had electricity at all until after the First World War. Now that it was gone again, people just did without.

Anielewicz went back to work. He pulled out a weed, made sure he had the whole root, then moved ahead about half a meter and did it again. *An odd task, he thought: mindless and exacting at the same time.* You wondered where the hours had gone when you knocked off at the end of the day.

A couple of rows over, a Pole looked up from his weeding and said, "Hey you, Jew! What does the creature that says he's governor of Warsaw call himself again?"

The fellow spoke quite without malice, using Anielewicz's religion to identify him, not particularly to scorn him. That he might feel scorned anyhow never entered the Pole's mind. Because he knew that, Anielewicz didn't feel scorned, or at least not badly. "Zolraag," he answered, carefully pronouncing the two distinct *a* sounds.

"Zolraag," the Pole echoed, less clearly. He took off his cap, scratched his head. "Is he as little as all the others like him? It hardly seems natural."

"All the males I've ever seen are about the same size," Mordechai answered. The Pole scratched his head again. Anielewicz had worked with the Lizards almost every day; he knew them as well as any man could. Here in Leczna, Lizards were hardly more than a rumor. The locals might have seen them when they ran the Nazis out of town, or when they went to Lublin to buy and sell. Other than that, the aliens were a mystery here.

"They are as nasty as people say?" the Pole asked.

How was he supposed to answer that? Slowly, he said, "They aren't as vicious as the Germans, and they aren't as smart, either—or maybe it's just that they don't understand people any better than we understand them, and that makes them seem dumber than they are. But they can do more with machines than the Germans ever dreamed of, and that makes them dangerous."

"You reason like a priest," the farmworker said. It wasn't quite a compliment, for he went on, "Ask a simple question and you get back, 'Well, sort of this but sort of that, too, because of these things. And on the other hand—'" He snorted. "I just wanted a yes or a no."

"But some questions don't have simple yes-or-no answers," Anielewicz said. Though he'd been a secular man, his ancestry had generations of Talmudic scholars in it—and just being a Jew was plenty to teach you things were rarely as simple as they looked at first glance.

The Pole didn't believe that; Anielewicz could see as much. The fellow took a flask of vodka off his hip, swigged, and offered it to Anielewicz. Mordechai took a nip. Vodka helped you get through the day.

After a while, the Pole said, "So what did you do to get yourself run out of Warsaw and show up in a little town like this?"

“I shot the last man who asked me a question like that,” Anielewicz replied, deadpan.

The farmworker stared at him, then let out a hoarse guffaw. “Oh, you’re a funny one, you are. We got to watch you every minute, hey?” He leered at Mordechai. “Some of the girls are watching you already, you know that?”

Anielewicz grunted. He did know that. He didn’t quite know what to do about it. As leader of the Jewish fighters, he hadn’t had time for women, and they might have endangered security. Now he was just an exile. His training in underground work insisted he still ought to hold himself aloof. But he was a man in his mid-twenties, and emphatically not a monk.

Grinning, the Pole said, “You go out to the backhouses at night, you have to be careful not to look toward the haystacks or under the wagons. Never can tell when you’re liable to see something you’re not supposed to.”

“Is that a fact?” Mordechai said, though he knew it was. The Poles were not only less straitlaced than the Jews who lived among them, they also used vodka or brandy to give themselves an excuse for acting that way. Anielewicz added, “I don’t see how anyone is up to doing anything except sleep after a day in the fields.”

“You think this is work, wait till harvest comes,” the Pole said, which made Anielewicz groan. The local laughed, then went on more soberly: “All the old-timers, the ones left alive, they’re sneering at us, on account of we’re having to make do without tractors and such, so I shouldn’t give you a hard time, friend. You pull your weight, and every pair of hands we can find is welcome. We want to keep ourselves fed through winter, we better work now.” He stooped, tore out a weed, moved ahead.

He probably didn’t care what happened two kilometers outside Leczna, but he’d put his finger on a worldwide truth there. With so much farm machinery out of commission or out of fuel, people everywhere were having to do all they could just to stay alive. That meant they were able to do less to fight the Lizards, too.

Anielewicz wondered if the aliens had planned it that way. Maybe not; some of the things Zolraag had said suggested they hadn’t expected people to *have* machines, let alone readapt to doing without them. But if the Lizards reduced all of mankind to nothing more than peasants grubbing a bare living from the soil, would people ever be able to get free of them? He shook his head like a horse bedeviled by gnats. He couldn’t see it.

Then rational thought went away for a while as the ancient rhythm of the fields took over. The next time he looked up from the furrows, the sun hung low in the west, sinking into the mist that rose from the flat, moist land as it cooled with approaching evening.

“Where does the time go?” he said, startled.

He’d spoken more to himself than to anyone else, but the Polish farmworker was still close enough to hear him. The Pole laughed, loud and long. “Got away from you, did it? That happens sometimes. You wonder what the devil you’ve been doing all day, till you

look back and see what you've done."

Mordechai looked back. Sure enough, he'd done a lot. He was an educated man, a city man. No matter how necessary farmwork was, he'd been sure it would drive him mad with boredom. He didn't know whether to be relieved or alarmed that that hadn't happened. Relief seemed natural, but if someone like him could sink down to the level of a farmer with no thought past his fields, what did that say about the rest of humanity? If the Lizards pressed the yoke of serfdom down on their necks, would they wear it?

He shook his head again. If he was going to start thinking, he would have preferred to start with something more cheerful. The mist rose; the sun sank until he could stare straight at its blood-red disk without hurting his eyes. The Pole said, "Hell with it. We're not going to get any more done today. Let's go back to town."

"All right by me." Anielewicz's back protested when he stood up straight. If aches bothered the Pole, he didn't show it. He'd worked on a farm all his life, not just for a couple of weeks.

Leczna was an ordinary Polish town, bigger than a village, not nearly big enough to be called a city. It was small enough for people to know one another, and for Mordechai to stand out as a stranger. People still greeted him in a friendly enough way, Jews and Poles alike. The two groups seemed to get on pretty well—better than in most places in Poland, anyhow.

Maybe the friendly greetings came because he was staying with the Ussishkins. Judah Ussishkin had been doctoring Jews and gentiles alike for more than thirty years; his wife Sarah, a midwife herself, must have delivered half the population of the town. If the Ussishkins vouched for you, you were good as gold in Leczna.

Most of the Jews lived in the southeastern part of town. As was fitting for one who worked with both halves of the populace, Dr. Ussishkin had his house at the edge of the Jewish district. His next-door neighbors on one side, in fact, were Poles. Roman Kłopotowski waved to Anielewicz as he came down the street toward the doctor's house. So did Kłopotowski's daughter Zofia.

Mordechai waved back, which made Zofia's face light up. She was a pretty blond girl—no, woman; she had to be past twenty. Anielewicz wondered why she hadn't married. Whatever the reason, she'd plainly set her sights on him.

He didn't know what to do about that (he knew what he wanted to do, but wasn't nearly so sure it was a good idea). For the moment, he did nothing but walk up the steps onto the front porch of Dr. Ussishkin's house and, after wiping his feet, on into the parlor.

"Good evening, my guest," Judah Ussishkin said with a dip of his head that was almost a bow. He was a broad-shouldered man of about sixty, with a curly gray beard, sharp dark eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles, and an old-fashioned courtliness that brought with it a whiff of the vanished days of the Russian Empire.

“Good evening,” Mordechai answered, nodding in return. He’d grown up in a more hurried age, and could not match the doctor’s manners. He might even have resented them had they not been so obviously genuine rather than affectation. “How was your day?”

“Well enough, thank you for asking, although it would have been better still had I had more medicines with which to work.”

“We would all be better off if we had more of everything,” Mordechai said.

The doctor raised a forefinger. “There I must disagree with you, my young friend: of troubles we have more than a sufficiency.” Anielewicz laughed ruefully and nodded, yielding the point.

Sarah Ussishkin came out of the kitchen and interrupted: “Of potatoes we also have a sufficiency, at least for now. Potato soup is waiting, whenever you *tzaddiks* decide you’d rather eat than philosophize.” Her smile belied the scolding tone in her voice. She’d probably been a beauty when she was young; she remained a handsome woman despite gray hair, the beginning of a stoop, and a face that had seen too many sorrows and not enough joys. She moved with a dancer’s grace, making her long black skirt swirl about her at every step.

The potato soup steamed in its pot and in three bowls on the table by the stove. Judah Ussishkin murmured a blessing before he picked up his spoon. Out of politeness to him, Anielewicz waited till he was done, though he’d lost that habit and his stomach was growling like an angry wolf.

The soup was thick not only with grated potatoes but also with chopped onion. Chicken fat added rich flavor and sat in little golden globules on the surface of the soup. Mordechai pointed to them. “I always used to call those ‘eyes’ when I was a little boy.”

“Did you?” Sarah laughed. “How funny. Our Aaron and Benjamin said just the same thing.” The laughter did not last long. One of the Ussishkins’ sons had been a young rabbi in Warsaw, the other a student there. No word had come from them since the Lizards drove out the Nazis and the closed ghetto ended. The odds were mournfully good that meant they were both dead.

Mordechai’s soup bowl emptied with amazing speed. Sarah Ussishkin filled it again, and he emptied it the second time almost as fast as the first. “You have a healthy appetite,” Judah said approvingly.

“If a man works like a horse, he needs to eat like a horse, too,” Anielewicz replied. The Germans hadn’t cared about that; they’d worked the Jews like elephants and fed them like ants. But the work they’d got out of the Jews was just a sidelight; they’d been more interested in getting rid of them.

Supper was just ending when someone pounded on the front door. “Sarah, come quick!” a frightened male voice bawled in Yiddish. “Hannah’s pains are close together.”

Sarah Ussishkin made a wry face as she got up from her chair. “It could be worse, I suppose,” she said. “That usually happens in the middle of a meal.” The pounding and

shouting went on. She raised her voice: "Leave us our door in one piece, Isaac. I'm coming." The racket stopped. Sarah turned to her husband for a moment. "I'll probably see you tomorrow sometime."

"Very likely," he agreed. "God forbid you should have to call me sooner, for that could only mean something badly wrong. I have chloroform, a little, but when it is gone, it is gone forever."

"This is Hannah's third," Sarah said reassuringly. "The first two were so simple I could have stayed here for them." Isaac started banging on the door again. "I'm coming," she told him again, this time following words with action.

"She's right about that," Judah told Anielewicz after his wife had gone. "Hannah has hips like—" Having caught himself about to be ungallant, he shook his head in self-reproach. As if to make amends, he changed the subject. "Would you care for a game of chess?"

"Why not? You'll teach me something." Before the war, Anielewicz had fancied himself as a chess player. But either his game had gone to pot after close to four years of neglect or Judah Ussishkin could have played in tournaments, because he'd managed only one draw and no wins in half a dozen or so games against the doctor.

Tonight proved no exception. Down a knight, his castled king's position not well enough protected to withstand the attack he saw coming, Mordechai tipped the king over, signifying surrender. "You might have gotten out of that," Ussishkin said.

"Not against you," Mordechai answered. "I know better. Do you want to try another game? I can do better than that."

"Your turn for white," Judah said. As they rearranged the pieces on the board, he added, "Not everyone would keep coming back after a string of losses."

"I'm learning from you," Anielewicz said. "And maybe my game is coming back a little. When I'm playing as well as I can, I might be able to put you to some trouble, anyhow." He pushed his queen's pawn to open.

They were in the middle of a hard-fought game with no great advantage for either side—Mordechai was proud of avoiding a trap a few moves before—when more pounding on the door made them both jump. Isaac shouted, "Doctor, Sarah wants you to come. Right away, she says."

"Oy," Judah said, cultivated manner for once forgotten. He pushed back his chair and stood up. "The game will have to keep, I'm afraid." He moved a pawn. "Think about that while I'm gone." He snatched up his bag and hurried out to the anxious Isaac.

Anielewicz studied the board. The pawn move didn't look particularly menacing. Maybe Judah was trying to make him think too much ... or maybe he really was missing something. He looked at the board again, shrugged, and started to get ready to go to sleep.

He hadn't even pulled his shirt off over his head when the thrum of aircraft engines overhead made him freeze. They were human-made planes; he'd heard and hated that

heavy drone for most of a month on end in 1939, when the *Luftwaffe* systematically pounded a Warsaw that could hardly defend itself. These aircraft, though, were coming out of the east. *Red Air Force?* Anielewicz wondered; the Russians had flown occasional bombing raids after Hitler invaded them. *Or are the Nazis still in business over there, too?* He knew German ground forces had kept fighting inside the Soviet Union even after the Lizards came; was the *Luftwaffe* still a going concern, too?

He went outside. If the bombers unloaded on Leczna, that was the worst place to be, but he didn't think the little town was anybody's primary target—and it had been a while since humans tried an air raid on Lizard-held territory.

Several other people stood in the street, too, their heads craning this way and that as they tried to spot the planes. Cloud cover was thick; there wasn't anything to see. The pilots probably hoped the bad weather would help shield them. Then, off to the south, a streak of fire rose into the sky, and another and another. "Lizard rockets," somebody close by said in Polish—Zofia Kłopotowski.

The rockets vanished into the clouds. A moment later, an enormous explosion rattled windows. "A whole plane, bombs and all," Anielewicz said sadly.

A streak of fire came out of the clouds—falling, not rising. "He's not going to make it," Zofia said, her tone echoing Mordechai's. Sure enough, the stricken bomber smashed into the ground a few kilometers south of Leczna. Another peal of man-made thunder split the air.

The rest of the planes in the flight droned on toward their goal. Had Anielewicz been up there and watched his comrades hacked from the sky, he would have reversed course and run for home. It might not have done him any good. More missiles rose. More aircraft blew up in midair or tumbled in ruins to the ground. Those that survived kept stubbornly heading west.

As the engines faded out of hearing, most people headed for their homes. A few lingered. Zofia said, "I wonder if I should be glad the Lizards are shooting down the Russians or Germans or whoever was in those planes. We live better now than we did under the Reds or the Nazis."

Mordechai stared at her. "But they're making slaves of us," he exclaimed.

"So were the Reds and the Nazis," she replied. "And you Jews were quick enough to hop in bed with the Lizards when they pushed this way."

Her choice of language made him cough, but he said, "The Nazis weren't just making slaves of us, they were killing us in carload lots. We had nothing to lose—and we didn't see at the start that the Lizards wanted only servants, not partners. They want to do to the whole world what the Germans and Russians did to Poland. That's not right, is it?"

"Maybe not," Zofia said. "But if the Lizards lose and the Germans and Russians come back here, Poland still won't be free, and we'll all be worse off."

Anielewicz thought about the revenge Stalin or Hitler would exact against people who had supported—the dictators would say "collaborated with"—the Lizards. He shuddered.



Still, he answered, “But if the Lizards win, there won’t be any free people at all left on Earth, not here, not in England, not in America—and they’ll be able to do whatever they want with the whole world, not just with one country.”

Zofia looked thoughtful, or Mordechai thought she did—the night was too dark for him to be sure. She said, “That’s true. I have trouble worrying about anything outside Leczna. This is the only place I’ve ever known. But you, you’ve been lots of places, and you can hold the world in your mind.” She sounded wistful, or perhaps even jealous.

He wanted to laugh. He’d done some traveling in Poland, but hardly enough to make him a cosmopolitan. In an important way, though, she was right: books and school had taken his mind places his body had never gone, and left him with a wider view of things than she had. And having a pretty girl look up to him, for whatever reason, was a long way from the worst thing that had ever happened.

He glanced around and realized with some surprise that he and Zofia were the last two people left on the street. Everyone else was snug inside, and probably snug in bed, too. He waited for Zofia to notice the lull in their talk, say good night, and go back to her father’s house. When she didn’t, but kept standing quietly by him, he reached out and, quite in the spirit of experiment, let his hand rest on her shoulder.

She didn’t shrug him off. She stepped closer, so that his arm went around her. “I wondered how long that would take you,” she said with a small laugh.

Miffed, he almost said something sharp, but luckily had a better idea: he bent his face down to hers. Her lips were upturned and waiting. For some time, neither of them said anything. Then he whispered, “Where can we go?”

“The doctor didn’t take his car, did he?” she whispered back. Ussishkin owned an ancient Fiat, one of the handful of automobiles in town. She answered her own question: “No, of course he didn’t. No one has any petrol these days. So it’s right in back of his house. If we’re quiet.”

The Fiat’s back door squeaked alarmingly when Anielewicz opened it for Zofia, who let out an almost soundless giggle. He slid in beside her. They were cramped, but managed to loosen and eventually pull off each other’s clothes all the same. His hand strayed down from her breasts to her thighs and the warm, moist softness between them.

She gripped him, too. When she did, she paused a moment in surprise, then giggled again, deep down in her throat. “That’s right,” she said, as if reminding herself. “You’re a Jew. It’s different.”

He hadn’t really thought he was her first, but the remark jolted him a little just the same. He made a wordless questioning noise.

“My fiancé—his name was Czeslaw—went to fight the Germans,” she said. “He never came back.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” He wished he’d ignored her. Hoping he hadn’t ruined the mood, he kissed her again. Evidently he hadn’t; she sighed and lay back as well as she could on the narrow seat of the car. He poised himself above her. “Zofia,” he said as they joined.

She wrapped her arms around his back.

When he paid attention to anything but her again, he saw the old Fiat's windows, which Ussishkin kept closed against pests, had steamed up. That made him laugh. "What is it?" Zofia asked. Her voice came slightly muffled; she was pulling her blouse back on over her head. He explained. She said, "Well, what would you expect?"

He dressed, too, as fast as he could. Getting back into clothes in the backseat was even more awkward than escaping from them had been, but he managed. He opened the car door and slid out, Zofia right behind him. They stood for a couple of seconds, looking at each other. As people do in such circumstances, Mordechai wondered where that first coupling would end up taking them. He said, "You'd better get back to your house. Your father will wonder where you've been." Actually, he was afraid Roman Klopowski might know where she'd been, but he didn't want to say that.

She stood on tiptoe so she could kiss him on the cheek. "That's for caring enough about me to worry what my father will think," she said. Then she kissed him again, openmouthed. "And that's for the rest."

He squeezed her. "If I weren't so tired from working in the fields—"

She burst out laughing, so loud he twitched in alarm. "Men are such braggarts. It's all right. We'll find other times."

That meant he'd pleased her. He felt several centimeters taller. "I hope we do."

"Of course you hope we do. Men always hope that," Zofia said without much anger. She laughed again. "I don't know why you Jews go to so much trouble and hurt to make yourselves different. Once it's in there, it's the same either way."

"Is it? Well, I can't help that," Anielewicz said. "I am sorry about your Czeslaw. Too many people, Poles and Jews, haven't come back from the war."

"I know." She shook her head. "That's God's truth, it certainly is. It's been a long time—three and a half years, more. I'm entitled to live my own life." She spoke defiantly, as if Mordechai were going to disagree with her.

But he said, "Of course you are. And now you had better go home."

"All right. I'll see you soon." She hurried away.

Anielewicz went back into the Ussishkins' house. They came in a few minutes later, tired but smiling. Judah said, "We got a good baby, a boy, and Hannah I think will be all right, too. I didn't have to do a cesarean, for which I thank God—no real chance for asepsis here, try as I will."

"That's all good news," Anielewicz said.

"It is indeed." The doctor looked at him. "But what are you doing still awake? You've been studying the chessboard, unless I miss my guess. I have noticed you don't like to lose, however polite you may be. So what are you going to do?"

The chess game hadn't crossed Mordechai's mind once since the sound of airplane engines made him go outside. Now he walked back over to the board. Thanks to the

pawn move Ussishkin had crowed about, he couldn't attack with his queen as he'd planned. He shifted the piece to a square farther back along the diagonal than he'd intended.

Fast as a striking snake, Judah Ussishkin moved a knight. It neatly forked the queen and one of Mordechai's rooks. He stared in dismay. Here was another game he wasn't going to win—and Ussishkin was right, he hated to lose.

All at once, though, it didn't seem to matter so much. All right, so he'd lose at chess one more time. He'd played a different game tonight, and won it.

Leslie Groves looked down the table at the scientists from the Metallurgical Laboratory. "The fate of the United States—and probably the world—depends on your answer to this question: how do we turn the theoretical physics of a working atomic pile into practical engineering? We have to industrialize the process as fast as we can."

"A certain amount of caution is indicated," Arthur Compton said. "By what we've been told, they're paying in Germany for rushing ahead with no thought for consequences."

"That was an engineering flaw we've already uncovered, wasn't it?" Groves said.

"A flaw? You might say so." Enrico Fermi made a fine Latin gesture of contempt. "When their pile went critical, they had no way to shut it down again—and so the reaction continued, out of control. For all I know, it continues still; no one can get close enough to find out for certain. It cost the Germans many able men, whatever we may think of them politically."

"Heisenberg," someone said softly. An almost invisible pall of gloom seemed to descend on the table. Many of the assembled physicists had known the dead German; you couldn't be a nuclear physicist without knowing his work.

"I am not about to let a foreign accident slow down our own program," Groves said, "especially when it's an accident we won't have. What were they doing, throwing pieces of cadmium metal into the heavy water of their pile to try to slow it down? We've designed better than that."

"In this particular regard, yes," Leo Szilard said. "But who can say what other problems may be lurking in the metaphysical undergrowth?"

Groves gave the Hungarian scientist an unfriendly look. However brilliant he was, he was always finding ways things could go wrong. Maybe he was so imaginative, he saw flaws no one else would. Or maybe he just liked to borrow trouble.

Whichever it was, Groves didn't intend to put up with it. He growled, "If we never tried anything new, we wouldn't have to worry about anything going wrong. Of course, if we'd had that attitude all along, the Lizards would have conquered us about twenty minutes after they landed here, because we'd all have been living in villages and sacrificing goats whenever we had a thunderstorm. So we will go ahead and see what the problems are. Objections?"

No one had any. Groves nodded, satisfied. The physicists were a bunch of prima donnas such as he'd never had to deal with in the Army, but no matter how high in the clouds their heads were, they had their hearts in the right place.

He said, "Okay, back to square one. What do we have to do to turn our experimental pile here into a bomb factory?"

"Get out of Denver," Jens Larssen muttered. Groves glowered at him; he'd had enough of Larssen's surly attitude.

Then, to his surprise, he noticed several other physicists were nodding. Groves did his best to smooth out his features. "Why?" he asked, as mildly as he could.

Larssen looked around; maybe he didn't want the floor. But he'd opened his mouth, and so he had it. He reached into a shirt pocket, as if digging for a pack of cigarettes. Not coming up with one, he said, "Why? The most important reason is, we don't have the water we'll need."

"Like any other energy source, a nuclear pile also generates heat," Fermi amplified. "Running water makes an effective coolant. Whether we can divert enough water here from other uses is an open question."

Groves said, "How much are we going to need? The Mississippi? The Lizards are holding most of it these days, I'm afraid."

He'd intended that for sarcasm. Fermi didn't take it as such. He said, "That being so, the Columbia is probably best for our purposes. It is swift-flowing, with a large volume of water, and the Lizards are not strong in the Northwest."

"You want this operation to move again, after we've just gotten set up here?" Groves demanded. "You want to pack everything up into wagons and haul it over the *Rockies*?" What he wanted to do was start heaving nuclear physicists out the window, Nobel laureates first.

"A move like the move we made from Chicago, no, that would not be necessary," Fermi said. "We can keep this facility intact, continue to use it for research. But production, as you call it, would be better placed elsewhere."

Heads bobbed up and down, all along the table. Groves sighed. He'd been given the power to bind and loose on this project, but he'd expected to wield it against bureaucrats and soldiers; he hadn't imagined the scientists he was supposed to ride herd on would complicate his life so. He said, "If you're springing this on me now, you probably have a site all picked out."

That's what he would have done, anyhow. But then, he was a hardheaded engineer. The ivory-tower boys didn't always think the way he did. This time, though, Fermi nodded. "From what we can tell by long-distance research, the town of Hanford, Washington, seems quite suitable, but we shall have to send someone to take a look at this place to make certain it meets our needs."

Larssen stuck his hand in the air. "I'll go." A couple of other men also volunteered.

Groves pretended not to see them. “Dr. Larssen, I think I may take you up on that. You have experience traveling through a war zone by yourself, and—” He let the rest hang.

Larssen didn’t. “—and it’d be best for everybody if I got out of here for a while, you were going to say. Now tell me one I hadn’t heard.” He ran a hand through his shock of thick blond hair. “I’ve got a question for you. Will the Lizard POWs stay with the research end or go to the production site?”

“Not my call.” Groves turned to Fermi. “Professor?”

“I think perhaps they may be more useful to us here,” Fermi said slowly.

“That’s kind of what I thought, too,” Larssen said. “Okay, now I know.” He didn’t need to draw anybody a picture. If the Lizards—and Sam Yeager, and Barbara Larssen-turned-Yeager—stayed here, Jens would likely end up at Hanford for good, assuming the place panned out.

That set off an alarm bell in Groves’ mind. “We will need a scrupulously accurate report on Hanford’s suitability, Dr. Larssen.”

“You’ll get one,” Jens promised. “I won’t talk it up just so I can move there, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Okay.” Groves thought for a minute, then said, “We ought to send a GI with you, too. That would help make sure you got back here in one piece.”

Larssen’s eyes grew hard and cold. “You try sending anybody from the Army with me, General, and I won’t go. The Army’s already done me enough bad turns—I don’t need any more. I’ll be there all by my lonesome, and I’ll get back, too. You don’t like that, put somebody else on the road.”

Groves glared. Larssen glared right back. Groves ran into the limits of his power to command. If he told Larssen to shut up and do as he was told, the physicist was liable to go on strike again and end up in the brig instead of Hanford. And even if he did leave Denver with a soldier tagging along, what would his report be worth when he got back? He’d already proved he could survive on his own. Groves muttered under his breath. Sometimes you had to throw in your hand; no help for it. “Have it your way, then,” he growled. Larssen looked disgustingly smug.

Leo Szilard stuck a forefinger in the air. Groves nodded his way, glad of the chance to forget Larssen for a moment. Szilard said, “Building a pile is a large work of engineering. How do we keep the Lizards from spotting it and knocking it to pieces? Hanford now, I would say as a statement of high probability, has no such large works.”

“We have to make it look as if we’re building something else, something innocuous,” Groves said after a little thought. “Just what, I don’t know. We can work on that while Dr. Larssen is traveling. We’ll involve the Army Corps of Engineers, too; we won’t need to depend on our own ingenuity.”

“If I were a Lizard,” Szilard said, “I would knock down any large building humans began, on general principles. The aliens must know we are trying to devise nuclear

weapons.”

Groves shook his head again, not in contradiction but in annoyance. He had no doubt Szilard was right; if he'd been a Lizard himself, he'd have done the same thing. “Hiding an atomic pile in the middle of a city isn't the world's greatest idea, either,” he said. “We've done it here because we had no choice, and also because this was an experiment. If something goes wrong with a big pile, we'll have ourselves a mess just like the one the Germans got. How many people would it kill?”

“A good many—you are right about that,” Szilard said. “That is why we settled on the Hanford site. But we also do have to consider whether working out in the open would come to the enemy's attention. Winning the war must come first. Before we go to work, we must weigh the risks to city folk against those to the project as a whole from starting up a pile out in the open, so to speak.”

Enrico Fermi sighed. “Leo, you presented this view at the meeting where we decided what we would advise General Groves. The vote went against you, nor was it close. Why do you bring up the matter now?”

“Because, whether in the end he accepts it or not, he needs to be aware of it,” Szilard answered. Behind glasses, his eyes twinkled. *And to raise a little hell*, Groves guessed.

He said, “We'll need Dr. Larssen's report on the area. I suspect we'll also need to do some serious thinking about how we'll camouflage the pile if we do build there.” His smile challenged the eggheads. “Since we have so many brilliant minds here, I'm sure that will be no trouble at all.”

A couple of innocents beamed; perhaps their sarcasm detectors were out of commission for the duration. A couple of people with short fuses—Jens Larssen was one—glared at him. Several people looked thoughtful: if he set them a problem, they'd start working on it. He approved of that attitude; it was what he would have done himself.

“Gentlemen, I think that's enough for today,” he said.

Major Okamoto seemed out-of place in a laboratory, Teerts thought. What the Big Ugliers called a lab wasn't impressive to a male of the Race: the equipment was primitive and chaotically arranged, and there wasn't a computer anywhere. One of the Nipponese who wore a white coat manipulated a curious device whose middle moved in and out as if it were a musical instrument.

“Superior sir, what is that thing?” Teerts asked Okamoto, pointing.

“What thing?” Okamoto looked as if he wanted to be interrogating, not interpreting and answering questions. “Oh, that. That's a slide rule. It's faster than calculating by hand.”

“Slide rule,” Teerts repeated, to fix the term in his memory. “How does it work?”

Okamoto started to answer, then turned and spoke in rapidfire Nipponese to the Big Ugly who was wielding the curious artifact. The scientist spoke directly to Teerts: “It adds and subtracts logarithms—you understand this word?”

“No, superior sir,” Teerts admitted. Explanations followed, with considerable backing and filling. Eventually Teerts got the idea. It was, he supposed, clever in an archaic way. “How accurate is this slide rule?” he asked.

“Three significant figures,” the Nipponese answered.

Teerts was appalled. The Big Ugliers hoped to do serious scientific research and engineering with accuracy to only one part in a thousand? That gave him a whole new reason to hope their effort to harness nuclear energy failed. He didn’t want to be anywhere close if it succeeded: it was liable to succeed altogether too well, and blow a big piece of Tokyo into radioactive slag.

The Nipponese added, “For finer calculations, we go back to pen and paper, but pen and paper are slow. Do you understand?”

“Yes, superior sir.” Teerts revised his opinion of the Big Ugliers’ abilities—slightly. Because they had no electronic aids, they did what they could to calculate more quickly. If that meant they lost some accuracy, they were willing to make the trade.

The Race didn’t work that way. If they came to a place where they needed two different qualities and had to lose some of one to get some of the other, they generally waited instead, until in the slow passage of time their arts improved to the point where the trade was no longer necessary. Because of that slow, careful evolution, the Race’s technology was extremely reliable.

What the Big Ugliers called technology was anything but. Not only didn’t they seem to believe in fail-safes, he sometimes wondered if they believed in safety at all. Much of Tokyo, which was not a small city even by the standards of the Race, looked to be built from wood and paper. He marveled that it hadn’t burnt down a hundred times. Traffic was even more horrifying than it had been in Harbin, and if a vehicle ran into another one, or over a male who was also using the street, too bad. Along with inaccuracy, the Big Ugliers accepted a lot of carnage as the price they had to pay for getting things done.

That thought put Teerts in mind of something he thought he’d heard a couple of the Nipponese scientists discussing. He turned to Major Okamoto. “Excuse me, superior sir, may I ask another question?”

“Ask,” Okamoto said with the air of an important male granting a most unimportant underling a boon beyond his station. Despite so many differences between them, in some ways the Race and Big Ugliers weren’t that far apart.

“Thank you for your generosity, superior sir.” Teerts played the inferior role to the hilt, as if he were addressing the fleetlord rather than a rather tubby Tosevite whom he devoutly wished dead. “Did this humble one correctly hear that some other Tosevites also experimenting with explosive metal suffered a mishap?”

Again Okamoto and the scientist held a quick colloquy. The latter said, “Why not tell him? If he is ever in a position to escape, the war will be so badly lost that that will be the least of our worries.”

“Very well.” Okamoto gave his attention back to Teerts. “Yes, this did happen. The

Germans had an atomic pile—what is the phrase?—reach critical mass and get out of control.”

Teerts let out a horrified hiss. The Big Uglies didn't just accept risk, they pursued it with insane zeal. “How did this happen?” he asked.

“I am not certain the details are known, especially since the accident killed some of their scientists,” Okamoto said. “But those who still live are pressing ahead. We shall not make the mistakes they did. The Americans have succeeded in running a pile without immediately joining their ancestors, and they are sharing some of their methods with us.”

“Oh.” Teerts wished he had some ginger to chase away the lump of ice that formed in his belly. When the Race came to Tosev 3, the patchwork of tiny empires that dotted the planet's surface had been a matter for jokes. It wasn't funny any more. Back on Home, only one line of experiment at a time would have been pursued. Here, all the competing little empires worked separately. Disunion usually was weakness, but could also prove strength, as now.

Yoshio Nishina came into the room. His alarmingly mobile lips—or so they seemed to Teerts—pulled back so that he showed what was for a Big Ugly a lot of teeth. Teerts had learned that meant he was happy. He spoke with the other scientist and with Major Okamoto. Teerts did his best to follow, but found himself left behind.

Okamoto eventually noticed he'd got lost. “We have had a new success,” the interpreter said. “We have bombarded uranium with neutrons and produced the element plutonium. Production is still very slow, but plutonium will be easier to separate from uranium-238 than uranium-235 is.”

“*Hai*,” Nishina echoed emphatically. “We prepared uranium hexafluoride gas to use to separate the two isotopes of uranium from each other, but it is so corrosive that we are having an impossible time working with it. But separating plutonium from uranium is a straightforward chemical process.”

Major Okamoto had to translate some of that, too. He and Teerts used a mixture of terms from Nipponese and the language of the Race to talk about matters nuclear. Teerts took for granted a whole range of facts the Big Uglies were just uncovering, but though he knew *that* things could be done, he often had no idea as to *how*. There they were ahead of him.

Nishina added, “Once we accumulate enough plutonium, we shall surely be able to assemble a bomb in short order. Then we will meet your people on even terms.”

Teerts bowed, which he found a useful way of responding without saying anything. The Nipponese didn't seem to have any idea how destructive nuclear weapons really were. Maybe it was because they'd never had any dropped on them. As he had a dozen times before, Teerts tried to get across to them that nuclear combat wasn't anything to anticipate with relish.

They wouldn't listen, any more than they had those other dozen times. They thought



he was just trying to slow down their research (which he was, and which, he knew, compromised his position). Okamoto said, “My country was backward until less than a hundred years ago. We saw then that we had to learn the ways of the Tosevite empires that knew more than we did, or else become their slaves.”

*Less than two hundred of our years*, Teerts thought. Two hundred of his years before, the Race had been just about where it was now, leisurely contemplating the conquest of Tosev 3. Best wait till all was perfectly ready. What difference could a few years make, one way or the other?

They’d found out.

Okamoto went on, “Less than fifty years ago, our soldiers and sailors beat the Russians, one of the empires that had been far ahead of us. Less than two years ago, our airplanes and ships smashed those of the United States, which had been probably the strongest empire on Tosev 3. By then we were better than they. Do you see where I am leading with this?”

“No, superior sir,” Teerts said, though he feared he did.

Major Okamoto drove the point home with what Teerts had come to think of as customary Tosevite brutality: “We do not let anyone keep a lead on us in technology. We will catch up with you, too, and teach you to learn better than to attack us without warning.”

Nishina and the other scientist nodded emphatically at that. In the abstract, Teerts didn’t suppose he could blame them. Had other starfarers attacked Home, he would have done everything he could to defend it. But war with nuclear weapons was anything but abstract—and if the Nipponese did build and use one, the Race would surely respond in kind, most likely on the biggest city Nippon had. *Right on top of my head, in other words.*

“This is not your concern,” Okamoto said when he worried about it out loud. “We will punish them for the wounds they have inflicted on us. Past that, all I need say is that dying for the Emperor is an honor.”

He meant the Nipponese emperor, whose line was said to run back more than two thousand years and to be astonishingly ancient on account of that. Teerts was tempted to bitter laughter. Dying for *the* Emperor was an honor, too, but he didn’t want to do it any time soon, especially not at the hands of the Race.

Nishina turned toward him. “Let’s go back to what we were discussing last week: the best arrangement for the uranium in a pile. I have the Americans’ report. I want to know how the Race does the same thing. You are likely to have more efficient procedures.”

*I should hope so*, Teerts thought. “How *do* the Americans do it, superior sir?” he asked as innocently as he could, hoping to get some idea of the Big Ugliers’ technical prowess.

But the Nipponese, though technically backward, were old in games of deceit. “You tell us how you do it,” Okamoto said. “We do the comparing. The rest is none of your business, and you would be sorry if you made it so.”

Teerts bowed once more. That was how the Nipponese apologized. “Yes, superior sir,” he said, and told what he knew. Anything was preferable to giving Okamoto the excuse to start acting like an interrogator again.

Ristin let his mouth hang open, showing off his pointy little teeth and Lizardy tongue: he was laughing at Sam Yeager. “You have what?” he said in pretty fluent if accented English. “Seven days in a week? Twelve inches in a foot? Three feet in a mile?”

“A yard,” Sam corrected.

“I thought something with grass growing in it was a yard,” Ristin said. “But never mind. How do you remember all these things? How do you keep from going mad trying to remember?”

“All what you’re used to,” Yeager said, a little uncomfortably: he remembered trying to turn pecks into bushels into tons in school. That was one of the reasons he’d signed a minorleague contract first chance he got—except for banking and his batting average, he’d never worried about math since. He went on, “Most places except the United States use the metric system, where everything is ten of this and ten of that.” If he hadn’t read science fiction, he wouldn’t have known about the metric system, either.

“Even time?” Ristin asked. “No sixty seconds make a minute or an hour or whatever it is, and twenty-four minutes or hours make a day?” He sputtered like a derisive steam engine, then tacked on an emphatic cough to show he really meant it.

“Well, no,” Sam admitted. “All that stuff stays the same all over the world. It’s—tradition, that’s what it is.” He smiled happily—the Lizards lived and died by tradition.

But Ristin wasn’t buying it, not this time. He said, “In our ancient days, before we were—what is the word? civilized?—yes, civilized, we had traditions like that, traditions that did harm, not good. We made them work for us or we got rid of them. This was a hundred thousand years ago. We do not miss these bad traditions.”

“A hundred thousand years ago,” Yeager echoed. He’d gotten the idea that Lizard years weren’t as long as the ones people used, but even so ... “A hundred thousand years ago—fifty thousand years ago, too, come to that—people were just cavemen. Savages, I mean. Nobody knew how to read and write, nobody knew how to grow their own food. Hell, nobody knew anything to speak of.”

Ristin’s eye turrets moved just a little. Most people wouldn’t even have noticed, but Sam had spent more time around Lizards than just about anybody. He knew the alien was thinking something he didn’t want to say. He could even make a pretty fair guess about what it was: “As far as you’re concerned, we still don’t know anything to speak of.”

Ristin jerked as if Sam had stuck him with a pin. “How did you know that?”

“A little bird told me,” Yeager said, grinning.

“Tell it to the Marines,” Ristin retorted. He didn’t quite understand what a Marine was, but he had the phrase down pat and used it at the right times. Sam wanted to bust out laughing every time he heard it.

“Shall we go outside?” he asked. “It’s a nice day.”

“No, it’s not. It’s cold. It’s always cold on this miserable iceball of a world.” Ristin relented. “It’s not as cold as it was, though. You are right about that.” He gave an exaggerated shiver to show how cold it had been. “If you say we must go out, it shall be done.”

“I didn’t say we had to,” Yeager answered. “I just asked if you wanted to.”

“Not very much,” Ristin said. “Before I was a soldier, I was a male of the city. The—what do you call them?—wide open spaces are not for me. I saw enough of them on the long, long way from Chicago to this place to last me forever.”

Sam was amused to hear his own turns of phrase coming out of the mouth of a creature born under the light of another star. It made him feel as if, in some small way, he’d affected the course of history. He said, “Have it your own way, then, even though I don’t call some grass on the University of Denver the wide open spaces. Maybe it’s just as well; Ullhass ought to be back in a few minutes, and then I can take both you guys back to your rooms.”

“They do not need you to be there any more to translate?” Ristin asked.

“That’s what they say.” Yeager shrugged. “Professor Fermi hasn’t called me this session, so I guess maybe he doesn’t. Both of you speak English pretty well now.”

“If you are not needed for this, will they take you away from us?” Ristin showed his teeth. “You want me and Ullhass to forget how we speak English? Then they still need you. We do not want you to go. You have been good to us since you catch us all this time ago. We think then that you people hurt us, kill us. You showed us different. We want you to stay.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay,” Yeager said. A year before, he’d have found absurd the notion that anything a turret-eyed creature with a hissing accent said could touch him. Touched he was, though, and sometimes he had to remind himself how alien Ristin really was. He went on, “I’ve been a bench warmer before. It’s not the end of the world.”

“It may be.” From sympathetic, Ristin turned serious. “If you humans do build an atomic bomb, it may be. You will use it, and we will use it, and little will be left when all is done.”

“We weren’t the first ones to use them,” Yeager said. “What about Washington and Berlin?”

“Warning shots,” Ristin said. “We could choose to use them in a way that did little harm”—he ignored the choked noise that escaped from Sam’s throat—“because we had them and you did not. If they turn into just another weapon of war, the planet will be badly hurt.”

“But if we don’t use them, the Race is probably going to conquer us,” Yeager said.

Now Ristin made a noise that reminded Sam of a water heater in desperate need of

replacement. “This is—how do you say two things that cannot be true at the same time but are anyhow?”

“A paradox?” Sam suggested after some thought; it wasn’t a word he hauled out every day.

“If that is what you say. Paradox,” Ristin repeated. “You may lose the war without these bombs, but you may lose it, too, because of them. Is this a paradox?”

“I guess so.” Yeager gave the Lizard a hard look. “But if you think things are like that, how come you and Ullhass have been so much help to the Met Lab?”

“At first, we did not think you Big Ugliers could know enough to make a bomb anyhow, so no harm done,” Ristin said. Sam knew he was worried, because he didn’t often slip and use the Lizard slang name for human beings. He went on, “Soon we found how wrong we were. You know enough and more, and were mostly using us to check the answers you had already. Again, because of this not much harm could come, so we went along.”

“Oh,” Yeager said. “Nice to know we surprised you.”

Ristin’s mouth opened and he wagged his head slightly: he was laughing at himself. “This whole planet has been a surprise, and not a good one. From the first time people started shooting at us with rifles and cannon, we knew everything we had believed about Tosev 3 was wrong.”

Somebody rapped on the door of the office where Yeager and Ristin were talking. “That’ll be Ullhass,” Yeager said.

But when the door opened, Barbara came through it. “You are not Ullhass,” Ristin said in accusing tones. He let his mouth hang open again to show he’d made a joke.

“You know what?” Sam said. “I’m darn glad she isn’t. Hi, hon.” He gave her a hug and a peck of a kiss. “I didn’t think they were going to let you off work till later.”

“One thing about English majors: we do learn how to type,” Barbara said. “As long as we don’t run out of ribbons, I’ll have plenty to do. Or until the baby comes—whichever happens first. They ought to give me a couple of days off for that.”

“They’d better,” Yeager said, and added the emphatic cough. He laughed at himself. To Ristin, he said, “That’s what I get for hanging around with the likes of you.”

“What, a civilized language?” Ristin said, laughing his kind of laugh once more. He turned *civilized* into a long hiss.

Despite his accent, he gave as good as he got. Yeager didn’t fire back at him. Instead, he asked Barbara, “Why did they let you go early?”

“I turned green, I guess,” she answered. “I don’t know why they call it morning sickness. It gets me any old time of day it feels like.”

“You look okay now,” he said.

“I got rid of what ailed me,” Barbara said bleakly. “I’m just glad the plumbing works. If it didn’t, somebody—probably me—would have a mess to clean up.”

“You’re supposed to be eating for two, not throwing up what one has,” Sam said.

“If you know a secret way to make lunch stay down, I wish you’d tell me what it is,” Barbara answered, now with a snap in her voice. “Everybody says this is supposed to go away after I get further along. I hope to heaven that’s true.”

Another knock, this one on the frame of the open door. “Here you go, Corporal,” said a kid in dungarees with a pistol holster on his belt. “I’ve brought your pet Lizard back for you.” Ullhass walked in and exchanged sibilant greetings with Ristin. The kid, who except for the pistol looked like a college freshman, nodded to Yeager, gave Barbara a quick once-over and obviously decided she was too old for him, nodded again, and trotted off down the hall.

“I am not a pet. I am a male of the Race,” Ullhass said with considerable dignity.

Yeager soothed him: “I know, pal. But haven’t you noticed that people don’t always say exactly what they mean?”

“Yes, I have seen this,” Ullhass said. “Because I am a prisoner, I will not tell you what I think of it.”

“If you ask me, you just did,” Yeager answered. “You were very polite about it, though. Now come on, boys; I’ll take you home.”

Home for the Lizards was an office converted into an apartment. *Maybe cell block was a better word for it*, Yeager thought: at least, he’d never seen any apartments with stout iron bars across the windows and an armed guard waiting outside the door. But Ristin and Ullhass liked it. Nobody bothered them in there, and the steam radiator let them heat the room to the bake-oven level they enjoyed.

Once they were safely ensconced, Yeager walked Barbara out onto the lawn. Unlike Ristin, she didn’t complain it was too cold. All she said was, “I wish I had some cigarettes. Maybe they’d keep me from wanting to toss my cookies.”

“Now that you haven’t smoked in a while, they’d probably just make you sicker.” Sam slipped an arm around Barbara’s waist, which was still deliciously slim. “As long as you are off early, you want to go back to the place and ...?” He let his voice trail away, but squeezed her a little.

Her answering smile was wan. “I’d love to go back to the place, but if you don’t mind, all I want to do is lie down, maybe take a nap. I’m tired all the time, and my stomach isn’t what you call happy right now, either. Is it okay?” She sounded anxious.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Yeager answered. “Fifteen years ago, I probably would have fussed and sulked, but I’m a grown-up now. I can wait till tomorrow.” *My dick doesn’t think for me the way it used to*, he thought, but that wasn’t something he could say to a new-wed wife.

Barbara let her hand rest on his. “Thanks, hon.”

“First time I ever got thanked for getting old,” he said.

She made a face at him. “You can’t have it both ways. Are you a grown-up and saying

it's okay because it really is, or are you just getting old and saying it's okay because you're all feeble and tired?"

"Ooh." He mimed a wound. When she wanted to, she could get him chasing his tail like nobody's business. He didn't think of himself as dumb (but then, who does?), but he hadn't had formal training in logic and in fencing with words. Trading barbs with ballplayers in his dugout and the ones on the other side of the field wasn't the same thing.

Barbara let out a loud, theatrical groan as she got to the top of the stairs. "That's going to be even less fun when I'm further along," she said. "Maybe we should have looked for a place on the ground floor. Too late to worry about it now, I suppose."

She groaned again, this time with pleasure, when she flopped onto the sofa in the front room. "Wouldn't you be more comfortable on the bed?" Yeager asked.

"Actually, no. I can put my feet up this way." The overstuffed sofa had equally overstuffed arms, so maybe that really was comfortable. Sam shrugged. If Barbara was happy, he was happy, too.

Somebody knocked on the door. "Who's that?" Sam and Barbara said in the same breath. *Why doesn't he go away?* lay beneath the words.

Whoever it was didn't go away, but kept on knocking. Yeager strode over and threw open the door, intending to give a pushy Fuller Brush man a piece of his mind. But it wasn't a Fuller Brush man, it was Jens Larssen. He looked at Sam like a man finding a cockroach in his salad. "I want to talk to my wife," he said.

"She's not your wife any more. We've been through this," Yeager said tiredly, but his hands bunched into fists at his sides. "What do you want to say to her?"

"It's none of your damn business," Jens said, which almost started the fight-then and there. But before Yeager quite decided to knock his block off, he added, "But I came to tell her good-bye."

"Where are you going, Jens?" In her stocking feet, Barbara came up behind Sam so quietly that he hadn't heard her.

"Washington State," Larssen answered. "I shouldn't even tell you that much, but I figured you ought to know, in case I don't come back."

"That sounds as if I shouldn't ask when you're going," Barbara said, and Larssen nodded to show she was right. Coolly, she told him, "Good luck, Jens."

He turned red. Because he was so fair, the process was easy to watch. He said, "For all you care, I could be going off to desert to the Lizards."

"I don't think you'd do that," she said, but Larssen was right: she didn't sound as if she much cared. Yeager had all he could do to keep from breaking into a happy grin. Barbara went on, "I told you good luck and I meant it. I don't know what more you want that I can give you."

"You know good and well what I want," Jens said, and Yeager gathered himself

again. If Larssen wanted that fight bad enough, he'd get it.

"That I can't give you, I said," Barbara answered.

Jens Larssen glared at her, at Sam, at her again, as if he couldn't decide which of them he wanted to belt more. With a snarl of curses, some in English, others in throaty Norwegian, he stomped off. His furious footfalls thundered on the stairs. He slammed the front door of the apartment building hard enough to rattle windows.

"I wish that hadn't happened," Barbara said. "I wish—oh, what difference does it make what I wish now? If he's going away for a while, that may be the best thing that could happen. We'll get some peace and quiet, and maybe by the time he gets back he'll have figured out he can't do anything about this."

"God, I hope so," Yeager said. "What he's put you through ever since we got here isn't right." He'd been riding the roller coaster himself, but he kept quiet about that. Barbara was the one who'd had the tough time, because she'd been in love with Jens—*right up to the minute she found out he was still alive*, Sam thought. Since then, since she'd chosen to stay Barbara Yeager instead of going back to being Barbara Larssen, Jens had done his best to act about as unlovable as a human being could.

Barbara's sigh showed a weariness that had nothing to do with her being pregnant. "Very strange to think that a year ago he and I were happy together. I don't think he's the same person any more. He never used to be bitter—but then, he never used to have much to be bitter about, either. I guess you can't really tell about someone till you see him when the chips are down."

"You're probably right." Sam had seen that playing ball—some guys wanted to be out there with the game on the line, while others hoped they wouldn't come up or be on the mound or have the ball hit to them in that kind of spot.

Musingly, Barbara went on, "I suppose that's one of the reasons people write so much about love and war: they're the situations that put the most strain on a person's character, so you can see it at its best and at its worst."

"Makes sense." Yeager hadn't thought about it in those terms, but it did make sense to him. He'd seen enough war close up to know it was more terrifying than exciting, but it remained endlessly interesting to read about. He'd never thought about why until now. "You put things in a whole new light for me," he said admiringly.

She looked at him, then reached out and took his hands in hers. "You've put some things in a new light for me, too, Sam," she murmured.

He felt ten feet tall the rest of the day, and didn't give Jens Larssen another thought.

"Superior sir, I greet you and welcome you to our fine base here," Ussmak said to the new landcruiser commander. *My latest*, he thought, and wondered how many more he'd go through before Tosev 3 was conquered—if it ever was.

That gloomy reflection was a far cry from the spirit of unity with which he—and all landcruiser males—had gone into this campaign. Then, they'd thought crews would stay



together through the whole war. They'd trained on that assumption, so that a male without his crew was an object of pity, both to his comrades and to himself.

Things hadn't quite worked that way. Ussmak had had two commanders and a gunner killed on him, and another commander and gunner swept away in the wild hunt for ginger lickers. He studied this new male and wondered how long *he'd* last.

The fellow seemed promising enough. He was good-looking and alert, and his neatly applied body paint argued that he didn't have his tongue in a ginger jar (though you never could tell; Ussmak was fastidious about his own paint just to keep his superiors from getting—justifiably—suspicious).

“Landcruiser Driver Ussmak, I am Landcruiser Commander Nejas; you are assigned to my crew,” the male said. “Skoob, our gunner, will be along shortly; he must be completing reporting formalities. Both of us will draw heavily on your knowledge, as you have more combat experience than we do.”

“I shall help you in any way I can, superior sir,” Ussmak said, as he had to. He did his best to sound fulsome, but was not rejoicing inside. He'd hoped he'd get crewed with veterans, but no such luck. As delicately as he could, he added, “The Deutsche are not opponents to take lightly.”

“So I am given to understand,” Nejas said. “I am also given to understand that this garrison has problems beyond the Deutsche, however. Is it true that the Big Ugliers actually spirited a landcruiser out of the vehicle park here?”

“I fear it is, superior sir.” Ussmak was embarrassed about that himself, though he'd had nothing to do with it. It showed Drefsab hadn't managed to sweep out all the ginger tasters, and it showed some of them didn't care for anything on Tosev 3 past where their next taste was coming from.

“Disgraceful,” Nejas said. “We must have order aboard our own ship before we can hope to put down the Tosevites.”

Another male came into the barracks and swiveled his eye turrets every which way, taking the measure of the place. By the time he was through, he looked dismayed. Ussmak understood that; he'd felt the same way the first time he'd inspected his new housing. From everything he'd heard, even the Big Ugliers lived better than this these days.

The newcomer might have been Nejas' broodbrother. They both had the same perfect body paint, the same alert stance, and, somehow, the same air of trusting innocence about them, as if they'd just come out of cold sleep and didn't know anything about the way the war against the Big Ugliers was (or rather wasn't) going, about what ginger had done to the landcruiser crews at Besançon, or about any of the many other unpleasant surprises Tosev 3 had given the Race. Ussmak didn't know whether to envy or pity them.

Nejas said, “Driver Ussmak, here is Skoob, the gunner of our landcruiser crew.”

Ussmak closely studied Skoob's body paint. It said the other male's rank was about the

same as his. Nejas' neutral introduction said the same thing. Ussmak had the feeling he was vastly superior in combat experience: what Nejas had said told him as much, at any rate. On the other hand, Skoob looked to have been together with Nejas for a long time. Ussmak said, "I greet you, superior sir."

Skoob took the deference as nothing less than his due, which irked Ussmak. "I greet you, driver," he said. "May we brew up many Tosevite landcruisers together."

"May it be so." Ussmak wished he had a taste of ginger; better that than the taste of condescension he got from Skoob. But, because his life would depend in no small measure on how well the gunner did his job, he went on politely, "The other half of the bargain involves keeping the Big Ugliers from brewing us up."

"Shouldn't be that difficult," Nejas said. "I've studied the technical specifications for all the Tosevites' landcruisers, even the latest ones from the Deutsche. They've improved, yes, but we still handily outclass them."

"Superior sir, in theory there's no doubt you're right," Ussmak said. "The only trouble is—may I speak frankly?"

"Please do," Nejas said, Skoob echoing him a moment later. From that, they were an established crewpair. *I was wise to defer to Skoob after all, even if he is arrogant*, Ussmak thought.

Still, he hoped their willingness to listen meant something. "The trouble with the Big Ugliers is, they don't fight the way we'd expect, or the way our simulations prepared us to meet. They're masters at setting ambushes, at using terrain to mask what they're up to, at using feints and minefields to channel our moves into the direction they want, and their intelligence is superb."

"Ours should be better," Skoob said. "We have reconnaissance satellites in place, after all, to see how they move."

"How they move, yes, but not always what the moves mean," Ussmak said. "They're very good at concealing that—until they hurt us. And we may have satellites, but they have every Big Ugly between here and their positions to let them know where we're going. This isn't like the SSSR, where a lot of the Tosevites preferred us to either the Deutsche or the Russkis. These Big Ugliers don't want us, and they wish we'd all disappear."

Nejas' tongue flicked out and then in again, as if at a bad taste. "Helicopter gunships should take the edge off their tactics."

"Superior sir, they're of less use here than they were in the SSSR," Ussmak said. "For one thing, the countryside gives the Deutsche good cover—I said that before. And for another, they've learned to bring antiaircraft artillery well forward. They've hurt our gunships badly enough that the males in charge of them have grown reluctant to commit them to battle except in emergency, and sometimes then, too."

"What good are they to us if they cannot be used?" Skoob asked angrily.

"A good question," Ussmak admitted. "But what good are they to us if they get blown

out of the air before they damage the Big Ugliers' landcruisers?"

"You are saying we face defeat?" Nejas' voice was silky with danger. Ussmak guessed part of his mission was keeping an eye turret turned for defeatists as well as ginger tasters.

"Superior sir, no, I am not saying that," the driver replied. "I am saying we need to be more wary than we thought we would against the Tosevites."

"More wary, possibly," Nejas said with the air of a male making a concession to another who was inferior mentally as well as in rank. "But, when faced in accord with sound tactical doctrine, I have no doubt the Big Ugliers will fall."

Ussmak had had no doubts, either, not until he had a couple of landcruisers wrecked while he was in them. "Superior sir, I say only that the Tosevites are more devious than our tactical doctrine allows for." He held up a hand to keep Nejas from interrupting, then told the story of the mortar attack on the Race's local base and the land mine waiting for the armor as it hurried toward the bridge that would let it get at the raiders.

Nejas did break in: "I have heard of this incident. My impression is that males with their heads in the ginger vial were in large measure responsible for our losing an armored fighting vehicle. They charged straight ahead without considering possible risks."

"Superior sir, that's true," Ussmak said, recalling just how true it was. "But it's not the point I was trying to make. Had they gone more cautiously, they would have taken an alternate route ... under which the Big Ugliers also had a bomb waiting. We are devious by doctrine and training; they seem to be devious straight from hatchlinghood. They play a deeper game than we do."

That got through, to Skoob if not to Nejas. The gunner said, "How do we protect ourselves against this Tosevite deviousness, then?"

"If I had the whole answer to that, I'd be fleetlord, not a landcruiser driver," Ussmak said, which made both his new crewmates laugh. He went on, "The one thing I will say is that, if a move against the Big Ugliers looks easy and obvious, you'll probably find it has claws attached. And the first thing you think of after the obvious move may well be wrong, too. And so may the second one."

"I have it," Skoob said. "The thing to do is post our landcruisers in a circle in the middle of a large, open field—and then make sure the Big Ugliers aren't digging under them."

Ussmak let his mouth drop open at that: good to see one of the new males could crack wise, anyhow. Nejas remained serious. Letting his eyes roam around the barracks once more, he said, "This is such a gloomy place, I'd hardly mind getting out of it to fight in a landcruiser. I expect I'd be more comfortable in one than I will here. Does it have anything in its favor?"

"The plumbing is excellent," Ussmak said. Through the newcomers' hisses of surprise, he explained, "The Big Ugliers have messier body wastes than we do, so they need more

in the way of plumbing. And this whole planet is so wet, they use water more for washing and such than we would dare back on Home. Standing under a decently warm spray is invigorating, even if it does play hob with your body paint.”

“Let me at it,” Skoob said. “We were on duty down south of here, somewhere in the landmass unit the Tosevites call Africa. It was warm enough there, but the water was in the streams or falling from the sky in sheets; the local Big Ugliers didn’t know anything about putting it in pipes.”

Nejas also made enthusiastic noises. Ussmak said, “Here, throw your gear on these beds”—they had been Hessef’s and Tvenkel’s—“and I’ll show you what we have.”

All three males were luxuriating in the showers when the unit commander, a male named Kassnass, stuck his head into the chamber and said, “All out. We have an operations meeting coming up.”

Feeling unjustly deprived, to say nothing of damp, Ussmak and his crewmales listened to Kassnass set forth the newest plan for a push toward Belfort. To the driver, it seemed more of the same. Nejas and Skoob, however, listened as if entranced. From what Ussmak had heard, they wouldn’t have faced serious opposition in this Africa place, which was almost as backward technologically as the Race had thought all of Tosev 3 to be. Things were different here.

The unit commander turned one eye turret from the holograms on which the positions of the Deutsche and the Race were marked to the males assembled before him. “A lot of you are new here,” he said. “We’ve had troubles with this garrison, but, by the Emperor”—he and the landcruiser crews cast down their eye turrets—“we’ve cleaned up most of that now. Our veterans know how devious the Deutsche can be. You newcomers, follow where they lead and stay cautious. If something looks too good to be true, it probably is.”

“That’s so,” Ussmak whispered to Nejas and Skoob. Neither of them responded; he hoped they’d pay more attention to Kassnass than they did to him.

Kassnass went on, “Don’t let them lure you into rugged country or the woods; you’re vulnerable if you get separated from the other landcruisers in the unit, because then the Big Ugliers will concentrate fire on you from several directions at once. Remember, they can afford to lose five or six or ten landcruisers for every one of ours they take out, and they know it, too. We have speed and firepower and armor on our side; they have numbers, trickery, and fanatical courage. We have to use our advantages and minimize theirs.”

*They’re the enemy and they’re only Big Ugliers, so of course we call their courage fanatical, Ussmak thought. Saying they’re just doing their best to stay alive like anybody else would give them too much credit for sense.*

The males trooped out to the revetments that protected the landcruisers, Ussmak guiding his new commander and gunner. The earth was scored with hits from Tosevite mortars; bomb fragment scars pocked the sides of buildings. Nejas and Skoob rapidly

swiveled their eye turrets. Ussmak guessed they hadn't seen resistance like this from the Big Ugliers.

Once in place in the driver's position, he stopped worrying about what they'd seen and what they hadn't. He had a vial of ginger stashed in the landcruiser's fuse box, but he didn't open it up and taste, not now. He wanted to be clear and rational, not berserk, if he saw action unexpectedly soon.

Helicopter gunships took off with whickering roars audible even through the landcruiser's thick armor. They'd reach the target area well before the ground vehicles did. With luck, they'd soften up the Deutsche and not take too much damage themselves. Ussmak knew somebody reckoned the mission important; as he'd told his crewmates, helicopters had grown too scarce and precious to hazard lightly.

Through the streets of Besançon, past the busy-looking buildings with their filigrees of iron railings and balconies. Engineers preceded the landcruisers, to make sure no more explosive surprises awaited. All the same, Ussmak drove buttoned up and regarded every Big Ugly he saw through his vision slits as a potential—no, even a likely—spy. The Deutsche would know they were coming even before the helicopters arrived.

Ussmak breathed easier when his landcruiser rumbled over the bridge across the Doubs and headed for open country. He was also taking the measure of Nejas as a landcruiser commander. The new male might not have seen much action, but he seemed crisp and decisive. Ussmak approved. He hadn't felt part of a proper landcruiser crew since a sniper killed Votal, his first commander. He hadn't realized how much he missed the feeling till he saw some chance of getting it back.

Somewhere off in the trees, a machine gun opened up with harassing fire. A couple of bullets pinged off the landcruiser. Nejas said, "Take no notice of him. He can't hurt us, anyway." Ussmak hissed in delight. He'd seen males with heads abuzz with ginger badly delay a mission by trying to hunt out Tosevite nuisances.

The column rolled north and east. Reports came back that the helicopters had struck hard at the Tosevite landcruisers. Ussmak hoped the reports were right. Knowing the Big Ugliers could hurt him put combat in a new light.

A flash, a streak of fire barely seen, a crash that made the landcruiser ring like a bell. "Turret rotate from zero to twenty-five," Nejas called—urgently, but without the panic or rage or excessive excitement a ginger taster would have used. "Machine-gun fire into those bushes."

"It shall be done, superior sir," Skoob replied. The turret swung through a quarter of a circle, from northeast to northwest. The machine gun yammered. "No way to tell whether I got him, superior sir, but he won't shoot another rocket at one of our landcruisers for a while, I hope."

"Let us hope not," Nejas said. "We're lucky that one hit us on the turret and not in the side of the hull, where the armor is thinner. Briefings say the results can be most unpleasant."

“Briefings don’t know the half of it, superior sir,” Ussmak said. Vivid inside his head were flames and explosions and unremitting fear, fear that had come flooding back at that impact against the turret and now receded only slowly.

The landcruiser column rolled on. Every now and again, bullets from the bushes struck sparks off armor plate, but the column did not slow. Ussmak kept driving buttoned up. He felt half blind, but didn’t care to have one of those rounds clip off the top of his head.

“Why don’t they keep those pests from harassing us?” Nejas asked after yet another band of Tosevites sprayed the column with gunfire. “This is *our* territory; if we can’t keep raiders from slipping in, we might as well not have conquered it.”

“Superior sir, the trouble is that almost all the Tosevites hereabouts favor the raiders and shelter them, and we have an impossible time trying to figure out who really lives in the farms and villages and who doesn’t. Identity cards help, but they aren’t enough. This is their planet, after all; they know it better than we can hope to.”

“It was simpler down in Africa,” the landcruiser commander said mournfully. “The Big Ugliers there had no weapons that could hurt a landcruiser, and did what they were told once we made a few examples of those who disobeyed.”

“We tried that here, too, I’ve heard,” Ussmak said. “This was before I arrived. The trouble was, the Big Ugliers had been making examples of one another yet fighting just the same. They ignored the examples we made, the same way they’d ignored their own.”

“Mad,” Skoob said. Ussmak didn’t contradict him.

The landcruisers began passing old battlefields, some still showing the scars of fires set by shot-up landcruisers. The hulks of destroyed Deutsch armored fighting vehicles still sprawled in death. Some of them were the angular little machines Ussmak had encountered on the plains of the SSSR, but others were the big new ones that could endanger a landcruiser of the Race if well-handled—and the Deutsche handled them well.

Nejas said, “Those are impressive-looking hulks, aren’t they? Even holograms don’t do them justice. When I first saw one, I wondered why our males hadn’t salvaged it; I needed a moment to realize the Big Ugliers had made it. I apologize for wondering about some of the things you said, Ussmak. Now I believe you.”

Ussmak didn’t answer, but felt a burst of pleasure more subtle than the jolt he got from ginger, and perhaps more satisfying as well. It had been too long since a superior acknowledged that the Race’s obligations ran down as well as up. His last pair of landcruiser commanders had taken him for granted, as if he were just a component of the machine he drove. Not even being a ginger buddy with Hessef had changed that. No wonder he’d felt isolated, alone, hardly part of the Race at all. Now ... it was almost as if he’d come out of the eggshell anew.

Smoke rose from the woods up ahead. An artillery shell burst off to one side of the road: the helicopters hadn’t routed the Deutsche, then. Ussmak had hoped he’d be going in to mop up. He hadn’t really believed it, but he’d hoped.

A cannon belched fire and smoke from behind some bushes. *Wham!* Ussmak felt as if he'd been kicked in the muzzle. But the landcruiser's heavy glacis plate kept the Tosevite shell from penetrating. Without being ordered, Ussmak swung the vehicle in the direction from which the round had come. "I almost fouled my seat," he said. "If the Big Ugliers had waited till we passed and shot at the side of our hull—"

Nejas took the time to give him one word: "Yes." Then the landcruiser commander snapped an order to Skoob: "Gunner!" A moment later another single-word command followed: "Sabot!"

Skoob put the automatic loader through its paces. A round of armor-piercing discarding sabot ammunition clattered into the breech of the gun, which closed with a solid thunk. "Up!" the gunner reported.

"Landcruiser, front!" Nejas said, noting the target for Skoob.

"Identified," Skoob answered: he had it in his thermal sight.

"Fire!"

"On the way," Skoob said. The report of the landcruiser cannon was less than thunderous inside the hull, but the massive vehicle rocked back from the recoil and a sheet of flame billowed across Ussmak's vision slits. Again the driver knew pleasure almost as intense as ginger gave: this was how a crew was supposed to work together. He hadn't known anything like it since Votal got killed. He'd forgotten how satisfying it could be.

And, just as ginger brought a burst of ecstasy as it shot from the tongue to the brain, so teamwork also had its reward: fire and black smoke boiled up behind the bushes as the Deutsch landcruiser that had tried to impede the progress of the Race paid the price for its temerity. The turret machine gun chattered, mowing down the Big Ugliers who'd bailed out of their wrecked vehicle.

"Ahead, driver," Nejas said.

"It shall be done, superior sir," Ussmak said. Along with part of the column of landcruisers, he pushed the machine forward down the road past the ambush the Big Ugliers had hoped to set. The rest of the Race's armor went after the Deutsche who'd tried to waylay them. The fight was savage, but didn't last long. When they weren't caught by surprise in disadvantageous positions, the Race's landcruisers remained far superior to those of the foe. They methodically pounded the Deutsche till no more Deutsche were left to pound, then rejoined the rear of the advancing column.

"These Big Ugliers are better than any Tosevites I've seen before," Nejas said, "but they don't seem to be anything we can't handle."

Ussmak wondered about that. Had his previous crew, their wits cooked on ginger and their tactics and even their commands full of drug-induced sloppiness, really been so inept? He had trouble believing it, but here was an ambush that would have thrown them into fits, brushed away like any minor annoyance.

On the highway, black smoke rose from burning trucks that formed a barricade across

the paved surface. The landcruisers in front of Ussmak's peeled off to the grassy verge to the left to bypass the obstacle. Ussmak was about to swing his handle-bar controller to follow them when dirt fountained up under one and it slewed sideways to a stop.

He hit the brakes, hard. "Mines!" he shouted.

Concealed Deutsch landcruisers and guns opened up on the crippled vehicle. No armor could take that pounding for long. Blue flames spurted from the engine compartment as a hydrogen line began to burn. Then the landcruiser went up in a ball of fire.

Big Ugly males with satchel charges burst from cover to attack the vehicles that had stopped. Machine guns cut down most of them, but a couple managed to fling the explosives either under the rear of a turret or through an open cupola hatch. The roars from those explosions shook Ussmak even inside his armored eggshell.

"Driver, I apologize," Nejas said. But then, a moment later, he was all business again: "Gunner ... Sabot!" The cannon spoke, and killed a Big Ugly landcruiser. Nejas gave his attention back to Ussmak. "Driver, there's a narrow space of ground on the right between the road and the trees. Take it—if we can get by, we'll put ourselves in the Tosevites' rear."

"Superior sir, that space is probably mined, too," Ussmak said.

"I know," Nejas answered calmly. "The gain we win by passing is worth the risk. Steer as close to the burning vehicles as you can without making our own paint catch fire."

"It shall be done." Ussmak tramped down hard on the accelerator. The sooner the passage was over, the sooner his scales would stop itching with anticipation of the blast that would put his landcruiser out of commission. With a hiss of relief loud as an air brake, he was through and back on the road again. Big Ugliers turned a machine gun on his landcruiser. He let his mouth fall open in scornful laughter: that wouldn't do them any good. Nor did it; from the turret, the coaxial machine gun scythed down the Tosevites.

"Keep advancing," Nejas said urgently. "We have more landcruisers behind us, and mechanized infantry combat vehicles as well. If we can deploy in the Big Ugliers' rear, we ruin their whole position."

Ussmak stepped on it again. The landcruiser bounded ahead. Speed, sometimes, was as important a weapon as a cannon. He spied a Deutsch landcruiser barreling through the undergrowth, trying to find a place from which to block the onslaught of the Race's armor.

"Gunner! ... Sabot!" Nejas shouted—he'd seen it, too. But before Skoob could acknowledge the order and crank the round into the cannon, a streak of fire off to one side took the Big Ugly vehicle in the engine compartment. Red and yellow flames shot up from it, setting the bushes afire.

"Superior, sir, I think the infantry's dismounted from their carriers," Ussmak said. "That was an antilandcruiser rocket."

"You're right," Nejas said, and then, "Steer right, away from the road." Ussmak



obeyed, and caught sight of another Tosevite landcruiser. Nejas gave orders to Skoob, the cannon barked, the landcruiser jerked with the recoil ... and the Deutsch machine brewed up.

Before long, Ussmak saw something he hadn't seen much of since the early days on the endless plains of the SSSR: Big Ugliers coming out of their overrun hiding places with arms raised in token of surrender. He hissed in wonder. Just for a moment, the sense of inevitable triumph he'd felt then—before the Race really understood how the Big Ugliers could fight—came flooding back. He doubted anything was inevitable any more, but the way to Belfort and, with luck, beyond lay open.

When the landcruiser finally stopped for the evening, he thought, he'd have a taste of ginger to celebrate. Just a small one, of course.

Mutt Daniels tasted the rich black earth just outside Danforth, Illinois. He knew soil; he'd grown up as a dirt farmer, after all. If he hadn't had a talent for baseball, he'd have spent his life eastbound behind the west end of a mule. This was soil as good as he'd ever come across; no wonder the corn grew here in great green waves.

All the same, he wished he weren't making its acquaintance under these circumstances. He tasted it because he lay flat on his belly between the rows, his face jammed into the dirt so he wouldn't get a shell splinter in the eye. With the coming of spring, the Lizards were driving hard. He didn't know how the Army would hold them out of Chicago this time. "Gotta try, though," he muttered, and tasted dirt again.

More shells came in. They lifted Mutt up, slammed him back to the ground like a wrestler putting on a show in a tank town. Unlike a wrestler, they didn't pull any punches—he'd be black and blue all over.

"Medic!" somebody shouted, not far away. The tone wasn't anguish; surprise was more like it. That meant one of two things: either the wound wasn't bad or the fellow who'd got it didn't realize how bad it was. Mutt had seen that before, men perfectly calm and rational with their guts hanging out and blood soaking into the dark dirt and making it blacker than it already was.

"Medic!" The cry came again, rawer this time. Mutt crawled toward it, tommy gun at the ready; no telling what the tall corn might hide.

But only Lucille Potter crouched by Freddie Laplace when Daniels reached him. She was gently getting him to take his bloodstained hands off his calf. "Oh ... goodness, Freddie," Mutt said, inhibited in his choice of language by Lucille's presence. He hurt not only for Laplace but for the squad; the little guy was—had been—far and away their best point man.

"Give me a hand, Mutt, if you please," Lucille Potter said. The place where the shell fragment had gone in was a small, neat hole. The exit wound—Mutt gulped. He'd seen worse, but this one wasn't pretty. It looked as if somebody had dug into the back of Laplace's leg with a sharp-edged serving spoon and taken out enough meat to feed a

man a pretty good dinner. Lucille was already cutting away the trouser leg so she could work on the wound.

“Careful with that scissors,” Laplace said. “You don’t want to slice me any worse than I am already.” Mutt nodded to himself; if that was what Freddie was worrying about, he didn’t know how bad he’d been hit.

“I’ll be careful,” Lucille answered gently. “We’re going to have to get you back to an aid station after Mutt and I bandage you up.”

“Sorry, Sarge,” Laplace said, still eerily composed. “I don’t think I can walk that far.”

“Don’t worry about it, kid.” Mutt was wondering whether Laplace would keep that leg, not about his walking on it. “We’ll get you there. You just want to hold still now while Miss Lucille patches you up.”

“I’ll try, Sarge. It—hurts.” Freddie was doing his best to be a good Scout, but it didn’t sound easy any more. After a while, the numbness that often came with a wound wore off, and then you started to realize what had happened to you. That wasn’t any fun at all.

Lucille dusted the wound with sulfa powder, then folded the skin over it as best she could. “Too big and ragged to sew up,” she murmured to Mutt. “Just lucky it didn’t smash the bones up, too. He may walk on it again one of these days.” She packed gauze into the hole and put more gauze and tape over it. Then she pointed back toward one of the windmills outside of Danforth. It had a big new Red Cross banner hanging from it. “Let’s get him over there.”

“Right you are.” Mutt stooped with Lucille Potter and got Laplace upright, with one of his arms draped over each of their shoulders. They hauled him along toward the windmill. “Musta been Dutch settled around these parts,” Mutt mused. “Not many other folks use those things.”

“That’s true, but I couldn’t tell you for certain,” Lucille said. “We’re too far upstate for me to know much about the people hereabouts.”

“You know more’n I do,” Daniels said. Freddie Laplace didn’t stick his two cents’ worth in. He hung limply in the grasp of the pair who carried him, his head down on his chest. If he was out, it probably counted as a mercy.

“Oh, God, another one,” an unshaven medic with a grimy Red Cross armband said when they hauled Freddie into the makeshift aid station in the room at the bottom of the windmill. “We just got Captain Maczek in here—he took one in the chest.”

“Shit,” Lucille Potter said crisply, which was exactly what Mutt was thinking. The word made his jaw drop just the same.

The medic stared at her, too. She stared back until he lowered his eyes and took charge of Laplace, saying, “We’ll patch him up the best way we know how. Looks like you did good emergency work on him.” He knuckled his eyes, yawned enormously. “Jesus, I’m tired. Other thing we’ve got to worry about is getting out of here in case we’re overrun. We’ve been falling back a lot lately.”

Mutt almost gave him a hot answer—anybody who bitched about the job the Army was doing could go to hell as far as he was concerned. But the medic had a real worry there, because they probably would have to retreat farther. And medic wasn't exactly a cushy job, either; the Lizards honored the Red Cross most of the time, but not always—and even if they meant to honor it, their weapons weren't perfect, either.

So, sighing, he tramped away from the windmill and back toward his squad. Lucille Potter followed him. She said, "With the captain down, Mutt, they're liable to give you a platoon and turn you into a lieutenant."

"Yeah, maybe," he said. "If they don't reckon I'm too old." He thought he could do the job; if he'd run a ballclub, he could handle a platoon. But how many guys in their fifties suddenly sprouted bars on their shoulders?

"If this were peacetime, you're right—they would," Lucille said. "But the way things are now, I don't think they'll worry about it—they can't afford to."

"Maybe," Mutt said. "I'll believe it when I see it, though. And the way things are now, like you said, I ain't gonna worry about it one way or the other. The Lizards can shoot me just as well for bein' a lieutenant as for bein' a sergeant."

"You have the proper attitude," Lucille said approvingly.

A compliment from her made Mutt scuff his worn-out Army boot over the ground like a damn schoolkid. "One thing bein' a manager'll teach you, Miss Lucille," he said, "and that's that some things, you can't do nothin' about, if you know what I mean. You don't learn that pretty darn quick, you go crazy."

"Control what you can, know what you can't, and don't worry about it." Lucille nodded. "It's a good way to live."

Before Mutt could answer, a burst of firing came from the front line. "That's Lizard small arms," he said, breaking into a trot and then into a run. "I better get back there." He was afraid they'd need Lucille's talents, too, but he didn't say that, any more than he would have told a pitcher he had a no-hitter going. You didn't want to put the jinx on.

Running through the corn made his heart pound in his throat, partly from exertion and partly for fear he'd blunder in among the Lizards and get himself shot before he even knew they were there. But the sound of the gunfire and a pretty good sense of direction brought him back to the right place. He flopped down in the sweet-smelling dirt, scraped out a bare minimum of a foxhole with his entrenching tool, and started firing short bursts from his tommy gun toward the racket from the Lizards' automatics. Not for the first time, he wished he had a weapon like theirs. As he'd said to Lucille Potter, though, some things you couldn't do anything about.

The Lizards were pushing hard; firing started to come from both flanks as well as straight ahead. "We gotta fall back," Mutt yelled, hating the words. "Dracula, you 'n' me'll stay here to cover the rest. When they're clear, we back up, too."

"Right, Sarge." To show he had the idea, Dracula Szabo squeezed off a burst from his BAR.

When you advanced, if you were smart, you split into groups, one group firing while the other one moved. You had to be even smarter to carry out that fire-and-move routine while you gave ground. What you wanted to do at a time like that was run like hell. It was the worst thing you could do, but you always had a devil of a time making your body believe it.

The guys in Daniels' squad were veterans; they knew what they had to do. As soon as they found decent positions, they hunkered down and started firing again. "Back!" Mutt shouted to Szabo. Shooting as they went, they retreated through the rest of the squad. The Lizards kept pressing. Another couple of rounds of fire-and-fall-back brought the Americans into the town of Danforth.

It had held three or four hundred people before the fighting started; if the locals had any brains, they'd abandoned their trim white and green houses a while ago. A lot of the houses weren't so trim any more, not after artillery and air strikes. The sour odor of old smoke hung in the air.

Mutt pounded on a front door. When nobody answered, he kicked it open and ran inside. One of the windows gave him a good field of fire to the south, the direction from which the Lizards were coming. He crouched down behind it and got ready to give them a warm welcome.

"Mind if I join you?" Lucille Potter's question made him jump and start to point his gun toward the doorway, but he stopped in a hurry and waved her in.

Freight-train noises overhead and a series of loud bursts a few hundred yards south of town made Mutt whoop with delight. "About time our artillery got off the dime," he said. "Feed the Lizards a taste of what they give us."

Before long, northbound roars and whistles balanced those coming from out of the north. "They're awfully quick with counterbattery fire," Lucille said. "Awfully accurate, too."

"Yeah, I know," Daniels said. "But—heck, come to that, all their equipment is better'n ours—artillery and planes and tanks and even the rifles their dogfaces carry. Whenever they want to bad enough, they can move us out of the way. But it's like they don't want to all the time."

"Unless I miss my guess, they're stretched thin," Lucille Potter answered. "They aren't just fighting in Illinois or fighting against the United States; they're trying to take over the whole world. And the world is a big place. Trying to hold it all down can't be easy for them."

"Lord, I hope it's not." Grateful for talk to help get him through the lull without worrying about what would happen when it stopped, Mutt gave her an admiring glance. "Miss Lucille, you got a good way of lookin' at things." He hesitated, then added, "Matter of fact, you look right good yourself."

"Mutt ..." Lucille hesitated, too. Finally, with exasperation in her voice, she said, "Is this really the right time or place to be talking about things like that?"

“Far as I can see, you don’t think there’s ever any right time or place,” Mutt said, also with some annoyance. “I ain’t no caveman, Miss Lucille, I just—”

The lull ended at that moment: some of the Lizard artillery, instead of going after its American opposite number, started coming in on Danforth. The rising whistle of shells warned Mutt they were going to hit just about on top of him. He threw himself flat even before Lucille yelled “Get down!” and also jammed her face into the floorboards.

The barrage put Daniels in mind of France in 1918. The windows of the house, those that weren’t broken already, blew in, scattering broken glass all over the room. A glittering shard dug into the floor and stuck like a spear, maybe six inches from Mutt’s nose. He stared at it, cross-eyed.

The shells kept falling, till the blast of each was lost in the collective din. Bricks fell from the chimney and crashed on the roof. Shell fragments punched through the walls of the house as if they were made of cardboard. In spite of his helmet, Mutt felt naked. You could take only so many heavy shellings before something in you started to crack. You didn’t want it to happen, but it did. Once you got your quota, you weren’t worth a whole lot.

As the pounding went on, Mutt began to think he wasn’t far from his own limit. Trying not to go to pieces in front of Lucille Potter helped him ride it out. He glanced away from the broken chunk of glass toward her. She was flattened out just like him, and didn’t look to be having any easier time of it than he was.

Later, he was never sure which one of them rolled toward the other. Whichever it was, they clung to each other tight as they could. In spite of what they’d been talking about when the barrage hit, there was nothing in the least sexual about the embrace—it was more on the order of drowning men grabbing at spars. Mutt had hung on to doughboys the same way when the *Boches* gave American trenches a going-over in the last war.

Because he was a veteran of 1918, he got to his feet in a hurry when the curtain of Lizard shells moved from the southern edge of Danforth, where he was, to the middle and northern parts of town. He knew about walking barrages, and knew soldiers often walked right behind them.

Danforth looked as if it had gone through the meat grinder and then been overcooked since the last time he’d looked out the window. Now most of the houses were in ruins, the ground cratered, and smoke and dust rising everywhere. And through the smoke, sure enough, came the skittering shapes of Lizard infantry.

He aimed and sprayed a long burst through them, fighting to hold the tommy gun’s muzzle down. The Lizards went over like tenpins. He wasn’t sure how many—if any—he’d hit and how many were just ducking for cover.

Off to one side, the BAR opened up. “Might have known Dracula was too sneaky to kill,” Mutt said to nobody in particular. If the Lizards had any brains, they’d try a rush-and-support advance to flush him and Szabo out in the open. He aimed to throw a monkey wrench into that scheme. From a different window, he fired at the bunch he

thought would be moving. He caught a couple of them on their feet. They went down, scrambling for cover.

“In the two-reelers, this is about the time the U.S. Cavalry gallops over the horizon,” Lucille Potter said as the Lizards started shooting back.

“Right about now, Miss Lucille, I’d be glad to see ’em, and that’s a fact,” Mutt said. Dracula’s BAR was stuttering away, and he had his tommy gun (though he didn’t have as many clips as he would have liked), but only a couple of rifles had opened up with them. Rifles didn’t add a whole lot as far as firepower went, but they covered places the automatic weapons couldn’t reach and denied the Lizards the cover they’d need to flank out Mutt and Szabo.

And then, just as if it had been a two-reeler, the cavalry did come riding to the rescue. A platoon of Shermans rumbled through the streets of Danforth, a couple of them so fresh off the assembly line that only dust, not paint, covered the bright metal of their armor. Machine guns blazing and cannon firing high explosive, they bore down on the Lizard infantry.

The Lizards didn’t have armor with them; they’d been more cautious about committing tanks to action since the Americans started using bazookas. They did have antitank rockets of their own, though, and quickly turned two Shermans into blazing wrecks. Then the tanks shelled the rocketeers, and after that they had the fight pretty much their own way. Most of the Lizards died in place. A few tried to flee and were cut down. A couple came out with their hands up; they’d learned the Americans didn’t do anything dreadful to prisoners.

Mutt let out the catamount screech his grandfathers had called the Rebel yell. The house in which he and Lucille Potter sheltered was pretty well ventilated, but the yell echoed in it just the same. He turned around and hugged her. This time he meant business; he kissed her hard and his hands cupped her backside.

As she had when he’d taken out the Lizard tank with her bottle of ether, she let him kiss her but she didn’t do anything in the way of kissing back. “What’s the matter with you?” he growled. “Don’t you like me?”

“I like you fine, Mutt,” she answered calmly. “I think you know it, too. You’re a good man. But that doesn’t mean I want to sleep with you—or with anybody else, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Over the years, Mutt had done a fair number of things he’d enjoyed at the time but wasn’t proud of afterwards. Forcing a woman who said—and obviously meant—she wasn’t interested wasn’t any of them, though. Frustrated almost past words, he said, “Well, why the ... dickens not? You’re a fine-lookin’ lady, it ain’t like you don’t have any juice in you—”

“That’s so,” she said, and then looked as if she regretted agreeing.

“By Jesus,” Mutt murmured. In a lifetime knocking around the United States, he’d seen and heard about a lot of things nobody who stayed on a Mississippi farm ever

dreamt of. “Don’t tell me you’re one o’ them—what do they call ’em?—lizzies, is that right?”

“It’s close enough, anyhow.” Lucille’s face shut up as tight as a poker player’s—especially one who was raising on a busted flush. Poker-faced still, she said, “Okay, Mutt, what if I am?”

She hadn’t said she was, not quite, but she didn’t deny it, either, only waited to see what he’d say next. He didn’t know what the hell to say. He’d run across a few queers in his time, but to find out somebody he liked not just because he wanted to lay her but on account of who she was—and he couldn’t be fooled on something like that, not when they’d been living in each other’s pockets through months of grinding combat—was one of these creatures almost as alien as a Lizard ... that was a jolt, no doubt about it.

“I dunno,” he said at last. “Reckon I’ll keep my mouth shut. Last thing I want to do is cost us a medic as good as you are.”

She startled him immensely by leaning forward and kissing him on the cheek. An instant later, she looked contrite. “I’m sorry, Mutt. I don’t want to play games with you. But that’s one of the kindest things anybody ever said about me. If I’m good at what I do, why should the rest matter?”

Words like *unnatural* and *perverted* flashed across his mind. But he’d had plenty of chances to see that Lucille was good people—somebody you could trust your life to, in the most literal sense of the words.

“I dunno,” he repeated, “but it does, somehow.” Just then, the Lizards started shelling the front part of Danforth again, probably sowing their little artillery-carried mines to keep the Shermans from pushing farther south anytime soon. Mutt had never imagined he could be relieved to take cover from a bombardment, but right at that moment he was.

Liu Han hated going out to the market. People looked hard at her and muttered behind her back. Nobody had ever done anything to her—the little scaly devils were powerful protectors—but the fear was always there.

Little devils paced through the prison camp marketplace, too. They were smaller than people, but nobody got too close to them; wherever they went, they took open space with them. It was, more often than not, the only open space in the crowded market.

The baby in her belly gave her a kick. Even the loose cotton tunic she wore couldn’t disguise her pregnancy any longer. She didn’t know what to feel about Bobby Fiore: sadness that he was gone and worry about whether he was all right mingled with shame over the way the scaly devils had forced them together and a different sort of shame at conceiving by a foreign devil.

She let the market din wash over her and take her away from herself. “Cucumbers!”—a fellow pulled a couple of them from a wicker basket tied round his middle. They were long and twisty like snakes. A few feet away another man cried the virtues of his snake

meat. “Cabbages!” “Fine purple horseradish!”

“Pork!” The man selling disjointed pieces of pig carcass wore shorts and an open jacket. His shiny brown belly showed through, and looked remarkably like one of the bigger cuts of meat he had on display.

Liu Han hesitated between his stall and the one next to it, which displayed not only chickens but fans made from chicken feathers glued to brightly painted horn frames. “Make up your mind, foolish woman!” somebody screeched at her. She hardly minded; that, at least, was an impersonal insult.

She went up to the man who sold chickens. Before she could say anything, he quietly told her, “Take your business somewhere else. I don’t want any money from the running dogs of the imperialist scaly devils.”

A *Communist*, she thought dully. Then anger flared in her. “What if I tell the scaly devils who and what you are?” she snapped.

“You’re not the dowager empress, to put me in fear with a word,” he retorted. “If you do that, I will find out about it and disappear before they can take me—or if I don’t, my family will be looked after. But you—you’ve been a quiet running dog so far. But if you begin to sing as if you were in the Peking opera, I promise you’ll be sorry for it. Now go.”

Liu Han went, a stone in her heart. Even buying pork at a good price from the fellow in the stupid jacket didn’t ease her spirit. Nor did the cries of the merchants who hawked amber or slippers with upturned toes or tortoiseshell or lace or beaded embroidery or fancy shawls or any of a hundred other different things. The little scaly devils were generous to her: why not, when they wanted to learn from her how a healthy woman gave birth? For the first time in her life, she could have most of the things she wanted. Contrary to what she’d always believed, that didn’t make her happy.

A little boy in rags flashed by. “Running dog!” he squealed at Liu Han, and vanished into the crowd before she got a good look at his face. His mocking laughter was all she could report to the scaly devils, assuming she was foolish enough to bother.

The baby kicked her again. How was he supposed to grow up when everyone down to street urchins scorned his mother so? The easy tears of pregnancy filled her eyes, spilled down her cheeks.

She started back toward the house she’d shared with Bobby Fiore. Though it was a house finer than the one she’d had back in her own village, it seemed as empty as the gleaming metal chamber in which the little scaly devils had imprisoned her on their plane that never came down. The resemblance didn’t end there, either. Like that metal chamber, it wasn’t a home in any proper sense of the word, but a cage where the little devils kept her while they studied her.

Suddenly she had had all the study she could stand. Maybe no scaly devils waited back at the house right now to take photographs of her and touch her in intimate places and ask her questions that were none of their business and talk among themselves with their



hisses and pops and squeaks as if she had no more mind of her own than the *kang* that kept her warm at night. But so what? If they weren't there now, they would be later today or tomorrow or the day after that.

Back in her village, the Kuomintang was strong; even thinking about being a Communist was dangerous, though Communist armies had done more than most in fighting the Japanese. Bobby Fiore hadn't had any use for the Reds, either, but he'd willingly gone with them to take a poke at the scaly devils. She hoped he still lived; even if he was a foreign devil, he was a good man—better to get along with than her Chinese husband had been.

If the Communists had fought the Japanese, if Bobby Fiore had gone with them to raid the little devils ... they were likely to be doing more against the devils than anyone else. "I owe them too much to let them do whatever they want with me forever," Liu Han muttered.

Instead of going on to her house, she turned around and went back to the stall of the fellow who sold chickens and chicken-feather fans. He was haggling with a skinny man over the price of a couple of chicken feet. When the skinny man sullenly paid his price and went away, he gave Liu Han an unfriendly look. "What are you doing here? I thought I told you to go away."

"You did," she said, "and I will, if that's what you really want. But if you and your friends"—she did not name them out loud—"are interested in knowing more about the little scaly devils who come to my hut, you'll ask me to stay."

The poultry seller's expression did not change. "You'll have to earn our trust, show you're telling the truth," he said, his voice still hostile. But he did not yell for Liu Han to leave.

"I can do that," she said. "I will."

"Maybe we'll talk, then," he said, and smiled for the first time.

Moishe Russie paced back and forth in his cell. It could have been worse; he could have been in a Nazi prison. They would have had special fun with him because he was a Jew. To the Lizards, he was just another prisoner, to be kept on ice like a bream until they figured out exactly what they wanted to do with him—or to him.

He supposed he should thank God they weren't often in a hurry. They'd interrogated him after he was caught. On the whole, he'd spoken freely. He didn't know many names, so he couldn't incriminate most of the people who'd helped him—and he figured they were smart enough not to stay in any one place too long, either.

The Lizards hadn't bothered questioning him lately. They just held him, fed him (at least as much as he'd been eating while he was free), and left him to fight boredom as best he could. They didn't put prisoners in the cells to either side of his or across from it. Even if they had, neither the Lizard guards nor their Polish and Jewish flunkies allowed much chatter.

The Lizard guards ignored him as long as he didn't cause trouble. The Poles and Jews who served them still thought he was a child molester and a murderer. "I hope they cut your balls off one at a time before they hang you," a Pole said. He'd given up answering back. They didn't believe him, anyhow.

Some blankets, a bucket of water and a tin cup, another bucket for slops—such were his worldly goods. He wished he had a book. He didn't care what it was; he would have devoured a manual on procedures for inspecting light bulbs. As things were, he stood, he sat, he paced, he yawned. He yawned a lot.

A Polish guard stopped in front of the cell. He shifted the club he carried from right hand to left so he could take a key out of his pocket. "On your feet, you," he growled. "They got more questions for you, or maybe they're just gonna chop you up to see how you got to be the kind of filthy thing you are."

As Russie got up, he remembered there were worse things than boredom. Interrogation was one of them, not so much for what the Lizards did as for the never-ending terror of what they might do.

*Crash!* Something hit the side of the prison like a bomb. At first, as he staggered and clapped hands to ears, Moishe thought that was just what it was, that the Germans had landed one of their rockets right in the middle of Lodz.

Then another crash came, hard on the heels of the first. It flung the Pole headlong against the bars of Russie's cell. The guard went down, stunned and bleeding from the nose. The key flew from his hand. In a spy story, Moishe thought, it would have had the consideration to land in his cell so he could grab it and escape. Instead, it bounced down the hall, impossibly far out of reach.

Still another crash—this one knocked Russie off his feet and showed daylight through

a hole in the far wall. As he curled up into a frightened ball, he wondered what the devil was going on. The Nazis couldn't have fired three rocket bombs so fast ... could they? Or was it artillery? How could they have brought artillery through Lizard-held territory to shell Lodz?

His ears rang, but not so much that he couldn't hear the nasty chatter of gunfire. A Lizard ran down the hall, carrying one of his kind's wicked little automatic rifles. He fired out through the hole the shells had made in the wall. Whoever was outside returned fire. The Lizard reeled back, red, red blood spurting from several wounds.

Someone—a human—burst in through the hole. Another Lizard came running up. The man cut him down; he had a submachine gun that at close range was as lethal as anything the aliens used. More men rushed in behind the first. One of them shouted, “Russie!”

“Here!” Moishe yelled. He uncoiled and scrambled to his feet, hope suddenly overpowering fright.

The fellow who'd called his name spoke in oddly accented Yiddish: “Stand back, cousin. I'm going to blow the lock off your door.”

Spy stories came in handy after all. Russie pointed to the floor of the corridor. “No need. There's the key. This *mamzer*”—he pointed to the unconscious Pole—“was about to take me away for more questions.”

“Oy. Wouldn't that have been a balls-up?” The last wasn't in Yiddish; Moishe wasn't sure what language it was in. He had precious little time to wonder; the man grabbed the key, turned it in the lock. He yanked the door open. “Come on. Let's get out of here.”

Moishe needed no further urging. Alarms were clanging somewhere, off in the distance; power here seemed to be out. As he ran toward the hole in the outer wall, he asked, “Who are you, anyway?”

“I'm a cousin of yours from England. David Goldfarb's my name. Now cut the talk, will you?”

Moishe obediently cut the talk. Bullets started flying again; he ran even harder than he had before. Behind him, somebody screamed. The medical student part of him wanted to go back and help. The rest made him keep running—out through the hole, out through the open space around the prison, out through a gap in the razor wire, out through the screaming, gaping people in the street.

“There are machine guns on the roof,” he gasped. “Why aren't they shooting at us?”

“Snipers,” his cousin answered. “Good ones. Shut up. Keep running. We aren't out of this mess yet.”

Russie kept running. Then, abruptly, his companions, those who survived, threw away their weapons as they rounded a corner. When they rounded another corner, they stopped running. David Goldfarb grinned. “Now we're just ordinary people—you see?”

“I see,” Moishe answered—and, once it was pointed out to him, he did.

“It won’t last,” said one of the gunmen who’d been with Goldfarb. “They’ll turn this town inside out looking for us. Somebody kills a Lizard, they get nasty about that.” His teeth showed white through tangled brown beard.

“Which means it’s a good idea to get away from the net before they go fishing,” Goldfarb said. “Cousin Moishe, we’re going to take you back to England.”

“Without Rivka and Reuven, I won’t go.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Russie realized how selfish and boorish they sounded. These men had risked their lives to save him; their comrades had died. Who was he to set conditions on what they did? But he didn’t apologize, because however selfish what he’d said sounded, he also realized he’d meant it.

He waited for Goldfarb to scream at him, and for the other man—who looked tough enough for anything, no matter how desperate—to pound him senseless and then do whatever he chose. Instead they just kept walking along, easygoing, as if he’d made a remark about the weather. Goldfarb said, “That’s taken care of. They’ll be waiting for us along the way.”

“That’s—wonderful,” Moishe said dazedly. Too much was happening too fast for him to take it all in. He let his cousin and the other fighter lead him through the streets of Lodz while he tried to adjust to the heady joys of freedom. It made him giddy, as if he’d gulped down a couple of shots of plum brandy on an empty stomach.

A tattered poster with his face on it peered down from a wall. He rubbed his chin. The Lizards hadn’t let him use a razor, so his beard was coming back. It wasn’t as long as he’d worn it before, but pretty soon he’d look like his pictures again.

“Don’t worry about it,” Goldfarb said when he fretted out loud. “Once we get you out of town, we’ll take care of things like that.”

“How will you get me out?” Moishe asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Goldfarb repeated.

His nameless friend laughed and said, “Asking a Jew not to worry is like asking the sun not to rise. You can ask all you like, but that doesn’t mean you’ll get what you ask for.” That was apt enough to make Moishe laugh, too.

Before long, they walked into a block of flats. Lodz was already beginning to boil around them. The sound of explosions and gunfire carried a long way; rumor rippled out from around the prison almost as fast as the racket. The two women who went into the building just behind Moishe and his companions were already wondering who had escaped. *If only they knew*, he thought dizzily.

They climbed stairs. The fellow without a name rapped on a door—one, two, one again. “Spy stuff,” David Goldfarb muttered. The other fellow poked him in the ribs with an elbow, hard enough to make him give back a pace.

The door opened. “Come in, come in.” The skinny little bald man who greeted them

looked like a tailor, but tailors did not commonly carry submachine guns. He looked them over, lowered the weapon. “Just you three? Where are the rest?”

“Just us,” Goldfarb answered. “A couple scattered off to the other hidey-holes, a couple others won’t be going anywhere any more. About what we figured.” The casual way he said that chilled Russie. His cousin went on, “We’re not hanging around here, either, you know. You have what we need?”

“You need to ask?” With a scornful sniff the bald little man pointed to bundles on the couch. “There—change your clothes.”

“Clothes are only part of it,” Goldfarb’s tough-looking friend said. “The rest is taken care of, too?”

“The rest is taken care of.” The bald fellow sniffed again, this time angrily. “We wouldn’t be good for much if it weren’t, would we?”

“Who knows what we’re good for?” the nameless fighter answered, but he shrugged off his shabby wool jacket and started unbuttoning his shirt. Moishe had no jacket to shrug off. He shed with a long sigh of relief the clothes he’d been wearing since he was captured. Their replacements didn’t fit as well, but so what? They were clean.

“Good thing the Lizards haven’t figured out prison uniforms; they’d have made it harder for us to do a vanishing act with you,” Goldfarb said as he, too, changed. His Yiddish was plenty fluent, but full of odd turns of phrase he didn’t seem to notice, as if he was using it to express ideas that came first in English. He probably was.

“You’re staying here, right, Shmuel?” asked the nondescript little Jew who kept the flat. The nameless fighter, now nameless no more, nodded. So did the little fellow, who turned to Moishe and Goldfarb. He handed each of them a thin rectangle of some shiny stuff, about the size of a playing card. Moishe looked at his. A picture that vaguely resembled him looked back from it. The card gave details of a life he’d never led. The bald little man said, “Don’t pull these out unless you have to. With luck, you’ll be away before they do a proper job of cordoning off the city.”

“And without luck, we’ll buy a plot,” Goldfarb said, holding up his own card. “This bloke looks more like Goebbels than he does like me.”

“Best we could do,” the bald Jew said with a shrug. “That’s why you don’t want to wave it around unless somebody asks for it. But if somebody does, he probably won’t look at it; he’ll feed it into a Lizard machine—and it shows you’ve been authorized for the past two weeks to leave Lodz on a buying trip.” He clucked mournfully. “Cost us plenty to pay off a Pole who works for the Lizards to make these for us, and he’d only take the best.”

“Gold?” Russie asked.

“Worse,” the fellow answered. “Tobacco. Gold at least stays in circulation. Tobacco, you smoke it and it’s gone.”

“Tobacco.” Goldfarb sounded even more mournful than the bald Jew had. “What I wouldn’t give for a fag. It’s been a bloody long time.”

Russie didn't care one way or the other about tobacco. He'd never got the habit, and his medical studies made him pretty sure it wasn't good for you. But it did show how far the underground had gone to rescue him. That warmed him, especially since some people thought him a traitor for broadcasting for the Lizards. He said, "Thank you more than I know how to tell you. I—"

Shmuel cut him off: "Listen, you'd better get out of here. You want to thank us, broadcast from England."

"He's right," David Goldfarb said. "Come on, cousin. Standing around chattering doesn't up the chances of our living to collect an old-age pension—not that we're in serious danger of it at any rate, things being as they are."

Out of the flat, out of the block of flats, they went. As they walked north, they listened to rumors swirl around them: "All the prisoners free—" "The Nazis did it. My aunt saw a man in a German helmet—" "Half the Lizards in Lodz killed, I heard. My wife's brother says—"

"By tomorrow, they'll be saying the Lizards dropped an atomic bomb on this place," Goldfarb remarked dryly.

"Did you hear what he said?" someone going the other way exclaimed. "They used an atomic bomb to blow up the prison." Russie and Goldfarb looked at each other, shook their heads, and started to laugh.

Less than an hour had gone by since the first blast (*piat*, Goldfarb called it, which sounded more Polish than either Yiddish or English) hit the prison, but the streets heading out of the ghetto already had checkpoints on them; the Lizards and their human henchmen, Order Service thugs and Polish bullies, had wasted not a moment. Some people took one look and decided they didn't need to leave after all; others queued up to show they had the right.

Moishe started to get into a line that led up to a couple of Poles. Goldfarb pulled him out of it. "No, no," he said loudly. "Come on over here. This line is much shorter."

Of course that line was much shorter: at its head stood three Lizards. Nobody in his right mind wanted to trust his fate to them when human beings were around. Humans might be thugs, but at least they were your own kind of thugs. But Moishe couldn't drag Goldfarb back from the line he'd chosen without making a scene, and he didn't dare do that. Convinced his cousin was leading them to their doom, he took his place in the queue that led up to the aliens.

Sure enough, the wait to get to them was short. A Lizard turned one eye turret toward Russie, the other toward Goldfarb. "You is?" he asked in bad Yiddish. He repeated the question in worse Polish.

"Adam Zilverstajn," Goldfarb answered at once, using the name on his new, forged identity card.

"Felix Kirshbojm," Moishe said more hesitantly.

He waited for alarms to go off, for guns to be pointed and maybe fired. But the Lizard

just stuck out his hand and said, “Card.” Again, Goldfarb promptly surrendered his. Again, Moishe paused almost long enough to draw suspicion to himself before he handed his over.

The Lizard fed Goldfarb’s card into a slot on a square metal box that sat on a table next to him. The box gulped it down as if alive. While still collaborating with the Lizards, Russie had seen enough of their astonishing gadgetry to wonder if perhaps that wasn’t so. It spat out Goldfarb’s phony card. The Lizard looked at a display—*like a miniature movie screen*, Moishe thought—it held in its hand. “You go on business? You be back—seven days?” it said as it returned the card to Moishe’s cousin.

“That’s right,” Goldfarb agreed.

Then Russie’s card went into the machine. He almost broke and ran as the Lizard turned an eye turret toward the handheld display; he was sure words like *traitor* and *escapee* showed up there. But evidently they didn’t, for the Lizard waited till the card came out again, then said, “You go business seven days, too?”

“Yes,” Moishe said, remembering not to tack “superior sir” onto the end.

“You both go seven days,” the Lizard said. “You go—how to say—together?”

“Yes,” Moishe repeated. He wondered if the Lizards were looking for people traveling in groups. But the guard just handed him his card and got ready to receive the next set of people passing through the checkpoint.

David Goldfarb indulged in the luxury of a long, heartfelt “Whew!” as soon as they’d walked a couple of hundred meters past the guard and out of the ghetto.

*Whew!* did not seem enough to Moishe. “*Gottenyu*,” he said, and then added, “I thought you’d killed us both when you pulled me into that line with the Lizards.”

“Oh, that.” Now Goldfarb looked jaunty. “No, I knew just what I was doing there.”

“You could have fooled me!”

“No, seriously—look at it. If we go through a line with Poles or those Order Service would-be Nazi *shmucks*, they’re liable to look at the pictures on the cards—and if they do that, we’re dead. No matter what the machine tells them, they’ll see we don’t really look like the pictures on the cards, or not enough, anyhow. But the Lizards can’t tell you from Hedy Lamarr without the machine to do it for them. That’s why I wanted them to check us.”

Moishe thought it over and found himself nodding. “Cousin,” he said admiringly, “you’ve got *chutzpah*.”

“Never get anywhere with the girls if I didn’t,” Goldfarb said, grinning. “You ought to see a chap I served with named Jerome Jones—he had crust enough to make a pie, he did.”

Watching the way his cousin smiled put Moishe in mind of his mother. But Goldfarb also had an alienness about him that went deeper than the curious expressions peppering his Yiddish. He wasn’t automatically wary the way Polish Jews were. “So

that's what growing up really free does for you," Moishe murmured.

"What did you say?"

"Never mind. Where will we pick up Rivka and Reuven?" Russie wondered if Goldfarb had lied to him about them just to get him moving. The man had the gall for it, no two ways about that.

But Goldfarb just asked, "Are you sure you want to find out? Suppose the Lizards catch you but kill me? The less you know, the less they can squeeze out of you."

"They aren't as good at squeezing as you'd think," Moishe said. "They didn't come close to getting everything I know out of me." Nevertheless, he didn't push the question. Mordechai Anielewicz's Jewish fighters had had that don't-ask-if-you-don't-need-to-know rule, too. Which meant ... "You were—you are—a soldier."

Goldfarb nodded. "RAF, actually, but yes. And you were going to be a doctor, before the Nazis came. My father used to beat me over the head with that; all I ever wanted to do was fiddle around with the insides of radios and such. Made me a valuable piece of goods when the war came, though: they put me into radar training straightaway, and I kept an eye on the Jerries all through the Blitz."

Russie didn't follow all of that; a couple of key words were in English, of which he knew next to nothing. He was content just to walk along for a while, savoring his freedom and daring to think about staying free a while longer. If his accomplished cousin was from the British military, maybe a submarine like the one Anielewicz had sometimes summoned lay waiting off the Polish coast. He started to ask about that, then changed his mind. If he didn't need to know, what was the point in trying to learn?

Goldfarb hurried up Krawiecka Street. He looked nervously to the right and left as he did. Finally, he said, "The sooner we're out of Lodz, the better I'll like it. Outside the ghetto, a Jew really sticks out around here, doesn't he?"

"Well, of course," Moishe answered. Then he realized it wasn't *of course*, not to his cousin. Years of living in the ghetto and before that in a Poland that didn't know how to deal with its three million Jews had made him so used to being the suspected and despised outsider that he took it for granted. Being reminded things weren't like that all over the world came as a distinct shock. "Must be nice, seeming like everyone else," he said wistfully.

"You mean, instead of getting slammed down just for being a Jew?" David Goldfarb said. Russie nodded. His cousin went on, "It is, I suppose. There's a good deal of small stuff left to fret over: people have a way of taking for granted that you're cheap or not very brave or what have you. But next to what I've seen here, what my folks left—blimey!" That wasn't Yiddish, either, but Moishe had no trouble figuring out what it meant.

If the submarine came, if it whisked him and his family off to England—would he be able to deal with so much freedom? Learning a new language as a grown man wouldn't come easy for him. Thinking thus, for a moment he was almost paralyzed with dread at



the prospect of abandoning everything familiar, no matter how unpleasant it could be.

Then he and Goldfarb strode past a couple of Polish housewives chattering on a front porch. The two pretty women stopped talking and stared at them as if they expected the plague to break out in their wake. They kept on staring until the men had gone a block farther down the road.

Moishe sighed. “No, maybe I won’t be sorry to get out of here after all.”

“I know what you mean,” his cousin answered. “Everyone here keeps thinking we’re about to make off with the good silver. I shan’t be sorry to see the last of that myself. If all goes well, we should have you and yours back in England in a couple of weeks. How does that strike you?”

“The word that comes to mind is *mechaieh*,” Moishe said. His cousin grinned and clapped him on the back.

“Hurry up!” Ludmila Gorbunova shouted. “If I don’t get the ammunition into my machine gun, how am I supposed to shoot it at the Lizards?”

“Patience, patience,” Georg Schultz answered as he checked the belts that fed the guns. “If your weapon jams when you’re taking it into action, you might as well not have it. Do things right at first and you won’t be sorry later.”

Nikifor Sholudenko paused before he passed Schultz another belt. “The Soviet Union is not your country,” he observed. “To you it means little if Sukhinichi falls. To us it means Moscow is in danger, just as it was from your fascists in 1941.”

“Screw Moscow,” Schultz answered, sending the NKVD man a glance redolent of dislike. “If Sukhinichi falls, it probably means I get shot. You think that doesn’t matter to me, you’re crazy.”

“Enough, you two,” Ludmila said. She’d been saying that ever since the German and the security man met. She’d kept them from trying to kill each other on the tramp back to the village where they’d shot it out with the anti-Tolokonnikovites (she still didn’t know who Tolokonnikov was or what sort of faction he led), and sometimes kept them from sniping at each other with words for as long as half an hour.

“You be careful up there,” Schultz told her, in the not-to-be-denied tones of a field marshal giving orders—or a man who wanted to go to bed with her. She knew which only too well. Wanting to go to bed with her was the only thing on which he and Sholudenko agreed. The air base had needed a political officer when Sholudenko got there, but that wasn’t the only reason Sholudenko had arranged to stay on here, even if it was the official one.

In a way, climbing into the cockpit of her new U-2 was a relief. She didn’t have to argue with the Lizards or cajole them along; all they wanted to do was kill her. Avoiding that was a lot simpler than the passes from Schultz and Sholudenko she kept ducking.

Schultz spun the prop. He’d been right about one thing—Colonel Karpov had been so glad to have his mechanical talents back that he’d overlooked the little matter of going

off without bothering to get permission first. That Schultz had actually returned with Ludmila hadn't hurt there, either.

The *Kukuruznik's* little five-cylinder radial buzzed into life. It had a note slightly different from the one she'd grown used to, but Schultz insisted that was nothing to worry about. On engines, if not many other places, Ludmila trusted his word.

She released the brake, gave the biplane full throttle, and bounced across the still-muddy steppe till she was airborne. She stayed at treetop height as she flew south and west toward the front. One rule the Red Air Force had learned: the higher you flew against the Lizards, the less likely you were to come back.

The front south of Sukhinichi was not far away, and got closer all the time whether she was in the air or not. With the coming of good weather, the Lizards were on the move again, pushing through German remnants and Soviet troops alike as they advanced on Moscow. By crackling shortwave Stalin had ordered, "*Ni shagu nazad!*—Not one step back!" Giving the order and being strong enough to make sure it was obeyed were not the same thing, worse luck.

The Red Army had brought up all the artillery it could to try to stem the Lizard tide. Ludmila flew past bare-chested young men in khaki trousers serving their guns for all they were worth. When a cannon, or sometimes a whole battery, discharged close by, the blast made the U-2 tremble in the air like a falling leaf caught by a gust of wind. The gun crews waved at her plane, not because they knew she was a woman, but for joy at seeing anything human-built in the air.

Tanks rumbled along the dirt roads. Some of them spewed smoke to help mask their positions. Ludmila hoped that would do some good; going up against Lizard armor was worse than facing the Germans. The Nazis had had better tactics but worse tanks. The Lizards' tanks were better than the T-34s and KV-1s that were the pride of Soviet armored forces, and their tactics weren't bad, either.

A curtain of dust thrown up from shell hits marked the front. Ludmila took a deep breath as she drew near; every second she spent in and around that curtain or on the other side was a second in which she was hideously more likely to die than at any other time. Her bowels clenched and loosened, her bladder felt very full though it wasn't. She noticed none of that, not consciously.

What she did notice was the Soviet line beginning to go to pieces. Along with the dust, smoke from burning tanks filled the air and made her cough and choke when she flew through plumes of it. She didn't see many tanks right at the front to try to halt the Lizards' advance. Most either hunkered down where they were or pulled back toward Sukhinichi.

Ludmila shook her head. That wasn't going to hold things together; it would probably end up costing the vital railway center, too. The Germans had had surprisingly few tanks, but they'd massed them and used them aggressively against Soviet troops. She'd thought the Red Army had grasped the principle. It didn't seem that way, not from what she was seeing here.

Without armor to support them, the Russian infantrymen who huddled in their trenches had to take whatever the Lizards dished out without much hope of hitting back. She wondered how long they would stay and fight, even with NKVD men with submachine guns back of the line to discourage them from doing anything else.

As the soldiers at the guns had, some of the infantry waved as she flew over them. She wondered if the young peasants and workers down below appreciated the irony of her sallying forth against the Lizards in an aircraft that had seemed obsolete even against the Nazis. She doubted it. All they saw was a plane with red stars on the fuselage and wings. That was enough to give them hope.

Then she was on the other side of the line, the side the Lizards controlled. The ground below her resembled nothing so much as the craters of the moon she'd once examined in a science text: the aliens were advancing through territory that had already been fought over. If that bothered them, they didn't show it.

*Pop, pop!* A couple of bullets tore through the doped fabric that covered the U-2's wings. Ludmila grunted in dismay. The only thing that would protect her was the aircraft's speed, and the *Kukuruznik* wasn't very fast ...

Off to one side a couple of kilometers, she glimpsed the fierce tadpole shape of a Lizard helicopter gunship. She heeled the U-2 away from it and dove even closer to the deck. The gunship could fly rings around her and blow her out of the sky, and painful experience had taught that the machine guns she carried wouldn't do anything more than scratch its paint.

Luck stayed with her: the helicopter continued on up toward the front without spying her. And her turn brought her straight toward a convoy of lorries—some Lizard-made, others captured from the Red Army or the Nazis—also moving up with troops and supplies. She never would have spotted them if she hadn't had to evade the gunship.

With a joyful whoop, she thumbed the firing button. The *Kukuruznik* jerked a little as its twin machine guns began to hammer away. Orange lines of tracers showed she was scoring hits. A German-made lorry suddenly became a ball of flame. Ludmila whooped louder.

Lizards bailed out of vehicles and started shooting at her. She got out of there as fast as she could.

After a good strafing run like that, she could have flown back to her base and truthfully reported success. But, like most good combat pilots, she lusted for more. She buzzed on, deeper into Lizard-held territory.

Back of the line, fire came her way less often. The Lizards seemed less alert, or maybe just hadn't counted on many human planes getting through. She wished she were flying a Pe-2 bomber with a couple of thousand kilos of high explosive rather than a wheezing trainer that had had a brace of machine guns strapped onto it. But then, the Lizards shot down Pe-2s with effortless ease.

She spied more lorries—human-made ones, stopped to fuel up. She raked them with

machine-gun fire, and felt a mix of terror and crazy exhilaration when flames shot so high that she had to pull up sharply to keep from flying straight through them.

The machine guns had performed without a jam. They usually did, so she didn't know how much Georg Schultz's relentless perfectionism had to do with that, but it couldn't have hurt. She swung the U-2 back toward the north; she was low on fuel and she'd used a lot of ammunition. She was willing to bet Schultz had spent the time she was flying methodically filling belts with bullets.

Coming back, she was fired on not only by the Lizards but also by jittery Soviet troops convinced anything in the air, especially if it flew over them from the other side of the line, had to be dangerous. But the *Kukuruznik*, not least because it was so simple, was a rugged machine: unless you hit the engine or the pilot or were lucky enough to snap a control wire with a bullet, you wouldn't hurt it much.

Ludmila flew over advancing Lizard tanks. They were across a small river whose line the Soviets had been holding when she'd gone out on her attack run an hour or so before. She bit her lip. It was as she'd feared: in spite of everything the Red Army could do, in spite of her own pinprick successes inside Lizard-held territory, the local position was deteriorating. Sukhinichi would fall, and after that only Kaluga stood between the Lizards and Moscow.

The U-2 bounced to a stop. A couple of groundcrew men lugged jerricans of petrol toward the airplane, squelching through mud that was still pretty thick. Behind them came Georg Schultz, ammunition belts draped across his chest so that he resembled nothing so much as a Cossack bandit. He took a chunk of black bread from a pocket of the German infantry blouse he still wore, held it out to Ludmila. "*Khleb*," he said, one Russian word he'd mastered.

"*Spasebo*," she answered, and took a bite. Right in back of Schultz slogged Nikifor Sholudenko. Maybe he didn't want the German spending even a moment alone with her because they were rivals, or maybe just because he was NKVD. Either way, Ludmila was glad to see him: he was someone to whom she could report, which meant she wouldn't have to hunt up Colonel Karpov.

Or could she? The air base looked like an anthill somebody had kicked, with people running every which way to no apparent purpose. Before she could ask any questions, Schultz spread his arms wide and exclaimed, "*Bolshoye drap*—big skedaddle." That was, ironically, the same term the Russians had used to describe the flight of bureaucrats from Moscow when it looked as if the Germans would capture the capital in October 1941. Ludmila wondered if Schultz was using it with malice aforethought.

That, however, mattered relatively little. "Skedaddle?" Ludmila said in dismay. "We're pulling out of here?"

"We are indeed," Nikifor Sholudenko said. "Orders are to shorten, consolidate, and strengthen the defensive front." He didn't bother to add that that was a euphemism for *retreat*, just as *severe fighting* meant *a battle we're losing*. Ludmila knew that as well as he did. So, very likely, did Georg Schultz.

Ludmila said, “May I fly another mission before we pull back? I stung them the last time; they hardly had any air defenses set up.”

“Who can defend against one of these things?” Schultz said in German, setting an affectionate hand on the U-2’s clothcovered fuselage. “They peep in through the keyhole when you’re taking a leak.”

Sholudenko snorted at that, but to Ludmila he shook his head. “Colonel Karpov’s orders are that we leave now. They came in just after you took off; if you hadn’t been airborne, we probably would have already cleared out.”

“Where are we going?” Ludmila asked.

The NKVD man pulled out a scrap of paper, glanced down at it. “They’re setting up a new base at Collective Farm 139, bearing 43, distance fifty-two kilometers.”

Ludmila translated distance and bearing into a dot on the map. “That’s right outside Kaluga,” she said unhappily.

“Just west of it, as a matter of fact,” Sholudenko agreed. “We’re going to fight the Lizards house by house and street by street in Sukhinichi to delay them while we prepare new positions between Sukhinichi and Kaluga. Then, at need, we will fight house by house in Kaluga. I hope the need does not arise.”

He stopped there; not even an NKVD man, answerable to no one at the air base but himself and perhaps, for something particularly heinous, Colonel Karpov, wanted to say too much. But Ludmila had no trouble reading between the lines. He didn’t expect whatever makeshift line the Red Army would set up north of Sukhinichi to hold the Lizards. He didn’t expect to hold them at Kaluga, either, not by the sound of what he said. And between Kaluga and Moscow lay only plains and forest—no more cities in which to slow down and maul the invaders.

“We’re in trouble,” Georg Schultz said in German. Ludmila wondered at his naïveté in speaking so freely: the Nazis might not have the NKVD, but they certainly did have the *Gestapo*. Didn’t Schultz know you weren’t supposed to open your mouth where people you couldn’t trust were listening?

Sholudenko gave him an odd look. “The Soviet Union is in trouble,” he conceded. “No more so than Germany, however, and no more so than any of the rest of the world.”

Before Schultz could answer, Colonel Karpov came running up the airstrip, shouting, “Get out! Get out! Lizard armor has broken through west of Sukhinichi, and they’re heading this way. We have maybe an hour to get clear—maybe not, too. Get out!”

Wearily, Ludmila climbed back into the little *Kukuruznik*. Groundcrew men turned the plane into the wind; Georg Schultz spun the two-bladed wooden prop. The engine, reliable even if puny, caught at once. The biplane rattled down the runway and hopped into the air. Ludmila swung it northeast, toward Collective Farm 139.

Schultz, Sholudenko, and Karpov stood on the ground waving to her. She waved back, wondering if she would ever see them again. Suddenly, instead of being the one who flew dangerous combat missions, she was the one who could escape the oncoming

Lizards. If they were only an hour away, they had a good chance of overrunning the humans trying to escape from the air base.

She checked her airspeed indicator and her watch. At the U-2's piddling turn of speed, Collective Farm 139 was about half an hour away. She hoped she'd be able to spot the new base, and then hoped she wouldn't: if the *maskirovka* was bad, the Lizards would notice it.

Of course, if the *maskirovka* was good, she'd fly around and around and probably have to set down in the wrong place because she was running out of fuel. Airspeed indicator, watch, and compass were not the most sophisticated navigational instruments around, but they were what she had.

A Lizard warplane shot by, far overhead. The howl of its jet engines put her in mind of wolves deep in the forest baying at the moon. She patted the fabric sides of her U-2. It was also an effective combat aircraft, no matter how puny and absurd alongside the jet. It had seemed puny and absurd alongside an Me-109, too.

She was still flying along when the Lizard plane came shrieking back on the reciprocal to its former course. She wasn't even done shifting bases, and it had already finished its mission of destruction.

*Speed.* The word tolled in Ludmila's mind, a mournful bell. The Lizards had more of it at their disposal than people did: their tanks rolled faster, their planes flew faster. Because of that, they held the initiative, at least while the weather was good. Fighting them was like fighting the Germans, only worse. Nobody ever won a war by reacting to what the other fellow did.

A bullet cracked past her head, rudely slaughtering that line of thought. She shook her fist at the ground, not that it would do any good. The stupid *muzhik* down there was no doubt convinced that anything so clever as an airplane had to belong to the enemy. Had Stalin had the chance to continue peacefully building socialism in the Soviet Union, such ignorance might have become a thing of the past in a generation's time. As it was ...

A peasant working in a newly sown field of barley took off his jacket and waved it as she buzzed over him. The jacket had a red lining. Ludmila started to fly on by, then exclaimed, "*Bozhemoi*, I'm an idiot!" The Red Air Force wouldn't send up a flare, literally or figuratively, to let her know exactly where the new base was. If they did, the Lizards would make sure said base didn't last long. She could credit good navigation—or more likely good luck—for finding her target at all.

She wheeled the *Kukuruznik* through the sky. As she bled off speed and what little altitude she had, she spotted marks that cut across plowed furrows. They told her where planes were landing and taking off. She brought the U-2 around one more time, landed it in more or less the same place.

As if by magic, men appeared where she had been willing to swear only grain grew. They sprinted toward the biplane, bawling, "Out! Out! Out!"

Ludmila scrambled out. As her booted feet dug into the stillmuddy ground, she began,

“Senior Lieutenant Gorbunova reporting as—”

“Tell us all that shit later,” said one of the fellows who was hauling the U-2 away toward concealment, though of what sort Ludmila couldn’t imagine. He turned to a comrade. “Tolya, get her under cover, too.”

Tolya needed a shave and smelled as if he hadn’t seen soap and water in a long time. Ludmila didn’t hold it against him; she was probably just as rank, but didn’t notice it on herself any longer. “Come on, Comrade Pilot,” Tolya said. If he noticed she was a woman, or cared, he didn’t let on.

Some of his friends unrolled a broad stretch of matting that so cunningly mimicked the surrounding ground, she hadn’t even noticed it (she was glad she hadn’t tried taxiing across it). It covered a trench wide and deep enough to swallow an airplane. As soon as the *Kukuruznik* vanished into the trench, the mats went back on.

Tolya led Ludmila toward some battered buildings perhaps half a kilometer away. “We don’t have to do anything special for people,” he explained, “not with the stuff for the *kolkhozniki* still standing.”

“I’ve flown from bases where people lived underground, too,” Ludmila said.

“We didn’t have much digging time here,” her guide said, “and machines come first.”

Somebody unrolled another strip of matting and ducked under it carrying a lighted torch. “Is he starting a fire down there?” Ludmila asked. Tolya nodded. “Why?” she said.

“More *maskirovka*,” he answered. “We found out the Lizards like to paste things that are warm. We don’t know how they spot them, but they do. If we give them some they can’t really hurt—”

“They waste munitions.” Ludmila nodded. “*Ochen khorosho*—very good.”

Even though they were alone in the middle of a field, Tolya looked around and lowered his voice before he spoke again: “Comrade Pilot, you’ve flown over the front south of Sukhinichi? How did it look to you?”

*It was coming to pieces*, Ludmila thought. But she didn’t want to say that, not to someone she didn’t know or trust: who knew what he might be under his baggy, peasant-style tunic and trousers? Yet she didn’t want to lie to him, either. Carefully, she replied, “Let me put it this way: I’m glad you don’t have much in the way of heavy, permanent installations here.”

“Huh?” Tolya’s brow furrowed. Then he grunted. “Oh. I see. We may have to move in a hurry, is that it?”

Ludmila didn’t answer; she just kept walking toward what was left of the collective farm’s buildings. Beside her, Tolya grunted again and asked no more questions; he’d understood her not-answer exactly as she meant it.

Alone on a bicycle with a pack on his back and a rifle slung over his shoulder: Jens Larssen had spent a lot of time and covered a lot of miles that way. Ever since his

Plymouth gave up the ghost back in Ohio, he'd gone to Chicago and then all around Denver on two wheels rather than four.

This, though, was different. For one thing, he'd been on flat ground in the Midwest, not slogging his way up through a gap in the Continental Divide. More important, back then he'd had a goal: he'd been riding toward the Met Lab and toward Barbara. Now he was running away, and he knew it.

"Hanford," he said under his breath. As far as he could tell, they all just wanted an excuse to get him out of their hair. "You'd think I was a goddamn albatross or something."

All right, so he'd made it real clear he wasn't happy about his wife shacking up with this Yeager bum. The way everybody acted, it was his fault, not hers. She'd run out on him, and she got the sympathy when he tried to put some sense into her thick head.

"It just isn't right," he muttered. "She bailed out, and I'm the one who's stuck in the plane wreck." He knew his work had suffered since the Met Lab crew got to Denver. That was another reason everybody was glad to get him out of town, on a bike if not on a rail. But how was he supposed to keep his eyes on calculations or oscilloscope readings if they were really seeing Barbara naked and laughing, her legs wrapped around that stinking corporal as he bucked above her?

He reached back over his right shoulder with his left hand to touch the hard, upthrust barrel of the Springfield. He'd thought about lying in wait for Yeager, ending those terrible visions for good. But he had enough sense left to realize he'd probably get caught and, even if he didn't, blowing Yeager's head off, however delightful that might be, wouldn't bring Barbara back to him.

"It's a good thing I'm not stupid," he told the asphalt of US 40 under his wheels. "I'd be in a whole heap of trouble if I were."

He looked back over his shoulder. He was thirty miles out of Denver now, and had gained a couple of thousand feet; he could see not only the city, but the plain beyond it that sloped almost imperceptibly downward toward the Mississippi a long way away. Down in the flatlands, the Lizards held sway. If he hadn't gone away from the city heading west, he might have left heading east.

Looked at rationally, that made as little sense as ambushing Sam Yeager, and Jens knew it. Knowing and caring were two different critters. Instead of just getting his own back from Yeager, selling out the Met Lab project gave him vengeance wholesale rather than retail, paying back all at once everybody who'd done him wrong. The idea had a horrid fascination to it, the way the sharp edge of a broken tooth irresistibly lures the tongue. Feel, it seems to say. *This isn't the way it should be, but feel it anyhow.*

Pushing the bike along at 7,500 feet took more out of him than making it go through the flat farming country of Indiana. He stopped every so often for a blow, and just to admire the scenery ahead. Now the Rockies loomed in every direction except right behind him. In the clear, thin air, the snowcapped peaks and the deep green cloak of



pine forest below them looked close enough to reach out and touch. The sky was a deep, deep blue, with a texture to it he'd never known before.

But for the sound of his own slightly winded breathing and the rustle of bushes in the breeze, everything was quiet: no buzz and wheeze of cars, no growling rumble of trucks. Jens had passed a patient convoy of horse-drawn wagons four or five miles back, and another coming into Denver just as he was leaving, but that was about it. He knew the Lizard-induced dearth of traffic meant the war effort was going to hell, but it sure worked wonders for the tourist business.

“Except there's no tourist business any more, either,” he said. The habit of talking to himself when he was alone on his bike had come back in a hurry.

He swung his feet back up onto the pedals, got rolling again. In a couple of minutes, he came up to a sign: IDAHO SPRINGS, 2 MILES. That made him lift one hand from the handlebars to scratch his head. “Idaho Springs?” he muttered. “This was still Colorado, last I looked.”

A few hundred yards ahead another sign said, HOT SPRINGS BATHING, 50¢. VAPOR CAVES, ONLY \$1. That explained the springs, but left him still wondering how a chunk of Idaho had shifted south and east.

The town might have had a thousand people before the Lizards came. It straggled along a narrow canyon. A lot of the houses looked deserted, and the doors to several shops hung open. Jens had seen a lot of towns like that. But if people had fled from everyplace, where had they all gone? His reluctant conclusion was that a lot of them were dead.

Not everybody was gone from Idaho Springs. A bald man in black overalls came out of a dry-goods store and waved to Larssen. He waved back, slowed to a stop. “Where you from, mister?” the local asked. “Where you goin’?”

Jens thought about replying that it was none of Nosy Parker's business, but his eye happened to catch a bit of motion in a second-story window that the breeze couldn't have caused: a curtain shifted slightly, perhaps from a rifle barrel stirring behind it. The folk of Idaho Springs were ready to take care of themselves.

And so, instead of getting smart, Jens said carefully, “I'm out of Denver, heading west on Army business. I can show you a letter of authorization, if you'd like.” The letter wasn't signed by Groves; the detested Colonel Hexham's John Hancock was on it instead. Larssen had been tempted to wipe his backside with it; now he was glad he'd refrained.

Black Overalls shook his head. “Nah, you don't need to bother. If you was one of them bad guys, don't reckon you'd be so eager to show it off.” The upstairs curtain twitched again as the not-quite-unseen watcher drew back. The bald guy went on, “Anything we can do for you here?”

Jens' stomach rumbled. He said, “I wouldn't turn down some food—or even a drink, if you folks have some hooch you can spare. If you don't, don't put yourselves out on

account of me,” he added hastily; in these times of scarcity, people got mighty touchy about sharing things like liquor.

But the fellow in black overalls just grinned. “We can spare a bit, I expect. We’d always stock up for the folks who’d come to visit the springs, you know, and there ain’t been many o’ them lately. You just want to ride on up ahead for another long block to the First Street Cafe. Tell Mary there Harvey says it’s okay to get you fed.”

“Thanks, uh, Harvey.” Jens started the bicycle rolling again. His back itched as he rode past the window where he’d seen the curtain move, but nothing at all stirred there now. If he’d satisfied Harvey, he must have satisfied the local hired gun, too.

The Idaho Springs city hall was an adobe building with a couple of big millstones in the yard in front of it. A sign identified them as coming from an old Mexican *arastra*, a mule-powered gadget that ground ore as an ordinary mill ground grain. Colorado had more history than Jens had thought about.

The First Street Cafe, by contrast, looked like a bank. It had its name spelled out in gold Old English letters across a plate glass window. Jens stopped in front of it, let down the kick-stand on his bike. He didn’t think bike rustlers would be as big a worry here as they were in Denver. All the same, he resolved not to eat with his back to the street.

He opened the door to the café. A bell jingled above his head. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom inside, he saw the place was empty. That amazed him, because a wonderful smell filled the air. From the room in back, a woman’s voice called, “That you, Jack?”

“Uh, no,” Jens said. “I’m a stranger here. Harvey was kind enough to say I could beg a meal from you, if you’re Mary.”

Brief silence fell, then, “Yeah, I’m Mary. Just a second, pal; I’ll be right with you.” He heard footsteps back there, then she came out behind the counter and looked him over, hands on hips. Voice slightly mocking, she went on, “So Harvey says I’m supposed to feed you, huh? You’re skinny enough you could do with some feeding, that’s for sure. Chicken stew do you? It had better—it’s what I’ve got.”

“Chicken stew would be swell, thank you.” That was what was making the wonderful smell, Jens realized.

“Okay. Comin’ right up. You can sit anywhere; we ain’t what you’d call crowded.” With a laugh, Mary turned and disappeared again.

Jens chose a table that let him keep an eye on his bicycle. Plates clattered and silverware jingled in the back room; Mary softly sang something to herself that, if he recognized the tune, was a scandalous ditty he’d last heard at the Lowry Field BOQ.

From a lot of women, such lyrics would have scandalized him. Somehow they seemed to suit this Mary. On thirty seconds’ acquaintance, she reminded him of Sal, the brassy waitress with whom, among many others, the Lizards had cooped him up in a church in Fiat, Indiana. Her hair was midnight-black instead of Sal’s peroxidized yellow, and they didn’t look like each other, either, but he thought he saw in Mary a lot of the same take-

it-or-leave-it toughness Sal had shown.

He still wished he'd laid Sal—especially considering the way everything else had turned out. It could have happened, but he'd figured Barbara was waiting for him, so he'd stayed good. *Shows how much I know*, he thought bitterly.

“Here you go, pal.” Mary set knife and fork and a plate in front of him: falling-off-the-bone chicken in thick gravy, with dumplings and carrots. The smell alone was enough to put ten pounds on him.

He tasted. The taste was better than the smell. He hadn't thought it could be. He made a wordless, full-mouth noise of bliss.

“Glad you like it,” Mary said, sounding amused. A moment later she added, “Listen, it's about dinnertime, and like I said, we ain't exactly packed. You mind if I bring out a plate and join you?”

“Please,” he said. “Why should I mind? This is your place and your terrific food—” He thought he was going to say more, but took another bite instead.

“Be right with you, then.” She went back to get some stew of her own. Jens twisted his head to watch the way she walked. *Like a woman*, he thought: *what a surprise*. Her long gray wool skirt didn't show much of her legs, but she had nice ankles. He wondered if she was older or younger than he. Close, either way.

She came back with not only a plate, but two glass beer mugs filled with a deep amber fluid. “You look like you could use one of these,” she said as she sat down across the table from him. “Just homebrew, but it's not bad. Joe Simpson who makes it, he used to work down at the Coors brewery in Golden, so he knows what he's doin'.”

Jens gulped at the beer. It wasn't Coors—he'd drunk that in Denver—but it was a long way from bad. “Oh, Lord,” he said ecstatically. “Will you marry me?”

She paused with a forkful of dumpling halfway to her mouth, gave him a long, appraising stare. He felt himself turning red; he'd just meant it for a joke. But maybe Mary liked what she saw. With a slightly wintry smile, she answered, “I dunno, but I'll tell you this right now—it's the best damn offer I had today, and that's a fact. Hell, if you was to tempt me with a cigarette, who knows what I might up and do?”

“I wish I could,” he said, regretfully for two different reasons. “I haven't seen one in months.”

“Yeah, me neither.” She let out a long, mournful sigh. “Don't even know why I bothered to ask. If you had smokes, I'd've smelled 'em on you minute you walked in.” She took another bite, then said, “Mind if I ask you what your name is?”

He told her, and discovered in turn that her last name was Cooley. *Black Irish*, he thought. That fit; her eyes were very, very blue and her skin even fairer than his, transparent white rather than pink.

She might not have been able to smell tobacco smoke on him, but he was sure she could smell sweat—getting the bike here from Denver had been work, no two ways

about it. It didn't worry him the way it would have a year before. He could smell her, too, and it was amazing how fast you got used to bodies that weren't as clean as they might have been. If most everybody needed a bath, things evened out.

He finished the stew, scraped up gravy with his fork until the plate was damn near clean again. He didn't want to up and leave; he felt full and happy and more nearly homey than he had since he'd found out he didn't really have a home any more. To give himself an excuse to stay a while longer, he pointed to the mug and said, "Could I have another one of those, please? That one hit the spot, but it didn't quite fill it up."

"Sure thing, pal. I'll get me one, too." She headed for the back room again. This time, Jens thought she might have noticed him eyeing her as she walked, but if she had, she didn't let on. She soon came back with the beer.

"Thanks," he said as she sat down once more. The scritch of the chair legs on the bricks of the café floor was almost the only sound. Jens asked, "How do you keep this place open with no customers?"

"What do you mean, no customers? You're here, aren't you?" Her face was full of impudent amusement. "But yeah, it's pretty quiet at dinnertime. Supper, now, folks come for supper. And I reckon the Army would shoot me if I closed up shop; I feed a lot of their people goin' in and out of Denver. But then, you said you're one of them, right?"

"Yeah." Jens took another pull at his beer. He eyed her over the top of the mug. "Bet you have to keep a shotgun by the till to keep some of the Army guys from getting too friendly."

Mary laughed. "Spilling something hot on 'em mostly does the trick." She drank, too. "Course, the other thing is, there's passes and then there's passes."

Was that an invitation? It sure sounded like one. Jens hesitated, not least because the memory of his ignominious failure with that chippie back in Denver still stung. If he couldn't get it up twice running, what was he supposed to do? Ride his bike off a cliff? He'd have plenty of chances, pedaling along US 40 through the mountains. Sometimes, though, leading with your chin was also a test of manhood. He stretched out his foot under the table. As if by accident, the side of his leg brushed against hers.

If she'd pulled away, he would have risen from the table feeling foolish, paid whatever she asked for the stew and the beer, and headed west. As it was, she stretched, too, slowly and languorously. He wondered if that sinuous motion came naturally or if she'd seen it in the movies and practiced. Either way, it made his heart thump like a drum.

He got up, walked around the table, and went down on one knee beside her. It was a position in which he could have proposed, although he had propositioning more in mind. He got the idea, though, that she didn't want a lot of talk.

When he leaned forward and kissed her, she grabbed his head and pulled him to her hard enough to mash his lips against her teeth. He broke away for a moment, partly to breathe and partly to let his mouth glide to her earlobe and then down the smooth side

of her neck. She arched her back like a cat and sighed deep in her throat.

His hand slid under her skirt. Her legs parted for him. He was gently rubbing at the crotch of her cotton panties when he remembered that plate-glass window. Idaho Springs wasn't much of a town, but anybody walking by could see in. Hell, anybody walking by could *walk* in. "Is there someplace we can go?" he asked hoarsely.

That seemed to remind her of the big window, too. "Come on back to the kitchen with me," she said. He didn't want to take his hand away, but she couldn't stand up unless he did.

She paused only a moment, to scoop up an old Army blanket from behind the counter on which the cash register sat. The stove in the kitchen, a coal-burner burning wood these days, made the place hot, but Jens didn't care. He was plenty hot himself.

He unbuttoned the buttons that ran down the back of Mary's white blouse and unhooked her brassiere. Her breasts filled his hands. He squeezed, not too hard. She shivered in his arms. He fumbled at the button that held her skirt closed, undid it, and yanked down the zipper beneath. The skirt made a puddle on the floor. She stepped out of it, kicked off her shoes, and pulled down her panties. Her pubic hair was startlingly dark against her pale, pale skin.

She spread the blanket on the floor while he tried not to tear his clothes getting out of them in excess haste. Everything would be all right this time—he was sure of it.

Everything was better than all right. She moaned and gasped and called his name and squeezed him with those wonderful contractions of the inner muscles so he exploded in the same instant she did. "Lord!" he said, more an exclamation of sincere respect than a prayer.

She smiled up at him, her face—probably like his—still a little slack with pleasure. "That was good," she said. "And you're a gentleman, you know that?"

"How do you mean?" he asked absently, not quite listening: he was hoping he'd rise again.

But she answered: "You keep your weight on your elbows." That made him not only laugh but also slip and stop being a gentleman, at least by her standards. She squawked and wiggled, and he slid out of her. When he sat back on his knees, she reached for her discarded clothes, so she hadn't been interested in a second round, anyhow.

Jens dressed even faster than he'd undressed. Where before he'd thought of nothing but getting his ashes hauled, now he recalled how much a stranger he was here, and what could happen to strangers when they fooled around with small-town women.

Another question formed in the back of his mind: did Mary expect to get paid? If he asked and the answer was no, he'd mortally offend her. If he didn't ask and the answer was yes, he'd offend her a different way, one that might end up with his having a discussion he didn't want with the gunman behind that curtained window.

After a few seconds' thought, he found a compromise that pleased him. "What do I owe you for lunch and everything?" he asked. If she wanted to interpret *and everything*

to mean a couple of beers, fine. If she thought it meant more than that, well, okay, too.

“Paper money?” Mary asked. Jens nodded. She said, “Thirty bucks ought to cover it.”

Given the way prices had gone crazy since the Lizards came, that wasn’t out of line for good chicken stew and two mugs of beer. Jens felt a surge of pride that she hadn’t been a pro. He dug in his pocket for a roll that would have astonished him in prewar days, peeled off two twenties, and gave them to her. “I’ll get your change,” she said, and started for the cash register.

“Don’t be silly,” he told her.

She smiled. “I said you were a gentleman.”

“Listen, Mary, when I come back from where I’m going—” he began, with the sentimentality satiation and a bit of beer can bring.

She cut him off. “If I ever see you again, tell me whatever you’re going to tell me. Till then, I’m not gonna worry about it. The war’s made everybody a little bit crazy.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” he said, and thought about Barbara for the first time since he decided to try playing footsie with Mary. *Take that, bitch*, he said to himself. Aloud, to Mary, he went on, “Thanks for everything—and I mean for everything. I’d better be heading out now.”

She sighed. “I know. Nobody ever stays in Idaho Springs—except me.” She took a couple of quick steps forward, pecked him on the cheek, and moved back again before he could grab her. “Wherever it is you’re going to, you be careful, hear me?”

“I will.” Suddenly he wanted to stay in Idaho Springs, a town he’d never heard of until he started planning the trip for Hanford. *Amazing what a roll in the hay can do*, he thought. But discipline held, aided by doubts whether Mary wanted anything more from him than that one roll, either.

The doorbell jingled again as he walked out of the First Street Cafe. He climbed onto his bicycle. “Giddyap,” he muttered as he started to pedal. The world wasn’t such a bad old place after all.

He held that view even though he needed a solid day to get to the top of Berthoud Pass, which wasn’t much more than twenty miles beyond Idaho Springs. He spent the night in the mining hamlet of Empire, then tackled the run to the pass the next morning. He didn’t think he’d ever worked so hard in this life. He’d gained a thousand feet between Idaho Springs and Empire, and picked up another three thousand in the thirteen miles between Empire and the top of the pass. Not only was he going up an ever-steeper grade, he was doing it in air that got thinner and thinner. Berthoud Pass topped out at better than eleven thousand feet: 11,315, said a sign that announced the Continental Divide.

“Whew.” Jens paused for a well-earned rest. He was covered with sweat and his heart was beating harder than it had when he’d come atop Mary Cooley, a day before and most of a mile lower. Denver had taken some getting used to. He wondered if anybody this side of an Andean Indian could hope to get used to the thin air of Berthoud Pass.

And yet signs on side roads pointed the way to ski resorts. People actually came up here for fun. He shook his head. “Me, I’m just glad it’s downhill from here on out,” he said, swigging from one of the canteens he’d filled back at Bards Creek in Empire. The kind folk there had also given him chunks of roast chicken to take along. He gnawed on a drumstick as he tried without much luck to catch his breath.

He thought he’d sweated out every drop of water in him, but emptying the canteen proved him wrong. He went off behind a boulder—not that anybody would have seen him if he’d taken a leak right out in the middle of US 40—and unzipped his fly.

The second he started to whiz, he hissed in sudden and unexpected pain; somebody might as well have lighted a match and stuck it up his joint. And along with the urine came thick yellow pus. “What the hell is that?” he burst out, and then, a moment later, as realization struck, “Jesus Christ, I’ve got the fucking clap!”

And where he’d got it was painfully obvious, in the most literal sense of the word. Not from the palm of his own hand, that was for goddamn sure. Somebody who’d lie down with one stranger passing through Idaho Springs ... he wondered how many strangers she’d lain down with. One of them had left her a present, and she’d been generous enough to give it to him.

“That’s great,” he said. “That’s just wonderful.” Here he’d been on the point of rejoining the human race, and this had to happen. What he’d hoped would be his ticket out of the black gloom that had seized him ever since Barbara started laying that miserable ballplayer now turned out to be just another kick in the nuts—again, literally.

He thought about turning the bicycle around and heading back toward Idaho Springs. *Give that tramp a Springfield thank-you*, he thought. It would be an easy ride, too—all downhill. *Down that grade, I could do twenty miles in twenty minutes*. He knew he was exaggerating, but not by that much.

In the end, he shook his head. He didn’t quite have coldblooded murder in him. Revenge was something else. As far as he was concerned, the whole human race had given him a screwing that made the dose he’d got from Mary Cooley look like a pat on the back by comparison.

Well, not quite like a pat on the back. As he climbed back onto the bicycle and started down the western slope of the Rockies, he was already dreading the next time he’d have to piss. Back before the war, sulfa had started knocking gonorrhoea for a loop. If any doctor so much as had the stuff these days, he’d be saving it for matters more urgent than a case of VD.

“Hanford,” Jens muttered. His breath smoked as the word escaped his lips; even now, the snow didn’t lie that far above Berthoud Pass. He pedaled harder to get warm again.

He’d go on to Hanford. He’d see what there was to see. He’d head back for Denver and make his report. He wondered how much good it would do, or whether General Leslie hotshot Groves would pay the least bit of attention to it if he didn’t like what he said. None of the Met Lab people paid any attention to him these days. They were

probably too busy laughing at him behind his back—and they'd laugh even harder when he came home with a drippy faucet. So would Barbara.

He wondered why he was wasting so much effort on sons of bitches—and one proper bitch—who wouldn't appreciate what he did if he went out and built a bomb singlehanded. But he'd said he'd go and he'd said he'd come back, and duty still counted for a lot with him.

“Hell, hadn't been for duty, I'd still be married—yes, sir, I sure would,” he said. They'd asked him to take word about the Met Lab from Chicago to the government-in-hiding in West Virginia, and he'd gone and done it. But getting back hadn't been so easy—and nobody'd bothered to ask his wife to keep her legs closed while he was gone.

So he'd do what he'd promised. He hadn't made any promises about afterwards, though. He might take it into his head to ride east out of Denver after all.

He picked up speed and he rolled downhill. The thin air that blew against his face was spicy with the smell of the pines from the Arapaho National Forest all around.

“Or who knows?” he said. “I might even run into some Lizards on the way to Hanford. They'd listen to me, I bet. What do you think?” The breeze didn't answer.



Atvar stood on sand, looking out to sea. “This is a most respectable climate,” the fleetlord said. “Decently warm, decently dry—” The wind blew bits of grit into his eyes. They bothered him not in the least; his nictitating membranes flicked them out of the way without conscious thought on his part.

Kirel came crunching up beside him. “Even this northern Africa is not truly Home, though, Exalted Fleetlord,” he said. “It grows beastly cold at night—and winter here, by the reports, is almost as hideous as anywhere else on Tosev 3.”

“Not winter now.” For a moment, Atvar turned an eye turret toward the star the Race called Tosev. As always, its light struck him as too harsh, too white, not quite like the mellow sunshine of Home. “I thought I would come down to the planet’s surface to see it at its best, not its worst.”

“It is well-suited to us here,” Kirel admitted. “Reports say the Tosevites from Europe there”—he pointed north across the blue, blue water—“who were fighting here when we arrived, spent most of their time complaining about how hot and dry this part of their planet was. Even the natives don’t care for the area during summer.”

“I have long since given up trying to fathom the Big Ugliers’ tastes,” Atvar said. “I would call them revoltingly ignorant, except that, were they only a little more ignorant, our conquest would have been accomplished some time ago.”

“With the return of good—well, bearable—weather to the lands of our principal foes, the optimism I felt at the outset of our campaign here begins to return as well,” Kirel said. “We’ve gained against the Deutsche from both east and west; we’re driving toward the capital of the SSSR, this Moskva being an important rail and transport center along with an administrative site; we continue to consolidate our hold on China despite bandits behind our lines; and the Americans fall back on the lesser continental land mass.”

“All true,” Atvar agreed, more happily than he’d spoken of the military situation on Tosev 3 for some time. “I begin to hope the colonists may yet find a pacified world awaiting their settlement. During the past winter in this hemisphere, I wouldn’t have put much credit in that.”

“Nor I, Exalted Fleetlord. But if our munitions hold out, I think we can successfully complete the conquest and settle down to administering rather than fighting.”

Atvar wished the shiplord hadn’t added that qualifying phrase. Munitions were a continuing problem. Provident as usual, the Race had given the conquest fleet far more supplies and weapons systems than it had expected the warriors to need against the animal-riding, sword-swinging savages the probes had shown inhabiting Tosev 3.

The only trouble was that, while Atvar still reckoned the Big Ugliers savages, these days they made landcruisers, fired automatic weapons, and were beginning to fly jet

aircraft and launch missiles. What would have been lavish supplies against primitives had to be carefully rationed to keep from running out before the Tosevites did. Atvar knew such care slowed the war effort, but he lacked the munitions to shut down all the Big Ugliers' industrial areas and keep them shut down.

"It does make things harder," Kirel said when Atvar spoke of his concern. "Still, I count us ahead of the game in that we've not had to use nuclear weapons to any great degree. Wrecking the planet for the colonists would not leave our names in good odor in the annals of the Race."

Would not leave Atvar's name in good odor, was what he meant, though he was too polite to say so. The fleetlord won the glory—if any glory was to be won. If not, he won the blame. Atvar didn't intend to win any blame.

"Some males—Straha, for instance," he observed, "would destroy Tosev 3 in order to conquer it. They might as well be Big Ugliers themselves, for all the care they give to the future."

"Truth in your words, Exalted Fleetlord," Kirel said; he didn't care for Straha, either. But he was also a thoroughgoing and conscientious officer, so he added, "In truth, though, sometimes the Tosevites are exasperating enough to make me wonder if we shouldn't exterminate them to keep them from troubling us later. Take this latest trouble with—what was that Big Ugly's name?—Moishe Russie."

"Oh yes—that." Atvar stuck out his tongue, as at a bad smell. "I thought it had to be one of Skorzeny's exploits till intelligence reminded me Russie belonged to one of the groups the Deutsche were busy slaughtering until we came to Tosev 3. Computer analysis makes it unlikely they would have tried to rescue one of their foes, and I must say I agree with the machines here."

"As do I," Kirel said with a hissing sigh. "But don't you think dismissing Zolraag as governor of the province was a trifle harsh? Other than when dealing with Russie and matters concerning him, his record was good enough."

"What he's cost us in those matters outweighs the rest," Atvar said. "He petitioned for a reconsideration; I denied it. We hold too much of Tosev 3 only because the locals submit to us out of fear. If we are made to look like idiots, we shall no longer be objects of fear, and we shall have to divert forces from serious fighting to hold down areas now quiet. No, Zolraag deserved sacking, and sacking he got."

Kirel cast his eyes to the ground in obedience to the fleetlord's will. Another male came up to him and Atvar, one whose rather drab body paint made him seem out of place in such august company. "I greet you, Exalted Fleetlord, Superb Shiplord," he said. His words were perfectly correct, his voice held the proper deference, and yet Atvar doubted his sincerity even so.

"I greet you, Drefsab," the fleetlord returned, swinging one eye turret toward the intelligence operative. Drefsab's motions were quick and jerky. With another male, that might have betrayed a ginger habit, but Drefsab had moved that way even before he

became addicted to the Tosevite herb; he had a Big Ugly's restlessness trapped in a body that belonged to the Race. Atvar said, "I presume you have come to report on the progress of your project in—what is the name of that Emperorless land?"

"*Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska*—the Independent State of Croatia," Drefsab answered. His clawed fingers twitched restlessly, a sure sign of disgust. "Do you know, Exalted Fleetlord, there are times when the Big Ugliers are as easy to manipulate as hatchlings still wet from the juices of their eggs?"

"I wish there were more such times," Kirel observed.

"So do we all," Atvar said. "How have you managed to manipulate the—Croats?—then?"

"They're subordinates of the Deutsche, of course," Drefsab said. "The Deutsche gained their support by giving them weapons and a free hand against their local enemies, which essentially means anyone who lives nearby and is not a Croat. All I had to do was promise more and better weapons and an even freer hand, and all at once they became most cooperative."

Atvar felt faintly sick. The guidelines on conquering Tosev 3 he'd brought from Home, tomes composed thousands of years before, after the Race subjected first the Rabotevs and then the Hallessi, suggested playing local groups against one another. That sounded clean and logical. The reality, at least on Tosev 3, was apt to be sordid and soaked in blood.

Drefsab went on, "When measured against Tosev 3 as a whole—as opposed to Tosev 3 as a hole, which the Emperor surely knows it is—the Independent State of Croatia is of no importance whatever, being barely visible to the naked eye. But its position gives it importance to the Deutsche, who do not want us gaining influence there at their expense. And we have deliberately kept our effort there on a small scale, confining it to the coastal city of Split."

"If you can damage the Deutsche in this Croatia place, why make only a small effort?" Kirel asked. "They are among the most dangerous of the Tosevites."

"To us, though, Superb Shiplord, Croatia has no great significance," Drefsab said. "And, in any case, I am seeking to elicit a specific response from the Deutsche. I don't want them flooding the area with males; the terrain inland is mountainous and very bad for both armor and aircraft. I want them to bring in their own specialists in sabotage and destruction, and then I want to trap and destroy those specialists."

"This is the lure you have prepared for Skorzeny," Atvar exclaimed.

"Exalted Fleetlord, it is," Drefsab agreed. "As you pointed out, he has embarrassed the Race too many times. Soon he will do so no more."

"Eliminating Skorzeny will go a long way toward getting rid of a weakness you just finished discussing, Exalted Fleetlord," Kirel said excitedly. "Big Ugliers around the world will have new reason to fear us once we take him out of play."

"Exactly so." Atvar turned his eye turrets back toward Drefsab. "How fares your other

battle?”

“The one against the Tosevite herb, you mean?” Drefsab let out a long hiss. “I still taste now and again; that far, the addiction keeps its hold. I continue to struggle not to let it master all my thoughts. It has my body, but I work to keep my mind as free as I can.”

“Another lonely battle, and a brave one,” Atvar said. “So many yield both to ginger.”

“As free as I can, I said,” Drefsab answered. Dropping his eyes in deference, he went on, “Emperor knows the craving never leaves, not altogether. Under the worst circumstances, who knows what I might do for a taste? For that very reason, I attempt to avoid placing myself in those circumstances.”

Atvar and Kirel also looked down at the yellow-brown sand. When the fleetlord raised his eyes once more, he said, “Your discipline in the face of this adversity does you great credit. Because of it, I am all the more certain you will succeed in eliminating that menace, Skorzeny.”

“Exalted Fleetlord, it shall be done,” Drefsab said.

Vyacheslav Molotov peered between the backs of Stalin and his generals to study the map pinned down on the table in front of them. From the way things looked, Soviet forces were effectively pinned down, too.

“Comrade General Secretary, if Moscow is to be held, we need more men, more armor, more aircraft, and above all more time to place our assets in proper position,” Marshal Georgi Zhukov said. “Absent these, I do not see how we are to prevail.”

Few men dared speak so boldly to Stalin; Zhukov had won the right by his successes first in Mongolia against the Japanese, then defending Moscow from the Germans, and finally in holding the Lizards at bay through the winter just past. Stalin sucked on his pipe. It was empty; not even he could get tobacco these days. He said, “Georgi Konstantinovich, you saved this city once. Can you not do it again?”

“Then I had fresh troops from Siberia, and the fascists were at the end of their tether,” Zhukov answered. “Neither applies here. Without some special miracle, we shall be defeated—and the dialectic does not allow for miracles.”

Stalin grunted. Like so many revolutionaries, especially Georgian ones, he’d had seminary training. Now he said, “The dialectic may not allow for miracles, Comrade Marshal, but nevertheless I think I may be able to furnish you with one.”

Zhukov scratched his head. He was a blocky, round-faced man, much more typically Russian in looks than the slender Molotov. “What sort of miracle do you have in mind?” he asked.

Molotov had wondered the same thing, but all at once he knew. Fear coursed through him. “Iosef Vissarionovich, we have discussed the reasons for not using this weapon,” he said urgently. “As far as I can see, they remain valid.”

That was as close as he'd come in years to criticizing Stalin. The general secretary whirled around in surprise, the pipe jumping in his mouth. "If the choice is between going down to defeat after using every weapon we have and yielding tamely without making every effort to hit back at the enemy, I prefer the former."

Zhukov didn't say anything. Ivan Koniev asked, "What weapon is this? If we have a weapon that will let us hurt the Lizards, I say we use it—and to the devil's grandmother with the consequences."

After Zhukov, Koniev was the best general Stalin had. If he didn't know about the explosive-metal bomb project, the secrecy was even more extraordinary than Molotov had imagined. He asked Stalin, "May we speak freely of this weapon?"

The pipe wagged again. "The time has come when we must speak freely of this weapon," Stalin answered. He turned to Koniev. "We have, Ivan Stepanovich, a bomb of the sort the Lizards used on Berlin and Washington. If they break through at Kaluga and advance on Moscow, I propose to use it against them."

With his crooked front teeth, Koniev looked even more like a middle-aged peasant than Zhukov did. "*Bozhemoi*," he said softly. "If we have such—you are right, Comrade General Secretary: if we have such bombs, we should use them against the foe."

"We have *one* such bomb," Molotov said, "and no prospect of getting more for some time. No one knows how many of these bombs the Lizards have—but we may be about to find out by experiment."

"Oh," Koniev said, and then again, in a whisper, "*Bozhemoi*." Glancing nervously at Stalin, he went on, "This is a choice we must face with great seriousness. One of these bombs, by report, can devastate a city as thoroughly as several weeks of unchallenged bombardment by an ordinary air force."

Now the pipe worked angrily in Stalin's mouth. Before he could speak, Molotov said, "These reports are true, Comrade General. I have seen photographs of both Washington and Berlin. The melted stump of the Washington Monument—" He did not go on, both from the remembered horror of the photographs and for fear of further antagonizing Stalin. But he was too afraid of what would happen if explosive-metal bombs began to be used freely to keep silent.

Stalin paced back and forth. He did not put down the incipient rebellion at once, which was unusual. *Maybe*, Molotov thought, *he has doubts, too*. Stalin nodded to Zhukov. "How say you, Georgi Konstantinovich?"

Zhukov and Stalin were the same sort of military team as Molotov and Stalin were a political team: Stalin the guiding will, the other man the instrument that shaped the will to practical ends. Zhukov licked his lips; plainly he was of two minds, too. At last he said, "Comrade General Secretary, if we do not use this weapon, I see nothing that will keep us from being overrun. We may be able to continue partisan warfare against the Lizards, but not much more. How can what they do to us after we use the weapon be worse than what they will do to us if we do not use it?"

“Have you *seen* the pictures of Berlin?” Molotov demanded. By then, he was certain, he had raised Stalin’s wrath, but he was too upset even to be frightened. That was most unusual; he would have to examine the feeling later. No time now.

Zhukov nodded. “Comrade Foreign Commissar, I have. They are terrible. But have you seen pictures of Kiev after first the fascists and then the Lizards went through it? They are just as bad. This bomb is a more efficient means of destruction, but destruction will take place with it or without it.”

As always, Molotov held his features immobile. Behind that unsmiling mask, his heart sank. It sank still further when General Koniev asked, “How do we deliver this bomb? Can we drop it from an airplane? If we can do that, can we have some hope of putting an airplane where we most need it without the Lizards’ shooting it down?”

“Before we examine ways and means, we still need to consider whether we should take this course.” Molotov’s impassive voice concealed the desperation that grew inside him.

Stalin pretended he had not spoken and answered Koniev instead: “Comrade, the bomb is too bulky to fit into any of our bombers, and, as you say, the Lizards shoot them down too readily to make them a good way to deliver it anyhow. But planes are for taking bombs to an enemy who is far away. If the enemy is instead coming to you—” He let the sentence hang.

Molotov scratched his head, not sure where Stalin was going with that. It must have made sense to Zhukov and Koniev, though; they both chuckled. Zhukov finished the phrase for Stalin: “—you put the bomb where he will be, and wait.”

“Just so,” Stalin said happily. “In fact, we shall encourage him to concentrate in the sector where we shall place the bomb, to make sure we do him as much damage as we can.” Now it made sense to Molotov, too, but it didn’t make him any happier.

Koniev said, “Two risks here. The first is that the weapon will be discovered; past *maskirovka*, I don’t see what we can do about that. The second is that a weapon left behind won’t go off when we want it to. How do we make sure that does not happen?”

“We have multiple devices to set it off,” Stalin answered. “One is by radio signal, one is with a battery, and one is with a clockwork manufactured by German prisoners in our employ.” He spoke utterly without irony; Molotov had no doubt those prisoners were no longer among the living. “They did not know to what device the clockwork would be affixed, of course. But it has been tested repeatedly; it is most reliable.”

“Just as well, considering the use to which it will be put.” But Koniev nodded. “You are right, Comrade General Secretary: however vile the fascists may be, they make excellent mechanical devices. This clockwork or one of the other means you noted should definitely be able to set off the bomb at a time of our choosing.”

“So the engineers and scientists have assured me,” Stalin said with a slight purr in his voice that told what would happen if the engineers and scientists were wrong. Molotov would not have wanted to be in the shoes of the men who labored on that *kolkhoz*

outside of Moscow.

He pushed forward between Zhukov and Koniev. Both officers looked at him in surprise; he was usually a good deal less assertive at military conferences, which he attended mostly so he would know how developments on the battlefield affected the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. He studied the map. Red units represented Soviet forces, green the Lizards, and occasional pockets of blue German troops that still fought on in the land they had invaded almost two years before.

Even to his unsoldierly eye, the situation looked grim. The makeshift line patched together between Sukhinichi and Kaluga wasn't going to hold. He could see that already; not enough Red Army forces were in place to hold back the advancing Lizard armor. And once the line was pierced, it was fall back or get cut off from your comrades and surrounded. Nazi panzers had done that to Soviet troops again and again in the desperate summer and fall of 1941.

Nonetheless, he stabbed a hesitant finger out toward Kaluga. "Cannot we stop them here?" he asked. "Any effort, it seems to me, would be better than using the explosive metal bomb and facing whatever retaliation the Lizards may choose to inflict."

"Even Kaluga is too close to Moscow, far too close," Stalin said. "From airstrips behind the city, they can smash us to pieces." But he glanced at Zhukov before he went on, "If they don't come past Kaluga, we shall not deploy the bomb."

"That is an excellent decision, Iosef Vissarionovich," Molotov said fulsomely. Zhukov and Koniev both nodded. Molotov felt sweat under the armpits of his white cotton shirt. He wondered if the Tsar's courtiers had had to tread so carefully in guiding their sovereign toward a sensible course. He doubted it—not since the days of Peter the Great, anyhow, or maybe Ivan the Terrible.

When Stalin spoke again, his voice held some of the steel that had given Iosef Dzhugashvili his revolutionary sobriquet: "If the Lizards advance past Kaluga, however, the bomb will be used against them."

Molotov looked to Koniev and Zhukov for support. He found none. The marshal and the general were both nodding, perhaps without enthusiasm but without hesitation, either. Molotov made his own head go up and down. *Useless to argue with Stalin*, he told himself. *Useless to antagonize him*. He kept on nodding, though in his heart winter's chill had returned to oust the bright spring day.

Heinrich Jäger glanced up at the sun before he raised the binoculars to his eyes. In the afternoon, the Lizards down in Split might have been able to spot reflections from the lenses. The hill-fortress of Klis in which he sheltered sat only a few kilometers inland from the city on the Adriatic coast.

The Zeiss optics brought Split leaping almost within arm's length. Sixteen hundred years after it was built, Diocletian's palace still dominated Jäger's view of the city. *Fortress is a better word*, he thought. Actually, it was in essence a Roman legionary camp

transformed into stone: a rough rectangle with sides of 150 to 200 meters, each one pierced by a single, central gate. Three of the four towers at the corners of the rectangle were still standing.

Jäger lowered the binoculars. “Not a place I’d care to try attacking, even nowadays, without heavy artillery on my side,” he said.

Beside him, Otto Skorzeny grunted. “I can see why you went into armor, Jäger: you have no head for the subtleties.”

“What’s that Hungarian curse?—a horse’s cock up your arse?” Jäger said. Both men laughed. Jäger peered through the binoculars again. Even they couldn’t make the Lizard sentries on the walls of the palace and in positions around it seem much more than little moving antlike specks. They were well-sited, no doubt about that; in set-piece situations, the Lizards were quite competent.

Skorzeny chuckled again. “I wonder if our scaly friends down there know that we have better plans of their strongpoint than they do.”

“They wouldn’t have picked it if they did,” Jäger answered. The plans hadn’t come out of the archives of the German General Staff, but from the *Zeitschrift für sudosteuropäischen Archäologie*. Skorzeny found that vastly amusing, and called Jäger “Herr Doktor Professor” every chance he got. But even Skorzeny had to admit that the quality of the plans couldn’t have been better had military engineers drafted them.

“I think you’re right,” the SS man said. “To them it’s just the strongest building in town, so naturally it’s where they moved in.”

“Yes.” Jäger wondered if the Lizards had a concept of archaeology. Word filtering out of intelligence said they were conservative by nature (which he’d already discovered from fighting against them) and that they’d had their own culture as a going concern since the days when people were barbarians if not downright (and barely upright) savages. That made Jäger think they wouldn’t reckon any building a mere millennium and a half old worth studying as a monument of antiquity.

“So, what are you going to do about getting those cursed creatures out of there?” Marko Petrovic asked in fluent if accented German. The Croatian captain’s khaki uniform contrasted with the field gray the Germans wore. Even though Petrovic wore a uniform, being around him made Jäger nervous—he seemed more bandit chief than officer. His thick black beard only added to the effect. It did not, however, completely conceal facial scars that made the one seaming Skorzeny’s cheek a mere scratch by comparison.

Skorzeny turned to the Croat and said, “Patience, my friend. We want to do the job properly, not just quickly.”

Petrovic scowled. His beard and scars made that scowl fearsome, but the look in his eye chilled Jäger more. To Petrovic, it wasn’t just a military problem; he took it personally. That would make him a bold fighter, but a heedless one: Jäger performed the evaluation as automatically as he breathed.



“What’s the complication?” the Croat demanded. “We’re in easy shelling range of the place now. We move in some artillery, open up, and—”

The idea of shelling a building that had stood since the start of the fourth century sickened Jäger, but that wasn’t why he shook his head. “Artillery wouldn’t root them all out, Captain, and it would give them an excuse to expand their perimeter to take in these hills. They’re staying in town; I’d just as soon keep them down there as long as they’re willing to sit quietly.”

“You would not be bleating ‘patience’ if Split were a town in the *Reich*,” Petrovic said.

He had a point; Hitler waxed apoplectic over German territory lost. Jäger was not about to admit that, though. He said, “We have a chance to drive them out, not just annoy them. I aim to make certain we don’t waste it.”

Petrovic glowered—like a lot of the locals, he had a face that was made for glowering: long and bony, with heavy eyebrows and deep-set eyes—but subsided. Skorzeny swatted him on the back and said, “Don’t you worry. We’ll fix those miserable creatures for you.” He sounded breezy and altogether confident.

If he convinced Petrovic, the Croat captain did a good job of hiding it. He said, “You Germans think you can do everything. You’d better be right this time, or—” He didn’t say *or what*, but walked off shaking his head.

Jäger was glad he’d gone. “Some of these Croats are scary bastards,” he said in a low voice. Skorzeny nodded, and anyone who worried him enough for him to admit it was a very rugged customer indeed. Jäger went on, “We’d better get the Lizards out of there, because if we don’t, Ante Pavelic and the *Ustashi* will be just as happy in bed with them as with us, as long as the Lizards let them go on killing Serbs and Jews and Bosnians and—”

“—all their other neighbors,” Skorzeny finished for him. He didn’t acknowledge that the Germans had done the same thing on a bigger scale all through the east. He couldn’t have been ignorant of that; he just deliberately didn’t think about it. Jäger had seen that with other German officers. He’d been the same way himself, until he saw too much for him to ignore. To him, a lot of his colleagues seemed willfully blind.

Skorzeny pulled a flask off his belt, unstopped it, took a healthy belt, and passed it to Jäger. It was vodka, made from potatoes that had died happy. Jäger drank, too. “*Zhiveli*,” he said, one of the few words of Serbo-Croatian he’d picked up.

Skorzeny laughed. “That probably means something like ‘here’s hoping your sheep is a virgin,’” he said, which made Jäger cough and choke. The SS man had another swig, then stowed the flask again. He glanced around with a skilled imitation of casual uninterest to make sure nobody but Jäger was in earshot, then murmured, “I picked up something interesting in town yesterday.”

“Ah?” Jäger said.

The SS colonel nodded. “You remember when I went into Besançon, I had the devil’s own time finding any Lizards to do business with, because one of their high mucky-

mucks had gone through there and cleaned out a whole raft of the chaps who'd gotten themselves hooked on ginger?"

"I remember your saying so, yes," Jäger answered. "It didn't seem to stop you." He also remembered his own amazement and then awe as the bulky Skorzeny writhed his way out of a Lizard panzer several sizes too small for him.

"That's my job, not getting stopped," Skorzeny said with a smug grin that twisted the scar on his cheek. "Turns out the name of that mucky-muck was Drefsab, or something like that. Half the Lizards in Besançon thought he was wonderful for doing such a good job of clearing out the ginger lickers; the other half hated him for doing such a good job."

"What about it?" Jäger said, then paused. "Wait a minute, let me guess—this Dref—whoever is down there in Split now?"

"You're clever, you know that?" The SS man eyed him half in annoyance at having his surprise spoiled, half in admiration. "I wasn't stupid to bring you along here, either. That's it exactly, Jäger: the very same Lizard."

"Coincidence?"

"Anything is possible." Skorzeny's tone said he didn't believe it for a minute. "But by what he did back in France, he's got to be one of their top troubleshooters. And there aren't any ginger lickers down there. The locals would be selling to them if there were, and the ten kilos I brought with me is gathering dust here in Klis. And if it's not about ginger, what's he doing down there?"

"Dickering with the Croats?"

Skorzeny rubbed his chin. "That makes more sense than anything I've come up with. The Lizards need to do some dickering, not just to get their toehold here but also because the Italians were occupying Split until they surrendered to the Lizards. Then the Croats threw 'em out. The scaly boys might be making a deal for Italy as well as for themselves. But it's like a song that's a little out of tune—it doesn't seem quite right to me somehow."

Jäger was indignant at having his brainchild criticized. "Why not?"

"What this Drefsab did in Besançon, that was police work, security work—call it whatever you like. But would you send a *Gestapo* man to negotiate a treaty?"

Now Jäger looked around to make certain neither Captain Petrovic nor any of his merry men could overhear. "If I were negotiating with Ante Pavelic and his Croatian thugs, I just might."

Skorzeny threw back his head and bellowed laughter. A couple of riflemen in the khaki of the Independent State of Croatia glanced over to see what was so funny. Wheezing still, Skorzeny said, "Wicked man! I've told you before, you were wasted in panzers."

"You've told me lots of things. That doesn't make them true," Jäger said, which made

the SS man give him a shot in the ribs with an elbow. He elbowed back, more to remind Skorzeny he couldn't be pushed around than because he felt like fighting. Jäger gave away centimeters, kilograms, and nasty attitude in any scrap with him; he didn't think Skorzeny knew what *quit* meant, either.

"Here, dig out those plans again," Skorzeny said. "I think I know what I want to do, but I'm not quite sure yet." Jäger obediently dug. Skorzeny bent over the drawings, clucking like a mother hen. "I like these underground galleries. We can do things with them."

The halls to which he pointed lay below the southern part of Diocletian's palace. "There used to be upper halls above them, too, with the same plan, but those are long gone," Jäger said.

"Then screw them." Skorzeny didn't care about archaeology, just military potential. "What I want to know is, what's in these galleries?"

"Back in Roman days, they used to be storerooms," Jäger said. "I'm not so sure what's in there now. We need to talk to our good and loyal Croatian allies." He was proud of himself; that came out without a hint of irony.

"Yes, indeed," Skorzeny said, accepting the advice in the spirit in which it was given. "What I'm thinking is, maybe we can dig a tunnel from outside the wall into one of those galleries—"

"Always making sure we don't happen to tunnel into the Lizards' barracks."

"That would make things more complicated." Skorzeny chuckled. "But if we can do that, we have our good and loyal allies make a nice, loud, showy attack on the walls, draw any Lizard who happens to be underground up to the top ... and then we bring in some of our lads through the tunnel and up, and—what was that? The horse's cock up the arse?"

"Yes," Jäger said. "I like that." Then, like a proper devil's advocate, he started picking holes in the plan: "Moving men and weapons into the city and into the place that houses the tunnel or at least somewhere close by it isn't going to be easy. And we'll need a lot of men. That's a big palace down there, big enough for a church and a baptistry and a museum to fit inside, plus God knows what all else. The Lizards will have packed a lot of fighters into it."

"I'm not worried about the Lizards," Skorzeny said. "If these Croats decide to hop into bed with them, though, that'll nail our hides to the wall. We have to keep that from happening, no matter what; I don't give a damn what we have to give Pavelic to keep him on our side."

"Free rein would probably do it, and he has that already, pretty much," Jäger said with distaste. The Independent State of Croatia seemed to have only one plan for staying independent: hammering all its neighbors enough to make sure nobody close by got strong enough to take revenge.

If Skorzeny felt the same revulsion Jäger did, he didn't show it. He said, "We can

promise him more chunks of the coast that the Italians are still occupying. He'll like that—it'll give him fresh traitors to get rid of." He spoke without sarcasm; he might have been talking about the best way to sweeten the deal for a secondhand car.

Jäger couldn't be so cold-blooded. Very softly, he said, "That Schweinhund Pavelic runs a filthy regime."

"You bet he does, but he's our *Schweinhund*, and we want to make sure he stays that way," Skorzeny answered, just as quietly. "If it does, every one of these Lizards, that Drefsab included, is ours, too." He brought a fist down onto his knee. "That *will* happen."

Compared to yielding to the Lizards, making deals with Ante Pavelic seemed worthwhile. Compared to anything else, Jäger found it most repugnant. And yet, before the Lizards came, Pavelic had been a loyal and enthusiastic supporter of the German Reich. Jäger wondered what that said about Germany. *Nothing good*, he thought.

Shanghai amazed Bobby Fiore. Much of the town was pure Chinese, and reminded him of a large-scale, rowdier version of the prison camp where he'd lived with Liu Han. So far, so good; he'd expected as much. What he hadn't expected was the long streets packed full of European-style buildings from the 1920s. It was as if part of Paris, say, had been picked up, carried halfway round the world, and dropped down smack in the middle of China. As far as Fiore was concerned, it didn't fit.

The other thing that amazed him was how much damage the city had taken. You walked around, you knew they'd been in a war here. The Japs had bombed the place to hell and gone, and then burned it when they took it in 1937; he still remembered the news photo of the naked little burned Chinese boy sitting up and crying in the ruins. When he first saw it, he'd been ready to go to war with Japan right then. But he'd cooled down, and so had everybody else. Then Pearl Harbor came along and said he'd been right the first time.

When the Lizards took Shanghai away from the Japs, they hadn't exactly given it a peck on the cheek, either. Whole blocks were leveled, and human bones still lay here and there. The Chinese weren't what you'd call eager to bury Japanese remains. Their attitude was more on the order of *let 'em rot*.

In spite of everything, though, the town, especially the Chinese part of it, kept right on humming. The Lizards made their headquarters in some of the Western-style buildings; the rest remained ruins. In the Chinese districts, things were going up faster than you could shake a stick at them.

But since the Lizards mostly stayed in the International Settlement, Bobby Fiore mostly stayed there, too. The job he'd taken on for the Reds was to keep on looking as much like a Chinaman as he could, to keep his ears open, and to report to Nieh Ho-T'ing anything interesting he heard. The Red officer had promised he'd get to go along when the guerrillas tried a raid based on what he'd learned.

So far, that hadn't happened. "And I'm not gonna worry about it, neither," Fiore muttered under his breath. "Yeah, I wouldn't mind nailing a few of those scaly bastards, but I didn't hire out to be no hero."

He walked across the Garden Bridge over Soochow Creek from the Bund to the Hongkew district to the north. Soochow Creek itself was filled with junks and other small Chinese boats whose names Fiore didn't know: from all he'd heard, people were born and raised and grew up and died on those boats. Some of them made their living fishing on the creek; others worked on land but didn't have anyplace else to stay.

The Hongkew district, in spite of its Chinese name, was part of the International Settlement. The Lizards had an observation post, and probably a machine-gun nest, in the clock tower of the Head Post Office, which lay along Soochow Creek between Broadway and North Szechuen Road.

Bobby Fiore was tempted to duck into the Temple of the Queen of Heaven just a few yards north of the Garden Bridge, even though the Chinese didn't mean the Virgin. In the temple's inner court were the images of the gods Lin Tsiang Ching, who was supposed to see everything within a thousand *li* of Shanghai, and Ching Tsiang Ching, who was supposed to hear everything within the same distance.

Fiore glanced up toward heaven. "They're just patron saints, kind of," he murmured to the Catholic God he assumed to be glancing down at him. The heavens remained mute. He walked past the Temple of the Queen of Heaven this time, though he'd gone in before.

Streets and sidewalks were crowded. No cars and trucks were running except Lizard models and human-made ones taken over by the Lizards, but people, rickshaws, pedicabs, and draft animals took up the slack. Beggars staked out squares of sidewalk; some of them chalked on the paving stones messages of woe Fiore couldn't read. They reminded him of the poor out-of-work bastards who'd hawked apples on streetcorners when the Depression was at its worst.

If the streets had been crowded, the Hongkew marketplace, at the corner of Boone and Woosung Roads, was jammed. Fishermen from Soochow Creek, farmers, butchers—all cried their wares at something just over the top of their lungs. If the market in the prison camp where he'd stayed with Liu Han was Fan's Field in Decatur, this place had to be Yankee Stadium.

Not only locals shopped here, either. Lizards made their skittering, herky-jerky progress from one stall to another. They could simply have taken whatever they wanted; from what Nieh Ho-T'ing had said, they'd done that at first.

"Now they pay," he'd said. "They learn that if they give nothing to get something, it is not in the market square the next time they want it."

Sure enough, a Lizard bought a live, kicking lobster and paid the stall keeper in Chinese silver dollars, which, for reasons Fiore could not fathom, were also called Mex dollars. The Lizard's companion said to him, "These are tasty creatures. Go on, Ianxx,

buy several more. We can cook them for the commandant's midday reception tomorrow."

"It shall be done, superior sir," said the lobster buyer, presumably Ianxx. He went back to bargaining with the fisherman.

Fiore bent his head down and did his best to look Chinese. The brim of his conical straw hat covered his nose and too-round eyes; he wore drab, dark cottons that reminded him of pajamas, just like most other people. The Lizards should have no reason to notice his skin wasn't exactly the right color.

They didn't. They went off with their purchases, holding them carefully to avoid the lobsters' flailing claws. Bobby Fiore followed them back across the Garden Bridge. The Lizards paid no attention to him; as far as they were concerned, he was just another Big Ugly.

*Now which commandant were you talking about?* he asked them silently. They went through the Public Garden near the south edge of the Garden Bridge, and then on to the British Consulate. Fiore skinned back his teeth in a fierce grin; that was where the Lizard commandant for all Shanghai had his headquarters.

Not all of the International Settlement was posh buildings full of foreigners—or rather, now, full of Lizards. In an alley off Foochow Road, jammed in between other equally unpretentious erections, was a dilapidated place called the Sweetheart; the door had the name in English and what he presumed to be its equivalent in Chinese characters. When Fiore went inside, he was greeted by a blast of scratchy jazz from a phonograph and by the multilingual chatter of the working girls in the front lounge.

He snorted laughter. Nieh Ho-T'ing was one smart cookie. The Reds had a reputation for being bluenoses. Who would have figured one of their big wheels would set up shop in a whorehouse?

As far as Bobby knew, Nieh didn't go to bed with any of the girls. He didn't mind if Fiore enjoyed himself, though, and some of the Russians, girls whose parents had been on the losing side of the Revolution and had to get out one step ahead of Lenin's bully boys, were simply gorgeous. He wondered what they thought of being in cahoots with a Red now. He hadn't tried finding out; he'd learned to keep his mouth shut when he wasn't sure about the person he was talking to.

He opened the door to the lounge. The jazz got louder. The chatter, on the other hand, suddenly stopped. Then the girls recognized him and started gabbing again.

He looked around like a kid in a candy store. Russians, Eurasians, Chinese, Koreans, some in European-style lingerie, others in clinging dresses of Chinese silk slit up to here and sometimes down to there, too ... just being a fly on the wall at the Sweetheart was almost as good as getting laid at some of the dismal sporting houses he'd been to back in the States.

"Is Uncle Wu around?" he asked; that was the name Nieh Ho-T'ing used hereabouts. Another wonderful thing about the Sweetheart was that he could speak English. Almost

all the girls understood it, and two or three of them were about as fluent as he was.

One of the Russians, a blonde in a silk dress slit up to here and then a couple of inches farther, pointed to the stairway and said, “*Da*, Bobby, he is in his room now.”

“Thanks, Shura.” Bobby made himself look away from the display of creamy thigh and head for the stairs.

Up on the second floor, he made sure he knocked on the third door on the left. If he’d picked the wrong one by mistake, he might have interrupted somebody who didn’t want to be interrupted. Too many people in Shanghai carried guns to make that a good idea.

As a matter of fact, when Nieh Ho-T’ing opened the door, he was holding a submachine gun himself. He relaxed when he saw Fiore—or relaxed as far as he ever did, which wasn’t much. “Come in,” he said, and closed the door behind Fiore. “What do you have for me?”

Bobby hated shifting from English to his halting Chinese, but he knew Nieh Ho-T’ing would burst a blood vessel if he suggested using one of the hookers to interpret. The Red officer waved him to a chair. On either wall, multitudes of mirrored images of him also sat down: this was a room in a brothel, sure enough.

He told Nieh Ho-T’ing what he’d heard in the Hongkew market. Nieh listened, asked questions, and finally nodded. “Luncheon tomorrow for their commandant in the British Consulate, you say?” he mused when Fiore was done. “Maybe we can make it a livelier occasion than the little scaly devils expect, eh?”

“Yeah,” Bobby Fiore said; one of his frustrations in speaking Chinese was that he couldn’t qualify anything. He had to go thumbs-up or thumbs-down, with nothing in the middle.

Nieh Ho-T’ing smiled, not altogether pleasantly. He said, “I was wise to use you and not liquidate you out in the countryside. You have brought information I can employ, and which I could not have had without you.”

“That’s nice,” Fiore said with an uneasy answering smile. *Liquidate* wasn’t a Chinese word he’d figured he’d pick up in ordinary conversation, but Nieh used it a lot. The Reds were in deadly earnest about what they did. You weren’t with them, you’d better have your life insurance paid up.

The really crazy part of it was, whenever Nieh Ho-T’ing didn’t make like a revolutionary or a Mafia soldier, he was as nice a guy as you’d ever want to meet. It was as if he put all the murderous stuff in a box and took it out whenever he needed it, but when he wasn’t using it, you wouldn’t guess it was there.

Now his smile was broad and happy, as if such things as liquidation had never crossed his mind. He said, “I’m going to do you a favor in return for the one you did me. I am sure you will take it in the intended spirit.”

“Yeah? What kind of favor?” Fiore asked suspiciously. Favors always sounded good. Sometimes they were, as when Nieh had said it was okay for him to fool around with the girls downstairs. But sometimes ...

This was one of *those* times. Still beaming, Nieh said, "I am going to keep the promise I made you: you will be part of our raiding team."

"Uh, thank you." That was the best Fiore could do in Chinese. If he'd been speaking English, it would have come out, *Oh boy, thanks a lot.*

If Nieh Ho-Ting noticed the irony and lack of enthusiasm, he didn't show it. "Aiding in the fight against the imperialist devils from another world is surely the duty of every human being. Those who do not join in the struggle are the devils' running dogs, and we know the fate of running dogs, eh?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," Bobby Fiore muttered. Talk about stuck between a rock and a hard place! If he came along for the ride, the Lizards would shoot him. If he didn't, the Chinese Reds would take care of the job. Either way, he could forget about finding out how the latest serial over at the Nanking on Avenue Edward VII was going to end.

Musingly, Nieh Ho-T'ing said, "Your pistol is not a good enough weapon for this work. We will make certain you have a submachine gun." He held up a hand. "No, don't thank me. It is for the mission as much as for yourself."

Bobby hadn't planned on thanking him. He wished he were back in the Lizard prison camp with Liu Han, and that he'd never, ever tried to teach that Chinaman named Lo how not to throw like a girl.

With a slight curl to his lip—he really was a bluenose at heart—Nieh said, "Why don't you go downstairs and amuse yourself for a time, if you have nothing better to do? I need to find out if we can do what needs doing on such short notice, and the best way to do it if we can."

Fiore didn't need any more urging to go downstairs. If he was going off to get shot at (he carefully didn't think of it as *to get shot*) tomorrow, he'd have fun tonight. Not much later, he ended up back in one of those mirrored rooms with Shura the White Russian blonde. By any objective standard, she was prettier and better in the sack than Liu Han had been, so he wondered why he didn't feel as happy as he might have when he went back to the room where he slept.

The only thing he could think of was that he'd cared about Liu Han and she about him, but Shura was just going through the motions, even if she played the mattress the way Billy Herman played second base. "Goddamn," he muttered sleepily. "I guess it was love." Next thing he knew, the sun was up.

He went down to breakfast like a condemned man heading off for his last meal. Even eyeing the girls couldn't snap him out of his funk. He was finishing his cup of tea when Nieh Ho-T'ing stuck his head into the kitchen and waved to him. "Come here. We have things to talk about."

Bobby came. Nieh handed Fiore a rattan suitcase. It was heavy. When Fiore opened it, he found a Russian submachine gun, several magazines of ammunition, and four potato-masher grenades.

"You will not go in with us," Nieh said. "You loiter across from the front entrance to



the British Consulate. When the time comes—you will know, I assure you—kill the guards there if you can and help any human beings who come out through those doors.”

“Okay,” Fiore said in English when he was sure he understood what Nieh wanted from him. The Red nodded; he got that. Fiore switched to his lousy Chinese: “How will you get in the consulate? How will you bring more guns in?”

“I should not tell you—security.” But Nieh Ho-T’ing looked too pleased with himself to keep his mouth shut altogether. He went on, “This much I will say: the consulate will have some new human cooks and waiters today, and they will be bringing in ducks to go with the lobsters for the commandant’s feast.”

He clammed up again—if Bobby couldn’t work it out from there, that was his tough luck. But he could, and started to laugh when he thought about how those ducks would be stuffed. No wonder Nieh looked so smug! “Good luck,” Fiore said. He stuck out his hand, but yanked it back; Chinamen didn’t go in for handshakes.

Nieh Ho-T’ing surprised him, though, by reaching out and taking his hand. “My Soviet comrades have this custom; I know what it means,” he said, then looked at his watch. “Take your place at noon. The banquet is supposed to begin at half past the hour, and will not last long.”

“Okay,” Fiore said. If he’d been in a town where he spoke the language, he would have thought about taking it on the lam with the arsenal. Getting the Reds mad at him, though, seemed a worse bet than taking his chances on the Lizards.

He had plenty of time for another screw before he took off. Shura came back upstairs with him willingly enough. Afterwards, she blinked when he gave her an extra couple of dollars Mex; he was usually as cheap as he could get away with. “You rob a bank, Bobby?” she asked.

“Two of ’em, babe,” he said, deadpan, as he started to dress. She blinked again, then decided it was a joke and laughed.

Suitcase in hand, he headed for the Bund. He knew Nieh Ho-T’ing and his buddies were taking the real risk; if the Lizards inside the British Consulate were on their toes, the scheme was dead in the water.

He got to Number 33, the Bund, just as clocks were striking twelve. Nieh would be pleased with him; when he said noon, he meant on the dot. Now Bobby had to hang around and look inconspicuous till the fireworks started. He bought a bowl of watery soup from a passing vendor, then had an inspiration and bought the bowl itself. He sat down on the pavement with it beside him and made like a beggar.

Every once in a while, somebody tossed a copper in the bowl, or even some silver. Bobby kept track—when the shooting started, he had just over a dollar, Mex.

The British Consulate was a large, imposing building. Not even its stonework, though, could muffle the rattle of automatic weapons fire. The Lizard guards at the main entrance whirled around and stared, as if unsure what to do next and unable to believe the ears they didn’t have.

Fiore didn't give them much of a chance to think it over. As soon as he heard guns, he opened the suitcase, yanked out a grenade, unscrewed the metal cap at the bottom, pulled the porcelain bead inside to work the friction igniter, and let fly as if he were making a throw to the plate.

Had there been a runner, he would have been out. The grenade landed right in the middle of the four Lizards. When it went off a second later, people who had been exclaiming over the shots inside the consulate started screaming and running instead.

The only trouble was, it didn't knock out all the Lizards. A couple of them started shooting, even if they didn't know just where it had come from. The screams along the Bund turned into shrieks. Fiore dove behind a solid bench of wood and iron; he opened up with the submachine gun. He hoped he didn't hit anybody on the street, but he wasn't going to lose any sleep if he did—those Lizards had to go down. And down they went.

More shots from inside the British Consulate, then those entry doors burst open. Nieh and half a dozen other Chinamen, some wearing cooks' clothes, the rest looking like penguins in fancy waiter getup (though waiters didn't commonly tote automatic weapons), sprinted down the steps and then down the street.

Lizards opened up on them from the roof and from second-story windows. The fleeing humans started spinning and dropping and kicking, like flies swatted not quite hard enough to die right away. "You just talked about the bastards at the door, goddammit," Bobby muttered, as if Nieh Ho-T'ing were close enough to hear. "You didn't say nothin' about the rest of 'em."

He raised the submachine gun and blazed away at the Lizards till his magazine ran dry. He grabbed another one, slammed it into the weapon, and had just started shooting again when a burst of three bullets stitched across his chest. The submachine gun fell out of his hands. He tried to reach for it, found he couldn't. He didn't hurt. Then he did. Then he didn't, ever again.

Brigadier General Leslie Groves strode across the campus of the University of Denver with his head down, as if he were a bull looking to trample anyone who got in his way. That hard-charging attitude had been instinctive in him until one day he noticed and deliberately cultivated it. Thanks in no small part to that, not a whole lot of people got in his way these days.

"Physicists," he snorted under his breath, again bullishly. The trouble with them was, they were so lost in their own rarefied world a lot of the time that they didn't always feel the pressure he put on them, let alone yield to it.

He didn't note anything out of the ordinary about the day until he walked into the Science building and discovered he didn't recognize any of the soldiers crowding the downstairs lobby. That made him frown; Sam Yeager and the rest of the dogfaces with the Met Lab crew were as familiar to him as his shoelaces.

He looked around for the highest-ranking officer he could find. “Why have we been invaded, Major?” he asked.

The fellow with the gold oak leaves on his shoulders saluted. “If you’d be so kind as to come with me, General—” he said in the polite phrases lower-ranking officers use to give their superiors orders.

Groves was so kind as to come with him until he figured out where he was going, which didn’t take long. “Major, if I need an escort to find my own office, I’m the wrong man to head this project,” he growled. The major didn’t answer; he just kept walking. Groves fumed but followed. Sure enough, they were heading for his office. In front of it stood a couple of men who looked as tough and alert as soldiers but wore medium-snappy civilian suits. A light went on in Groves’ head. He turned to the major and asked, “Secret Service?”

“Yes, sir.”

One of the T-men, after checking Groves’ face against a little photo he held in the palm of his hand, nodded to the other. The second one opened the door and said, “General Groves is here, sir.”

“Well, he’d better come in, then, hadn’t he?” an infinitely familiar voice replied from within. “It being his office, after all.”

“Why the devil didn’t I get any warning President Roosevelt was coming to Denver?” Groves hissed to the major.

“Security,” the other officer whispered back. “We have to assume the Lizards monitor everything we broadcast, and we’ve lost couriers, too. The less we say, the safer FDR is. Now go on in; he’s been waiting for you.”

Groves went in. He’d met Roosevelt before, and knew the President wasn’t as vibrant in person as he appeared in the newsreels: being cooped up in a wheelchair would do that to you. But since the last time he’d seen FDR, a year earlier at White Sulphur Springs, the change was shocking. Roosevelt’s flesh seemed to have fallen in on his bones; he might have aged a decade or more in that year. He looked like a man worn to death’s door.

For all that, though, his grip was still strong when he reached out to shake General Groves’ hand after the engineer had saluted. “You’ve lost weight, General,” he observed, amusement in his eyes—his body might be falling to pieces around it, but his mind was still sharp.

“Yes, sir,” Groves answered. Roosevelt had lost weight, too, but he wasn’t about to remark on it.

“Sit down, sit down.” The President waved him to the swivel chair behind his desk. Groves obediently sat. Roosevelt turned the wheelchair to face him. Even his hands had lost flesh; the skin hung loose on them. He sighed and said, “I wish to God I had a cigarette, but that’s neither here nor there—certainly not here, worse luck.” FDR sighed again. “Do you know, General, when Einstein sent me that letter of his back in ‘39, I

had the feeling all his talk of nuclear weapons and bombs that could blow up the world was likely to be so much moonshine, but I couldn't take the chance of being wrong. And, it turns out, I was right—and how I wish I hadn't been!"

"Yes, sir," Groves repeated, but then added, "If you hadn't been right, though, sir, we'd have been in no position to resist the Lizards and to copy what they've done."

"That's true, but it's not what I meant," Roosevelt said. "I wish I'd been right, and that all the talk about nuclear weapons and atomic power and who knows what *were* so much moonshine. Then all I'd have to worry about would be beating Hitler and Hirohito, and the Lizards would be back on the second planet of the star Tau Ceti where they belong, and people wouldn't meet them for another million years, if we ever did."

"Is that where they're from?" Groves asked with interest. "I'll have to have our liaison man put the question to the Lizard POWs we have here."

FDR made a gesture of indifference. "As you like, and if you have the time; otherwise don't trouble yourself about it. These Lizards are an astonishing intelligence resource, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir," Groves said enthusiastically. "The ones we have here have been extremely cooperative."

"Not just them, General. With what we're learning from systematic interrogation of all our captives, we'll leap forward by decades, maybe centuries." Roosevelt's expression, which had brightened, turned cloudy again. "If we win the war, that is—which is what I came to talk about. What I want to know is, how soon will we have nuclear weapons of our own to use against the Lizards?" He leaned forward in his chair, intently awaiting Groves' reply.

Groves nodded; he'd expected the question. "Sir, I am told we can have one nuclear bomb fairly soon. England supplied us with enough plutonium that we need to manufacture only a few more kilograms of our own to have enough for a bomb. Within a year, the scientists here tell me."

"That's not soon enough." Roosevelt made a sour face. "It may do, but every day they shave off it will bring the country one day closer to being saved. How long for more after the first?"

Now it was Groves' turn to look unhappy. "You understand, sir, that we have to come up with all the explosive material for them on our own. The pile—that's what they call it—the Met Lab staff has built here isn't ideally designed for that, although we are improving it as we gain experience. And one of our physicists is scouting a site where we can build a pile that will give us larger amounts of plutonium." He wondered how Jens Larssen was doing.

"I know about Hanford," Roosevelt said impatiently. "I don't need the technical details, General—that's why *you're* here. But I do need to know how long I have to wait for my weaponry so I can make sure there's still a country left when I get it."

"I understand," Groves said. "If all goes well—if the pile goes up on schedule and

works as advertised, and if the Lizards don't overrun Hanford or wherever we put it—you should have more bombs starting about six months after the first one: by the end of 1944, more or less.”

“Not soon enough,” Roosevelt repeated. “Still, we're better off than the rest. The Germans might have been right there with us, but you've no doubt heard about the mistakes they made with their pile. The British are relying on us; we're passing information to the Japanese, who are well behind us; and the Russians—I don't know about the Russians.”

Groves' opinion of Soviet scientific prowess was not high. Then he remembered the Russians had got some plutonium from that raid on the Lizards, too. “A wild card,” he said.

“That's right.” Roosevelt nodded emphatically. His famous jaw still had granite in it, no matter how badly the rest of his features had weathered. “I've been in touch with Stalin. He's worried—the Lizards are pushing hard against Moscow. If it falls, who can say whether the Russians will keep on listening to their government, and if they don't, we've lost a big piece of the war.”

“Yes, sir,” Groves said. Although he was as security-conscious as a man in his position had to be, he also had a well-honed curiosity—and how often did you get to pick the brain of the President of the United States? “How bad is it over in the Soviet Union, sir?”

“It's not good,” FDR said. “Stalin told me that if I had any men to spare, he'd leave them under their own officers, leave them under my direct personal command if that was wanted, as long as they went over there and fought the Lizards.”

Groves' lips puckered into a soundless whistle. That was a cry of pain if ever he'd heard one. “He's not just worried, sir, he's desperate. What did you tell him?”

“I answered no, of course,” Roosevelt said. “We have a few small differences with the Lizards on our own soil at the moment.” The high-pitched laugh so familiar from the radio and the newsreel screen filled the office. As it had so often in the past, it lifted Groves' spirits—but only for a moment. The danger facing—filling—the United States was too great to be laughed off. The President continued, “For instance, the Lizards are pushing hard against Chicago, too. They have us cut in half along the Mississippi almost as badly as the North did with the South during the Civil War, to say nothing of the other areas they've carved out of the country. It hinders us every way you can think of, militarily and economically both.”

“Believe me, sir, I understand that,” Groves said, remembering how he'd had to bring the plutonium to Denver by way of Canada. “What can we do about it, though?”

“Fight 'em,” Roosevelt answered. “If they're going to *beat* us, they'll have to beat us, no other way. From what we hear from prisoners we've captured, they've taken over two other whole worlds before they attacked us, and they've ruled them for thousands of years. If we lose, General, if we lay down and give up, it's for keeps. That's why I came

to talk about the atomic bomb: if I have any weapon I can use against those dastardly creatures, I want to know about it.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give you better news, sir.”

“So am I.” Roosevelt hunched his shoulders and let out another long sigh. His shirt and jacket both seemed a couple of sizes too big. The burden of the war was killing him; Groves realized with a jolt that that was literally true. He wondered where Vice President Henry Wallace was and what sort of shape he was in.

He couldn’t say that to the President. What he did say was, “The trick will be to get through the time between using the one bomb we can make fairly quickly and the rest, which will take longer.”

“Yes indeed,” FDR said. “I’d hoped that would be a shorter gap. As it is, we’ll have to be very careful picking the time when we use the first one. You’re right that we would be very vulnerable to whatever atomic response the Lizards make.”

Groves had seen pictures of the slag heap the Lizards had made of Washington, D.C. He heard men who’d seen it talk about the incongruous beauty of the tall cloud of dust and hot gas that had sprouted over the city like a gigantic, poisonous toadstool. He imagined such toadstools springing into being above other cities across the United States, across the world. A bit of Latin from his prep-school days came back to haunt him: *they make a desert and they call it peace.*

When he murmured that aloud, the President nodded and said, “Exactly so. And in a curious way, that may turn out to be one of our greatest strengths. Our Lizard prisoners insist to a man—well, to a Lizard—that they don’t want to use their atomic weapons here on a large scale. They say it would do too much damage to the planet: they want to control Earth and settle colonists on it, not just smash us by any means that come to hand.”

“Whereas, we can do anything we have to, to get rid of them,” Groves said. “Yes, sir, I see what you mean. Odd that we should have fewer constraints on our strategy than they do when they have the more powerful weapons.”

“That’s just what I mean,” Roosevelt agreed. “If we—humanity, that is—can say, ‘If we don’t get to keep our world, you won’t use it, either,’ that will give our scaly friends something new and interesting to think about. Their colonization fleet will be here in a generation’s time, and I gather it can’t be conveniently recalled. If the Lizards lay Earth to waste, the colonists are like somebody invited to a party at a house that’s just burnt to the ground: all dressed up with no place to go.”

“And no one to pass them a hose to put out the fire, either,” Groves observed.

That won a chuckle from FDR. “Nice to know you were paying attention when I made my Lend-Lease speech.”

Any military man who didn’t pay attention to what his commander-in-chief said was an idiot, as far as Groves was concerned. He replied, “The question is how far we can push that line of reasoning, sir. If the Lizards are faced with the prospect of either losing

the war or hurting us as badly as we hurt them, which will they choose?"

"I don't know," Roosevelt said, which made Groves respect his honesty. "I tell you this, though, General: compared to the problems we have right now, I shouldn't mind facing that one at all. I want you and your crew here to exert every effort possible to producing that first atomic bomb and then as many more as fast as you can. If we go down, I'd sooner go down with guns blazing than with our hands in the air."

"Yes, sir, so would I," Groves said. "We'll do everything we can, sir."

"I'm sure you will, General." Roosevelt turned his wheelchair and rolled toward the door. He got to it and opened it before Groves could come around the desk to do the job for him. That made the old jaunty look come back to his haggard features, just for a moment. He liked to preserve as much independence as his circumstances allowed.

And in that, Groves thought, he was a good representative for the whole planet.

Mordechai Anielewicz had never imagined he would be relieved that the Lizards had set up a rocket battery right outside Leczna, but he was. That gave him an excuse to stay indoors, which meant he didn't have to see Zofia Klopotowski for a while.

"It's not that I don't like her, you understand," he told Dr. Judah Ussishkin over the chessboard one night.

"No, it wouldn't be that, would it?" Ussishkin's voice was dry. He moved a knight. "She's fond of you, too."

Anielewicz's face flamed as he studied the move. Zofia would have been more fond of him in direct proportion to any increased stamina he showed. He'd never imagined an affair with a woman who was more lecherous than he was; up till now, he'd always had to do the persuading. But Zofia would drop anything to get between the sheets—or under a wagon, or into the backseat of Dr. Ussishkin's moribund Fiat.

Trying to keep his mind on the game, Mordechai pushed a pawn one square ahead. That kept the knight from taking a position in which, with one more move, it could fork his queen and a rook.

A beatific smile wreathed Ussishkin's tired face. "Ah, my boy, you are learning," he said. "Your defense has made good progress since we began to play. Soon, now, you will learn to put together an effective attack, and then you will be a player to be reckoned with."

"Coming from you, Doctor, that's a compliment." Anielewicz wanted to be a player to be reckoned with, and he wanted to mount an effective attack. He hadn't got to be head of the Jewish fighters in Lizard-occupied Poland by sitting back and waiting for things to happen; his instinct was to try to make them happen. Against Ussishkin, he hadn't been able to, not yet.

He did his best; the midgame might have seen a machine gun rake the chessboard, so fast and furious did pieces fall. But when the exchanges were done, he found himself down a bishop and a pawn and facing another losing position. He tipped over his king.

"You make me work harder all the time," Ussishkin said. "I got some plum brandy for stitching up a farmer's cut hand yesterday. Will you take a glass with me?"

"Yes, thank you, but don't ask me for another game of chess afterwards," Mordechai said. "If I can't beat you sober, I'm sure I can't beat you *shikker*."

Ussishkin smiled as he poured. "Chess and brandy do not mix." The brandy came from a bottle that had once, by its label, held vodka. People still had vodka these days, but it was homemade. For that matter, the plum brandy had to be homemade, too. Ussishkin lifted his glass in salute. "*L'chaym*."

"*L'chaym*." Anielewicz drank. The raw brandy charred all the way down; sweat sprang out on his face. "Phew! If that were any stronger, you wouldn't need gasoline for your



automobile.”

“Ah, but if I got it running, think how disappointed you and Zofia would be,” Ussishkin said. Mordechai blushed again. In the candlelight, the doctor didn’t notice, or pretended he didn’t. He turned serious. “I know telling a young man to be careful is more often than not a waste of time, but I will try with you. Do be careful. If you make her pregnant, her father will not be pleased, which means the rest of the Poles here will not be pleased, either. We and they have gotten on as well as could be expected, all things considered. I would not like that to change.”

“No, neither would I,” Mordechai said. For one thing, Leczna held a good many more Poles than Jews; strife would not be to the minority’s advantage. For another, strife among the locals was liable to draw the Lizards’ unwelcome attention to the town. They already had more interest than Anielewicz liked, for they drew their food locally. He preferred staying in obscurity.

“You seem sensible, for one so young.” Ussishkin sipped his brandy again. He didn’t cough or flush or give any other sign he wasn’t drinking water. An aspiring engineer till the war, Anielewicz guessed he’d had his gullet plated with stainless steel. The doctor went on, “You should also remember—if she does conceive, the child would be raised a Catholic. And she might try to insist on your marrying her. I doubt”—now Ussishkin coughed, not from the plum brandy but to show he did more than doubt—“she would convert. Would you?”

“No.” Mordechai answered without hesitation. Before the Germans invaded, he hadn’t been pious; he’d lived in the secular world, not that of the *shtetl* and the *yeshiva*. But the Nazis didn’t care whether you were secular or not. They wanted to be rid of you any which way. More and more, he’d decided that if he was a Jew, he’d *be* a Jew. Turning Christian was not an option.

“Marriages of mixed religion are sometimes happy, but more often battlegrounds,” Ussishkin observed.

Mordechai didn’t want to marry Zofia Klopotoski. He wouldn’t have wanted to marry her if she were Jewish. He did, however, want to keep on making love with her, if not quite as often as she had in mind. If he did, she’d probably catch sooner or later, which would lead to the unpleasant consequences the doctor had outlined. He knocked back the rest of his brandy, wheezed, and said, “Life is never simple.”

“There I cannot argue with you. Death is simple; I have seen so much death these past few years that it seems very simple to me.” Ussishkin exhaled, a long, gusty breath that made candle flames flutter. Then he poured fresh plum brandy into his glass. “And if I start talking like a philosopher instead of a tired doctor, I must need to be more sober or more drunk.” He sipped. “You see my choice.”

“Oh, yes.” Mordechai put an edge of irony in his voice. He wondered how many years had rolled past since Judah Ussishkin last got truly drunk. *Probably more than I’ve been alive*, he thought.

Far off in the distance, he heard airplane engines, at first like gnats with deep voices but rapidly swelling to full-throated roars. Then roars, these harsh and abrupt, rose from the rocket battery the Lizards had stationed out beyond the beet fields.

Ussishkin's face grew sad. "More death tonight, this time in the air."

"Yes." Anielewicz wondered how many German or Russian planes, how many young Germans or Russians, were falling out of the sky. Almost as many as the Lizards had shot at—their rockets were ungodly accurate. Flying a mission knowing you were likely to run into such took courage. Even if you were a Nazi, it took courage.

Somewhere not far away, a thunderclap announced a bomber's return to earth. Dr. Ussishkin gulped down the second glass of brandy, then got himself a third. Anielewicz raised an eyebrow; maybe he did mean to get drunk. The physician said, "A pity the Lizards can slay with impunity."

"Not with impunity. We—" Anielewicz shut up. One glass of brandy had led him to say one word too many. He didn't know how much Ussishkin knew about his role as Jewish fighting leader; he'd carefully refrained from asking the doctor, for fear of giving away more than he learned. But Ussishkin had to be aware he was part of the resistance, for Anielewicz was not the first man who'd taken refuge here.

In a musing voice, as if speculating about an obscure and much disputed biblical text, Ussishkin said, "I wonder if anything could be done about those rockets without endangering the townsfolk."

"Something could probably be done," Anielewicz said; he'd studied the site with professional interest while the Lizards prepared it. "What would happen to the town afterwards is a different question."

"The Lizards are not the hostage takers the Nazis were," Ussishkin said, still musingly.

"I have the feeling they knew war only from books before they got here," Mordechai answered. "A lot of the filthy stuff, no matter how well it works, doesn't get into that kind of book." He glanced sharply over at Ussishkin. "Or are you saying *I* should do something about that rocket installation?"

The doctor hesitated; he knew they were treading dangerous ground. At last he said, "I thought you might perhaps have some experience in such things. Was I wrong?"

"Yes—and no," Anielewicz said. Sometimes you had to know when to drop your cover, too. "Playing games with the Lizards here is a lot different from what it's like in a place like Warsaw. A lot more buildings to hide among there—a lot more people to hide among, too. Here their rocket launchers and everything they use for them are set up right out in the open—hard to get at without being spotted."

"I don't suppose the razor-wire circles around them make matters any easier, either," Ussishkin murmured.

"They certainly don't." Anielewicz thought about going off in the night and trying to pot a few Lizards from long range with his Mauser. But the Lizards had gadgets that let them see in the dark the way cats wished they could. Even without those gadgets,

sniping wouldn't really hurt the effectiveness of the battery: the Lizards would just replace whatever males he managed to wound or kill.

Then, all of a sudden, he laughed out loud. "And what amuses you?" Judah Ussishkin asked. "Somehow I doubt it's razor wire."

"No, not razor wire," Anielewicz admitted. "But I think I know how to get through it." He explained. It didn't take long.

By the time he was done, Ussishkin's eyes were wide and staring. "This will work?" he demanded.

"They had enough trouble with it in Warsaw," Mordechai said. "I don't know just what it will do here, but it ought to do *something*."

"You're still lying low, aren't you?" Ussishkin said, then answered his own question: "Yes, of course you are. And even if you weren't, I'd be a better choice to approach Tadeusz Sobieski, anyhow. He's known me all his life; when he was born, my Sarah delivered him. I'll talk with him first thing in the morning. We'll see if he can be as generous to the Lizards as you have in mind."

With that, Anielewicz had to be content. He stayed inside Dr. Ussishkin's house. Sarah wouldn't let him help with the cooking or cleaning, so he read books and studied the chessboard. Every day, a horse-drawn wagon rattled down the street, carrying supplies from Sobieski the grocer to the Lizards at their rocket battery.

For several days, nothing happened. Then one bright, sunny afternoon, a time when neither the *Luftwaffe* nor the Red Air Force would be insane enough to put planes in the air over Poland, the battery launched all its rockets, one after another, *roar! roar! roar!* into the sky.

Farmworkers came running in from the fields. Mordechai felt like hugging himself with glee as he listened to scraps of their excited conversation: "The things have gone crazy!" "Shot off their rockets, then started shooting at each other!" "Never seen fireworks like them in all my born days!"

Dr. Ussishkin came into the house a few minutes later. "You were right, it seems," he said to Anielewicz. "This was the day Tadeusz laced all the supplies with as much ginger as he had. They do have a strong reaction to the stuff, don't they?"

"It's more than a drunk for them; more like a drug," Mordechai answered. "It makes them fast and nervous—hair-trigger, I guess you might say. Somebody must have imagined he heard engines or thought he saw something in one of their instruments, and that would have been plenty to touch them off."

"I wonder what they'll do now," Ussishkin said. "Not the ones who went berserk out there today, but the higher-ranking ones who ordered the battery placed where it was."

They didn't have long to wait for their answer. At least one of the Lizards must have survived and radioed Lublin, for inside the hour several Lizard lorries from the urban center rolled through the streets of Leczna. When they left the next day, they took the rocket launchers with them. If the battery went up again, it went up somewhere else.

With the Lizards out of the neighborhood, Anielewicz had no more excuse for staying indoors all the time. Zofia Kłopotowski waylaid him and dragged him into the bushes, or as near as made no difference. After his spell of celibacy, he kept up with her for a while, but then his ardor began to flag.

Just as he'd never imagined he'd have been relieved to see the Lizards erect their rocket battery in his own back yard, so to speak, he found equally surprising his halfhearted wish that they'd come back.

A disheveled soldier shouted frantically in Russian. When George Bagnall didn't understand fast enough to suit him, he started to point his submachine gun at the grounded aviator.

By then, Bagnall had had a bellyful of frantic Russians. He'd even had a bellyful of frantic Germans, a species that did not exist in stereotype but proved quite common under the stress of combat. He got to his feet, knocked the gun barrel aside with a contemptuous swipe, and growled, "Why don't you shove that thing up your arse—or would you rather I did it for you?"

He spoke in English, but the tone got across. So did his manner. The Red Army man stopped treating him like a servant and started treating him like an officer. The old saw about the Hun being either at your throat or at your feet seemed to apply even more to Russians than it did to Germans. If you gave in to them, they rode roughshod over you, but if you showed a little bulge, they figured you had to be the boss and started tugging at their forelocks.

Bagnall turned to Jerome Jones. "What's this bloody goon babbling about? I have more Russian than I did when we got stuck here—not hard, that, since I had none—but I can't make head nor tail of it when he goes on so blinking fast."

"I'll see if I can find out, sir," Jones answered. The radarman had spoken a little Russian before he landed in Pskov; after several months—*and no doubt a good deal of intimate practice with the fair Tatiana*, Bagnall thought enviously—he was pretty fluent. He said something to the Russian soldier, who shouted and pointed to the map on the wall.

"The usual?" Bagnall asked.

"The usual," Jones agreed tiredly: "wanting to know if his unit should conform to General Chill's orders and pull back from the second line to the third one." He switched back to Russian, calmed down the soldier, and sent him on his way. "They'll obey, even if he is a Nazi. They probably should have obeyed two hours ago, before Ivan there came looking for us, but, God willing, they won't have taken too many extra casualties for being stubborn."

Bagnall sighed. "When I proposed this scheme, I thought we'd get only the serious business." He made a face. "I was young and naive—I admit it."

"You'd damned well better," said Ken Embry, who was pouring himself a glass of

herb-and-root tea from a battered samovar on the opposite side of the gloomy room in the *Pskov Krom*. “You must have thought being tsar came with the *droit de seigneur* attached.”

“Only for Jones here,” Bagnall retorted, which made the radarman stammer and cough. “At the time, I remember thinking two things. First was to keep the Nazis and Bolshies from bashing each other so the Lizards wouldn’t have themselves a walkover here.”

“We’ve managed that, for the moment, anyhow,” Embry said. “If the Lizards committed more tanks to this front, we’d have a dry time of it, but they seem to have decided they need them elsewhere. They get no complaints from me on that score, I assure you.”

“Nor from me,” Bagnall said. “They’re quite enough trouble as is.”

“There’s fighting on the outskirts of Kaluga, the wireless reports,” Jerome Jones said. “That’s not far southwest of Moscow, and there’s damn all between it and Red Square. Doesn’t sound what you’d call good.”

“No, that’s bad,” Embry agreed. “Makes me glad so many of the fighters here are partisans—locals—and not regular-army types recruited from God knows where. If you’re fighting for your own particular home, you’re less likely to want to pack it in if Moscow falls.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but I dare say you’re right,” Bagnall answered, “even if it is a most unsocialist thing to say.”

“What, that you’re gladder to fight for your own property? Well, I’m a Tory from a long line of Tories, and I don’t feel the slightest bit guilty about it,” Embry said. “All right, George, you didn’t want the Russians and the Jerries to go at each other. What was the other notion in what passes for your mind as to why we needed this particular headache?”

“After that raid on the Lizards’ outpost, I had a serious disinclination toward infantry combat, if you must know,” Bagnall said. “What of you?”

“Well, I must admit that, given the choice between another stint of it and ending up in the kip with that barmaid in Dover we all knew, I’d be likely to choose Sylvia,” Embry said judiciously. “I do believe, however, that we perform a useful function here. If we didn’t, I’d feel worse about not shouldering my trusty rifle and going out to do or die for Holy Mother Russia.”

“Oh, quite,” Bagnall agreed. “Keeping the Germans and the Soviets from each other’s throats isn’t the least contribution we could make to the war effort in Pskov.”

Lizard planes roared low overhead. Antiaircraft guns, mostly German, threw shells into the air at them, adding to the racket that pierced the *Krom*’s thick stone walls. None of the antiaircraft guns was stationed very close to Pskov’s old citadel. The ack-ack wasn’t good enough to keep the Lizards from hitting just about anything they wanted to hit, and drew their notice to whatever it tried to protect. Bagnall approved of not

having their notice drawn to the *Krom*: being buried under tons of rock was not the way of shuffling off this mortal coil he had in mind.

Lieutenant General Kurt Chill stalked into the room, followed by Brigadier Aleksandr German, one of the chiefs of what had been the partisan Forest Republic until the Lizards came. Both men looked furious. They had even more basic reasons than most in Pskov for disliking and distrusting each other: it wasn't just *Wehrmacht* against Red Army with them, it was Nazi against Jew.

"Well, gentlemen, what seems to be the bone of contention now?" Bagnall asked, as if the disagreements in Pskov were over the teams to pick for a football pool rather than moves that would get men killed. Sometimes that detached tone helped calm the excited men who came for arbitration.

And sometimes it didn't. Aleksandr German shouted, "This Hitlerite maniac won't give me the support I need. If he doesn't send some men, a lot of the left is going to come apart. And does he care? Not even a little bit. As long as he can keep *his* precious troops intact, who cares what happens to the front?"

Bagnall could barely follow the partisan brigadier's fast, guttural Yiddish. It was close enough to German for Chill to have no trouble understanding it, though. He snapped, "The man is a fool. He wants me to commit elements of the 122nd Antitank Battalion to an area where no panzers are opposing his forces. If I send the battalion piecemeal into fights which are not its proper province, none of it will be left when it is most desperately needed, as it will be."

"You've got those damned 88s," Aleksandr German said. "They aren't just antitank guns, and we're getting chewed up because we don't have any artillery to answer the Lizards."

"Let's look at the situation map," Bagnall said.

"We've had to fall back here and here," Aleksandr German said, pointing. "If they force a crossing of this stream, we're in trouble, because they can nip in toward the center and start rolling up the line. We're holding there for now, but God knows how long we can keep doing it without some help—which *Herr* General Chill won't give us."

Chill pointed at the map, too. "You have Russian units here you can draw on for reinforcements."

"I have bodies, God knows," Aleksandr German said, and then was seized by a coughing fit as he realized he'd twice invoked a deity he wasn't supposed to believe in. He wiped his mouth on a sleeve and went on, "Bodies won't do the job by themselves, though. I need to break up the Lizards' concentrations back of their lines."

"It's a wasteful use of antitank troops," Chill said.

"I've been wasting Russians—why should your pampered pets be any different?" Aleksandr German retorted.

"They are specialists, and irreplaceable," the *Wehrmacht* man replied. "If we expend them here, they will not be available when and where their unique training and

equipment are truly essential.”

Aleksandr German slammed a fist against the map. “They are essential now, in the place where I requested them,” he shouted. “If we don’t use them there, we won’t have a later for you to trot them out with all your fancy talk about right timing and right equipment. Look at the mess my men are in.”

Chill looked, then shook his head with a disdainful expression on his face.

“Maybe you should reconsider,” Bagnall told him.

The German general fixed him with a baleful stare. “I knew this piece of dumbheadedness was doomed to fail the moment it was suggested,” he said. “It is nothing more than a smokescreen to get good German troops thrown into the fire to save the Anglo-Russian alliance.”

“Oh, balls,” Bagnall said in English. Chill understood him; his face got even chillier. Aleksandr German didn’t, but he got the tone. The RAF man went on, in German again, “Not half an hour ago, I sent a Russian off confirming your—or some German’s, anyhow—order to fall back. I’m trying to do the best job I can, given my look at the map.”

“Perhaps you left your spectacles behind when you left London,” Chill suggested acidly.

“Maybe I did, but I don’t think so.” Bagnall turned to Aleksandr German. “Brigadier, I know there aren’t many tanks on your section of the front; if the Lizards had a lot of tanks, they’d be here by now, and we’d all be dead, not bickering. But are they using those troop carriers with the turret-mounted guns?”

“Yes, we have seen a good many of them,” the partisan leader answered at once.

“There!” Bagnall said to Kurt Chill. “Are those troop carriers a good enough target for your antitank lads? You’d have to be lucky to take out a Lizard tank with an 88, but you can do all sorts of lovely things to a troop carrier with one.”

“This is so.” Chill rounded on Aleksandr German. “Why did you not say light armor was part of the threat you were facing? Had I known, I would have released units from the battalion at once.”

“Who can tell what will make up a fascist’s mind?” Aleksandr German answered. “If you’re going to send men, you’d better go and do it.” They left the map room together, arguing now about how many men and guns and where they needed to go rather than whether to send any at all.

Bagnall indulged in the luxury of a long, heartfelt “Whew!” Jerome Jones walked over and patted him on the back.

“Nicely done,” Ken Embry said. “We are earning our keep here after all, seems to me.” He got himself a glass of hot, brownish muck from the samovar, then let one eyelid droop in an unmistakable wink. “D’you suppose Comrade Brigadier German has really seen a whole fleet of armored troop carriers, or even so many as one?”

Jones gaped; his head swung from Embry to Bagnall and back again. Bagnall said, “I

haven't the foggiest notion, truth to tell. But he picked up his cue in a hurry, didn't he? If armor rumbles into the neighborhood, even a literal-minded Jerry can hardly quarrel with rolling out the antitank guns, now can he?"

"Doesn't look as though he can, at any rate," Embry said. "I would have to say that hand goes to the heroic partisan." He raised his glass in salute.

"Comrade German is one very sharp chap," Bagnall said. "How good he is as a soldier or a leader of men I'm still not certain, but he misses very little."

"You threw out that line sure it was a lie and expecting him to snap at it anyhow," Jones said, almost in accusation.

"Haven't you ever done the like, with a barmaid for instance?" Bagnall asked, and was amused to watch the radarman turn red. "My notion was that if he said no, we'd be no worse off than we were already: Chill was going to balk, and we have nothing save whatever he uses as a sense of honor to get him to keep the promise he made to accept our decision. Giving him a reason he could swallow for doing what we wanted looked to be a good idea."

"And next time, with luck, he'll be likelier to go along," Embry said. "Unless, of course, his men get wiped out and the position overrun, which is a risk in this business."

"If that happens, it will announce itself," Bagnall said, "most likely by artillery shells starting to land on Pskov." He pointed to the map. "We can't lose much more ground without coming into range of their guns."

"Nothing to do now but wait," Jones said. "Feels like being back at Dover, waiting for the Jerries to fly over and show up on the radar screen: it's a cricket match with the other side at bat, and you have to respond to what their batsman does."

Hours passed. A *babushka* brought in bowls of borscht, thick beet soup with a dollop of sour cream floating on top. Bagnall mechanically spooned it up till the bowl was empty. He'd never fancied either beets or sour cream, but he fancied going hungry even less. Fuel, he told himself. *Nasty-tasting fuel, but you need to top off your tanks.*

Evening came late to Pskov these days: the town didn't have the white nights of Leningrad to the north and east, but twilight lingered long. The western sky was still a bright salmon-pink when Tatiana came into the map room. Just the sight of her roused all the Englishmen, who were fighting yawns: even in the shapeless blouse and baggy trousers of a Red Army soldier, she seemed much too decorative to have a rifle with a telescopic sight slung over her back.

Jerome Jones greeted her in Russian. She nodded to him, but astonished Bagnall by walking up to him and kissing him to a point just short of asphyxiation. Her clothes might have concealed her shape, but she felt all woman in his arms.

"My God!" he exclaimed in delighted amazement. "What's that in aid of?"

"I'll ask," Jones said, much less enthusiastically. He started speaking Russian again; Tatiana replied volubly. He translated. "She says she's thanking you for getting the Nazi mother-molester—her words—to move his guns forward. They hit a munitions store



when they shelled the rear area, and took out several troop carriers at the front lines.”

“They really were there,” Embry broke in.

Tatiana went on right through him. After a moment, Jones followed her: “She says she had a good day sniping, too, thanks to the confusion the guns sowed among them, and she thanks you for that, too.”

“Looks as though we’ve held, at least for the time being,” Embry said.

Bagnall nodded, but he kept glancing over at Tatiana. She was watching him, too, as if through that rifle sight. Her gaze was smoky as the fires Pskov used for heating and cooking. It warmed Bagnall and chilled him at the same time. He could tell she wanted to sleep with him, but the only reason he could see for it was that he’d helped her do a better job of killing.

The old saw about the female of the species being more deadly than the male floated through his mind. He’d heard it a dozen times over the years, but never expected to run across its exemplification. He didn’t meet Tatiana’s gaze again. No matter how pretty she was, as far as he was concerned, Jerome Jones was welcome to her.

*Crack!* Sam Yeager took an automatic step back. Then he realized the line drive was hit in front of him. He dashed in, dove. The ball stuck in his glove. His right hand closed over it to make sure it didn’t pop out. He rolled over on the grass, held up his glove to show he had the ball.

The fellow who’d smacked the drive flipped away his bat in disgust. Yeager’s teammates and, from behind the backstop, Barbara yelled and clapped. “Nice catch, Sam!” “Great play!” “You’re a regular Hoover out there.”

He threw the ball back to the PFC who was playing short, wondering what all the fuss was about. If you couldn’t make that play, you weren’t a ballplayer, not by the standards he set for himself. Of course, by those standards he was probably the only ballplayer at the Sunday afternoon pickup game. He might not have ever come close to the big leagues, but even a Class B outfielder looked like Joe DiMaggio here.

After an error on a routine ground ball, a strikeout ended the inning. Yeager tossed his glove to the ground outside the foul line and trotted in to the chicken-wire cage that served for a dugout. He was due to lead off the bottom of the sixth.

He’d walked his first time up and swung at a bad ball the second, hitting a little bleeder that had been an easy out. The pitcher for the other side had a pretty strong arm, but he also thought he was Bob Feller—or maybe getting Yeager the last time had made him cocky. After wasting a curve down and away, he tried to bust Sam in on the fists with a fastball.

It wasn’t fast enough or far enough in. Sam’s eyes lit up as soon as he pulled the trigger. *Thwack!* When you hit the ball dead square, your hands hardly know it’s met the bat—but the rest of you does, and so does everybody else. The pitcher wheeled through one of those ungainly pirouettes pitchers turn to follow the flight of a long ball.

The ball would have been out of Fan's Field or any other park in the Three-I League, but the field they were playing on didn't have fences. The left fielder and center fielder both chased after the drive. Sam ran like hell. He scored standing up. His teammates pounded him on the back and slapped him on the butt.

Behind the backstop, Barbara bounced up and down. Beside her, Ullhass and Ristin hissed excitedly. They weren't about to try going anywhere, not with so many soldiers around.

Yeager sat down on the park bench in the dugout. "Whew!" he said, panting. "I'm getting too old to work that hard." Somebody found a threadbare towel and fanned him with it, as if he were between rounds in a fight with Joe Louis. "I'm not dead yet," he exclaimed, and made a grab for it.

He got another hit his next time up, a line single to center, stole second, and went to third when the catcher's throw flew over the shortstop's head. The next batter picked him up with a ground single between the drawn-in shortstop and third baseman; that was the last run in a 7-3 win.

"You beat them almost singlehanded," Barbara said when he came around the wire fence to join her and the Lizard POWs.

"I like to play," he answered. Lowering his voice, he added, "And this isn't near as tough a game as I'm used to."

"You certainly made it look easy," she said.

"Make the plays and it does look easy, like anything else," he said. "Mess them up and you make people think nobody could ever play it right. God knows I've done that often enough, too—otherwise I wouldn't have been in the bush leagues all those years."

"How can you hit a round ball with a round stick and have it go so far?" Ristin asked. "It seems impossible."

"It's a bat, not a stick," Yeager answered. "As to how you hit it, it takes practice." He'd let the Lizards swing at easy tosses a few times. They choked way up on the bat; they were only about the size of ten-year-olds. Even so, they had trouble making contact.

"Come on," somebody called. "Picnic's starting."

It wasn't a proper picnic, to Yeager's way of thinking: no fire for wieners, just sandwiches and some beer. But the MPs and air raid wardens would have come down on them like a ton of bricks—if Lizard bombers hadn't already used the point of flame as a target for some of their explosive goodies.

The sandwiches were tasty: ham and roast beef on home-baked bread. And the Coors brewery was close enough to Denver that even horse-drawn wagons brought enough into town to keep people happy. The beer wasn't as cold as Sam would have liked, but he'd grown up in the days before iceboxes were universal, and falling back to those days wasn't too hard for him.

The breeze kicked up as the sun went down. Yeager wouldn't have minded a fire then, not at all: Denver nights got chilly in a hurry. Ullhass and Ristin felt it worse than he did; they put on the heavy wool sweaters they'd had knotted around their skinny, scaly waists. The sky got dark in a hurry, too, once the sun slipped behind the Rockies. Stars glittered brightly in the midnight-blue bowl of the heavens.

The ballplayers were used to having the Lizard POWs around. One of them pointed up to the points of light in the sky and asked, "Hey, Ristin, which one of those do you come from?"

"It is behind Tosev—your star for this world," Ristin answered. "You cannot see it now."

"The Lizards come from the second planet of Tau Ceti," Yeager said. "They've got their hooks on the second planet of Epsilon Eridani and the first planet of Epsilon Indi. We were next on the list."

"Those are the names of stars?" said the fellow who'd asked Ristin where he was from. "I've never heard of any of 'em."

"I hadn't, either, not till the Lizards came," Sam answered. "I grew up on a farm, too—I thought I knew stars like the back of my hand. I knew the Dippers and Orion and the Dogs and the zodiac and things like that, but there's a lot more sky than I ever figured on. And Epsilon Indi's like the Southern Cross—too far south to see from here."

"So what're these places like?" the man asked.

"Tosev is hotter and brighter than the sun—the sun of Home, I mean," Ristin said. "Rabotev—what you call Epsilon Eridani"—he hissed the name—"is like our sun, but Halless, Epsilon Indi"—another hiss—"is cooler and more orange. Next to any of the worlds the Race rules, Tosev 3 is cold and wet and not very comfortable." He gave a theatrical shiver.

"The sun's a type-G star, a yellow one," Yeager added. "So is Tau Ceti, but it's at the cool end of the G range and the sun's at the warm end. Epsilon Eridani's at the warm end of the K range, which is the next one over from G, and Epsilon Indi's a little fellow at the cool end of that range."

"How much of this stuff did you know before you started riding herd on the Lizards there?" somebody asked slyly.

"Some; not all," Yeager said. "If I hadn't known some, I would have been lost—but then, if I hadn't known some, I wouldn't have gotten the job in the first place." He added, "I've learned a heck of a lot since then, too." He would have made that stronger if Barbara hadn't been sitting on the grass beside him.

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "I'm proud of how much you know," she said. He grinned like a fool. Till Barbara, he'd never known a woman who gave a damn how smart he was—and precious few men, either. If a ballplayer read books on the train or the bus, he got tagged "Professor," and it wasn't the sort of nickname you wanted to have.

He climbed to his feet. “Come on, Ullhass, Ristin—time to take you back to your nice heated room.” The adjective got the Lizards moving in a hurry, as it usually did. Sam chuckled under his breath. He’d always figured white men knew more than Indians, because Columbus had found America and the Indians hadn’t discovered Europe. By that standard, the Lizards knew more than people: Sam might have flown to far planets in his mind, but the Lizards had come here for real. All the same, though, the gap wasn’t so wide that he couldn’t manipulate them.

“So long, Sam.” “See you in the morning.” “Way to play today, Slugger.” The ballplayers said their good-byes. The pitcher off whom he’d homered and singled added, “I’ll get you next time—or maybe we’ll be on the same side and I won’t have to worry about it.”

“They like you,” Barbara remarked as they picked their way across the dark University of Denver campus with Ristin and Ullhass.

Keeping an eye on them made his answer come slower than it would have otherwise: “Why shouldn’t they like me? I’m a regular guy; I get along with people pretty well.”

Now Barbara walked along silently for a while. At last she said, “When I would go out with Jens, it was always as if we were on the outside looking in, not part of the crowd. This is different. I like it.”

“Okay, good,” he said. “I like it, too.” Every time she compared him favorably to her former husband, he swelled with pride. He laughed a little. Maybe she was using that the same way he used the promise of heat with the Lizards.

“What’s funny?” Barbara asked.

“Nothing’s funny. I’m happy, that’s all.” He slipped an arm around her waist. “Crazy thing to say in the middle of a war, isn’t it? But it’s true.”

He got Ristin and Ullhass settled in their secured quarters, then headed back to the apartment with Barbara. They were just coming to East Evans Street when a flight of Lizard planes roared over downtown Denver to the north. Along with the roar of their engines and the flat *crummp!* of exploding bombs came the roar of all the anti-aircraft guns in town. Inside half a minute, the sky turned into a Fourth of July extravaganza, with tracers and bursting shells and wildly wigwagging searchlights doing duty for skyrockets and pinwheels and Roman candles.

Shrapnel pattered down like hail. “We better not stand here watching like a couple of dummies,” Sam said. “That stuff’s no good when it lands on your head.” Holding Barbara’s hand, he led her across the street and into the apartment building. He felt safer with a tile roof over him and solid brick walls all around.

The anti-aircraft guns kept hammering for fifteen or twenty minutes, which had to be long after the Lizards’ planes were gone. Behind blackout curtains, Sam and Barbara got ready for bed. When she turned out the light, the bedroom was dark as the legendary coal cellar at midnight.

Sam slid toward her under the cover. Even through his pajamas and the cotton

nightgown she wore, the feel of her in his arms was worth all the gold in Fort Knox, and another five bucks besides. “Yeah, happy.”

“So am I.” Barbara giggled. “By the way he’s poking me there, you’re not just happy.”

She wasn’t shy about it, or upset, either. That was the good half of her having been married before: she was used to the way men worked. But Yeager shook his head. “Nah, he’s horny, but I’m not really,” he answered. “I’d sooner just hold you for a while and then go to sleep.”

She squeezed him tight enough to bring the air out in a surprised *oof*. “That’s a very sweet thing to say.”

“It’s a very *tired* thing to say,” he answered, which made her poke him in the ribs. “If I were ten years younger—aah, phooey, if I were ten years younger, you wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

“You’re right,” she said. “But I like you fine the way you are. You really have learned an amazing amount about the Lizards in a very short time.” As if to prove her own point, she added an emphatic cough.

“Mm, I suppose so,” he said. “Not as much as I want to, though, not just for the sake of the war but because I’m curious, too. And there’s one thing I don’t begin to have a clue about.”

“What’s that?”

“How to get rid of them,” Yeager said. Barbara nodded against his chest. He fell asleep with her still in his arms.

Ussmak gunned the landcruiser toward the next Tosevite town ahead: Mulhouse, its name was. After so long going up and down the road between Besançon and Belfort, pushing past Belfort made him feel he was exploring new territory. He spoke that conceit aloud: “We might as well be part of the band of Sherran—you know, the first male to march all the way around Home.”

“We studied Sherran just out of hatchlinghood, driver,” Nejas said. “How long ago did he live? A hundred fifty thousand years, something like that—long before the Emperors unified Home under their benevolent rule.”

Ussmak cast down his eye turrets, but only for a perfunctory instant. No matter how important formalities were to the life of the Race, not getting killed counted for even more. And the more built-up the area got, the more danger the landcruiser faced and the smaller the chance he had to react to it.

A cloth whipped in the breeze above a half-burnt building: not the red, white, and blue stripes of France, but a white circle on a red background, with a twisty black symbol on the white. The Big Ugliers used such flapping rags to tell one of their tiny empires from the next. Ussmak felt a certain amount of pride that the forces of the Race had at last penetrated into Deutschland.

Bullets rattled off the landcruiser's flank and turret. The cupola up top closed with a clang. Ussmak hissed in relief: for the first time in a long while, he had himself a landcruiser commander whom he would have minded seeing dead.

"Driver halt," Nejas ordered, and Ussmak obediently pressed on the brake pedal. "Gunner, turret bearing 030. That building with the banner above it, two rounds high explosive. The machine gun is in there somewhere."

"Two rounds high explosive," Skoob echoed. "It shall be done, superior sir."

The landcruiser's main armament spoke once, twice. Inside the hull, shielded by steel and ceramic, the reports were not especially loud, but the heavy armored fighting vehicle rocked back on its tracks after each one. Through his vision slits, Ussmak watched the building, already in ruins, fly to pieces; the flag on the makeshift staff was wiped away as if it had never existed.

"Forward, driver," Nejas said in tones of satisfaction.

"Forward, superior sir," Ussmak acknowledged, and stepped on the accelerator. No sooner had the landcruiser begun to roll, though, than more bullets pattered off its side and rear deck.

"Shall I give them another couple of rounds, superior sir?" Skoob asked.

"No, the infantry will dig them out soon enough," the landcruiser commander said. "Small-arms ammunition is still in good supply, but we're low on shells, and we'll need high-explosive as well as armor-piercing if we have to fight inside Mulhouse." He didn't sound happy at the prospect. Ussmak didn't blame him: landcruisers were made for quick, slashing attacks to cut off and trap large bodies of the enemy, not to get bogged down battling for a city one street at a time. But taking cities with infantry alone used up males at an alarming rate, even with air strikes. Armor had to help.

A cloud of dust rose not far in front of the landcruiser; dirt and asphalt rose in a graceful fountain, then pattered down again, some of it onto Ussmak's vision slits. He hit the cleaner button to clear them. Inside the landcruiser, he needed to worry about only a lucky hit from artillery—and if a round did pierce the vehicle, he'd probably be dead before he knew it.

Night was falling when they approached the built-up area Ussmak had seen ahead. Nejas said, "We have orders to halt outside of town. This shall be done, of course." Again the commander sounded less than pleased. As if trying to convince himself, he went on, "However good our night-vision equipment may be, our commanders do not care to go in amongst the Big Ugliers' buildings in darkness. This is no doubt a wise precaution."

Ussmak wondered. If you lost momentum, sometimes you had trouble getting it back again. He said, "Superior sir, just this once I wish our commanders would stick their tongues in the ginger jar." Maybe he'd have a taste himself after everything was secured for the night. Nejas had searched the landcruiser for his little vial, but he'd never found it.

The commander said, “Just this once, maybe they should. I never thought I would hear myself say that, driver, but you may well be right.”

Several landcruisers bivouacked together, under the cover of some broad, leafy trees. Not for the first time, Ussmak marveled at the spectacular profusion of plants on Tosev 3—far more varieties than Home enjoyed, or Rabotev 2, or Halless 1. He wondered if all the water on this world had something to do with that: it was the most obvious difference between the planets of the Empire and the Big Ugliers’ homeworld.

Even with infantry sentries all around, Nejas ordered his crewmates to stay in the landcruiser till they’d finished eating. Then he and Skoob took their blankets and went under the big armored hull to sleep, which gave them almost as much protection from the alert Deutsch snipers as staying inside the turret would have. Ussmak’s seat flattened out enough to let him stay inside the forward hull section through the night.

That night should have passed peacefully, but it didn’t. He jerked awake in alarm when the turret hatches clanged open. Fearing Big Ugly raiders, he grabbed for his personal weapon and crawled back through the hull to poke his head up through the bottom of the turret ring.

The silhouette above him unmistakably belonged to a male of the Race. “What’s going on?” Ussmak said indignantly. “I could have shot you as easy as not.”

“Don’t speak to me of shooting.” Nejas sounded furious. “For a tenth of a day’s pay, I’d turn the main armament of this landcruiser on what are lyingly called our supply services.”

“Give the order, superior sir,” Skoob said. The gunner had to be even more irate than his commander. “You wouldn’t need to pay me to make me obey. I’d do it for free, and gladly. No supply service would be better than the mishatched one we have in place—or no worse, anyhow, for as best I can tell, we have no supply service in place.”

“We expended a couple of rounds of high explosive against that machine-gun nest yesterday, if you’ll recall?” Nejas said. “And we used the usual amount of armor-piercing finstabilized discarding sabot rounds, too—you may have noticed we’ve been fighting lately.” He sounded as sardonic as Drefsab, the most cynical male Ussmak had ever met.

The driver caught the drift of the way things were going. “We didn’t get resupplied?” he asked.

“We got resupplied,” Skoob said. Again echoing his commander, he went on sarcastically, “In their infinite wisdom and generosity, the fleetlords of the supply service have deigned to dole out to us five magnificent new rounds, one of which is actually high explosive.”

“Aii.” Ussmak let out a hiss of pain. “They’ve shorted us before, but never anywhere near so badly. If they do that for another two or three days, we won’t have any ammunition left.”

“It’s all right,” Skoob said. “Before long, they’ll stop issuing hydrogen, too, so we won’t be going anywhere anyhow.”

That alarmed Ussmak all over again. Nejas said, “It’s not quite so bad. To make hydrogen, all they need is water and energy. If Tosev 3 has too much of anything, it’s water, and energy is cheap. But ammunition needs precision manufacture, too, and the Big Ugliers who can do precision manufacture, or most of them, anyhow, aren’t on our side. So we’re short on landcruiser shells. They made it sound very logical when they explained it.”

“Superior sir, I don’t care about logic like that,” the gunner retorted. “I have a logic of my own: if I don’t get rounds for my gun, and if the Race doesn’t take over some of the places here that can turn out our rounds, we’ll lose—but how can we take them if we don’t have the ammunition to do it?”

“Believe me, I wasn’t supporting what the supply service males said, just setting it forth,” Nejas said. “As far as I’m concerned, they all come out of addled eggs. If we don’t have the ammunition to do the job now, it’s just going to be tougher later.”

The gunner grunted. “Right you are, superior sir. Let’s get what they gave us stowed—the Emperor knows we’ll need it tomorrow, even if the supply service hasn’t a clue.” One after another, the five new rounds clunked into place in the racks.

“Go back to sleep, driver,” Nejas said when the job was done. “That’s what we’re going to do, anyhow.”

Ussmak did his best to go back to sleep, but found himself worrying instead. Skoob’s circular logic set his own head spinning. If the Race didn’t have the munitions to overcome the Big Ugliers, how were they supposed to conquer Tosev 3? For that matter, how were they supposed to conquer Mulhouse? They could fight their way into the town, but what were they supposed to do when they had no more shells and supply services had none to bring forward?

*Get killed, that’s what,* Ussmak thought. He’d come too close to getting killed already, he’d seen too many males die around him, to contemplate that with equanimity. He wiggled and twisted on the lowered seat, trying to find a position where he wouldn’t have to think. The manufacturers of the seat seemed to have overlooked that important design feature.

When sleep would not come no matter how he tried to lure it, he sat up and ever so cautiously took his vial of ginger from its hiding place. Even though he was alone in the landcruiser, he let his eye turrets swivel in all directions to make sure no one was watching him. Only then did his tongue flick out to taste the precious powder.

Instantly, his worries about how the advance into Deutschland would continue fell away. Of course the Race would do whatever was required. Ussmak could see, could all but reach out and touch, the best and easiest way to smash the Big Ugliers once and for all. He wished Nejas and Skoob were in here with him. His wisdom would amaze them.

But somehow, try as he would, he couldn’t make the image glittering in his ginger-filled mind turn from mere image into concrete words and plans. That was the herb’s frustration: what it showed you seemed real until you tried to make it so. Then it proved



as evanescent as the steam of his breath on a chilly Tosevite morning.

“Maybe if I have another taste, everything will come clear,” Ussmak said. He reached for the vial again. Even before his hand closed on it, his tongue flicked out in anticipation.

Liu Han hated the little scaly devils’ photographs, whether they moved or stood still. Oh, they were marvelous in their way, full of lifelike color and able to be viewed from more than one perspective, almost as if they were life itself magically captured.

But they had seldom shown her anything she wanted to see. When the little devils held her prisoner on the airplane that never came down, they’d made moving pictures of the congress they’d forced her to have with men she hadn’t wanted. Then, after Bobby Fiore put a child in her, they’d terrified her with images of a black woman dying in childbirth. And now ...

She stared down at the still photograph the scaly devil named Ttomalss had just handed her. A man lay on his back on the paved sidewalk of some city. His face looked peaceful, but he rested in a great glistening pool of blood and a submachine gun lay beside him.

“This is the Big Ugly male named Bobby Fiore?” Ttomalss asked in fair Chinese.

“Yes, superior sir,” Liu Han said in a small voice. “Where is this picture from? May I ask?”

“From the city called Shanghai. You know this city?”

“Yes, I know this city—I know of it, I should say, because I have never been there. I have never been close to it.” Liu Han wanted to make that as plain as she could. If Bobby Fiore had been killed fighting against the scaly devils, as certainly looked likely, she didn’t want Ttomalss to suspect she was involved. Of that she was innocent.

The little devil turned one eye turret toward the photograph, the other toward her. She always found that disconcerting. He said, “This male of yours met these evil males who fight us while he was in this camp. He met with them here, in this house. We have proof of this, and you do not ever say it is a lie. If he is with the Big Ugly bandits, maybe you are with these bandits, too?” In spite of the interrogative cough, his words sounded much more like a threat.

“No, superior sir.” Liu Han used the other cough, the emphatic one. She would have been more emphatic still had she not been feeding the Communists information for weeks. Fear clogged her throat. To the little scaly devils, she was hardly more than an animal. Moreover, she was a woman, and women always ended up with the raw end of any deal.

“I think you are telling me lies.” Ttomalss used the emphatic cough, too.

Liu Han burst into tears. Part of that was strategy as calculating as any general’s. Tears bothered the little scaly devils even more than they bothered men: the little devils never cried. Seeing water from a person’s eyes affected them much as seeing smoke

coming out of someone's ears would have affected her. It distracted them and kept them from pushing as hard as they would have otherwise.

But if she forced the timing of the tears, at bottom they were real enough. Without the scaly devils, she never would have had anything to do with Bobby Fiore; he'd been just another of the men with whom they'd paired her. But he'd been as good to her as circumstances allowed—and he was the father of the child that kicked in her belly even now. Seeing him dead in a great puddle of his own blood was like a blow to the face.

And she wept for herself. Just before the little scaly devils came down from the sky, the Japanese had bombed her village and killed her husband and son. Now Bobby Fiore was gone, too. Everyone she cared about seemed to die.

She hugged herself; her forearms went around the swell of her abdomen. The baby kicked again. What would the little devils do with it once it came out into the world? Fear filled her again.

Ttomalss said, "Stop this disgusting dripping and answer what I say. I think you are lying, I tell you. I think you know much more of these bandits than you admit ... Is that the right word, admit? Good. I think you hide this from us. We do not put up with these lies forever, I promise. Maybe not for long at all."

"Do you know what I think?" Liu Han said. "I think you have night soil where your wits should be. How am I supposed to be a bandit? I am in this camp. You put me here. You put all the people in here. If there are bandits among them, whose fault is that? Not mine, I tell you."

She managed to startle Ttomalss enough to make him turn both eye turrets toward her. "There are bandits in this camp; I admit that. When we set it up, we did not know how many foolish and dangerous factions you Big Ugliers had, so we did not weed you carefully before we planted you here. But just because the bandits are here does not mean a properly obedient person will have anything to do with them."

The phrase he used had the literal meaning of *properly respectful to one's elders*. Hearing a little devil speak of filial piety was almost enough to send Liu Han from tears to hysterical laughter. But she sensed she'd made him retreat; he spoke to her now more as equal to equal, not in the badgering way he'd used before.

She pressed her tiny advantage: "Besides, how could I have anything to do with bandits? You watch me all the time. The only place I ever go is to the market. What can I do there?"

"The bandits came here," Ttomalss said. "This male"—he held up the photo of Bobby Fiore's corpse—"went with them. You knew it, and you said nothing to us. You are not to be trusted."

"I did not know where Bobby Fiore went, or why," she returned. "I never saw him again after that—till now." She started to cry again.

"I told you not to do that," the little devil said peevishly.

"I can't—help it," Liu Han said. "You show me a horrible picture that says my man is

dead, you say I did all sorts of dreadful things”—*most of which I did*—“and now you want me not to cry? Too much!”

Ttomalss threw his hands in the air, much as Liu Han’s husband had when he’d given up arguing with her. She hardly mourned him and her boy any more; her life had taken too many other hammer blows since they died. The scaly devil said, “Enough! Maybe you are telling the truth. Our drug to learn this works imperfectly, and I noted that we do not want to give it to you for fear of harming the hatchling growing inside you. You Big Ugliers are revolting in so many different ways, and we have to learn about all of them if we are to rule you properly.”

“Yes, superior sir.” Being bold came anything but easy for Liu Han, however useful she found it. She always breathed a silent sigh of relief when she returned to the submissive behavior that had been drilled into her since childhood.

The scaly devil said, “You will be closely watched. If you have any sense, you will act in a way that shows you remember this.” He stalked out of Liu Han’s dwelling. Had he been a man, he would have slammed the door behind him. Since he was a scaly devil, he left it open. Liu Han had learned that meant he thought anyone on the street was welcome to come in.

She poured herself a cup of tea from the battered brass pot that simmered above a charcoal brazier. Sipping it helped relax her—but not enough. She walked over and closed the door, but that didn’t make her feel any more secure. She was as much the little devils’ captive here as she had been in the metal cell on the airplane that never came down.

She wanted to scream and curse and tell Ttomalss exactly what she thought of him, but made herself hold back. Screaming and cursing would make her a scandal among her neighbors, and being the little scaly devils’ creature made her scandal enough already. Besides, they might be taking talking cinema pictures of her, as they had to her shame up in that metal cell. If she cursed them, they could find out about it.

The baby moved inside her, not a kick this time but a slow, oceanic roll followed by a quick flutter. Again her arms went protectively round her belly. If she kept on obeying the little devils, what would the baby’s fate be?

And if she didn’t obey them, what would its fate be then? She didn’t think the Communists would disappear even if the scaly devils conquered all of China (*all of the world*, she added to herself, something that never would have occurred to her before she spent time with Bobby Fiore). They’d kept right on fighting the Japanese; they would count on the people to hide them from the little devils. And they were very good at revenge.

In the end, fear wasn’t what made her go out of her house and walk slowly toward the prison camp marketplace. Fury was: fury with the little scaly devils for turning her life upside down, for treating her like a beast rather than a human being, for showing her, without the slightest worry over what she might feel to see him dead, the picture of the man she’d come to love—all they wanted from her was to confirm the body did belong

to Bobby Fiore.

“Bean sprouts!” “Candles!” “Fine tea here!” “Carved jade!” “Peas in their pods!” “Sandals and straw hats!” “You can’t beat my tasty ducks!” “Fine silk parasols—keep your pretty skin white!” “Pork sits sweet in your belly!”

The hubbub of the market square surrounded Liu Han. Along with vendors shouting the virtues of their wares, customers shouted scorn in the age-old struggle to get a better price. The din was dreadful. Liu Han could hardly hear herself think.

Ttomalss had warned her she would be closely watched. She believed that; the little scaly devils didn’t understand people well enough to lie convincingly. But just because they watched her and listened to her, could they understand anything she said in this racket? She couldn’t understand people who were yelling right beside her, and the little devils had trouble following even the most plain-spoken Chinese. She could probably say most of what she wanted without their being any the wiser.

She went slowly through the market, stopping now here, now there to haggle and gossip. Even had she been foolish enough to go straight to her contact in the marketplace, the Communists would have trained her to know better. As things were, she spent a lot of time loudly complaining about the little devils to a cadaverous-looking man who sold herbal medicines—and who worked for the Kuomintang. If the scaly devils landed on him, they’d be doing the Communists a favor.

Eventually, in the course of her wanderings, she reached the poultry dealer who had his stand next to the big-bellied pork merchant with the open vest. As she looked over the cut-up chunks of duck and chicken, she remarked, as if it were something that mattered little to her, “The little devils showed me a picture of Bobby Fiore today. They do not say so, but they put an end to him.”

“I am sorry to hear this, but we know the ghost Life-Is-Transcendent has been seeking him.” The poultry seller also spoke obliquely; that prancing ghost was a precursor of the god of death.

“He was in a city,” Liu Han said.

“May he have aided the rise of the proletarian movement,” the poultry seller answered. He paused, then asked very quietly, “Was the city Shanghai?”

“What if it was?” Liu Han was indifferent. To her, one city was just like another. She’d never lived in a place that had more people than this prison.

“If it was,” the fellow went on, “a heavy blow against oppression and for the liberty of the oppressed peasants and workers of the world was struck there not long ago. In his passing, the foreign devil may well have shown himself to be a hero of the Chinese people.”

Liu Han nodded. Since the scaly devils had the photo of Bobby Fiore dead, she’d figured they were likely the ones who had shot him—and the likeliest reason they had for shooting him was his being part of a Red raiding team. He wouldn’t have thought of himself as a hero of the Chinese people: she was sure of that. Though living with her had

rubbed some of the rough edges off him, at heart he remained a foreign devil.

She didn't much care that he had died a hero, either. She would rather have had him back at her hut, foreign and difficult but alive. She would rather have had many things that hadn't happened.

The poultry seller said, "What other interesting gossip have you heard?" The kind of gossip he found interesting had to do with the little scaly devils.

"What do you want for these chicken backs here?" she asked, not responding right away. He named a price. She shrieked at him. He yelled back. She attacked his gouging with a fury that astonished her. Then, after a moment, she realized she'd found a safe way to vent her sorrow for Bobby Fiore.

For whatever reasons he had, the poultry seller got caught up in the squabble, too. "I tell you, foolish woman, you are too stingy to deserve to live," he shouted, waving his arms.

"And I tell you, the little scaly devils are on especial watch for your kind, so you had better take care!" Liu Han waved her arms, too. At the same time, she watched the poultry seller's face to make sure he understood *your kind* to mean Communists, not thieving merchants. He nodded. He followed that perfectly well. She wondered how long he'd been a conspirator, looking for double meanings everywhere and finding them, too.

She hadn't been a conspirator long, but she'd managed to put a double meaning across. Even if the little devils were listening to and understanding every word she said, they wouldn't have grasped the second message she'd given the poultry seller. She was learning the ways of conspiracy herself.

London was packed with soldiers and RAF men, sailors and government workers. Everyone looked worn and hungry and shabby. The Germans and then the Lizards had given the city a fearful pounding from the air. Bombs and fires had cut broad swaths of devastation through it. The phrase on everyone's lips was, "It's not the place it used to be."

All the same, it struck Moishe Russie as a close approximation to the earthly paradise. No one turned to scowl at him as he hurried west down Oxford Street toward Number 200. In Warsaw and Lodz, gentiles had made him feel he still wore the yellow Star of David on his chest even after the Lizards drove away the Nazis. The Lizards weren't hunting him here, either. There were no Lizards here. He didn't miss them.

And what the English reckoned privation looked like abundance to him. People ate mostly bread and potatoes, turnips and beets, and everything was rationed, but nobody starved. Nobody was close to starving. His son Reuven even got a weekly ration of milk: not a lot but, from what he remembered of his nutrition textbooks, enough.

They'd apologized for the modest Soho flat in which they'd set up his family, but it would have made three of the ones he'd had in Lodz. He hadn't seen so much furniture in years: they weren't burning it for fuel here. He even had hot water from a tap whenever he wanted it.

A guard in a tin hat in front of the BBC Overseas Services building nodded as he showed his pass and went in. Waiting inside, sipping a cup of ersatz tea quite as dreadful as anything available in Poland, stood Nathan Jacobi. "Good to see you, Mr. Russie," he said in English, and then fell back into Yiddish: "And now, shall we go and give the Lizards' little stumpy tails a good yank?"

"That would be a pleasure," Moishe said sincerely. He pulled his script from a coat pocket. "This is the latest draft, with all the censors' notes included. I'm ready to record it for broadcast."

"Jolly good," Jacobi said, again in English. Like David Goldfarb, he flipped back and forth between languages at will, sometimes hardly seeming to realize he was doing so. Unlike Goldfarb's, his Yiddish was not only fluent but elegant and unaccented; he spoke like an educated Warsaw Jew. Russie wondered if his English was as polished.

Jacobi led the way to a recording studio. But for a couple of glass squares so the engineers could watch the proceedings, the walls were covered with sound-deadening tiles, each punched with its own square grid of holes. On the table sat a microphone with a BBC plaque screwed onto its side. A bare electric bulb threw harsh light down onto the table and the chairs in front of it.

The arrangements were as up-to-date as human technology could produce. Moishe wished they impressed him more than they did. They were certainly finer than anything

the Polish wireless services had had in 1939. But that was not the standard by which Russie judged them. In the first months after the Lizards took Warsaw, he'd broadcast anti-Nazi statements for them. Compared to their equipment, the BBC gear looked angular, bulky, and not very efficient, rather like an early wind-up gramophone with trumpet speaker set alongside a modern phonograph.

He sighed as he sat down on one of the hard-backed wooden chairs and set his script in front of him. The censors' stamps—a triangular one that said PASSED FOR SECURITY and a rectangle that read PASSED FOR CONTENT—obscured a couple of words. He bent down to peer at them and make sure he could read them without hesitation; even though the talk was being recorded for later broadcast, he wanted to be as smooth as he could.

He glanced over to the engineer in the next room. When the man suddenly shot out a finger toward him, he began to talk: "Good day, people of Earth. This is Moishe Russie speaking to you from London in free England. That I am here shows the Lizards lie when they say they are invincible and their victory inevitable. They are very strong; no one could deny that. But they are not supermen"—he'd had to borrow *Übermenschen* from the German to put that across—"and they can be beaten.

"I do not intend to say anything about how I came from Poland to London, for fear of closing that way for others who may come after me. But I will say that I was rescued from a Lizard prison in Lodz, that Englishmen and local Jews took part in the rescue, and they defeated both the Lizards and their human henchmen.

"Too many men, women, and children live in parts of the world under Lizard occupation. I understand that, if you are to survive, you must to some degree go on about your daily work. But I urge you from the bottom of my heart to cooperate with the enemy as little as you can and to sabotage his efforts wherever you can. Those who serve as their prison guards and police, those who seek work in their factories to make munitions that will be used against their fellow human beings—they are traitors to mankind. When victory comes, collaborators will be remembered ... and punished. If you see the chance, move against them now."

He had his talk nicely timed—he'd practiced it with Rivka back in the flat. He was just reaching his summing-up when the engineer held up one finger to show he had a minute left, and came to the end as the fellow drew his index finger across his throat. The engineer grinned and gave him a two-finger V for victory.

Then it was Nathan Jacobi's turn. He read an English translation (similarly stamped with censors' marks) of what Russie had just said in Yiddish, the better to reach as large an audience as possible. His timing was as impeccable as Moishe's had been. This time the engineer signaled his approval with an upraised thumb.

"I think that went very well," Jacobi said. "With any luck at all, it should leave the Lizards quite nicely browned off."

"I hope so," Moishe said. He got up and stretched. Wireless broadcasting was not physically demanding, but it left him worn all the same. Getting out of the studio always

came as a relief.

Jacobi held the door open for him. They went out together. Waiting in the hallway stood a tall, thin, tweedy Englishman with a long, craggy face and dark hair combed high in a pompadour. He nodded to Jacobi. They spoke together in English. Jacobi turned to Moishe and switched to Yiddish: “I’d like to introduce you to Eric Blair. He’s talks producer of the Indian Section, and he goes in after us.”

Russie stuck out his hand and said, “Tell him I’m pleased to meet him.”

Blair shook hands with him, then spoke in English again. Jacobi translated: “He says he’s even more pleased to meet you: you’ve escaped from two different sets of tyrants, and honestly described the evils of both.” He added, “Blair is a very fine fellow, hates tyrants of all stripes. He fought against the fascists in Spain—almost got killed there—but he couldn’t stomach what the Communists were doing on the Republican side. An honest man.”

“We need more honest men,” Moishe said.

Jacobi translated that for Blair. The Englishman smiled, but suffered a coughing fit before he could answer. Moishe had heard those wet coughs in Warsaw more times than he cared to remember. *Tuberculosis*, the medical student in him said. Blair mastered the coughs, then spoke apologetically to Jacobi.

“He says he’s glad he did that out here rather than in the studio while he was recording,” Jacobi said. Moishe nodded; he understood and admired the workmanlike, professional attitude. You worked as hard as you could for as long as you could, and if you fell in the traces you had to hope someone else would carry on.

Blair pulled his script from a waistcoat pocket and went into the studio. Jacobi said, “I’ll see you later, Moishe. I’m afraid I have a mountain of forms to fill out. Perhaps we should put up stacks of paper in place of barrage balloons. They’d be rather better at keeping the Lizards away, I think.”

He headed away to his upstairs office. Moishe went outside. He decided not to head back to his flat right away, but walked west down Oxford Street toward Hyde Park. People—mostly women, often with small children in tow—bustled in and out of Selfridge’s. He’d been in the great department store once or twice himself. Even with wartime shortages, it held more goods and more different kinds of goods than were likely to be left in all of Poland. He wondered if the British knew how lucky they were.

The great marble arch where Oxford Street, Park Lane, and Bayswater Road came together marked the northeast corner of Hyde Park. Across Park Lane from the arch was the Speakers’ Corner, where men and women climbed up on crates or chairs or whatever they had handy and harangued whoever would hear. He tried to imagine such a thing in Warsaw, whether under Poles, Nazis, or Lizards. The only thing he could picture was the public executions that would follow unbridled public speech. Maybe England had earned its luck after all.

Only a handful of people listened to—or heckled—the speakers. The rest of the park



was almost as crowded with people tending their gardens. Every bit of open space in London grew potatoes, wheat, maize, beets, beans, peas, cabbages. German submarines had put Britain under siege; the coming of the Lizards brought little relief. They weren't as hard on shipping, but America and the rest of the world had less to send these days.

The island wasn't having an easy time trying to feed itself. Perhaps in the long run it couldn't, not if it wanted to keep on turning out war goods, too. But if the English knew they were beaten, they didn't let on.

All through the park, trenches, some bare, some with corrugated tin roofs, were scattered among the garden plots. Like Warsaw, London had learned the value of air raid shelters no matter how makeshift. Moishe had dived into one of them himself when the sirens began to wail a few days before. The old woman sprawled in the dirt a few feet away had nodded politely, as if they were meeting over tea. They'd stayed in there till the all-clear sounded, then dusted themselves off and gone on about their business.

Moishe turned and retraced his steps down Oxford Street. He explored with caution; wandering a couple of blocks away from the streets he'd already learned had got him lost more than once. And he was always looking the wrong way, forgetting traffic moved on the left side of the street, not the right. Had more motorcars been on the road, he probably would have been hit by now.

He turned right onto Regent Street, then left onto Beak. A group of men was going into a restaurant there—the Barcelona, he saw as he drew closer. He recognized the tall, thin figure of Eric Blair in the party; the India Section man must have finished his talk and headed off for lunch.

Beak Street led Russie to Lexington and from it to Broadwick Street, on which sat his block of flats. As with much of the Soho district, it held more foreigners than Englishmen: Spaniards, Indians, Chinese, Greeks—and now a family of ghetto Jews.

He turned the key in the lock, opened the door. The rich odor of cooking soup greeted him like a friend from home. He shrugged out of his jacket; the electric fire here kept the flat comfortably warm. Not sleeping under mounds of blankets and overcoats was another reward of coming to England.

Rivka walked out of the kitchen to greet him. She wore a white blouse and a blue pleated skirt that reached halfway from the floor to her knees. Moishe thought it shockingly immodest, but all the skirts and dresses she'd been given when she got to England were of the same length.

“You look like an Englishwoman,” he told her.

She cocked her head to one side, giving that a woman's consideration. After a moment, she shook her head. “I *dress* like an Englishwoman,” she said, with the same precision a *yeshiva* student might have used to dissect a subtle Talmudic point. “But they're even pinker and blonder than the Poles, I think.” She flicked an imaginary bit of lint from her own dark curls.

He yielded: “Well, maybe so. They all seem so heavy, too.” He wondered whether that

perception was real or just a product of so many years of looking at people who were slowly—sometimes not so slowly—starving to death. The latter, he suspected. “That soup smells good.” In his own mind, food had grown ever so much more important than it seemed before the war.

“Even with ration books, there’s such a lot to buy here,” Rivka answered. The pantry already bulged with tins and jars and with sacks of flour and potatoes. Rivka didn’t take food for granted these days, either.

“Where’s Reuven?” Moishe asked.

“Across the hall, playing with the Stephanopoulos twins.” Rivka made a wry face. “They haven’t a word in common, but they all like to throw things and yell, so they’re friends.”

“I suppose that’s good.” Moishe did wonder, though. In Poland, the Nazis—and the Poles, too—had cared too much that Jews were different from them. No one here seemed to care at all. In its own way, that was disconcerting, too.

As if to ease his mind over something he hadn’t even mentioned, Rivka said, “David’s mother telephoned this morning while you were at the studio. We had a good chat.”

“That is good,” he said. Working phones were another thing he was having to get used to all over again.

“They want us over for supper tomorrow night,” Rivka said. “We can take the underground; she gave me directions on how to do it.” She sounded excited, as if she were going on safari. Moishe suddenly got the feeling she was adapting to the new city, the new country, faster than he was.

Teerts felt bright, alert, and happy when Major Okamoto led him into the laboratory. He knew he felt that way because the Nipponese had laced his rice and raw fish with ginger—the spicy taste still lay hot on his tongue—but he didn’t care. No matter what created it, the feeling was welcome. Until it wore off, he would feel like a male of the Race, a killercraft pilot, not a prisoner almost as much beneath contempt as the slops bucket in his cell.

Yoshio Nishina came round a corner. Teerts bowed in Nipponese politeness; no matter how much the ginger exhilarated him, he was not so foolish as to forget altogether where he was. “*Konichiwa*, superior sir,” he said, mixing his own language and Nipponese.

“Good day to you as well, Teerts,” replied the leader of the Nipponese nuclear weapons research team. “We have something new for you to evaluate today.”

He spoke slowly, not just to help Teerts understand but also, the male thought, because of some internal hesitation. “What is it, superior sir?” Teerts asked. The warm buzz of ginger spinning inside his head made him not want to care, but experience with the Nipponese made him wary in spite of the herb to which they’d addicted him.

Now Nishina spoke quickly, to Okamoto rather than directly to Teerts. The Nipponese

officer translated: “We need you to examine the setup of the uranium hexafluoride diffusion system we are establishing.”

Teerts was a little puzzled. That was simple enough for him to have understood it in Nipponese. These days, Okamoto mainly reserved his translations for more complicated matters of physics. But pondering the ways of Big Uglies, even with a head full of ginger, seemed pointless. Teerts bowed again and said, “It shall be done, superior sir. Show me these drawings I am to evaluate.”

He sometimes wondered how the Big Uglies managed to build anything more complicated than a hut. Without computers that let them change plans with ease and view proposed objects from any angle, they had developed what seemed like a series of clumsy makeshifts to portray three-dimensional objects on two-dimensional paper. Some of them were like single views of computer graphics. Others, weirdly, showed top, front, and side views and expected the individual doing the viewing to combine them in his mind and visualize what the object was supposed to look like. Not used to the convention, Teerts had endless trouble with it.

Now, Major Okamoto bared his teeth in the Tosevite gesture of amiability. When the scientists smiled at Teerts, they were generally sincere. He did not trust Okamoto as far. Sometimes the interpreter seemed amiable, but sometimes he made sport with his prisoner. Teerts was getting better at reading Tosevite expressions; Okamoto’s smile did not strike him as pleasant.

The major said, “Dr. Nishina is not speaking of drawings. We have erected this facility and begun processing the gas with it. We want you to examine it, not pictures of it.”

Teerts was appalled, for a whole queue of reasons. “I thought you were concentrating on production of element 94—plutonium, you call it. That’s what you said before.”

“We have decided to produce both explosive metals,” Okamoto answered. “The plutonium project at the moment goes well, but more slowly than expected. We have tried to speed up the uranium hexafluoride project to compensate, but there are difficulties with it. You will evaluate and suggest ways to fix the problems.”

“You don’t expect me to go inside this plant of yours, do you?” Teerts said. “You want me to check it from the outside.”

“Whichever is necessary,” Okamoto answered.

“But one reason you have so much trouble with uranium hexafluoride is that it’s corrosive by nature,” Teerts exclaimed in dismay, his voice turning into a guttural hiss of fright. “If I go in there, I may not come out. And I do not want to breathe either uranium or fluorine, you know.”

“You are a prisoner. What you want is of no importance to me,” Okamoto said. “You can obey or you can face the consequences.”

Ginger lent Teerts spirit he couldn’t have summoned without it. “I am not a physicist,” he shouted, loud enough for the stolid guard who accompanied Okamoto to unslung his rifle for the first time in many days. “I am not an engineer, not a chemist, either. I am a

pilot. If you want a pilot's view of what is wrong with your plant, fine. I do not think it will help you much, though."

"You are a male of the Race." Major Okamoto fixed Teerts with a glare from the narrow eyes in that flat, muzzleless face: never had he looked more alien, or more alarming. "By your own boasting, your people have controlled atoms for thousands of years. Of course you will know more about them than we do."

"*Honto*," Nishina said: "That is true." He went on in Nipponese, slowly, so Teerts could understand: "I was speaking with someone from the Army, telling him what the atomic explosive would be like. He said to me, 'If you want an explosive, why not just use an explosive?' *Bakatare*—idiot!"

Teerts was of the opinion that most Big Uglies were idiots, and that most of the ones who weren't idiots were savage and vindictive instead. Expressing that opinion struck him as impolitic. He said, "You Tosevites have controlled fire for thousands of years. If someone sent one of you to inspect a factory that makes steel, how much would your report be worth to him?"

He used Nipponese for as much of that as he could, and spoke the rest in his own language. Okamoto interpreted for Nishina. Then, much to Teerts' delight, the two of them got into a shouting match. The physicist believed Teerts, the major thought he was lying. Finally, grudgingly, Okamoto yielded: "If you don't think he can be trusted to be accurate, or if you think he truly is too ignorant to be reliable, I must accept your judgment. But I tell you that with proper persuasion he could give us what we need to know."

"Superior sir, may I speak?" Teerts asked; he'd understood that well enough to respond to it. The surge of pleasure and nerve the ginger had brought was seeping away, leaving him more weary and glum than he would have been had he never set tongue on the stuff.

Okamoto gave him another baleful stare. "Speak." His voice held a clear warning that if Teerts' words were not very much to the point, he would regret it.

"Superior sir, I just wish to ask you this: have I not cooperated with you since the day I was captured? I have told everything I know about aircraft to the males of your Army and Navy, and I have told everything I know—much more than I thought I knew—to these males here, whom your Professor Nishina leads"—he bowed to the physicist—"even though they are trying to build weapons to harm the Race."

Okamoto bared his broad, flat teeth. To Teerts, they were unimpressive, being neither very sharp nor very numerous. He did, however, recognize the Big Ugly's ugly grimace as a threat gesture. Mastering himself, Okamoto answered, "You have cooperated, yes, but you are a prisoner, so you had better cooperate. We have given you better treatment since you showed yourself useful, too: more comfort, more food—"

"Ginger," Teerts added. He wasn't sure whether he was agreeing with Okamoto or contradicting him. The herb made him feel wonderful while he tasted it, but the Big

Uglies weren't giving it to him for his benefit: they wanted to use it to warp him to their will. He didn't think they had, so far—but how could he be sure?

“Ginger, *hai*,” Okamoto said. “Suppose I tell you that, after you go look at this uranium hexafluoride setup, we will give you not just ginger powder with your rice and fish, but pickled ginger root, as much as you can eat? You'd go then, neh?”

As much ginger as he could eat ... did Tosev 3 hold that much ginger? The craving rose up and grabbed Teerts, like a hand around his throat. He needed all his will to say, “Superior sir, what good is ginger to me if I am not alive to taste it?”

Okamoto scowled again. He turned back to Nishina. “If he is not going to inspect the facility, do you have any more use for him today?” The physicist shook his head. To Teerts, Okamoto said, “Come along, then. I will take you back to your cell.”

Teerts followed Okamoto out of the laboratory. The guard followed them both. Even through the melancholy he felt after ginger's exaltation left him, Teerts felt something akin to triumph.

That triumph faded as he went out onto the streets of Tokyo. Even more than he had in Harbin, he felt himself a mote among the vast swarms of Big Uglies in those streets. He'd been alone in Harbin, yes, but the Race was advancing on the mainland city; had things gone well, he could have been reunited with his own kith at any time. But things had not gone well.

Here in Tokyo, even the illusion of rescue was denied him. Sea protected the islands at the heart of the Tosevite empire of Nippon from immediate invasion by the Race. He was irremediably and permanently at the mercy of the Big Uglies. They stared at him as he walked down the street; hatred seemed to rise from them in almost visible waves, like heat from red-glowing iron. For once, he was glad to be between Major Okamoto and the guard.

Tokyo struck him as a curious mixture. Some of the buildings were of stone and glass, others—more and more outside the central city—of wood and what looked like thick paper. The two styles seemed incompatible, as if they'd hatched from different eggs. He wondered how and why they coexisted here.

Air-raid sirens began to wail. As if by magic, the streets emptied. Okamoto led Teerts into a packed shelter in the basement of one of the stone-and-glass buildings. Outside, anti-aircraft guns started pounding. Teerts hoped all the Race's pilots—males from his flight, perhaps—would return safely to their bases.

“Do you wonder why we hate you, when you do this to us?” Okamoto asked as the sharp, deep blasts of bombs contributed to the racket.

“No, superior sir,” Teerts answered. He understood it well enough—and what it would do to him, sooner or later. His eye turrets swiveled this way and that. For the first time since he'd resigned himself to captivity, he began looking for ways to escape. He found none, but vowed to himself to keep looking.

Wearing His Majesty's uniform once more felt most welcome to David Goldfarb. The ribbon of the Military Medal, in the colors of the Union Jack, held a new place of pride just above his left breast pocket. He'd imagined the only way a radarman could win a ground combat medal was to have the Jerries or the Lizards invade England. Going to Poland as a commando hadn't been what he'd had in mind.

Bruntingthorpe had changed in the weeks he'd been away. More and more Pioneer and Meteor jet fighters sheltered in revetments. The place was becoming a working air base rather than an experimental station. But Fred Hipple's team for evaluating Lizard engines and radars still worked here—and, Goldfarb had not been surprised to discover on his return, still shared a Nissen hut with the meteorologists. The one they had occupied was replaced, but somebody else worked in it these days.

He traded greetings with his comrades as he went in and got ready to go to work. The stuff brewing in the pot above the spirit lamp wasn't exactly tea, but with plenty of honey it was drinkable. He poured himself a cup, adulterated it to taste, and went over to the Lizard radar unit.

It hadn't languished while he'd been performing deeds of derring-do and speaking Yiddish. Another radarman, an impossibly young-looking fellow named Leo Horton, had made a good deal of progress on it in the interim.

"Morning to you," Horton said in a nasal Devonshire accent.

"Morning," Goldfarb agreed. He sipped the not-quite-tea, hoping this morning's batch would carry a jolt. You couldn't gauge that in advance these days. Sometimes you could drink it by the gallon and do nothing but put your kidneys through their paces; sometimes half a cup would open your eyes wide as hangar doors. It all depended on what went into the witches' brew on any given day.

"I think I've made sense of some more of the circuitry," Horton said. He was frightfully clever, with a theoretical background in electronics and physics Goldfarb couldn't come close to matching. He also had a fine head for beer and, perhaps not least because he made them feel motherly, was cutting quite a swath through the barmaids up in Leicester. He reminded Goldfarb of an improved model of Jerome Jones, which was plenty to make him feel inadequate.

But business was business. "Good show," Goldfarb said. "Show me what you've got."

"You see this set of circuits here?" Horton pointed to an area of the disassembled radar not far from the magnetron. "I'm pretty sure it controls the strength of the signal."

"You know, I suspected that before I got drafted away from here," Goldfarb said. "I didn't have the chance to test it, though. What's your evidence?"

Horton opened a fat notebook with a cover almost the exact dark blue of his RAF uniform. "Here, look at these oscilloscope readings when I shunt power through this lead here—" He pointed again to show which one he meant.

"I think you're right," Goldfarb said. "And look at the amplification." He whistled softly. "We wouldn't just be promoted—we'd be bloody knighted if we found out how

the Lizards do this and we could fit it into our own sets.”

“Too true, but good luck,” Horton replied. “I can tell you what those circuits do, but I will be damned if I have the slightest notion of how they do it. If you took one of our Lancs and landed it at a Royal Flying Corps base in 1914—not that you could, because no runways then were anywhere near long enough—the mechanics then would stand a better chance of understanding the aircraft and all its systems than we do of making sense of—this.” He jabbed a thumb at the Lizard radar.

“It’s not quite so bad as that,” Goldfarb said. “Group Captain Hipple and his crew have made good progress with the engines.”

“Oh, indeed. But he’d already figured out the basic principles involved.”

“We have the basic principles of radar,” Goldfarb protested.

“But their radar is further ahead of ours than their jet engines are,” Horton said. “It’s just the quality of the metallurgy that drives the group captain mad. Here, the Lizards are using a whole different technology to achieve their results: no valves, everything so small the circuits only come clear under the microscope. Figuring out *what* anything does is a triumph; figuring out *how* it does it is a wholly different question.”

“Don’t I know it,” Goldfarb said ruefully. “There have been days—and plenty of ’em—when I’d sooner have kicked that bleeding radar out onto the rubbish pitch than worked on it.”

“Ah, but you have managed to get away for a bit.” Horton pointed to the Military Medal ribbon on Goldfarb’s chest. “I wish I’d had the chance to try to earn one of those.”

Remembering terror and flight, Goldfarb started to say he would have been just as glad not to have had the opportunity. But that wasn’t really true. Getting his cousin Moishe and his family out of Poland had been worth doing; he knew only pride that he’d been able to help there.

The other thing he noted, with a small shock, was the edge of genuine envy in Horton’s voice. The new radarman’s savvy had intimidated him ever since he got back to Bruntingthorpe. Finding out that Horton admired him was like a tonic. He remembered the gap that had existed back at Dover between those who went up to do battle in the air and those who stayed behind and fought their war with electrons and phosphors.

But Goldfarb had crossed to the far side of that gap. Even before he went to Poland, he’d gone aloft in a Lancaster to test the practicability of airborne radar sets. He’d taken Lizard fire then, too, but returned safely. Ground combat, though, was something else again. If one of those Lizard rockets had struck the Lanc, he never would have seen the alien who killed him. Ground combat was personal. He’d shot people and Lizards in Lodz and watched them fall. He still had nasty dreams about it.

Leo Horton was still waiting for an answer. Goldfarb said, “In the long run, what we do here will have more effect on how the war ends than anything anyone accomplishes gallivanting about with a bloody knife between his teeth.”

“You go gallivanting about with a knife between your teeth and it’ll turn bloody in short order, that’s for certain,” Horton said.

Flight Officer Basil Roundbush came in and poured himself a cup of ersatz tea. His broad, ruddy face lit up in a smile. “Not bad today, by Jove,” he said.

“Probably does taste better after you run it through that soup strainer you’ve got on your upper lip,” Goldfarb said.

“You’re a cheeky bugger, you know that?” Roundbush took a step toward Goldfarb, as if in anger. Goldfarb needed a distinct effort of will to stand his ground; he gave away three or four inches and a couple of stone in weight. Not only that, Roundbush wore a virtual constellation of pot metal and bright ribbons on his chest. He’d flown Spitfires against the *Luftwaffe* in what then looked to be Britain’s darkest hour.

“Just a joke, sir,” Horton said hastily.

“You’re new here,” Roundbush said, his voice amused. “I know it’s a joke, and what’s more, Goldfarb there knows I know. Isn’t that right, Goldfarb?” His expression defied the radarman to deny it.

“Yes, sir, I think so,” Goldfarb answered, “although one can’t be too certain with a man who grows such a vile caricature of a mustache.”

Leo Horton looked alarmed. Roundbush threw back his head and roared laughter. “You *are* a cheeky bugger, and you skewered me as neatly there as if you were Errol Flynn in one of those Hollywood cinemas about pirates.” He assumed a fencing stance and made cut-and-thrust motions that showed he had some idea of what he was about. He suddenly stopped and held up one finger. “I have it! Best way to rid ourselves of the Lizards would be to challenge them to a duel. Foil, épée, saber—makes no difference. Our champion against theirs, winner take all.”

From one of the tables strewn with jet engine parts, Wing Commander Julian Peary called, “One of these days, Basil, you really should learn the difference between simplifying a problem and actually solving it.”

“Yes, sir,” Roundbush said, not at all respectfully. Then he turned wistful: “It would be nice, though, wouldn’t it, to take them on in a contest where we might have the advantage.”

“Something to that,” Peary admitted.

Leo Horton bent over a scrap of paper, sketched rapidly. In a minute or two, he held up a creditable drawing of a Lizard wearing a long-snouted knight’s helmet (complete with plume) and holding a broadsword. *Prepare to die, Earthling varlet*, the alien proclaimed in a cartoon-style speech bubble.

“That’s not bad,” Roundbush said. “We ought to post it on a board here.”

“That’s quite good,” Goldfarb said. “You should think of doing portrait sketches for the girls.”

Horton eyed him admiringly. “No flies on you. I’ve done that a few times. It works



awfully well.”

“Unfair competition, that’s what I call it,” Basil Roundbush grumped. “I shall write my MP and have him propose a bill classing it with all other forms of poaching.”

As helpful as he’d been before, Peary said, “You couldn’t poach an egg, and I wouldn’t give long odds about your writing, either.”

About then, Goldfarb noticed Fred Hipple standing in the doorway and listening to the back-and-forth. Roundbush saw the diminutive group captain at the same moment. Whatever hot reply he’d been about to make died in his throat with a gurgle. Hipple ran a forefinger along his thin brown mustache. “A band of brothers, one and all,” he murmured as he came inside.

“Sir, if we can’t rag one another, half the fun goes out of life,” Roundbush said.

“For you, Basil, more than half, unless I’m sadly mistaken,” Hipple said, which made the flight officer blush like a child. But Hipple’s voice held no reproof; he went on, “So long as it doesn’t interfere with the quality of our work, I see no reason for the badinage not to continue.”

“Ah, capital,” Roundbush said in relief. “That means I can include my distinguished gray-haired superior in that letter to my MP; perhaps I can arrange to have his tongue ruled a noxious substance and shipped out of the country, or at least possibly rabid and so subject to six months’ quarantine.”

Julian Peary was not about to let himself be upstaged: “If we inquire at all closely into what your tongue has been doing, Basil old boy, I dare say we’d find it needs more quarantine than a mere six months.” Roundbush had turned pink at Hipple’s gibe; now he went brick-red.

“Torpedoed at the waterline,” Goldfarb whispered to Leo Horton. “He’s sinking fast.” The other radarman grinned and nodded.

Hipple turned to the two of them. Goldfarb was afraid he’d overheard, but he just said, “How are we coming at fitting a radar set into the Meteor fuselage, gentlemen?”

“As long as we don’t fly with fuel tanks in there, we’ll be fine, sir,” Goldfarb answered, deadpan. Hipple gave him a fishy stare, then laughed—warily—and nodded. Goldfarb went on, “Horton, though, has made some exciting finds about which part of the circuitry controls signal amplitude.”

He’d expected that to excite Hipple, who had been almost as eager to learn about radar as he had been to tinker with his beloved jet engines. But Hipple just asked, “Is it something we can apply immediately?”

“No, sir,” Horton answered. “I know what they do, but not how they do it.”

“Then we’ll just have to leave it,” Hipple said. “For now, we must be as utilitarian as possible.”

Goldfarb and Horton exchanged glances. That didn’t sound like the Fred Hipple they’d come to know. “What’s up, sir?” Goldfarb asked. Roundbush and the other RAF officers

who worked directly under the group captain also paid close attention.

But Hipple just said, "Time is not running in our favor at the moment," and buried his nose in an engineering drawing.

"Time for what?" Goldfarb asked Horton in a tiny voice. The other radarman shrugged. *One more thing to worry about*, Goldfarb thought, and went back to work.

Except for being illuminated only by sunlight, Dr. Hiram Sharp's office in Ogden didn't seem much different from any other Jens Larssen had visited. Dr. Sharp himself, a round little man with gold-rimmed glasses, looked at Jens over the tops of them and said, "Son, you've got the clap."

"I knew that, thanks," Jens said. Somehow he hadn't expected such forthrightness from a doctor in Mormon Utah. He supposed doctors saw everything, even here. After that hesitation, he went on, "Can you do anything about it?"

"Not much," Dr. Sharp answered, altogether too cheerfully for Jens' taste. "If I had sulfa, I could give you some of that and cure you like nobody's business. If I had acriflavine, I could squirt it up your pipe in a bulb syringe. You wouldn't like that for beans, but it would do you some good. But since I don't, no point fretting over it."

The mere thought of somebody squirting medicine up his pipe made Larssen want to cover his crotch with both hands. "Well, what do you have that will do me some good?" he demanded.

Dr. Sharp opened a drawer, pulled out several little foil-wrapped packets, and handed them to him. "Rubbers," he said, as if Jens couldn't figure that out for himself. "Keep you from passing it along for a while, anyway." He pulled out a fountain pen and a book full of ruled pages. "Where'd you get it? You know? Have to keep records, even with everything all gone to hell these days."

"A waitress named Mary, back in Idaho Springs, Colorado."

"Well, well." The doctor scribbled a note. "You do get around, don't you, son? You know this here waitress' last name?"

"It was, uh, Cooley, I think."

"You think? You got to know her pretty well some ways, though, didn't you?" Dr. Sharp whistled tunelessly between his teeth. "Okay, never mind that for now. You screw anybody else between there and here?"

"No." Jens looked down at the rubbers in his hand. Next time he did end up in the sack with a woman, he might use one ... or he might not. After what the bitches had done to him, he figured he was entitled to get some of his own back.

"Just been a Boy Scout since you got your dose, have you?" Sharp said. "Bet you wish you were a Boy Scout when you got it, too."

"The thought had crossed my mind," Larssen said dryly. The doctor chuckled. Jens went on, "Truth is, I've been moving too much to spend time chasing skirt. I'm on

government business.”

“Who isn’t, these days?” Dr. Sharp said. “Government’s just about the last thing left that’s working—and it isn’t working what you’d call well. God only knows how we’re supposed to hold an election for President next year, what with the Lizards holding down half the country and beating the tar out of the other half.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Jens admitted. It was an interesting problem from a theoretical point of view: as a theoretical physicist, he could appreciate that. The only even remotely similar election would have been the one of 1864, and by then the North had pretty much won the Civil War; it wasn’t invaded itself. “Maybe FDR has volunteered for the duration.”

“Maybe he has,” Sharp said. “Damned if I know who’d run against him, anyhow, or how he’d campaign if he did.”

“Yeah,” Jens said. “Look, Doc, if you don’t have any medicine that’ll help me, what am I supposed to do about what I’ve got?”

Dr. Sharp sighed. “Live with it as best you can. I don’t know what else to tell you. The drugs we’ve been getting the past few years, they’ve let us take a real bite out of germs for the first time ever. I felt like I was really doing something worthwhile. And now I’m just an herb-and-root man again, same as my grandpa back before the turn of the century. Oh, I’m maybe a better surgeon than Gramps was, and I know about asepsis and he didn’t, but that’s about it. I’m sorry, son, but I don’t have anything special to give you.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Larssen said. “Do you think I’m likely to find any other doctors who have the drugs you were talking about?” Even if the acriflavine treatment sounded worse than the disease it was supposed to help, at least it would be over pretty soon. You got gonorrhoea for keeps.

“Nobody else here in Ogden, that’s for damn sure,” Dr. Sharp answered. “We share what we have, not that it’s much. Your best bet would be some fellow in a little town who hasn’t used up all his supplies and doesn’t mind sharing them with strangers passing through. A lot of that kind, though, won’t treat anybody but the people they live with. It’s like we’re going back to tribes instead of being one country any more.”

Jens nodded. “I’ve seen that, too. I don’t much like it, but I don’t know what to do about it, either.” Before the Lizards came, he’d taken for granted the notion of a country stretching from sea to shining sea. Now he saw it was an artificial construct, built on the unspoken agreement of citizens and on long freedom from internal strife. He wondered how many other things he’d taken for granted weren’t as self-evident as they seemed to be.

*Like Barbara always loving you, for instance,* he thought.

Dr. Sharp stuck out a hand. “Sorry I couldn’t help you more, son. No charge, not when I didn’t do anything. Good luck to you.”

“Thanks a bunch, Doc.” Larssen picked up the rifle he’d propped in a corner of the

office, slung it over his shoulder, and left without shaking hands. Sharp stared after him, but you didn't want to get huffy with somebody packing a gun.

Jens had chained his bicycle to a telephone pole outside the doctor's office. It was still there when he went out to get it. Looking up and down Washington Boulevard (which US 89 turned into when it ran through Ogden), he saw quite a few bikes parked with no chains at all. The Mormons were still a trusting people. His mouth twisted. He'd been trusting, too, and look where it had got him.

"In Ogden goddamn Utah, on my way to a job nobody else wants," he muttered. A fellow in overalls driving a horse-drawn wagon down the street gave him a reproachful stare. He glared back so fiercely that Mr. Overalls went back to minding his own business, which was a pretty good idea any way you looked at it.

A puff of breeze from the west brought the smell of the Great Salt Lake to his nostrils. Ogden lay in a narrow stretch of ground between the lake and the forest-covered Wasatch Mountains. Larssen had grown used to the tang of the sea in his grad school days out in Berkeley, but the Great Salt Lake's odor was a lot stronger, almost unpleasant.

He'd heard you floated there, that you couldn't sink even if you wanted to. *Wish I could throw Yeager in, and find out by experiment, he thought. And that waitress, too. I'd hold 'em under if they didn't drown on their own.*

He stowed the chain, swung up onto his bike, and started pedaling north up Washington. He rolled past City Hall Park and the three-story brick pile of the Broom Hotel, with its eighteen odd, bulging windows. Another three-story building, at the corner of Twenty-fourth Street, had the wooden statue of a horse atop it, complete with a tail that streamed in the breeze.

He had to stop there to let a convoy of wagons head west down Twenty-fourth. While he waited, he turned to a fellow on horseback and asked, "You live here?" When the man nodded, Jens went on, "What's the story of the horse?" He pointed to the statue.

"Oh, Nigger Boy?" the man said. "He was a local racehorse, and he'd beat critters you couldn't believe if you didn't see it. Now he's the best weather forecaster in town."

"Oh, yeah?" Jens said. "How's that?"

The local grinned. "If he's wet, you know it's raining; if he's covered with snow, you know it's been snowing. And if his tail's blowin' around like it is now, it's windy out."

"Walked into that one, didn't I?" Jens said, snorting. The last wagon of the convoy creaked by. He started rolling again, and soon passed Tabernacle Park. The Ogden Latter Day Saints Tabernacle was one of the biggest, fanciest buildings in town. He'd seen that elsewhere in Utah, too, the temples much more the focus of public life than the buildings dedicated to secular administration.

Separation of church and state was another of the things he'd taken for granted that didn't turn out to be as automatic as he'd thought. Here in Utah, he got the feeling they separated things to keep outsiders happy, without really buying into the notion that that

was the right and proper way to operate.

He shrugged. It wasn't his problem. He had plenty of his own.

Just past the city cemetery, a concrete bridge took him over the Ogden River. By then, he was just about out of town. The scrubby country ahead didn't look any too appetizing. *No wonder the Mormons settled here*, he thought. *Who else would be crazy enough to want land like this?*

He lifted one hand to scratch his head. As far as he was concerned, what the Mormons believed was good only for a belly laugh. Even so, he'd never felt safer in all his travels than he did in Utah. Whether the doctrines were true or not, they turned out solid people.

*Is that what the answer is?* he wondered: *as long as you seriously believe in something, almost no matter what, you have a pretty good chance of ending up okay?* He didn't care for the idea. He'd dedicated his career to pulling objective truth out of the physical world. Theological mumbo-jumbo wasn't supposed to stack up against that kind of dedication.

But it did. Maybe the Mormons didn't know a thing about nuclear physics, but they seemed pretty much content with the lives they were living, which was a hell of a lot more than he could say himself.

Putting your faith in what some book told you, without any other evidence to show it was on the right track, struck him as something right out of the Middle Ages. Ever since the Renaissance, people had been looking for a better, freer way to live. *Jesus loves me/ This I know/ 'Cause the Bible/ Tells me so*. Jens' lip curled derisively. Sunday school pap, that's what it was.

And yet ... When you looked at it the right way, accepting your religion could be oddly liberating. Instead of being free to make choices, you were free from making them: they'd already been made for you, and all you had to do was follow along.

"Yeah, that's what Hitler and Stalin peddle, too," Larssen said as he left Ogden behind. Thinking was what he did best; the idea of turning that part of him over to somebody else sent the heebie-jeebies running up and down his spine.

People looked up from whatever they were doing when he rode past. He didn't know how they did it, but they could tell he didn't belong here. Maybe somebody'd pinned a sign to him: I AM A GENTILE. He laughed, partly at himself, partly at Utah. Hell, even Jews were gentiles here.

Up ahead on US 89, a fellow was riding a buckboard that had probably been sitting in the barn since his grandfather's day. As Jens put his back into pedaling and whizzed past the gray mule drawing the buggy, the man called out to him: "You headin' up toward Idaho, stranger?"

*Stranger*. Yeah, they could tell, all right. Larssen almost kept going without answering, but the question hadn't sounded hostile or suspicious. He slowed down and said, "What if I am?"

"Just that you oughta be careful, is all," the man on the buckboard answered. "Them

Lizard things, there's some of 'em up there, I hear tell."

"Are there?" Jens said. If he wanted to abdicate responsibility for his life, that would be the way to do it. He had enough reasons for thinking it wouldn't be such a bad thing, either. He owed so many people so much ... "Are there? Good." He turned on the heat, and left the fellow in the buggy staring after him.

The only way Mutt Daniels had ever wanted to see the south side of Chicago was to bring in a big-league team to play the White Sox at Comiskey Park. He'd learned, though, that what you wanted and what life handed you all too often weren't the same thing.

Take the gold bars he wore on his shoulders. He hadn't even changed shirts when he got 'em, because he had only one shirt. He'd just taken off the stripes with somebody's bayonet and put on lieutenant's insignia instead. People from his old squad still called him Sarge. He didn't care. He felt like a sergeant, and the platoon he was leading now had taken enough casualties that it had only two squads' worth of guys, anyway.

One nice thing about turning into an officer was that he got his orders with one less layer of manure on top, and that they gave him a bigger picture of what was going on. As now: Captain Sid Klein (who'd been Lieutenant Klein till Captain Maczek got hit) drew in the dirt between the ruins of what hadn't been fancy apartment buildings even before the Lizards came, saying, "It may not look that way, boys, but the brass says we've got these scaly bastards right where we want 'em."

"Yeah, an' we retreated through half of Illinois to get 'em here, too," Mutt said.

The captain was half his age; damn near everybody in the Army, seemed like, was half his age. Klein said, "You may think you're joking, but you're not. When it comes to maneuver, they got us licked. Their tanks and trucks are faster than ours, and they've got those goddamn helicopters to give it to us in the rear when we're bent over the wrong way. But that doesn't count for much in city fighting. Here it's just slugging, block by block, body by body."

Mutt's opposite number for the company's first platoon was a skinny midwesterner named Chester Hicks. "Puts a lot of bodies underground," he observed.

"Lord, you can say that again," Daniels said. "I did some of that block-by-block stuff last fall, and it's ugly. Even for war, it's ugly."

Captain Klein nodded. "You bet it is. But the brass don't think the Lizards can afford that kind of slugging any more. When the Germans were blitzing across Russia in '41, they got their noses bloody when they went into the towns, not out on the plains. Maybe it'll be the same way here."

"And if it ain't, so what, 'cause the Lizards drove us back here anyways," Mutt said.

"You're right about that." Captain Klein sighed and ran a hand through his short, curly red hair. "We gotta do all we can, though. Go on back to your boys and give 'em the word."

Mutt's platoon was defending a couple of blocks of East 111th Street. Off to the west was the Gothic ornateness of the Morgan Park Military Academy. Daniels wondered if the cadets were in the line somewhere, the way the boys from the Virginia Military Institute had marched out and fought during the States War. He didn't see anybody who looked like a cadet, but he knew that didn't mean anything. It was a hell of a big fight.

To the east was an American strongpoint on the high ground of Pullman, and then, east of that, the marsh around Lake Calumet. If the Lizards dislodged his boys, he aimed to fall back to the east if he could. North of 111th Street stood the low, ornate buildings that housed the Pullman car shops. He'd fought through blocks of factories before. That was even worse than the trenches had been back in France, but Captain Klein was right about one thing: digging determined troops out of a warren like that would cost the Lizards plenty.

Some of the platoon's foxholes and bits of trench were on the south side of 111th, some on the north. Some were literally in the middle of the street; bombs and shells had torn big holes in the asphalt.

Dracula Szabo waved to Daniels as he came up the broken sidewalk. Szabo was wearing the chevrons Mutt had cut off his own sleeve; Mutt's old squad belonged to him now. Mutt was sure the men would get on better than most: as long as there were supplies to scrounge, Dracula would figure out how to scrounge them.

Now he said, "Took ya long enough to get back, Sarge—uh, I mean, Lieutenant. You're lucky we still got more o' what I came up with."

"Not more fancy booze?" Mutt said. "I told you a dozen times, if it ain't beer or bourbon, I ain't interested—not real interested, anyways," he amended hastily.

"Better'n booze," Dracula said, and before Daniels could deny that anything was better than booze, he named something that was, or at least harder to come by: "I found somebody's stash o' cigarettes: ten bee-yoo-tee-full, lovely cartons of Pall Malls."

"Goddamn," Mutt said reverently. "How'd you manage that one?"

"C'mere an' I'll show ya." Proud of his exploit, Szabo led Daniels to one of the battered houses on the south side of 111th Street, then down into the basement. It was dark down there, and full of cobwebs. Mutt didn't like it worth a damn. Dracula seemed right at home; he might have been in a Transylvanian castle.

He started stomping on the floor. "It was somewhere right around here," he muttered, then grunted in satisfaction. "There. You hear that?"

"A hollow," Daniels said.

"You betcha," Szabo agreed. He flicked on his Zippo, lifted up the board, pointed. "Lined with lead, too, so it don't get wet in there." He reached in, pulled out a couple of cartons, and handed them to Mutt. "Here, these are the last ones."

The precious tobacco had disappeared into Daniels' pack by the time he went outside again. He didn't know whether Dracula was telling the truth, but if he tried putting the arm on him this time, he was liable never to see any more bounty.

“I want to jam a whole pack in my face all at once,” he said, “but I figure the first drag’ll be enough to do for me—or maybe do me in, I ain’t had one in so long.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Szabo said. “It’s been a while even for me.” Mutt gave him a sharp stare at that—had he been holding out on other finds?—but Szabo just gazed back, bland as a preacher. Mutt gave up.

Suddenly he grinned and headed off to a brick cottage a few hundred yards north of the front lines. The house had a big red cross painted inside a whitewashed circle on the roof and a red cross flag flying on a tall pole above it to show the Lizards what it was.

Before Mutt got halfway there, the grin evaporated. “She don’t even smoke,” he muttered to himself. “She said as much.” He stopped, kicking a stone in irresolution. Then he pressed on, even so. “I know what to do with ’em just the same.”

Perhaps because of the warning tokens, the house that held the aid station and several around it were more or less intact, though cattle could have grazed on their lawns. Here and there, untended zinnias and roses bloomed brightly. A medic on the front steps of the aid station nodded to Daniels. “Morning, Lieutenant.”

“Mornin’.” Mutt went on up the stairs past the tired-looking medic and into the aid station. Things had been pretty quiet the past couple of days; the Lizards didn’t seem any too enthusiastic about the street fighting they’d have to do to take Chicago. Only a handful of injured men sprawled on the cots and couches packed into every available inch of floor space.

Lucille Potter bent over one of those men, changing a wound dressing. The fellow sucked in his breath to keep from crying out. When he was able to drive some of the rawness from his voice, he said carefully, “That hurt some, ma’am.”

“I know it did, Henry,” she answered, “but we have to keep the wound as clean as we can if we don’t want it to get infected.” Like a lot of nurses, she used the royal we when talking to patients. She looked up and saw Daniels. “Hello, Mutt. What brings you here?”

“Got a present for you, Miss Lucille,” Daniels said. Henry and a couple of the other guys in the aid station laughed. One of them managed a wheezing wolf whistle.

Lucille’s face froze. The look she gave Mutt said, *You’re going to have to stay after school, Charlie.* She figured he was trying to get her into the sack with whatever his present turned out to be. As a matter of fact, he was, but he was smart enough to figure out that sometimes the indirect approach was the only one that stood a chance—if any approach stood a chance, which wasn’t nearly obvious.

He shrugged off his pack, reached into it, and pulled out one of the cigarette cartons. The wounded dogface who’d let out the wolf whistle whistled again, a single low, awed note. Mutt tossed the pack underhanded to Lucille. “Here you go. Share these out with the guys who come through here and want ’em.”

Flesh clung too close to the bony underpinnings of her face for it to soften much, but her eyes were warm as she surehandedly caught the carton of Pall Malls. “Thank you,



Mutt; I'll do that," she said. "A lot of people will be glad you found those."

"Don't give me the credit for that," he said. "Dracula found 'em."

"I might have known," she answered, smiling now. "But you were the one who thought to bring them here, so I'll thank you for that."

"Me too, sir," Henry said. "Ain't seen a butt—uh, a cigarette—in a he—heck of a long time."

"Got that right," the whistler said. "Ma'am, can I have one now, please? I'll be a good boy all the way till Christmas if I can, I promise." He drew a bandaged hand over his chest in a crisscross pattern.

"Victor, you're impossible," Lucille said, but she couldn't keep from laughing. She opened the carton, then opened a pack. The wounded men sighed as she took out a cigarette for each of them. Mutt could smell the tobacco all the way across the room. Lucille went through her pockets. Her mouth twisted in annoyance. "Does anyone have a match?"

"I do." Mutt produced a box. "Good for startin' fires at night—and besides, you never can tell when you might come across somethin'."

He handed the matches to Lucille. She lit cigarettes for her patients. The aroma of fresh tobacco had made his nose sit up and take notice. Real tobacco smoke, harsh and sweet at the same time, was almost too much to bear.

"Give the lieutenant one, too, ma'am," Victor said. "Hadn't've been for him, none of us'd have any." The other wounded soldiers agreed loudly. A couple of them paused to cough in the middle of agreeing; after you hadn't smoked for a while, you lost the knack.

Lucille brought the pack over to him. He took out a cigarette, tapped it against the palm of his hand to tamp down the tobacco, and stuck it in his mouth. He started to reach for the matches, too, but Lucille had already struck one. He bent down over it to get a light.

"Now this here's livin'," he said, sucking in a long, deep drag of smoke: "gettin' your cigarette lit for you by a beautiful woman."

The GIs whooped. Lucille sent him an I'll-get-you-later look. He ignored it, partly on general principles, partly because he was busy coughing himself—the smoke tasted great, but it felt like mustard gas in his lungs. Spit flooded into his mouth. He felt dizzy, light-headed, the same way he had when he first puffed on a corncob pipe back in the dying days of the last century.

"Cigarettes may be good for morale," Lucille said primly, "but they're extremely unhealthful."

"What with everything out mere that can kill me quick or chop me up, I ain't gonna worry about somethin' that's liable to kill me slow," Mutt said. He took another drag. This one did what it was supposed to do; his body remembered all the smoke he'd put

into it after all.

The wounded soldiers laughed again. Lucille sent him that narrow-eyed stare again; if they'd been by themselves, she would have tapped her foot on the ground, too. Then a smile slowly stole across her face. "There is something to that," she admitted.

Mutt beamed; any concessions he managed to get from her made him feel grand. He brought his right hand up to the rim of his helmet in a sketched salute. "I'm gonna get back to my platoon, Miss Lucille," he said. "Hope those cigarettes last you a good long time, on account of that'll mean not too many guys gettin' hurt."

"Thank you for your kindness, Mutt," she answered. The soldiers echoed her. He nodded and waved and went outside.

The cigarette was still hanging out of the corner of his mouth, but the medic taking a break on the front steps didn't notice till he caught the smell of smoke. When he did, his head came up as if he were a bird dog taking a scent. He stared in disbelieving envy as Mutt smoked the Pall Mall down to where the coal singed his lips, then stubbed out the tiny butt on the sidewalk.

Everything stayed pretty quiet as Mutt made his way back to his unit. Off in the distance somewhere, artillery rumbled like far-off thunder. A couple of plumes of smoke rose, one over toward Lake Calumet, the other way off in the west. But for somebody who'd seen more close combat than he wanted to think about, that kind of stuff was hardly worth noticing.

When he got back, he discovered that a lot of his dogfaces had acquired cigarettes, too. Dracula Szabo was looking sleek and prosperous. Mutt suspected he hadn't given his chums smokes for free. Keeping your lieutenant happy was part of the cost of doing business, but the rest of the soldiers were the guys you did business with. As long as nobody in the platoon beefed to Mutt about being gouged, he was willing to look the other way.

He sent scouts out well south of 111th Street to make sure the Lizards wouldn't get away with pulling a fast one after darkness fell. He was sorting through ration cans to see what he'd have for supper when Lucille Potter came up.

Everyone in the platoon who saw her greeted her like an older sister or a favorite aunt or even a mom: she'd been "theirs" for a long time before the shortage of anybody who knew anything about patching up the wounded forced her out of the front line. "Got some smokes for the guys you're taking care of, Miss Lucille," Dracula said.

"That's been taken care of, Bela, thank you, though you're kind to offer." She turned to Mutt, raised one eyebrow. "The ones you brought came from your own supply?"

"Well, yeah, Miss Lucille." Mutt kicked at bits of broken concrete from what had been a sidewalk.

"That just makes it nicer of you," she said, and he felt he'd done his problem on the blackboard right. "To share what Dracula passed on to you in particular—I don't think that that many people would have done as much."

“Wasn’t so much of a much,” he said, though under dirt and stubble he knew he was turning red. He held out a can of beef stew to Lucille. “Care to stay for some supper?”

“All right.” She pulled a can opener out of a pistol-style holster on her belt and made short work of the lid to the stew. She dug in with a spoon, then sighed. “Another cow that died of old age—and the potatoes and carrots with it.”

Mutt opened an identical can. He sighed, too, after his first taste. “You’re right about that, sure enough. But it does stick to your ribs. Better food than they gave us in France, I’ll tell you that. The trick in France was getting the Frenchies to feed you. Then you ate good. They could make horse meat taste like a T-bone.” He didn’t know what all he’d eaten Over There, but he remembered it fondly.

Before Lucille answered, Lizard artillery opened up, off to the east. Shells whistled in maybe half a mile away—not close enough to make him dive for cover. He looked over to see if they’d done any damage. At first he didn’t notice anything new, but then he saw that the ornate water tower that had towered over the Pullman car factory wasn’t there any more.

Lucille saw that, too. She said, “I don’t think there are many people—civilian people, I mean—left in Chicago to feed us. This was the second biggest city in the United States a year ago. Now it might as well be a ghost town out West somewhere.”

“Yeah, I been by some o’ those, places like Arizona, Nevada. Whatever they used to be for isn’t around any more, and they aren’t, either. Chicago is—or was—about bringin’ things in and shippin’ ’em out, or makin’ ’em here and shippin’ ’em out. What with the Lizards, that isn’t around any more, either,” Mutt said.

As if to punctuate his words, more shells thumped in, these a little closer than the ones before. “They’re working over the front line,” Lucille Potter observed. “But, Mutt, those ghost towns out West never had more than a few hundred people, a few thousand at most. Chicago had more than three million. Where is everybody?”

“A lot of ’em are dead,” he answered bleakly, and she nodded. “A lot of ’em run off, either scared away by the fighting or on account of their factories couldn’t go on working because of the Lizards or ’cause nobody could get food to ’em here. So one way or another, they ain’t here no more.”

“You’re right,” she said. “You have a sensible way of looking at things.”

“Yeah?” Mutt glanced around. None of his men was real close; they were all going about their own business. He lowered his voice even so: “I’m so all-fired sensible, how come I got stuck on you?”

“Most likely just because we lived in each other’s pockets for too long.” Lucille shook her head. “If things were different, Mutt, it might have worked both ways. Even the way things are, I sometimes wonder—” She stopped and looked unhappy, plainly thinking she’d said too much.

Mutt unwrapped a chocolate bar. Like smoking, the simple action gave him something to do with his hands while he thought. He broke the bar in half and gave Lucille a piece.

Then, ever so cautiously, he said, “You mean you might be lookin’ at—tryin’ a man?” He wasn’t sure how to phrase that to keep from offending her, but did his best.

Lucille’s face was wary, but she nodded. “*Might* be looking at it is about right, Mutt. I’m closer to it, I think, than I’ve ever been in my life, but I’d be lying if I said I was ready yet. I hope you can understand that and be patient.”

“Miss Lucille, you get as old as I am, some things you ain’t in a hurry about like you was when you were younger. It’s just that—” Mutt was going to say something about the uncertainty of war arguing against delay, but he never got the chance: the uncertainty of war came to him.

The hideous whistle in the air rose to a banshee shriek. His body realized the Lizard shells were aimed straight at him before his mind did. Without conscious thought, he flattened out just as they landed.

The cluster of explosions—three in all—left him stunned. They picked him up from the ground and threw him back down as if a professional wrestler had body-slammed him. The blast tore at his ears and at his insides; somebody might have been reaching in through his nose and trying to rip out his lungs. Shell fragments whistled and whined all around him.

More shells crashed home, these not quite so close. Through the ringing in his ears and the crazy hammering of his heart, Mutt heard somebody scream. Somebody else—was that Dracula’s voice?—shouted, “Miss Lucille!”

Mutt dug his face out of the dirt. “Aw, heck,” he said. “They tagged somebody.”

Lucille Potter didn’t answer. She didn’t move. One of those shell fragments that missed Mutt had neatly clipped off the top of her head. He could see her brain in there. Blood ran down into her graying hair. Her eyes were wide and staring. She’d never known what hit her, anyhow.

“Miss Lucille?” Yeah, that was Dracula calling. “We need you over here.”

Mutt didn’t say anything. He looked at her body, at the ruined Chicago neighborhood that had just had a little more ruin rained onto it. Without intending to, he started to cry. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done that. The tears rolled down his cheeks and made tiny damp spots on the chewed-up ground. Then they soaked in and were gone as if they’d never existed.

*Just like Lucille*, he thought, and cried even harder.

“Assembled shiplords, I am pleased to report to you that progress in the conquest of Tosev 3, while slower than we hoped when we reached this planet, is nonetheless accelerating,” Atvar told the throng of high-ranking males aboard the *127th Emperor Hetto*. After some time down on Tosev 3, being back on his bannership felt good.

“Some details would be appreciated,” Shiplord Straha called out.

“I have assembled the shiplords here this day to give those details,” Atvar said. He did not show Straha the dislike he felt. Straha was waiting for him to get into trouble, for the campaign to fail. If enough went wrong, the shiplords might turn Atvar out of power and set someone in his place. Straha wanted to be that someone.

Kirel had had such ambitions, too, but Kirel was a good male—he put the cause of the Race ahead of personal ambition. All Straha cared about was himself and the moment. For all the forethought and restraint he showed, he might as well have been a Big Ugly.

To Kirel, Atvar murmured, “The first situation map, please.”

“It shall be done, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel replied. He touched a button on the podium. A large hologram sprang into being behind the two males.

“This is the big northern land area of the main continental mass,” Atvar said by way of explanation. “As you will see, we have smashed through the line of defense centered on the town of Kaluga which the SSSR threw up in a last desperate attempt to hold our forces away from their capital, Moskva.”

“The fall of this capital will give me particular satisfaction, and not just from the military and strategic perspective,” Kirel said. “The regime currently ruling the SSSR came to power, assembled shiplords, as many of you know, after murdering their emperor.”

Although most of the males in the hall did know that, a murmur of horror ran through it just the same. Impericide was not a crime the Race had imagined until the Big Uglies brought it to their notice.

“The military and strategic considerations are not to be taken lightly, either,” Atvar said. “Moskva being not only an administrative but also a communications hub, its capture will go a long way toward taking the SSSR out of the war. That accomplished, we shall be able to devote more of our resources to the defeat of Deutschland, and shall be able to attack the Deutsche from improved positions.”

He enjoyed the buzz of approval that rose from the shiplords; he had not heard that sound often enough while discussing Tosevite affairs. At his hand signal, Kirel pressed the button again and brought up another map.

Atvar said, “This is the island of Britain, which lies off the northwestern coast of Tosev 3’s main continental mass. The British have also made themselves into unmitigated nuisances to us. Because the island was so small, we did not reckon it of major

significance in our opening attacks. We made the same error with the island empire of Nippon, on the eastern edge of this same land mass. Air strikes have harmed both empires, but not enough. The males and matériel freed up after the defeat of the SSSR will allow us to mount full-scale invasions of all these pestilential islands.”

“Permission to speak, Exalted Fleetlord?” Straha called.

“Speak,” Atvar said. Straha hadn’t asked for permission the last time. The list of successes and anticipated successes must have served notice to him that he wasn’t likely to be fleetlord any time soon.

Straha said, “With the Deutsche still holding northern—’France’ is the proper geographic designation, is it not?—can we invade this Britain with reasonable hope of success, even assuming the SSSR drops out of the fight against us?”

“Computer models show our probability of success as being higher than seventy percent under the circumstances you describe,” Atvar answered. “With the SSSR still in the war and forcing us to continue to expend resources to suppress it, chances for a successful invasion of Britain drop to slightly below fifty percent. Shall I send you a printout of the analysis, Shiplord?”

“If you please, Exalted Fleetlord.”

That was the most politeness Atvar had heard from Straha in a long time. The fleetlord signaled Kirel for the next map. When it appeared, Atvar said, “This, as you see, illustrates our position in the northern part of the lesser continental mass, particularly in our fight against the empire, or rather not-empire, known as the United States. The major urban center called Chicago, which eluded us in our previous attack, has now been reached by our armies; its reduction is only a matter of time.”

Kirel said, “With other major moves planned, Exalted Fleetlord, can we afford the drain on our resources a hard-fought city campaign would entail?”

“My judgment is that we can,” Atvar answered. Kirel might be a good and loyal male, but he was also too cautious and conservative to suit the fleetlord. Straha, on the other hand, fairly bounced in his seat, so eager was he to mix it up with the Big Ugliers. Yes, he might have been a Tosevite himself.

“If the fleetlord decrees it shall be done, then of course it shall be done,” Kirel declared. Atvar knew he would have to go back into cold sleep if he wanted to live long enough to hear Straha make the same pledge.

The fleetlord signaled to Kirel once more, and a new map replaced the one of the northern portion of the lesser continental mass. This one was far more detailed: it showed the street plan of a seacoast town and enough of the hinterland to depict a tumbledown ruin on a hilltop not far away.

“I admit, assembled shiplords, that the situation portrayed here lacks the large-scale strategic importance of those I have previously outlined,” Atvar said. “Nonetheless, I shall set it forth for you because it also illustrates, in a different way, the progress we are making against the Tosevites. Have security briefings brought the Big Ugly named

Skorzeny to the attention of everyone gathered here at this time?”

“The Tosevite terrorist? Yes, Exalted Fleetlord,” one of the males said. Atvar was comfortably certain some of them had paid no attention to their security briefings. Some of them never did. Well, no matter, not today. As far as Skorzeny was concerned, it would soon be no matter ever again.

Atvar resumed: “One of our operatives has set up an elaborate scheme in this town—it is known as Split—to lure the vassal state known as Croatia out of the empire of Deutschland and toward acceptance of the dominion of the Race. If this succeeds, well and good. But the effort has deliberately been kept to a small scale, to let the Deutsche get the notion they can check it by similarly modest means. We have now confirmed that Skorzeny is operating in the area. All that remains is for our skilled operative to close the trap on him. I expect that to be completed within days. Without this Skorzeny, the Big Ugliers will not be able to cause us nearly so much trouble.”

The assembled shiplords didn’t quite burst into cheers, but they came close. Atvar basked in the warm glow of their approval as if he were lying on a sandbank under summer sunshine back on Home.

Heinrich Jäger mooched through the streets of Split. In old Yugoslav Army boots, baggy civilian pants, and faded gray Italian Army tunic, he fit in perfectly. Half the men in town wore a mixture of military and civilian garb. Even his craggy features belonged here; he could have been a Croat or a Serb as easily as a German. He ambled right past a couple of Lizard patrols. They didn’t turn so much as an eye turret his way.

The tavern across the street from the south wall of Diocletian’s palace had seen better days. It had once had a window in front, but the square of plywood nailed where the window had been was weathered almost gray; it had been up there a long time.

Jäger opened the door, slid inside, shut it behind him in a hurry. The fellow behind the bar was about fifty, going gray, with bushy eyebrows that grew together above his bony beak of a nose. Jäger hadn’t learned much in the way of Serbo-Croatian, but he had a little Italian. In that language, he said, “Are you Barisha? I hear you’ve got some special brandy in stock.”

The bartender looked him over. “We keep the special stuff in the back room,” he said at last. “You want to come with me?”

“Sì, grazie,” Jäger said. A couple of old men sat at a table in the corner, drinking beer. They didn’t look up when Jäger accompanied Barisha into that back room.

The back room was considerably bigger than the one in front; it took up not only the rear of Barisha’s tavern but also of the shuttered shops to either side. It needed to be large, for it was packed with poorly shaven men in a motley mixture of clothes. One of the tallest of them grinned at him, his teeth shining in the candlelight. “Thought you’d never get here,” the fellow said in German.

“I’m here, Skorzeny,” Jäger answered. “You can take that makeup off your cheek

now, if you care to.”

“I was just getting used to going without the scar, too,” the SS man said. “Come here—I’ve saved one of the *Fallschirm-jägergewehrs* for you.” He held the weapon up over his head.

Jäger pushed his way through the crowd. Some of the men carried infantry rifles, others submachine guns. A few, like Skorzeny himself, had paratroop rifles—automatic weapons that fired a full-sized cartridge from a twenty-round box magazine. Jäger eagerly took the FG-42 and several full magazines from Skorzeny. “This is as good as anything the Lizards carry,” he said.

“Better than what the Lizards carry,” Skorzeny said. “More powerful cartridge.”

Not inclined to argue the point, Jäger said, “When are we going to go down the hole?” He pointed to a black pit that, from the look of it, might have led straight down to hell. It didn’t; it led to the underground galleries inside the wall to Diocletian’s palace.

“Five minutes by my watch after Captain Petrovic and his merry boys start their attack on the palace,” Skorzeny answered. “Five minutes,” he repeated in Italian and Serbo-Croatian. Everybody nodded.

A couple of men came in after Jäger. Skorzeny passed them submachine guns. Sneaking the weapons into Split had been harder than getting the men in, but Skorzeny and his local contacts, whoever they were, had managed the job.

A thuttering roar filled the back room, followed by another and another. In Italian, somebody yelled, “Start watching the time,” to Skorzeny.

He shook his big head. “That’s not fighting. That’s just some of the Lizards heading off in helicopters.” He grinned again. “So much the better. That leaves fewer of them for us to deal with.”

\* \* \*

Even up front with the pilot and weapons officer, the helicopter was noisy. Drefsab didn’t care to think about what it was like for the eight males back in the troop compartment. He waited until all three of his assault aircraft had taken off before he turned to the pilot and said, “On to the ruined castle at Klis. The Deutsche and the Croats there have been plotting against us long enough. This time we bag Skorzeny and all his henchmales.”

“To the castle at Klis,” the pilot repeated, as if he were hearing the order for the first time rather than something like the hundred and first. “It shall be done, superior sir.”

The town of Split shrank as the helicopter gained height. Drefsab found it remarkably ugly: bricks and stucco and red tile roofs were nothing like the concrete and glass and stone of Home. The ruined castle, already growing larger in the distance as the pilot shoved the collective forward, struck him as even uglier.

“Why are you so hot to be rid of this particular Big Ugly, superior sir?” the pilot



asked.

“Because he is the biggest nuisance on this entire nuisance of a planet,” Drefsab answered. “He is responsible for more grief to the Race than any other three Big Ugly males I can think of.” He didn’t go into detail; the pilot had no need to know. But his sincerity was so obvious that the pilot turned one eye turret to look at him for a moment before returning full attention to the flight.

The ruined gray stone pile of Klis drew swiftly nearer. Drefsab waited for the Tosevites hiding within to open up with small-arms fire. Satellite and aerial reconnaissance both claimed they had no anti-aircraft artillery in there. He hoped the males in recon knew whereof they spoke.

He wished he’d tasted ginger before he got into the helicopter. His body craved it. But he’d restrained himself. Ginger would take away his doubts, and against a foe as wily as Skorzeny he wanted them all in place.

“Shouldn’t they be shooting at us by now?” the weapons officer asked. The castle of Klis seemed very quiet and peaceful, as if no raiders had lived in it for thousands of years. Drefsab hissed softly. Thousands of years ago, the castle probably hadn’t even been built. Tosev 3 was a *new* world.

He answered the male’s question: “You never can tell with Big Ugliers. They may be lying low, hoping to make us think they aren’t really there. Or they may have some sort of ambush set.”

“I’d like to see them try, superior sir,” the weapons officer said. “It’d be a sorry-looking ambush after it bit down on us.”

Drefsab liked his confidence. “Let’s give the place a sandstorm of fire, to make sure we don’t have any trouble getting our males on the ground.”

“It shall be done.” The weapons officer and the pilot spoke together. The pilot called on the radio to his opposite numbers in the other two helicopters. One of them dropped to the ground to unload its soldiers. The other, along with the helicopter in which Drefsab flew, popped up into the air and started pasting the castle of Klis with rockets and machine-gun bullets. No return fire came. As soon as the eight males had scuttled out of the landed helicopter, it rose into the air to join the barrage, while the second one descended to disgorge its soldiers.

Drefsab took a firm grip on his personal weapon. He intended to go down there with the fighting males, and to be certain Skorzeny was dead. There were whole little Tosevite empires that had caused the Race less trouble than that one Deutsch male. Stolen nuclear materials, Mussolini kidnapped to spew propaganda against the Race, a landcruiser lifted out from under everyone’s snout at Besançon, and who could guess how many other crimes lay at his feet.

Males scrambled away from the second helicopter, opening up with their personal weapons to add to the fire that made whatever defenders huddled in Klis keep their heads down. The pilot started to lower Drefsab’s helicopter to let off the males it carried,

but before he could grab the collective, the radio speaker taped to his hearing diaphragm began to chatter.

“You’d better hear this, superior sir,” he said, and touched the control that fed the incoming signal to the main speaker in the flight cabin.

Through engine noise and ordnance, a male’s voice squawked, “Superior sir, the outwalls of our base are under attack by a motley crew of Big Ugliers with rifles and other small arms. Their forcing a breach seems unlikely, but our defending males have taken some casualties.” Some of the noise of firing, Drefsab realized, was coming out of the speaker.

“If the situation is not urgent, I shall continue neutralizing this target before I return,” he answered. His mouth fell open in a laugh of amusement and relief. So Skorzeny had chosen this moment to attack, had he? Well, he would pay for it. The fighting males he’d left here would be destroyed. The Race would keep a garrison in Klis from now on. Control in this area would expand at the expense of the Deutsche, and one Drefsab, ginger-tasting addict though he was, would rise in prestige and importance to the leaders of the Race’s forces on Tosev 3.

“Shall I proceed as planned, superior sir?” the pilot asked.

“Yes,” Drefsab said, and the helicopter lost altitude. Drefsab ran a battery check on the radio gear implanted in his helmet. If the main base needed to get in touch with him, he wanted to ensure that he wasn’t cut off. That was the only special precaution he took against Skorzeny’s attack.

Ever so gently, the helicopter’s wheels touched ground. Drefsab clapped the helmet onto his head and hurried back into the fighting compartment to exit with the rest of the males.

When Jäger fought, he was usually closed up inside the thick steel shell of a panzer, which muffled the racket all around him. The tavern’s wall didn’t do nearly so good a job as that; the rifle and machine-gun fire from and at the wall of Diocletian’s palace all sounded as if it were aimed right at him. The other soldiers and guerrillas in the back room of Barisha’s tavern took no special notice, so he assumed they were used to this kind of din.

Through it, Skorzeny said, “Two minutes!” in German, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian. In German alone, he went on, “Do we have all the men with the automatic weapons closest to the hole?”

The question was rhetorical; he’d bullied people into place before the shooting outside started. With his FG-42, Jäger was one of the lucky few who would lead the way through the tunnel. Around the troops with automatic rifles clustered those who carried submachine guns; the men who bore ordinary bolt-action rifles would bring up the rear.

“One minute!” Skorzeny said, and then, what seemed to Jäger a year or two later, “Now!” He was the first one to plunge into the tunnel.

Jäger went in either fourth or fifth; in all the jostling, he wasn't sure which. The dim light behind him vanished, leaving him surrounded by absolute black. The toe of his boot caught the heel of the man in front of him. He stumbled and almost fell. When he straightened up, his head bumped the low ceiling. Dirt showered down; some got inside his collar and slid down his back. He wished he had a helmet—for more reasons than keeping the dirt off. He also wondered how Skorzeny was faring in the tunnel—the SS man, who lacked only eight or ten centimeters of two meters, probably had to bend himself double to move at all.

Though the tunnel couldn't have been more than fifteen meters long, it seemed to go on forever. It was narrow as well as low-ceilinged; whenever his elbow bumped a wall, Jäger felt as if it were closing in on him. He was afraid someone would start screaming in the confining dark. Some people couldn't even stand being shut up in a panzer with the hatches dogged. The tunnel was a hundred times worse.

He realized he could see the silhouette of the soldier in front of him. A couple of paces later, he emerged in a dusty storeroom illuminated only by lights from other rooms, none of them especially close. All the same, after the tunnel it seemed almost noonday bright.

“Spread out, spread out,” Skorzeny urged in a hissing whisper. “Give the men behind you room to get out.” When the whole force had emerged, Skorzeny thumped Jäger on the back. “The colonel here, being an expert in archaeology, knows where the stairs are.”

By now, the SS man—and several others among the raiders—had studied the underground maze enough to know it as well as Jäger, if not better. He appreciated the nod even so: it reminded the men that his word counted next after Skorzeny's. He said, “I just don't want to find a lot of Lizards down here. If we have to fight underground, we won't get up to the surface and sweep them off the walls.”

“That's what Petrovic's diversion is for,” Skorzeny said: “to flush all of them up to the top so they won't notice us till too late—for them.”

Jäger knew that was what the diversion was for. He also knew diversions weren't always diverting enough to do what they were supposed to do. He kept quiet. They'd find out soon enough how well this one had worked.

Skorzeny turned his attention to the group as a whole. “My advice is simple: shoot first.” He repeated the phrase in Italian and Serbo-Croatian. The men he led just grinned—they'd figured that one out for themselves. Skorzeny grinned, too. “Come on, you lugs.” As he'd been first into the tunnel, he was first out of the storeroom.

Jäger had never seen the underground maze of hallways and chambers in Diocletian's palace, not till now. But he moved through it confidently, counting off turns under his breath as he trotted along. A blast of heat came from one big room he passed: the Lizard barracks. If ever the raiders would be discovered down here, this was the place.

No shouts, no hisses, no gunfire. There ahead were the stone stairs. Skorzeny bounded

up them three at a time. The rest of the men, Jäger still near the front of the pack, ran at his heels. The panzer colonel's stomach knotted. An eye turret turned at the wrong moment and the assault could still turn into a slaughter.

Trying to match the Lizards' swiveling eyes, his head twisted every which way as he reached the top of the stairs. The aliens were still banging away from the wall, but the bulk of the baptistry hid them from him—and him from them.

Skorzeny used hand signals to divide the raiders into two groups and to show no one had better argue against Jäger's leading one of them. He pointed right and then forward to show Jäger's group was to go around the baptistry, then led his own group to the left.

"Come on," Jäger hissed to his men. He trotted at their fore: if you wanted to impress anybody who'd already seen Skorzeny in action, you'd better lead from the front. Otherwise, your men wouldn't follow you for long.

He waved the group to a halt as they came to the corner of the baptistry. FG-42 at the ready, he stepped out into the narrow street that led north to the wall. As he did so, he heard Skorzeny's group start firing.

A Lizard a couple of hundred meters ahead whirled at that unexpected sound. It caught sight of Jäger. Before it could bring up its rifle, he cut it down. "Forward!" he shouted, and ran up the street. The pound of boots on cobblestones behind him said he'd brought his troops with him.

Personal weapon at the ready, Drefsab scrambled over a big gray stone and dropped down into the enclosed area of the castle of Klis. His feet scrunched on dry weeds. Several other males were already there, scurrying around and nervously checking anything that could hide a Big Ugly.

Thus far, they'd found precisely nothing. Drefsab was disappointed—he wanted Skorzeny dead and proved dead. But sealing off this place and taking possession of it for the Race wasn't bad in and of itself, either. *High time to expand the foothold in Croatia beyond the town of Split*, he thought.

"They've been here," a male said, pointing to the litter scattered wherever it wasn't visible from Split. "Why aren't they here now?" He sounded indignant; to the Race, the world by rights should have been a neatly predictable place.

"They may have timed their attack in town to match ours here," Drefsab answered. "Their intelligence is revoltingly good." That didn't surprise him overmuch; only natural for beings of one kind to stick together against those of another, especially when the latter were trying to conquer them.

He badly wanted a taste of ginger. He'd all but promised the fleetlord that he'd bring back Skorzeny's head in a clear block of acrylic resin. Would Atvar be content if presented with a mere strategic gain rather than said head? Unless Skorzeny got himself killed and identified back in Split, it looked as if Drefsab would have to find out. Ginger wouldn't change that, but would keep him from having to think about it for a while.

Another male waved to him from a stone-lined hole in the ground. “Over here, superior sir,” he said. “Looks like the Big Ugliers that haunted this place made their home underground.”

Drefsab shone an electric torch into the hole. Even without it, he would have been sure this was a Big Ugly den: the Tosevites’ rank, meaty smell filled the scent receptors on his tongue. He played the torch back and forth, then let out a low hiss. “This place will hold a lot of Big Ugliers.”

“That’s true, superior sir,” the male agreed. “Where do you suppose they’ve all gone?”

“Some of them back to their villages, I suppose, and some into town to attack our walls,” Drefsab answered. He stuck out his tongue. The words did not taste right. From all he’d learned of Skorzeny, such a simpleminded frontal assault seemed out of character.

“If you want us to set up camp in this pile of stones, superior sir, I hope you don’t expect *us* to use that place down there.” The soldier also stuck out his tongue, and wagged it in derision and disgust. “It stinks.”

“That it does,” Drefsab said. “And no, I promise you won’t have to set up your sleeping gear down there—not until we fumigate, anyhow.” His mouth and the other male’s dropped open in a laugh.

The speaker built into his helmet suddenly screamed at him: “Superior sir! Superior sir! We’re under attack not just from outside the wall but also from within! Somehow a large party of Big Ugliers managed to get inside the walls without being noticed. We’re taking heavy casualties. Need for assistance urgent in the extreme!”

Drefsab made a noise like a pressure cooker forgotten on top of a hot stove. “None of them slipped away to their villages,” he said when coherent speech returned. The male beside him stared in confusion; he hadn’t heard the desperate call. Drefsab went on, “They all went down into Split.” No, Skorzeny wasn’t simpleminded at all.

“Who? The Big Ugliers?” the male asked, still trying to figure out what was going on.

Drefsab ignored him. He waved to the soldiers scattered over the castle of Klis. “Back to the helicopters!” he shouted. “Quick as you can!”

A virtue of the Race was obedience to superiors. The males neither hesitated nor asked questions. They ran toward the helicopters as fast as their legs would take them. Behind the armor-glass windscreens, the pilots waved frantically. They’d got the message, too, then.

Drefsab dashed up to the cockpit. “To the fortress!” he snarled. “Skorzeny will pay for this. Oh, how he will pay.”

All the pilot said was, “It shall be done.” He pulled up on the collective. The helicopter sprang into the air. It wheeled within its own diameter and darted back toward Split. Only then did the pilot say, “May I ask your plan, superior sir?”

“Use our firepower to blast the Big Ugliers out of the fortress,” Drefsab answered.

“They may have smuggled in men and rifles; I refuse to believe they could carry anti-aircraft weapons into Split without our noticing.”

“No doubt you are right about that, superior sir,” the weapons officer said with all proper deference. “But I see I must remind you that we expended most of our munitions in the bombardment of that empty castle. We have little left to use back at the city.”

Drefsab stared at him in blank dismay. After a moment, he said, “Keep going anyhow. I’ll think of something.” The ground blurred by under the helicopter. He didn’t have much time.

Jäger had fought house to house, street to street, in towns and cities in the Ukraine. He’d hated it then. Even with a panzer wrapped around him, it was deadly dangerous work. Doing it in nothing but these ragged clothes struck him as clinically insane. “You’d never get me to join the infantry now,” he muttered, sheltered in the doorway of a building near the wall. “I did that the last war.”

Bullets sprayed past him, biting chips out of stone and brickwork. They stung when they hit; if you got one in the eye, it could blind you. The Lizards all had automatic weapons and, by the way they hosed fire around, they might have had all the ammunition in the world, too. Jäger was too aware that he didn’t. The FG-42 was a wonderful weapon, but it went through magazines in a hurry.

Several men in front of him shot back at the Lizards. That was the signal for him and half a dozen fellows with him to leapfrog forward past them. Leaving the doorway was as hard as getting out of a trench and springing across no-man’s-land had been in France a generation ago. But fire and move was how you fought as a foot soldier if you wanted any kind of chance of living to do it again.

He bounded along the cobblestones, bent over as if his belly griped him to make himself as small a target for the Lizards as he could. The men firing hadn’t suppressed all the enemies ahead. Bullets struck sparks from the cobbles close by his feet and ricocheted away at crazy angles.

He’d had a new doorway in mind when he started his dash. He threw himself into it, panting as if he’d just run a marathon rather than a few meters. A moment later, another fellow squeezed in behind him. In Slavic-accented German, he asked, “Think any of the things are inside here?”

Jäger made a sour face. “We’re getting up close to their position. It could be.”

“I have grenade,” the Croat said, pulling a German potatomasher model from his belt. He tried a thick wooden door. The knob turned in his hand. That was plenty to make Jäger suspicious, and the Croat as well. He unscrewed the grenade’s protective cap, yanked the igniter, opened the door, chucked in the grenade, and slammed it again.

The blast made Jäger’s head pound. Fragments rattled off the door. Jäger flung it open once more, sprayed a quick burst into the chamber to catch any Lizards the grenade had missed. Then he dove behind a massive oaken desk that had probably sat

there since the days of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The Croat ran to the next door in, fired a few rounds from his submachine gun, then peered around the corner. That was the right order in which to do things. He grunted. “I think we maybe are lucky.”

“Better for us to shoot up the place and not need to than to need to and not do it,” Jäger said. The Croat nodded. Taking no chances even so, Jäger crawled back to the outer doorway.

Just as he got there, a blast like a 500-kilo bomb went off to the north. When he ever so cautiously looked out of the doorway, he saw a great hole in the outwall to Diocletian’s palace. The antiquarian in him lamented. The soldier rejoiced—Skorzeny’s raiders had distracted the Lizards enough to let Petrovic’s men lay the explosives next to the wall.

He sprang to his feet, stormed forward. The best time to advance was while the enemy was momentarily stunned. Now the Lizards would have a doubly hard time: they’d have to fight Skorzeny’s men and keep Petrovic’s followers from getting through the breach in the wall. This mad raid just might work.

Then a stuttering roar filled the sky. Jäger dove for the nearest cover he could find. The Lizard helicopters were coming back.

Split was in flames, with smoke mounting fast into the sky. Drefsab hissed in astonished disbelief—who could have imagined a town could go from peace to ruin in so short a time? “Oh, Skorzeny, how you will pay,” he whispered.

Even as the helicopters reached the outskirts of Split, a big explosion sent a great cloud of dust leaping into the air. “They’ve blown up part of the wall,” the pilot said in dismay, scanning the electronically amplified vision display. “How did they get all these munitions into town under our muzzles?”

“Some have probably been there all along—the Big Ugliers were fighting among themselves when we got here, you know. As for the rest, they’re good at it,” Drefsab said bitterly. “We didn’t X-ray every bit of every single animal cart going in, and now we’re paying the price. But if we did that everywhere, we wouldn’t have enough males to do anything else. The fault here is mine; I accept it.”

That made him feel virtuous. Otherwise, it did nothing to change matters. Split kept on burning. Radio calls for help kept pouring in. Every one of them reported some fresh Tosevite gain. “What do we do, superior sir?” the weapons officer asked, fixing Drefsab with worried eyes. “We have no rockets left, and our machine-gun ammunition is low.”

*Worries about conserving ammunition, Drefsab thought, had cost the Race victories.* If they lost here, it wouldn’t be on account of that. “If we don’t expend what we have, our ground position in Split falls,” he said. “Next to that, ammunition—or, come to that, three helicopters—counts for nothing. Maybe we can kill enough of the Big Ugliers to make the rest break contact and give our males a chance. Let’s go try.”

“It shall be done, superior sir.” Neither the pilot nor the weapons officer sounded enthusiastic. Drefsab couldn’t blame them for that—even if the Big Ugliers didn’t have anti-aircraft guns, the helicopters were still going into danger: if they’d armored all the wires and hydraulics heavily enough to protect them from rifle fire, the aircraft would have been too heavy to fly. But the pilot didn’t hesitate. He radioed Drefsab’s orders to his two comrades.

The three helicopters skimmed low over the rooftops of Split. They started taking fire long before they got to the rectangular stone wall the Race had used as a perimeter for its base. Some bullets went *spanng!* off armored sections; others punched through sheet metal in less vital spots.

Drefsab quickly realized the ground fire away from the fortress came from Big Ugliers who just happened to have rifles and pistols. It turned into a storm of bullets when the aircraft approached the fighting zone. “Shall I return fire against the Tosevite males outside the walls, superior sir?” the weapons officer asked.

“No,” Drefsab said. “The ones who got inside are even more important. If we have only limited ammunition, we’ll use it at the point of decision.”

Again, the pilot relayed Drefsab’s will to the males flying the other two helicopters. All three machines hovered above the narrowing area inside the walls that the Race still held. The machine guns roared. Drefsab felt a savage surge of satisfaction, almost as good as ginger, as Big Ugliers twisted and fell under assault from the air.

“We’ll get them out of there yet!” he cried.

Another doorway. This time, Jäger didn’t think it would be cover enough. He kicked in the door and rolled inside, automatic rifle at the ready. No Lizard shot at him. He crawled toward a north-facing window.

Outside, death reigned. He’d hated the Lizards’ helicopters when he was in a panzer. Their rockets smashed through armor as if it were pasteboard. Against infantry, their machine guns were similarly destructive.

The fire wasn’t aimed. It didn’t need to be. As he’d seen in France in the last war, machine guns put out so many bullets that if this one didn’t get you, the next one would. Without luck amounting to divine intervention, anyone caught on the street without cover would be dead.

The helicopters’ noses seemed to be spitting flame. Jäger squeezed off a burst at the nearest of them, then rolled away as fast as he could. He had no idea whether he’d damaged the helicopter, but he was sure as need be that the Lizards would have spotted his muzzle flashes.

Sure enough, bullets battered the wall. Some pierced the stones; others sent shards of glass from the broken window flying like shell fragments. Something bit Jäger in the leg. Blood began to soak into his trousers. It wasn’t a flood. He cautiously tried putting weight on the leg. It held. He might not run as fast as usual for a while, but he could



move around pretty well. He headed up to the second story of the building. When he got there, he planned on firing another burst at the helicopters. It would also let him deliver plunging fire against the Lizards at the base of the wall. He was still on the stairs when the firing from the helicopters died away: first one machine gun fell silent, then a second, then a third.

His first thought was to rush—or come as close as he could to rushing with a sliver of glass in his leg—back down and join the final attack that would sweep away the last of the Lizards. His second thought was that his first one was less than smart. The Lizards surely had imagination enough to stop shooting and see how many men they could fool into thinking they'd run out of ammunition.

He went up to the second floor after all. The helicopters still hung menacingly in the air, but they weren't shooting. Men on the ground—Skorzeny's forces and Petrovic's both—kept blazing away at them, though. Jäger fired, too. This time the Lizards didn't shoot back.

“Maybe you are out of ammo,” he muttered to himself. Even so, he didn't hurry downstairs and rush out into the street. Maybe they *weren't* out of ammo, too.

Drefsab turned to the weapons officer in anger and dismay when the machine gun stopped firing. “Is that all of it?” he demanded.

“Not quite, superior sir, but almost all,” the fellow answered. “I've reserved the last couple of hundred rounds. Whatever decision you make on how or if we use them, though, I suggest you make it quickly. We already have one male wounded back in the fighting compartment, and we can't stay under such intense fire indefinitely. The odds of any one bullet doing us significant damage are low, but we are encountering a great many bullets.”

That was an understatement. The patter and clatter of incoming rounds all but deafened Drefsab. He said, “The area close to the wall is too built up to let us land and take aboard those of our males who still live.” He added the interrogative cough to that, though it looked pretty plain to him. Maybe the pilot would tell him he was wrong.

But the pilot didn't. “We could fit the fuselages of our machines down there, superior sir, but the rotors—” He didn't finish the sentence, but Drefsab had no trouble finishing it for him. The pilot went on, “We do still have fuel enough to return to Italia, where the Race holds unchallenged control.” He sounded hopeful.

“No,” Drefsab said flatly. He reached into a pouch on his belt, took out a vial of ginger, and tasted. The pilot and weapons officer gaped at him. He didn't care. Atvar the fleetlord knew he was addicted, so what these low-grade officers thought mattered not at all to him. He said, “We shall not flee.”

“But, superior sir—” The pilot broke off, perhaps because of drilled subordination, perhaps because he couldn't decide whether to protest Drefsab's tactics or the vial of ginger he still held so blatantly in his left hand.

Ginger certainty and ginger cunning rushed through Drefsab. “The Big Uglies can’t have brought all that many males into the fortress,” he said. “If we land behind them, where we took off, we can catch them between two fires, as they’ve done with our males down there.”

Now the pilot had something concrete to which to object: “But, superior sir, we’ve twenty-three effectives at most; I don’t know if anyone aboard the other helicopters is wounded.”

“Thirty,” Drefsab corrected, his voice cold. “Pilots and weapons officers have their personal weapons, and I have mine. If we can drive the Big Uglies from the fortress, we may be able to hold on here long enough for reinforcements to arrive.”

The pilot was still staring. Drefsab deliberately looked away from him, daring him to protest further. To underline his contempt, he tasted again. Ginger filled him with the burning urge to *do something*, and with the confidence that if he just acted boldly, everything would turn out fine.

“Back to the landing area,” he snapped.

“It shall be done, superior sir,” the pilot said miserably. He relayed Drefsab’s command to the other two helicopters.

When the helicopters darted away, Jäger hoped with all his heart they were fleeing. But, though the engine noise diminished, it didn’t vanish.

“Where are they going?” he muttered suspiciously. He couldn’t believe they would just up and fly away, not when they’d done such a job of working over the humans’ positions moments before. He tried to think himself into the head of the Lizard commander—Drefsab, Skorzeny had said his name was. The exercise had proved useful over and over again in the Soviet Union. If you could figure out what the other fellow needed to do, you were halfway to keeping him from doing it.

All right, assume this Drefsab was no fool. He wouldn’t be, not if he’d made the Lizards shape up in Besançon (Jäger wondered how his regiment was faring; the news out of France—and then out of Germany—hadn’t been good) and been entrusted with swinging the Croats away from Germany.

What to do, then? Those big Lizard helicopters carried soldiers as well as munitions. What would Skorzeny do if he had some men he could put anywhere he wanted? The answer to that formed of itself in Jäger’s mind: he’d stick them up the enemy’s rear. He’d done just that, here in Split.

Next question was, would Skorzeny figure that out for himself? He’d better.

Jäger couldn’t get in touch with him by radio or field telephone. But Skorzeny was no fool, either. He’d think of something like that ... Jäger told himself hopefully.

The panzer colonel wondered if he ought to head back toward the rear. Before he made up his mind, he decided to evaluate the position he already held. He moved toward the window, peered out from well back in the room so as not to make himself an

obvious target for the Lizards by the wall.

He needed only a couple of seconds to realize he was in too good a place to abandon. He could see four or five Lizards no more than a hundred meters from him, and they didn't know he was there. He switched the FG-42 from automatic to single-shot, raised it, breathed out, and touched the trigger on the exhale. The automatic rifle bucked against his shoulder. One of the Lizards toppled over bonelessly.

Even single-shot, the weapon was a lot faster than a bolt-action rifle. All you had to do was pull the trigger again. He missed a shot at his second Lizard, but his next round was on the way before the creature could react to the one before. He didn't think he made a clean kill on that Lizard, but he was sure he'd hit it. Getting it out of the fight would definitely do.

Instinct made him move away from the window after that. Hardly had he done so when bullets came searching for him. He nodded to himself. If you pushed things too far, you paid for it.

Firing broke out off to the south, at first mostly Lizards' weapons, then men's answering back. Jäger nodded again. Drefsab was trying to retrieve the situation, all right. He might have been a nasty little alien from the black depths of unknown space, but he knew what fighting was all about.

Drefsab had been trained as an intelligence officer. When he got to Tosev 3, he'd never expected to meet combat face-to-face. His brief forays in a landcruiser at Besançon hadn't come close to preparing him for what infantry fighting—especially in the heart of a town—was like.

The helicopters had remained under fire all the way to the landing area from which they'd taken off what seemed like a couple of years before. A male was hit exiting through the troop compartment door, and another couple as they skittered toward cover. The weapons officers had used up the last precious rounds in the helicopter machine guns trying to suppress the Big Ugly defenders.

Drefsab had never felt so naked as when sprinting across the cobblestones toward a pile of rubble. Not even ginger's bravado could make him believe he was invulnerable to the bullets cracking past him. But he reached the rubble without getting hit. He sprawled down behind it and started shooting back.

He didn't need long to realize only a couple of Tosevites were defending against the males of the Race. The soldiers' commander figured out the same thing at the same time. His orders crackled in the speaker inside Drefsab's helmet. Some of the males sprayed bullets at the Big Ugliers to make them keep their heads down. Others moved to gain positions from which they could fire at the enemy from the side. Soon the Tosevites were down. The males of the Race ran forward.

They hadn't taken the Big Ugliers as much by surprise as Drefsab had hoped. The trouble was, they were fighting in too small a space. An alert commander—and no one

had ever faulted the Tosevites for that—could quickly pull some of his males from the fighting near the wall and send them to meet the new threat. And the males of the Race trapped against the wall had trouble exploiting that because of the danger from the Big Ugliers in the buildings on the other side.

No sooner had that thought crossed Drefsab's mind than an explosion to the north made him sure another piece of the wall had just gone down. He hissed in dismay. His detachment couldn't hold the fortress by itself. If the males he was trying to rescue perished, Split would fall.

“Hurry!” he shouted. “We have to fight through the Tosevites and reach them.”

Two of the helicopter pilots were already down. They'd joined the attack bravely enough, but they had even less notion of how to fight on the ground than Drefsab did. And so many bullets were in the air that the most skilled soldier, if he was unlucky, would fall as readily as anyone else.

Crouched in a doorway, Drefsab tasted again. He needed the spirit ginger brought him. If it drained away, he wouldn't be able to keep on fighting. So he told himself, at any rate.

One of the buildings ahead, or more than one, had caught fire. Smoke filled the narrow street. A determined male—especially one who was full to bursting with ginger—could take advantage of the cover. Drefsab thought there would be plenty of hiding places ahead. He burst out of the doorway, sprinted up the street.

He changed directions every few steps. No one would get a good shot at him if he could help it. The thick smoke made him gasp and cough; nictitating membranes slid across his eyes to protect them from the stinging stuff.

Through the smoke, he didn't see the Tosevite until they almost ran into each other. He hadn't heard him, either; the din of battle made sure of that. Even for a Big Ugly, this male was enormous. He could have made two of Drefsab.

Weapons were great equalizers, though. As Drefsab swung his toward the Tosevite, he noted that the fellow had a scar on his face, hidden not quite well enough by paint and powder. He started to shout, “Skorzeny!”

But Skorzeny had a weapon, too, a rifle of unfamiliar make. It spat a stream of fire like the automatic rifles of the Race. Something hit Drefsab a series of hammer blows. He felt only the first one or two.

Lizard jets screamed overhead. Thunderous blasts ripped across the area Diocletian's palace had enclosed. Huddled in a doorway, Jäger prayed the building wouldn't fall down on top of him. He didn't think much would be left of the palace by the time the bombers were done. Sixteen hundred years of history, blown to hell in an afternoon.

The jets unloaded their last bombs and flew away. Stunned, battered, but with no worse wounds than that chunk of glass in his leg, Jäger slowly got to his feet. He looked around at the smoking ruins of what had been a scenic little port. “It's ours,” he said.

“And a good thing, too,” somebody behind him answered. He whirled. That hurt, but his battle reflexes permitted nothing less. There stood Skorzeny. Sweat had made his makeup run, but his face was so covered with grime and soot that the scar wasn’t easy to spot, anyhow. He went on, “If we’d bogged down there, they might have been able to fly in reinforcements to their soldiers here. That wouldn’t have been much fun.”

“Not even a little bit,” Jäger said fervently. He looked around at the wreckage—and the carnage. “They’re tougher than I thought they were.”

“They can fight.” Skorzeny looked around. If the devastation bothered him, he didn’t show it. “We found out the Russians were tougher than we thought, too, but we would have licked them in the end.” Nothing seemed to get him down. Give him a military job, no matter how bizarre or impossible it seemed, and he’d go out and do it.

A Croat aimed his rifle at a Lizard prisoner. “*Halt!*” Jäger shouted as loud as he could—if the Croat understood any German, that would be it.

“Stop that!” Skorzeny echoed, even louder than Jäger. “What the bleeding hell do you think you’re doing, you shitheaded syphilitic cretinous puddle of dog puke?”

The Croat understood German, all right. He swung his rifle away from the frightened, cringing Lizard—and halfway toward Skorzeny. “I get rid of this thing,” he said. “Maybe I get rid of you first.”

Most of the men on the battered streets, most of the men who had done the fighting in Split, were Croats, not Germans. A lot of them started drifting over toward Skorzeny and Jäger. They didn’t quite aim their weapons at the German officers, but they had them ready. Among them was Captain Petrovic. He looked as ready to get rid of the Germans as any of his troops.

Jäger said, “Shooting Lizards is wasteful. They know so much that we don’t. Better to keep them alive and squeeze it out of them.”

The Croat with the rifle spat. “This I care for what they know. I know I enjoy killing this one, so I do it.”

“If you kill that Lizard, I’ll kill you,” Skorzeny said, as casually as if he were sitting over coffee with the Croat. “If you try to kill me, I’ll kill you. Colonel Jäger is right, and you damn well know it.”

The Croat’s scowl got blacker yet. He did not move his rifle another centimeter in Skorzeny’s direction, though. Jäger gestured to the Lizard: a peremptory *come-here*. The Lizard skittered over to stand beside him.

“Good,” Skorzeny said softly. He turned to Petrovic, raised his voice: “Order your men to round up the rest of the Lizards and bring them here. From what I’ve heard, we should have twenty or so who surrendered, plus about as many wounded. I want them all there—immediately. They’re as big a haul as this whole town.”

“You want,” Petrovic said coldly. “So what? This is the Independent State of Croatia, not Germany. I give orders here, not you. What do you do if I tell you no?”

“Shoot you,” Skorzeny answered. “If you think I can’t take you out along with your cheerful friend over there”—he jerked his chin at the Croat who had threatened the Lizard—“before your bully boys bring me down, you’re welcome to find out if you’re right.”

Petrovic was no coward. Had he been a coward, he wouldn’t have thrown himself into the middle of the fighting that had just ended. Skorzeny stood, almost at ease, waiting for him to do whatever he would do. Jäger did his best to match the SS man’s show of confidence. Matching his gall was something else again.

After a long, long pause, Petrovic barked orders in Serbo-Croatian. One of his men shouted a protest. Petrovic screamed abuse at him. Jäger hadn’t picked up much of the local language, but the invective sounded impressive as hell.

The Croats straggled away. A few minutes later, they started coming back with Lizard prisoners, first the males who had given up as the fighting ebbed and then, on makeshift litters, the crudely bandaged ones wounds had forced out of combat. Their sounds of pain were unpleasantly close to the ones men made.

“I wasn’t sure you’d get away with that,” Jäger murmured to Skorzeny.

“You have to make it personal,” Skorzeny whispered back. “These bastards take *everything* personally. I just played their game with them, and I won.” His smile was smug as he added one final word: “Again.”

Georg Schultz said, “I figured I’d get into Moscow one way or another, but I never guessed what those ways would be—first you flew me in, and now I’m retreating into it.”

“It isn’t funny.” Ludmila Gorbunova tore a chunk of black bread with her teeth. Someone handed her a glass of ersatz tea. She gulped it down. Someone else gave her a bowl of *shchi*. She gulped the cabbage soup, too. While she refueled herself, groundcrew men took care of her aircraft, pouring petrol into it, loading on light bombs, and stowing the belts of machine-gun ammunition Schultz had filled.

“I never said it was funny,” the German said. He looked worn unto death, his skin gray rather than fair, his hair and beard unkempt, grease on his face and tunic—no one had much chance to wash these days. Purple pouches lay under his eyes.

Ludmila was sure she was no more prepossessing. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had more than a couple of hours of sleep at a stretch. Even before the Kaluga line began to unravel, she’d been desperately overtaxed. Since then ...

The cry was *buy time*. When the Germans neared Moscow in 1941, old men, boys, and tens of thousands of women had dug trenches and antitank obstacles to slow their progress. They were out again. How much good their barriers would do against the Lizards when stronger ones had already failed was questionable, but the Soviet capital would not fall without as much of a fight as the Soviet people could put up.

“Ready, Comrade Pilot,” one of the groundcrew men shouted.

Ready or not, Ludmila put down the bowl of *shchi*—thin, watery stuff, without ham or salami, and without enough cabbage, too—and got up. She climbed wearily into the U-2 biplane. Georg Schultz said, “I hope you come back. I hope we’re still here when you come back.”

Nikifor Sholudenko walked up just in time to hear the panzer-gunner-turned-mechanic say that. The NKVD man bristled. “The penalty for defeatist talk is death,” he said.

Schultz rounded on him. “What’s the penalty for killing the only decent technician this base has?” he retorted. “You do that, you do more to make your side lose than I do by talking.”

“This may be true,” Sholudenko said, “but there is no fixed sentence for it.” His hand fell to the Tokarev pistol he wore on his hip.

Ludmila knew each of them wanted the other dead. Loudly, she said, “Spin my prop, one of you. Save your war with each other until after we’ve held off the Lizards.” *If we hold off the Lizards*, she added to herself. Had she said that aloud, she wondered whether Sholudenko would have come down on her for defeatism. Probably not. He didn’t want to see her dead—only naked.

The NKVD man and the ex-*Wehrmacht* sergeant both sprang toward the front of the *Kukuruznik*. Schultz got there first. When he yanked at the prop, Sholudenko had to back away; walking into a spinning prop blade would kill you as surely as a pistol, and a lot more messily.

*Buzz!* The prop caught; the five-cylinder radial engine spat out acrid exhaust fumes. Ludmila released the brake. The U-2 bounded over the rough airstrip (not really a strip at all, just a stretch of field), picking up speed. Ludmila gave it more throttle, eased the stick back. The ugly little biplane clawed its way into the air.

Even in flight, the U-2 did not go from duckling to swan. Yet, as a mosquito will bite and escape where a horsefly gets noticed and swatted, *Kukuruzniks* came back from missions more often than any other Soviet planes.

Not much was left of Kaluga. Ludmila flew over the outskirts of the industrial town. The Germans had wrecked part of it when they took it in their drive on Moscow in fall 1941, and the Russians had wrecked more when they took it back later the same year. Whatever they’d left standing, the Lizards had knocked down over the last couple of weeks.

The front lay north of Kaluga these days. The Lizards had cleared a few of the north-south streets through the town so they could move supplies forward. Lorries, some of their manufacture, others captured from the Nazis or the Soviets (some of those Russian-made, others American) rolled along, as if no enemies were to be found for a thousand kilometers.

*I may not be much of an enemy, but I’m the best the Soviet Union has here*, Ludmila thought. She worked her flaps and rudder, heeled the U-2 over into an attack run on the lorry column she’d spotted.

No one in the column spotted her until she was close enough to open fire. “The mosquito stings!” she hollered, and whooped with glee as Lizards bailed out of the lorries and dove for cover.

Some of them didn’t bail out—some shot back. Bullets snarled past the U-2. Ludmila kept boring in. She pulled the bomb-release handle. The aircraft suddenly got lighter and more maneuverable as weight and drag fell away.

She gunned it for every ruble it was worth, although, with the *Kukuruznik*, such things were better measured in kopecks. The biplane shook slightly as the bombs exploded behind it. Ludmila looked back over her shoulder. Some of the lorries were burning merrily. Between them and the little bomb craters she’d made, the Lizards wouldn’t be moving much forward on that route for a while.

Pity the U-2 could carry only light bombs. “I don’t just want to block off one road for a while,” Ludmila said, as if a witch might hear and grant her wish. “I want to keep the Lizards from using the whole city.”

What she wanted and what she could do, sadly, were not one and the same. She flew over Kaluga at rooftop height—not that many of the gutted houses and factories still had roofs—shooting at whatever targets she saw. None was as good as that first line of lorries.

The Lizards shot back. After a while, they started shooting the instant she came into range, sometimes before she opened up herself. *Time to go*, she thought. The Lizards used many more radios than the Red Army did; they must have spread the word that she was buzzing around.

She got out of Kaluga as fast as she could, ducking down between ruined buildings to make herself as nearly unhittable as she could. It must have worked; she escaped with no more damage than a few bullet holes through the fabric covering of the U-2’s wings and fuselage.

She flew off toward the west; the Lizards had to know the air base lay in that direction, and flying into the afternoon sun made her a harder target for gunners in Kaluga. But she zigzagged around a half-burned grove of plum trees and then headed east and north toward the front. With not much standing between the Lizards and Moscow, she had to do all she could, however little that was, to stem the tide of their advance.

Wreckage littered the ground north of Kaluga, the all-too-familiar signs of a Soviet army in disintegration: shattered tanks and armored cars, trench lines reduced to craters by artillery, unburied corpses in khaki. Even zooming by at full throttle, she gagged at the stink of death and decay that filled her nostrils.

Far less Lizard wreckage was strewn about. The Lizards made a point of salvaging their damaged equipment, which accounted for some of the disparity. But most of it sprang from their losing a lot less than their opponents had. That had been a constant of the war since its earliest days.



Artillery boomed and flashed, off toward the east. The Lizards' guns outranged those of the Red Army, too; from north of Kaluga, they could all but reach Moscow. Ludmila flew toward the guns. If she could shoot up the crews, that would be a good part of a day's work.

Though retreating, the Red Army hadn't given up the fight. She heard screams in the air; a ragged pattern of explosions tore up a square kilometer of ground not far ahead of the *Kukuruznik* "*Katyushas!*" she cried in high glee. The rockets were some of the best weapons the Soviets had. Unlike more conventional artillery, they were easily portable, and a flight of them not only did a lot of damage but also spread terror.

Some Lizards were just emerging from their hidey-holes after the *Katyusha* salvo when Ludmila flew by. She opened up with her machine gun. The Lizards dove back into cover. She hoped some of them weren't fast enough to reach it, but was gone before she could be sure.

As she approached the Lizards' artillery position, she got down below treetop height. Some of those gun stations had tank chassis with anti-aircraft cannon mounted in place of big guns protecting them. If she spotted one of those, she'd sheer off. A hit or two from their shells would turn the U-2 to kindling. She deliberately thought about it in terms of the aircraft rather than herself.

Jinking, weaving, Ludmila came up on the Lizard guns. She didn't see any of the anti-aircraft tanks, so she bored in. "*Za rodina!*—For the motherland!" she shouted as her thumb came down on the firing button.

Lizard gunners scattered before her, like cockroaches across a kitchen floor when someone comes in with a lamp. Unlike cockroaches, some of them snatched up personal weapons and shot back. Muzzle flashes might have looked pretty as fireflies, but they meant the Lizards were trying to kill her. More thrumming noises spoke of bullets making hits on the *Kukuruznik*, but the little biplane kept flying.

Ludmila glanced at her fuel gauge. She had a bit more than half a tank left. *Time to head for home*, she thought regretfully; she hadn't had such a good day shooting up the Lizards in a long time. But she also knew about stretching her luck. If she tried to go on until she found one more perfect target, she was only too likely to make one instead.

"There will be more tomorrow," she said, and then laughed at herself. She wouldn't wait for tomorrow to go out again: as soon as she had more fuel, more bullets, more bombs, she'd be in the air again. They kept using you until they used you up. Then they found somebody else—if they could.

*What happens when they run out of everybody?* she wondered. The answer came back stark: *then we lose*. It hadn't happened yet, no matter how black things sometimes looked. But when the Germans drove on Moscow in 1941, they'd faced Russian winter and fresh troops from Siberia. Now it was the beginning of summer, and if the Red Army had any fresh troops left, Ludmila didn't know where they might come from.

"Which means the veterans like me will just have to carry the load a while longer,"

she said, adding after a moment, “if any veterans like me are left alive.” There was Georg Schultz, but he didn’t really count; he’d started the war on the wrong side. Colonel Karpov had been through the whole thing, but he was more a military administrator than a fighting soldier. Ludmila had nothing against that; Karpov ran his air base as well as a man could in the chaos of a losing war. But it removed him from her list, or what would have been her list had she had anyone to put on it.

She wondered how Heinrich Jäger was doing these days. He’d been in it from the start, even if he came from the wrong side, too. The memory of their brief time together in Germany the winter before seemed faded, unreal. What would she do if she ever saw him again? She shook her head. For one thing, it wasn’t likely. For another, how could she know till it happened?

Down on the ground, a man in a khaki Red Army uniform waved his cap as she flew by. She was back over Soviet-held territory now, well away from the bulge northeast of Kaluga where the Lizards were forcing their way toward Moscow. They were concentrating their effort on that push, and had loaded the bulge with troops and weapons. Ludmila dared hope the air base would still be operating when she got back to it.

The U-2 bucked in the air, as if it had taken a hit from an anti-aircraft gun. Then the aircraft steadied. Ludmila swore; were Red Army gunners shooting at her again? She checked the sketchy instrument panel. Everything looked fine, though she had trouble reading some of the dials because of the black shadow her head and shoulders cast on them.

She accepted that for a moment. Then she remembered she was flying into the sun.

Even as she wheeled the *Kukuruznik* through a tight turn, that impossible shadow began to fade. She looked back to see what could have made it; her first guess was a Lizard bomb. The shock wave from a bomb might have made her think she was hit.

But while the flash from a bomb might have given her a momentary shadow, it could hardly have lasted long enough for her to notice it. She figured that out while her head turned ahead of the plane’s motion to see what had happened.

Because she checked the near distance first, she didn’t spot anything right away. Then she raised her eyes a little higher, and felt like the prize fool of all time. The fireball that had printed her shadow on the instrument panel was already dissipating, but not the enormous cloud of dust and wreckage it had raised.

“*Bozhemoi*—My God,” she whispered. That growing cloud had to be at least twenty-five kilometers off to the east, maybe more. It towered thousands of meters into the air, glowing yellow and pink and salmon and colors for which she had no name. Its shape took her back to fall days before the war, when she and her family would hunt mushrooms in the woods outside Kiev.

“*Bozhemoi*,” she said again, when what it had to be hit her like a kick in the stomach: one of the Lizards’ explosive-metal bombs, the kind that had flattened Berlin and

Washington, D.C. She moaned, back deep in her throat—were the Lizards sealing the *rodina's* doom by raining such destruction on it?

The cloud climbed and climbed. Five thousand meters? Six? Eight? She couldn't begin to guess. She simply watched, stunned, flying the U-2 with hands and feet but without much conscious thought. Little by little, though, as her wits began to work once more, she noticed where the bomb had gone off: not ahead of the Lizards' lines, to clear the road to Moscow, but right at the front or a little behind it—at a spot where it would hurt the Lizards much more than the Soviet forces opposing them.

Had the Lizards dropped it in the wrong place? She hadn't thought they made mistakes like that. Or, somehow, had the scientists of the Soviet Union devised an explosive-metal bomb of their own?

“Please, God, let it be so,” she said, and didn't feel the least bit guilty about praying.

Reports flooded onto Atvar's desk: video of the nuclear explosion from a spy satellite, confirmation (as if he needed any) from those ground commanders lucky enough not to have been incinerated in the blast, sketchy preliminary lists of units that hadn't been so lucky.

Kirel came in. Atvar grudged him a brief glance from one eye turret, then went back to plowing through the reports. “Forgive me, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel said, “but I have a formal written communication from Straha, shiplord of the *206th Emperor Yower*.”

“Give it to me,” Atvar said. Males used formal written communication only when they wanted to get something down on the record.

The communication was to the point: it read, EXALTED FLEETLORD, NOW WHAT?

“You've looked at it?” Atvar asked Kirel.

“Yes, Exalted Fleetlord,” the shiplord answered glumly.

“All right. Reply on the usual circuits—no need to imitate this.”

“Yes, Exalted Fleetlord,” Kirel repeated. “And the reply is?”

“Very simple—just three words: I don't know.”

Continue the most exciting  
journey through the past  
in all of science fiction!

Harry Turtledove's

---

# WORLDWAR: UPSETTING THE BALANCE

---

For a look at the third installment in the WORLDWAR series from the master of alternate history, read on...

*Mordechai Anielewicz huddled in a deep foxhole in the middle of a thick clump of bushes. He hoped it would give him good enough cover. The forest partisans must have miscalculated how much their raids were annoying the Lizards, for the aliens were doing their best to sweep them into oblivion.*

*Firing came from ahead of him and from both sides. He knew that meant he ought to get up and move, but getting up and moving struck him as the quickest and easiest way to get himself killed. Sometimes sitting tight was the best thing you could do.*

*The Lizards were worse in the woods than even an urban Jew like him. He heard them skittering past his hole in the ground. He clutched his Mauser. If the Lizards started poking through the bushes that shielded him, he'd sell his life as dear as he could. If they didn't, he had no intention of advertising his existence. The essence of partisan warfare was getting away to fight another day.*

*Time crawled by on leaden feet. He took a Wehrmacht-issue canteen from his belt, sipped cautiously—he had less water than he wanted, and didn't know how long it would have to last. Going out to find more didn't strike him as a good idea, not right now.*

*The bushes rustled. Sh'ma yisroayl, adonai elohaynu, adornai ekhod ran through his head: the first prayer a Jew learned, the last one that was supposed to cross his lips before he died. He didn't say it now; he might have been wrong. But, as silently as he could, he turned toward the direction of the rustling. He was afraid he'd have to pop up and start shooting; otherwise the Lizards could finish him off with grenades.*

*"Shmuel?" A bare thread of whisper, but an unmistakably human voice.*

*"Yes. Who's that?" The voice was too attenuated for him to recognize it, but he could make a good guess. "Jerzy?"*

By way of reply, he got a laugh as discreet as the whisper had been. "You damn Jews are too damn smart, you know that?" the partisans' point man answered. "Come on, though. You can't hang around here. Sooner or later, they'll spot you. I did."

If Jerzy said staying around wasn't safe, it probably wasn't. Anielewicz scrambled up and out of his hidey-hole. "How'd you notice me, anyway?" he asked. "I didn't think anybody could."

"That's just how," the point man answered. "I looked around and I saw an excellent hiding place that didn't look like it had anyone in it. I asked myself, who would be clever enough to take advantage of that kind of place? Your name popped into my head, and so—"

"I suppose I should be flattered," Mordechai said. "You damn Poles are too damn smart, you know that?"

Jerzy stared at him, then laughed loud enough to alarm them both. "Let's get out of here," he said then, quietly once more. "We'll head east, in the direction they're coming from. Now that the main line of them is past, we shouldn't have any trouble slipping away. They're probably aiming to drive us against some other force they have waiting. That's how the Nazis hunted partisans, anyhow."

"We caught plenty of you Pole bastards, too," someone behind them said in German. They both whirled. Friedrich sneered at them. "Poles and Jews talk too fucking much."

"That's because we have Germans to talk about," Anielewicz retorted. He hated the arrogant way Friedrich stood there, feet planted on the ground as if he'd sprung from it, every line of his body proclaiming that he thought himself a lord of creation, just as if it had been the winter of 1941, with the Lizards nowhere to be seen and the Nazis bestriding Europe like a colossus and driving hard on Moscow.

The German glared at him. "You've got smart answers for everything, don't you?" he said. Anielewicz tensed. A couple of more words to Friedrich and somebody was liable to die right there; he resolved he wouldn't be the one. But then the Nazi went on, "Well, that's just like a Jew. You're right about one thing—we'd better get out of here. Come on."

They headed east down a game track Mordechai never would have noticed for himself. Just as if they were raiding rather than running, Jerzy took the point and Friedrich the rear, leaving Anielewicz to move along in the middle, making enough noise to impersonate a large band of men.

Friedrich said, "This partisan business stinks." Then he laughed softly. "Course, I don't remember hunting you bastards was a whole lot of fun, either."

"Hunting us bastards," Mordechai corrected him. "Remember which side you're on now." Having someone along who'd been on both sides could be useful. Anielewicz had theoretical knowledge of how partisan hunters had operated. Friedrich had done it. If only he weren't Friedrich ...

Up ahead a few meters, Jerzy let out a hiss. "Hold up." he said. "We're coming to a road."

Mordechai stopped. He didn't hear Friedrich behind him, so he assumed Friedrich stopped, too. He wouldn't have sworn to it, though; he hadn't heard Friedrich when they were moving,

either.

*Jerzy said, "Come on up. I don't see anything. We'll cross one at a time."*

*Anielewicz moved up to him as quietly as he could. Sure enough, Friedrich was right behind him. Jerzy peered cautiously from behind a birch, then sprinted across the rutted, muddy dirt road and dove into the brush there. Mordechai waited a few seconds to make sure nothing untoward happened, then made the same dash and dive himself. Somehow Jerzy had done it silently, but the plants he dove into rustled and crackled in the most alarming way. His pique at himself only got worse when Friedrich, who would have made two of him, also crossed without producing any noise.*

*Jerzy cast about for the game trail, found it, and headed east once more. He said, "We want to get as far away from the fighting as we can. I don't know, but—"*

*"You feel it too, eh?" Friedrich said. "Like somebody just walked over your grave? I don't know what it is, but I don't like it. What about you, Shmuel?"*

*"No, not this time," Anielewicz admitted. He didn't trust his own instincts, though, not here. In the ghetto, he'd had a fine-tuned sense of when trouble was coming. He didn't have a feel for the forest, and he knew it.*

---

# **THE WORLDWAR SAGA**

---

by Harry Turtledove

**IN THE BALANCE TILTING THE BALANCE UPSETTING THE BALANCE STRIKING THE  
BALANCE**

**Published by Del Rey® Books.**

Available in your local bookstore.

**Visit [www.delreybooks.com](http://www.delreybooks.com)—  
the portal to all the  
information and resources  
available from Del Rey Online.**

- Read sample chapters of every new book, special features on selected authors and books, news and announcements, readers' reviews, browse Del Rey's complete online catalog and more.
- Sign up for the Del Rey Internet Newsletter (DRIN), a free monthly publication e-mailed to subscribers, featuring descriptions of new and upcoming books, essays and interviews with authors and editors, announcements and news, special promotional offers, signing/convention calendar for our authors and editors, and much more.

To subscribe to the DRIN: send a blank e-mail to [sub\\_Drin-dist@info.randomhouse.com](mailto:sub_Drin-dist@info.randomhouse.com)  
or you can sign up at [www.delreybooks.com](http://www.delreybooks.com)

The DRIN is also available at no charge for your PDA devices—go to [www.randomhouse.com/partners/avantge](http://www.randomhouse.com/partners/avantge) for more information, or visit [www.avantgo.com](http://www.avantgo.com) and search for the Books@Random channel.

Questions? E-mail us at [delrey@randomhouse.com](mailto:delrey@randomhouse.com)



[www.delreybooks.com](http://www.delreybooks.com)



# HOW FEW REMAIN

The dramatic novel by  
HARRY TURTLEDOVE

## The Master of Alternate History

In 1862, key Confederate orders nearly fell into Union hands. But those orders were saved, the Rebels swept into Pennsylvania, smashed the Army of the Potomac, and assured Southern independence.

A generation later, America writhed once more in the throes of battle. Furious over the annexation of key Mexican territory, the U.S. again declared war on the Confederacy, and in 1881 the fragile peace was shattered.

This new war was fought on a lawless frontier where the blue and gray battled not only each other but the Apache, the outlaw, and even the redcoat. For along with France, England entered the fray on the side of the South.

Out of this tragic struggle emerged historic figures. A disgraced Abraham Lincoln crisscrossed the nation championing Socialist ideals. Cocky Theodore Roosevelt bickered with George Custer. Confederate General Stonewall Jackson again soared to the heights of military genius, while the North struggled to find a leader who could prove his equal.

Thanks to such journalists as Samuel Clemens, the nation witnessed the clash of human dreams and passions in this, a Second War Between the States.

*Published by Del Rey Books.  
Available at a bookstore near you.*

A Del Rey® Book

Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1995 by Harry Turtledove

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Del Rey Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Del Rey is a registered trademark and Del Rey colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

[www.delreybooks.com](http://www.delreybooks.com)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 95-92523

eISBN: 978-0-345-45613-7

v3.0