Dynamic Science Fiction

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Cover by Alex Schomberg
(*illustrating "Snail's Pace"*)

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

FEATURE NOVELET

TEMPLE OF DESPAIR ..... **M. C. Pease** **10**
They gave life to millions, at the cost of rotting death to themselves.

SHORT STORIES and FEATURES

THE LOBBY (Where You and I Talk Things Out) **6**

READIN' AND WRITHIN' (Book Reviews) .. **Robert W. Lowndes** **32**

SNAIL'S PACE ..... **Algis Budrys** **33**
There had been too much haste; now men would have to go slowly.

THE PLOT-FORMS OF SCIENCE FICTION ..... **James Gunn** **44**
Beginning the thorough survey you wanted to see.

NIGHT-FEAR ..... **Frank Belknap Long** **54**
They'd tried to protect Johnny, but it didn't work; he was afraid.

INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION (Special Department) ..... **Robert A. Madle** **58**

MACHINE COMPLEX ..... **Leonard Wampler** **62**
An old book can sometimes give a youngster the wrong ideas...

THE POETESS AND THE 21 GREY-HAIRED CADAVERS ..... **W. Malcolm White** **65**
The episode of the cannery world is not to be taken seriously...

SKYLARK SMITH: An Appreciation .... **Anthony K. Van Riper** **70**
A brief discussion on one of the men who shaped the field.

FIEHERS OF MEN ..... **Hal Annas** **73**
It wasn't just a case of protecting "frail, infierior" wemen...

THE RECKONING and READERS' PREFERENCE COUPON .. **98**
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Too late, Sintor realized that the girl had picked up a nerve-whip. He tried to duck, but found himself paralyzed, as stabbing pain flowed over him...

The Federation was ready to write off the planet Pelton, now that a substitute for Seekar's Lilly had been found. Seekar's Lilly — whence came the cure for cancer — whose dust-like pollen was the deadliest narcotic known. Now no one needed the lilly — but Sintor wanted to find out something: how were people driven to harvest this flower on Pelton, to give life to others at the cost of rotting death to themselves?

TEMPLE OF DESPAIR

Novelet of Worlds to Come

by M. C. Pease

(illustrated by Don Sibley)

SINTOR was ugly—ugly as a caricature of a man. Twisted and ill-shapen, born with a sneer that seemed bred of the evil of space, only his eyes were different; humor lay in them and evil has no humor. In those eyes were light where there should have been only blackness; in them was a knowledge of beauty.

He sat, twisted uncomfortably into the chair that was built in one corner of the spaceship's stateroom. Over his shoulder, through a porthole, came the dim light of a thousand unknown suns, but he paid them no attention; he simply sat and read.

The door to the stateroom opened and a man came in. He wore the uniform of a Captain in the Navy of the Federation. Tall and virile, with an athlete's snug compactness, he was a strange contrast to Sintor. But, by the eyebrow he lifted at Sintor as he stretched out on the bunk, he showed the knowledge of an ancient friendship.

Sintor said nothing, nor did he so much as glance up from his book, until the other was thoroughly settled. Then, with a somewhat elaborate sigh, he raised his eyes and said, "Come in Iklan; come in and have a seat."

"Nope, can't do it," Iklan drawled, removing his shoes. "An officer's not allowed to mingle with the riff-raff. Wouldn't think of being here at all except for business."

"Business? Then please go away."

"Can't. Wish I could; my bunk's better than yours," the Captain said. "But we drop you off in an hour. Got to make sure everything's set."

"We are that close to Pelton?" Sintor asked in mild surprise.

"Yes," Iklan said. "Are you all set? Do you know the program?"

"Of course," Sintor replied. "It is quite simple. I borrow the space dingy and float down whither I wilt—which will not be far from where the Tradeship lands. You then proceed to make a routine check of Pelton—but without landing. You will be on the Tradeship on its next trip, which should be in about ten days. If I do not show up, you will return again on the next trip ninety days or so later. If I don't show up then, you will report me to headquarters as lost. Quite simple."

"I doubt it," Iklan answered. "Things are always simple when you start. But comes the end of your assignment and not even the Commissioner himself can figure out what happened. However, that's beside the point. Got your identification?"

"Yes," Sintor said. "I know the code. 'The impossibility of providing pseudo time-invariant channels of communication between barbarians causes the development of non-topological culture on Pelton.' It sounds plausible."

"It does," Iklan said, "but it actually isn't. There are no non-topological cultures. And in fact there can be no culture at all without a 'pseudo time-invariant channel of communication.' It is quite impossible for any culture to exist without some kind of topologic invariance. Each person in a culture has to be in some kind of known relation to other people in it. And the culture is made stable only by the stability of those relations. If there is no topology—no pattern of stable relations—there can be no culture. So, as any good identifying code, it sounds good but means nothing."

"That's good," Sintor said.

"And will you remember it?" the Captain asked. "Or will that be asking too much of your feeble mind?"

"You touch me on my vanity," Sintor said. "My mind, sir, is brilliant; it is, in fact, my one great shining virtue. And now go twiddle your knobs and be a captain while I change my clothes and otherwise prepare to give my all for glory."

"I'd rather stay here," Iklan replied. Besides, before you die, I want to learn what made you a policeman."

"A policeman?" Sintor came as close as he could to smiling. "It was either that or be a crook; with my face, no other profession would have me."

"Well, why aren't you a crook, then?"

"I don't know." Sintor sounded puzzled. "I really don't; pure perverseness, I guess. I came from the slums of space, you know. Any time I hear of

any of my old boyhood chums, they've gone the twisted road. But I think maybe that's the reason; maybe I decided to fight my world—the world I came from was a crooked one, so I am on the law's side. Sort of a double negative being positive." He chuckled.

"It's a good thing," Iklan said. "You'd have been too good a crook."

"Maybe." Sintor said. "Except that my face would make it difficult. Too easily seen, too hard to forget."

"Should think that would make it as difficult for you to be a detective, too." The Captain's voice was idle.

"No. Surprisingly, not." Sintor shook his head. "In fact, I rather think it's one of my strongest points—next to my brain, of course. The point is that nobody, seeing me, can think that I'm not a crook."

"But you're so easy to identify!"

"Even that's a help," Sintor said. "It works on kind of a reverse logic. They figure the Service would never have an operator who was so easy to remember; being what I am, I cannot be an operator. So...I must be the crook I tell them I am. Simple, though wrong."

"Eventually they find out their error," Iklan argued.

"Yep," Sintor agreed, "and some even live to regret it."

Iklan chuckled in response. "I know what you mean. I know some of your record. But I still think you'd do better with not quite so astonishing a mug. Why don't you let the doctors work you over? Who knows—you might get to enjoy the normal life."

SINTOR rose slowly from his chair. His eyes burned for a moment, and then he spoke. "No. I don't want it. Maybe I'm being perverse, but I do not want to be 'normal'." His voice was level, but grated. "At the age of four or five, I knew I was different. This is hard on a kid, bitterly hard, but I learned to take it. I learned to take it, and I learned to cram it down the throat of anyone who didn't like it. And when I learned that, then I found I had something. I am me—the ugliest man in space. Maybe that's not as good as being the handsomest man, or the cleverest, or the bestest in some other way. But at least it's something—and being only "normal" isn't. I'm unique, and I intend to stay that way."

"That seems rather silly." Iklan's voice was carefully quiet. "After all, as you point out, you have that wonderful brain. Maybe you can be the cleverest guy in space, but nobody's going to think of it when they see your puss."

Sintor relaxed and laughed. "I'm afraid, sir, you do not understand me. It is true my brain is astonishing—perhaps unique—but not, I'm afraid, in any way that would impress people. Now my face most certainly does impress them.... But tell me—just what is this all about? It's a strange conversation for a sendoff, and I doubt if it's accidental."

The Captain swung himself up to a sitting position. "No, it's not. But the Commissioner would like to see you chuck this."

"Chuck it?" The agent gaped. "Chuck it? If he wants me to chuck it, what'd he send me for?"

"He didn't," Iklan answered. "You were the one who decided to come. The Federation's ready to write Pelton off; you were the one who insisted we ought to find out how Pelton worked before we scrapped it. Remember?"

Sintor thought a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's right. But, damn it all, how can they just write it off? What about the people there? Do we just forget what they've done for us? How many of them have died so the Federation can have its Radinol? Do we just forget them—let them rot in their graves and let other tens of thousands follow them?...

"And anyway, I think that we should learn just how they do it. For science if for nothing else."

"What do you mean 'how they do it'?" Iklan asked. "The stuff is easy to grow, isn't it?"

"It is, if you don't give a damn," Sintor said. "Seekar's Lilly—a pretty flower, they say, with pollen that floats like dust. It carries the strongest narcotic known to man, and also carries the only cure for cancer. Life and death, so twisted together that you cannot grow the one without the other. Think of it man! Think of it and weep! Picture the men—or maybe women—going out to gather the precious dust, gathering it in from each flower of the field. Collecting it so that all over the galaxy men need no longer die of cancer. Collecting it and dying—dying in agony of addiction to the drug that's in the pollen of the flower.

"What's the problem, do you ask? It is simple. What is the social structure that can make these people do this? What is its secret? There is a secret, there, you know. They only let us land in one small valley, at very certain times, and threaten us with no more Radinol if we do not obey. When we land, it is only priests we see. Where are the people and what are they like? And why, in exchange for the pollen, do they ask for food and cloth, and such other basic things—in quantities to feed and clothe the world?

"It sounds as if they make no effort to provide themselves with basic needs. They could; it is a fertile world, so why don't they? There is a fascinating problem on Pelton; and even though we do not need them now, even though we've bred a variant species of the lilly with less lethal pollen—and built a new technology to handle even that mild species—yet I think that we should find out how this culture works. It must be strange. The crop they harvest must be paid for in

fantastic measure of drug-rotted bodies—and yet the priests can get the people to pay the price. How?"

"Do we really have to know?" Iklan asked. "We have the milder species now, and the technology to handle it. We no longer need depend on Pelton for the stuff. Is Pelton important?"

"It is to me, at least," Sintor replied. "Maybe the Federation does not need to know, but there is something in me that does. I think of those who have died down there—died as slaves to the priesthood so that we could have the medicine. Now that we can tell the priests to go to hell, I don't want any more to die. And maybe I can stop it."

"It would be nice to know," Iklan agreed. "But is the knowing worth the price of finding out? Seven operators have gone in; not one has come out. They seem to have died without even having the priests know they'd been there—at least we never got a protest about them. So what do you have that those seven didn't?"

"Plenty," Sintor answered. "A very ugly puss for one thing. And a brain that, as far as I can make out, is unique."

"But how do you expect to use your wonderful brain? You have no knowledge of Pelton, nor any special gadgets. And however good your brain is, it still needs data to compute and tools to act with."

"Maybe, maybe not," Sintor answered. "But I am not the naked babe you make me out. It's true, my data on Pelton is extremely meager. But, on the other hand, I have a vast amount of data on what makes other worlds and other peoples work; there is no reason to suppose that that data will not be true on Pelton.

"You say I have no weapon. But you are wrong. I *have* a weapon; it is myself—and I am a weapon that I know how to use to very good advantage. My instincts were trained in the slums from which I came; I have kept them in razor keenness in the human jungles I have known. Iklan, my friend, I am a master of the perverse—the unexpected action or unaccounted silence. And few there are that can deal with perverse action or stop the one who uses it. I am far from weaponless."

Iklan got to his feet. He shook his head in a gesture half mocking, half admiring. "You are, of course a stubborn fool. You are stubborn in insisting on going ahead, in spite of what I or the Commissioner say. You are a fool in being willing to go at all in the face of the obvious odds. You are also romantic since you are doing it for the people of Pelton. Either that or for science—an equally romantic reason. You are a romantic stubborn fool and I love you; be lucky." He turned and left without further sign or word.

SINTOR stood for a while in the protection of the forest, studying the country before him, his mind coldly analytical and his eyes observant. Hills in the distance blocked his view; but in between lay rolling grasslands. Under the hills was a hut from which smoke curled; around the hut were some few specks that might have been cattle. Before him lay a road that followed the edge of the forest as far as he could see in both directions—but otherwise, it was a pleasantly wild land. Peaceful, but untamed; a land adapted only to a nomadic precivilization; a gentle, if primitive, culture.

Here lay no hint of the brutal and terrifying domination that there must be on this world. No hint at all of the whips the priests must have to make people gather the dust of Seekar's Lilly at the cost of broken lives and bodies.

Even the road gave no hint of anything but primitive hardship. Two ruts pounded deep through the topsoil winding together along the easiest path. Dodging boulders and bushes. Leisurely, with the faith of the uncivilized that tomorrow will follow today. Peaceful and without fear.

No one was in sight, so Sintor stepped out onto the road. As a last-minute check, he looked down over his robe. This was the dress of a priest, he knew. The priests were the only people the Service knew, their only contact being through the Tradeship with the priests. He was unhappy at the thought. He would have preferred the clothes of a peasant, but there was nothing for it; the robe would have to do.

He thought a bit wryly that if he had a weapon, it could easily be concealed under the single baggy piece that was the robe. But Sintor did not have a weapon. There was not anything at all on him to say that he was not of this world—not even so much as a knife. It was so he preferred to work. Weapons, he thought, were crutches for a good investigator. A man should rely on his wits for survival—not on any feeble blaster. A man's most potent weapon was his brain, besides which all others failed. And, Sintor thought, his own brain was a very potent weapon indeed.

Besides, his element of perversity made him refuse to display the sign of

weakness that he considered a weapon to be.

So, although it was a pity not to use the opportunities presented by the robe, there was no help for it. Sintor turned his face to the right and started to walk along the road. In that direction, he knew, lay the valley used by the Tradeship. In that direction lay his ultimate rendezvous with Iklan.

As he plodded along, he was suddenly aware of a voice in the distance behind. Stooping as if to pick up a stone, he glanced back down the road. There was no one in sight, but that told him little. Not far behind him, the road bent around the point of the forest; he could not see beyond. Straightening up, Sintor still saw nothing. He moved to a nearby boulder and sat down, as if for a moment's rest, while he waited for the owner of the voice to appear.

In a minute, he saw an oxlike animal pulling a wagon. As the wagon itself came into view, he saw it was filled high with some kind of vegetables, and driven by a man sitting on a high seat at the front. The driver was a man of powerful build, the typical frame of the peasant. His eyes were sullen and discontented, and there was a smoldering hatred in them. Beside him there rode a boy. The lad who was about half grown, was not handsome, nor did he seem intelligent. He sat there, apathetic, dull, a sharp contrast to the brutal force of the man who, one might judge, was probably his father.

As Sintor sat on the boulder observing and analyzing what he saw, he could spot the moment when the driver first saw him. It was marked by a disinterested glance, at first. Then with a double-take, the driver's eyes swung back to him with surprise. The peasant stood up on the wagon and looked at him and all around, studying particularly the forest. Then, with a sudden grin, the driver bent down, reaching behind the seat of the wagon. And when he straightened up, his arm flashed up and out.

Sintor acted with pure instinct. He dove flat on the ground. and heard the stone the driver had thrown shatter on the boulder where he had sat. He snapped himself over, gathering his feet under him in one efficient move, then dove into the forest and behind a tree. And as he did, a second stone plowed up the dirt beside him. He heard his attacker shout: "Dog of a priest, you will die!"

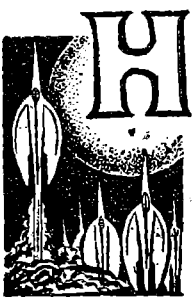
Sintor blinked his eyes in momentary thought, wondering how best to tackle this; apparently, the priests were not exactly popular. It occurred to him that the only strategy open was to counterattack, so he roared back: "Imbecile beast of a peasant! I am no priest. Nor have I any better love for them than you do. Are you so simple-minded as to let my robe confuse you? Have you no wit at all?"

"I say you are a priest, and I say you die," was the answer, but it did not sound so sure.

"Put down your stones," Sintor called, "and let me speak in peace. A man with one eye could see that I am not a priest, but you do not. Have you then no eyes? Put down your stones and let me see if you have even a single ear that's open."

"I'll not put down the stones," the driver answered, "but I will listen while you talk. Come on out."

2



HE THOUGHT a moment, and then stepped out. His opponent had jumped off the wagon and was standing in the middle of the road, a heavy rock in each hand. The boy still sat upon the seat, his mouth open in stupid wonderment. In the face of the

massive threat that was the peasant, Sintor felt a perverse desire to bluff.

With a snarl, Sintor slouched back to his boulder and sat down. "I am not a priest," he said, "and if you had the smallest part of the sense that you were born with, you would know it. I am from the stars. My ship—the ship that brought me here—lies wrecked in the woods up there. I came to see this world, and I have no love for the priests." He sneered, and his face became inhuman.

The peasant stared at him a moment, his face becoming dark. His hand drew back and for a moment, Sintor stared at death. The agent did not move, but only let his own eyes burn. "From the stars, eh?" the peasant grated. "And you do not call yourself a priest! Are not the Starmen the arch priests of all? Is it not from them that the priests here gain their power? Did I not see with my own eyes the priests receive the manna from the Starmen three Releases back? And you are not a priest!"

"I am not a priest." Sintor's voice was savage, but then he let it smooth in sudden contrast. "I said I came from the stars. I did not say I was a 'starman'." He smiled in his twisted way, though inside he wondered what the words might mean.

The peasant brooded. A look of wonder crossed his face, and the arm that held the stone relaxed again. "You are ugly. And why should a Starman be ugly? They have all of space to loot. Maybe you aren't a Starman; maybe even the Starmen have their enemies. It could be so."

Sintor wondered what the possibility of looting space had to do with being ugly, but this did not seem the time to ask. He simply said: "It is so."

"And then what are you here for?" the peasant asked.

Sintor smiled his evil-looking smile. "It is in my mind that there are certain things the priests here do not know." And he chuckled, and the sound was very evil.

The peasant stared at him, then suddenly roared out with laughter. "By the dust that flows, I think there are. And even though I pay the price, I'd like to see you teach the priests. It will be worth it." He dropped his stones and strode over to clap the agent on the shoulder.

Sintor winced at the blow but still felt happy; he had at least avoided being stoned to death. Also, he seemed to have gained an ally—an ally, however, before whom he had pretended knowledge. He had talked with glibness of starmen and of priests; the situation was still dangerous.

The peasant, he learned, was called "Brandis"—a farmer of vegetables and things. Not, emphatically, of Seeker's Lilly, locally known simply as "the Lilly".

"No, I've been lucky," Brandis said. "I haven't worked with the Lilly for five Releases. Three Releases back, as I said, I was a porter for the priests. I would have been a packer when the time came, but the Release came first; I was lucky."

"And now you're just an ordinary farmer, eh?" Sintor asked, wondering what a "Release" might be, but not daring to ask.

"Yeah," Brandis answered. "I got it soft this time. A good farm. Enough to eat. This ox and wagon. And the boy to help." He nodded at the boy up on the seat. "I been lucky. Maybe I'll pay for it next time, but I got no complaints right now."

Sintor thought a bit, and decided this was all incomprehensible. The only way seemed to be to keep the peasant talking with some safe questions. "He your son?" he asked.

THE FARMER whirled, and seemed to gather his strength. His eyes burned and his lip drew back. "Who are you?" he snarled. "Who

are you and what are you doing here?"

Sintor kept his face calm, though wondering what had happened. "I am what I said I am. And why are you so touchy?"

Brandis kept on frowning, but his muscles eased their bunching. "The question was too dumb," he said. "How would I know whose son he might be? How many Releases have there been since he was born? It was a stupid question."

His frown intensified with an obvious effort at thought. "But still, if you were a priest, you would know this; you would not ask the question. And you are ugly, though your mind is strong. If you were a priest, you would not be so ugly. Tell me—where you come from, how often do you have Releases?"

"We generally manage to know who belongs to whom," Sintor evaded.

Sintor studied the farmer. The peasant seemed to be calmed down, but he had no wish to stir any further outbursts. What, he wondered, was a "Release" that it had such a disruptive influence? That it left a man not able to know his own son? He was beginning to think that this was the key question to his whole problem. "How often do *you* have Releases?" he asked.

The peasant shrugged. "Sometimes often, sometimes not. You can't figure it—except that there will most likely be one soon. Things are getting edgy."

"Edgy?" Sintor asked.

"Yeah," the peasant answered. "There are too many of us beginning to think about killing the priests, and we're beginning to get together. It ain't going to last long—so if you're going to do anything, you better not wait."

Sintor thought a moment, trying to make some sense of the words, but there was little that added up. He decided to accept at face value Brandis' suggestion of the need for haste. "Okay," he said. "So I get to work. Where can I find me some priests on which to work?"

"On the end of the road," Brandis said, nodding ahead. "The main temple's there. I'm taking this stuff in so I can get some liquor. You can ride if you want, but you'll have to ride in back and under the stuff."

"Why?" Sintor asked.

"You're dressed like a priest," Brandis said; "I don't want to get stoned."

Sintor nodded and, without further talk, jumped up onto the wagon and arranged himself to be concealed.

●

The sun was going down when the wagon stopped and Brandis called him out from his cover. Sintor found they were on the top of a ridge that looked over a valley. They had ridden all day.

"There she be," Brandis said. "The valley of the main temple. The Tradeship comes to one which branches off. That's why they made this it. The temple's up at the head of the valley. That way." He pointed to his right, then he thought a moment. "I don't know. You can come with me if you want. But maybe you'd rather drop off here. Then you could work up along the side of the valley. That might be better for you. The priests down there are particular who gets in. Scared. Too many of us figure it's worth it to die if we can only kill one of them while we're at it."

He chuckled, but there was nothing of humor in it. "That's why I got stones here. Maybe I'll get a chance. Wasn't even hoping to find a priest on the road." He looked at Sintor.

"Yes, I'll get off here," Sintor said. "What kind of weapons do they have?"

"Don't you know?" Brandis frowned in sudden suspicion.

"I know the weapons the Starmen have," Sintor said. "But I don't know how many or which ones they've given to your priests."

"Oh," the farmer shrugged. "Their

best weapon, of course, is the Release. Any time we start getting organized against them, they pull one on us. But the weapon they carry is the nerve-whip."

"What's that?" Sintor asked. And then he noted the other's look of surprise. "I don't know the name."

"Oh," Brandis said. "Looks like a stick. They point it at you and you fall down and look like you're dead, or at least asleep. But inside you're screaming. It feels like fire and ice and something sharp all at the same time. Then they turn it off but it leaves you so tired and shaky you can't do anything for a couple of hours."

"Ah, the nerve-vibrator," Sintor said. To himself he made the note that it sounded like a weapon built for sigma-radiation. And this, he thought, was most peculiar: sigma-radiation was the product of a most advanced technology; even the Federation did not have it in effective or portable form as this must be. It was a surprise to find it on such a primitive world.

"How far will the ones they've got work?" he asked.

"About from here to that tree," Brandis said, indicating about fifty feet. "It'll make you uncomfortable for maybe three-four times as far, but it won't cripple you the same way."

"I see," Sintor nodded. "Okay, I'll move now. Thanks for the lift." He climbed stiffly down off the wagon.

"Uh, look," Brandis said. The agent turned to look at him. "I don't know what you figure to do. Take over, I suppose—and I don't suppose your taking over's going to make things any different. But that's okay—at least you'll give the priests some of their own stuff. Let them see what it's like to be in on a Release—to wake up some morning and find a Release has been made. Make them take their chances the same as they've made us take ours. You do that and there'll be a lot of us'll feel kindly for you, whatever you do afterwards." The hatred in his voice was ugly.

Sintor twisted his face into a leering grin. "I'll do that, pal," he said; "I'll do just that." He turned and slid into the forest that bordered the road. But he could not soon forget the tone of Brandis' voice, or stop wondering what the priests had done to earn such hatred.

IT WAS TOUGH going, through the forest. But Sintor, for all his seemingly ungainly body and jerky-looking movements, was skilled in finding the easiest way. He managed to make good time until it got too dark. When he could no longer see enough to make it worth while to go on, he stopped. Setting his mind to key himself alert at the first change in his surroundings, he slept.

The dawn-light awoke him and he moved on, ignoring the hunger within him, threading his way between the trees with a speed incredible in one who looked so clumsy. The sun was high when finally he crept to the edge

of the forest and looked down into the valley. He was, he saw, about opposite to where another valley angled off this one. Across the mouth of the other one there ran a string of sheds. From pictures he had seen, he recognized them.

That second valley was the one the Tradeship used. From the sheds, the crates of the pollen of Seekar's Lilly were delivered. The crates that—up until just recently—had held the only hope of life for millions who otherwise would die of cancer. Only, he thought, no more—no longer need the galaxy depend upon the lethal dust of pollen. The chain was broken, which was why he was here. The chain was broken that tied the Federation to this world. But only the Federation knew it. On all this world, Sintor was the only one who knew the truth.

Below him, he saw what was no doubt the temple-city. Built of polished stone, it sprawled upon the hillside. Beautiful in itself, but ugly in the blood and sweat that must have gone into its building. Only force—brutal and overwhelming force—could have built it on this primitive world. Only force or abiding love—and, to judge by Brandis, there was no love upon this world.

Between him and the temple the ground was grassy. Men dressed in robes such as the one he wore patrolled the space, each one armed with a short and ulgy-looking rod. It was well-patrolled.

Sintor thought a bit. The intelligent way, he thought, would be to wait until night and then sneak in. He felt perversely irritated at the thought. He would be damnably hungry by night. And, anyway, he did not feel like waiting.

The decision made, he scouted along the edge of the forest. Finally he found a dead branch of a tree that suited him. He broke it off at the proper length and tucked it under his

arm. He then turned and backed slowly and carefully away from the forest.

"This is the way they would do it," he thought. "I am a priest and the son of a priest. I have seen something suspicious on the edge of the forest. I have investigated and satisfied myself that it was nothing. But still I take no chances. I do not turn my back. And I keep this 'nerve-whip' that feels like a branch ready for use. I back down slowly and carefully until I am beyond the range of a well-thrown stone. About here. And here I straighten up; I look around. I wave to those priests down there who are watching me. I wave them to say that it was nothing. And I do *not* breathe a sigh of relief to see them turn away. Instead, I turn and amble on my route around the temple. For I am a priest and my duty is to guard the temple." Turn he did, and so also did he amble on around.

The priests—the real priests—paid no attention to him. They waved or nodded as he passed, but it was obvious they had no suspicion of him. His step was unhurried, his manner almost careless, as he drifted along the slope. The only fact to distinguish him from all the others was that, as he drifted on around the temple, he also slid in towards it. And, in fact, by the time he had reached the other side of the valley, he was practically in the shadow of its walls. It was there that he stopped and, with complete casualness, looked around. Since no one appeared to be watching him, he turned and strolled idly towards a gate in the wall.

THERE WERE two priests lounging by the gate, but Sintor walked

with assurance, and they only nodded to him. He lifted his hand in calm return and kept going. Only his eyes moved alertly to take in what they saw, and his brain to evaluate it.

Before him lay a broad avenue over which massive trees arched. Far down at the end he could see the broad steps of some huge building gleaming whitely. Clearly, he thought, there lay the center of the priesthood and a dangerous place for him until he knew some more. To the right of the walk, behind the bordering trees, there were rows of buildings, squat and rather ugly. Dormitories, perhaps, for the lesser priests. A possible place to hide, he considered, but a poor place to learn or to strike. To the left was a park, scattered with small buildings. Like the main hall, they looked to be made of marble and with care and luxury. There, he decided, lay his opportunity —danger too, of course, but also opportunity. His shadow was not through the gate, therefore, when his feet bent left with easy carelessness.

Once off the main avenue, and cut off from the view of the priests at the gate, Sintor's steps became more purposeful. Finding the opportunity, he dropped the stick that he had carried to simulate what Brandis had called the "nerve-whip", and strode on with lengthening step. After all, he thought, he was in a place that was probably reserved for the aristocracy of the priesthood; and the clothes he wore were crude and coarse, not at all befitting to a prince. Therefore, he considered, it might be well if he appeared to know where he was going.

As he passed others in the park, he dipped his head in quick obeisance, making the gesture give an air of servility. They were, he noted, almost uniformly young and handsome. Both boys and girls were there in, apparently, approximate equality. These, he thought, were the chosen ones, the darlings of this world—the ones for whom this world was but a plaything. He thought this until he read their eyes and saw fear, and hatred, and despair. A despair they may have failed to recognize themselves—that perhaps they felt as simple boredom. But a despair, nevertheless, that made these the accursed, instead of chosen ones.

Walking as he was, as if he had a goal, Sintor was bound to find one. He came to a corner of the park that seemed set apart, somehow. There was a special aura about it that was hard to identify. The trees and gardens were a bit more carefully tended; there were fewer priests, and those there were seemed slightly furtive.

Ahead of him was a wall, just barely higher than his head. The path he was on led towards this wall, and through and opening in it. Sintor's instinct was to avoid this; here, quite possibly, was the center of power in the temple—and perhaps in the entire world of Pelton. For this he was not ready. But there was no path onto which he could turn; the one he was on led only through the wall, and he hesitated to reverse his steps. He saw that he was being watched, apparently with some suspicion. It occurred to him that he would probably be questioned if he turned back. And so, with a mental shrug, and a face that was impassive in its ugliness, he kept on past the wall.

The path immediately forked, but Sintor did not hesitate. He knew he had no reason at all to choose one way rather than the other—so he turned right and followed it on a curving path that led through a group of trees. There was no one in sight, nor was there anything to be heard; but he did not drop his pretense of knowing his route. Not until he walked around a tree and suddenly found himself before a pool.

He stopped when he saw the pool, and froze, hoping he had not been

seen. For a girl lay in the pool, floating with lazy sensuality among some water-flowers, rich golden hair streaming through the water. He looked around, studying the neighborhood with care, looking for her attendants; there did not seem to be any. On the far side of the pool was a little house that nestled among the trees with exquisite perfection. Perhaps the girl had come from there, he thought; perhaps she had no need for attendants; or perhaps the attendants stayed within the house. This, he thought, was more than possible for the pervading mood in this secluded grove was one of self-assurance. The girl, he felt, was not afraid.

He studied her, trying with all his strength to stay objective. Young she was, and very beautiful. Long and lithe, with a sleek perfection. Lazily, she turned and, with a sudden drive sent herself coasting towards the further bank. Touching it, she drew herself up with a smooth deliberateness. She lifted herself to sit on the edge leaving her feet in the water, then twisted back to reach for the towel that lay behind her.

3

TOO LATE did Sintor try to jump; too late did he see that she had grasped, not the towel, but a nerve-whip that lay beneath it; too late did he see that whip pointed towards himself. As he realized it and tried to gather himself to leap, he felt his every muscle scream in agony, and saw red blackiness.

He came to with his mind still shrinking from the horror of that torture. The nerves of his body still trembled and his muscles felt utterly weary. He was lying on the ground, he felt—apparently where he had fallen since his body was crumpled in on itself. Cautiously, he opened his eyes to slits, trying to control the trembling of the lids.

Before him were two small feet. Long sleek legs still dripped water onto them. A golden tan, they bore simple golden anklet on the one. The wish came up within him to see the rest of her, but he forced himself to lie still and let himeslf recover from the nerve-whip.

The girl, apparently, thought he had lain there long enough. One foot came out to prod him and her voice said: "Get up; get up unless you want some more." It was a lazy voice, but a cold and indifferent one. Its tone said that, to its owner, Sintor was of little interest and of no importance. Not contemptuous but simply unaware of him as more than a slave—an aristocrat without knowledge of the peasant's virtues.

Sintor obeyed the command. Painfully he rolled over and gathered his knees and elbows under him. With a groan that he could not stop, he pushed himself up and squatted before her. For a moment he stayed there, gathering strength and waiting for his muscles to let go their quivering. And finally he managed to stand swaying before her.

The girl, he found, had backed off a step or two. She stood there, clad carelessly in her towel, looking with an expression of astonishment at him. "By the dust that flows," she said, "who are you?"

"I am but one of your lesser priests," he answered, "who has blundered into where he should not be."

"Are you?" She smiled with dawning delight. "But you are so beautifully ugly. My priests are not. Not even the least of them are less than handsome. But you—!" She laughed a rippling sound of appreciation.

Sintor shrugged. "Yes, my lady, that

is so. But, nevertheless, at the last Release..." He peered at her to see how this explanation might affect her. Apparently it was acceptable because her eyes twinkled with malicious humor while she nodded. "It could be so," she said. She smiled cruelly.

She stood there with easy and assured grace, grey eyes studying him. Sintor, in his turn studied her, although with greater subtlety. He saw a girl who was, undoubtably, one of the most beautiful he had ever seen. Her slim body fitted the impression he had gained when he first saw her in the pool. Her face, under the golden hair, had a perfection of feature that was classic in its symmetry. But it was a cruel face—without trace or hint of mercy. There was no pity there, nor anything at all except satisfaction and assurance. Aware of her own power, certain of her right, Sintor knew that she was without humility.

She apparently made up her mind regarding him, for she pointed to the little house that nestled in the trees and told him to go there. With stumbling feet still unrecovered from the nerve-whip, he obeyed. Entering, she ordered him to sit, pointing to a couch. Then, going to a cupboard, she got out food and placed it on a table in front of him. "Eat, my ugly one," she said. "Eat, for, as the whip has made a quivering wretch of you, so will food make of you as much of a man as you may be. Eat, my hoptoad, for you fascinate me." And she smiled. Her eyes were lazy but were also watchful.

At the sight of food, Sintor was aware of desperate hunger. Even if the whip did not make for hunger—and her words had said it did—yet it had been long since he had eaten. Even his self-discipline was stretched as he paused momentarily to think. But a quick review of the factors showed him no reason why he should hesitate and he began to wolf it down.

When he had finished, he lay back with a sudden weariness he could not fight. "Sleep, oh monster," he heard her say. "Sleep, and you will wake a man." He heard no more.

HOW LONG he slept, he did not know; but when he awoke, it was night. Through half-veiled eyes, Sintor saw the room lit only with a fire. He lay there, unstirring, while he recalled the events that had brought him there. Carefully he went over them, reliving in his mind each separate moment—to recollect the shade of meaning, the tone and word unsaid. And it was only when he was sure he had each separate fact and unrelated detail well in hand that he allowed himself to stir. It was only then that he yawned and stretched and finally heaved himself up sitting.

He peered around, blinking in simulated sleepiness. When he saw her, there was a startled moment as his instincts closed his face. Then, knowing the effect was intentional, he relaxed his control. The girl was in a chair in a corner of the room. She was curled up like a cat inside a deep black robe. The firelight danced at her throat accenting the compelling contrast. Her blonde hair curled down in a river of fire across her silhouette. Priestess of the night. Relaxed but all aware.

When she saw he was awake and had become aware of her, she moved. With slow deliberateness, she stretched up to her feet, and moved towards him. The black robe flowed about her, and only her feet showed out beneath, threading a delicate pattern over the floor. When she reached him she paused, staring at him with opaque eyes, and then she sat down, close but nowheres touching him.

She smiled obliquely and said, "I told you you would wake a man, my misshapen one." Her voice was softly chanting. "I told you, did I not? And was I not correct? Are you not a man, just as I am a woman?" Her hand moved and barely touched his arm.

Sintor moved towards her, his blood pounded darkly in his head, and his fingers tingling. But as he moved, the perversity that was a part of him cried out. It cried out against the domination that the girl desired; it cried out for him to think and to decide in cold rationality if that was what he wanted.

He stopped, for the blink of an eye, and thought. He glazed his eyes and let his mind sink in—falling away into an abstraction that was without emotion. And he considered.

This world was psychopathic; its structure was imposed without regard for the fear and hatred it engendered. It was given what stability it had only by the "Release"—whatever that might be. Let the people only get together for a minute; give them a moment's chance to fuse their hatred into single action; and the priests would die a bloody death.

This girl, he also knew, acted as if she were the highest priestess of this cult of fear; she had the arrogance and the assurance of one used to such a post. If so, then as the Priestess of Despair she was the symbol and the target of the hatred of the world. What kind of person was she, he asked himself, to stand untouched by so much hate? She could not be normal—possibly a paranoiac, given what stability she might have by the fact of her success.

If this were so, then only in success could she be stable. As the target of a world's hatred, she had to prove herself above that world or be crushed beneath its guilt. The gratification of her whim was more than luxury; it was a necessity of her survival. Only so long as she could get what she might want could she survive.

In the present case, she had cast her whim on Sintor. Bored, no doubt, with handsome men, tired of her normal toys, his surpassing ugliness, was novelty; she desired him.

It had not occurred to her that he might not take what she offered. Obviously it had not, or she would not have offered so openly. With the open offer given, she was vulnerable, committed to her whim; if she did not get it, it would be a savage blow to her assurance. If he wanted, Sintor could let loose the full unlogic of her mind.

Did he want to, he wondered. He had two choices. He could give her what she sought, and this would not only be pleasant, but it might lead to the key he wanted—if it led her to carelessness. But it might not; surrounded by hatred and abiding fear, the pattern of carefulness might be too deep. He would be her toy, but she might not give her toy the chance to scratch her.

The other choice was dangerous. To thwart her, to frustrate her when she least expected it, was to let loose a beast. It was dangerous, but, in his perversity, this was the choice that appealed to Sintor.

THE DECISION made in the blink of an eye, he hesitated but a moment further. He paused to implement the choice, and to give it strength and body. He reached back into the awareness of his own ugliness, the awareness that was almost his first conscious memory. And he drew from that awareness, building a solid hatred of the beautiful one before him. Like a valve he shunted that hatred in, and the hollow shell of his decision became a solid driving force; he let his eyes unglaze and looked at the girl before him.

"Why yes, I am a man." He spoke reasonably. "And I am quite certain you are a woman." There was only the barest glint of irony in his tone, and his eyes were cool and without humor.

The girl stared at him, her eyes wide. She looked like a picture of surprised innocence. She was puzzled, and

could not account for his words. She smiled tentatively, and reached out her hand again, to stroke his arm. Her fingers trembled slightly.

Sintor blinked, and with perfect realism, half stifled a yawn. "By the way," he said, "do you happen to have any more food around. I seem to be still hungry." He sounded a trifle apologetic.

The girl drew back her hand as if he'd burned her. There was a hint of panic in her eyes. "Food? You want food?" He nodded blandly. "But I am the Kritna, and you are here with me. I have offered you that for which many men would gladly die; how can you want food?" There was a desperate note in her voice.

"I'm sorry," Sintor answered. "It is, I know, impolite of me—but the simple fact is that I am hungry. You see I am a very ugly man, and you might think that I am therefore lonely. But strangely enough, women seem to like ugliness."

He acted coy, and looked at her with an arch humor. "I don't know why, but it is a fact—and I do all right. I like you, and you are a very pretty girl; but I am afraid I am too hungry right now to bother with you." There was laughter in his tone, and he gave no sign at all that he saw the rising flush of anger in her face.

She whirled up out of the sofa. With one bound she crossed the room and seized a nerve-whip from off a shelf. Her face was twisted and savage as she turned to him. "It's food you want is it?" The words were hoarse and rough. "You won't bother with me till you've had some food, will you? I'll give you food, you..." She fired a string of words at him, calling him all manner of strange things. Each world has its own curse-words, so these were unfamiliar to him. But of their purpose her drawn lips and glaring eyes left no doubt at all. And as her voice mounted to a screaming climax, she pressed the stud and once more he was lost in the bright red agony of the nerve-whip.

As the waves of torture rolled over him, tearing savagely at the very structure of his mind, he was dimly aware that other men came in. He heard the girl, cursing. He felt himself lifted up and carted off ungently. And in the end, he felt the damp floor of a dungeon and heard the crash of a metal door. And then he was alone and left to sink into unconsciousness or sleep. Alone to dream of the tiger he had let loose, with full malice aforethought; to dream of being clawed by that tiger, and of striving to find some way to use its very savagery against it. But in the dream he could not find the way.

SINTOR slept; and after a while, he awoke. He was lying on a damp stone floor in a room just barely big enough to lie in. The only light came dimly through the bars on the door from a torch outside. The only thing in the room except himself was an earthenware bowl on the floor near the door.

With twisted, twitching arms, he dragged himself to the bowl. In it he found a rotten slimy mess. Food, perhaps—but food that only a vulture would eat. But inside him was the frantic hunger that the nerve-whip seemed to breed; his body cried out for the food and its cry was stronger than the revulsion of his mind. He ate.

Having eaten, he slept. When, again, he woke, he found himself still stretched upon the floor. The bowl had been refilled with the same vile mess. But still, with trembling hands, he ate. And having eaten, fell asleep again.

Three times this happened. Slowly he was forced to realize that the pattern was not changing. The utter weakness, the twitching that made each motion agony, was not abating. The hunger that before had marked recovery was this time only a single phase of torture. The sleep brought no release and no improvement; the pattern of hell was fixed and he was caught.

Three times this pattern of his life repeated. And then the fourth time, his guard awakened him. "Wake up, you fool, for the Kritna would speak with you," he heard. "Wake up, or I will have to wake you up with this." He felt the nudge of a club.

He twisted over and tried, without success, to hoist himself on agonizing joints. He could not do it, and the pain sent him back to the floor, drenching him with sweat. He lay there, struggling to remember. "The Kritna?" And then the memory came flooding back. The girl! That was what she had called herself.

"Yeah, the Kritna," the guard said. "What did you do to her, by the way?" His voice was curious.

"I made her mad," Sintor said.

The guard laughed. "You sure did," he said. "Don't remember ever seeing anybody as badly off as you are." There was no pity in his voice—only interest.

"What did she do to me?" Sintor asked. "The nerve-whip, I know, but I'm not coming out of it. How come?"

"She gave you too much of it," the guard answered. "You turn the nerve-whip on a guy and he gets knocked out. If you turn it off fast, he'll recover. If you don't...well, he's liable not to be quite as good as he was. And if you keep pouring it into him the way she must have into you, why then they get left like you. And, brother, you've had it!"

"Then I'll never be any better?" Sintor asked, feeling a black despair sweep over him.

"No." The guard was contemptuous. "No, you've had it for all time. Except, of course, you get a chance in a Release. But I don't think you will. I think that's why she wants you now; she don't seem to like you." He chuckled with mild good humor.

"A Release?" Sintor could not, for a moment, remember. And then he did. That was the unknown factor here. The "Release" was, he knew, the key to this whole world. It was what made for such stability as there was. It was through the "Release", apparently, that the priests were able to make the people gather the pollen of Seekar's Lilly, in the face of the certain death from addiction to the drug that it contained. And it was the "Release" that made this world a bitter hatred—a world in which there was no love that he had found. No love nor any pity, but only lust and fear and hatred. It was the "Release" that was the key, but he did not know what it might be.

The guard stood looking at him for a moment. Then, apparently conceding that Sintor could not walk—even if clubbed—he called another guard. Together, each taking an arm, they picked him up and carried him out the door, down a corridor, and up a flight of stairs. They carried him across a crowded hall and dumped him on the edge of a raised portion of the floor.

4

THE SILKY voice, though not loud, cut through the drone of the crowd with hidden intensity. "So my little monster is not feeling well. Is he hungry? Does he want food? Or has he had enough?"

Sintor looked up. In a thronelike chair in the center of the raised portion sat the girl. Her lips were curled in a semblance of a smile but her eyes glittered as she watched him and the light in them was quite insane.

He looked around, not bothering to answer her. The hall, what he could see of it through holes in the crowd of priests was large. He figured it was probably the huge white temple he had seen in the center of the city. It was closed, without windows or other openings, and the walls were quite bare. The only decorative features at all were the torches spaced at even intervals around, and the doors along the far wall that kept opening to admit more people from the night outside.

The throne, if throne it was, was near the back of the hall. On that wall there were several small doors. It was through one of those, he thought, that he had been brought. The others probably led to other subterranean quarters and apartments.

He stared at the torch that was nearest him. There was something odd about it, he thought. He could not quite decide at first, what it might be. And then he realized that there was a peculiar sheen to the wall behind it. The walls seemed to be of marble, but there was a quality to their reflection that was different. He stared at it, striving to make his eyes focus sharply. It looked, he thought with sudden recognition, as if there were a fine, metallic screen over all the surface. It was with a start that the thought came to him that this appeared to be a shielded room. He wondered why.

"Do you approve, my little pet?" The girl's voice sneered.

"Do I have the choice of disapproval?" he asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "I don't mind in the least if you dislike this. And, as a matter of fact, you will see this many times before you die. You will see it each time we call a Release. Each time we will bring you up here from your pleasant little room below. For I am merciful and I would spare you the agony of Release." She laughed. low and viciously.

"There is no Release here?" he asked.

"In here?" She seemed puzzled. "Of course not. This is the Temple-room. Are your wits befuddled? You may not have seen this one before, but don't you remember the other temple-rooms you must have seen?" She waited for an answer, but Sintor decided to keep quiet and let his silence force her speech.

She did not wait for long. "No, my little monster, there is no Release in here; this is where we come to avoid Release. Only when we're old, or sick, or want to change for any reason do we not come to a Temple-room. Do you think I would take a chance on losing this?" She looked down at her body. "While it stays young, I would rather that there were no Releases than to risk its loss. Only when it's old or useless will I go out and pick some other young and handsome one, and pit my will against the peasant's feeble panic." Her face was cruel and unpitying.

"There is no Release in here," she went on, a moment later, "even though we make it here. You will lie there and will watch me build the forces of Release. You will see the Sphere light up, and you will know that if you

were outside, then you would find Release. But, because you are not a man—but only the shell of a man, sucked dry by my contempt—then you will know that there is no Release for you but death!" She glared at him from snakelike eyes.

She turned her head suddenly to four men who stood waiting at her side. "Bring it here," she said. "It is time." The men bowed and disappeared behind the throne. A moment later they appeared again, each bearing the corner of a table. They set the table down beside the throne. On it was an apparatus whose nature Sintor could not fathom. It was alien in form and design—so alien that he doubted if it had been made by human hands. It could have been, he thought, a relic of some ancient life form. Such relics did exist throughout the universe, and occasionally they showed a high technocracy. This could be one of those. For it was alien, and only the empty sphere that formed the apex of the equipment seemed natural in its geometric perfection.

The men took from the table a coil of heavy cable. This they laid along the floor and plugged the end into a socket in the wall. The cable passed very close to where Sintor lay. He could have touched it easily but simply lay there studying it. It, too, was somewhat alien. The outer layer appeared to be a woven copper mesh, but over it there was a faint suggested iridescence that puzzled him. And the cable was not uniform; its diameter varied with its length in some obscure pattern. What kind of energy was it supposed to carry? He wondered. Considering it, and the machine that was to generate the energy, and the suggested strangeness of the effects the energy would have, he doubted if it was of any form his civilization knew.

WHEN ALL was set, and the men had told the girl so, she stood up. The hall became silent before her. "It is time," she cried. "Are the doors all sealed and the room prepared?" One after another, men who seemed to be stationed at the doors called out that all was ready. Then she went on: "If it is so, then I, the Kritna, do summon the strength of the globe. I summon it to build the pattern that defends you. I do that which only I can do and for which you worship me. For the Globe is mine and only to my mind does it react, and I am unique. I am the Kritna!" The assembled crowd bowed low before her, and she stood there a moment, secure in her arrogance.

She turned to the table at her side. Her eyes became opaque, her face impassive and quiet as she stared at the sphere. In response there came a faint shimmering in it. A shimmering of light, shifting in color and intensity, weaving an obscure pattern.

It was no fake, he knew. In some queer telepathic way, he sensed that she was actually activating the equipment. Sintor wondered if he could interfere with what she did. He thought not; it did not feel as if he could. And even if he could, what good would it do? It would not destroy her or the hierarchy that she headed. It would just make her kill him. And he was sure she would not hesitate a moment to do so if she felt him any sort of threat. He did not try to take control.

Slowly the pattern in the globe built up, weaving with greater and greater speed and brilliance, building a complexity that was almost solid. Serpents of fire that intertwisted in fantastic pattern. There was a hypnotic quality to it at first, as it kept folding itself inside out. But as it shifted with increasing speed, and as the color grew intense it became almost painful to watch. The instinct was to crouch with averted eyes, as if awaiting an explosion.

There was a part of Sintor's brain that was remote and cool. With careful abstraction, it was studying the problem, testing the validity of its

data, checking each logical step, assuring itself that it was not neglecting any logical possibility. It waited, prepared, for the climactic instant.

And there was another part of him, some deeper more unknown level, that studied the girl. It was this part that was aware of her mind, and of what it was doing with the sphere. Telepathy, perhaps; awareness on a subtle plane —he did not know. He only knew that it watched, waiting to give the signal that the instant had arrived.

And the instant came. The awareness came that the girl was ready to release the energy of the sphere—to let the wierd energy stored there flow down through the cable in a rushing torrent, flow out through whatever means of radiation was provided, pour loose upon this world to create the "Release", whatever that might be.

SINTOR acted; with a convulsive movement, he grabbed the cable where it passed near him. The agony of the effort seared through his nerves, but, by sheer force of will, he wrenched the cable and tipped over the table. The table tottered and fell, the strange and alien machinery falling with it. As it landed, the sphere exploded with blinding light. The sphere that contained and restrained the unknown energy was shattered—even as he had hoped.

He felt a sensation beyond all normal experience—a twisting and a wrenching of his very soul, as if he were plucked out of his body and crushed and pulled by some enormous mystic hand.

It was black. There was a solid blackness that denied the very thought of light. There was a numbness that refused the thought of feeling, and a silence that beat in upon him. He was alone.

The deep resources of his mind took hold, enforcing sanity. They clamped down, keeping his mind from destroying itself in panic, and demanded an analysis. They forced his rational mind to effective action. They made him realize that there was only a limited number of possibilities. And most of those—such as the possibility that he could think of that offered anything but complete failure. He assumed its truth.

On that assumption, then, he acted. He thought of the girl. He visualized her, and cried out to himself the command to go there. And, in the formless void, he felt himself move. He summoned his power and drove whatever it was that was himself towards the identification of the girl.

There was a sudden moment of contact, a moment of violence and of struggle, a moment in which he threw the full and uninhibited force of his peculiar will against the other. But then he felt the other flee in panic and despair, and he was alone again.

Once more he felt the floor beneath him, solid, and hard. He lay full length upon it. For a moment, he thought only of failure. But then he realized that one leg was pinned against a solid object. As he had lain before, there had been nothing that could pin it.

Wild hope surged up within him. One eye he opened cautiously. He could not see, for a curtain hung in front of it—a curtain of long, silky hair that looked blonde. He put his hand up to shove it out of the way, and the hand was smooth and delicate, with tapering fingernails. For final proof, he shifted so that he could see the body that was his. There was no doubt. The body was quite obviously the one that had belonged to the girl known as the Kritna!

He lay there, letting the knowledge sweep through him. His assumption—the wild, crazy assumption which was the only one he could think of that fitted the facts—was right. The energies the sphere had stored were, in some amazing way, able to release the minds and personalities of all the people exposed to it. And while that energy, that unknown radiation, flooded

the ether, all minds were free, floating in a formless void. Only when the radiation died could the minds return to the bodies. But when they did, the pairing of mind and body tended to be random, like the ball dropping into the slot of a roulette wheel. This was a "Release"—when all minds were gathered up, shuffled, and redealt according to the laws of chance.

But even as a roulette-wheel can be crooked, and control be had of the slot into which the ball shall fall, so had the Kritna and the priests made this game crooked. Firstly, it was crooked because they gave themselves the choice of whether or not to play. If the body that they had was young and healthy, and gave them pleasure, they did not play. Instead they stayed protected against the strange radiation. Only if they were sick, or old—or if, for some other reason, the body that they had no longer gave them pleasure—only then did they take their chance in the game.

But it was also crooked in an even more brutal way. For there were those—himself as an example—who had some strange power of the mind that let them control their fate in the Release. They could go out and, as the girl had said, "pick some other young and handsome one..." Thieves they were, without pity or humanity; it was no wonder they were hated.

It was no wonder also that their rule was hard to break. For in the moment of a gathering revolution, when the people in their hatred were preparing to strike, they had put to release the energy of the sphere; in the consequent reshuffle, the revolutionists would lose each other. The organization of revolt would be broken, and the group dispersed. It would be scattered, furthermore, without leaving any mechanism of identification.

SINTOR thought for a moment, drifting down into his mind. And he found in there some vestigial memories of the body itself. He could, though faintly and in unorganized manner, remember some of the things the girl had done, or had experienced. And in this fact, he saw the final link of the chain of the people of this world. For if they organized a revolution, and thought to foil Release by arranging some signal for their mutual identification—then, if, in the reshuffle, a priest got hold of one of the bodies, then he would remember the signal. The revolution would be doomed. No, the Release was a perfect devise for the protection of revolt.

He shuddered as he thought of it, and of its implications. How could there be anything but hatred and despair in all this world? Brandis, the peasant, had not known whether the boy with him was his son. How could he, through all the Releases there had been since he was born? And how could he love the boy or any other person, not knowing who they were or where they might be shortly? How could there be love or pity, or any of the higher feelings, on this world with its history and its prospect of Release. Here, without even the elemental stability of identity, there could be only loneliness and aloneness.

This, he thought, was the reason why they could harvest the deadly crop of the pollen of Seekar's Lilly. What did it matter if your body rotted from the drug the dust contained? Why should you worry as it pulled you toward ultimate dissolution? Before the end, you could be sure that there would be Release and you would have a chance. Somebody lost, of course; the body died eventually, and with it died a personality. But that would not be you, providing a Release occurred in time. So you really did not mind the work; you did not mind the rot it started in your body. And you gathered in the pollen as required.

With a shudder Sintor rose to his—her—feet. The crowd that had been

standing in the hall still squirmed upon the floor. Some few were getting up with dazed expressions, but most were staring around, shocked by the unexpected Release.

The machine, the wierd and alien mechanism of Release, lay on the floor, half melted, destroyed—without chance of any reconstruction. And, reaching back into the memories left by the Kritna, Sintor knew that the machine was unique. It was, as he had guessed, a relic of an ancient culture that they had found. No man had made it; no man could even start, as yet, to study the forces that it had controlled. Destroyed, it was unique and could not be rebuilt. Never again would this world or any other know the horror of Release.

Sintor could picture the future. Revenge, there would be, bloody and cruel. There would be nothing to stop the peasants from revolt. They would learn to get together, without the Release to shatter their organization. And when they were together, even the nerve-whips would be futile. The priests would die. Those that did not would be hunted with savage intentness. The rule of the priests would be destroyed, and the world would fall to anarchy. They would starve, and they would kill each other for a crust of bread or for whatever else they might desire. Each for himself, facing for the first time a future for which it would be meaningful to gather food and other things, they would act in absolute brutality.

But they would learn. They would learn to love. First their women and their children. Then their tribe, and then their race. And finally they would learn to love humanity. Through the blood purge that was surely coming, they would learn, and grow to full humanity.

SINTOR smiled and turned away.

As he did so, pushing back the long blonde hair, he saw the body that had once been his. It lay where he had left it. In the eyes that glared out at him there was no sanity; he knew that the mind behind those eyes had not survived the shock. Vengeance was his, he thought, but he found no joy in it. The turnabout that he suspected was, he thought appropriate. There was justice in it; but there was no mercy. And pity was in his heart, but there was nothing he could do.

He looked around. Seeing a nerve-whip, he picked it up. From his acquired memories, he knew that this too, was a relic of the ancient culture. He doubted if the technologies of man could duplicate it, but he thought that he might let them try. Besides, these priest might try to stop him—even in the face of their habit of obedience to this body. So, carrying it slung over an arm, he threaded his way through the mob towards the doors to the Temple.

Outside, he gazed around, breathing the cool night air. Orienting himself, he started to make his way towards the valley where the Tradeship would land. From the memories that were not his own, he knew the ship would be in soon.

As Sintor walked, he smiled to himself. He was free, and he had done what he had come to do; he had found out how this world had worked. He had learned the device the priests had used to make the people harvest the crop of the pollen of Seekar's Lilly. And he had destroyed that device, so that—now that humanity no longer needed that awful crop—the people of this world would not continue slaves. And now he was on his way back.

He wondered how much trouble he would have convincing Iklan who he was. He thought of his indentification: "The impossibility of providing pseudo time-invariant channels of communication between barbarians causes the development of non-topological cultures on Pelton."

Sintor chuckled at the strange irony that had picked that sentence as the

identification code; a code should be meaningless, however meaningful it sounded. But Pelton had given meaning to it. On Pelton there were no "pseudo time-invariant channels of communication." Not between the peasants, anyway. And there *was* a culture in spite of it. There was stability, though there was no topology that lasted more than till the next Release. The culture was a hell, but it existed; and the code made sense.

But getting back to his original problem, he doubted if Iklan would be easily convinced, even with the identification-code; and even with his assignment. When you drop off an agent who is a very ugly man, you do not lightly accept him back as an extremely beautiful girl. No, Iklan would be hard to convince, Sintor thought.

He found perverse amusement in the thought, and smiled. His hand went up to smooth the golden hair. The gesture was quite feminine, but Sintor was adaptable.