

Colony

by
Philip K. Dick

Major Lawrence Hall bent over the binocular microscope, correcting the fine adjustment.

"Interesting," he murmured.

"Isn't it? Three weeks on this planet and we've yet to find a harmful life form." Lieutenant Friendly sat down on the edge of the lab table, avoiding the culture bowls. "What kind of place is this? No disease germs, no lice, no flies, no rats, no—"

"No whiskey or red-light districts." Hall straightened up. "Quite a place. I was sure this brew would show something along the lines of Terra's. Or the Martian sand rot corkscrew."

"But the whole planet's harmless. You know, I'm wondering whether this is the Garden of Eden our ancestors fell out of."

"Were pushed out of."

Hall wandered over to the window of the lab and contemplated the scene beyond. He had to admit it was an attractive sight. Rolling forests and hills, green slopes alive with flowers and endless vines; waterfalls and hanging moss; fruit trees, acres of flowers, lakes. Every effort had been made to preserve intact the surface of Planet Blue—as it had been designated by the original scout ship, six months earlier.

Hall sighed. "Quite a place. I wouldn't mind coming back here again some time."

"Makes Terra seem a little bare." Friendly took out his cigarettes, then put them away again. "You know, the place has a funny effect on me. I don't smoke any more. Guess that's because of the way it looks. It's so—so damn pure. Unsullied. I can't smoke or throw papers around. I can't bring myself to be a picnicker."

"The picnickers'll be along soon enough," Hall said. He went back to the microscope. "I'll try a few more cultures. Maybe I'll find a lethal germ yet."

"Keep trying." Lieutenant Friendly hopped off the table. "I'll see you later and find out if you've had any luck. There's a big conference going on in Room One. They're almost ready to give the go-ahead to the E.A. for the first load of colonists to be sent out."

"Picnickers!"

Friendly grinned. "Afraid so."

The door closed after him. His footsteps echoed down the corridor. Hall was alone in the lab.

He sat for a time in thought. Presently he bent down and removed the slide from the stage of the microscope, selected a new one and held it up to the light to read the marking. The lab was warm and quiet. Sunlight streamed through the windows and across the floor. The trees outside moved a little in the wind. He began to feel sleepy.

"Yes, the picnickers," he grumbled. He adjusted the new slide into position. "And all of them ready to come in and cut down the trees, tear up the flowers, spit in the lakes, burn up the grass. With not even the common-cold virus around to—"

He stopped, his voice choked off—

Choked off because the two eyepieces of the microscope had twisted suddenly around his windpipe and were trying to strangle him. Hall tore at them, but they dug relentlessly into his throat, steel prongs closing like the claws of a trap.

Throwing the microscope onto the floor, he leaped up. The microscope crawled quickly toward him, hooking around his leg. He kicked it loose with his other foot, and drew his blast pistol.

The microscope scuttled away, rolling on its coarse adjustments. Hall fired. It disappeared in a cloud of metallic particles.

"Good God!" Hall sat down weakly, mopping his face. "What the—?" He massaged his throat. "What the hell!"

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The council room was packed solid. Every officer of the Planet Blue unit was there. Commander Stella Morrison tapped on the big control map with the end of a slim plastic pointer.

"This long flat area is ideal for the actual city. It's close to water, and weather conditions vary sufficiently to give the settlers something to talk about. There are large deposits of various minerals. The colonists can set up their own factories. They won't have to do any importing. Over here is the biggest forest on the planet. If they have any sense, they'll leave it. But if they want to make newspapers out of it, that's not our concern."

She looked around the room at the silent men.

"Let's be realistic. Some of you have been thinking we shouldn't send the okay to the Emigration Authority, but keep the planet our own selves, to come back to. I'd like that as much as any of the rest of you, but we'd just get into a lot of trouble. It's not our planet. We're here to do a certain job. When the job

is done, we move along. And it is almost done. So let's forget it. The only thing left to do is flash the go-ahead signal and then begin packing our things."

"Has the lab report come in on bacteria?" Vice-Commander Wood asked.

"We're taking special care to look out for them, of course. But the last I heard nothing had been found. I think we can go ahead and contact the E.A. Have them send a ship to take us off and bring in the first load of settlers. There's no reason why—" She stopped.

A murmur was swelling through the room. Heads turned toward the door.

Commander Morrison frowned. "Major Hall, may I remind you that when the council is in session no one is permitted to interrupt!"

Hall swayed back and forth, supporting himself by holding on to the door knob. He gazed vacantly around the council room. Finally his glassy eyes picked out Lieutenant Friendly, sitting halfway across the room.

"Come here," he said hoarsely.

"Me?" Friendly sank farther down in his chair.

"Major, what is the meaning of this?" Vice-Commander Wood cut in angrily. "Are you drunk or are—?" He saw the blast gun in Hall's hand. "Is something wrong, Major?"

Alarmed, Lieutenant Friendly got up and grabbed Hall's shoulder. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Come to the lab."

"Did you find something?" The Lieutenant studied his friend's rigid face. "What is it?"

"Come on." Hall started down the corridor, Friendly following. Hall pushed the laboratory door open and stepped inside slowly.

"What it is?" Friendly repeated.

"My microscope."

"Your microscope? What about it?" Friendly squeezed past him into the lab. "I don't see it."

"It's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"I blasted it."

"You blasted it?" Friendly looked at the other man. "I don't get it. Why?"

Hall's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

"Are you all right?" Friendly asked in concern. Then he bent down and lifted a black plastic box from a shelf under the table. "Say, is this a gag?"

He removed Hall's microscope from the box. "What do you mean, you blasted it? Here it is, in its regular place. Now, tell me what's going on? You saw something on a slide? Some kind of bacteria? Lethal? Toxic?"

Hall approached the microscope slowly. It was his all right. There was the nick just above the fine adjustment. And one of the stage clips was slightly bent. He touched it with his finger.

Five minutes ago this microscope had tried to kill him. And he knew he had blasted it out of existence.

"You sure you don't need a psych test?" Friendly asked anxiously. "You look post-trauma to me, or worse."

"Maybe you're right," Hall muttered.

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The robot psyche tester whirred, integrating and gestalting. At last its color-code lights changed from red to green.

"Well?" Hall demanded.

"Severe disturbance. Instability ratio up above ten."

"That's over danger?"

"Yes. Eight is danger. Ten is unusual, especially for a person of your index. You usually show about a four."

Hall nodded wearily. "I know."

"If you could give me more data—"

Hall set his jaw. "I can't tell you any more."

"It's illegal to hold back information during a psyche test," the machine said peevishly. "If you do that you deliberately distort my findings."

Hall rose. "I can't tell you any more. But you do record a high degree of unbalance for me?"

"There's a high degree of psychic disorganization. But what it means, or why it exists, I can't say."

"Thanks." Hall clicked the tester off. He went back to his own quarters. His head whirled. Was he out of his mind? But he had fired the blast gun at *something*. Afterward, he had tasted the atmosphere in the lab, and there were metallic particles in suspension, especially near the place he had fired his blast gun at the microscope.

But how could a thing like that be? A microscope coming to life, trying to kill him!

Anyhow, Friendly had pulled it out of its box, whole and

sound. But how had it got back in the box?

He stripped off his uniform and entered the shower. While he ran warm water over his body he meditated. The robot psyche tester had showed his mind was severely disturbed, but that could have been the result, rather than the cause, of the experience. He had started to tell Friendly about it but he had stopped. How could he expect anyone to believe a story like that?

He shut off the water and reached out for one of the towels on the rack.

The towel wrapped around his wrist, yanking him against the wall. Rough cloth pressed over his mouth and nose. He fought wildly, pulling away. All at once the towel let go. He fell, sliding to the floor, his head striking the wall. Stars shot around him; then violent pain.

Sitting in a pool of warm water, Hall looked up at the towel rack. The towel was motionless now, like the others with it. Three towels in a row, all exactly alike, all unmoving. Had he dreamed it?

He got shakily to his feet, rubbing his head. Carefully avoiding the towel rack, he edged out of the shower and into his room. He pulled a new towel from the dispenser in a gingerly manner. It seemed normal. He dried himself and began to put his clothes on.

His belt got him around the waist and tried to crush him. It was strong—it had reinforced metal links to hold his leggings and his gun. He and the belt rolled silently on the floor, struggling for control. The belt was like a furious metal snake, whipping and lashing at him. At last he managed to get his hand around his blaster.

At once the belt let go. He blasted it out of existence and then threw himself down in a chair, gasping for breath.

The arms of the chair closed around him. But this time the blaster was ready. He had to fire six times before the chair fell limp and he was able to get up again.

He stood half dressed in the middle of the room, his chest rising and falling.

"It isn't possible," he whispered. "I must be out of my mind."

Finally he got his leggings and boots on. He went outside into the empty corridor. Entering the lift, he ascended to the top floor.

Commander Morrison looked up from her desk as Hall stepped through the robot clearing screen. It pinged.

"You're armed," the Commander said accusingly.

Hall looked down at the blaster in his hand. He put it down on the desk. "Sorry."

"What do you want? What's the matter with you? I have a report from the testing machine. It says you've hit a ratio often within the last twenty-four hour period." She studied him intently. "We've known each other for a long time, Lawrence. What's happening to you?"

Hall took a deep breath. "Stella, earlier today, my microscope tried to strangle me."

Her blue eyes widened. "What!"

"Then, when I was getting out of the shower, a bath towel tried to smother me. I got by it, but while I was dressing, my belt—" He stopped. The Commander had got to her feet.

"Guards!" she called.

"Wait, Stella." Hall moved toward her. "Listen to me. This is serious. There's nothing wrong. Four times things have tried to kill me. Ordinary objects suddenly turned lethal. Maybe it's what we've been looking for. Maybe this is—"

"Your microscope tried to killed you?"

"It came alive. Its stem got me around the windpipe."

There was a long silence. "Did anyone see this happen besides you?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

"I blasted it."

"Are there any remains?"

"No," Hall admitted reluctantly. "As a matter of fact, the microscope seems to be all right, again. The way it was before. Back in its box."

"I see." The Commander nodded to the two guards who had answered her call. "Take Major Hall down to Captain Taylor and have him confined until he can be sent back to Terra for examination."

She watched calmly as the two guards took hold of Hall's arms with magnetic grapples.

"Sorry, Major," she said. "Unless you can prove any of your story, we've got to assume it's a psychotic projection on your part. And the planet isn't well enough policed for us to allow a psychotic to run loose. You could do a lot of damage."

The guards moved him toward the door. Hall went unprotestingly. His head rang, rang and echoed. Maybe she was right.

Maybe he was out of his mind.

They came to Captain Taylor's offices. One of the guards rang the buzzer.

"Who is it?" the robot door demanded shrilly.

"Commander Morrison orders this man put under the Captain's care."

There was a hesitant pause, then: "The Captain is busy."

"This is an emergency."

The robot's relays clicked while it made up its mind. "The Commander sent you?"

"Yes. Open up."

"You may enter," the robot conceded finally. It drew its locks back, releasing the door.

The guard pushed the door open. And stopped.

On the floor lay Captain Taylor, his face blue, his eyes gaping. Only his head and feet was visible. A red-and-white scatter rug was wrapped around him, squeezing, straining tighter and tighter.

Hall dropped to the floor and pulled at the rug. "Hurry!" he barked. "Grab it!"

The three of them pulled together. The rug resisted.

"Help," Taylor cried weakly.

"We're trying!" They tugged frantically. At last the rug came away in their hands. It flopped off rapidly toward the open door. One of the guards blasted it.

Hall ran to the vidscreen and shakily dialed the Commander's emergency number.

Her face appeared on the screen.

"See!" he gasped.

She stared past him to Taylor lying on the floor, the two guards kneeling beside him, their blasters still out.

"What—what happened?"

"A rug attacked him." Hall grinned without amusement. "Now who's crazy?"

"We'll send a guard unit down." She blinked. "Right away. But how—"

"Tell them to have their blasters ready. And better make that a general alarm to *everyone*."

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Hall placed four items on Commander Morrison's desk: a microscope, a towel, a metal belt, and a small red-and-white rug.

She edged away nervously. "Major, are you sure—?"

"They're all right, *now*. That's the strangest part. This towel.

A few hours ago it tried to kill me. I got away by blasting it to particles. But here it is, back again. The way it always was. Harmless.

Captain Taylor fingered the red-and-white rug warily. "That's my rug. I brought it from Terra. My wife gave it to me. I—I trusted it completely."

They all looked at each other.

"We blasted the rug, too," Hall pointed out.

There was silence.

"Then what was it that attacked me?" Captain Taylor asked. "If it wasn't this rug?"

"It looked like this rug," Hall said slowly. "And what attacked me looked like this towel."

Commander Morrison held up the towel to the light. "It's just an ordinary towel! It couldn't have attacked you."

"Of course not," Hall agreed. "We've put these objects through all the tests we can think of. They're just what they're supposed to be, all elements unchanged. Perfectly stable non-organic objects. It's impossible that any of these could have come to life and attacked us."

"But something did," Taylor said. "Something attacked me. And it if wasn't this rug, what was it?"

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Lieutenant Dodds felt around on the dresser for his gloves. He was in a hurry. The whole unit had been called to emergency assembly.

"Where did I—?" he murmured. "What the hell!"

For on the bed were *two* pair of identical gloves, side by side.

Dodds frowned, scratching his head. How could it be? He owned only one pair. The others must be somebody else's. Bob Wesley had been in the night before, playing cards. Maybe he had left them.

The vidscreen flashed again. "All personnel, report at once. All personnel, report at once. Emergency assembly of all personnel."

"All right!" Dodds said impatiently. He grabbed up one of the pairs of gloves, sliding them onto his hands.

As soon as they were in place, the gloves carried his hands down to his waist. They clamped his fingers over the butt of his gun, lifting it from the holster.

"I'll be damned," Dodds said. The gloves brought the blast gun up, pointing it at his chest.

The fingers squeezed. There was a roar. Half of Dodd's chest dissolved. What was left of him fell slowly to the floor, the mouth still open in amazement.

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Corporal Tenner hurried across the ground toward the main building as soon as he heard the wail of the emergency alarm.

At the entrance to the building he stopped to take off his metal-cleated boots. Then he frowned. By the door were two safety mats instead of one.

Well, it didn't matter. They were both the same. He stepped onto one of the mats and waited. The surface of the mat sent a flow of high-frequency current through his feet and legs, killing any spores or seeds that might have clung to him while he was outside.

He passed on into the building.

A moment later Lieutenant Fulton hurried up to the door. He yanked off his hiking boots and stepped onto the first mat he saw.

The mat folded over his feet.

"Hey," Fulton cried. "Let go!"

He tried to pull his feet loose, but the mat refused to let go. Fulton became scared. He drew his gun, but he didn't care to fire at his own feet.

"Help!" he shouted.

Two soldiers came running up. "What's the matter, Lieutenant?"

"Get this damn thing off me."

The soldiers began to laugh.

"It's no joke," Fulton said, his face suddenly white. "It's breaking my feet! It's—"

He began to scream. The soldiers grabbed frantically at the mat. Fulton fell, rolling and twisting, still screaming. At last the soldiers managed to get a corner of the mat loose from his feet.

Fulton's feet were gone. Nothing but limp bone remained, already half dissolved.

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"Now we know," Hall said grimly. "It's a form of organic life." Commander Morrison turned to Corporal Tenner. "You saw two mats when you came into the building?"

"Yes, Commander. Two. I stepped on—on one of them. And came in."

"You were lucky. You stepped on the right one."

"We've got to be careful," Hall said. "We've got to watch for

duplicates. Apparently it, whatever it is, imitates objects it finds. Like a chameleon. Camouflage.”

“Two,” Stella Morrison murmured, looking at the two vases of flowers, one at each end of her desk. “It’s going to be hard to tell. Two towels, two vases, two chairs. There may be whole rows of things that are all right. All multiples legitimate except one.”

“That’s the trouble. I didn’t notice anything unusual in the lab. There’s nothing odd about another microscope. It blended right in.”

The Commander drew away from the identical vases of flowers. “How about those? Maybe one is—whatever they are.”

“There’s two of a lot of things. Natural pairs. Two boots. Clothing. Furniture. I didn’t notice that extra chair in my room. Equipment. It’ll be impossible to be sure. And sometimes—”

The vidscreen lit. Vice-Commander Wood’s features formed. “Stella, another casualty.”

“Who is it this time?”

“An officer dissolved. All but a few buttons and his blast pistol—Lieutenant Dodds.”

“That makes three,” Commander Morrison said.

“If it’s organic, there ought to be some way we can destroy it,” Hall muttered. “We’ve already blasted a few, apparently killed them. They can be hurt! But we don’t know how many more there are. We’ve destroyed five or six. Maybe it’s an infinitely divisible substance. Some kind of protoplasm.”

“And meanwhile—?”

“Meanwhile we’re all at its mercy. Or *their* mercy. It’s our lethal life form, all right. That explains why we found everything else harmless. Nothing could compete with a form like this. We have mimic forms of our own, of course. Insects, plants. And there’s the twisty slug on Venus. But nothing that goes this far.”

“It can be killed, though. You said so yourself. That means we have a chance.”

“If it can be found.” Hall looked around the room. Two walking capes hung by the door. Had there been *two* a moment before?

He rubbed his forehead wearily. “We’ve got to try to find some sort of poison or corrosive agent, something that’ll destroy them wholesale. We can’t just sit and wait for them to attack us. We need something we can spray. That’s the way we got the twisty slugs.”

The Commander gazed past him, rigid.

He turned to follow her gaze. "What is it?"

"I never noticed two briefcases in the corner over there. There was only one before—I think." She shook her head in bewilderment. "How are we going to know? This business is getting me down."

"You need a good stiff drink."

She brightened. "That's an idea. But—"

"But what?"

"I don't want to touch anything. There's no way to tell." She fingered the blast gun at her waist. "I keep wanting to use it, on everything."

"Panic reaction. Still, we are being picked off, one by one."

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Captain Unger got the emergency call over his headphones. He stopped work at once, gathered the specimens he had collected in his arms, and hurried back toward the bucket.

It was parked closer than he remembered. He stopped, puzzled. There it was, the bright little cone-shaped car with its treads firmly planted in the soft soil, its door open.

Unger hurried up to it, carrying his specimens carefully. He opened the storage hatch in the back and lowered his armload. Then he went around to the front and slid in behind the controls.

He turned the switch. But the motor did not come on. That was strange. While he was trying to figure it out, he noticed something that gave him a start.

A few hundred feet away, among the trees, was a second bucket, just like the one he was in. And that *was* where he remembered having parked his car. Of course, he was in the bucket. Somebody else had come looking for specimens, and this bucket belonged to them.

Unger started to get out again.

The door closed around him. The seat folded up over his head. The dashboard became plastic and oozed. He gasped—he was suffocating. He struggled to get out, flailing and twisting. There was a wetness all around him, a bubbling, flowing wetness, warm like flesh.

"Glub." His head was covered. His body was covered. The bucket was turning to liquid. He tried to pull his hands free but they would not come.

And then the pain began. He was being dissolved. All at once he realized what the liquid was.

Acid. Digestive acid. He was in a stomach.

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"Don't look!" Gail Thomas cried.

"Why not?" Corporal Hendricks swam toward her, grinning.
"Why can't I look?"

"Because I'm going to get out."

The sun shone down on the lake. It glittered and danced on the water. All around huge moss-covered trees rose up, great silent columns among the flowering vines and bushes.

Gail climbed up on the bank, shaking water from her, throwing her hair back out of her eyes. The woods were silent. There was no sound except the lapping of the waves. They were a long way from the unit camp.

"When can I look?" Hendricks demanded, swimming around in a circle, his eyes shut.

"Soon." Gail made her way into the trees, until she came to the place where she had left her uniform. She could feel the warm sun glowing against her bare shoulders and arms. Sitting down in the grass, she picked up her tunic and leggings.

She brushed the leaves and bits of tree bark from her tunic and began to pull it over her head.

In the water, Corporal Hendricks waited patiently, continuing in his circle. Time passed. There was no sound. He opened his eyes. Gail was nowhere in sight.

"Gail?" he called.

It was very quiet.

"Gail!"

No answer.

Corporal Hendricks swam rapidly to the bank. He pulled himself out of the water. One leap carried him to his own uniform, neatly piled at the edge of the lake. He grabbed up his blaster.

"Gail!"

The woods were silent. There was no sound. He stood, looking around him, frowning. Gradually, a cold fear began to numb him, in spite of the warm sun.

"GAIL!"

And still there was only silence.

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Commander Morrison was worried. "We've got to act," she said. "We can't wait. Ten lives lost already from thirty encounters. One-third is too high a percentage."

Hall looked up from his work. "Anyhow, now we know what we're up against. It's a form of protoplasm, with infinite versatil-

ity.” He lifted the spray tank. “I think this will give us an idea of how many exist.”

“What’s that?”

“A compound of arsenic and hydrogen in gas form. Arsine.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

Hall locked his helmet into place. His voice came through the Commander’s earphones. “I’m going to release this throughout the lab. I think there are a lot of them in here, more than anywhere else.”

“Why here?”

“This is where all samples and specimens were originally brought, where the first one of them was encountered. I think they came in with the samples, or as the samples, and then infiltrated through the rest of the buildings.”

The Commander locked her own helmet into place. Her four guards did the same. “Arsine is fatal to human beings, isn’t it?”

Hall nodded. “We’ll have to be careful. We can use it in here for a limited test, but that’s about all.”

He adjusted the flow of his oxygen inside his helmet.

“What’s your test supposed to prove?” she wanted to know.

“If it shows anything at all, it should give us an idea of how extensively they’ve infiltrated. We’ll know better what we’re up against. This may be more serious than we realize.”

“How do you mean?” she asked, fixing her own oxygen flow.

“There are a hundred people in this unit on Planet Blue. As it stands now, the worst that can happen is that they’ll get all of us, one by one. But that’s nothing. Units of a hundred are lost every day of the week. It’s a risk whoever is first to land on a planet must take. In the final analysis, it’s relatively unimportant.”

“Compared to what?”

“If they are infinitely divisible, then we’re going to have to think twice about leaving here. It would be better to stay and get picked off one by one than to run the risk of carrying any of them back to the system.”

She looked at him. “Is that what you’re trying to find out—whether they’re infinitely divisible?”

“I’m trying to find out what we’re up against. Maybe there are only a few of them. Or maybe they’re everywhere.” He waved a hand around the laboratory. “Maybe half the things in this room are not what we think they are. . . It’s bad when they attack us. It would be worse if they didn’t.”

"Worse?" The Commander was puzzled.

"Their mimicry is perfect. Of inorganic objects, at least. I looked through one of them, Stella, when it was imitating my microscope. It enlarged, adjusted, reflected, just like a regular microscope. It's a form of mimicry that surpasses anything we've ever imagined. It carries down below the surface, into the actual elements of the object imitated."

"You mean one of them could slip back to Terra along with us? In the form of clothing or a piece of lab equipment?" She shuddered.

"We assume they're some sort of protoplasm. Such malleability suggests a simple original form—and that suggests binary fission. If that's so, then there may be no limits to their ability to reproduce. The dissolving properties make me think of the simple unicellular protozoa."

"Do you think they're intelligent?"

"I don't know. I hope not." Hall lifted the spray. "In any case, this should tell us their extent. And, to some degree, corroborate my notion that they're basic enough to reproduce by simple division—the worse thing possible, from our standpoint.

"Here goes," Hall said.

He held the spray tightly against him, depressed the trigger, aimed the nozzle slowly around the lab. The commander and the four guards stood silently behind him. Nothing moved. The sun shone in through the windows, reflecting from the culture dishes and equipment.

After a moment he let the trigger up again.

"I didn't see anything," Commander Morrison said. "Are you sure you did anything?"

"Arsine is colorless. But don't loosen your helmet. It's fatal. And don't move."

They stood waiting.

For a time nothing happened. Then—

"Good God!" Commander Morrison exclaimed.

At the far end of the lab a slide cabinet wavered suddenly. It oozed, buckling and pitching. It lost its shape completely—a homogeneous jellylike mass perched on top of the table. Abruptly, it flowed down the side of the table on to the floor, wobbling as it went.

"Over there!"

A bunsen burner melted and flowed along beside it. All around the room objects were in motion. A great glass retort

folded up into itself and settled down into a blob. A rack of test tubes, a shelf of chemicals...

"Look out!" Hall cried, stepping back.

A huge bell jar dropped with a soggy splash in front of him. It was a single large cell, all right. He could dimly make out the nucleus, the cell wall, the hard vacuoles suspended in the cytoplasm.

Pipettes, tongs, a mortar, all were flowing now. Half the equipment in the room was in motion. They had imitated almost everything there was to imitate. For every microscope there was a mimic. For every tube and jar and bottle and flask...

One of the guards had his blaster out. Hall knocked it down. "Don't fire! Arsine is inflammable. Let's get out of here. We know what we wanted to know."

They pushed the laboratory door open quickly and made their way out into the corridor. Hall slammed the door behind them, bolting it tightly.

"Is it bad, then?" Commander Morrison asked.

"We haven't got a chance. The arsine disturbed them; enough of it might even kill them. But we haven't got that much arsine. And, if we could flood the planet, we wouldn't be able to use our blasters."

"Suppose we left the planet."

"We can't take the chance of carrying them back to the system."

"If we stay here we'll be absorbed, dissolved, one by one," the Commander protested.

"We could have arsine brought in. Or some other poison that might destroy them. But it would destroy most of the life on the planet along with them. There wouldn't be much left."

"Then we'll have to destroy all life forms! If there's no other way of doing it we've got to burn the planet clean. Even if there wouldn't be a thing left but a dead world."

They looked at each other.

"I'm going to call the System Monitor," Commander Morrison said. "I'm going to get the unit off here, out of danger—all that are left, at least. That poor girl by the lake..." She shuddered. "After everyone's out of here, we can work out the best way of cleaning up this planet."

"You'll run the risk of carrying one of them back to Terra?"

"Can they imitate us? Can they imitate living creatures? Higher life forms?"

Hall considered. "Apparently not. They seem to be limited to inorganic objects."

The Commander smiled grimly. "Then we'll go back without any inorganic material."

"But our clothes! They can imitate belts, gloves, boots—"

"We're not taking our clothes. We're going back without anything. And I mean without anything *at all*."

Hall's lips twitched. "I see." He pondered. "It might work. Can you persuade the personnel to—to leave all their things behind? Everything they own?"

"If it means their lives, I can *order* them to do it."

"Then it might be our one chance of getting away."

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The nearest cruiser large enough to remove the remaining members of the unit was two hours' distance away. It was moving Terraside again.

Commander Morrison looked up from the vidscreen. "They want to know what's wrong here."

"Let me talk." Hall seated himself before the screen. The heavy features and gold braid of a Terran cruiser captain regarded him. "This is Major Lawrence Hall, from the Research Division of this unit."

"Captain Daniel Davis." Captain Davis studied him without expression. "You're having some kind of trouble, Major?"

Hall licked his lips. "I'd rather not explain until we're aboard, if you don't mind."

"Why not?"

"Captain, you're going to think we're crazy enough as it is. We'll discuss everything fully once we're aboard." He hesitated. "We're going to board your ship naked."

The Captain raised an eyebrow. "Naked?"

"That's right."

"I see." Obviously he didn't.

"When will you get here?"

"In about two hours, I'd say."

"It's now 13:00 by our schedule. You'll be here by 15:00?"

"At approximately that time," the Captain agreed.

"We'll be waiting for you. Don't let any of your men out. Open one lock for us. We'll board without any equipment. Just ourselves, nothing else. As soon as we're aboard, remove the ship at once."

Stella Morrison leaned toward the screen. "Captain, would it

be possible—for your men to—?”

“We’ll land by robot control,” he assured her. “None of my men will be on deck. No one will see you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Not at all.” Captain Davis saluted. “We’ll see you in about two hours then, Commander.”

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“Let’s get everyone out onto the field,” Commander Morrison said. “They should remove their clothes here, I think, so there won’t be any objects on the field to come in contact with the ship.”

Hall looked at her face. “Isn’t it worth it to save our lives?”

Lieutenant Friendly bit his lips. “I won’t do it. I’ll stay here.”

“You have to come.”

“But, Major—”

Hall looked at his watch. “It’s 14:50. The ship will be here any minute. Get your clothes off and get out on the landing field.”

“Can’t I take anything *at all*?”

“Nothing. Not even your blaster. . . They’ll give us clothes inside the ship. Come on! Your life depends on this. Everyone else is doing it.”

Friendly tugged at his shirt reluctantly. “Well, I guess I’m acting silly.”

The vidscreen clicked. A robot voice announced shrilly: “Everyone out of the buildings at once! Everyone out of the buildings and on the field without delay! Everyone out of the buildings at once! Everyone—”

“So soon?” Hall ran to the window and lifted the metal blind. “I didn’t hear it land.”

Parked in the center of the landing field was a long gray cruiser, its hull pitted and dented from meteoric strikes. It lay motionless. There was no sign of life about it.

A crowd of naked people was already moving hesitantly across the field toward it, blinking in the bright sunlight.

“It’s here!” Hall started tearing off his shirt. “Let’s go!”

“Wait for me!”

“Then hurry.” Hall finished undressing. Both men hurried out into the corridor. Unclothed guards raced past them. They padded down the corridors through the long unit building, to the door. They ran downstairs, out onto the field. Warm sunlight beat down on them from the sky overhead. From all the unit

buildings, naked men and women were pouring silently toward the ship.

"What a sight!" an officer said. "We'll never be able to live it down."

"But you'll live, at least," another said.

"Lawrence!"

Hall half turned.

"Please don't look around. Keep on going. I'll walk behind you."

"How does it feel, Stella?" Hall asked.

"Unusual."

"Is it worth it?"

"I suppose so."

"Do you think anyone will believe us?"

"I doubt it," she said. "I'm beginning to wonder myself."

"Anyhow, we'll get back alive."

"I guess so."

Hall looked up at the ramp being lowered from the ship in front of them. The first people were already beginning to scamper up the metal incline, into the ship, through the circular lock.

"Lawrence—"

There was a peculiar tremor in the Commander's voice. "Lawrence, I'm—"

"You're what?"

"I'm scared."

"Scared!" He stopped. "Why?"

"I don't know," she quavered.

People pushed against them from all sides. "Forget it. Carry-over from your early childhood." He put his foot on the bottom of the ramp. "Up we go."

"I want to go back!" There was panic in her voice. "I—"

Hall laughed. "It's too late now, Stella." He mounted the ramp, holding on to the rail. Around him, on all sides, men and women were pushing forward, carrying them up. They came to the lock. "Here we are."

The man ahead of him disappeared.

Hall went inside after him, into the dark interior of the ship, into the silent blackness before him. The Commander followed.



At exactly 15:00 Captain Daniel Davis landed his ship in the center of the field. Relays slid the entrance lock open with a

bang. Davis and the other
officers of the ship sat waiting in the control cabin, around
the big control table.

“Well,” Captain Davis said, after a while. “Where are they?”

The officers became uneasy. “Maybe something’s wrong.”

“Maybe the whole damn thing’s a joke?”

They waited and waited.

But no one came.