

City at World's End

The City at World's End

by Edmond Hamilton

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Chapter I— cataclysm

Kenniston realized afterward that it was like death. You knew you were going to die someday, but you didn't believe it. He had known that there was danger of the long-dreaded atomic war beginning with a sneak punch, but he hadn't really believed it.

Not until that June morning when the missile came down on Middletown. And then there was no time for realization. You don't hear or see a thing that comes faster than sound. One moment, he was striding down Mill Street toward the plant, getting ready to speak to the policeman coming toward him. The next moment, the sky split open.

It split wide open, and above the whole town there was a burn and blaze of light so swift, so violent, that it seemed the air itself had burst into instantaneous flame. In that fraction of a second, as the sky flared and the ground heaved wildly under his feet, Kenniston knew that the surprise attack had come, and that the first of the long-feared super-atomic bombs had exploded overhead....

Shock, thought Kenniston, as his mouth crushed against the grimy sidewalk. The shock that keeps a dying man from feeling pain. He lay there, waiting for the ultimate destruction, and the first eye-blinding flare across the heavens faded and the shuddering world grew still. It was over, as quickly as that.

He ought to be dead. He thought it very probable that he was dying right now, which would explain the fading light and the ominous quiet. But in spite of that he raised his head, and then scrambled shakily to his feet, gasping over his own wild heartbeats, fighting an animal urge to run for the mere sake of running. He looked down Mill Street. He expected to see pulverized buildings, smoking craters, fire and steam and devastation. But what he saw was more stunning than that, and in a strange way, more awful.

He saw Middletown lying unchanged and peaceful in the sunlight.

The policeman he had been going to speak to was still there ahead of him. He was getting up slowly from his hands and knees, where the quake had thrown him. His mouth hung open and his cap had fallen off. His eyes were very wide and dazed and frightened. Beyond him was an old woman with a shawl over her

head. She, too, had been there before. She was clinging now to a wall, the sack of groceries she had carried split open around her feet, spilling onions and cans of soup across the walk. Cars and street-cars were still moving along the street in the distance, beginning erratically to jerk to a halt. Apart from these small things, nothing was different, nothing at all.

The policeman came up to Kenniston. He looked like a young, efficient officer. Or he would have, if his face had not gone so slack and his eyes so stunned. He asked hoarsely:

“What happened?”

Kenniston answered, and the words sounded queer and improbable as he said them. “We’ve been hit by a bomb— a super-atomic.”

The policeman stared at him. “Are you crazy?”

“Yes,” said Kenniston, “I think maybe I am. I think that’s the only explanation.”

His brain had begun to pound. The air felt suddenly cold and strange. The sunshine was duskiest and redder and did not warm him now. The woman in the shawl was crying. Presently, still weeping, she got painfully down upon her thick old knees and Kenniston thought she was going to pray, but instead she began to gather up her onions, fumbling with them as a child does, trying to fit them into the broken paper bag.

“Look,” said the policeman, “I’ve read stuff about those super-atomic bombs, in the papers. It said they were thousands of times more powerful than the atom-bombs they used to have. If one of them hit any place there wouldn’t be anything left of it.” His voice was getting stronger. He was convincing himself. “So no super-atomic bomb could have hit us. It couldn’t have been that.”

“You saw that terrific flash in the sky, didn’t you?” said Kenniston.

“Sure I did, but—” And then the policeman’s face cleared. “Say, it was a fizzle. That’s what it was. This super-atomic bomb they’ve been scaring the world with — it turned out to be just a fizzle.” He laughed noisily, in vast relief. “Isn’t that rich? They tell for years what terrible things it’s going to do, and then it just makes a big fizz and flash like a bad Fourth of July firecracker!”

It could be true, Kenniston thought with a wild surge of hope. It could be true.

And then he looked up and saw the Sun.

“It was maybe a bluff, all the time,” the policeman’s voice rattled on. “They maybe didn’t really have any super-atomic bomb at all.”

Kenniston, without lowering his gaze, spoke in a dry whisper. “They had them, all right. And they used one on us. And I think we’re dead and don’t know it yet. We don’t know yet that we’re only ghosts and not living on Earth any more.”

“Not on Earth?” said the policeman angrily. “Now, listen—”

And then his voice trailed away to silence as he followed Kenniston’s staring gaze and looked up at the Sun.

It wasn’t the Sun. Not the Sun they and all the generations of men had known as a golden, dazzling orb. They could look right at this Sun, without blinking. They could stare at it steadily, for it was no more than a very big, dull-glowing red ball with tiny flames writhing around its edges. It was higher in the sky now than it had been before. And the air was cold. “It’s in the wrong place,” said the policeman. “And it looks different.” He groped in half-forgotten high-school science for an explanation. “Refraction. Dust that that fizzle-bomb stirred up—”

Kenniston didn’t tell him. What was the use? What was the good of telling him what he, as a scientist, knew— that no conceivable refraction could make the Sun look like that. But he said, “Maybe you’re right.”

“Sure I’m right,” said the policeman, loudly. He didn’t look up at the sky and Sun, any more. He seemed to avoid looking at them.

Kenniston started on down Mill Street. He had been on his way to the Lab, when this happened. He kept on going now. He wanted to hear what Hubble and the others would say about this.

He laughed a little. “I am a ghost, going to talk with other ghosts about our sudden deaths.” Then he told himself fiercely, “Stop that! You’re a scientist. What good is your science if it cracks up in the face of an unexplained phenomenon?”

That, certainly, was an understatement. A super-atomic bomb went off over a quiet little Midwestern town of fifty thousand people, and it didn't change a thing except to put a new Sun into the sky. And you called that an unexplained phenomenon.

Kenniston walked on down the street. He walked fast, for the air was unseasonably cold. He didn't stop to talk to the bewildered-looking people he met. They were mostly men who had been on their way to work in Middletown's mills when it had happened. They stood now, discussing the sudden flash and shock. The word Kenniston heard most often was "earthquake." They didn't look too upset, these men. They looked excited and a little bit glad that something had happened to interrupt their drab daily routine. Some of them were staring up at that strange, dull-red Sun, but they seemed more perplexed than disturbed.

The air was cold and musty. And the red, dusky sunlight was queer. But that hadn't disturbed these men too much. It was, after all, not much stranger than the chill and the lurid light that often foreshadow a Midwestern thunderstorm.

Kenniston turned in at the gate of the smoke-grimed brick structure that bore the sign, "Industrial Research Laboratories." The watchman at the gate nodded to him unperturbedly as he let him through.

Neither the watchman nor any of Middletown's fifty thousand people, except a few city officials, knew that this supposed industrial laboratory actually housed one of the key nerve centers of America's atomic defense setup.

Clever, thought Kenniston. It had been clever of those in charge of dispersal to tuck this key atomic laboratory into a prosaic little Midwestern mill town.

"But not clever enough," he thought.

No, not quite clever enough. The unknown enemy had learned the secret, and had struck the first stunning blow of his surprise attack at the hidden nerve center of Middletown.

A super-atomic, to smash that nerve center before war even started. Only, the super-atomic had fizzled. Or had it? The Sun was a different Sun. And the air was strange and cold.

Crisci met Kenniston by the entrance of the big brick building. Crisci was the youngest of the staff, a tall, black-haired youngster— and because he was the youngest, he tried hard not to show emotion now.

“It looks like it’s beginning,” said Crisci, trying to smile. “Atomic Armageddon — the final fireworks.” Then he quit trying to smile. “Why didn’t it wipe us out, Kenniston? Why didn’t it?”

Kenniston asked him, “Don’t the Geigers show anything?”

“Nothing. Not a thing.”

That, Kenniston thought numbly, fitted the crazy improbability of it all. He asked, “Where’s Hubble?”

Crisci gestured vaguely. “Over there. He’s had us trying to call Washington, but the wires are all dead and even the radio hasn’t been able to get through yet.”

Kenniston walked across the cluttered plant yard. Hubble, his chief, stood looking up at the dusky sky and at the red dull Sun you could stare at without blinking. He was only fifty but he looked older at the moment, his graying hair disordered and his thin face tightly drawn.

“There isn’t any way yet to figure out where that missile came from,” Kenniston said.

Then he realized that Hubble’s thoughts weren’t on that, for the other only nodded abstractedly.

“Look at those stars, Kenniston.”

“Stars? Stars, in the daytime—?”

And then, looking up, Kenniston realized that you could see the stars now. You could see them as faint, glimmering points all across the strangely dusky sky, even near the dull Sun.

“They’re wrong,” said Hubble. “They’re very wrong.”

Kenniston asked, “What happened? Did their super-atomic really fizzle?”

Hubble lowered his gaze and blinked at him. “No,” he said softly. “It didn’t fizzle. It went off.”

“But Hubble, if that super-atomic went off, why—”

Hubble ignored the question. He went on into his own office in the Lab, and began to pull down reference volumes. To Kenniston’s surprise, he opened them to pages of astronomical diagrams. Then Hubble took a pencil and began to scrawl quick calculations on a pad.

Kenniston grabbed him by the shoulder. “For Christ’s sake, Hubble, this is no time for scientific theorizing! The town hasn’t been hit, but something big has happened, and—”

“Get the hell away from me,” said Hubble, without turning.

The sheer shock of hearing Hubble swear silenced Kenniston. Hubble went on with his figures, referring often to the books. The office was as silent as though nothing had happened at all. Finally, Hubble turned. His hand shook a little as he pointed to the figures on the pad.

“See those, Ken? They’re proof— proof of something that cannot be. What does a scientist do when he faces that kind of a situation?”

He could see the sick shock and fear in Hubble’s gray face, and it fed his own fear. But before he could speak, Crisci came in.

He said, “We haven’t been able to contact Washington yet. And we can’t understand— our calls go completely unanswered, and not one station outside Middletown seems to be broadcasting.”

Hubble stared at his pad. “It all fits in. Yes, it all fits in.”

“What do you make of it, Doctor?” asked Crisci anxiously. “That bomb went off over Middletown, even though it didn’t hurt us. Yet it’s as though all the world outside Middletown has been silenced!”

Kenniston, cold from what he had seen in Hubble’s face, waited for the senior scientist to tell them what he knew or thought. But the phone rang suddenly with strident loudness.

It was the intercom from the watchman at the gate. Hubble picked it up. After a minute he said, "Yes, let him come in." He hung up. "It's Johnson. You know, the electrician who did some installations for us. He lives out on the edge of town. He told the watchman that was why he had to see me— because he lives on the edge of town."

Johnson, when he came, was a man in the grip of a fear greater than Kenniston had even begun to imagine, and he was almost beyond talking. "I thought you might know," he said to Hubble. "It seems like somebody's got to tell me what's happened, or I'll lose my mind. I've got a cornfield, Mr. Hubble. It's a long field, and then there's a fence row, and my neighbor's barn beyond it."

He began to tremble, and Hubble said, "What about your cornfield?"

"Part of it's gone," said Johnson, "and the fence row, and the barn... Mr. Hubble, they're all gone, everything..."

"Blast effect," said Hubble gently. "A bomb hit here a little while ago, you see."

"No," said Johnson. "I was in London last war, I know what blast can do. This isn't destruction. It's..." He sought for a word, and could not find it. "I thought you might know what it is."

Kenniston's chill premonition, the shapeless growing terror in him, became too evil to be borne. He said, "I'm going out and take a look."

Hubble glanced at him and then nodded, and rose to his feet, slowly, as though he did not want to go but was forcing himself. He said, "We can see everything from the water tower, I think— that's the highest point in town. You keep trying to get through, Crisci."

Kenniston walked with him out of the Lab grounds, and across Mill Street and the cluttered railroad tracks to the huge, stilt-legged water tower of Middletown. The air had grown colder. The red sunshine had no warmth in it, and when Kenniston took hold of the iron rungs of the ladder to begin the climb, they were like bars of ice. He followed Hubble upward, keeping his eyes fixed on the retreating soles of Hubble's shoes. It was a long climb. They had to stop to rest once. The wind blew harder the higher they got, and it had a dry musty taint in it that made Kenniston think of the air that blows from deep rock tombs with dust of ages in them.

They came out at last on the railed platform around the big, high tank. Kenniston looked down on the town. He saw knots of people gathered on the corners, and the tops of cars, a few of them moving slowly but most of them stopped and jamming the streets. There was a curious sort of silence.

Hubble did not bother to look at the town, except for a first brief glance that took it all in, the circumference of Middletown with all its buildings standing just as they always had, with the iron Civil War soldier still stiffly mounting guard on the Square, and the smoke still rising steadily from the stacks of the mills. Then he looked outward. He did not speak, and presently Kenniston's eyes were drawn also to look beyond the town.

He looked for a long time before it began to penetrate. His retinas relayed the image again and again, but the brain recoiled from its task of making sense out of that image, that unbelievable, impossible... No. It must be dust, or refraction, or an illusion created by the dusky red sunlight, anything but truth. There could not, by any laws known to Creation, be a truth like this one!

The whole countryside around Middletown was gone. The fields, the green, flat fields of the Middle West, and the river, and the streams, and the old scattered farms— they were all gone, and it was a completely different and utterly alien landscape that now stretched outside the town.

Rolling, ocher-yellow plains, sad and empty, lifted toward a ridge of broken hills that had never been there before. The wind blew over that barren, lifeless world, stirring the ocher weeds, lifting heavy little clouds of dust and dropping them back again to earth. The Sun peered down like a great dull eye with lashes of writhing fire, and the glimmering stars swung solemn in the sky, and all of them, the Earth, the stars, the Sun, had a look of death about them, a stillness and a waiting, a remoteness that had nothing to do with men or with anything that lived.

Kenniston gripped the rail tightly, feeling all reality crumbling away beneath him, searching frantically for an explanation, for any rational explanation, of that impossible scene.

“The bomb— did it somehow blast the countryside out there, instead of Middletown?”

“Would it take away a river, and bring instead those hills and that yellow scrub?”

said Hubble. “Would any bomb-blast do that?”

“But for God’s sake, then what—”

“It hit us, Kenniston. It went off right over Middletown, and it did something...” He faltered, and then said, “Nobody really knew what a super-atomic bomb would do. There were logical theories and assumptions about it, but nobody really knew anything except that the most violent concentrated force in history would be suddenly released. Well, it was released, over Middletown. And it was violent. So violent that...”

He stopped, again, as though he could not quite muster up the courage to voice the certainty that was in him. He gestured at the dusky sky.

“That’s our Sun, our own Sun— but it’s old now, very old. And that Earth we see out there is old too, barren and eroded and dying. And the stars.... You looked at the stars, Ken, but you didn’t see them. They’re different, the constellations distorted by the motions of the stars, as only millions of years could distort them.”

Kenniston whispered, “Millions of years? Then you think that the bomb...” He stopped, and he knew now how Hubble had felt. How did you say a thing that had never been said before?

“Yes, the bomb,” said Hubble. “A force, a violence, greater than any ever known before, too great to be confined by the ordinary boundaries of matter, too great to waste its strength on petty physical destruction. Instead of shattering buildings, it shattered space and time.”

Kenniston’s denial was a hoarse cry. “Hubble, no! That’s madness! Time is absolute—”

Hubble said, “You know it isn’t. You know from Einstein’s work that there’s no such thing as time by itself, that instead there is a space-time continuum. And that continuum is curved, and a great enough force could hurl matter from one part of the curve to another.”

He raised a shaking hand toward the deathly, alien landscape outside the town.

“And the released force of the first super-atomic bomb did it. It blew this town

into another part of the space-time curve, into another age millions of years in the future, into this dying, future Earth!”

Chapter 2— the incredible

The rest of the staff was waiting for them when they came back into the Lab grounds. A dozen men, ranging in age from Crisci to old Beitz, standing shivering in the chill red sunlight in front of the building. Johnson was with them, waiting for his answer. Hubble looked at him, and at the others. He said, “I think we’d better go inside.”

They did not ask the questions that were clamoring inside them. Silently, with the jerky awkward movements of men strung so taut that their reflex centers no longer function smoothly, they followed Hubble through the doorway. Kenniston went with them, but not all the way. He turned aside, toward his own office, and said, “I’ve got to find out if Carol is all right.”

Hubble said sharply. “Don’t tell her, Ken. Not yet.”

“No,” said Kenniston. “No, I won’t.”

He went into the small room and closed the door. The telephone was on his desk, and he reached for it, and then he drew his hand away. The fear had altered now into a kind of numbness, as though it were too large to be contained within a human body and had ebbed away, carrying with it all the substances of strength and will as water carries sand. He looked at the black, familiar instrument and thought how improbable it was that there should still be telephones, and fat books beside them with quantities of names and numbers belonging to people who had lived once in villages and nearby towns, but who were not there any more, not since— how long? An hour or so, if you figured it one way. If you figured it another...

He sat down in the chair behind the desk. He had done a lot of hard work sitting in that chair, and now all that work had ceased to matter. Quite a lot of things had ceased to matter. Plans, and ideas, and where you were going to go on your honeymoon, and exactly where you wanted to live, and in what kind of a house. Florida and California and New York were words as meaningless as “yesterday” and “tomorrow.” They were gone, the times and the places, and there wasn’t anything left out of them but Carol herself, and maybe even Carol wasn’t left, maybe she’d been out with her aunt for a little drive in the country, and if she wasn’t in Middletown when it happened she’s gone, gone, gone...

He took the phone in both hands and said a number over and over into it. The operator was quite patient with him. Everybody in Middletown seemed to be calling someone else, and over the roar and click of the exchange and the ghostly confusion of voices he heard the pounding of his own blood in his ears and he thought that he did not have any right to want Carol to be there, and he ought to be praying that she had gone somewhere, because why would he want anybody he loved to have to face what was ahead of them. And what was ahead of them? How could you guess which one, out of all the shadowy formless horrors that might be...

“Ken?” said a voice in his ear. “Ken, is that you? Hello!”

“Carol,” he said. The room turned misty around him and there was nothing anywhere but that voice on the line.

“I’ve been trying and trying to get you, Ken! What on earth happened? The whole town is excited—I saw a terrible flash of lightning, but there wasn’t any storm, and then that quake... Are you all right?”

“Sure, I’m fine...” She wasn’t really frightened yet. Anxious, upset, but not frightened. A flash of lightning, and a quake. Alarming yes, but not terrifying, not the end of the world... He caught himself up, hard. He said, “I don’t know yet what it was.”

“Can you find out? Somebody must know.” She did not guess, of course, that Kenniston was an atomic physicist. He had not been allowed to tell that to anyone, not even his fiancée. To her, he was merely a research technician in an industrial laboratory, vaguely involved with test tubes and things. She had never questioned him very closely about his work, apparently content to leave all that up to him, and he had been grateful because it had spared him the necessity of lying to her. Now he was even more grateful, because she would not dream that he might have special information. That way, he could spare her a little longer, get himself in hand before he told her. “I’ll do my best,” he told her. “But until we’re sure, I wish you and your aunt would stay in the house, off the street. No, I don’t think your bridge-luncheon will come off anyway. And you can’t tell what people will do when they’re frightened. Promise? Yes—yes, I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

He hung up, and as soon as that contact with Carol was broken, reality slipped

away from him again. He looked around the office, and it became suddenly rather horrible, because it had no longer any meaning. He had an urgent wish to get out of it, yet when he rose he stood for some while with his hands on the edge of the desk, going over Hubble's words in his mind, remembering how the Sun had looked, and the stars, and the sad, alien Earth, knowing that it was all impossible but unable to deny it. The long hall of time, and a shattering force... He wanted desperately to run away, but there was no place to run to. Presently he went down the corridor to Hubble's office.

They were all there, the twelve men of the staff, and Johnson. Johnson had gone by himself into a corner. He had seen what lay out there beyond the town, and the others had not. He was trying to understand it, to understand the fact and the explanation of it he had just heard. It was not a pleasant thing, to watch him try. Kenniston glanced at the others. He had worked closely with these men. He had thought he knew them all so well, having seen them under stress, in the moments when their work succeeded and the others when it did not. Now he realized that they were all strangers, to him and to each other, alone and wary with their personal fears.

Old Beitz was saying, almost truculently, "Even if it were true, you can't say exactly how long a time has passed. Not just from the stars."

Hubble said, "I'm not an astronomer, but anyone can figure it from the tables of known star-motions, and the change in the constellations. Not exactly, no. But as close as will ever matter."

"But if the continuum were actually shattered, if this town has actually jumped millions of years..." Beitz' voice trailed off. His mouth began to twitch and he seemed suddenly bewildered by what he was saying, and he, and all of them, stood looking at Hubble in a haunted silence.

Hubble shook his head. "You won't really believe, until you see for yourselves. I don't blame you. But in the meantime, you'll have to accept my statement as a working hypothesis."

Morrow cleared his throat and asked, "What about the people out there—the town? Are you going to tell them?"

"They'll have to know at least part of it," Hubble said. "It'll get colder, very much colder, by night, and they'll have to be prepared for it. But there must not

be any panic. The Mayor and the Chief of Police are on their way here now, and we'll work it out with them."

"Do they know yet, themselves?" asked Kenniston, and Hubble said, "No."

Johnson moved abruptly. He came up to Hubble and said, "I don't get all this scientific talk about space and time. What I want to know is— is my boy safe?"

Hubble stared at him. "Your boy?"

"He went out to Martinsen's farm early, to borrow a cultivator. It's two miles out the north road. What about him, Mr. Hubble— is he safe?"

That was the secret agony that had been riding him, the one he had not voiced. Hubble said gently. "I would say that you don't have to worry about him at all, Johnson."

Johnson nodded, but still looked worried. He said, "Thanks, Mr. Hubble. I'd better go back now. I left my wife in hysterics."

A minute or two after he left, Kenniston heard a siren scream outside. It swung into the Lab yard and stopped. "That," said Hubble, "would be the Mayor."

A small and infirm reed to lean upon, thought Kenniston, at a time like this. There was nothing particularly wrong about Mayor Garris. He was no more bumbling, inefficient, or venal than the average mayor of any average small city. He liked banquets and oratory, he worried about the right necktie, and he was said to be a good husband and father. But Kenniston could not, somehow, picture Bertram Garris shepherding his people safely across the end of the world. He thought so even less when Garris came in, his bones well padded with the plump pink flesh of good living, his face the perfect pattern of the successful little man who is pleased with the world and his place in it. Just now he was considerably puzzled and upset, but also rather elated at the prospect of something important going on. Kimer, the Chief of Police, was another matter. He was a large angular man with a face that had seen many grimy things and had learned from them a hard kind of wisdom. Not a brilliant man, Kenniston thought, but one who could get things done. And he was worried, far more worried than the Mayor. Garris turned immediately to Hubble. It was obvious that he had a great respect for him and was proud to be on an equal footing with such an important person as one of the nation's top atomic scientists. "Is there any news yet, Doctor Hubble? We

haven't been able to get a word from outside, and the wildest rumors are going around. I was afraid at first that you might have had an explosion here in the laboratory, but..."

Kimer interrupted him. "Talk is going around that an atomic bomb hit here, Doctor Hubble. Some of the people are getting scared. If enough of them get to believe it, we'll have a panic on our hands. I've got our officers on the streets soothing 'em down, but I'd like to have a straight story they'll believe."

"Atomic bomb!" said Mayor Garris. "Preposterous. We're all alive, and there's been no damage. Doctor Hubble will tell you that atomic bombs..."

For the second time he was cut short. Hubble broke in sharply. "We're not dealing with an ordinary bomb. And the rumors are true, as far as they go." He paused, and went on more slowly, making every word distinct, "A super-atomic was exploded an hour ago, for the first time in history, right here."

He let that sink in. It was a lingering and painful process, and while it was going on Kenniston looked away, up through the window at the dusky sky and the sullen red Sun, and felt the knot in his stomach tighten. We were warned, he thought. We were all warned for years that we were playing with forces too big for us.

"It didn't destroy us," Hubble was saying. "We're lucky that way. But it did have certain— effects."

"I don't understand," said the Mayor piteously. "I simply don't— Certain effects? What?"

Hubble told him, with quiet bluntness.

The Mayor and the Chief of Police of Middletown, normal men of a normal city, adjusted to life in a normal world, listening to the incredible. Listening, trying to comprehend— trying, and failing, and rejecting it utterly.

"That's insane," said Garris angrily. "Middletown thrown into the future? Why, the very sound of it... What are you trying to do, Doctor Hubble?"

He said a great deal more than that. So did Kimer. But Hubble wore them down. Quietly, implacably, he pointed to the alien landscape around the town, the

deepening cold, the red, aged Sun, the ceasing of all wire and radio communication from outside. He explained, sketchily, the nature of time and space, and how they might be shattered. His scientific points they could not understand. But those they took on faith, the faith which the people of the Twentieth Century had come to have in the interpreters of the complex sciences they themselves were unable to comprehend. The physical facts they understood well enough. Too well, once they were forced to it.

It got home at last. Mayor Garris sank down into a chair, and his face was no longer pink, and the flesh sagged on it. His voice was no more than a whimper when finally he asked, “What are we going to do?”

Hubble had an answer ready, to a part of that question, at least. “We can’t afford a panic. The people of Middletown will have to learn the truth slowly. That means that none of them must go outside the town yet— or they’d learn at once. I’d suggest you announce the area outside town is possibly radioactive contaminated, and forbid anyone to leave.”

Police Chief Kimer grasped with pathetic eagerness at the necessity of coping with a problem he could comprehend. “I can put men and barricades at all the street-ends, to see to that.”

“And our local National Guard company is assembling now at the Armory,” put in Mayor Garris. His voice was shaky, his eyes still stunned.

Hubble asked, “What about the city’s utilities?”

“Everything seems to be working— power, gas and water,” the Mayor answered.

They would, Kenniston thought. Middletown’s coal-steam electric generation plant, and its big watertower, and its artificial gas plant, had all come through time with them.

“They, and all food and fuel, must be rationed,” Hubble was saying. “Proclaim it as an emergency measure.”

Mayor Garris seemed to feel a little better at being told what to do. “Yes. We’ll do that at once.” Then he asked, timidly, “Isn’t there any way of getting in touch with the rest of the country?”

“The rest of the country,” Hubble reminded him, “is some millions of years in the dead past. You’ll have to keep remembering that.”

“Yes— of course. I keep forgetting,” said the Mayor. He shivered, and then took refuge in the task set him. “We’ll get busy at once.”

When the car had borne the two away, Hubble looked haggardly at his silent colleagues.

“They’ll talk, of course. But if the news spreads slowly, it won’t be so bad. It’ll give us a chance to find out a few things first.”

Crisci began to laugh, a little shrilly. “If it’s true, this is a side-splitting joke! This whole town flung into the end of the world and not even knowing it yet! All these fifty thousand people, not guessing yet that their Cousin Agnes in Indianapolis has been dead and dust for millions of years!”

“And they mustn’t guess,” Hubble said. “Not yet. Not until we know what we face in this future Earth.”

He went on, thinking aloud. “We need to see what’s out there, outside the town, before we can plan anything. Kenniston, will you get a jeep and bring it back here? Bring spare gasoline, and some warm clothing, too. We’ll need it out there. And Ken— bring two guns.”

Chapter 3— dying planet

Kenniston walked back down Mill Street, toward the garage where he had left his car a billion years ago when such things were still important. He knew they kept a jeep there for road service, and he knew also that they would not have any need for it now because there were no longer any roads. He wished he had a topcoat. At the rate the air was chilling off it would be below zero by nightfall.

Quite literally, he began to feel as though he were walking in a nightmare. Above him was an alien sky, and the red light of it lay strangely on the familiar walls of brick. But the walls themselves were not altered. That, he decided, was the really shocking thing— the drab everyday appearance of the town. When time and space gape open for the first time in history, and you go through into the end of the world, you expect everything to be different. Middletown did not look different, except for that eerie light.

There were a lot of people on Mill Street, but then, there always were a good many. It was the street of dingy factories and small plants that connected Middletown with the shabby South Side, and there were always buses, cars, pedestrians on it. Perhaps the bumbling traffic was a bit more disorganized than usual, and the groups of pedestrians tended to clot together and chatter more excitedly, but that was all.

Kenniston knew a number of these people, by now, but he did not stop to talk to them. He was somehow unwilling to meet their eyes. He felt guilty, to know the truth where they did not. What if he should tell them, what would they do? It was a terrible temptation, to rid himself of his secret. His tongue ached to cry it out.

There were people like old Mike Witter, the fat red-faced watchman who sat all day in his little shack at the railroad crossing, with his small rat-terrier curled up by his feet. The terrier was crouching now, shivering, her eyes bright and moist with fear, as though she guessed what the humans did not, but old Mike was as placid as ever.

“Cold, for June!” he hailed Kenniston. “Coldest I ever saw. I’m going to build a fire. Never saw such a freak storm!”

There was the knot of tube-mill workers at the next corner, in front of Joe's Lunch. They were arguing, and two or three of them that Kenniston knew turned toward him.

"Hey, there's Mr. Kenniston, one of the guys at the Industrial Lab. Maybe he'd know!" Their puzzled faces, as they asked, "Has a war started? Have you guys heard anything?"

Before he could answer, one asserted loudly, "Sure it's a war. Didn't someone say an atomic bomb went off overhead and missed fire? Didn't you see the flash?"

"Hell, that was only a big lightning flash."

"Are you nuts? It nearly blinded me."

Kenniston evaded them. "Sorry, boys— I don't know much more than you. There'll be some announcement soon."

As he went on, a bewildered voice enquired, "But if a war's started, who's the enemy?"

The enemy, Kenniston thought bitterly, is a country that perished and was dust— how many millions of years ago?

There were loafers on the Mill Street bridge, staring down at the muddy bed of the river and trying to explain the sudden vanishing of its water. In the beer-parlors that cheered the grimy street, there were more men than was normal for this hour. Kenniston could hear them as he passed, their voices high, excited, a little quarrelsome, but with no edge of terror.

A woman called across the street from an upstairs flat window, to the other housewife who was sweeping the opposite front porch. "I'm missing every one of my radio stories! The radio won't get anything but the Middletown station today!"

Kenniston was glad when he got to Bud's Garage. Bud Martin, a tall thin young man with a smudge of grease on his lip, was reassembling a carburetor with energetic efficiency and criticizing his harried young helper at the same time.

“Haven’t got to your car yet, Mr. Kenniston,” he protested. “I said around five, remember?”

Kenniston shook his head and told Martin what he wanted. Martin shrugged. “Sure, you can hire the jeep. I’m too busy to answer road calls today, anyway.” He did not seem particularly interested in what Kenniston intended to do with the jeep. The carburetor resisted and he swore at it.

A man in a floury baker’s apron stuck his head into the garage. “Hey, Bud, hear the news? The mills just shut down— all of them.”

“Ah, nuts,” said Martin. “I been hearing news all morning. Guys running in and out with the damndest stories. I’m too busy to listen to ‘em.”

Kenniston thought that probably that was the answer to the relative calm in Middletown. The men, particularly, had been too busy. The strong habit patterns of work, a job at hand to be done, had held them steady so far.

He sighed. “Bud,” he said, “I’m afraid this story is true.”

Martin looked at him sharply and then groaned. “Oh, Lord, another recession! This’ll ruin business— and me with the garage only half paid for!”

What was the use of telling him, Kenniston thought, that the mills had been hastily shut down to conserve precious fuel, and that they would never open again.

He filled spare gasoline cans, stacked them in the back of the jeep, and drove northward.

Topcoats were appearing on Main Street now. There were knots of people on street corners, and people waiting for buses were looking up curiously at the red Sun and dusky sky. But the stores were open, housewives carried bulging shopping-bags, kids went by on bicycles. It wasn’t too changed, yet. Not yet.

Nor was quiet Walters Avenue, where he had his rooms, though the rows of maples were an odd color in the reddish light. Kenniston was glad his landlady was out, for he didn’t think he could face many more puzzled questions right now.

He loaded his hunting kit— a .30-30 rifle and a 16-gauge repeating shotgun with boxes of shells— into the jeep. He put on a mackinaw, brought a leather coat for Hubble, and remembered gloves. Then, before re-entering the jeep, he ran down the street half a block to Carol Lane's house.

Her aunt met him at the door. Mrs. Adams was stout, pink and worried.

“John, I'm so glad you came! Maybe you can tell me what to do. Should I cover my flowers?” She babbled on anxiously. “It seems so silly, on a June day. But it's so much colder. And the petunias and bleeding-heart are so easily frost-bitten. And the roses—”

“I'd cover them, Mrs. Adams,” he told her. “The prediction is that it will be even colder.”

She threw up her hands. “The weather, these days! It never used to be like this.” And she hurried away to secure covering for the flowers, the flowers that had but hours to live. It hit Kenniston with another of those sickening little shocks of realization. No more roses on Earth, after today. No more roses, ever again.

“Ken— did you find out what happened?” It was Carol's voice behind him, and he knew, even before he turned to face her, that he could not evade with her as he had with the others. She didn't know about science, and such things as time warps and shattered continuums had never entered her head. But she knew him, and she gave him no chance to temporize.

“Are they true, the stories about an atom bomb going off over Middletown?”

She had had time, since he called her, to become really alarmed. She had dark hair and dark eyes. She was slim in a sturdy fashion, and her ankles were nice, and her mouth was firm and sweet. She liked Tennyson and children and small dogs, and her ways were the ways of pleasant houses and fragrant kitchens, of quiet talk and laughter. It seemed a dreadful thing to Kenniston that she should be standing in a dying garden asking questions about atomic bombs.

“Yes,” he said. “They're true.” He watched the color drain out of her face, and he went on hastily, “Nobody was killed. There are no radiation effects in the city, nothing at all to be afraid of.”

“There is something. I can see it in your face.”

“Well, there are things we’re not sure of yet. Hubble and I are going to investigate them now.” He caught her hands. “I haven’t time to talk, but...”

“Ken,” she said. “Why you? What would you know about such terrible things?”

He saw it coming, now, the necessity he had always a little dreaded and had hoped might be forever postponed, the time when Carol had to learn about his work. With what eyes would she look on him when she knew? He was not sure, not sure at all. He was glad he could evade a little longer.

He smiled. “I’ll tell you all about it when I get back. Stay in the house, Carol, promise me. Then I won’t worry.”

“All right,” she said slowly. And then, sharply, “Ken...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Be careful.”

He kissed her, and ran back toward the jeep. Thank God she wasn’t the hysterical type. That would have been the last straw, right now.

He climbed in and drove to the Lab, wondering all the way what this was going to do to Carol and himself, whether they would both be alive tomorrow or the next day, and if so, what kind of a life it would be. Grim, cold thoughts, and bitter with regret. He had had it all so nicely planned, before this nightmare happened. The loneliness would all be over, and the rootless drifting from place to place. He would have a home again, which he had not had since his parents died, and as much peace as a man was allowed in the modern world. He would have the normal things a man needed to keep him steady and give meaning to his years. And now...

Hubble was waiting for him outside the Lab, holding a Geiger counter and a clutter of other instruments. He placed them carefully in the jeep, then put on the leather coat and climbed into the seat beside Kenniston.

“All right, Ken— let’s go out the south end of town. From the hills we glimpsed that way, we can see more of the lay of the land.”

They found a barricade, and police on guard, at the southern edge of town. There

they were delayed until the Mayor phoned through a hasty authorization for Hubble and Kenniston to go out “for inspection of the contaminated region.”

The jeep rolled down a concrete road between green little suburban farms, for less than a mile. Then the road and the green farmland suddenly ended.

From this sharp demarcation, rolling ocher plains ran away endlessly to east and west. Not a tree, not a speck of green broke the monotony. Only the ocher-yellow scrub, and the dust, and the wind.

Hubble, studying his instruments, said, “Nothing. Not a thing. Keep going.”

Ahead of them the low hills rose, gaunt and naked, and above was the vast bowl of the sky, a cold darkness clamped down upon the horizons. Dim Sun, dim stars, and under them no sound but the cheerless whimper of the wind.

Its motor rattling and roaring, its body lurching over the unevenness of the ocher plain, the jeep bore them out into the silence of the dead Earth.

Chapter 4— dead city

Kenniston concentrated on the wheel, gripping it until his hands ached. He stared fixedly at the ground ahead, noting every rock, guiding the jeep carefully across shallow gullies, driving as though there were nothing in the universe but the mechanical act. He envied the jeep its ability to chug unemotionally over the end of the world. It struck him as so amusing that he laughed a little.

Hubble's fingers clamped his shoulder, hard enough to hurt even through the heavy coat. "Don't, Ken."

Kenniston turned his head. He saw that Hubble's face was drawn and gray, and that his eyes were almost pleading.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Hubble nodded. "I know. I'm having a hard enough time hanging on myself."

They went on across the empty plain, toward the low skeletal hills that were like bony knees thrust up from the ochre dust. Soon the jeep was climbing an easy slope, its motor clattering and roaring. Somehow, the familiar motor sound only served to emphasize the fact that around them lay the silence and red dusk of world's end. Kenniston wished that Hubble would say something, anything. But the older man did not, and Kenniston's own tongue was frozen. He was lost in a nightmare, and there was nothing to do but drive.

A sudden whistling scream came piping down the slope at them. Both men started violently. With hands slippery with cold sweat, Kenniston swung the jeep a little and saw a brown, furry shape about the size of a small horse bolting over the ridge, going with long, awkward bounds.

Kenniston slowed down until he had stopped shaking. Hubble said in a low whisper, "Then there is still animal life on Earth— of a sort. And look there—" He pointed to a deep little pit in the dusty ground with a ridge of freshly dark new soil around it. "The thing was digging there. Probably for water. The surface is arid, so it must dig to drink."

They stopped the jeep, and examined the pit and the scrub around it. There were

marks of teeth on the bark of the low shrubs.

“Rodentia teeth,” said Hubble. “Enormously larger than anything like them occurring in our time, but still recognizable.” They looked at each other, standing in the chill red light. Then Hubble turned back to the jeep. “We’ll go on.”

They went on, up the ridge. They saw two more of the pits made by the diggers, but these were old and crumbling. The blind red eye of the Sun watched them coldly. Kenniston thought of a frightened, furry thing loping on and on over the other desolation that once long ago had been the home of men.

They came up onto the low ridge, and he stopped the jeep so they could look out across the red-lit plain beyond.

Hubble stared southwest, and then his hands began to tremble a little.

“Ken, do you see it?” Kenniston looked that way, and saw.

The stunning shock of relief and joy! The wild gladness at finding that you and your people are not alone on a lifeless Earth!

Out there on the barren plain stood a city. A city of white buildings, completely enclosed and roofed and bounded by the great shimmering bubble of a transparent dome.

They looked and looked, savoring the exquisite delight of relief. They could see no movement in that domed city at this distance, but just to see it was enough.

Then, slowly, Hubble said, “There are no roads. No roads across the plain.”

“Perhaps they don’t need roads. Perhaps they fly.” Instinctively both men craned their necks to examine the bleak heavens, but there was nothing there but the wind and the stars and the dim Sun with its Medusa crown of flames.

“There aren’t any lights, either,” said Hubble.

“It’s daytime,” said Kenniston. “They wouldn’t need lights. They’d be used to this dusk. They’ve had it a long time.”

A sudden nervousness possessed him. He could barely perform the accustomed motions of starting the jeep again, grating the gears horribly, letting in the clutch with a lurching jerk.

“Take it easy,” said Hubble. “If they’re there, there’s no hurry. If they’re not...” His voice was not quite steady. After a moment he finished, “There’s no hurry then, either.”

Words. Nothing but words. It seemed to Kenniston that he could not bear the waiting. The plain stretched endlessly before him. The jeep seemed to crawl. Rocks and pits and gullies moved themselves maliciously into its path. The city mocked, and came no nearer.

Then, all at once, the domed city was full before them. It loomed in the sky like a glassy mountain out of fairy tale, for from this angle its curved surface reflected the sunlight.

Here, at last, they struck a smooth, broad road. It went straight toward a high, arched portal in the glassy wall of the city. The portal was open.

“If they domed this city to keep it warm, why should the door be open?” Hubble said.

Kenniston had no answer for that. No answer, except the one that his mind refused to accept.

They drove through the portal, were beneath the city dome. And after the emptiness of the plain, the weight of this city and its mighty shield was a crushing thing.

And it was warmer here beneath the dome. Not really warm, but the air here lacked the freezing chill of the outside.

They went down a broad avenue, going slowly now, timidly, shaken by the beating of their own hearts. And the noise of the motor was very loud in the stillness, echoed and re-echoed from many facets of stone— blasphemously loud, against the silence. Dust blew heavily along the pavement, hung dun-colored veils across the open places where boulevards met. It lay in ruffled drifts in the sheltered spots, in doorways and arches and the corners of window ledges.

The buildings were tall and massive, infinitely more beautiful and simple in line than anything Kenniston had ever imagined. A city of grace and symmetry and dignity, made lovely with the soft tints and textures of plastics, the clean strength of metal and stone.

A million windows looked down upon the jeep and the two men from another time. A million eyes dimmed with cataracts of dust, empty, blind. Some were open, some shut, but none saw.

The chill wind from the portal whispered in and out of sagging doorways, prowling up and down the streets, wandering restlessly across the wide parks that were no longer green and bright with flowers, but only wastes of scrub and drifting dust. Nowhere was there anything but the little wind that stirred. Yet Kenniston drove on. It seemed too terrible a thing to accept, that this great domed city was only a shell, an abandoned corpse, and that Middletown was alone on the face of the dying Earth.

He drove on shouting, crying out, sounding the horn in a sort of frenzy, both of them straining their eyes into the shadowy streets. Surely, somewhere in this place that men had built, there must be a human face, a human voice! Surely, in all these countless empty rooms and halls, there was space enough for life! But there was no life.

Kenniston drove more and more slowly. He ceased to sound the horn and call out. Presently he ceased even to look. He allowed the jeep to roll to a halt in a great central plaza. He cut the motor, and the silence descended upon him and Hubble like an avalanche.

He bowed his head in his hands and sat that way for a long time. He heard Hubble's voice saying, "They're all dead and gone."

Kenniston raised his head. "Yes. Dead and gone, all of them, long ago." He looked around the beautiful buildings. "You know what that means, Hubble. It means that Earth won't support human life any more. For even in this domed city they couldn't live."

"But why couldn't they?" Hubble said. He pointed to a wide space of low, flat, open tanks that covered acres of the city nearby. "Those were hydroponic tanks, I think. They could raise food in them."

“If they had water. Perhaps that’s what ran out on them.” Hubble shook his head. “Those ratlike digging animals we saw could find water. Men could find it, too. I’m going to see.” He got out of the jeep and walked toward the dusty tanks nearby. Kenniston dully watched him.

But presently he too climbed out, and began looking into the buildings around the plaza. He could see little but lofty, shadowy rooms illuminated only by the sad light that filtered through dusty windows. In some of the rooms was heavy furniture of metal, massive yet graceful. In others, nothing but the quiet dust.

A great sadness and futility came upon Kenniston as he went slowly around the silent streets. What did it matter, after all, that a town lost out of its time was facing death? Here a race had died, and the face of the Earth was barren wilderness. Kenniston was roused from his numbness by Hubble’s voice. “There’s still water there, Ken— big reservoirs of it under those tanks. So that isn’t what ended them. It was something else.”

“What difference does it make now what it was?” Kenniston said heavily.

“It makes a difference,” Hubble said. “I’ve been thinking— But there isn’t time to talk now. The night and cold are coming.”

With a start, Kenniston realized that the Sun was sinking in the west, and that the shadow of the mighty buildings lay black upon the streets of the city. He shivered a little, and led the way back to the jeep. Again, its clattering roar profaned the deathly silence as they drove back to and through the portal.

“We have to get back,” Hubble was saying. “They don’t know yet in Middletown what they’re facing.”

“If we tell them of this place,” Kenniston said, “if they learn that there are no more people, that they’re maybe all alone on Earth, they’ll go mad with panic.”

The Sun was very low, a splotch of crimson that bulked huge in the western sky as the jeep whined and lurched toward the ridge. The stars were brighter, the unfamiliar stars that had done with man. The cold became more piercing by the minute, as the dusk deepened.

A horror of the dying planet’s gathering night gripped both men. They uttered exclamations of shaken relief when the jeep finally topped the ridge.

For there ahead, incongruous on this nighted elder Earth, gleamed the familiar street lights of Middletown. The bright axes of Main Street and Mill Street, the fainter gridiron of the residential sections, the red neon beer signs of South Street — all shining out on the icy night of a dead world.

“I forgot about anti-freeze in the jeep’s radiator,” Kenniston said, inconsequentially.

It was that cold, now. The wind had the edge of a razor of ice, and even in their heavy coats they couldn’t stop shivering.

Hubble nodded. “People have to be warned about things like that. They don’t know yet how cold it will be tonight.”

Kenniston said hopelessly, “But after tonight— when the fuel and food are gone, what then? Is there any use struggling?”

“Why, no, if you look at it that way, there’s no use,” Hubble said. “Stop the jeep, and we’ll lie down beside it and freeze to death quickly and comfortably.”

Kenniston drove in silence for a moment. Then he said, “You’re right.”

“It isn’t completely hopeless,” Hubble said. “There may be other domed cities on Earth that aren’t dead. People, help, companionship. But we have to hang on, until we find them. That’s what I’ve been thinking about— how to hang on.” He added, as they neared the town, “Drive to City Hall first.”

The barricade at the end of Jefferson Street had a leaping bonfire beside it now. The police guards, and a little knot of uniformed National Guardsmen, had been staring out into the gathering darkness. They greeted the jeep excitedly, asking eager questions, their breath steaming on the frosty air. Hubble steadily refused answers. There would be announcements soon.

But the terrier-like little police captain who cleared the way through the group for them had his own questions before they left him. “They’re talking stuff around City Hall about the whole Earth being dead. What’s there to this story about falling through time?”

Hubble evaded. “We’re not sure of anything yet. It’ll take time to find out.”

The police captain asked shrewdly, “What did you find out there? Any sign of life?”

“Why, yes, there’s life out there,” Hubble said. “We didn’t meet any people yet, but there’s life.”

Furred and furtive life timidly searching for its scant food, Kenniston thought. The last life, the poor last creatures who were the inheritors of Earth.

Swept by an icy wind, South Street was as empty-looking as on a February night. But the red beer signs beckoned clamorously, and the bars seemed crowded.

Bundled-up children were hanging about the pond in Mill Street Park. Kenniston realized the reason for their whooping excitement when he saw the thin ice that already sheeted the pond. The cold was already driving the crowd off Main Street. Yet puzzled-looking people still clotted at corners, gesturing, arguing.

Hubble said suddenly, “They have to be told, Ken. Now. Unless they know the truth, we’ll never get them to do the things that must be done.”

“They won’t believe,” Kenniston said. “Or if they do, it’ll likely start a panic.”

“Perhaps. We’ll have to risk that. I’ll get the Mayor to make the announcement over the radio station.”

When Kenniston started to follow Hubble out of the jeep at City Hall, the other stopped him.

“I won’t need you right now, Ken. And I know you’re worried about Carol. Go on and see she’s all right.”

Kenniston drove north through streets already almost deserted. The cold was deepening, and the green leaves of trees and shrubs hung strangely limp and lifeless. He stopped at his lodgings. His landlady’s torrent of questions he answered with a reference to a forthcoming announcement that sent her hurrying to her radio. He went up to his rooms and dug out a bottle of Scotch and drank off half a tumbler straight. Then he went to Carol’s house.

From its chimney, as from all the chimneys along the street, smoke was curling

up. He found Carol and her aunt beside a fireplace blaze.

“It won’t be enough,” Kenniston told them. “We’ll need the furnace going. And the storm windows up.”

“In June?” wailed Mrs. Adams, shocked again by the crazy vagaries of weather.

Carol came and stood before him. “You know a lot you’re not telling us, Ken. Maybe you think you’re being kind, to spare us, but— I want to know.”

“As soon as I get the house fixed up,” said Kenniston heavily, “I’ll tell you what I can. Turn the radio on, Mrs. Adams, and keep it going.”

It seemed strange to him that the end of the world meant fussing with furnace-shakers and ashes in a cold basement, hauling out storm windows and swearing at catches that wouldn’t catch. He worked outside in almost total darkness, his hands stiff with the frigid chill.

As though she could no longer endure the waiting, Carol came out as Kenniston finished with the windows. He heard her low, startled cry and turned, alert for any danger. But she was standing still, looking at the eastern sky. An enormous dull-copper shield was rising there. The Moon— but a Moon many times magnified, swollen to monstrous size, its glaring craters and plains and mountain chains frighteningly clear to the unaided eye. Kenniston had a moment of vertigo, a feeling that that unnatural bulk was about to topple forward and crush them, and then Carol had him by the arms in such a painful grip that he forgot about the Moon.

“What is it, what’s happening?” she cried, and for the first time her voice had a shrill edge of hysteria.

Mrs. Adams called from the doorway to come quickly. “It’s the Mayor. He’s going to make an important announcement.”

Kenniston followed them inside. Yes, an important announcement, he thought. The most important ever.

World’s end should be announced by a voice of thunder speaking from the sky. By the trumpets of the archangels. Not by the scared, hesitating voice of Mayor Bertram Garris.

Even now, politician-like, Mayor Garris tried to shift responsibility a little. He told what he had to tell, but he prefixed it by, “Doctor Hubble and his associates are of the opinion that—” and, “It would appear from scientific evidence that—” But he told it. And the silence that followed in the living room of Mrs. Adams’ comfortable house was, Kenniston knew, only a part of the stunned silence that whelmed all Middletown.

Later, he knew, would come the outburst. But now they could not speak, they could only look at him with terrified faces pleading for a reassurance that he could not give.

Chapter 5— in the red dawn

Kenniston was aroused next morning by the sharp summons of the telephone. He awoke with chill, stiff limbs on the sofa where he had dozed fitfully during the night. He had fired the coal furnace half a dozen times, but the house was cold and white frost was thick on the storm windows. He stood up, heavy with sleep, oppressed with a sense of evil things but still mercifully vague, and stumbled mechanically toward the phone. It was not until he heard Hubble's voice on the wire that his mind cleared and he remembered yesterday.

Hubble's message was brief. "Will you get over here, Ken? The Keystone coal yard. I'm afraid there's going to be trouble." Kenniston said, "Right away." He hung up and stood where he was for a moment, painfully adjusting himself to the realization of how different today was from all the other days of his life. His hands and feet were numb, and his breath steamed faintly in the room. Presently he stirred himself, going hastily to the cellar, where he dug into the dwindling dregs of last winter's coal.

Carol was there when he went back up. She wore her fur coat over her night things, and her eyes were heavy and shadowed, as though she had not slept much. "The phone woke me," she said. "Is it...?"

She did not finish. It was ridiculous to inquire whether the call had brought bad news. They were all existing in a horror dream in which everything was bad.

He only told her that Hubble wanted him for a while. Then, a little hesitantly, he put his arms around her. "You're all right now?" he asked.

"Yes. Ken. I'm all right." But her voice was remote and tired, and had no life in it.

Kenniston did not refer to the night before, to the time after the Mayor's apocalyptic announcement. Of all the bad moments he had had that day, that one had been the worst. Mrs. Adams did the expected things, which he could cope with by means of brandy and ammonia capsules, but Carol did not. She sat quite still, looking at him in a way that he had never seen before. The Mayor had told the full truth about the Industrial Research Laboratory. It had been necessary, to explain why Hubbies' statements were authoritative. Kenniston wished that he

had told Carol about it himself. It seemed an unimportant thing in the face of the world's end, and yet he felt that to her it was not unimportant at all. He could not talk it out with her then, with Mrs. Adams' hysterics dominating everything, and she had not come out to him later, and now, facing her again this morning, Kenniston felt unsure of himself and of her for the first time since he had met her.

"Stay inside and keep the furnace going," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He kissed her, and she stood there in the circle of his arms, neither yielding nor resisting. He said, almost desperately, "Don't give up, Carol. We'll find an answer to it all, somehow."

She nodded and said, "Yes. Be careful," and turned away. Kenniston went out alone, into the bitter morning.

It was still half dark, for the sullen Sun had not quite risen, sprawling in the east like some bloated monster heavy with blood. He refilled the jeep's radiator, which he had drained the night before. It was very still, he noticed. The mill whistles, the delivery trucks, the peremptory voices of locomotives quarrelling at the Junction—all were gone. Even the children were silent now, afraid of the red, cold dawn. The roses all were dead, and the frost had blackened the summer shrubs and trees. The streets seemed empty as Kenniston drove the jeep down Main Street. Middletown had taken on, overnight, the aspect of a tomb. Smoke arose from every chimney, in the houses where the people crouched indoors, peering sometimes with pale faces framed in frost-rimed glass as the jeep went clattering by in the silence. From every church he passed came sounds of hymns and praying. The bars, too, were noisy, having apparently defied law to remain open all night.

Kenniston realized that this town was dying as it stood. Fuel would run out fast, and without it life could not survive these bitter nights. A feeling of utter hopelessness swept over him. It seemed ironic that Middletown should have come safely through the most staggering cataclysm in history, only to perish miserably of cold.

Dimly, in the back of his mind, a thought began to form. It tempered his hopelessness a little, but before he could get it clear, he had made the turn into Vine Street, and the Keystone coal yard lay before him. And at that place in this still and deathly city, there was life and noise enough.

Policemen and National Guardsmen formed a cordon around the yard and its great black heaps of coal. They faced a crowd— an ugly crowd, still only muttering, but bound for trouble. Kenniston saw people he knew in that crowd, people who sat on their front porches in the warm summer nights and talked with neighbors and laughed. Mill hands, merchants, housewives— solid, decent folk, but turned wolfish now with the cold and the fear of dying.

Hubble met him inside the yard. A worried police sergeant was with him, and Borchard, who owned the yard.

“They were starting to loot the coal piles,” Hubble said. “Poor devils, it was summer and they didn’t have much fuel. Some of them burned their furniture last night to keep alive.”

Borchard said anxiously, “We don’t want to have to kill anyone. And right now, they’ll believe you scientists before anyone else.”

Hubble nodded. “You talk to them, Ken. You’ve gotten to know them better than I have, and they’ll trust you more.”

Kenniston said, “The hell they will. And anyway, what’ll I say to them? ‘Go home and freeze to death quietly, like gentlefolk, and let’s not have any nasty scenes.’ They’ll love that.”

“Maybe they don’t have to freeze,” said Hubble. “Maybe there’s an answer to that.”

The half-formed thought in the back of Kenniston’s mind leaped forward. He looked at Hubble, and he knew that the older man had had that same thought, but sooner and clearer. A small flicker of hope began to stir again in Kenniston.

“The domed city,” he said.

Hubble nodded. “Yes. It retains heat to a considerable degree, at night. We saw that. That’s why the dome was built— how long ago? No matter. It’s our only half-warm refuge. We have to go there, Ken, all of us. And soon! We can’t go through many more nights here!”

“But will they go? And if they do, what’ll happen when they see that city and realize Earth is a dead world?”

Hubble made an impatient gesture. “We’ll have to take care of that when it comes. The thing now is to give these people some hope. Tell them to wait in their homes, that soon they’ll be safe. Tell them anything you like, but make them go!”

Kenniston scrambled up a black ridge of coal, to stand above the crowd. From outside the cordon they snarled at him when he began. But he shouted them down, calling out the names of the ones he knew, ordering them to listen— being masterful, while his heart pounded with the same dread that drove the men and women in the street.

“Don’t talk to us about law when it’s the end of the world!” yelled a hard-faced woman.

“It’s the end of nothing unless you lose your heads,” Kenniston hammered. “The Mayor is arranging now to give you what you want— an answer to how you’re going to live and be safe. Your lives and the lives of your families depend on how you cooperate. Go home to your radios and wait for the orders.”

“Will they give us coal?” shouted a burly millhand.

“Coal, food, everything you need. Nobody’s going to cheat anyone. We’re all in the same boat. We’ll stay in, or get out, together. Now go home and keep your families together and wait.”

He called suddenly to the men on guard, “You, too! Get out of here and report back to your headquarters! The orders coming up are more important than this coal!”

He climbed back down from the black heap, wondering whether his feeble attempt at psychology would work. Borchard started angry remonstrance about dismissal of the guards, but Hubble shut him up.

“It worked,” he said. “Look, they’re going.” As the crowd dispersed, Chief of Police Kimer arrived. His unshaven face was gray from lack of sleep, his eyes red-rimmed. He did not seem to be much excited by the trouble at the coal yard.

“We’ve had a lot more than this on our hands, during the night,” he said.

Kenniston learned then what had gone on in Middletown since the Mayor had

finished speaking—the deaths from shock, the scattering of suicides, the outbreaks of looting in the downtown streets, quickly checked. A dozen people, mostly drunks, had died of cold.

“But the barricades at the edge of town were the worst,” Kimer said tiredly. “You know, a good number of people from outside Middletown were trapped here by this thing. They, and some of our own people gone panicky, tried to stampede out of town.” He added, as he turned back to his car, “They tell me more than two thousand people were baptized last night.”

“We’ll go with you to City Hall,” Hubble told him. “Yes, you too, Ken. I’ll need your help with the Mayor.”

It seemed impossible that the pudgy little Mayor could be a problem. He had been so docile, so pathetically eager to take advice and follow orders. But when, in City Hall, Hubble confronted him with the plan to evacuate Middletown, Mayor Garris’ face took on a mulish look.

“It’s crazy,” he said. “Take up a whole city of fifty thousand people and transport them to another place we don’t know anything about? It’s insane!”

“There are enough cars, buses and trucks to transport the population and supplies. There’s enough gasoline to run them.”

“But this other city— what do we know about it? Nothing. There might be any kind of danger there. No. I was born in Middletown. I’ve lived here all my life. I’ve worked hard to get where I am. I just spent five thousand dollars to redecorate my house, and I’m not going to leave it.”

He glared at them, and his plump body trembled. Hubble said gently, “We’re all afraid, Mr. Garris. It’s a hard thing to do. People have their roots, and they can’t break them easily all at once. But we must go. We must seek shelter, or die.”

The Mayor shook his head. “My wife and daughter— they’ve been hysterical all night, pleading with me to do something, to make things go as they always have. This has been an awful shock to them. I don’t think they could stand any more.”

“Slap their faces, Mr. Garris,” Hubble said brutally. “This has been a shock to all of us. Now what are you going to do? Will you call in the City Council or won’t you?”

“I can’t, not on that proposal.” Garris’ face crinkled like that of a child about to cry. “Honestly, gentlemen, I can’t.”

Kenniston thought of Carol shivering in her fur coat, struggling with the last shovels of coal, and the thought made him grasp Garris savagely by the shirtfront.

“All right, don’t,” he snapped. “The people are waiting for an announcement from you, but I’ll make one myself. I’ll tell them that there’s a way to save them, but that Mayor Garris won’t hear of it. I’ll tell them they must die of cold because their Mayor won’t give up his big fine house with its cellarful of coal. Would you like me to tell them that, Mr. Garris?”

Kenniston thought he had never seen a man turn so white. “They’d tear me to pieces,” whispered Garris. “No. No, don’t.” He looked piteously from one to the other, and then he said, “I’ll call in the Council.”

The men of the Council reacted, at first, very much as the Mayor had done. Kenniston did not entirely blame them. The difficulties of uprooting a population of fifty thousand and moving it bodily in a short space of time to a place it had never seen nor heard of were enough to daunt anybody. But Hubble’s arguments were unanswerable. It was move or die, and they knew it, and in the end the decision was made. A crushed, frightened little man, Mayor Garris went to make his announcement.

On the way to the broadcasting station, Kenniston looked at Middletown. The big houses, standing lordly on the North Side. The little houses, in close-set rows, with their tiny gardens. It was going to be hard, very hard. The people who lived in those houses would not want to leave them.

In a low, tired voice, bereft now of pomposity and guile, the Mayor spoke to the people of Middletown.

“So we must leave Middletown, temporarily,” he concluded. And he repeated the word. “Temporarily. The domed city out there will be a little cold too, but not so cold as unprotected Middletown. We can live there, until— until things clear up. Stay by your radios. You will be given instructions. Please cooperate, to save all our lives. Please—”

Chapter 6— caravan into tomorrow

Kenniston lost track of his own emotions very quickly in the rush of urgent tasks. City Hall became the nerve center of the evacuation. The police and National Guard officers were already there, and other men were called in— the wholesale grocers, the warehouse men, the heads of trucking and bus and van lines. McLain, the big rawboned manager of the largest trucking company, proved a tower of strength. He had been a transport officer in the last war, and knew something about moving men and supplies.

“You’ll have a traffic madhouse, and won’t get these people out for weeks,” he said crisply. “It’s got to be organized by wards. There have to be quarters in your domed city assigned for each ward, so they can go into their own streets when they get there.”

Hubble nodded. “I can get a crew of twenty men ready to handle that.”

“Good. I figure the move will take three days. A third of the population is about all we can handle safely at one time. Civilian populations are the devil and all! Now, there’ll have to be a squad assigned to distribute fuel to the ones who have to wait here in Middletown, and to quarter them so as to conserve that fuel. Also...”

Hubble sighed. “You take a big load off my mind, McLain. Will you organize the march? Kenniston can lead the first contingent, when you’re ready.”

McLain nodded brusquely, sat down at someone else’s desk, and began to fire orders. Hubble departed with his twenty picked men, well armed, to set up a base in the domed city.

The radio chattered incessantly now, urging, soothing, cajoling, issuing instructions. Police and Guardsmen were dispatched to each ward, with a responsible man heading each squad. They were ordered to take the streets house by house, to assure complete evacuation, and also to ascertain how many private cars could be counted on for transportation. The city buses could carry only a fraction of the evacuees.

McLain was the one who thought of the patients in the Middletown hospitals,

and set men to collecting ambulances, hearses, whatever would carry the sick comfortably. The police patrol wagons and a few big army trucks from the Armory he assigned to move the prisoners in the jail who could not safely be released. Both they and the sick would be left until the last day, to ensure proper quarters for their reception.

Fleets of trucks were started to the warehouses, with hasty lists of the food and other emergency supplies that must go with them. "We can run a truck line back to Middletown for more supplies later," McLain told Kenniston. "But this stuff we'll need right away."

The First and Second Wards were to go first, and that meant that Carol and her aunt would be in the first day's evacuation. Kenniston managed to get away long enough to see them.

He was sorry he went. Mrs. Adams sat weeping in the living room, and Carol struggled alone with blankets and mattresses and suitcases, in a bitter, stonyfaced mood that Kenniston could not quite understand. He stayed longer than he should have done to help them pack, trying earnestly to penetrate Carol's tight-lipped silence.

"I know it's hard to leave your home," he said, "but it's hard for everybody. And after all, we'll have shelter and warmth, and can stay alive."

"Shelter and warmth?" said Carol. She looked around at the starched white curtains, the polished furniture, the pictures on the walls and the bits of fine china that were so lovingly placed, and she said bitterly, "We had those. We had them for generations, until we had to have scientific progress too."

"I'll admit you have a point there," said Kenniston heavily, "but it's too late to argue now."

"Yes," she said. "Too late." Suddenly she began to cry, in a slow, painful way that was not in the least like Mrs. Adams' whimpering. "Oh, Ken, my house and all the things I loved..." He had wit enough to know that it was not for glass and china that she wept, but for a way of life that was gone and could never possibly return. He felt a terrible pity for her, which almost smothered his irritation at the inability of the female mind to grapple with the essentials of a situation.

"It won't be so bad," he said reassuringly. "And I'll be leading tomorrow's first

evacuation, and won't be far from you at any time."

It was before nine o'clock the next morning when Kenniston left City Hall with McLain, to check the progress of preparations. Under the cold red eye of the Sun, Middletown seethed with an excited activity that centered in the First and Second Wards.

Cars were being hastily loaded, piled high on roofs and fenders. Children were being called together, barking dogs being caught and leashed, families gathering in excited haste. Roar of motors filled the wintry air. Motors of great trucks rumbling to and from the warehouse, motors of police cars dashing with sirens screaming, sputtering motors of old cars being agonizedly coaxed to life.

The people on the streets, the people hurrying with bundles and children and dogs, looked more dazed than frightened. Some of them were laughing, a false merriment edged with excitement. Only a few women were sobbing.

McLain and Kenniston rode down in the jeep to the center of town, the Square. This was the down town First Ward of Middletown.

"The First and Second Ward will move out in that order," McLain told Kenniston. "You take charge of the First, since you're to lead the way."

Police and National Guardsmen were already forming up cars on South Jefferson Street. Cadillacs, Buicks, Fords, ancient Hupmobiles. City and school buses were crowded with those who had no cars, and piled high with their belongings. Policemen on motorcycles roared past.

McLain boomed rapid orders. "Get sidecars on those motorcycles— they won't make it without them, over rough ground.

"Divide up the garage tow-trucks as they come in— divide them evenly between the wards, so they can haul any car that conks out!"

And, to a worried National Guard officer, "No! What the devil use would we have for your fieldguns? Leave 'em in the Armory and bring cots, blankets, camp equipment, instead!"

Then McLain commandeered a car, jumped in, and shouted back to Kenniston, "Have 'em ready to move out by noon! I'll have the Tube Mill whistle sounded,

for a starting signal!”

And he was gone, racing off to the other ward gathering point. Kenniston found himself faced by police, Guardsmen, deputies, officials, all clamoring for orders.

“What are we going to do with these cars? Half of them are so overloaded they’ll never get anywhere!”

Kenniston saw that. The arriving cars were piled not only with bedding and other essentials, but with radios, musical instruments, big framed family portraits, hobby-horses, every sort of possession.

“Go along and tear some of that junk off,” he ordered. “Form up all the way down South Jefferson— but only two abreast, for some of those South Side streets are narrow.”

As he sweated to marshal the gathering cars, he watched for Carol’s blue coupe. When she came, driving with pale self-possession while her aunt looked scaredly at the jam, he got her as near the front of the form-up as he could, and then raced back to the Square.

The squad leaders rapidly reported in on their assigned streets. “Everybody’s out of Adams Street! Everybody’s out of Perry Street! Lincoln Avenue—”

But— “We haven’t got ‘em all out of North Street, Mr. Kenniston! Some of those old people just won’t go!”

Kenniston swore, and then jumped back into the jeep and drove around to North Street. It was the street of shabby ancient brick houses only two blocks off Main Street. And the first person he saw there was a grim-looking, shawled old woman standing with folded arms on her front porch.

“I’m not leaving my home,” she snapped to Kenniston before he could speak. “I’ve lived in this house all my life, and my mother before me. I’ll not leave it now.” She sniffed scornfully. “The idea of the whole town taking up and running away just because it’s got a little cold!”

Kenniston, baffled, saw a little girl of six peering at him from inside the window of the house.

“That your granddaughter?” he asked. “Listen. She’ll be dead in a few days. Stone, frozen dead. Unless you bring her and your warm clothes and blankets along now.”

The shawled old woman stared at him. Then, her voice suddenly dull, she asked, “Where do I go?”

He hastened on along the street. A peppery old man was being carried out in a wheelchair by two squad men, and was viciously striking at them with his cane.

“God-damned foolishness!” he was swearing. They got them into the waiting buses, and hastily loaded on their belongings. Then Kenniston raced back to the Square. His watch said eleven-ten, and he knew how far they were from ready.

On the Square, under the big sycamore tree, a gaunt, tall man with burning eyes was brandishing a Bible and shouting, to no one, “End of the world—punishment for sin—”

Lauber, the truck dispatcher whom McLain had left in charge of the First Ward caravan under Kenniston, came running up to him when he reached South Jefferson.

“These people are crazy!” he panted. “The ones already here want to start right now— and they don’t even know the way!”

Kenniston saw that the police had drawn a barricade of big trucks across the street some blocks southward. Cars were surging against it, motors roaring, drivers shouting, horns sounding in a deafening chorus.

Panic! He knew it was in the air. He, all of them, had known there was danger of it when the Mayor had made his broadcast. They had had to risk it, for only real fear could make people leave their lifelong homes. But if it got out of hand—

He rode along the line, shouting, “Form up! Form in line! If you jam the street, you’ll be left behind!”

He couldn’t even be heard. Limousines, trucks, jalopies— they crowded each other, banged fenders, bumped and recoiled and pressed forward again. And the horns never stopped their shrieking cacophony.

Kenniston, sweating now despite the frozen chill of the air, prayed that the gathering panic would not burst into violence. At the front of the surging, roaring mass, he found Mayor Garris. And the Mayor's pallid face showed that panic had infected him too.

"Shouldn't we go?" he shouted to Kenniston over the uproar of horns and motors. "Everyone seems ready here!"

"McLain's running the traffic movement, and we've got to stick to his orders!" he shouted back.

"But if these people break loose—" the Mayor began. He stopped. Over the shrieking horns and thundering motors, a new sound was rising. A distant, banshee wail, a faraway scream that swelled into a hoarse, giant howl. The auto horns, the shouting voices from the cars, fell silent. Only the sound of motors was background to that unending scream that wailed across Middletown like a requiem.

"That's the Tube Mill whistle!" cried Lauber. "That's the signal!"

Kenniston sent the jeep jumping ahead. "Okay, let those trucks roll! But keep people in line, back of them! No stampeding!"

The big Diesels that barricaded the way began to snort and rumble, and then started to move out, as ponderously as elephants. Kenniston's jeep swung in front. But almost at once, cars behind pressed to get around them.

"Run the trucks three abreast, in front!" he shouted to Lauber. "It'll keep them from getting around!"

Down Jefferson Street, down over the muddy bed of the vanished river, past the old houses with their doors carefully shut and locked, past the playground that looked as forlorn as though it knew the children were going, never to return.

Past Home Street, past the silent mills, past the beer signs of South Street, where from an upstairs window a drunken man shouted and waved a bottle at them. Past the last rows of drab frame houses, the last brave little yards whose flowers were blackened now by frost.

Kenniston saw ahead of them the line of demarcation, the boundary between the

past and what was now Earth. They reached it, passed it—

And then the rolling, ocher-yellow plains were all about them, barren and drab beneath the great, firelashed red eye of the Sun. The cold wind whooped around them, as they started to climb the easy slope toward the ridge. Behind his jeep, Diesels, jalopies, buses, shiny station wagons rolled with roaring, sputtering, purring motors.

Kenniston looked back down the slope at them. Already the other Ward was moving out, and he rode at the head of a huge caravan of vehicles crawling endlessly out of Middletown— a caravan out of the Earth that was gone forever, into this unguessable tomorrow.

Chapter 7— under the dome

When they came up over the ridge, and for the first time had view of the distant domed city that shimmered in the wan light far out on the desolate plain, Kenniston could sense the shock of doubt and fear that ran through all of this host who were seeing it for the first time. He could see it in all their peering faces, pale and strained in the red light of the dying Sun.

Even he, seeing it for only the second time, felt an inner recoiling. With his mind still filled with every sight and sound and smell of the old town they had left, the alien, solemn, deathly city of the dome seemed to him impossible as a refuge. He choked down that feeling, he had to choke it down; it was go on or die.

“Keep moving!” he shouted, sounding the jeep’s horn to command attention, gesturing authoritatively forward. “Keep going!”

He conquered that brief pause of recoil, got them moving over the ridge, skidding and sliding down the other slope, in clouds of heavy dust.

He glimpsed Mayor Garris staring ahead, his plump face shocked and pallid. He wondered what Carol was thinking, as she looked out at the lonely shining bubble in the sad wastes.

The endless caravan, shrouded in dust, was halfway down the long slope when Kenniston heard a raging of horns and looked back. An old sedan had stopped squarely in the middle of the narrow track the trucks had beaten down across a shallow gully. Cars were pulling out around it, wallowing in soft earth, jamming their low-hung frames against the banks, getting inextricably tangled. Behind them, the line was damming up.

Kenniston yelled to Lauber to keep the head of the caravan moving on toward the distant dome, and then sent his jeep snorting back along the line. A knot of people had collected now around the offending sedan. Kenniston hastily shouldered his way through them.

“What the hell’s going on here?” he demanded. “Whose car is this?”

A weatherbeaten, middle-aged man turned to him, half-scared, half-apologetic.

“Mine— my car. I’m John Borzak.” He gestured to the back seat of the old sedan. “My wife, she’s having a baby in there.” He added, as an afterthought, “My fifth.”

“Oh, Christ, that’s all we needed!” Kenniston cried. Borzak looked instantly guilty. He looked so sad that Kenniston began to laugh. Suddenly all of them were laughing, in sheer relief from nervous tension.

He set men scurrying to get a doctor and ambulance out of the procession, and meanwhile willing hands carefully rolled the old sedan a little aside.

The dammed-up lines of cars began to roll again. But the pause, the waiting, the minutes spent in staring at the drear landscape, had been too much for some of those in line. Kenniston saw cars, only a few of them as yet, curving out of line and scrambling on the slope to swing back toward Middletown.

He’d feared that, above all things. People— people of a 20th Century Middlewestern town— could take only so much of the unknown. But he had to stop them, or panic would spread like fire that nobody could stop. He bucketed the jeep after them, got ahead of them by the advantage of his four-wheel drive, and then blocked their way back and stood up in the jeep and shouted at them and pointed ahead.

A man who looked like an aging carpenter, with a knobby face sheet-pale now, cursed Kenniston out of the depths of his fear.

“We’re not going out to die in this damned desert! We’re going back home!”

“You’ll never even get near it!” Kenniston warned. “There are special guards who won’t let anyone back into Middletown! Get it into your heads that the place is a death trap, will you!”

“Oh, Hugh, maybe we’d better go on!” whimpered the shapeless woman beside the man.

“Like hell we will! I’m a free American and this isn’t any dictatorship!”

Kenniston found the only argument that could sway these people who were recoiling from the deathliness of the desert.

“If you go back, if you do get into Middletown and stay there, you’ll soon be all alone there! You and the few like you— all alone, here at the end of the world, with the night and the cold!”

That got to them, replacing their fear with a greater dread, the dread of aloneness in this lonely world. The knobby-faced man looked sick and trapped, but he finally turned his car around, and the other cars followed him back into line.

Kenniston’s squad cars had come up but they weren’t needed. He told them, “Watch the line close! Don’t let one start to turn again— not one.”

He fought the jeep back up along the line, choking on dust and exhaust fumes, hanging precariously to the wheel, deafened by the continuous roar of motors.

At the head of the caravan he was at least out of the dust, and could look ahead at the distant city. It was still only a shimmering, tiny bubble on the horizon, only a glittering point lost and drowned in the vast indifference of the ocher-colored wastes that stretched— how far? Clear around the world, over the beds of dried-up oceans and the sites of vanished cities? Was the bottom of the Atlantic like this, was New York, was Paris, were the Poles?

He had to forget that and keep his mind on the city ahead, on the job of getting these thousands of people to it, for if he didn’t the weight of the whole dying world would come down upon him like an avalanche and he would cease to struggle. The world couldn’t all be like this, there must be green valleys and people somewhere yet. But there wasn’t time to think of it now, they had hit the road that led to the portal and the dome of man’s last refuge was towering, colossal, in front of them.

He saw that Hubble’s men had closed the portal. That would be the first step, of course, to conserve what warmth there was and keep out the frigid wind. It opened now to receive them, and an armed man waved and smiled, and then clung on to the side of the jeep.

“Straight up this boulevard, and then turn. I’ll show you. Yeah, we got the section ready. No, no sign of anything. I don’t think even a mouse lives here anymore.” A pause. “I’m sure glad you people have got here. This place is so damned quiet it would scare you.”

The tall, white silent towers watched them, the long, long line of dusty cars and

trucks and buses that crept along the empty boulevards. The noise of motors greatly magnified echoed and rebounded from the walls and was repeated faintly from the dome, and the very shocking loudness of the sound made Kenniston shiver.

Apart from that mechanical racket, a curious hush had come over the Middletowners. All down the lines heads were thrust forth out of car windows, looking, peering, savoring the height of buildings whose tops they could not see, staring at the lines and colors that were alien to all they knew, listening to the emptiness. Kenniston knew how they felt. It was too big, and too strange. Even a native New Yorker would have found awe among these mighty towers, and to the folk of Middletown, used to the little slate-roofed houses and the squat buildings of dingy brick, they were overpowering, crushing, with something in them of dread because they were all deserted.

The head of the caravan reached a section that was barred off with ropes. The ropes were laid aside, and the cars went in.

Hubble's advance squad was ready. Without them the assignment of nearly seventeen thousand people to improvised quarters would have been impossible. With them, it was a scrambling chaos, carried out strangely without much noise. Men and women moved with a sort of stunned docility, glancing sidelong into the dust and the shadows, peering at the blank windows and the tall strange rooms, afraid to raise their voices. Gradually the sound of motors died, and the streets were ghastly in their silence, and it was a silence so great that the scuffling of many feet and the murmur of many voices and the labor of unpacking trucks and cars did not disturb it, but were merely lost. Even the dogs were cowed.

Kenniston made his report to Hubble and then went in search of Carol. Here and there people still sat in their cars, refusing to move from their one last familiar reality, and he passed a woman who crouched in the dust of the street and wept, with her arms full of blankets. Something of the same feeling of despair infected Kenniston. It was not going to work, it was not going to work at all, and he dreaded to talk to Carol. But he plodded on until he found her.

There was a great vaulted room on the street level, smelling dismally of the dust and desertion of ages. Very tall windows let in what light they could, but still it was dusky. There were twenty women in the room, of all sorts and ages, milling

about with suitcases and loads of bedding, uttering vague wails and words of complaint, struggling with rolled-up-mattresses. Carol and her aunt were two of the twenty.

Characteristically, they had managed to get off in a corner as much by themselves as possible. Mrs. Adams had collapsed onto her improvised bed, and Carol was making what order she could of their scanty belongings.

“Are you all right?” he asked her anxiously, and she nodded. From the nested blankets on the floor Mrs. Adams whimpered, “Why did they bring us here, to this dreadful place? Why couldn’t they have let us stay at home?” Carol hushed her as she would a fretful child.

Two sniffing, mouse-faced girls had crept up to ask Kenniston questions. Behind them a short, thick, middle-aged woman was stamping up and down along the walls, banging open the doors that pierced them. “Where’s the bathrooms?” she was demanding belligerently.

Kenniston took Carol to the doorway and a little beyond it, where if there was no more privacy they were at least not besieged. He said, “I know it’s rough as hell now, but it’s only for a little while— this bunking together, I mean. There’s room enough for everybody here, and you can pick out a place you like, all to yourselves. I can fetch anything you want from your house, your books and things, even furniture...”

She cut him short. “No! I don’t want anything touched there. I want to know it’s all just as I left it, so I can at least think about it, and maybe...” She shook her head, and then went on, “Ken, old Mr. Peters from our street had another stroke when we got here. They took him away on a stretcher. He was dying, and I saw his face. He was looking up at these awful buildings, so puzzled and afraid. He was trying to understand, and he couldn’t.” She shivered.

“Dying isn’t good anywhere you do it,” he said. “But we’re young and strong and we aren’t going to die.” He added, before he left her, “There was a baby born on the march. Think of the baby, Carol, instead of the old man.”

He went away, depressed and worried. Carol seemed different, and he didn’t think it was just her tiredness. Perhaps she had roots too deep, not just in Middletown but in the pattern, the state of mind. Well, the pattern was smashed forever now, and she, and all of them, had to adjust.

Kenniston had gone two of the long squares, sunk in his disturbed thoughts, before he realized that a change had come into the streets. He tried to think what it was. People were more in the buildings now, and less in the cars, but that was not all of it. There was something...

The streets had suddenly come alive.

The children had done it. Overawed at first by the strangeness and the silence and the behavior of their elders, it had slowly dawned upon them that here was a whole great city lying ready to their hands—fabulous empty buildings full of mysteries and treasures, new streets, new narrow ways behind them, all virgin territory to be explored. By twos and threes the venturesome spirits had started out and taken others with them. And now the lofty hallways rang with shouts and running feet, small figures scudded to and fro across the pavement, the shadows teemed with motion, with screams and squeals and the voices of parental anger. One bull-lunged urchin had discovered that he could make echoes. Another, intoxicated by blank expanses of white, unsullied wall, stood with a stub of pencil in his hand writing in ever-enlarging letters. Kenniston thought, The irreverent little bastards! But his step quickened, and quite suddenly, he felt that it was going to work out after all. The human race was tough.

He had further evidence of that in the next two days. The great waves of the migration poured down across the dusty ridge and in through the portal, the clamorous thousands of wheels and motors, the countless faces and peering eyes. And for those who came on the second day and on the third, it was not so bad as it had been for those who came first. The seventeen thousand pioneers had lifted the curse of the empty stillness. Community kitchens, working on oil and gasoline ranges, filled the air with the homely, cheering smell of coffee. There was hot food, and the excitement of searching out friends and comparing notes. Indefatigable housewives busied themselves with brooms and drove their husbands to cleaning windows and whacked their unruly children. And the cars piled up in lines along the streets and boulevards, the Plymouths and Nashes and Chevrolets and Fords, incongruous in this dreamlike city of an elder Earth.

On the third day they brought the sick and put them in the hospital. They brought the prisoners from the jail and locked them away in another building. A great structure on the central plaza became the City Hall. And by that third night, not a soul was left in Middletown. All were here under the great dome of the alien

city.

“We’ll call this place New Middletown,” Mayor Garris had proclaimed. “Makes it seem more like home.”

Kenniston walked with Carol that night down one of the dark main avenues of the domed city. There was candlelight and lamplight from doorways and tall windows. A baby wailed from inside a dark doorway and was hastily soothed. Dogs barked defiance to alien ghosts. A tinny phonograph sang somewhere:

“I can’t give you anything but love, baby!”

Kenniston thought that the streets of tall white buildings looked down with their windows as with eyes— amazed, bewildered. This city beneath the shimmering starlit dome had had silence for a long, long time. Silence, and the slow swing of the cold red Sun and the farther stars.

Could a city remember, Kenniston wondered? Did this one remember the old days of its builders, the lovers who had walked its ways and the children who had known its nooks and corners? Was it glad that men had come again, or did it regret the agelong silence and peace?

Carol shivered a little and buttoned her topcoat. “It’s getting colder.”

Kenniston nodded. “But not bitterly so— only like an October night, back in our own time. We can stand that.”

She looked up at him, her eyes dark in the white blur of her face. “But how will we live here, Ken? I mean, when the food from Middletown’s warehouses runs out?”

He and Hubble had known the question would come up, and had the answer for it. Not a perfect answer, but the only one.

“There are big hydroponic tanks farther over in the city, Carol. The people here raised their food in them. We can do the same. There are plenty of seeds in Middletown.”

“But water?”

“Lots of it,” he answered promptly. “Big underground reservoirs, that must tap deep water-bearing strata. Hubble had it tested, and it’s perfectly safe.”

They walked on to the edge of the plaza. Now the Moon was rising, that copper-colored, unreal big Moon that was so much nearer Earth than in the old times. Its coppery light poured through the dome upon the city. The white towers dreamed. The chill deepened.

The whole mighty past of dead Earth seemed to crush down upon Kenniston. Millions of years, trillions of lives full of pain and hope and struggle, and all for what? For this?

Carol felt it too, for she pressed closer to him. “Are they all dead, Ken? All the human race, but ourselves?”

He and Hubble had the answer for that, too, the answer they would have to give to everyone.

“There’s no reason to assume that. There may be other cities that are still inhabited. If so, we’ll soon contact them.”

She shook her head. “Words, Ken. You don’t even believe them yourself.” She drew away from him. “We’re alone,” she said. “Everything we had is gone, our world, our whole life, and we’re quite alone.”

He put his arms around her. He would have said something to comfort her, but she stood stiff and quivering, and suddenly she said,

“Ken, there are times when I can’t help hating you.”

Utterly shocked, and too bewildered to be angry yet, he let her go. He said, “Carol, you’re wrought up— hysterical—”

Her voice was low and harsh, the words came fast as though they could no longer be held back. “Am I? Maybe. But I can’t help remembering that if you and men like you hadn’t come to Middletown with that secret laboratory, fifty thousand people wouldn’t have had to suffer for it. You brought this on us...”

He began to understand now all that had been behind Carol’s taut manner and unfriendly silences, all the blind resentment that had focused upon himself.

He was for the moment furiously indignant, the more so because what she had said stung him on a sensitive nerve. He stood, almost glaring at her, and then his anger washed away, and he took her by the shoulders and said,

“Carol, you’re not making sense, and you know it! You’re bitter because you’ve lost your home, your way of life, your world, and you’re making me a scapegoat for that. You can’t! We need each other more than ever, and we’re not going to lose each other.”

She stared at him rigidly, then started to sob, and clung to him crying.

“Oh, Ken, don’t let me be a fool! I’m so mixed up, I don’t know my own mind any more.”

“All of us feel like that,” he said. “But it’ll all come right. Forget about it, Carol.”

But as he held her and soothed her and looked up past her at the alien towers and the face of the alien Moon, he knew that she could not completely forget, that that deep resentment would not die easily, and that he would have to fight it. And it would be hard to fight, for there had been the sting of truth in her words, only a partial truth but one he had not wanted ever to face.

Chapter 8— Middletown calling!

When Kenniston awoke, he lay for some time in his blankets looking around the great room, with the same feeling of unreality that he felt now each morning.

It was quite a large room, with graceful curving walls and ceiling of soft-textured, ivory plastic. But it was not as large as it looked, for the builders of the city had known how to use daringly jutting mezzanines to give two floor levels the spaciousness and loftiness of one.

He looked up at the tall, dusty windows, and wondered what this room had once been. It was part of a big structure on the plaza, for Mayor Garris had insisted that the whole Lab staff be quartered near City Hall. It had obviously been a public building, but except for a few massive tables it had been quite empty, and there was no clue to its function.

He looked around at the others on the row of mattresses. Hubble was still

sleeping calmly. So was Beitz, with the slight, groaning stirrings of slumbering age. But Crisci lay wide awake and unmoving, looking up at the ceiling.

Kenniston remembered something, with a sudden pang, something that he had completely forgotten in the rush of events. He went over to Crisci, and whispered, "I'm sorry, Louis. I never thought until now about your girl."

"Why would you think about that?" Crisci's low voice was toneless. "Why would you, when all this has happened?" He went on, as tonelessly, "Besides, it was all over a long time ago. For millions of years now, she's been dead."

Kenniston lingered a moment, seeking something to say, remembering now Crisci's eager talk of the girl he was soon to marry—the girl who lived fifty miles away from Middletown. He could find nothing to say. Crisci's tragedy had been repeated many times among these people—the mother whose son had gone to California, the wife whose husband had been upstate on a business trip, the lovers, the families, the friends, divided forever by the great gulf of time. He felt again a great thankfulness that Carol had come through with him, and a renewed determination to hold her against anything.

Kenniston was lighting his morning cigarette, when the others rose. He paused suddenly, and said, "I just thought—"

Hubble grinned at him. "Yes, I know. You just thought about tobacco. You, and a lot of people, will soon have to do without."

As they went out to get their breakfast at the nearest community kitchen, Hubble told him what was going forward.

"McLain's going back to Middletown to bring gasoline engines and pumps. We have to get water flowing in the city's system at once, and it may be a long time before we can figure out its pumping power. They seem to be atomic engines of some sort, but I'm not sure."

"What about food rationing?"

"Food and medicine will all go into guarded warerooms. Ration tickets will be printed at once. Use of cars is forbidden, of course. Everybody is restricted to their own Ward district temporarily, to prevent accidents in exploration. We've already organized crews to explore the city."

Kenniston nodded. He drew the last drags of a cigarette suddenly precious, before he spoke.

“That’s all good. But the main problem will be morale, Hubble.” He thought of Carol, as he added, “I don’t believe these people can take it, if they find out they’re the last humans left.” Hubble looked worried. “I know. But there must be people left somewhere. This city wasn’t abandoned because of sudden disaster. They may just have gone to other, better cities.”

“There wasn’t a whisper on the radio from outside Middletown,” Kenniston reminded.

“No. But I believe they used something different from our radio system. That’s what I want you for this morning, Ken. Beitz last night found a communication system in a building near here. It has big apparatus that he thinks was for televisor communication. That’s more in your field than ours.”

Kenniston felt a sharp interest, the interest of the technician that not even world’s end could completely kill. “I’d like to see that.”

As they walked through the cold red morning, Kenniston was surprised by the unexpectedly everyday appearance of this alien city beneath the dome.

Families were trooping toward the community kitchens, with the air of going on picnic. A little band of children whooped down the nearest street, a small, woolly dog racing beside them with frantic barking. A bald, red-faced man in undershirt and trousers smoked his pipe and looked down the mighty street with mild curiosity. Two plump women, one of whom was buttoning a reluctant small boy into his jacket, called to each other from neighboring doorways.

“— and they say that Mrs. Biler’s feeling better now, but her husband’s still poorly—”

“Human beings,” said Hubble, “are adaptable. Thank God for that.”

“But if they’re the last? They won’t be able to adapt to that.”

Hubble shook his head. “No. I’m afraid not.”

After breakfast, Beitz led them to a big square building two blocks off the plaza.

Inside was a large, shadowy hall, in which bulked a row of tall, square blocks of apparatus. They were, obviously, televisor instruments. Each had a square screen, a microphone grating, and beneath that a panel of control switches, pointer dials, and other less identifiable instruments.

Kenniston found and opened a service panel in the back of one. Brief examination of the tangled apparatus inside discouraged him badly.

“They were televisor communication instruments, yes. But the principles on which they worked are baffling. They didn’t even use vacuum tubes— they’d apparently got beyond the vacuum tube.”

“Could you start one of them transmitting again?”

Kenniston shook his head. “The video system is absolutely beyond me. No resemblance at all to our primitive television apparatus.”

Hubble asked, “Would it be possible then to use just the audio system— use one of them as a straight sound-radio transmitter?”

Kenniston hesitated. “That might be done. It’d be mostly groping in the dark. But there are some familiar bits of design—” He pondered, then said, “The power leads come from outside. See anything around here that looks like a power station?”

Old Beitz nodded. “Only a block away. Big, shielded atomic turbines of some kind, coupled to generators.”

“We might spend years trying to learn how to operate their atomic machinery,” Kenniston said.

“We could couple gasoline engines to those generators,” Hubble suggested. “It’d furnish power enough to try one of these transmitters.”

Kenniston looked at him. “To call to the other people still left on Earth?”

“Yes. If there are any of them, they’d not hear our kind of radio calls. But this is their own communication setup. They’d hear it.”

Kenniston said finally, “All right Give me power, and I’ll try.”

In the next few days, Kenniston was so immersed in the overmastering fascination of the technical problem set him, that he saw little of how Middletown's people were adapting to New Middletown. He could hear the trucks rumbling constantly under the dome, as McLain indefatigably pushed the work of bringing supplies from the deserted town beyond the ridge.

They brought the gasoline engines needed, not only to pump water from the great reservoirs but also to turn one of the generators in the power station. Once he had power, Kenniston began to experiment. Realizing the futility of trying to fathom the principles of the strange super-radio transmitters, he tried merely to deduce the ordinary method of operating them.

The trucks brought other things— more food, clothing, furniture, hospital equipment, books. McLain began to talk of organizing a motor expedition to explore the surrounding country. And meanwhile, the crews already organized to explore New Middletown itself were searching every block and building. Already, they had made two surprising discoveries.

Hubble took Kenniston away from his work to see one of these. He led down through a chain of corridors and catacombs underneath the city.

“You know that it's a few degrees warmer here in New Middletown than the Sun's retained heat can account for,” Hubble said. “We found big conduits that seem to bring that slightly wanner air up into the city, so I had the men trace the conduits down to their source.”

Kenniston felt sudden excitement. “The source? A big artificial heating plant?”

“No, not that,” Hubble said. “But here we are now. Have a look for yourself.”

They had suddenly emerged onto a railed gallery in a vast underground chamber. The narrow gallery was the brink of an abysmal pit— a great, circular shaft that dropped into unplumbed blackness. Kenniston stared puzzledly. He saw that big conduits led upward out of the pit, and then diverged in all directions. “The slightly warmer air comes up from this shaft,” Hubble said, nodding toward the pit. He added, “I know it sounds impossible, to our engineering experience. But I believe this shaft goes downward many, many miles. I believe it goes down into Earth's core.”

“But Earth's core is incredibly hot!” Kenniston objected. “It was hot, millions of

years ago,” Hubble corrected. “And as it grew cooler, as the surface grew cold, they built this domed city and maybe others like it— and sank a great shaft downward to bring up heat from the core. But Earth’s core is even cooler now, almost cold. And now there is only a trifle of heat from it to warm the city a little.”

“So that’s why they couldn’t live here any more— it was the Earth heat they depended on, and that ran out,” said Kenniston, a little hopelessly.

The second discovery was made by Jennings, a young auto salesman who headed one of the exploration crews. He brought news of it to the scientists, and Kenniston went with Beitz and Crisci to see it.

It was simply a big, semicircular meeting hall in one of the larger buildings, with tiers of several hundred seats.

“A council room, or lecture hall, maybe,” said Beitz. “But what’s unusual about it?”

“Look at those seats in the second tier,” said Jennings. They saw then what he meant. The seats in that tier were not ordinary metal chairs like the others. They were different— different from the chairs, and different from each other. Some of them hardly looked like seats at all. One row of them were very wide and flat and low, with broad backs that flared in a little inward. Another row were very narrow seats, that had no backs at all. Still others looked a little like curved lounging chairs, but the curve was an impossibly deep one.

“If they’re seats,” said Jennings, “they weren’t intended for ordinary human people to sit in.”

Kenniston and the others looked at each other, startled. He had a sudden grotesque vision of this hall crowded with an audience, an audience partly human, and partly— what? Had humanity, in the last ages, shared the Earth with other races that were not human?

“We are all jumping to conclusions.” Beitz’ voice broke the spell. “They may not be seats at all.” But he added to Jennings as they left, “Better not tell the people about this. It might upset them.”

What the other exploration crews had found was summarized in a short speech

by Hubble at the big town meeting of Middletown's people held in the plaza on Sunday afternoon.

There had been church services that morning— services without bells or organs or stained glass, but held in lofty, shadowy rooms of cathedral solemnity. The first town meeting of New Middletown followed. Loudspeakers had been set up so that all in the big plaza might hear, and Mayor Garris, an older-looking, humbled Mayor Garris, spoke to them. He was stumblingly encouraging.

The ration system was working well, he told them. There was no danger of starvation, for hydroponic farming would soon be started. They could live in New Middletown indefinitely, if necessary.

“Doctor Hubble,” he added, “will tell you of what has been found in New Middletown by the exploring crews.”

Hubble was concise. He emphasized first that the original inhabitants of New Middletown had apparently left it deliberately.

“They took their personal belongings, their books, their clothing, their smaller apparatus, instruments, and furnishings. What they left were things too massive for easy transportation. That includes certain machinery which we think was atomically powered, but which must be studied with great care before attempts at operation can be made. We feel sure that in time, study will make it possible to use all such equipment.”

Mayor Garris rose to add eagerly, “And at least one piece of equipment is now ready to use! Mr. Kenniston has got one of the radio transmitters here going, and will now start calling to contact the other people of the Earth.”

A great cheering rose instantly from the gathered Middletowners. Kenniston, after the gathering broke up, found himself besieged by excited questioners. Yes, they would start calling, right away.

He was worried when he got a moment alone with Hubble. “Garris shouldn't have announced that! These people are dead sure now that we'll soon be talking to other, peopled cities!”

Hubble looked worried too. “They're so sure there are other people— that it's only a matter of contacting them.”

Kenniston looked at him. “Do you believe there are any others? I’m beginning to doubt it, Hubble. If they couldn’t live in this city, they couldn’t anywhere.”

“Perhaps,” Hubble admitted uneasily. “But we can’t be sure of anything. We have to try, and keep trying.”

Kenniston started the transmitter that night, using it for only ten minutes each hour, to conserve gasoline as much as possible. “Middletown calling!” he spoke into the microphone, “Middletown calling!”

No use of adding more— they could not yet operate a receiver to hear an answer. They could only call to make known their presence, and wait and hope that any others left on dying Earth would hear and come.

Crowds watched from outside the door, as he called. They were there through the night, when Beitz took over, and there again the next day, and the next. They were quite silent, but the hope in their faces made Kenniston sick. He felt, as another day and another passed, the mockery of the words he kept repeating.

“Middletown calling!”

Calling to what? To an Earth dying, devoid of human life, to a cold and arid sphere that had done with humanity long ago? Yet he had to keep sending it out, the cry of man lost in the ages and seeking his kind, the cry that he felt there were no ears on Earth to hear.

“Middletown calling— calling—”

Chapter 9— out of the silence

No answer. Weeks had gone by, while Kenniston and Beitz called and called, and out of the silence of the dying Earth had come no reply. Every hour they had spoken the words that had become meaningless. And between calls, they had fumbled with the strange receivers that they did not know how to tune. And nothing at all had happened.

Kenniston came to dread the times when he must leave the building and walk through the little crowd of hopeful Middletowners who were always gathered outside.

“No, not yet,” he had to say, always trying to look confident. “But maybe soon —”

“And maybe never,” Carol said to him hopelessly, when they were alone. “If anybody had heard, they could have got here from any part of Earth, in these weeks you’ve been calling.”

“Perhaps they don’t have airplanes,” he reminded her.

“If they had complicated radio receivers to hear our call, they’d have planes too, wouldn’t they?”

Her logic was unanswerable. For a moment Kenniston was silent. Then, “Please don’t say that to anyone else, Carol. All these people— it’s what keeps them going, I think, their hope of finding other people. They wouldn’t feel so lost, then.” He sighed. “We’ll keep calling. It’s all we can do. And maybe McLain and Crisci will find someone out there. They should be back soon.”

McLain had succeeded in organizing his motor expedition to explore the surrounding country. It had taken weeks of preparation, of marshalling tank-trucks from Middletown to use as gasoline caches at carefully selected points, of laying out tentative routes to follow. Two weeks before, the little caravan of jeeps and half-tracs had started out, and its return was due.

And as it searched the dusty wastes out there, as Kenniston and Beitz again and again voiced the unanswered call, work and life and death had marched forward

in New Middletown.

Hubble had helped lay out the schedule of necessary work. The hydroponic tanks had to be got ready. The whole city had to be cleaned of drifted dust. The supplies brought from old Middletown had to be inventoried.

A board of elected officials had assigned men to their work. Every man had his job, his schedule of hours, his pay in ration tickets. The schools had been set up again. Courts and law functioned once more, though all except serious offenders were liberated on probation.

Babies were born in New Middletown each day. And the death toll was heavy at first, most of its victims among the old who could not stand the shock of uprooting. A space of land outside the dome had been carefully fenced in as a cemetery.

But underneath all the bustle of new activities, it was a waiting city. A city, waiting with terrible eagerness for an answer to that call that went hourly out into the silence.

Kenniston felt his helplessness. He could not even understand completely the transmitters he used. He had, in these weeks, completely disassembled one of them without being able to puzzle out its circuits. He was sure that it employed radio frequencies far outside the electro-magnetic spectrum of twentieth-century science. But parts of the design were baffling. The words stamped on the apparatus meant nothing—they were in the same completely unknown language as all the city's inscriptions. He could only keep sending out the same questioning, hopeful message into the unknown. "Middletown calling!"

Finally, McLain's exploring expedition returned. Carol came running to Kenniston with the news. He went with her to the portal, where thousands of Middletowners were already anxiously gathering.

"They've had a hard time," said Kenniston, as the jeeps and half-tracs rolled through the portal and came to a halt. McLain, Crisci and the others were unshaven, dust-smearing, exhausted-looking. Some of them sagged in their seats.

McLain's voice boomed to the eager questioners. "Tell you all about it later! Right now, we're pretty beat up."

Crisci's tired voice cut in. "Why not tell them now? They'll have to know." He faced the wondering crowd and said, "We found something, yes. We found a city, two hundred miles west of here. A domed city, just like New Middletown."

Bertram Garris asked the question that was in everyone's mind. "Well? Were there people in that other city?"

Crisci answered softly, "No. There was nobody there. Not a soul. It was dead, and it had been dead a long time."

McLain added, "It's true. We saw no sign of life anywhere, except a few little animals on the plains."

Carol turned a pale face toward Kenniston. "Then there's no one else? Then we are the last?"

A sick silence had fallen on the crowd. They looked at each other numbly. And then Bertram Garris displayed unsuspected capacities of leadership. He got up on one of the half-tracs and spoke cheerfully.

"Now, folks, no use to let this news get you down! McLain's party only covered a few hundred miles, and Earth is a mighty big place. Remember that Mr. Kenniston's radio calls are going out, every hour." He rattled on with loud heartiness. "We've all been working hard, and we need some recreation. So tonight we're going to have a big get-together in the plaza— a town party. Tell everybody to come!"

The crowd of Middletowners brightened a little. But as they went away, Kenniston saw that most of them still looked back soberly. He told Garris, "That was a good idea, to take their minds off things."

The Mayor looked pleased. "Sure. They're just too impatient. They don't realize it may take the other people a good while to answer those calls of yours."

Kenniston realized that Garris' confidence had not been assumed. Despite the shattering new revelation, the Mayor still had faith that there were other people.

But Hubble was somber when he heard the news. "Another dead city? Then there's no further doubt in my mind. Earth must be lifeless."

“Shall I keep sending out the radio call?” Hubble hesitated. “Yes, Ken— for a while. We don’t want to spoil their party tonight.”

The town party in the plaza that night had the unusual luxury of electric lights, powered by a portable generator. There was a swing band on a platform, and a big space had been roped off for dancing. Kenniston threaded through the crowd with Carol, for Beitz had offered to stand his trick. Everyone knew him now and greeted him, but he noticed a significant difference in the greetings. They did not ask him now whether his calls had had an answer.

“They’re giving up hope,” he said to Carol. “They’re afraid there are no other people, and they don’t want to think about it.”

Yet the party went well, until Mayor Garris blundered. He had been cheerily backslapping his way through the crowd all evening, admiring babies, exchanging familiar greetings, obviously enjoying this relapse into the arts of politicians. Flushed and happy, he got up on the band platform and called through the loudspeaker to the crowd.

“Come on, folks, how about a little community singing? I’ll lead you with my famous tenor. How about ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart’?”

They laughed, and sang, as the band struck up the tune and the pudgy Mayor cheerfully waved his hand like a conductor. The old songs not heard on Earth for millions of years echoed off the tall white buildings and the great shimmering dome overhead.

But as they sang, as they sang “Banks of the Wabash” and “Old Kentucky Home,” voices and faces lost their brightness. Kenniston saw the haunting yearning that came into the gathered thousands of faces, and the mistiness in Carol’s eyes.

The swell of voices dropped a little. The singers seemed to hesitate. And then with an hysterical cry, a woman in the crowd sank sobbing to the ground.

The singing and the music stopped, and there was nothing but the racking sobs of the woman, whom a man vainly tried to comfort. Kenniston heard her crying out, “It’s all gone forever— our whole world and all its people! There’s only us, alone on a dead world!”

“Let’s not get downhearted, folks!” pleaded the Mayor, but it was too late for that. The spell was broken. The people of Middletown were at last confronted with their awful aloneness.

The party was over. The crowd silently dispersed, not speaking to each other, each man going back to his own home, his own thoughts. Kenniston tried to find words of comfort for Carol when he left her, but he could not. There was no comfort for anyone, not now. They all had to face it, the certainty that they were the last on Earth.

He walked slowly back through the silent, empty streets, to relieve Beitz. The Moon had risen now, and through the great dome it poured coppery light upon the deserted plaza. Then, suddenly, he stopped and turned as he heard a voice and running feet pursuing him.

“Hey! Hey, Mr. Kenniston!”

He recognized Bud Martin, who had owned the garage in old Middletown. Bud’s lean young face was excited, and the words came tumbling out of him so fast as to be almost incoherent.

“Mr. Kenniston, I thought I just saw a plane going over the dome, high up! Only it looked more like a big submarine than a plane. But I saw it, I know I did!”

Kenniston thought that he might have expected this. In their reaction of bitter disappointment, many of the Middletowners might be expected now to “see” the other people they so longed to see.

He said, “I didn’t hear anything, Bud.”

“Neither did I. It went quiet and fast, high up there. I got just a glimpse of it.”

Kenniston looked up with him. They stared for moments, but the moonlit sky was cold and empty. He lowered his gaze. “It must have been a cloud shadow, Bud. There’s nothing there.”

Bud Martin swore, and then said earnestly, “Listen, Mr. Kenniston, I’m not an hysterical woman. I saw something.”

It gave Kenniston pause. For a moment, his heart quickened. Was it possible..?

He stared again, for long minutes. The sky remained empty, and yet his throb of excitement persisted.

He said abruptly, “We’ll get Hubble. But don’t say anything to anyone else. Stirring up false hopes now would be disastrous.”

Hubble was with McLain and Crisci in a candlelit room, listening to their account of that other dead city they had found. He heard Bud Martin’s eager tale, and then looked at Kenniston.

“I saw nothing,” Kenniston admitted. “But through the dome, anything would be hard to see except when it was dead overhead.”

Hubble rose. “Perhaps we’d better have a look from outside. Get your coats on.”

Heavily wrapped, the five of them went along the silent streets to the portal, and through it into the outer night. They walked a hundred yards out from the portal, along the sand-drifted highway, and then stopped and scanned the sky. The cold was intense. The big Moon shone with a hard, coppery brilliance that washed the looming dome of New Middletown with light.

Kenniston’s gaze swept the blazing chains of stars. The old groups were much changed by the ages but a few he could still vaguely recognize—the time-distorted Great Bear warding the north, the warped and altered star-pattern of the Lyre. And individual stars still burned in unmistakable splendor—the blue-white, flaring beacon of Vega, the somber, smoky red magnificence of Antares, the throbbing gold of Altair.

“People are going to be seeing plenty of things,” said McLain skeptically. “We might as well...”

“Listen!” said Hubble sharply, holding up his hand. Kenniston heard only the whisper of the bitter wind. Then, faintly, he caught a thrumming sound that rose and fell and rose again.

“It’s from the north,” Crisci said suddenly. “And it’s coming back around toward us.”

All five of them were suddenly rigid, held in the grip of an emotion too big for utterance, as they peered at the starry sky. The thrumming deepened.

“That’s no plane motor!” McLain exclaimed.

It wasn’t, Kenniston knew. It was neither the staccato roar of combustion engines nor the scream of jets, but a deep bass humming that seemed to fill the sky. He was aware that his heart was pounding.

Crisci shouted and flung up his hand. They saw it almost at once, an elongated black mass cutting rapidly down across the stars.

Bud Martin yelled. “It’s coming right down on us!”

The thing, in a heartbeat, had become an enormous dark bulk rushing down upon them, looming like a thundercloud. They ran back toward the portal, their feet slipping on the loose sand.

“Look!” cried Crisci. “Look at it!”

They turned, there at the portal. And Kenniston saw now that the downward rush of the black visitant upon them had been only an illusion born of its bigness. For the thing, whatever it was, humming like a million tops, was settling upon the plain a half-mile from New Middletown. Sand spumed up wildly to veil the giant bulk, then fell away and disclosed it resting on the plain.

It was, Kenniston saw instantly, a ship. Bud Martin’s description had been accurate. The thing looked for all the world like a gigantic submarine without a conning tower, that had come down out of the sky to land upon the plain.

The deep bass thrumming had stopped. The thing lay there in the moonlight, big, dark, silent. They stared rigidly.

“A ship from another world?” Kenniston whispered. “A spaceship?”

“It must be. But there were no rocketjets. It uses some other kind of power.”

“Why don’t they come out of it, now they’ve landed?”

“What did they come here for? Who are they?”

The bulky enigma out there brooded, silent, unchanged. Then Kenniston heard a calling of voices, a rising uproar in the city behind him. Others had seen, and

called the news. The uproar of voices and running feet increased. All the thousands in New Middletown were beginning to stream in wild excitement toward the portal.

Mayor Garris' pudgy figure ran toward them. "Have they really come? Have the other people come?"

Hubble's voice crackled. "Keep the people back! They mustn't go outside yet. Something has come, we don't know what. Until we do know, we've got to be careful."

Into Kenniston's mind suddenly flashed the remembrance of that big meeting hall that Jennings had found, with its special section of queer seats that no ordinary human man or woman could have used. He felt a chill along his nerves. What manner of beings were in the looming, monstrous mass out there?

Garris sounded a little scared. "Why— why, I never thought that if people came, they might be enemies."

He started to shout to the police and National Guardsmen already on hand. "Get those people back! And get your guns!"

Presently the crowd had been forced back into the adjacent streets. And a score of armed police and Guardsmen waited with Hubble and Kenniston and the others, just inside the portal. The Mayor, his teeth chattering in the cold, said, "Shall we go out to them?"

Hubble shook his head. "No, we're not sure of anything. We'll wait."

They waited, shivering in the cold wind, and as they waited, Kenniston's mind rioted with speculation. This great vessel from outer space— whence had it come to dying Earth? From the farther stars? Why had it come? And what was going on inside it now? What eyes were watching them?

They waited. All New Middletown waited, and watched, as the Moon swung lordly across the zenith and the stars shifted and the cold deepened. And nothing happened. The monster metal bulk out there lay lightless and without sound.

The stars dimmed. Bleak gray light crept up the eastern sky. To Kenniston, chafing half-frozen hands, the mighty vessel out on the plain seemed unreal and

dreamlike.

McLain swore. “If they’re not coming to see us, we might as well go out to see them.”

“Wait,” said Hubble.

“But we’ve waited for hours, and—”

“Wait,” said Hubble again. “They’re coming now.”

Kenniston saw. A dark opening had appeared, low in the side of the distant, looming hull. Figures that were vaguely unreal in the dawn light were emerging from that opening, and moving slowly toward New Middletown.

Chapter 10— from the stars

Kenniston watched them come, the four vague figures walking slowly through the dawn, toward New Middletown. His heart pounded and his mouth was dry, and he was strangely afraid.

Perhaps it was the manner of their coming that made him so— the brooding, enigmatic bulk of that unknown ship, that long and cautious silence. It came to him that they, too, were doubtful.

The three leading figures resolved themselves gradually into men, clad in slacks and jackets against the biting cold. The fourth member of the party trudged along some distance behind them, a stocky form veiled in the blowing dust.

Mayor Garris said, wonderingly, “They look just like us. I guess people haven’t changed much after all, in a billion years.”

Kenniston nodded. For some reason, the cold knot in the pit of his stomach would not relax. There was something overpowering in this incredible meeting of two epochs.

He glanced at the others. Their faces were white and tense. There was a fooling of excitement verging almost on hysteria.

The strangers were close enough now to distinguish features. The stocky laggard remained indistinct, but of the three who came before, Kenniston saw now that only two were men. The third was a blue-eyed woman, tall and lithe, with hair the color of pale gold smooth-coiled about her head. Kenniston was struck by her. He had seen more beautiful women, but he had seldom seen one who carried herself with such grace and authority, and who looked at the world with such a direct, intelligent gaze. Almost instantly he resented her, for no more reason than that she made him instantly conscious of vast horizons of knowledge and experience which were far beyond his present ken. And yet her mouth was friendly, quite a strong mouth, but ready to smile.

The younger of the two men was broad and hard and healthy, with sorrel hair and one of those frank, jovial faces that is built over flint. Like the woman’s, his attitude was of alert, half-cautious reserve.

The other man was thin and untidy and very human. He had none of the cool reserve of his companions. He was excited, and showed it, blinking eagerly at the Middletowners. Kenniston warmed to him at once.

There was a strange silence, and the woman and two men stopped. They looked at the Middletowners, and the Middletowners stared at them. Then the woman said something to her companions in a rapid, unfamiliar tongue. The younger man nodded silently, and the thin eager man poured out a tumbling flood of words.

Mayor Garris stepped forward hesitantly, a paradox of pompous humility.

“I...” he said, and stopped. The small word vanished away on the wind, and he could seem to find nothing to replace it. The blond woman regarded him with her bright gaze, intent and faintly amused.

The thin man stepped forward toward them. Forming the words very carefully, he said, “Middletown calling.” And again, “Middletown— calling!”

Kenniston was shaken by a great amazement. Relief and understanding made him almost giddy for the moment, and he heard again his own tired voice speaking those two hopeless, pleading words into a silence that neither heard nor answered. But it had heard. It had answered, from somewhere. From where? Another world, another star? Not from anywhere on Earth, surely. That great ship had never stooped to make such a paltry journey.

He heard Mayor Garris utter a squeaking, strangled cry. A wave of shock, audible in the indrawn breath of every man there, swept the tight-packed group. Kenniston’s wandering thoughts came back with a start.

The fourth member of the party had come up and joined the other three. And Kenniston himself was appalled at what he saw.

The fourth of the newcomers was not human. Manlike, yes— but not a man.

He was tall, his body enormously strong and massive, his thick arms ending in hands like heavy paws. He was clothed in his own shaggy fur, supplemented by a harness-like garment. His head was flattened, its muzzle protruding in the fashion of a beast, his round and tufted ears alert. And his eyes... It was the eyes that were most shocking. They met Kenniston’s, large, and dark and full of a

quick, penetrating intelligence. Good-natured eyes, curious, smiling...

The Mayor had backed away. His face was quite white. He cried out shrilly, "Why, it isn't human!"

The furry one looked puzzled by this outburst. He glanced at the woman and the two men, and they all looked at Garris, frowning, as though at a loss to understand his fright.

The creature moved toward Garris a step or two, his pawlike hands outstretched. He spoke in a slow, rumbling voice and smiled, showing a row of great teeth that glistened sharp as sabres in the light.

Garris shrieked. And Kenniston saw panic on the faces of the other men, and saw the guns come up.

"Wait!" he yelled, and darted forward, thrusting the Mayor aside. "For God's sake, wait, you fools!" He faced them, standing so that his body shielded the alien one. He had, himself, a revulsion from that creature that was both beastlike and manlike. But the furry one had looked at him, and had smiled...

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "It's intelligent, it's one of them!"

"Stand aside, Kenniston," shouted the Mayor, his voice high with panic. "The brute looks dangerous!"

The guns he faced swung sharply away from Kenniston. He turned and saw that the four newcomers had suddenly stepped a little to one side. And abruptly, the scene ended. The woman raised her hand in a swift gesture. From the ship out on the plain came a flash of white light. It struck like a snake, at all the crowd of Middletowners in the portal. It struck, and was gone in an instant.

Kenniston had been in its path, too. He felt a stunning shock in every nerve of his body. There was only a split second of pain, and then a numbed paralysis as from an electric shock. He saw Garris and Hubble and the others stagger, their faces white and shaken. The guns dropped from nerveless hands.

Then the furry one trudged toward Kenniston. Again, his dark eyes smiled. He made reassuring rumbling sounds, and his big pawlike hands kneaded into Kenniston's neck with expert deftness. The paralysis of Kenniston's nerves

began to fade.

The sorrel-haired younger man had stepped forward and picked up one of the fallen guns. Incredulity came into his eyes as he examined it. He said something in a sharp voice to the others. They looked the gun over and over. Then, puzzled and startled, they stared at Kenniston and at the other Middletowners who now seemed returning to normal.

“They’ve got a death ray or something!” choked Bertram Garris. “They can kill us!”

Hubble said savagely, “Shut up. You’re making an ass of yourself. That weapon was only a nonlethal means of defense that you forced them to use.”

The woman called excitedly to the furry one. “Gorr Holl!” It was, obviously, his name. And Gorr Holl rejoined the other three. He too uttered sounds of bewilderment as he looked at the gun.

Kenniston spoke to Hubble, ignoring Garris and the dazed police. “I think they’ve just begun to suspect where we came from.”

The excitement of the four newcomers was obvious. It was the woman, Kenniston noticed, who first recovered from that bewilderment. She spoke quickly to the thin, blinking man, the one who had so happily repeated, “Middletown calling!” From her repeated use of the name, Kenniston guessed the man was called Piers Eglin. And Piers Eglin looked the most staggered of all the four— and the most joyful.

He came back to Kenniston. He almost devoured him with those blinking eyes. “Middletown,” he said. And then, after a moment, “Friends.”

Kenniston seized on that. “Friends? Then you speak English?” The word “English” set Piers Eglin off into a new paroxysm of excitement. He began to babble to the others, but the woman cut him short. He swung back to Kenniston. “English— language,” he almost panted. “You— speak— English— language.” Kenniston simply nodded.

A look of awe crept into Piers Eglin’s blinking eyes as he asked, “Who— No!” He began again. “Where— do you— come from?”

“From the past,” Kenniston answered, and felt the full unreality of it as he said it. “From far in the past.”

“How far?”

Kenniston realized that twentieth-century dates would mean little, after all these epochs. He thought a moment. Then he said, “Very far in the past. In our lifetime, atomic power was first released.”

“So far?” whispered Piers Eglin numbly. “But how? How?” Kenniston shrugged helplessly. “There was an atomic explosion over our city. We found our whole city in this age. That’s all.”

The thin man feverishly translated for the others. The woman showed deep interest. But it was Gorr Holl, the furry one, who made the longest comment in his rumbling voice.

Piers Eglin swung back to Kenniston, but Kenniston stemmed the other’s eager questions by a question of his own. “Where do you come from?”

The thin one pointed up at the dawnlit sky. “From—” he seemed trying to remember the ancient name. Then, “— from Vega.”

It was Kenniston’s turn to be staggered. “But you’re Earth-men!” He pointed to Gorr Holl’s furry figure. “And what about him?”

Again, Piers Eglin seemed to search his memory for a name. Then he said it. “Capella. Gorr Holl is from Capella.”

There was a silence, in which the four looked at the men of Middletown. Kenniston’s mind was a chaotic whirl, out of which one thing stood clear. The television-radio of this domed city had indeed been far outside his comprehension. That radio had been designed for interstellar distances. That was where the call had gone, and whence it had been answered— from Vega, from Capella, from the stars!

“But you speak our old language!” he cried incredulously.

Piers Eglin stumblingly explained. “I am an— historian, specializing in the pre-atomic Earth civilization. I learned its language from the old records. That is

why I asked leave to accompany this party to Earth.”

The woman interrupted. She was shivering a little, and she spoke now in a low, rapid voice. Piers Eglin told them, “She is Varn Allan, the Administrator of this — this sector. Here—” nodding to the sorrel-haired younger man— “is Norden Lund, the Sub-Administrator.” The words were hard for him to remember, harder still to shape. He added, “Varn Allan asks that we— we talk inside the city, where it is not so cold.”

Kenniston had guessed that the woman held authority in the group. He was not surprised. Her vibrant forcefulness was striking.

Mayor Garris, who was half frozen himself, was only too happy to accede to that request. He turned toward the portal, behind which all the thousands of New Middletown were being held with difficulty. Their massed faces showed as a pale blur through the glass of the dome.

“Make way, there!” Garris ordered, in his most important tone. He gestured at the sweating guardsmen and police who held the line. “Clear a way there, now, we’re coming in.” He raised his voice, speaking to the people beyond. “Stand back, will you? Everything’s fine, the other people have come at last, and they want to see our city. So let them through, let them through!”

The crowd, with painful reluctance, made a narrow lane through itself, which was widened by the efforts of the guardsmen. Leading the way for the star-folk, the Mayor’s dignity was somewhat injured by the uneasiness that caused him to skip hastily ahead with nervous backward glances at Gorr Holl’s towering figure. But he kept up his jovial front as leader of his people, shouting to them that all was well, that there was nothing to fear, and begging them to keep back and refrain from pushing.

Varn Allan was the first one to follow Garris through the portal. She hesitated, just an instant, as she and the jostling eager crowd caught sight of one another, and the crowd sent up a wild-throated roar of cheering that shook the dome. Behind her, Norden Lund grinned and shook his head, as a man might at the bad manners of children. Then Varn Allan smiled at the people and went on, and the edges of the crowd swayed and buckled inward and the guardsmen swore, and some irreverent soul whistled appreciatively at the tall, lithe woman with the golden hair. They shouted questions at her, a thousand all at once, and the half-

hysterical greetings of people who have waited so long that they have lost hope and then find it suddenly fulfilled, and Kenniston hoped that they would not do anything violent, like carrying her and Norden Lund on their shoulders.

He went in right beside Gorr Holl. The people had not seen him yet, except as a vague, dark figure beyond the wall of curving glass. When they did, their voice dropped dead still for a moment and then took up again on a rising note of incredulity and alarm. Women who had shoved and clawed to get in the first row now tried to scramble back out of harm's way, and the edges of the crowd drew sharply apart. Kenniston walked close to the big furry Capellan, his hand resting on one mighty shoulder, to show the crowd that they had nothing to fear. And the people stared and stared.

“What the devil is it? A pet?”

“Look, it's got clothes on! Don't tell me it's one of them!”

“Keep it away from me! It's showing its teeth...” Kenniston shouted explanations, and under his palm the dark thick fur was hot and alien, and he was almost as much afraid of Gorr Holl as they were. And then, from out of the crowd, a tiny girl came toddling directly into their path. Her eyes shining with childish glee, she ran toward Gorr Holl's mighty, furry form. “Teddy-bear!” she shrieked joyfully. “Teddy-bear!” And she flung her arms around his leg.

Gorr Holl uttered a rumbling laugh. He reached down his great paw to pat her head, and other children came running, breaking away from fearful mothers, clustering eagerly around the big Capellan as he trudged along. The little girl he hoisted to his shoulder and she rode there clinging to his ears, and after that it was impossible for anyone to fear him. The tension of the crowd relaxed and they grinned at each other and laughed.

“Sure, it's a pet! Hey, how do you like that? Walking on his hind legs, just like a man! Smart, ain't he? Why, you'd almost think he was trying to talk!”

Piers Eglin, who must have caught at least a part of this, peered sidelong at Gorr Holl, but he did not offer to translate.

The crowd became a fluid mass flowing along the boulevards, following the strangers. Help and hope and companionship had come at last to New Middletown, and the relief and joy in the faces of the people were wonderful to

see. But Kenniston watched the faces of the blue-eyed woman and the man Norden Lund, seeing their expressions change from incredulity to a startled acceptance.

Pier Eglin was beside himself. A woman's fur coat entranced him— quite ordinary cheap fur, but from a species of animal that Kenniston realized must have been extinct for millions of years. Cloth and leather became treasures unimaginable in his eyes. He talked incessantly, feverishly, pointing out this wonder and that to his companions, lapsing occasionally into his painful English to ask Kenniston some question. And when he saw an automobile he became perfectly hysterical with excitement.

The automobile was of interest to them all. Varn Allan and Norden Lund stopped to examine it, and Gorr Holl, gently disengaging himself from his burden of children, joined them. The furry one's quick eye apparently divined where the motive power was hidden away, and he made signs to Kenniston that he wanted to see inside. Kenniston lifted the hood. Immediately all four bent over to inspect the motor, and the crowd of Middletowners laughed to see the big tame pet animal imitating its masters. The star-folk talked, in their swift unfamiliar tongue, and Norden Lund pointed to the engine assembly with the same half mocking wonder that a man of Kenniston's day might have felt toward an oxcart. Gorr Holl spoke to Piers Eglin, and the little man turned to Kenniston.

“So beautiful, so primitive,” he whispered, and clasped his hands. “They ask you make it— make it....” He was stumped for a word, but Kenniston got his meaning. The keys were in the lock. He started the motor. Gorr Holl was fascinated. There was a good bit of talking and then the last cupful of gas in the tank ran out, and the motor died. The star-folk looked at each other, and nodded, and went on.

Mayor Garris was now in his finest form. He had lost his terror of Gorr Holl in his pride and his excitement. He showed the strangers from the stars the means by which New Middletown had been made livable, he babbled about it government, its schools and courts, the distribution of food. How much of it the strangers got through Pier Eglin's stumbling translations, Kenniston could not know. But an unreasoning resentment was growing in him.

For he and all the folk of Middletown shared Garris' pride. They had had a hard time, but they had taken this alien city and with their own hands and ingenuity

they had made a functioning decent habitation out of it, and they were proud of that. And all the while they were being proud, the strangers peered at the gasoline pumps and the improvised water system and the precious electric lights that had cost such labor, and were appalled at the crudity and ignorance of these things. They did not need to say so. It was plain in their faces.

Presently they stopped and conferred at some length among themselves. Evidently they reached a decision, for Piers Eglin turned and spoke.

“We have seen enough for this time,” he said. “Later—” and here he trembled with eagerness and his eyes shone moistly, like a hound’s— “later we will wish to see the old city, which you say still stands. But now Varn Allan says we will return to the ship, to report what we have found to Government Center.”

“Listen!” said Kenniston urgently. “We need help. We need power, and our fuel is running low.”

Hubble, who had been nearby through all the visit of the strangers, nodded and said, “If you could start up some of the atomic generators here...”

Piers Eglin turned at once to consult Varn Allan, who glanced at Kenniston and Hubble and nodded. Piers Eglin said, “Of course. She says you should be made as comfortable as possible while you are still here. The crew of the *Thanis* will help. They will work under Gorr Holl, who is our chief atomic technician.”

The Mayor gasped. “That furry brute a technician?”

Piers Eglin cleared his throat. “There will be— others, among the crew. They will be strange to you. But they are also friends. You had better assure your people.”

Garris gulped, and said, “I’ll attend to it.”

“I will act as— yes, interpreter. And now there is much to be done. I will return shortly, with the crew and the necessary— uh— objects.”

The star-folk left then, going back as they had come, though the portal and out across the dusty plain. And as they went Mayor Garris gave the news to the crowd— power, more water, more lights, perhaps even heat. The wild, jubilant cheering startled the still heights of the towers and the dome rang with it and

underneath that cry of joy, Hubble said to Kenniston, “What did he mean— while we are still here?” Kenniston shook his head. A cold doubt was in him, almost a foreboding, and it was based on nothing that had been said or done, but simply on the realization of the abyss that separated the civilization of old Middletown from civilization that had gone out among the stars so far and so long ago that Earth was almost forgotten.

He wondered how well those two incredibly disparate cultures were going to understand each other. He stood for a long while, wondering, watching the crowd disperse, and even the thought that soon the big generators would be humming again could not dispel his worry.

Chapter 11— revelation

The Crew of the Thanis came into New Middletown that afternoon, and Kenniston and Carol, and all the rest of the city's thousands, watched them come.

There were two score of them— a hard-handed, alert, capable breed no different from all the sailors Kenniston had ever seen, though their seas were the incalculable deeps of outer space and their faces were darkened by the rays of alien Suns. Across the blowing dust of this world that had bred and lost them they came, and with them were the others Piers Eglin had spoken of— the strange children of other stars.

Kenniston had explained about these aliens to Carol, who had seen no more than the tips of Gorr Holl's furry ears and had supposed, like the others, that he was only a peculiar kind of pet. He didn't think that she had really understood him, any more than the people of New Middletown had really understood the Mayor's similar explanation.

"From Vega," Carol had said, and shivered, looking toward the dim sky where the stars showed even in daylight. "They can't be like us, Ken. No human being could ever go out there, and still be like us."

Kenniston was startled to hear his own thoughts repeated in her voice, but he said reassuringly. "They can't have changed too much. And the others, the humanoids— they may look queer, but they're our friends."

It was what Mayor Garris had told his people. "Whatever these newcomers are like, they've got to be treated right, and there's a jail cell waiting for anyone who makes trouble with them. Do you all get that? No matter what they look like, act as though they're people!"

Hearing is one thing, seeing another. And now Carol's fingers closed tight on Kenniston's hand and her body shrank against his, and the crowd who had gathered to watch this second entrance of the incredible into their midst, stared and whispered and moved uneasily.

One of these aliens was big and bulky, walking stodgily on massive legs. His

wrinkled gray skin hung in heavy folds. His face was broad and flat and featureless, with little, wise old eyes that glanced with shrewd understanding at the staring, silent crowd.

Two were lean and dark, moving like conspirators wrapped in black cloaks. Their narrow heads were hairless, and their glance was bright and full of madcap humor. Kenniston realized with a shock that the cloaks they wore were wings, folded close around their bodies.

There was another, who had peculiar gliding grace that hinted of unguessed strength and speed, and whose bearing was very cool and proud. He was handsome, with a mane of snow-white fur sweeping back from his brow, and there was only a faint touch of cruelty in his broad cheekbones and straight, smiling mouth.

These four, and Gorr Holl were manlike but not men, children of far worlds walking with easy confidence on old Earth.

“They’re horrible,” whispered Carol, drawing away. “Unholy! How can you stand to be near them?”

Kenniston was fighting down much the same reaction. The Middletowners gaped and muttered and drew back, partly from a creeping fear of the unnatural, partly from sheer racial resentment. It was hard enough to accept the fact that such nonhuman people existed at all. It was harder still to accept them as equals. Beast was beast and man was man, and there was no middle ground...

But not to Middletown’s children. They ignored the bronzed spacemen and clustered in droves around the humanoids. They had none of their elders’ preconceptions. These were creatures out of fairy tales come alive, and the children loved them.

Piers Eglin came up to Kenniston. Kenniston said. “Hubble has the main generator rooms opened up. He’s waiting for us there. I’ll take you.”

Eglin sighed. “Thank you,” he said. He seemed desperately unhappy. Kenniston said a hasty goodbye to Carol, and fell in beside the little historian.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

“My orders,” said Piers Eglin. “I am to interpret, and to teach some of you our language.” He shook his head dismally. “It will take days, and that old city of yours— I should be in it every moment.”

Kenniston smiled. “I’ll try to learn fast,” he said.

He led the way to where Hubble was waiting by the generators, and behind him he heard the eerie footfalls of the creatures who were not human, and it was incredible to him that he was going to have to work beside these weird beings who gave him a cold shiver every time he came near them. Surely they could not behave like men!

They went into the building, into an enormous room filled with the towering, dusty shapes of armored mechanisms that he and Hubble had not been able to make head nor tail of. The senior scientist joined them, looking askance at the humanoids.

Kenniston said, “We supposed that these were the main generators.” He spoke to Pier Eglin, since Eglin must do the translating, but he was facing Gorr Holl and the four others who stood beside him. “If they can really repair and start them, we...”

His voice trailed off. The five pairs of alien eyes regarded him, the five alien bodies breathed and stirred, and the crest of white fur on the proud one’s skull lifted in a way so beastlike that it was impossible for Kenniston to pretend any longer to accept them as human. Doubt, distrust, and just a hint of fear crept into his face. Piers Eglin frowned a little, and started to speak.

With the suddenness of a bat darting out in the evening, one of the lean dark brothers whipped wide his wings and made a little spring at Kenniston, uttering a cry that sounded very much like “Boo!”

Kenniston leaped backward, startled almost out of his skin. And the lean one promptly doubled up with laughter, which was echoed by the others. Even the large grey creature smiled. They all looked at Kenniston and laughed, and presently Hubble got it and began to laugh too, and after that there was nothing for Kenniston to do but join in. The joke was on him, at that. They had known perfectly well how he felt about them, and the lean one had paid him back in his own coin, but with humor and not malice.

And somehow, after they had laughed together, the tension was gone. Laughter is a human sort of thing. Kenniston mumbled something, and Gorr Holl slapped his shoulder, nearly putting him on his face.

But when he approached the dusty generators, Gorr Holl changed abruptly from a shambling, good-natured creature into a highly efficient technician. He operated hidden catches, and had a shield panel off one of the big mechanisms before Kenniston saw how he did it. He drew a flat pocket flash from a pouch on his harness, and used it for light as he poked his hairy bullet-shaped head inside the machine. His low, rumbling comments came out of the bowels of the generator. Finally Gorr Holl withdrew his head from the machine, and spoke disgustedly.

Eglin translated, “He says this old installation is badly designed and in poor condition. He says he would like to get his hands on the technician who would do a job like this.”

Kenniston laughed again. The big, furry Capellan sounded like a blood brother to every repair technician on old Earth. While Gorr Holl examined the other generators, Piers Eglin fastened onto Hubble and Kenniston, deluging them with questions about their own remote time. They managed at last to ask a question of their own, one that was big in their minds but that they’d had no chance to ask before.

“Why is Earth lifeless now? What happened to all its people?”

Piers Eglin said, “Long ago, Earth’s people went out to other worlds. Not so much to the other planets of this System—the outer ones were cold, and watery Venus had too small a land surface— but to the worlds of other stars, across the galaxy.”

“But surely some of them would have stayed on Earth?” said Kenniston.

Eglin shrugged. “They did, until it grew so cold that even in these domed cities life was difficult. Then the last of them went, to the worlds of warmer Suns.”

Kenniston said, “In our day, we hadn’t even reached the Moon.” He felt a little dazed by it all. “...to the worlds of other stars, across the galaxy...”

Gorr Holl finally came back to them and rumbled lengthily. Eglin translated, “He

thinks they can get the generators going. But it'll take time, and he'll need materials— copper, magnesium, some platinum—”

They listened carefully, and Hubble nodded and said, “We can get all those for you in old Middletown.”

“The old city?” cried Piers Eglin eagerly. “I will go with you! Let us start at once!”

The little historian was afire for a look at the old town. He fidgeted until he and Hubble and Kenniston, in a jeep; were driving across the cold ocher wasteland.

“I shall see, with my own eyes, a town of the pre-atomic age!” he exulted.

It was strange to come upon old Middletown, standing so silent in the midst of desolation. The houses were as he had last seen them, the doors locked, the empty porch swings rocking in the cold wind. The streets were drifted thick with dust. The trees were bare, and the last small blade of grass had died.

Kenniston saw that Hubble's eyes were misted, and his own heart contracted with a terrible pang of longing. He wished that he had not come. Back in that other city, absorbed in the effort to survive, one could almost forget that there had been a life before.

He drove the jeep through those deathly streets, and memory spoke to him strongly of lost summers— girls in bright frocks, catalpa trees heavy with blossom, the quarreling of wrens, and the lights and sounds of human voices in the drowsy evening. Piers Eglin was speechless with joy, lost in a historian's dream as he walked the streets and looked into shops and houses.

“It must be preserved,” Eglin whispered. “It is too precious. I will have them build a dome and seal it all— the signs, the artifacts, the beautiful scraps of paper!”

Hubble said abruptly, “There's someone here ahead of us.” Kenniston saw the small bullet-shaped car that stood outside the old Lab. Out of the building came Norden Lund and Varn Allan.

She spoke to Eglin, and he translated, “They have been gathering data for her report to Government Center.”

Kenniston saw the distaste in the woman's clearcut face as her blue eyes rested on the panorama of grimy mills, the towering stacks black with forgotten smokes, the rustling rails of the sidings, the drab little houses huddled along the narrow streets. He resented it, and said defiantly. "Ask her what she thinks of our little city?"

Eglin did, and Varn Allan answered incisively. The little historian looked uneasy when Kenniston asked him to interpret.

"Varn Allan says that it is unbelievable people could live in a place so pitiful and sordid."

Lund laughed. Kenniston flushed hot, and for a moment he detested this woman for her cool, imperious superiority. She looked at old Middletown as one might look at an unclean apes' den.

Hubble saw his face, and laid a hand on his arm. "Come on, Ken. We have work to do."

He followed the older man into the Lab, Piers Eglin trailing along. He said, "Why the hell would they put a haughty blonde in authority?"

Hubble said, "Presumably because she is competent to fill the job. Don't tell me old-fashioned masculine vanity is bothering you?"

Piers Eglin had understood what they were saying, for he chuckled. "That's not such an old-fashioned feeling. Norden Lund doesn't much like being Sub for a girl."

When they came out of the building with the materials Gorr Holl had requested, Varn Allan and Lund were gone.

They found, upon their return to New Middletown, that Gorr Holl and his crew were already at work disassembling the generators. Bellowing orders, thundering deep-chested Capellan profanity, attacking each generator as though it were a personal enemy, Gorr Holl drove his hard-handed spacemen into performing miracles of effort.

Kenniston, in the days that followed, forgot all sense of strangeness in the intense technical interest of the work. Laboring as he could, eating and sleeping

with these star-worlders though the long days and nights, he began to pick up the language with amazing speed. Piers Eglin was eager to help him, and after Kenniston discovered that the basic structure of the tongue was that of his own English, things went more easily.

He discovered one day that he was working beside the humanoids as naturally as though he had always done it. It no longer seemed strange that Magro, the handsome white-furred Spican, was an electronics expert whose easy unerring work left Kenniston staring.

The brothers, Ban and Bal, were masters at refitting. Kenniston envied their deftness with outworn parts, the swift ease with which their wiry bodies flitted batlike among the upper levels of the towering machines, where it was hard for men to go.

And Lal'lor, the old grey stodgy one of the massive body, who spoke little but saw much from wise little eyes, had an amazing mathematical genius. Kenniston discovered it when Lal'lor went with him and Hubble and Piers Eglin to look at the big heat shaft that seemed to go down to the bowels of Earth.

The historian nodded comprehendingly as he looked at the great shaft and its conduits. It descended, he said, to Earth's inmost core.

"It was a great work. It and others like it, in these domed cities, kept Earth habitable ages longer than would otherwise have been the case. But there is no more heat in Earth's core to tap, now." He sighed. "The doom of all planets, sooner or later. Even after their Sun has waned they can live while their interior heat keeps them warm. But when that interior planetary heat dies the planet must be abandoned."

Lal'lor spoke in his throaty, husky voice. "But Jon Arnol, as you know, claims that a dead, cold planet can be revived. And his equations seem unassailable."

And the bulk gray Miran—for that star had bred him, Kenniston had learned—repeated a staggering series of equations that Kenniston could not even begin to follow.

Piers Eglin, for some reason, looked oddly uncomfortable. He seemed to avoid Lal'lor's gaze as he said hastily, "Jon Arnol is an enthusiast, a fanatic theorist. You know what happened when he tried a test."

As soon as Kenniston could make himself understood in the new tongue, Piers Eglin considered that his duty was done and he departed for Old Middletown, to shiver and freeze and root joyfully among the archaic treasures that abounded in every block. Left alone with the star-worlders, Kenniston found himself more and more forgetting differences of time and culture and race as he worked with them to force life back into the veins of the city.

They had New Middletown's water system in full operation again, and the luxury of opening one of the curious taps and seeing water gush forth in endless quantities was a wonderful thing. Many of the great atomic generators were functioning now, including a tremendous auxiliary heating system which made the air inside the dome several degrees warmer. And Gorr Holl and Margo had been working hard on the last miracle of all.

There came a night when the big Capellan called Kenniston into one of the main generator rooms. Magro and a number of the crewmen were there, smeared with dust and grease but grinning the happy grins of men who have just seen the last of a hard job. Gorr Holl pointed to a window.

"Stand over there," he said to Kenniston, "and watch." Kenniston looked out, over the dark city. There was no moon, and the towers were cloaked in shadow, the black canyons of the streets below them pricked here and there with the feeble glints of candles and the few electric bulbs that shone around the City Hall. Gorr Holl strode across the room behind him, to a huge control panel half the height of the wall. He grunted. There was a click and a snap as the master switch went home, and suddenly, over that nighted city under the dome, there burst a brilliant flood of light.

The shadowy towers lit to a soaring glow. The streets became rivers of white radiance, soft and clear, and above it all there was a new night sky—the wondrous luminescence of the dome, like a vast bowl fashioned out of moonbeams and many-colored clouds, crowning the gleaming towers with a glory of its own. It was so strange and beautiful, after the long darkness and the shadows, that Kenniston stood without moving, looking at the miracle of light, and was aware only later that there were tears in his eyes.

The sleeping city woke. The people poured out into the shining streets, and the sound of their voices rose and became one long shout of joy. Kenniston turned to Gorr Holl and Magro and the others. He wanted to say something, but he could

not find any words. Finally he laughed, and they laughed with him, and they went out together into the streets.

Mayor Garris met them almost at once, having run all the way from City Hall. Hubble was with him, and most of the men from the old Lab, and a crowd of Middletowners. There was no making any sense out of anything that was said, but the people hoisted Gorr Holl and Magro and the crewmen to their shoulders and rode them in a triumphal procession around the plaza, and the shouts and cheers were deafening. More than water, more than heat, the people treasured this gift of light. And on that night they accepted the humanoids as brothers.

A little later, a breathless and jubilant group gathered in City Hall— Gorr Holl and Magro, Kenniston, Hubble, and the Mayor. Bertram Garris wrung the big Capellan's mighty paw and beamed at Magro, trying to express his thanks for all that they and the others had done, and Gorr Holl listened, grinning.

"What's he saying?" he asked Kenniston, who now occupied the position of interpreter.

Kenniston laughed. "He wants to know what he can do to show his appreciation — like giving you the city or his daughter in marriage, or a few pints of his blood. Seriously, Gorr, we are all mighty grateful. You people have made the city live again, and— well, is there anything we can do to show you we mean it?"

Gorr Holl considered. He looked at Magro, and Magro nodded solemnly. Gorr Holl said, "Well, being primitives— we could use a drink!"

Hubble, who had picked up a smattering of the language, began to laugh. Kenniston translated for the Mayor, who immediately proclaimed a medical emergency and hastened to produce bottles from the hoard. It was a cheerful celebration, and Kenniston found himself actively missing Bal and Ban and the grey Lal'lor, who had returned to the ship with part of the crew a day or so before.

An unhappy thought occurred to him, and he said, "I suppose you people will be going away pretty soon, now that the work's done."

Margo shrugged his supple shoulders. "That will depend on a number of things." He glanced lazily at Gorr Holl.

Gorr Holl was a little drunk by now— not much, but loud and cheerful. The Mayor was feeling good too, and was affectionately patting the Capellan’s great furry shoulder.

“I want you to understand,” Garris was saying earnestly, “that I’m sorry about that stupid bull of mine when I first saw you. We’re all sorry, seeing how much you’ve done for us.”

“Listen, we haven’t done much,” said Gorr Holl, when Kenniston had translated. “But the lights and all will make you more comfortable here, while you’re waiting.”

Kenniston stared at him. “What do you mean— while we’re waiting?”

“Why, while you’re waiting to be evacuated, of course,” said Gorr.

There was a little silence. Kenniston felt a queer tension seize him, and he knew suddenly that this was something he’d been unconsciously expecting, something that he’d felt wasn’t quite right, all along.

He said carefully, “Gorr, we don’t understand this. What is this talk of evacuation?”

The big Capellan stared at him, with surprise in his large dark eyes and bearlike face. But, of a sudden, Kenniston felt that that surprise was completely assumed, that in this offhand, casual way Gorr Holl was springing something on them and watching for their reaction.

“Didn’t Piers tell you?” said Gorr Holl. “No, I suppose he’d have instructions not to. They’d figure you people were emotional primitives like Magro and me, and that the less time you have to think about it, the better.”

Kenniston said tightly again, “What do you mean by evacuation?”

The Capellan looked at him levelly now. “I simply mean that, by order of the Governors, all you people are to be evacuated from Earth to some other star-world.”

Chapter 12— crisis

Three men of Earth stared at the big Capellan, and for a long, long moment no one spoke. Gorr Holl became absorbed in the glass he held between his hands. Magro watched them with his bright cat eyes. The beautiful streaming light poured over them, and the men were like three images of stone.

Bertram Garris found his tongue at last. But it was only to repeat Gorr Holl's words, as Kenniston had translated them.

“Evacuation?” he said. And again, “Evacuation?”

“To the world of another star,” said Kenniston slowly. His mouth twitched, and he leaned close to Gorr Holl, and cried, “What do you think we're made of?”

Gorr Holl looked around their faces, and then said ruefully, “I guess I've talked too much.” His ruefulness was no more convincing than his earlier surprise.

Mayor Garris had begun to tremble. A fury was building up in him, a genuine fury that had nothing to do with display. He glared at Magro and at Gorr Holl.

“They knew this all along, that woman and the others,” he said. “They came in here, pretending to be our friends, and all the time behind our backs...” He stopped. His wrath and fear were all but choking him, coming so swiftly after joy. His voice went up an octave. “You tell them, Kenniston, tell them from me — if they think we're going to move clear off the Earth to some— some—” he stammered over the sheer impossibility of what he was saying, “— some damn fool place out in the sky— well, they're crazy!”

Hubble said to Kenniston, “Ask him if this is a thing they do, these Governors? I mean, this moving of whole populations from one world to another?”

Gorr Holl nodded to that. “Oh, yes. Whenever life on some planet becomes economically unsound, or the margin of survival is too small, the Governors evacuate the people to a better world. There are lots of them, good warm fertile planets that are uninhabited or nearly so. They did it to some of my own people, moved them from Capella Five to Aldebaran.”

Kenniston cried out of his anger, “And people let that be done to them? They didn’t even resist it?”

Gorr Holl said, “People— human people, I mean— have got millions of years of civilization behind them. They’re used to peaceful government, used to obedience, and they’ve been moving from world to world ever since they left Earth ages ago, so that one planet doesn’t mean much more than another to them. But the primitive humanoid folk, lately civilized, like my own and Magro’s, aren’t so reasonable. There’s been a good bit of resentment among them about this evacuation business. In fact, they hate it— just as much as you do.”

“Here!” said Hubble sharply. “Where are you going?” He was talking to the Mayor, who was striding suddenly toward the door. He caught Garris by the coat and pulled him back. The Mayor struggled sullenly to free himself.

“I’m going to tell them,” he said, jerking his head toward the sounds of revelry that came from the crowd of Middletowners in the plaza. “Move off the Earth? They’ll have something to say about that!”

“What do you want to do?” snapped Hubble. “Start a riot? Don’t be a fool, that’s no way to handle this. No, it’s that ice-water blonde we’ve got to talk to, and that fellow Lund.” He shook Garris. “Stop it, I say! Going off half-cocked will only make it harder for everyone.”

Garris stopped struggling. He looked from Hubble to Kenniston and back again. “All right,” he said, “we’ll talk to them. But they’d better get it through their heads that they’re not dealing with any flock of tame sheep.” He stamped back into the room. “Ordering us off our own world..! Get those two freaks out of here, Kenniston. I was right the first time. They’re not to be trusted, they’re...”

“Oh, shut up,” said Kenniston impatiently. “Gorr and Margo don’t make the laws. They’re simply being decent enough to give us fair warning of something we wouldn’t have known about until it was too late.” He knew there was more in it than that, but he was too hurried and upset to search for deeper motives now. He turned to Gorr and the Spican.

“Listen,” he said. “You’ve seen how the Mayor reacted. Well, I can assure you that all our people will react just that way, only more so. Tell that to Varn Allan, and tell her that she’d better come here and talk about this evacuation before she

gets in too deep. Tell her we don't like having things done behind our backs. Tell her—" He caught himself, surprised by his own fury. "No, I guess you couldn't tell her that," he said, and Gorr Holl grinned.

"As one primitive to another, I get your meaning."

"Well, all right. And Gorr— you and Magro and the others better stay out of the city. When this thing breaks, I wouldn't guarantee anybody's safety."

"Oh," said Gorr Holl, and grinned very widely so that even his grinders glistened, "we'll be quite safe, confined to quarters in the ship. We, or rather I, have done an evil thing. We have spoken out of turn, and upset the Policy."

The three of them, humanoids and human, looked at each other, and there was understanding between them. Kenniston put his hand on Gorr Holl's furry shoulder, and gripped the iron muscles of it, and Magro said, "One more thing, Kenniston. If there's trouble— and I seem to smell trouble very strongly in the air— watch out for Lund. Varn Allan may be much too sure of herself, but she's honest. Lund— well, he wants Varn's job, and he will cheerfully cut anyone's throat to get it."

"That is so," said Gorr Holl. "Remember, Kenniston."

"I'll remember. And— thanks."

They went away, to take the message of defiance to the ship. Kenniston watched them go, and the Mayor watched them, and they listened to the cheering that followed them all the way to the portal.

"I'm sorry I called them freaks," the Mayor said suddenly. "By God, they're more like us than the people in that ship!"

Hubble nodded. "Their culture level is closer to ours. They haven't lost their old aboriginal roots. Our own people have gone too far beyond us. The whole pattern of their thinking is different. We— well, we're strangers now, to our own kind."

To Kenniston, the cheering and the happiness of the Middletowners out there was an ironically bitter thing, now. If they knew what was being planned for them...

He said to Hubble, nodding his head toward the Mayor, “Will you stick with him and keep him from telling everyone? He’ll listen to you more than to anyone.”

Hubble said, “I will. You get some sleep, Ken. You’ve been working a tough grind— and the Allan woman and Lund won’t likely come before morning.”

And Kenniston slept, but neither much nor well. In spite of his exhaustion, Gorr Holl’s words rang like passing bells in his mind all the rest of that night— evacuate, evacuate— to the world of another star. And he thought of all the people of Middletown who happily believed their troubles were over, and of Carol— particularly of Carol— and most of all he thought of Varn Allan, whom he had begun to hate. And he was afraid.

It did not take much imagination to divine what the Mayor’s narrowness had missed— a vast and powerful machinery of government directing this future universe, a machinery of which the big starship and its occupants were but a symbol. It did not seem likely that a handful of people on a dying planet could successfully defy that government for very long.

Hubble woke him at last out of an uneasy slumber, to tell him that Varn Allan and Lund had come, and that the Mayor had called the City Council.

“We need you to interpret, Ken,” he said. “You speak the language better than any of us, and this is too important to take any chances of misunderstanding.”

Neither of them talked much on the way to the soaring tower that was now City Hall. And Kenniston could see that Hubble was as worried and oppressed as he.

A crowd had gathered in the plaza, a happy crowd, come to cheer their good friends who had helped them so much. Inside City Hall, the Council of Middletown sat around a massive metal table. The Mayor, Borchard the coal dealer, Moretti the wholesale produce merchant, half a dozen more, facing at one end of the table the woman and the man who came from Vega and who were Administrators over a vast sector of space with all its worlds and peoples.

Mayor Garris fastened on Kenniston the moment he came in. He looked as though he had slept even less than Kenniston, and his mood had not changed since the night before.

“You ask her, Kenniston,” he said. “You ask her if this evacuation story is true.”

He asked her.

Varn Allan nodded. “Quite true. I’m sorry that Gorr Holl spoke so prematurely—is seems to have upset your people.” She glanced at the ominous faces of the City Council and the tense countenance of the Mayor. It struck Kenniston that she had been all through this situation before with other populations, and was attacking the problem with a kind of weary patience.

“I am sure,” she said, “that when they understand, they will realize that we are only serving their best interests.”

“Best interests?” cried Garris, when he had heard that. “Then why didn’t you tell us at first? Why plan this behind our backs?”

Norden Lund, a smug look on his face, said to the woman, “I told you it would have been better—”

“We’ll discuss that later,” she flashed. Kenniston could see the effort she made to keep her imperious temper in check as she went on, speaking directly to him, “We wanted to wait until we could present a complete plan of evacuation, so as not to upset your people too much.”

“In other words,” said Kenniston angrily, “you were dealing with a bunch of primitive aborigines who had to be coaxed along?”

“Aren’t you acting in just such fashion?” Varn Allan demanded. Again, she visibly got a grip on her irritation. She said, carefully as though explaining to a child, “A shipful of evacuation experts is on its way here, should arrive soon. They can assess the needs of your people, and find a world that will fit their physical and psychological needs. We will see that it is a world as much like your past Earth as possible.”

“That,” said Kenniston ironically, “is very decent of you.” The woman’s blue eyes flashed open hostility at him. He turned away from her, for Garris was demanding a translation. He gave it, and in his own resentment he did not soften it.

Garris forgot oratory, in his indignation. He sputtered, “If they think we are going to move away from Earth to some crazy world out in the sky, they’re badly mistaken! You make that clear to them!”

Varn Allan looked honestly bewildered, when Kenniston did. “But surely you people don’t want to stay in the cold and hardship of this dying world?”

Kenniston, watching the anger and the instinctive, basic fear grow still stronger in the Mayor’s white face, could understand his feelings. His own reaction was the same.

“Not want to stay here?” said Garris, forcing words out painfully from a throat constricted with emotion. “Not want to? Listen, you people! We have left our own time. We have had to leave our own city, our homes. That’s enough. It’s all we can stand in one lifetime. Leave Earth, leave our own world? No!” There was no oratory about him now, at all. He was like a man who has been asked to die.

Kenniston spoke to Varn Allan. His own voice was not quite steady. “Try to understand. We are Earth-born. Our whole life, all the generations before us, since the beginning...”

He could not put it into words, this sudden passionate oneness with Earth.

The Earth hath He given to the children of men... The Earth, the soil, the winds and the rains, the growth and the dying over the ages, beast and tree and man. You could not forget that. You could not let drop the heritage of a world as though it had never been.

The sorrel-haired Norden Lund was speaking to Varn Allan, looking contemptuously at the Middletowners as he spoke. “I warned you, Varn, that these primitives are too emotional for ordinary methods.”

The woman, her blue eyes troubled, ignored Lund and addressed Kenniston. “You must make them recognize the facts. Life here is impossible, and therefore they must go.”

“Let her tell that to the people,” said the Mayor, in an oddly tight voice. “No. I’ll tell them myself.”

He rose and left the council room. There was a curious dignity about his plump figure now. Borchard and Moretti and the others followed. They, too, showed a shrinking, instinctive dread of the thing that had been proposed. They went out on the steps, and Kenniston and Hubble and the two from the stars went with them.

Outside in the plaza were still gathered thousands of the Middletowners, millhand, housewife, banker and bookkeeper, the old men and the little children. They were still happy, and they cheered, sending up a great joyous shout to echo from the towers.

Mayor Garris took the microphone of the loudspeaker system.

“Folks, listen carefully! These new people are telling us now that we ought to leave Earth. They say they’ll give us a better world, somewhere out there among the stars. What about it? Do you want to go— away from Earth?”

There was a long moment of utter silence, in which Kenniston saw the Middletowners’ faces grow bewildered, incredulous. He looked at Van Allan’s clearcut face and saw that the shadow of weariness on it was deeper. He realized again that two epochs, two utterly different ways of life were looking at each other here, and finding it difficult to understand each other.

When, finally, the crowd of Middletowners had grasped the suggestion, their answer came as a rising chorus of exclamations.

“Go off and live someplace in the sky? Are these people nuts?”

“It was bad enough to leave Middletown for this place! But to leave Earth?”

A large-handed, stocky man whom Kenniston recognized as Lauber, McLain’s truckdriver, came to the steps and spoke up to the Mayor.

“What’s all this about, anyway? We’re getting along here all right now. Why would we want to go off to the Moon or somewhere?”

The Mayor turned to the two star-folk. “You see? My people wouldn’t listen to an idea like that for a minute!”

Kenniston told the woman, “The people completely reject the whole proposal.”

Varn Allan stared at him, in honest surprise. “But it is not a ‘proposal’— it is a formal order of the Board of Governors! I recommended this evacuation, and they have approved it.”

Kenniston said dryly, “Unfortunately, our people don’t recognize any authority

but their own government, so the order means nothing to them.”

The woman looked appalled. “But nobody defies the Governors! They are the executive body of the whole Federation of Stars.”

The Federation of Stars? It had a sound of distant thunder in it, and again Kenniston realized the incomprehensible, staggering vastness of the civilization out there which this woman and this man represented.

He said, exasperated, “Can’t you understand that to these people the stars are just points of light in the sky? That your Suns and worlds and Governors mean nothing to them?”

Norden Lund chose that moment to intervene. He said smoothly to Varn Allan, “Perhaps, in an impasse of this nature, we should consult Government Center?”

She gave him a hot look. “You would like me to admit my incapacity by doing that. No. I’ll carry this matter through, and when it’s done I’ll have words to say to Gorr Holl for precipitating things prematurely.”

She turned to Kenniston, and said, “Your people must comprehend that this is not a cruel thing we’re doing. Explain to them what life would be like on this dead planet— isolated, precarious, increasingly difficult, with nothing to look forward to but an ultimate dying out of attrition and sheer hopelessness. Perhaps they’ll realize then that what they’re asking me to do is to abandon them to a very ugly fate.”

“Perhaps,” said Kenniston, “but I wouldn’t count on it. You don’t know us yet. As a people, we’re neither soft nor easily frightened.”

He spoke with hostility, because of the truth that he had recognized in Varn Allan’s words, and did not want to recognize.

She gave him a level glance, as though she were taking his measure and through him the measure of all Middletown. Then she said quietly, “Bear in mind that a formal decree passed by the Board of Governors is a law which must be respected and complied with. The evacuation has been ordered, and will be carried out.”

She nodded to Lund, who shrugged and fell in beside her. They went down the

steps and across the plaza, and the muttering crowd, alarmed and confused but not yet hostile, moved apart to let them through.

Kenniston turned to Hubble. “What are we going to do?” he said, and the older man shook his head.

“I don’t know. But I know one thing we must not do, and that is to let any violence occur. That would be fatal. We’ve got to calm people down before that evacuation staff arrives and brings things to a head.”

Kenniston did his best, during the rest of that day. He repeated Varn Allan’s plea for understanding, but it fell on unreceptive ears. The city was functioning, they had light and water, they were not alone in the universe, and life today seemed pretty good. With the irrepressible optimism of the human race, they were convinced that they could make tomorrow even better. And they were not going to leave Earth. That was like asking them to leave their bodies.

The shock of losing their own time and the pattern of life that went with it had been terrible enough. It might have overwhelmed them completely, Kenniston knew, except that in a measure the shock had been softened. For a while they had kept their own old city, and it was still there beyond the ridge, an anchor in their memories. To a certain extent, they had brought their own time with them, for life in the alien city had been adapted as much as possible to the pattern of life in old Middletown. They had oriented themselves again, they had built a facsimile of their familiar existence. It had been hard, but they had done it. They could not now, quite suddenly, throw it all away and start again on something utterly divorced from everything they had ever known.

Kenniston realized perfectly that it was not only an atavistic clinging to the Earth that had bred them which made them reject the idea of leaving it so fiercely. It was the physical and immediate horror of entering a perfectly unknown kind of ship and plunging in it out beyond the sky, into— into what? Night and nothingness and sickening abysses that ran on for ever, with only the cold stars for beacons and the Earth, the solid, understandable, protecting Earth lost forever! His own mind recoiled from the very imagining. Why couldn’t the woman understand? Why couldn’t she realize that a people to whom the automobile was still quite recent were not psychologically capable of rushing into space!

The great ship brooded on the plain, and all that afternoon and evening the people drifted restlessly toward the wall of the dome to look at it, and stand in little groups talking angrily, and move away again. The streets seethed with a half-heard murmur of voices and movement. Crowds gathered in the plaza, and a detachment of National Guardsmen in full kit went marching down to mount guard at the portal. Dejected, oppressed, and more than a little sick with worry, Kenniston faced the unavoidable and went to Carol.

She knew, of course. Everybody in New Middletown knew. She met him with the drawn, half-bitter look that had come more and more often on her face since the June day their world had ended, and she said, "They can't do it, can they? They can't make us go?"

"They think they're doing the right thing," he said. "It's a question of making them understand they're wrong."

She began to laugh, quite softly—laughter with no mirth in it. "There isn't any end to it," she said. "First we had to leave Middletown. Now we have to leave Earth, Why didn't we stay in our homes and die there, if we had to, like decent human beings? It's all been madness ever since—this city, and now..." She stopped laughing. She looked at him and said calmly, "I won't go, Ken."

"You're not the only one that feels that way," Kenniston told her. "We've got to convince them of that." Restlessness rode him, and he got up and said, "Let's take a walk. We'd both feel better."

She went out with him into the dusk. The lights were on, the lovely radiance that they had greeted with such joy. They walked, saying very little, burdened with their own thoughts, and Kenniston was conscious again of the barrier that seemed always between them now, even when they agreed. Their silence was not the silence of understanding, but the silence which is between two minds that can communicate only with words.

They drifted toward the section of the dome through which the distant starship was visible. The unease in the city had grown, until the air quivered with it. There was a mob around the portal. They did not go close to it. Through the curved, transparent wall the lighted bulk of the Thanis was no more than a distorted gleaming. Carol shivered and turned away.

"I don't want to look at it," she said. "Let's go back."

“Wait,” said Kenniston. “There’s Hubble.”

The older man caught sight of him and swore. “I’ve been hunting the hell and gone over town for you,” he said. “Ken, that bloody fool Garris has blown his top completely, and is getting the people all stirred up to fight. You’ve got to come with me and help soothe him down!”

Kenniston said bitterly, “No wonder Varn Allan thinks we’re a bunch of primitives! Oh, all right, I’ll come. We’ll walk you back home on the way, Carol.”

They started back through the streets, whose towers now shone timelessly beautiful in the calm white radiance. But the people in those streets, the little tense, talking groups, the worried faces and questions, the angry expletives, jarred against that supernal calm.

The pulse of unease in the city seemed to quicken. A low cry ran along the streets. People were calling something, a shout was running along the ways, hands pointed upward, white faces turned and looked at the shimmer of the great dome above.

“What—” Hubble began impatiently, but Kenniston silenced him.

“Listen!”

They listened. Above the swell of distant voices, growing louder every moment, they heard a sound that they had heard only once before. A vibration, more than a sound, a deep, bass humming from the sky, too deep to be smothered even by the dome.

It came downward, and it was louder, and louder, and then quite suddenly it stopped. People were running now toward the portal and the words they shouted came drifting confusedly back.

“Another starship,” said Kenniston. “Another starship has come.”

Hubble’s face was gray and haggard. “The evacuation staff. She said they’d arrive soon. And the whole town ready to blow off— Ken, this is it!”

Chapter 13— embattled city

With a sinking heart, Kenniston stared at Hubble and listened to the sharpening voice of the city. Carol spoke, and the words reached him from a long way off.

“Never mind me, Ken. I’ll get home all right.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m afraid we’ve got to get hold of the Mayor right away...Stay in off the streets, Carol.”

He kissed her swiftly on the cheek, and she turned away, walking fast. Kenniston hesitated, feeling that he ought to go with her, but Hubble had already started on and there was no time for punctilio. After all, there was no danger— not yet.

He caught up with Hubble. People streamed past them, going the other way, toward the portal. Frightened, belligerent people, their eyes a little too bright, their voices too loud. Kenniston and Hubble were almost running, but even so, it took them some minutes to reach the plaza in front of City Hall. As they crossed it, jeeps loaded with National Guardsmen pulled away from the government building and went tearing off down the boulevard. The men were wrapped to the eyes in heavy clothing, and Hubble groaned.

“They’re going outside. Now what the devil has that idiot done?”

They raced up the steps and into the building. In the Council chamber they found the Mayor with Borchard and Moretti and most of the Councilmen. Garris strode up and down, his face mottled, his eyes glittering with the courage born of fear. He turned to Kenniston and Hubble as they came in, and there was a curious blankness in his look, an absence of reason that made Kenniston lose what little hope he had.

“So they’re going to try to rush us away from Earth,” said Garris. “Well, we’ll see! We’ll see how far they’re going to get with that!” His voice shook, his pudgy hands were clenched. “I’ve called up all units of the National Guard, and did you see those jeeps? They’re on their way to Old Middletown, to bring the field guns from the Armory. Guns, Hubble, guns! That’s the only way to show ‘em they can’t order us around!”

“You fool,” said Hubble. “Oh, you fool.”

It was too late in the day to call the Mayor a fool, and Hubble found it out. Borchard snarled at him, “He’s acting with our complete approval. Listen, Mr. Hubble, you stick to your science and we’ll handle the government.”

“That’s right,” said Moretti. He said it two or three times, and the remaining council members backed him up.

Hubble faced them. “Listen to me!” he said. “You’re all scared so blind you can’t see what’s in front of you. Guns! All the guns we’ve got won’t make a pop like a toy pistol compared to what they can bring against us if they want to. These people have conquered the stars, can’t you understand that? They can conquer us with no more than that ray they’ve got on the ship, and violence will only anger them into doing it!”

Garris thrust his face close to Hubble’s. “You’re afraid of them,” he said. “Well we’re not. We’ll fight!” The Council cheered.

“All right,” said Hubble, “go ahead. There’s no use arguing with idiots. The only chance we had of beating this thing was to behave like civilized men. They might have listened to us, then, and respected our feelings. But now...” He made a gesture of negation, and the Mayor snorted.

“Talk! A lot of good your talking did. No, sir! We’ll handle this our way, and you can be thankful that your Mayor and Council haven’t forgotten how to defend the rights of the people!”

His voice rose almost to a shout to carry the last words to Hubble, who had walked out with Kenniston close on his heels.

Outside in the plaza, Kenniston said abruptly, “There’s only one thing to do—talk to Varn Allan. If she’d agree to call off her dogs for a while, things might simmer down.” He shook his head, making a wry face. “I hate to admit to that blonde bureaucrat that we’re governed by a bunch of half-witted children, but...”

“You can’t really blame them,” said Hubble. “We are like children, faced with the unknown, and since we can’t run and hide we have to fight. It’s just that they’re taking the wrong way.” He sighed. “You go out to the ship, Ken. Do

what you can. I'm going back in and struggle with His Honor. If I'm patient enough— Oh, well, good luck.”

He went back inside, and Kenniston retraced his weary steps toward the portal.

The crowd had doubled since he had last seen it. It pushed and swirled around the portal, spreading out on both sides along the wall of the dome. Out on the plain the lights of two ships gleamed, and the people watched them, a low murmur running through them like the first mutter of wind before a storm. The company of Guardsmen in full kit had taken up their station in the portal, a barrier of olive-drab picked out with the dull gleam of gunbarrels.

Kenniston went up to them. He nodded to some of the men he knew and said, “I'm going out to the ships— important conference,” and started through the line. And they stopped him,

“Mayor's orders,” the lieutenant said. “Nobody goes outside. Yeah, I know who you are, Mr. Kenniston! But I have my orders. Nobody goes outside.”

“Listen,” said Kenniston desperately, manufacturing a lie. “The Mayor sent me, I'm on his business.”

“Bring me a written order,” said the lieutenant, “and we'll talk about it some more.”

The line of guns and stolid men remained unmoved. Kenniston considered trying to crash it, and gave that up at once. The lieutenant was watching him suspiciously, so suspiciously that an uncomfortable thought occurred to Kenniston. He spoke the language and he had worked closely with the star-folk, and the good people of Middletown might just possibly take him for a traitor or a spy...

“If the Mayor sent you,” the lieutenant said, “he'll give you an order.”

Kenniston went away, back to the City Hall. And he spent the rest of the night cooling his heels with Hubble, outside the guarded door behind which the Mayor, the Council and the ranking officers of the National Guard were drawing up a plan of campaign.

Shortly after daybreak an orderly came in hastily, and was admitted to the

guarded room. Immediately the Mayor, the Council, and the officers came out. Garris, haggard, heavy-eyed, but triumphant, caught sight of Kenniston and said, "Come along. We'll need you to interpret."

Feeling old and hopeless, Kenniston rose and joined the little procession. Falling in beside him, Hubble leaned over and murmured, "Talk fast, Ken. Your knowledge of the language is our one last ace in the hole."

They reached the portal at almost the same time as the party from the starships. Varn Allan and Lund were the only ones in the group that Kenniston recognized. Of the others, one was a woman of mature years, and the remainder were men of varying ages. They stared, more in wonder than in apprehension, at the line of soldiers, Varn Allan frowned.

The Mayor marched up to her, as the line reformed to let him and his party through. A soiled, haggard little man, devoutly convinced of his own wisdom and secure in the knowledge that his people were with him, his courage screwed up to the last trembling notch, he faced the strangers from the stars and said to Kenniston, "Tell them this is our world, and we give the orders here. Tell them to get into their ships and go. Inform them that this is an ultimatum which we are prepared to enforce."

The crowd behind him roared approval.

A faint uneasiness had appeared in the faces of the star-folk. That mob yell, the armed soldiers, and the attitude of the Mayor must have roused a doubt in them. And yet Varn Allan spoke quite calmly to Kenniston, hardly waiting for the Mayor to finish.

"Will you please have way made for us?" She indicated the newcomers who were with her. "These officials head a large staff of experts on mass migration. They will begin preliminary planning of the evacuation, and it is important that you cooperate..."

Kenniston interrupted her. "Listen," he said, "you take your officials and get back to your ships." The crowd was beginning to move forward a little, pressing up against the line of soldiers. Individual shouts came out of it, ugly, threatening counterpoint to the growling undertone. The Mayor shifted nervously from one foot to the other, "Did you tell her?" he demanded. "What's she saying? Did you tell her?"

Kenniston cried out, “Go back to your ships, and quickly! Can’t you see that mob’s about to break loose?”

But still Varn Allan did not seem to understand. “There’s no room for further argument,” she said, as though her patience was at an end. “We are here on direct orders from the Board of Governors, and I must ask you to...”

Speaking very distinctly, Kenniston said, “I am trying to prevent violence. Go back to your ships now, and I’ll come out and talk to you later.”

She stared at him in utter astonishment. “Violence?” she said. And again, “Violence? Against officials of the Federation?”

It crossed his mind that that was something she had never seen nor heard of. In the momentary silence between them, the surge and rumble of the crowd grew louder, and abruptly, Norden Lund laughed.

“I told you that you were taking the wrong way to deal with savages,” he said. “We’d better go.”

“No!” Secure in her pride, in the authority vested in her by the Federation of Stars, in her proven ability as an administrator, Varn Allan was not going to run before the shouts of a mob. She turned on Kenniston, her voice perfectly steady and sharp as a steel knife.

“I don’t think you understand,” she said. “When an order is issued in the name of the Board of Governors, that order is obeyed. You will so inform your Mayor, and require him to disperse his people— and at once!”

Kenniston, clenched his fists and groaned. “For Christ’s sake...” he began, and then the Mayor, the overanxious, bellicose, and frightened Mayor, set the spark to the ready tinder.

“You tell ‘em they’d better get out in a hurry!” he cried, loud enough to be heard clearly by the front ranks of the crowd. “Tell ‘em to get out, or we’ll run ‘em out!”

Run ‘em out!” yelled a man, and another, and a hundred others. “Run ‘em out!” The crowd roar rose to a howl. The press of men and women surged forward through the portal, and even if they had wanted to the soldiers could not have

held them back.

Kenniston caught a kaleidoscopic glimpse of faces— the middle-aged woman official with her mouth open in a scream, the incredulous eyes of the men that did not credit what they saw, Varn Allan’s cheeks flaming a sudden angry red, Lund already backing away, a study in mingled fear and triumph.

Varn Allan said, “If you dare to touch Federation officials—”

“Get back to your ships!” yelled Kenniston. “Get back!” The first wave of the mob was upon them, all shouts and fists and trampling feet. They were howling for Varn Allan because she was the leader. Kenniston saw the danger. He grabbed her wrist and began to run toward the Thanis, hauling her along. The other officials, including Lund, had taken to their heels. It was amazing how they could run.

He dragged Varn Allan along, and for some seconds she did not resist. He realized later that it must have been the first physical violence she had ever encountered, and that she was too astonished by it to think of resisting at first. Then, all at once, she cried out passionately, “Let me go!” and set her heels hard into the dust.

The crowd was boiling after them, and it was no time for niceties. Kenniston gave her wrist a jerk that snatched her off balance and began to run again, yanking her bodily along. And then, as the Thanis loomed fairly close ahead, he missed his footing in the loose sand and stumbled, and she wrenched herself free from him.

During the moment that he floundered in the treacherous sand, Kenniston saw the first pallid beam flick out from the ship. It swung in a wide arc, bringing a sudden uproar from the crowd. And then it hit him, and this time the shock was strong. He dropped forward into the sand and lay there like a dead man, utterly still and knowing nothing.

He came back to consciousness, lying flat on his face in a bunk with Gorr Holl’s powerful fingers kneading the nerve centers along his spine. He groaned, and the Capellan exclaimed in relief.

“Thank the gods you’ve come round! I’ve been working on you the last couple of hours!”

Kenniston sat up painfully. He saw in a small windowless cabin, furnished with a desk and a chair designed to accommodate Gorr Holl's huge proportions, and it dawned on him that he must be inside the Thanis. "How did I get here?" he asked. It was difficult to speak. His tongue, like the rest of him, was numb and leaden.

"Varn Allan had you brought in. She realized afterward that you were trying to haul her out of trouble, and knocking you out was a mistake. She wanted you fixed up as quickly as possible."

Kenniston was too groggy to be sarcastic. He groaned again, and mumbled, "What's happened, Gorr?"

"Plenty— and all of it bad. Look here." He touched a stud, and a square section of the metal wall became perfectly transparent, a window.

Kenniston struggled to his feet and looked out through it, at the distant, gleaming dome of New Middletown. And he saw the men of Middletown laboring in the ochre dust before the portal, digging trenches, filling sandbags, drawing up the lines of war.

Gorr Holl pointed out across the dreary waste toward the far-off ridges. Kenniston looked, and saw the brave small cavalcade that toiled down from them, out of the old town. He saw the shrouded field guns, the whole mobile force of the Middletown battery of the National Guard— the little guns that came to bark defiance to the Federation of Stars.

Gorr Holl said, "They gave us three hours to pack up our traps and go— long enough to get their battery in position. After that, they'll start shooting."

"The fools," Kenniston whispered. "The poor bloody fools!" He could have wept with pride, in spite of his full realization of the extent of that folly.

The time was almost up. Those hurrying limbers would reach the portal and swing around, and soon then the men of Middletown would cast the die of their own destruction.

"I've got to stop this, Gorr," he said. "Somehow, I've got to stop it!"

Gorr Holl studied him with a curiously intent, measuring look. He said, "How

much are you willing to risk on a try? No, wait before you answer. It won't be easy. Especially for you, with your background, it won't be easy."

"Get to the point," said Kenniston. He grasped almost fiercely at the hint of hope. "Come on! What is it?"

Gorr Holl said, "There are other dying planets beside your Earth. And as I told you, we primitives cling to the worlds of our birth just as your people do. There has been a— well, call it a conspiracy, between the primitive races to stop mass migration, and our whole plans center on the process Lal'lor told you about, Jon Arnol's process of reviving dead worlds, which has been forbidden by the Federation. Kenniston, we could make Earth a test case!"

"In other words," said Kenniston slowly, "you want to involve me and my people in a movement to help your peoples buck the Federation law?"

"Quite frankly, yes. But it's to your benefit, too. If you win, you'll have Earth and we'll have our own worlds, to stay on. If you lose well, you'll be no worse off than you are now." He put his great paw on Kenniston's shoulder. "Listen to me. Varn Allan is on the televisor now, getting authorization from Vega Center to use force in carrying out her orders. Think fast, Kenniston!"

Kenniston thought. It was like moving blindfold through an unfamiliar maze, but he could sense some of the outlines, the undercurrents of disaffection that flowed between the stars. He had no right to involve himself and Middletown in a struggle that he knew almost nothing about...But there beyond the window were the trenches filled with angry men, and the dusty limbers wheeling down, and how could they be worse off than they were now? If there was even an outside chance...

"What do I have to do?" he asked.

Gorr Holl grinned. "Good," he said. "And remember, you'll have allies in this thing! Now come on with me, and I'll tell you on the way."

Chapter 14— last appeal

The big Cappellan led him out then swiftly through a maze of narrow passageways that ran through the bowels of the Thanis. They met no one, and Kenniston guessed that Gorr Holl was avoiding the main corridors.

He hardly looked at what he could see of the ship as he passed through it. He didn't care now. All he could think of was the terrible need for haste, the need to avert the disaster that was coming. His ears, his nerves cringed, waiting for the first shell to burst against the Thanis. He knew it was too soon, but the minutes were passing fast.

Gorr Holl did some rapid explaining as they went. "The evacuation order came from the Board of Governors by an executive committee. According to Federation law, you can make an appeal from that order to the Board of Governors in full session. Now, remember, Kenniston, no one can deny you the right of appeal, so don't let them bull you out of it."

They came out on a shadowy catwalk. Gorr Holl stopped and pointed to a corridor some nine feet below. At its end was a closed door.

"That's the Visor room. Varn Allan is in contact with the committee now. Go in and make your appeal. And remember, Lund is in there too."

He melted back into the shadows. Kenniston went down a companionway to the corridor and along it to the door at the end. He tried it and it swung open under his hand, and he went through into a high and narrow room, where Varn and Norden Lund turned to face him, startled and surprised by his sudden entrance.

He hardly saw them. Something else caught his gaze and held him transfixed, frozen with a kind of awe.

Two walls of the room were occupied by complicated and unfamiliar mechanisms, all apparently automatic. Facing him was the third wall— a giant-sized screen, reproducing so clear a picture that it was weirdly like a window.

A window into another world...

At a black plastic table sat four figures. Three of these were men in ordinary jackets and slacks— one of them quite old, another elderly, the third dark, brusque-looking, not far into middle age. The fourth at the table was not a man. He was a Spican like Magro, white-furred and oddly catlike with his narrow mane and handsome, faintly cruel face. But he was older and graver than Magro.

The four of them were like a quartet of businessmen, rudely interrupted in the midst of an earnest conference. They stared out of the screen at Kenniston, and the youngest man demanded of Varn Allan, “Who is this person?”

Kenniston still stood motionless, looking beyond them now. He saw that the room behind them was like the one in which he stood but much larger, a communications room massive with control banks and screens.

Through the window of that room billions of miles across space, Kenniston could see the looming wall of a titanic building. And above it blazed the fiery limb of a diamond Sun, supernal, magnificent, shedding a blue-white blaze across the heavens.

Again the sharp voice from across the galaxy, flashing through the parsecs far faster than light by the magic of latter-day science.

“Varn Allan! Who is this man?”

“He’s one of the Earth primitives, sir,” she answered angrily, and turned again to Kenniston. “You have no right here! Leave at once.”

“No,” said Kenniston. “Not until I’ve had my say.”

“Lund,” said Varn Allan, “will you please call orderlies and have him removed?”

Kenniston moved a little. “I wouldn’t,” he said.

Lund considered. His eyes moved from Kenniston’s knotted fist to Varn Allan’s angry face, and there was a smile in them.

“After all,” he said, “I suppose this man is a citizen of the Federation now. Can we deny him his right of speech?”

Varn Allan’s blue eyes flashed hotly at him. Then she spoke to the images in the

screen. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. But perhaps this will demonstrate the situation here more clearly. I have had no cooperation from the primitives, and my own subordinate is apparently trying to undermine my authority."

The dark younger man of the four said impatiently, "This is not the occasion to hear complaints of administrative wrangling!"

Kenniston was glaring upward at the quartet on Vega's faraway world who seemed to hold the fate of Middletown in their hands. He demanded, "Are you the executive committee responsible for the evacuation order?"

The oldest man said to him quietly, "There is no need for truculence. Yes, we are that committee." He glanced at Varn Allan. "I think, Allan, that since the interruption has been made, we may as well clear this thing up now."

Varn Allan shrugged, and Lund's smile broadened a little.

Kenniston said, "I'm sorry, but there isn't time for politeness. In a few minutes my people are going to fire on your ships. I don't want that to happen. I don't want my people killed, nor yours."

The old man answered, "There will be no killing. The paralysis ray, used at full potency, can immobilize your whole population without harm."

Kenniston shook his head. "That's only a postponement. When they come to again they will fight. That is what I must make you understand. As long as my people live they will fight to stay on Earth!"

The ring of utter truth in his passionate cry seemed to disturb them deeply. And the white-furred Spican said slowly, "It may be so. Some of my own people still have such an illogical attachment to one planet."

Lund spoke up, his tone smooth and deferential. "That is the point of basic psychology which I have been trying to make with Administrator Allan."

Varn Allan said icily, "If you have a suggestion to make, I shall be glad to hear it."

"Of course," said Lund, "it's quite impossible to allow these people to remain on Earth. To do so would establish a fatal precedent for other waning planets whose

populations must be transferred. But my idea—”

Whatever Lund had been going to say was lost, for Kenniston drowned him out. “The hell with your ideas!” He moved closer to the screen. “I ask you to revoke the order for evacuation.”

The old man spread his hands in a weary gesture of negation. “That is out of the question.”

“Then,” said Kenniston harshly, “I appeal your decision to the Board of Governors in full session!”

That startled them all. They stared at him, and Lund said, “So the savage has learned a little law!” Then he laughed. “But of course— Gorr Holl and his friends have been coaching him.”

Varn Allan came up to Kenniston, “This is a waste of time,” she said. “The Board of Governors will issue the same ruling.”

“Quite so,” said the dark brusque man in the screen. “It’s merely a stratagem to gain time,”

“Nevertheless,” said the Spican, regarding Kenniston with faint amusement in his slit-pupiled eyes, “his demand is perfectly legal.”

The old man sighed. “Yes.” He looked at Kenniston. “I am forced by Federation law to grant your right of appeal. But I warn you that Administrator Allan is right. The Board will ratify our decision.”

“Until they do,” Kenniston pressed, “I demand that you withdraw from Earth the ships that have created this critical situation.”

The old man nodded reluctantly. “That too is a legitimate demand. The ships will be recalled temporarily to Vega. And you will come with them, since all appeals to the Board of Governors must be made in person.”

In person? The significance of the two casual words hit Kenniston staggeringly, replacing his dawning hope with a breathless and more personal emotion.

Those two words meant— they meant leaving Earth, he, John Kenniston, going

out into the dark abyss, out across half the starry universe on a forlorn hope. Out to an incredibly distant and alien world, to plead the cause of Middletown to alien ears, with all the odds against him! He knew now what Gorr Holl had meant, “—with your background, it won’t be easy”

Varn Allan’s crisp voice was challenging him. “Do you agree to go? Say quickly — there’s little time left to notify your people before they attack.”

Mention of that imminent attack that meant irrevocable disaster to his people, steadied Kenniston. He had to avert that, at any cost or risk.

He drew a long breath. “Yes,” he said. “Yes. I’ll go.”

“In that case, Administrator Allan,” said the old man, “you will take your ships off in not more than two hours.” He rose, signing that the interview was closed. “I shall notify the Board of Governors.”

The screen went blank. Varn Allan looked at Kenniston and said, “You had better go and tell your people, at once.”

He knew, as he went out, that she was very angry. But Lund seemed strangely pleased.

With what speed he could muster, Kenniston went back across the desert toward the portal, and with every step he took the incredible reality of his commitment beat into his mind.

“You’re going away from Earth. You’re going to get into a ship, that ship, and step clear off the Earth, out to the stars—”

Just the realization of it gave him a feeling of vertigo, a shuddering recoil, and he knew that he had to keep his mind away from what it would be like in that ship, in space— he had to avoid anticipation or the impact of it would be too much for him.

Soldiers met him well outside the portal, raising their rifles but lowering them again when they recognized him. Beyond them, the red dust was flying from laboring shovels and the gun limbers were being wrestled into place.

“What’s going on out there?” cried a sergeant. “Are those ships going to attack?”

Are—”

“Where’s the Mayor?” Kenniston interrupted. “Back inside the portal. They’re all there, waiting.” Kenniston pushed past them, between the half-dug trenches, and saw Hubble and most of the Council grouped around Mayor Garris just inside the dome.

Most of Middletown’s people seemed crowded in the background, held back by rope barriers. They weren’t shouting now, their faces looked anxious, and he knew that that demonstration of the paralysis ray’s power had cooled down their rage and given them something to worry about.

Garris’ plump face was haggard with strain too, and he greeted Kenniston with a suspicious scowl. “What brought you back? I thought you’d stay out there with your friends.”

Kenniston’s temper, tightened by the weight of the thing he was going to do, let go. “For Christ’s sake,” he snarled, “I’ve been fighting to save your necks. I’ve even agreed to go out to Vega to do it, and this is the kind of reception I get!” Then he was ashamed of his outburst, and got a grip on his nerves. “Listen to me. Those ships are leaving. They’re leaving inside of two hours, and I’m going with them. I’m appealing this whole evacuation question to their Board of Governors.”

A wondering silence fell upon them all. They stared at him, all their faces except Hubble’s uncomprehending.

Hubble exclaimed, “Good God, Ken— you, to Vega? But will it do any good?”

“I’m hoping so,” Kenniston said. He ignored the others, speaking to Hubble as he rapidly explained. “So there’s a chance that I can make them understand our case, and let us alone.”

Mayor Garris had only now begun to understand, apparently. His face had changed— there was an eager hopefulness in it now, a hopefulness dawning also on the faces of Borchard and Moretti and the others.

Kenniston realized then just how hopeless they had all been before his coming. They, and the soldiers, and the people of Middletown, were still ready to fight evacuation, but the futility of such a fight had been made clear to them by the

power of the ray, they had known they must fight a battle foredoomed to failure, and now he had brought them a hope at least of another way out.

“Well, now,” said Garris, a little unsteadily, “that’s the way I’ve wanted it all along. Due course of law, peaceful debate... It was just that I couldn’t let them force our people...” He broke off, seizing Kenniston’s hand. “You’ll do your best for us out there, Kenniston, I know that! They can’t all be as stubborn as that blasted woman!”

And, almost unmanned by his relief, Garris turned and cried out to the anxious crowd, “It’s all right, folks, there’s not going to be any fighting right now. Mr. Kenniston’s going to go clear out to where those people come from and put this thing to their government! He’s going to ask a square deal for us!”

There was cheering, during which the Mayor’s high color began to fade back to its original pallor as a new thought struck him.

He said to Kenniston, “But if anyone’s going out there to represent us, maybe as Mayor—” Kenniston really admired him as he struggled to get out those last awful words— “as Mayor, I ought to go?”

Kenniston shook his head. “You’re needed right here, Mr. Garris. And besides, you don’t speak the language, so there wouldn’t be any use in your going.”

“That’s so,” said the Mayor, beginning to breathe again. “Of course, that’s so. Yes, indeed. Now, Kenniston, what can we do to help you? Anything—”

“No, there’s nothing,” said Kenniston. “I haven’t much time. I only need to get a few things, and to say goodbye to someone. Hubble, will you come with me?”

Hubble came. And behind them, as they hurried back into town, they heard the Mayor shouting, and heard the rising voice of relief and jubilation from the people.

They had seen themselves about to be beaten in a hopeless fight against weapons they couldn’t combat, those people. And now, suddenly, there wasn’t going to be any fight, the ships were going away, one of their own was going out and convince the star-folk that they couldn’t shove Earth people around, everything was going to be all right!

Kenniston groaned. “I wish they weren’t so God-damned sure! This is only a reprieve.”

“What are our chances, Ken?” Hubble asked him. “Between us.”

“Honest to God, Hubble, I don’t know! I’ve got us into a big undercover struggle that I don’t half understand yet.” He told Hubble what Gorr Holl had said, and added, “Gorr and the humanoids are on our side, but maybe they’re only using me as a catspaw. Anyway, I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will,” said Hubble. “I wish I were going with you— but I’m too old, and I’m needed here.” He added, “I’ll get Carol while you pack.”

The nightmare unreality of it hit Kenniston again as he hastily got his few necessities together. It was just like packing for an overnight run to Pittsburgh or Chicago, instead of for a trip across the galaxy. It couldn’t be really going to happen... Carol’s face, when she came, didn’t help him. There was no color in it at all, and when he took her in his arms and tried to explain, she only whispered, “No, Ken— no! You can’t go! You’re not like them— you’ll die out there!”

“I won’t die, and I can maybe help us all,” he told her. “Carol, listen— if I can do this, if I can find a way out for us, it’ll make up a little for our work that brought this whole thing on Middletown, won’t it? Won’t it?”

She wasn’t even listening to him. She was searching his face, her hands clinging to him painfully, and she said suddenly, “You want to go.”

“Want to?” said Kenniston. “I’m scared stiff! My skin is crawling right now! But I’ve got to.”

“You want to go,” she said again, and looked at him, he thought, as though she finally saw clearly a barrier between them. “That’s the difference between us, it’s always been the difference. I only want the old things, the old, loved ways. You want the new.”

Time was running out, and a sort of despair was in him, and it made him grasp her with a rough male masterfulness, and hold her fiercely against the intangible tide that was sweeping them apart.

“I’m going, to do what I can for us all, and I’m coming back the same, and

you're going to be waiting for me, Carol! You hear?"

He kissed her, and she returned his kiss with a curious tenderness as if she were never going to see him again and was remembering all the good days that they had had together. And when he let her go, her eyes were bright with tears.

He went with Hubble toward the portal, and now the whole city was vibrant with a new hopefulness and excitement, that centered upon himself. But he was quaking with the realization of what he was going toward, he hardly saw the crowded faces that watched him with a mixture of anxious hope and of awe, he hardly heard the voices that shouted, "Good luck, Mr. Kenniston!" and "You tell 'em out there, Mr. Kenniston! You tell 'em!"

Kenniston went on, out of the domed city and across the plain, and the black, strange belly of the Thanis took him in.

Chapter 15— mission for earth

He would not show fear. They expected him to do so, they were watching him with sidelong glances of interest and amused expectation. But Kenniston clenched his fists inside his jacket pockets, and resolved fiercely to disappoint them.

He was afraid, yes. It was one thing to read and talk and speculate on flying space. It was another and much more frightening thing to do it, to step off the solid Earth, to rush and plunge and fall through the worldless emptiness.

He stood there with Gorr Holl and Piers Eglin in the bridge of the Thanis, looking ahead through the curving view windows, and a cold sickness clutched at his vitals.

“It isn’t the way I expected it to be,” he said unsteadily. “Only those stars ahead —”

He fought against the impulse to clutch for support. He wouldn’t do that, while the bronzed star-men behind him were curiously watching him.

The deep humming and slight quivering of the great fabric around him were the only evidence that the Thanis was moving.

Directly ahead, Kenniston looked at a depthless black in which fierce stars flared like lamps. The blue-hot beacon of Vega centered that vista, and up from it blazed the stars of the time-distorted Lyre and Aquila, crossed on the upper left by the glittering sun-drift of the Milky Way.

Only that section of sky ahead was clear. The rest of the firmament, extending back from it, was an increasingly blurred vista of warped starlight whose rays seemed to twitch, jerk and dance.

Gorr Holl nodded toward the bank of controls behind which four men sat. “You know the principle of propulsion? Reaction rays many times faster than light, pushing back against the cosmic dust of space.”

Kenniston sighed. “I feel ignorant as a child. The possibility of such rays was

wholly unsuspected, in my day. And Einstein's equations proved that if matter moved faster than light, it would expand indefinitely."

Gorr Holl uttered a rumbling chuckle. "Your Einstein was a great scientist, but we've opened up new fields of knowledge since then. The mass control that prevents that expansion, and other things."

Kenniston was only half listening. He was looking at the blue-white eye of Vega, glaring arrogantly at him from the great drift of spangled stars. And looking at it somehow made him sense their awful speed, their nightmare fall through the infinite.

It was worse than the takeoff, and he had not thought that anything could be worse than that. If he lived forever, he would never forget those last still minutes, strapped into a recoil chair, trying to relax and not succeeding, listening to ringing alarm bells, watching the blinking of lights, feeling the deep quivering of the ship as it gathered itself for the outward leap, his heartbeats choking him and the icy sweat running, trying to tell himself that it was no different from taking off in a plane... And then the lift, the pressure, the instinctive gasp for breath, the terrible claustrophobia of being shut into a moving thing over which he had no control.

He could not know yet by what mastery of science the occupants of the ship were shielded from the enormous pressures of that acceleration. Yet shielded they were, for the pressure was not so much worse than that in a fast ascending elevator. It was the knowledge that Earth was falling irretrievably away that made the lift horrible. He could hear the whisper and the hiss and then the scream of air against the cleaving hull, and then almost at once it was gone. He was in space. And he was sick with the age-old fear of abysses and of falling. He thought of the emptiness that lay beneath his feet, beyond that thin floor of metal, and he shut his teeth hard on his tongue to keep from screaming.

"Don't think about it," Gorr Holl had said. "And remember, there's a first time for all of us! I thought I wouldn't live through my own first takeoff." He had helped Kenniston get to his feet. "Let's go up on the bridge. You might as well get it all over with at once."

And so they had come to the bridge, and Kenniston had looked into outer space where the great Suns burned unveiled and there was neither air nor cloud to hide

them. And he had got hold of himself, because he was too proud to do what he wanted to do, which was to get down on his belly and whimper like a dog.

He tried now to visualize the ordeal that awaited him there at Vega where he must plead the cause of little Middletown to the Governors of the stars. How could he make people who traveled casually in ships like this one, understand the passionate devotion of his own people to their little, ancient planet?

Yet if he failed to do so, he would fail the people of Middletown, who had such hope in his mission. That was what he had to think about— not space, nor his sensations about it, but the task he had ahead of him.

He glanced at Gorr Holl and said, “I’ve seen enough. Let’s go.”

They left Piers Eglin there and went below again, and when they were in the main corridor, alone, Kenniston said, “All right, Gorr. I want to know what I’ve got myself in on.”

The big Capellan nodded. “Let’s join Magro and Lal’lor. They’re waiting for us.”

He led Kenniston along companionways and narrow corridors, to a cabin only two doors from his own. And it was a relief for Kenniston to be in a closed place without windows, so that he need not look at the staggering, crushing emptiness of space, where only the proud Suns had any right to be. There was a wild thrill to it, underneath the fear— but a twentieth century man couldn’t take much of it at first.

Lal’lor’s massive gray form was bent over a table littered with sheets of complicated symbols. Margo, who was sprawled in the bunk, explained to Kenniston, “He works theorems for amusement. He even claims he knows what all those figures mean.”

Lal’lor’s small eyes twinkled in his flat, featureless face. He thrust the sheets aside and said, “Sit down, Kenniston. So we are to be allies now, as well as friends.”

“I wish,” said Kenniston, “that someone would tell me just what this alliance means. Remember, I’m gambling the fate of my people on faith, without knowing a damned thing.”

“There’s nothing sinister about it,” said Gorr Holl. He eased his furry bulk onto the corner of Lal’lor’s table, which was quite strong enough to hold him. “As I told you, we all have the same problem, and the solution to that problem revolves around a man and a process.”

He paused. “By a peculiar freak, Kenniston, you have been thrown with us rather than with your own kind. The human races spread out from Earth so long ago, and have continued to move and spread, constantly expanding, that they have lost all sense of identification with their old birthworld, or any other. The universe is their home, not a planet.”

Kenniston was beginning to understand that better with every passing minute. The impersonal magnitudes of space, many times recrossed, would tend to sever a man from the old narrow ways of thought. Carol had been right about that.

Gorr Holl went on. “But we of the humanoid races don’t have that background. When the humans came to our worlds, we were nearly all barbarians, and quite happy in our barbarism. Well, they civilized us, and now we are accepted as equals. But we’re still more primitive in thought than they, we still cling to our native worlds, and whenever it becomes necessary to move us, we balk— just as your people are balking now, though we have learned to be less violent. In the end, of course, we’ve always given in. But in the last few years we’ve hung on more desperately because we’ve had something to hope for— this process of Jon Arnol’s.”

“Hold on,” said Kenniston. “All I know of Jon Arnol is his name. What exactly is this process? You said it was a process for the rejuvenation of cold and dying planets?”

Lal’lor answered that. “Arnol’s plan is this— to start a cycle of matter-energy transformation similar to the hydrogen-helium transformation which gives a Sun its energy— to start such a nuclear cycle operating deep inside a cold planet.”

Kenniston stared at him, completely stunned. “But,” he said at last, “that would be equivalent to creating a giant solar furnace deep inside a planet!”

“Yes. A bold, brilliant idea. It would solve the problem of the many cold and dying worlds within the Federation— since, as you know, a planet may live on its interior heat long after the parent Sun’s heat has decreased.”

He paused. “Unfortunately, when Arnol tested his process on a small asteroid, the results were disastrous.”

“Disastrous?”

“Quite disastrous. Arnold’s energy bomb, designed to start the cycle inside that asteroid, went wrong and caused terrible quakes. In fact, the asteroid was wrecked. Arnol claims that it was because he was not allowed a large enough planet for his test. His equations bear him out.”

Kenniston said, “Why didn’t he make another test on a bigger planet, then?”

“The Governors would not allow it,” said Lal’lor, “They said it was too dangerous.”

“But couldn’t he have tested it on an uninhabited planet without danger?”

Lal’lor sighed. “You don’t understand, Kenniston. The Governors don’t want Arnol’s process to succeed. They don’t want to make it possible for primitive peoples to cling to their native worlds. That’s the kind of provincial patriotism they oppose, in their efforts to establish a truly cosmopolitan star-community.”

Kenniston thought about that. It fitted what he had seen and heard of this vast Federation of Stars. And yet...

He said, slowly, “It comes down to the fact that you want to use my world, our Earth, to test a scheme which your Governors, whatever their motives, have already ruled as dangerous.”

Lal’lor nodded calmly. “Yes. It comes down to that. But whether the test is made first on Earth or some abandoned planet is beside the point. The point is to force the Board of Governors to allow another test.”

Gorr Holl exclaimed, “Don’t you see how it links up? Alone, your plea to remain on Earth will be turned down because you can’t present any alternative to evacuation. But by advancing Jon Arnol’s planet-reviving process as an alternative, you might be able to help both Earth and us!”

Kenniston struggled to comprehend the galactic complexity of the problem. “In other words, if we could persuade the Governors to give Arnol another chance,

they would delay the evacuation of Earth?”

“They would,” said Lal’lor. “And if Arnol succeeded, Earth and our similar worlds throughout the Federation could be made warm and livable again. Is it not worth trying for?”

“When you put it like that,” said Kenniston, “yes. Yes, it is.” He was beginning to be hopeful again. “And you think this— this solar-furnace thing might succeed? Safely, I mean?”

“According to all mathematical evidence, yes.” Still Kenniston hesitated, and Gorr Holl said, “The decision would be up to your people, Kenniston, and not you— whether they’d take the risk, I mean. And remember, it’s a small population and could be taken off quite easily until any danger was over.”

That was true. He need not be afraid of committing his people too deeply, because he had not the power to do that. And it might be a way.

“Is it agreed, then?” asked Lal’lor. “Arnol has been my friend for many years, and I can message ahead to him to be there when we land. He can help you prepare your plea.”

Kenniston looked at them, the three familiar, unhuman faces. He had to trust them, to take what they said on trust. Suddenly, he knew he did trust them.

“All right,” said Kenniston. “I guess any hope is better than none.”

“Then we are agreed,” said Lal’lor quietly.

Kenniston felt a little breathless, as though he had taken an irrevocable plunge into deeps far beyond his own fathoming. Gorr Holl shot a keen glance at him, and said, “You need something. And I think I know what it is.”

He went out, and returned in a moment with a large flat flask of gray metal. He showed his great teeth in that frightening grin. “Fortunately, not being ship’s personnel, we of the technical staff are not forbidden stimulants. Get some cups, Magro.”

The white-furred Spican brought only three of the plastic cups. “Our wise Lal’lor prefers to stimulate himself with equations,” he explained, and the grey

one nodded.

Gorr Holl carefully poured a clear liquid from the flask. “Try this, Kenniston.”

The liquid had a musty, mushroomy taste. Then it seemed to explode inside Kenniston, sending waves of heat to his fingertips. When he could breathe again, he gasped, “What is the stuff?”

Gorr Holl said, “It’s distilled from fungus growths found on the worlds of Capella. Smooth, eh?”

Kenniston, as he drank again, felt his worries recede a little. He sat relaxed and listening as these children of alien worlds talked. He knew they were talking now just to let down his tension.

“First voyages can be tough.” Magro was saying. He was curled up on the bunk like a sleepy cat, with a distant, lazy gleam in his eyes. “I remember my own. We shot the Pleiades with half our power burned out, and the little worlds swarming around us like angry bees.”

Gorr Holl nodded. “Do you remember that wreck in the Algol stardrift? I lost good friends then. A cold grave, those empty deeps.”

Kenniston listened as they talked on, of old voyages beyond the Federation’s starry frontiers, of dangers from nebula and comet and cosmic cloud, of shipwreck on wild worlds.

He quoted slowly, “Then shall we list to no shallow gossip of Magellans and Drakes. Then shall we give ear to voyagers who have circumnavigated the Ecliptic; who have rounded the Polar Star as Cape Horn”

Lal’lor asked interestedly, “Who wrote that? Some man of your own time who foresaw space travel?”

“No,” said Kenniston. “A man of a century before even my time. His name was Melville, and he was a sailor too, but on Earth’s seas.”

Gorr Holl shook his head. “Queer days they must have been, with only the water oceans of one little planet to venture on.”

“Yet there was adventure enough in that,” Kenniston said. “The Atlantic in a fall storm, the Gulf on a moonlight night...” An aching nostalgia took him again, that haunting homesickness for an Earth lost forever, for the smell of leaves burning on crisp fall nights, for a clover field under the summer Sun, for the blue skies and green hills, the snowy mountains and the sleepy villages and the old cities and the roads that went between them, for all that was gone and could never be again. It made him long even for the Earth that still was, the tired, dying old planet that at least held memory of the world he had known, the people there who had known that world too. Carol was right, the old ways and the old things were best! What was he doing out here in these alien immensities?

Then he saw that the others were looking at him with a queerly sympathetic understanding in their faces, those strange and yet familiar and friendly humanoid faces.

“Give me another drink,” he said.

It did not help any. It only seemed to heighten his futile yearning. Presently Kenniston left them, and went to his own cabin.

He switched off the cabin lights and pressed the stud that made a window of the solid hull. The black, star-shot gulf opened to infinity beyond. He sat on the edge of the bunk and stared, hating that uncaring, unhuman vastness, brooding upon his desperate mission.

Presently he realized that someone was knocking at his door. He rose and opened it, and the light in the corridor showed him that it was Varn Allan.

Chapter 16— at Vega

She glanced quickly from his face to the darkened room, and then back at him, with a look of understanding. She asked, “May I come in?”

He stepped aside, reaching for the switch, and she said, “No, don’t. I like to look out, too.”

She took the chair by the window and sat for a few moments in silence, looking out, the dim starglow touching her face.

Kenniston, his immediate feeling of hostility tempered a little by puzzlement, waited for her to speak. She sat almost stiffly, a queerly prim little figure in the drab jacket and slacks, but he thought that there were lines of tiredness and strain in her clear face now.

She turned and looked at him with thoughtful blue eyes, and it came to him that Varn Allan felt ill at ease with him, that she wanted to say something that she did not quite know how to say. So she, too, was worried about this business at Vega? He thought savagely that that was fine, that it cut her down from a high-and-mighty official of the great Federation into an anxious woman, almost a girl.

She said, “I came to tell you— owing to the pressing nature of this case, the Board of Governors has granted us two hours on the day after we arrive at Vega Four.”

“Two hours!” exclaimed Kenniston. It did not seem much time in which to decide the fate of a world.

“The Governors have the problems of half a galaxy to decide. They cannot give more time than that to anyone. So perpare your case carefully. There is never a second hearing.”

He thought that she had not come only to say that, and he waited, forcing her to speak. He realized now that her tension and weariness equaled his own.

Finally, reluctantly, Varn Allan said, “As Sub-Administrator of the sector, Norden Lund will have the right to speak on this problem to the Governors.”

Kenniston hadn't known that, but it made no difference to him and he said so.

"It may make a very great difference indeed to you and your people," she warned him.

"In what way?"

She told him, "Lund is ambitious. He wants to be an Administrator, and later, a Governor— perhaps even Chairman. His aspirations are unbounded."

Now, Kenniston began to understand a little. "In other words, as Gorr Holl said, Lund is after your job."

"Yes. It would be a step up for him. And to make that step, he would quite cheerfully commit an injustice. Of that I am sure." Varn Allan leaned forward. "He sees in the problem of Earth an unparalleled opportunity to advance himself. Your unheard-of irruption into this time from the past has created tremendous interest in you. And many worlds will be watching this coming hearing."

In her earnestness, she had risen and was standing in front of him, speaking carefully, choosing her words to make him understand.

"If Lund can dominate this hearing, if he can offer some sensational proof that I have blundered in handling the Earth problem and that he has been right, he will have distinguished himself before the eyes of everyone."

Kenniston was sure now that he completely understood, but he did not let his feelings show in his face or voice as he asked, "Then you're afraid that Lund is going to spring some surprise at this hearing?"

Varn Allan nodded earnestly. "Yes— I know that he has something in mind. He has been smugly triumphant with me, ever since we took off. But what it is, I do not know." She looked at Kenniston worriedly, and asked, "Do you know? Is there something about your people, about this Earth problem, that Lund could use at the hearing?"

Kenniston got to his feet. He looked down into her face, and then he began to laugh. Softly, at first, and then more loudly— a bitter, angry laughter that vented all the resentment he had felt from the first. She looked up at him, startled and uncomprehending.

“This,” he said, “is very rich indeed. This is really comic. You come to Earth as the law of the Federation, as Miss High-and-Mighty, and look at us as though we were a bunch of sheep, and order us this and order us that, and can hardly bear even to talk to the poor fuzzy-witted primitives. And then, all of a sudden, when your own precious job is in danger, you come running to me to help you save it!”

Varn Allan’s face was white and incredulous, her blue eyes starting to flare, her whole slim figure rigid.

Kenniston told her savagely, “You know what? I don’t give a damn who’s administrator, you or Lund! You’re neither of you my kind. If he can take your job, more power to him— it’ll make no difference to me or mine!”

He knew by the white wrath in her face that he had thrust beneath that serious, composed exterior at last, that the competent, brilliant official had emotions like any other woman and that he had got to them.

“So you think that,” Varn Allan breathed. “So you think that I would plead for your help, to save my position?”

Her voice rose then, driven by an anger that seemed almost more than her small figure could contain. It was as though he had touched a spring that released a hot, long-pent passion.

“My position— my official rank! Do you think I am like Lund, that the power to give orders is pleasure to me? What would you, a primitive, know of a tradition of service to the Federation? Do you suppose I wanted to follow that family tradition, that I enjoyed the years of study when other girls were dancing, that my idea of a happy life is to spend it in starship cabins and on unfriendly worlds? Do you think all that is so dear to me that I would worry and plot and come pleading to a primitive, to keep it?”

She choked on her own indignation, and turned toward the door. Kenniston, startled by that violent outburst, obeyed a sudden impulse and caught her arm.

“Wait! Don’t go. I—”

She looked up at him with blazing eyes and said, “Let me go or I’ll call an orderly.”

Kenniston did not release her. He said awkwardly, “No, wait. I was out of line. I’m sorry—”

He was. He was ashamed of himself, and he did not know exactly why he should be, but something in her passion had made him so. He hated unfairness, and he felt that he had been unfair.

He said so, and Varn Allan looked up at him with eyes that were still angry, but after a moment she turned away from the door.

“Let us forget it,” she said stiffly. “I was at fault, for talking emotionally like—”

“Like a primitive,” Kenniston finished for her, and she set her small jaw and said, “Exactly. Like a primitive.”

Kenniston laughed. His hostility to her and her kind might remain, but he had lost that resentful consciousness of inferiority that had nagged him since he met her. He had lost it, when the cool, competent Federation official had revealed herself as a worried and lonely girl.

“No, no, I wasn’t laughing at you,” he said hastily. “Now tell me, why did you feel it necessary to bring up this Lund business with me?”

“It was to save my rank and position,” she said bitterly. “It was because I was afraid of losing them, of—”

“Oh, all right, I’ve apologized for that,” he said impatiently. “Christ, but you people are touchy!”

For a moment Varn Allan was silent. Then she said, “You think it will make no difference to you whether Lund or I speak at the hearing, that we’re both against your people. You are wrong, Kenniston.”

“You and he are both for evacuating us off Earth,” he reminded her, “So what difference is there?”

“There’s a very great difference,” she said earnestly. “I may have made mistakes in dealing with your people, but my desire has been to accomplish a smooth, peaceful evacuation. Lund would like to deal with this Earth problem dramatically— that is to say, forcefully.”

“Forcefully?” Kenniston stiffened. “I told you both what it would mean if you tried force!”

“I know, and I believe you enough to want to solve this evacuation problem peacefully, even though it should involve delay. That is my idea of an Administrator’s duty. But Lund knows that due to your strange background, and due to the fact that this Earth case focuses the whole long controversy about world evacuation, all eyes will be on this hearing, and he would use it to advance himself, no matter what disastrous events he might unchain on Earth.”

Her logic was clear enough, and it squared with Kenniston’s estimate of Lund. He felt a suddenly deepened worry.

“But what could Lund bring up about the Earth problem that would be a surprise?” he wanted to know.

Varn Allan shook her head. “I don’t know. I thought maybe you might know. He has something, I’m sure.”

Kenniston said thoughtfully, “I don’t. But maybe Gorr and the others might have some idea. I’ll try to find out.”

He looked at her, and whatever his feelings about her might be he had to admit that he was convinced of her sincere attachment to her duty, and that though her ideas of justice might not jibe with his, she would not be deliberately unjust.

He said, “Thanks for telling me this. And again— I’m sorry I shot off.”

She said soberly, “I know you’re under strain, from this voyage and from anxiety. But— don’t let Gorr and the rest encourage you to hope for too much. The evacuation itself cannot be avoided; it is the way in which it is to be done that worries me.” And she added with sudden weariness, “I wish I were a girl of your Middletown, who had never left her world and to whom the stars were just lights in the sky.”

He shook his head. “You’d still have your worries, believe me. Hurlled out of your own life into this one— Carol, right now, is more upset than you’ll ever be.”

“Carol? That would be the girl I saw with you?”

He nodded. “Yes. My girl. She was raised in that old town of ours, school and picnics and parties and what hat to wear, and then suddenly— bang! She’s here in this crazy future, and may not even be allowed to stay on Earth!”

Varn Allan said, musingly, “How strange it must be, to have grown up on one little, little planet, to have lived that tiny, circumscribed routine. In a way, I envy her. And I’m sorry for her.”

She turned to go, and Kenniston held out his hand. “No hard feelings, then?”

She was for a moment completely puzzled by his gesture, then understood and smiled and laid her hand awkwardly in his. But she took it away hastily and went out.

Kenniston stared after her. “Well, I’ll be damned if she isn’t afraid of men!”

His resentful hostility to her was gone, and while he knew she would be in there pitching against him on this evacuation that she thought so necessary, it did not worry him like the matter of Norden Lund.

The more he thought about Lund, the more he worried. Finally, he went to Gorr Holl’s cabin and told the big Capellan.

Gorr Holl instantly looked upset. “That’s bad. Lund could make nasty trouble, if he’s got hold of something. But what could it be?”

“I thought maybe you’d know.”

“Not a thing,” the Capellan denied. “Wait a minute— Piers Eglin has been a little thick with Lund lately. Maybe he’d know.”

Kenniston got up. “Piers always wants to talk to me about the old town. If he knows anything, maybe he’ll spill it.”

But it was not until the next day— the strange dawnless artificial day of starship routine— that he got a chance to talk to the little historian.

He asked Eglin bluntly, “Do you know what Lund’s got up his sleeve for this hearing?”

The question fluttered Piers Eglin badly. He fidgeted, and looked away with a hunted expression, and mumbled, “Why do you ask me? What could I know?”

Kenniston stared at him. “You’re a pretty poor liar, Piers. What do you know?”

Eglin began to babble almost incoherently. “Kenniston, listen— you mustn’t draw me into your troubles! I like you, I wish I could help you— but I’m a historian, it’s my life, that old town of yours on Earth is like a dream come true to me, and to save it, I would do anything. Anything!”

“What the devil are you talking about?” Kenniston demanded. “What does Middletown have to do with it?”

The little historian said feverishly, “You don’t understand its importance. You people from the past will die away, but that city from the far past can be preserved forever, the greatest of historical treasures. I can preserve it, keep it for future study, if I have official backing—”

A light dawned on Kenniston. “And Norden Lund is going to give you that backing? In exchange for what? What have you done to help him?”

Eglin shook his head wretchedly. “I can’t say anything. Honestly, I can’t.”

He was nearly in tears, as he went away. Kenniston looked after him, mystified and deeply troubled.

He told Gorr Holl and the others. Magro looked baffled. “But what could Piers do to help Lund? I don’t get it at all.”

“Maybe he overheard some of our people making threats and wild talk, and reported it?” Kenniston said.

Gorr Holl shook his head. “Just hearsay wouldn’t be worth much. And anyway, Piers wasn’t around your people much after the first— he spent all his time in the old town.”

Lal’lor said slowly, “I do not like it. Try to find out what it is that Piers has done, Kenniston.”

Kenniston, thought, found in the following “days” that Piers Eglin very

definitely was avoiding him. He did not even see the little historian again until they made their landing on Vega Four.

He had sat for hours that day in the bridge room of the *Thanis*, looking with unbelieving wonderment at the alien solar system shaping itself out of the void, the spinning planets sweeping in majestic curves through the brilliant circle of Vega's light.

The ship was sweeping in toward the fourth planet. Kenniston saw the cloudy globe leap up to meet them, and again he felt the magically tempered pressure. As they hummed downward, he was stricken with a vertiginous fear that they were going to crash.

He glimpsed a vast landscape whose dominant colors were quite unearthly. Cruel, lofty mountains of purple-black rock rose grandly beyond broad blue plains. Then the rushing ship swept over a great expanse of vivid yellow—a golden ocean that flashed back Vega's brilliance blindingly. And then a city. A white, towering continent of a city that, even viewed from the stratosphere, was enough to take Kenniston's breath away. There was a huge starship port near it, and the *Thanis* was dropping smoothly through tangled shipping traffic toward it, making worldfall in its waiting dock with the softest of jars.

Vega Four. He was here. And he could not believe it, not even now.

Gorr Holl unfastened his straps. The *Capellan* was almost as tense as Kenniston himself.

"Jon Arnol should be here waiting for us," he said rapidly. "His workshop is on the other side of this planet. Come along, Kenniston!"

Jon Arnol? Kenniston had almost forgotten about him, in the grip of this strange arrival. In the shivering fascination of being here, he found it hard to keep his mind on why he was here.

He went down with Gorr Holl to the big vestibule inside the entrance port. The lock was open, and strange blue sunlight struck the metal floor, strange air, laden with faintly alien scents, drifted to his nostrils.

Lund and Varn Allan were there, and the woman said to him, "Your quarters will be in Government Center. I can take you there."

Gorr Holl, looking out at a dark, lean man who was hurrying across the concrete apron toward the Thanis, said hastily, “No, you needn’t bother. We’ll take Kenniston along to his quarters.”

The lean, dark man was coming up the stairs to the lock. He was perhaps ten years older than Kenniston, with a worn face and the eyes of a dreamer, and the unsteady hands of a man who is laboring under great excitement.

Varn Allan’s eyes rested on him, and she said, “I see. Jon Arnol. I thought that’s what you had in mind. But it won’t succeed, Gorr.”

“Maybe it will, this time,” rumbled the Capellan.

Norden Lund, looking at Arnol as he entered, laughed, and then without saying anything went out. Varn Allan looked as though she were going to speak to Kenniston, but didn’t.

She said, “Then you are responsible for his appearance tomorrow, Gorr,” and she left.

Kenniston, looking after her, wished she had not spoken. And he wished that Lund had not laughed quite so smugly. He was worried enough as it was.

Arnol had reached them, was greeting Lal’lor as an old friend, smiling at Magro and Gorr Holl. His smile, his movements, were quick and sharp and only half finished, as though the tense nerves of the body were acting independently of the brain.

“I think we’ve got a chance this time, Lal’lor!” he said eagerly. “By God, I think we do! This Earth business may be just what we’ve waited for, the chance to ram the Arnol process down their throats whether they like it or not! It’s a lucky break!” Gorr Holl told him, “This is Kenniston, of Earth.” Jon Arnol looked a little ashamed as he turned to Kenniston. “I’m sorry if I sounded selfish. I know you’ve got your own terrible problem. But if you knew how long I’ve sweated and waited and hoped! I’m a scientist, nothing else is important to me, and I’ve seen my whole life’s work and achievement held back by politics—”

Gorr Holl interrupted. “Now listen, this is no place to talk! Let’s get on to Government Center. We can talk in Kenniston’s quarters, and we’ve got plenty of planning to do before tomorrow!”

Kenniston went down the steps with them, onto the concrete apron, and for a moment the whole problem of Earth seemed impossibly far away.

He stood on an alien world, under an alien Sun, and all around him was the rush and clangor of the starport, where the great ships came and went across the galaxy. Somehow here, more than in space, he caught the reality of that incredible commerce that plied between the farthest Suns, that knew the shining trails among the nebulae and the deadly currents of the stardrifts, and the infinite numbers of ports on infinite nameless worlds. Something in him rose up in mingled awe and pride, remembering that men of Earth had first voyaged across the unknown seas to these star-fringed shores of the universe.

The deep bass thrumming of the great ships shook the ground beneath him and the atomic forges beat, hammering the plates for bow and keel, and the black hulls lifted majestically against the sky, scarred and pitted with the dusts and atmospheres of a galaxy, and Kenniston would have stood forever watching if Gorr Holl had not led him away with them.

Jon Arnol had a car waiting, a car that bore small relation to the ones that Kenniston had known except that it went along the ground. It was sleek and low, and he knew that it must be very swift, but speed seemed to be controlled along the incredible network of ramps and roads and flying bridges that spanned the city. They went fast, but not so fast that he could not see.

He looked at this city, splendid in the light of setting Vega, and he felt like an ignorant barbarian come down from the hills to Babylon. It was more a nation than a city, too huge and awesome to comprehend. Already the dusk was gathering in its deep ways, soft lights were glowing forth and the traffic and the crowd flowed there in murmuring rivers. And along such a river sped their car, the others so little impressed that they were talking eagerly still of the morrow, of the hearing, of the great chance.

Kenniston looked at the thronged and glowing streets, the strange thousands who went its ways, and it was borne in upon him with crushing impact that this was the center of the galaxy, the capital of a thousand thousand worlds. Man and woman and humanoid, silken clothing and furry hides and backs humped with wings, voices human and nonhuman, alien music that jarred his nerves, throb of hidden machines, and over all the deep humming from the sky that told of more and more starships dropping down through the deepening dusk.

As though from a remote distance he heard Gorr Holl speaking to him, pointing ahead toward a range of titan buildings that rose like white Cordilleras, their tops raking the sky. It came to his numbed mind presently that that was Government Center, the place to which they were bound, the place where he must presently stand up alone and speak for faraway Earth to these strangers of the stars.

Chapter 17— judgment of the stars

Kenniston clenched his hands under the table of gleaming plastic and clung hard to his sanity.

This is true, he told himself fiercely. It is happening, and I am not mad. I am John Kenniston. Only a few weeks ago I was in Middletown. Now I am in a place called Vega Center. I am still John Kenniston. Only the world has changed.

But he knew that it was not so. He knew that Vega Center and the marble amphitheatre in which he sat were only shadows in a shifting nightmare from which he could not wake.

Unsteadily he looked upward. They sat silently, row upon row of them, tier upon tier, full circle around the vast echoing space, reaching up into the shadowy vault, watching him with the crushing thousands of their eyes, human and unhuman, curious, intent.

The hosts of the Federation of Stars. The Board of Governors, in full session.

These countless hundreds who came from the far-flung worlds of a galaxy— to them, he must seem equally unreal. It would seem impossible to them that they looked down upon a man of the forgotten past.

Varn Allan's quiet, earnest voice broke in upon his reeling thoughts. She was finishing her report on Middletown.

“This is a complex situation. In finding a solution for it, I would ask you to remember that these people are a special case, for which there is no precedent. In my belief, they are entitled to special consideration.

“Therefore, my recommendation is as follows: that the proposed evacuation be delayed until these people can be psychologically conditioned to the idea of world-change. Such conditioning, in my belief, would enable this evacuation to be carried out without difficulty.”

She glanced at Norden Lund, who sat next her at the table. “Perhaps Sub-Administrator Lund has something to add to that report.”

Lund smiled. “No. I will reserve my right to speak until later.” His eyes held a gleam of anticipation.

There was a moment of silence. And Kenniston could hear the soft gigantic rustling, the breathing and small stirring of the ranked thousands of the Governors.

The Spokesman, a small alert man who was the voice of the Board, the questioner, and who sat with them at the table, said, “The Board of Governors recognizes Kenniston, of Sol Three.”

The rulers of the galaxy were waiting for him to speak.

Others were waiting, too. They were waiting in the dusk and cold of Sol Three, the little world whose ancient name of Earth had been all but forgotten in these halls of government. The millhands, the housewives, the rich men and the poor, the folk of Middletown.

Varn Allan looked at him and smiled.

He took a deep breath. He forced himself to speak. He forced the words to come out of the tight dark corridors of fear.

“We did not ask to come into your time. Having come, we are under Federation law, and we do not defy your authority as such. We do not wish to make trouble. Our problem is a psychological one...”

He tried to explain to these men of the Federation something of what life had been like before that fateful morning in June. He tried to make them understand how his people were bound to their world and why they must cling to it so desperately.

“I understand the technological problems of supporting life on a world such as ours. But we have known privation and suffering before. We are not afraid of them. And we believe that, given time, we can solve those problems.

“We don’t even ask you for help, though we would be grateful if you cared to give it. All we ask of you is to be let alone, to work out our own salvation!”

He stopped. The silence, the thousands of watching eyes, bore down upon him

with a crushing weight.

Kenniston struggled for a final word. There was so much he had not said— so much that could never be put into words.

How do you phrase the history of the race of men, the pride and sorrow of their beginning?

He said, “Earth is the mother that bore you. You should not let her die!”

It was done. For good or ill, it was done and over.

Jon Arnol leaned from where he sat beside him at the table. “Magnificent,” he whispered. And again, “Magnificent!”

The Spokesman asked, “Is it through the application of Jon Arnol’s theories that you hope to bring back life to Sol Three?”

Before Kenniston could answer, Arnol himself cried out, “On that point, I ask leave to speak!”

The Spokesman nodded.

Arnol rose. The fierce energy that drove him could not be contained for long in any chair. He seemed to face the entire Board of Governors at once, turning his dark, challenging gaze upon them.

“You have denied me another chance to test my process— in spite of the fact that no reputable scientist can challenge my equations. You have denied me that chance, because of political considerations which are known to everyone here. The same considerations which deliberately made my first test fail, by choosing for it a world too small for the energy-blast released in its core!

“But Earth is not such a world. The experiment will succeed, there. I demand that you let it be done! Remember, this process will solve not only the immediate problem before you but also the whole future problem of dying worlds. You think that evacuation, transfer of populations, is a better solution. But you can’t go on moving populations forever!”

He paused. Then his voice rang out sternly. “Neither can you, for a preconceived

political philosophy, forever hold back scientific progress. I say that you have no right to deny to the peoples of the Federation the incalculable good that this process can do them. And therefore, I ask permission to prove my process, using the planet Sol Three as the subject!”

He sat down. There was much whispering in the ranks of the Governors, a nodding together of heads. Kenniston stared hungrily at their faces. Impossible to tell...

“I think,” Jon Arnol whispered, “we may have done it!” The Spokesman lifted his gavel, about to signal the beginning of the vote.

Norden Lund said, “I now claim my right to speak.” It was granted. And Kenniston felt his heart stop beating. Lund’s voice rang through the amphitheatre. “There is one fact concerning these so-called Middletowners that has not been mentioned— one that my superior did not even discover! A fact which was learned from records in their own old town, deciphered by the linguistic and historical expert of our party.”

Kenniston grew tense. So it was coming now, whatever it was that Lund had found out through Piers Eglin.

“You have been told that these Middletowners are a kindly, harmless folk. You are asked to be sorry for them, to give them special indulgences, to overlook their little violences. And why? Because they are pathetic creatures, innocent victims of a freak of chance that threw them forward along their world-line.”

Lund’s face hardened. His voice thundered wrathfully.

“It was no freak of chance that brought them into our time. It was an act of war!”

He paused, to let them understand that. Kenniston saw Varn Allan’s face. She was looking at Lund in amazement.

Lund went on. “Let Kenniston deny this if he can! It was the explosion of a hostile atomic bomb that ruptured the continuum and hurled his city through. These people are the children of war, born and bred in an age of wars.

“Consider the mob violence, the threats made against Federation officials, the refusal to accept peaceful authority! Consider that at this moment those kindly

folk of Middletown are prepared for war, their trenches dug, their guns in place, ready to fire on the first Federation ship that lands!”

Lund’s voice dropped to a lower, tenser pitch.

“I warn you that these people are rotten with the plague of war. For centuries, we of the Federation struggled to find release from war, and we found it. The galaxy has been clean of that hideous disease. Now it has appeared again among us.

“And we— the upholders of Federation law— are wavering before a show of force!”

Kenniston was on his feet. Jon Arnol clung to him, holding him back. Varn Allan leaned over the table, telling him in a desperate undertone, “Don’t Kenniston! Keep your temper!”

The Spokesman asked of Lund, “What is your recommendation to the Board of Governors?”

Lund cried, “Show these people that they cannot flout peaceful authority with a threat of war! Remove them, as quickly as possible, to some isolated world on the frontiers of the galaxy— a world so remote that they cannot infect the main thought currents of the Federation with their brute psychology!”

Kenniston broke away from Arnol’s grasp. He strode up to Lund and took him by the front of his jacket and bent over him a face so white with anger that Lund quailed before it.

“Who are you,” snarled Kenniston, “to sit in judgment upon us?”

The words choked in his throat. He thrust Lund from him, flung him away so that he went sprawling to his knees, and turned to face the Governors.

“Yes, we fought our wars! We fought because we had to, so that thought and progress and freedom could live in our world. You owe us for that! You owe us for the men that died so that there could one day be a Federation of Stars. You owe us for atomic power, too. We may have misused it— but it’s the force that built your civilization, and we gave it to you!

“Think of those things, you men of the future! From Earth you came, and your

whole civilization is rooted in our blood. You live in peace, because we died in war. Remember that, when you sit in judgment upon the past!”

He stood silent then, trembling, and Varn Allan came to bring him back to his chair.

Lund had got to his feet. He said, “I will let Kenniston’s own actions stand as my final argument.” He sat down. The Spokesman brought his gavel down. Kenniston was hardly aware of the taking of the vote. He wrestled with a dark turmoil of doubt and anger and fear, dreading to hear the words of judgment that he knew were coming. “It is the final decision of the Board of Governors that the population of Sol Three shall be evacuated in accordance with the official order already outstanding.

“No experiments with the Arnol process on a planetary scale can be considered safe at this time.

“It is the wish of the Governors that the people of Sol Three be peaceably assimilated into the Federation. It is hoped that their attitude in the future will be such as to make this possible. If it is not, then they must be shown the futility of armed resistance.

“The hearing is concluded.”

Kenniston realized that Arnol was telling him to get up. He rose and went out of the amphitheatre with the others. He heard Varn Allan’s voice speaking in bitter anger to Norden Lund.

Nothing was very clear to him after that until he was back in his own quarters and Gorr Holl was putting a glass in his hand. Magro and Lal’lor had waited there for the verdict. Varn Allan was still with him, and Arnol.

“I’m sorry, Kenniston,” said Varn, and he knew she meant it. He shook his head.

“It was my fault. If I hadn’t lost my temper...”

“Don’t blame yourself, Kenniston. Forgive me, but Lund had just enough truth on his side to carry the day. Why didn’t you or your people tell us that you had been engaged in war, back in your own time?”

He shook his head. “Because we weren’t in any war. Don’t you see, the bomb that hurled us out of our own time came in peacetime! Whatever followed we never knew about, because we weren’t there!”

She paced the room, frowning, and then said, “I’m going to try to get this evacuation order lengthened out as long as possible. It may soften the blow a little for your people. I used to have some influence with the Coordinators— Now I don’t know. Lund has undermined me pretty badly.”

It dawned on Kenniston then that this day had been a defeat for her, too, and an unjust one. He had been too wrapped up in his own despair to think about it.

It was his turn to say, “I’m sorry.”

She smiled a little and turned to go, pausing to lay her hand briefly on Kenniston’s shoulder. “Don’t take this too hard,” she said. “Nobody could have done a better job than you did.”

She went out. They looked at each other with faces sick, angry, sullen— the two men and the three humanoids.

“Well,” said Gorr Holl, “It was a damned good try. I vote we have a drink.”

Magro said, “It’ll be bitter news for our people, Gorr. They were beginning to hope.”

The Capellan rumbled, “I know that. Shut up.”

He took a glass to Jon Arnol, who was sitting staring at the wall. “Cheer up,” he said. “Your process is bound to win out some day.”

Arnol said, “Maybe. But that’s not doing your people any good— all the humanoid peoples who backed and financed my work and put their hopes in it. I’ve let you down.”

“The hell you have,” said Gorr.

Kenniston was thinking sickly of the people back there on Earth, waiting anxiously for his return. He was thinking of Carol, and he said slowly, “I can’t go back. I can’t face them, and tell them I’ve failed.”

“They’ll get over it,” said Gorr Holl, in a heavy attempt to be reassuring. “After all, going to a strange world isn’t half as much of a shock as being hurled forward in time. They stood that.”

“It happened before they knew it,” said Kenniston, “That makes a difference. And they were still in a place they knew. No. They won’t get used to it. They’ll fight it to the bitter end.”

He spread his hands in a gesture of futile anger. “That’s what I can’t make anybody, even you, understand! They belong on Earth. It’s like an extension of themselves. They will risk any danger, dare and threat, to hold onto it!”

His gaze fell then on Jon Arnol’s bitter face, abstracted and brooding on his own disappointment. Kenniston’s pulse gave a sudden leap.

He said softly, “Any danger, any threat... Yes. by heaven!” He was suddenly shaken by a terrible, desperate hope. He got up and went across the room to Jon Arnol.

“You said that you had a small starcruiser and technical crew of your own?” Kenniston said.

Arnol nodded. “Yes. Over at my workshop in the mountains.” He added bitterly, “I sent them word last night to get the cruiser ready to go to Earth. I was so sure that our chance had come.”

Kenniston asked him softly, “Tell me, Arnol. Do you really believe in your own process?”

Arnol got to his feet. His eyes were suddenly hot, and he looked as if he would hit the Earthman.

Kenniston demanded, “Do you believe in it enough, to defy an order of the Board?”

Arnol stiffened. After a moment he said, “Explain that, Kenniston.”

Kenniston explained. Fairly shaking with the intensity of his idea, he talked. And gradually Arnol’s eyes took on a febrile glitter.

He muttered. “It could be done quickly, there on Earth. The ancient heat shafts would eliminate the necessity of deep boring—”

But then he shook his head, in a kind of dread, “No! It would mean dismissal from the College of Scientists, exile for the rest of my life. I can’t do it, Kenniston.”

“You’ve worked and hoped for many years,” Kenniston reminded him cruelly. “Some day you’ll give up hoping, and your process will be forgotten and lost.”

He stood back. “I won’t say any more— except that here is your chance, if you wish to take it. Your chance to try your planet rejuvenation process, on Earth!”

He waited, then, silent. Gorr Holl and the others watched. The Capellan’s eyes were very bright.

Arnol put his head in his hands and groaned. “I can’t, I can’t! And yet— they’ll never grant permission, that I know. A whole life’s work wasted...”

Kenniston watched him suffer, caught between desire and fear. And at last Arnol struggled to a decision. He said, hesitantly, “We would have to leave it to your people to decide, Kenniston. They must agree to accept the risk.”

“I know them, and I know they’ll agree!” Kenniston exclaimed. “And if they do?”

Beads of sweat stood on Arnol’s forehead. “If they’re willing, I’ll do it,” he said huskily.

A great excitement coursed through Kenniston. One chance— one last chance, after all!

He looked at Gorr Holl and Magro and Lal’lor. He asked, “Are you with us in this?”

Gorr Holl uttered a great, booming laugh. “Are we with you?” He strode to Kenniston, and he said, “We humanoids have been fighting this battle for a long time. Do you think we’d drop out now?”

Magro’s cat eyes were glittering, but he merely nodded agreement

Jon Arnol said excitedly, “My flier is docked at South Port, near here. It won’t take long to get to my mountain workshop.”

Lal’lor began, “I, too—”

Gorr Holl told him, “You, grey one, shall stay here and cover for us. Tell anyone who asks that we have all gone out to show Kenniston the sights.”

The Miran sighed. “All right, Gorr. But— try to be careful. All of you.”

They left the apartment Half an hour later, their flier was splitting the night on the way to the other side of Vega Four.

Chapter 18—fateful return

Another night had come. Under the brilliant, unfamiliar stars, black mountain peaks looked broodingly at the scene of feverish activity on the little plateau.

Lights flared there, illuminating the little group of long, low buildings, the supply yard with its crane, and the dim metal mass of a small starcruiser battered and tarnished by long use.

A wide hatch gaped in the side of the ship's hull. And toward it Kenniston and his three companions were carefully rolling a massive, black ovoid thing that rested in a wheeled cradle.

“You needn't worry— there's no danger of detonating it, when it isn't even electrofused,” Jon Arnol was saying reassuringly.

“Listen, if this energy bomb is able to change a whole plant, I'm treating it with respect!” rumbled Gorr Holl.

Kenniston felt the unreality of it. The whole scheme now seemed to him mad, harebrained. This big black mass his hand touched— how could it change the future of a world?

He tried to fight down these doubts. The scientists of this latter-day universe, masters of a knowledge far beyond his own, had affirmed the soundness of Arnol theory. That was what had nerved him to start this project, and he must cling to it. It was too late now for questions.

He was tired, dead tired. They had worked without respite all through the day, he and Gorr Holl and Magro, helping Arnol and his technical crew to load the masses of supplies and incomprehensible equipment necessary for the experiment.

The little starcruiser was Arnol's workshop. It had carried him on many research trips throughout the galaxy. And the eager young men of the crew who had worked and dreamed beside Arnol for so long had asked no questions. Whether or not they guessed what their mission was to be, Kenniston had no way of knowing.

The Chief pilot came up to Arnol as the four of them reached the hatchway with their cryptic burden.

“She’s all checked and ready for takeoff, whenever you are.”

Arnol nodded. The technical men were taking over the task of loading the energy bomb and making it fast in its shockproof well.

“As soon as they’re through,” said Arnol. He glanced at Kenniston and the others, with a weary, triumphant smile. “In about twenty minutes, we’ll be on our way.”

It was then that Kenniston saw the jet streams of a flier drawing a distant curve of flame across the sky, coming toward the plateau.

The others saw it, too. They waited, while the technical crew labored swiftly on, and Kenniston said, “It must be Lal’lor, with a message!”

“Yes,” said Arnol. “No one else could know we were here.”

Yet their uneasiness grew as they watched the flier sweep in to a landing. Kenniston thought desperately, “No one else could know! We wouldn’t have been followed!”

He found himself running with the others across the flat surface of the landing field.

He saw the figure that stepped out of the flier. It was not Lal’lor. It was a man he had never seen— a stocky man with clipped iron-grey hair and a look of authority on his square face.

Behind this stranger came Varn Allan, and with her, his face alight with triumph, was Norden Lund.

Kenniston stopped, his heart sinking in cold despair. The stocky newcomer stood, surveying with startled, unbelieving eyes, the bustle of activity around the cruiser.

“I wouldn’t have thought it possible!” he gasped. “Lund, you were right. They were going to do it without permission.”

Lund said happily, “Yes, sir. I suspected it That’s why I had them watched. You can see for yourself.” And to Kenniston and Arnol and the others he said, “Let me introduce you. This is Coordinator Mathis.”

Varn Allan was still standing and looking at them, her face shocked and incredulous in the white glare of the worklights. She looked as though she could not credit what she saw.

“I didn’t believe it,” she said, speaking to Kenniston slowly. “When the Coordinator informed me of what Lund had told him, what you were doing, I refused to believe it I came with him, to prove that he was wrong.”

She paused, her blue eyes growing hot, fixed on Kenniston. “But I was wrong. You are a complete barbarian, with no respect for law. I’m beginning to think your people should be quarantined!”

Mathis, the Coordinator, was looking grimly at Jon Arnol. “You’ve gone too far this time, Arnol. You know the penalty for breaking Federation law, even if this Kenniston hasn’t learned it yet.”

“Arrest,” said Lund softly. “Arrest and exile for all of them. I hope, sir, you will remember that it was I who exposed this criminal plot after my superior had shown open sympathy for the criminals.”

“I will remember it,” Mathis said crisply. “Now advise Vega Center of this situation at once.”

Lund turned to go back to the flier. Its radio-televisor, Kenniston knew, would put him into instant contact with the Government Center.

He sprang forward in running strides. He caught up to Lund, and with one hand on the man’s shoulder he spun him around. With the other, he smashed a driving blow at Lund’s jaw.

Mathis recoiled, horrified by the violence. Varn Allan ran toward Kenniston, as Lund struggled to get up.

“Get back, Kenniston!” she ordered him. “You’re not on your barbaric world now. You can’t...”

She had no chance to finish. Lund came up fast, drawing a small glass weapon from his pocket. He had foreseen Kenniston's reactions sufficiently to come armed.

Gorr Holl's great furry shape loomed up behind the Sub-Administrator. One huge paw caught the hand with the weapon, the other arm went around Lund's body and lifted him in the air like a child. His powerful fingers tightened. Lund dropped the glass weapon.

"Let me go!" he gasped. "I order you..."

"You might have killed someone," Gorr Holl rumbled, and shook Lund until his teeth rattled. "You have no orders for me, little man!"

He looked around, still holding Lund. "What now?" Mathis said, a little shakily, "I demand in the name of the Federation—" Nobody paid any attention to his demand, and he stopped.

Arnol had come up. There was an iron set to his jaw now. "We are already liable to penalties for what we have done. Arrest and exile. They can't do much more to us if we go through with it. Are you still game?"

"Yes!" Kenniston looked at Varn Allan and Mathis. He said regretfully, "I'm sorry you two came. You'll have to go with us now— you and Lund. We can't leave you behind to spread an alarm."

Her eyes met his coldly and steadily. "It will do you no good. Our disappearance, and yours, will be noticed very soon."

She said nothing more. She glanced once at the flier, and then at the men around her, and at the fleet Magro. She did not try to escape. Arnol had turned to face his men. He told them, "You are not responsible for my plans, and you are not yet under any penalty. Therefore you are free to decide now whether or not you will go with me."

The Chief Pilot stepped forward. He was a tall young man with a reckless grin and eyes that were not given to showing fear.

"I've sweated this tub across the galaxy too many times to quit now," he said. "I don't know about the other boys, but I'm going."

The others, technicians and crewmen alike, shouted assent.

“We’ve worked too long and too hard to throw this chance away! We’re with you, Arnol!”

Arnol’s dark eyes suffused with a mist that was very like the tears of gratitude. But his voice rang out like a bugle, crying, “Then prepare for takeoff! The Government ships will be after us as soon as the Coordinator and Varn Allan and Lund are missed and traced!”

Men began to run toward the starcruiser. Kenniston went with them, holding tight to Varn Allan, with Gorr Holl coming after with the squirming, protesting Lund clutched in his great arms. Magro brought the pale-faced Mathis, who neither spoke nor resisted.

The hatches were shut. The airlock valves clanged into place. As he followed Arnol along a narrow passageway, Kenniston was aware of the swift, ordered confusion that seethed throughout the ship. Warning lights flashed on the bulkheads. Bells rang. Somewhere, deep in the bowels of the cruiser, machinery jarred into life, settling to a steady humming.

Arnol thrust open two doors that faced each other across the passage. Indicating one, he said, “I think this is the most comfortable, Administrator Allan. You’ll understand if we keep the door locked.”

She went inside without a word. Lund and Mathis were thrust into the opposite cabin, the former still snarling threats. Arnol glanced at the warning lights.

“All set,” he said. “Come on.”

In the cruiser, Kenniston sat dazedly through the last taut seconds of preparations, feeling all his weariness collapsing upon him. Then a bell rang, and the little ship went smoothly skyward. There was little sensation of the tremendous acceleration, any more than in the Thanis. He had learned by now of the elastic force-stasis that gripped everything in a starship to temper acceleration pressure.

As in a dream, Kenniston listened to the banshee scream of atmosphere past the outer hull. Then through the port he saw the great cloudy bulk of Vega Four falling away with slow majesty. And then the sky was gone, replaced by the

depthless black vault of space that was hung thick with loops and chains and pendants of blazing Suns.

He became aware later of Gorr Holl's big paws shaking him gently. "Come on, Kenniston. You're nearly out. Time to sleep."

The big Capellan bore him away bodily to a cabin, and rolled him into a bunk.

He woke hours later, feeling rusty and still tired from the strain of the past days. He looked out. The cruiser was in deep space now, droning steadily across the mighty gulf that separated it from Earth. Kenniston felt an involuntary thrill. This voyaging in the great interstellar deeps was getting into his blood.

He stuck his head in the bridge and found Magro there with the Chief Pilot.

"I've been listening with the Visor operator," said the Spican. "There's been no alarm yet, back there."

"But there will be, when they find all of us gone."

"Yes. And Control ships will be after us like hounds. We're not going to have much time, on Earth."

Kenniston was silent. Then he asked, "Where's Arnol?"

"You'll find him down in the bomb compartment."

As Kenniston groped his way down a series of ladders, into the compartment where the great bomb brooded in its well, that troubling doubt rose again within him.

Until now, the swiftness of events had crowded it down. But now it seemed suddenly fantastic that he should pin the hopes of Earth's last people to this black thing. It had only been tested once, and that test had ended disastrously...

But Jon Arnol sat there in the dim light and smiled, a happy, peaceful smile.

"I have been admiring my child, Kenniston. That seems silly, doesn't it? But I've put most of my life into that thing. I've waited— how long I've waited! And now, in a little while..."

His gaze dwelt fondly again upon the black metallic ovoid in its cradled pit.

“It is a dream, and it is half a lifetime of toil, and it is a power that will revive a world.”

Kenniston cried, out of his haunting doubt, “Can this bomb really rekindle Earth’s interior heat? How?”

Arnol said, a little helplessly, “I know the uncertainty that must oppress you. I’d like to explain my equations. But how can I, without first teaching you all that the ages have brought in new science?”

He went on, “But even though a primitive scientist, you are a scientist. I will try to make you understand the principle, at least. You know that most suns derive their energy from a nuclear reaction that changes four hydrogen atoms into one helium atom, by a series of shifting transmutations involving carbon and nitrogen?”

Kenniston nodded quickly. “Yes, that carbon-nitrogen cycle was discovered in my time. Scientists called it the Solar Phoenix. The tiny fraction of atomic weight left over, after the cycle, was the source of solar radiation.”

“Exactly,” said Arnol. “What you wouldn’t know is that scientists in the ages since then have succeeded in triggering similar cyclical reactions in other, heavier elements. That is the key to my process.

“Most planets, like your Earth, have a central core of iron and nickel. Now, a transformation of iron to nickel in cyclic reaction had been achieved in the laboratory, liberating the energy. I asked myself— instead of in a laboratory, why not start that reaction inside a planet?”

“Then it would reproduce the basic solar reaction inside such a planet?”
Kenniston said incredulously.

“Not really, for the iron-nickel cycle does not yield such terrific radiation as your Solar Phoenix,” Arnol corrected. “It would, however, create a giant solar furnace inside a planet, and raise the surface temperature of that world by many degrees.”

Kenniston voiced his worry. “There wouldn’t be danger of the nuclear reaction

bursting through to the surface?”

“It can’t burst through,” Arnol declared. “The cycle can only feed on nickel and iron, and the massive outer sphere of silicon and aluminum around the core would contain the reaction forever.”

He added, “That is why the energy-bomb that triggers the reaction must be detonated in the core. And that is why we can quickly start the process on your Earth— because the ancient heat shafts there provide access to the deep core without elaborate preliminary boring.”

Kenniston nodded. The theory seemed sound enough. And yet—

He said slowly, “But when you tested it before, the planet was nearly destroyed by quakes that the convulsion in the core started.”

“Planetoid” said Arnol wearily. “Not planet. Haven’t I explained that enough times? The mass was insufficient to sustain the blast.” He was suddenly angry. “Why was I ever fool enough to accept that impossible test? But I repeat, Kenniston, I know what I am doing. The entire College of Science has not been able to find flaws in my equations. You’ll have to be content with that.”

“Yes,” said Kenniston. “Yes, I’ll have to be.” But as he left Arnol, he could not entirely crush his apprehension. This man-made creation of a solar furnace in the heart of a planet was as monstrous to his mind as the making of fire must have been to the first man. What if, by his faith in Jon Arnol, he had doomed Earth instead of helping it?

One decision came clear in his mind. If there was a possibility that Earth’s surface might be ravaged by destructive quakes, no one should remain for the detonation of the bomb who did not do so of his own free will.

With a queer pang of guilt, he thought of Varn Allan. She and Lund and Mathis, prisoners against their will, would have to be let go before the great risk was taken. He would give her that reassurance, at least.

The door of her cabin had a simple combination lock, and the dial numbers had been given to all hands in case of necessity. Kenniston opened it, and went in.

She was sitting rather as he had sat that time aboard the *Thanis*, her shoulders

bent, her gaze brooding on the immensity of space beyond the port. He thought she had not slept, from the lines of strain and weariness in her face.

She straightened up at once, and turned toward him defiantly. “Have you come to your senses and abandoned this criminal project?” she demanded.

The hard anger in her clear eyes awakened answering anger in Kenniston.

“We have not,” he said. “I came only to tell you that you and Lund and Mathis will be allowed to leave Earth before the thing is done.”

“Do you think I’m worried about my own safety?” cried Varn Allan. “It’s the thousands of your people whom you’re endangering by this mad defiance of Federation law.”

“To the devil with Federation law,” he said roughly. Her eyes flashed hotly. “You’ll learn its power. Control ships will speed to Earth before you can even do this thing.”

Exasperated beyond measure, he grabbed her shoulders with a brutal impulse to shake her.

Then the totally unexpected happened. Varn Allan began to cry.

Kenniston’s anger melted into distress. She had always seemed so cool and self-contained that it was upsetting to see her in tears.

After a moment, he clumsily patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Varn. I know you were trying to help me there at Vega Center. And it must seem to you that I’m ungrateful. But I’m not! It’s just that I have to try this thing, or see Middletown’s people break their hearts trying to fight your Federation.”

She looked at him, wet-eyed, and murmured, “I’m behaving like an emotional fool.”

He looked down at her, his hands still on her shoulders. She pushed him back. She seemed to avoid his eyes as she said,

“I know you’re sincere, Kenniston. But I know too that this thing is wrong, that you can’t successfully defy the power of all the stars.”

He was strangely depressed when he left her. He tried not to think about it—tried not to remember the touch of her, tried not to recognize the choking emotion that had leaped in him for a moment.

“That’s just insane,” he muttered to himself. “And there’s Carol—”

He would not go to her again, in all the hours and days that the little starcruiser swept full speed across the galactic void. He was, somehow, afraid to see her once more.

A tension grew in Kenniston as the dim red spark of Sol largened to a sullen sphere. As the cruiser swept in at decelerating speed past the lifeless outer planets, he looked ahead.

“We must work fast, once we’re there,” Jon Arnol was saying tautly. He, too, was showing the strain. “Already Federation ships must be on their way here to stop us.”

Kenniston made no answer. That cold, haunting doubt was a deeper shadow on him as he watched the gray blob of old Earth grow big ahead.

His people were there, waiting. What was he bringing to them and their dying planet? New life, or final, ultimate death?

Chapter 19— Middletown decides

With tightening nerves, Kenniston walked across the dust and desolation of the plain toward the bright dome of New Middletown. Arnol was with him, and big Gorr Holl. The cold wind was as he remembered it, and the red, lowering Sun with its crown of fire.

“Perfect!” whispered Arnol. “Perfect! Such a world as I have dreamed of for a test!”

“Here they come,” said Gorr Holl, and pointed to the portal.

The armed lookouts had recognized Kenniston and the big Capellan. Word had gone around, and the folk of Middletown were pouring out through the portal to meet them.

Within seconds the crowd was around them, shouting, all but trampling them in its excitement. He recognized well-known faces— Bud Martin, John Borzak, Lauber—

McLain’s towering figure shouldered toward him. “What happened out there, Kenniston?”

“Yeah, what’s the verdict?” came a cry from beside him. “Are they going to let us be?”

He raised his voice to shout back to the wildly excited crowd. “Everybody— go to the plaza! Pass the word around. I’ll tell you all about it, there.”

“The plaza! The plaza!”

Some of them began to run back toward the city, to cry the news through the streets. Others swarmed around Gorr Holl, glad to see him back. They stared curiously at Jon Arnol, demanding to know who he was, but Kenniston shook his head. The story would be hard enough to tell once. He was not going to do it twice.

He searched for Carol’s face in the crowd. He yearned to see her— and yet deep

in his mind somewhere there was a strange reluctance to see her, to face her, and he did not know why this should be so. But she was not there, he should have known she would not have ventured into this excited crowd.

Mayor Garris bustled up to him at the portal, preceding Hubble and a few of the City Council.

“Did you fix things, Kenniston?” he cried. “Did you make them understand out there?”

Kenniston said, “I’d like to make my report in the plaza, where everyone can hear.”

The Mayor gave him a worried, half-frightened look, and fell back. Kenniston reached out to take Hubble’s hand.

“I’ve got to talk to you, Hubble,” he said. “I’ve done something, and I don’t know...”

He talked in a rapid undertone to the older scientist as they made their way through the streets.

Hubble’s reaction was the same as Kenniston’s had been when the thing had been first broached to him. He recoiled from it.

“Good God, Ken! It’s mad— dangerous...”

But as he heard more, his alarm changed to grave attention, and then keenest interest.

“Yet it does sound logical, by every principle of our own physical science.” He looked at Jon Arnol. “If I could only talk clearly to him!”

“It wouldn’t do any good,” said Kenniston grimly. “That’s the awful part of it. His science is a million years beyond us.”

Hubble turned to Gorr Holl. He had worked beside the big furry Capellan. He knew and trusted his ability as an atomic technician. Haltingly, he asked, “Will Arnol’s process work?”

Gorr Holl answered simply, “I believe in it enough to risk my life helping to try it.”

Kenniston translated that. And Hubble seemed reassured. “It still seems a great gamble, Ken. But— I think it’s worth it.”

Soon Kenniston had mounted the steps of the building that was City Hall, and stood by the microphone. Before him were the gathered thousands of Middletowners— a kaleidoscope of eager faces, excited, waiting.

This was the moment he had dreaded— the moment he had thought he could not endure. And it was harder even than he had dreamed, to say the words he must say.

There was no use being gentle about it. He told them almost brutally, “The decision is against us. They say we have to go.” He listened to the roar that broke out then, the angry cry of a people driven beyond their patience.

Mayor Garris voiced the passionate reaction of all Middletown.

“We won’t leave Earth! And if they want to push it to a fight, they can!”

Kenniston raised his hands, begging for quiet.

“Wait!” he shouted into the microphone. “Listen! You may not have to go, and you may not have to fight. There’s one chance...”

He told them, as simply and carefully as he could, of Jon Arnol’s great proposed experiment.

“Earth would be warm again— perhaps not quite as warm as before, but warm enough so that you could live here comfortably for all time to come.”

There was a long silence. He knew that the concept was too enormous for them to grasp at once. But they were trying to grasp it, trying to equate it with some familiar thing. The planetary scale of it, their minds could not hold onto. They struggled for a personal significance they could understand.

Finally John Borzak stepped forward, a rawboned, grizzled man who had spent a lifetime in the mills.

“Does it mean, Mr. Kenniston, that we could go back then to Middletown?”

He answered, “Yes.”

A cheer went up that shook the very walls of the buildings. “Back to Middletown! Did you hear that? We could go back to Middletown!”

Kenniston was touched beyond measure. To them, the shocking of a planet back to life meant primarily one thing—the ability to return to the drab little city beyond the hills, the city that was still home.

He motioned to them again for silence.

“I have to warn you. This experiment has never been tried on a world like Earth. It’s possible that it may fail. If it does, the surface of the Earth may be wrecked by quakes.”

That gave them pause. Kenniston saw the shadow of fear cross their faces, saw how they turned to one another and talked, and shook their heads, and looked anxiously back and forth.

Finally a voice cried, “What do you and Doctor Hubble think? You’re scientists. What’s your advice?”

Kenniston hesitated. Then he said slowly, “If I were alone on Earth, I would try it. But I cannot advise you. You must make your own decision.”

Hubble said into the microphone, “We can’t advise you, because we don’t know ourselves. We are dealing here with the science of this future age, which is far beyond us. We can only take what their scientists tell us on faith.

“They say that the theory is entirely workable. We have warned you of the possibility of failure. It’s up to you to decide how great the risk is, and how much you are willing to gamble.”

Kenniston turned and spoke to Mayor Garris. “Tell them to think it over carefully. Then call for a vote— those in favor of trying it to go to one side of the plaza, those against it to the other.” Aside, to Hubble, he said, “They should have months to decide a thing like this, instead of minutes!”

Hubble said, "It may be just as well. They won't torture themselves with too much waiting and thinking."

Mayor Garris talked to the crowd. There was a deepening, seething turmoil in the plaza then as people tried to reach others, to gather opinions from each other on what they ought to do. Scraps of heated conversations reached Kenniston's ears:

"These guys from outside have done pretty well so far, getting this city going again. They know what they're doing!"

"I don't know. Suppose it does bring on terrible quakes?"

"Listen, these people know their stuff! They'd have to, to live out there in the stars the way they do!"

"Yeah. And I'd rather sit through an earthquake than go kiting off to the Milky Way!"

At last Mayor Garris asked, "Are you ready for the vote?"

They were, as ready as they would ever be.

Kenniston watched, his heart pounding. And beside him, Jon Arnol watched also. Kenniston had explained the procedure to him. He knew what Arnol must be going through as he waited while his life's work was weighed in the balance.

For a time, the motion of the crowd was only a chaotic churning. Then, gradually, the separating motion came clear.

Those for the experiment, to the right side of the plaza...

Those against it, to the left...

The channel between the two factions widened. And Kenniston saw that on the left were a scant two hundred people.

The vote was carried. The experiment was approved.

Kenniston's knees felt weak. He saw Arnol's face, moved almost to tears with

relief and joy. He himself was conscious of a wild excitement— and yet, even now, he could not stifle all his fear. They were committed, now, he and Arnol and the rest. For life or death, they were committed.

He spoke again into the microphone. “We must do this thing as soon as we can. We have very little time before ships of the Federation will arrive to stop us.

“You will please, all of you prepare to leave the city at a moment’s notice. As a precaution, no one is to remain under the dome when the energy bomb is detonated.

“Those of you who voted against the experiment will be given a chance to leave Earth before it takes place. The starcruiser can take only part of you, so it is suggested that you draw lots for space aboard her.” He swung around to the Mayor. “Will you take over now? Start the work of organizing the departure—we’ll need every minute we’ve got!”

Hubble said, “I think we’d better let Jon Arnol see the shaft.” Arnol’s technical crew came in from the ship. They studied the great heat shaft, with Gorr Holl and Magro and Arnol himself, while Kenniston and Hubble stood by and watched.

Arnol finally said, “It’ll do. It goes right down to the core. But the similar shafts in the other domed cities here— they’ll have to be exploded and sealed, first.”

Kenniston was startled. He hadn’t thought of that “But that’ll take time—”

“No, not so long. A few of my men can whip around to them in the cruiser and do it quickly. Of course I brought Earth maps— and there are only half a dozen of the domed cities.”

Kenniston asked him. “How long will it take to get things ready here?”

Arnol said, “If we perform a miracle, we can be ready by noon tomorrow.”

Kenniston nodded. “I’ll do my damndest to help you, and so will everybody here. Just let me have ten minutes, first.”

Ten minutes wasn’t much. Not much, for a man who has just been halfway across a universe to spend with his girl. But time was what they didn’t have, an

inexorable limit was closing down on them every second, and even this little time he took to go to Carol was time cheated and stolen from the common need.

Yet in the face of this terrible decision that had been taken, this thing that they were going to do to Earth, he had to see her, to quiet her fears and reassure her as best he could. He thought she would want to take frightened refuge on the cruiser, when the moment came, and he could only hope that he could get her on it.

Carol was waiting, as though she had known he would come. And to Kenniston's amazement, there was no fear in her face— it was bright with eagerness and hope, her eyes lighted in a way he had not seen since the old time.

“Ken, can it really be done?” she cried. “Will it really work, make Earth warmer?”

“We're so sure that we're gambling everything it will,” he said. “Of course, there's always a chance of failure—”

She didn't even listen to that. Her hands clutched his arms, her face had a breathless excitement, as she explained, “But that doesn't matter! It's worth running any chance, if it succeeds! If it lets us go back to Middletown—”

He saw the mist in her eyes, the hunger, the yearning, as she whispered, “Just to think of it— of going back to our own town, our own homes, our own people—”

Kenniston understood, now. Deep indeed was her homesickness for the old town, for the old way of life. So deep, that it had completely conquered the fear she might otherwise have felt

He took her in his arms and kissed her, and touched her hair, and he was thinking, She does love me— but only as part of a life that's gone, not me alone, not just John Kenniston by himself, but the Kenniston of Middletown. And she'll be happy with me again, if we can change our life back a little to what it was.

Why did that thought bring no joy? Why must he think of Varn Allan, tired and lonely, and yet courageously facing the wide universe, carrying a burden of duty too heavy for her?

Carol was asking him, “What was it like, Ken? Out there?”

He shook his head. “Strange— and hostile— and beautiful, in a terrible way.”

She said, “I think it changed you, a little. I think it would change anybody.”

And she shivered a little, as though even in the touch of him now was a freezing breath of alien deeps, a taint of unearthly worlds.

“No, Carol,” he said. “I’m not changed! But I can’t stay now. I have to get back— every minute is precious—”

As he hurried back to the others, Kenniston saw that New Middletown had become a rushing, surging swirl of excitement. Voices called to him, hands grabbed to delay him, men and women tried to reach him with questions. He was glad to rejoin the others around the lip of the great heat shaft.

Gorr Holl grinned his frightening grin at him. “Now, get ready to work!”

For what seemed an eternity, Kenniston worked. Machinists and sheet metal workers of Middletown were called in, every available man and piece of equipment. Great loads were brought in from the ship. Hammers rang with a deafening clamor, shaping metal on improvised forges. Riveting machines gave out their staccato thunder.

And gradually, painfully, shaped out of the sweat and effort of their bodies, a scaffolding of steel girders rose above the mouth of the great shaft

Magro labored with the technicians over the complicated and delicate electrofuses, and the timing devices, and the radio control that from a distance would drop and detonate the charge.

Kenniston had little time to think of anything but the work. Yet his mind reverted strangely often to Varn Allan, locked in her cabin aboard the cruiser, and he wondered what her thoughts were.

Morning came. The city was to be cleared by noon, and the men and women of Middletown were gathering their children in readiness. They would not take much out of the city with them. They would not need much, either way.

The cryptic black ovoid was wheeled into position by the shaft. And with it were brought four small round objects of a different look.

“Copper bombs, that we made in the ship’s laboratory on the way here,” explained Arnol. “They will drop an instant after the energy bomb and will explode in the shaft just before it detonates below, sealing the shaft to prevent backlash.”

Kenniston watched while the technicians set the copper bombs in their racks, one above the other, inside the frame of girders. The racks would be tripped by electronic relay, from the remote control box.

Kenniston felt an increasing dread, as the fateful moment loomed close. His dread was for the trusting thousands of Middletown, who accepted the powers of scientists with the same unquestioning faith with which men had once accepted the powers of wizards.

He hoped that, if the experiment were a disastrous failure, he would not survive to know it.

A crane had been rigged to handle the energy bomb. The electronics crew were working desperately to finish the intricate wiring of the rack mechanisms, the split second timing of the relays. One of the cantilever support girders had flawed, and steel workers were sweating away to replace it.

A few more hours now, and the thing would be done. By noon, or a little after, they would know whether Earth was to live or die.

Then one of Arnol’s men came running. He had run all the way from the starcruiser. He was breathless, and his eyes were wild.

He cried out to Arnol, “A message on the televisor from a Control Squadron! They say they are approaching Earth, and order us to cease operations at once!”

Chapter 20— appointment with destiny

Kenniston felt the impact of the news as a catastrophe crushing all their desperate hopes. He stood sagging, looking at the technicians who stared frozenly back.

Like an ominous echo, Varn Allan's warning came back into his mind.

"You cannot fight Federation law!"

But Jon Arnol, raging at seeing the dream of a lifetime threatened at this last moment, rushed forward to the messenger.

He grabbed the man's collar. "Did you think to use a distance gauge on the message from those ships?"

The man nodded hastily. "Yes. The readings were—"

"The devil with readings! How far from Earth are those ships?"

"I'd estimate that they're three or four hours away, if they come at full speed."

"They'll come at full speed, don't worry," said Arnol grimly. His face was a sweating mask, the bones of it standing out gauntly, as he turned to the others. "Can we be ready in time?"

"The rack-trip controls are in," answered a technician. "It'll take an hour or more to prepare the timers."

Kenniston had regained a little hope, when he heard of the time limit they faced.

"Surely we can be ready in time, Arnol! I'll start them moving out the people, at once!"

Mayor Bertram Garris was not far to seek. Round-eyed and pale with worry, the pudgy Mayor had been watching their work around the great shaft.

Kenniston ran up to him. "Get the people started out at once, to the ridge of the hills. Only the sick and old to go in cars— the rest must walk. We can't risk a

traffic tangle now!”

“Yes,” gasped the Mayor. “Yes, right away.” He caught Kenniston’s arm, looking past him at the black ovoid bulk of the bomb. As though ashamed to show the terror he felt, Garris stammered, “How much danger is there, Kenniston?”

Kenniston gave him a reassuring shake. “Don’t worry. Go along and get those people out of the city!” He wished he could find reassurance himself.

The next hours were nightmarish. Working under pressure, grudging every second, it seemed that everything conspired against them. The metal, the mechanisms, the very tools seemed determined to betray them.

And yet, at last, the dark shape of the energy bomb swung it its rack over the mouth of the shaft. The last of the timers was set, and it was done.

“Get your equipment ready,” Kenniston told them tautly. “Let’s go. There’s still a lot to be done.”

He went out with Hubble and Arnol and the rest. The city was as he had first seen it— empty, still, lifeless. The people had gone. As he passed out the portal he could see the dark, trailing mass of them already far across the plain, the thousands streaming slowly up the slope of the distant ridge.

Anxiously he scanned the sky. There was no sign yet of the Control Squadron.

Arnold sent his technical crew ahead to the ridge, with the remote control mechanisms and recording instruments. Gorr Holl and Margo and Hubble went with them. Then Kenniston and Arnol ran toward the starcruiser.

There was a little knot of people standing beside it in the dust and cold— the Middletowners who were leaving Earth.

Kenniston stared at them in amazement. Out of the two hundred, only a score had actually come to the cruiser.

Arnol told them curtly, “You can come aboard now.”

A few of them picked up their bundles and stood irresolutely glancing from their companions to Kenniston and back, wanting to speak. Then they turned and

went aboard.

Kenniston counted. Two men, three women, and a child.

“Well,” he snapped at those who were left, “what are you waiting for? Get aboard!”

“I guess,” said one man, and then stopped to clear his throat. “I guess I’d rather stay with all the rest.”

He grabbed his bundle and started away, hurrying after the distant crowd.

Another and another followed him until all were gone, a small hastening group in the immense desolation of the plain.

Arnol smiled. “Among your people, Kenniston, even the cowards are brave. It must be even harder, in some ways, for those who have decided to go.”

They entered the cruiser, and released Mathis and Norden Lund and Varn Allan from their locked cabins. Varn Allan did not speak, but the Coordinator said icily, “So you are really going to do it?”

“We are,” said Arnol. “My chief pilot is about to take this ship off. You’ll be safe.”

Norden Lund said bitterly, “I hope it blows you all to fragments! But even if it doesn’t, even if it succeeds, you won’t win. You’ll still have Federation law to face. We’ll see to that!”

“I don’t doubt it. And now we must go.”

He turned, but Kenniston paused, still looking at Varn Allan. Her face was a little pale but in it was no such anger as Lund’s. She was looking at him with a searching, level gaze.

He wanted to speak to her, he wanted to voice something that was in him, but he could find no words. He could only say, finally, “I’m sorry things had to be this way, Varn. Goodbye—”

“Wait, Kenniston.”

He stopped, and she came up to him, pale and calm, her blue eyes very steady on his face. She said, "I'm staying here, while you do this thing."

He stared at her, dumb with astonishment. And he heard Mathis exclaim, "Are you mad? What are you thinking of?"

She told Mathis slowly, "I am Administrator of this world's sector. If my mistakes have caused this crisis, I will not evade its consequences. I will stay."

Lund cried to Mathis, "She's not thinking of her responsibility! She's thinking of this primitive, this Kenniston!"

She turned, as though to make furious reply. But she did not speak. She looked instead at Kenniston, her face white and strained.

Mathis was saying to her coldly, "I will not order you to come with us. But be sure that your conduct will be remembered when your fitness for office is re-examined."

She bowed silently to that, and turned and went out of the ship. And Kenniston, following her, felt a wondering, incredulous emotion that he dared not let himself recognize.

They stepped out into the red sunlight, and with a soft humming the starcruiser mounted into the sky and was lost to view.

The last, dark, trailing mass of people was disappearing over the ridge, as Kenniston and Varn Allan and Arnol started that way.

"Hurry!" urged Arnol. "Even yet, we might be too late—"

When they reached the ridge, Gorr Holl and Margo and Hubble were waiting there with the young technicians and their apparatus. And Gorr Holl uttered a rumbling exclamation when he saw them.

"I thought you'd stay, Varn!"

Her head went up and she said half angrily, "But why should you—" She stopped abruptly, and was silent a moment, then asked, "How soon?"

“We’re all set now,” the big Capellan answered. Kenniston saw that the radio control box and the panels of strange instruments were ready. He glanced at Arnol.

The scientist’s face was filmed with sweat. All the color had gone from it, and his hands shook. In this moment, he was facing the climax of his whole life, all the years and the pain and the effort

He said in a strangely toneless voice, “You’d better warn them, Kenniston. Now.”

Below them, on the far slope of the ridge, waited the thousands of Middletown’s people.

Kenniston went down toward them. He cried out to them, and his voice carried thin and unreal on the chill wind, across the dead rocks and the dust.

“Keep down behind the ridge! Pass the word to keep down! We’re going to blow it!”

They looked toward him, all the massed white faces pale in the dim light of the Sun—the dying Sun that watched them with its red uncaring eye.

A great silence fell upon them. By ones and twos, and then by hundreds, they knelt to pray. And others, by the hundreds, stood unspeaking, looking solemnly upward to the crest of the ridge. Here and there, a child began to cry.

Slowly, gripped as in a strange and fateful dream, Kenniston mounted again to where Arnol and the others stood. Far beyond them he saw the dome of the city, still glowing with light as they had left it, lonely in the vast barrenness of the plain.

He thought of the black thing waiting alone in the city to make its nightmare plunge, and a deep tremor shook him. He reached out and took Varn Allan’s hand.

In that last minute before Arnol’s fingers pressed the final pattern on the control board, Varn Allan looked past Kenniston, down at the silent, waiting thousands who were the last of all the races of old Earth.

“I see now,” she whispered, “that in spite of all we have gained since your day, we have lost something, too. A courage, a blind, brave something— I’m glad I stayed!” Arnol drew a sharp and painful breath. “It is done,” he said.

For a long, eternal moment, the dead Earth lay unstirring. Then Kenniston felt the ridge leap under his feet— once, twice, four times. The sharp grinding shocks of the capper bombs, sealing the great shaft.

Arnol watched the quivering needles of the dials. He had ceased his trembling now. It was too late for anything, even emotion.

Deep, deep within the buried core of the Earth a trembling was born, a dilating shudder that came slowly upward to the barren rocks and touched them and was gone.

It was as though a dead heart had suddenly started to beat again. To beat strongly, exultantly, a planet reborn...

The pointers on the panel of dials had gone quite mad. Gradually they quivered back to normal. All but one row of them, at which Arnol and his crew stared with intensity.

Kenniston could bear the terrible silence no longer.

“Has it...” His voice trailed away into hoarseness.

Arnol turned very slowly toward him. He said, as though it was difficult for him to speak. “Yes. The reaction is begun. There is a great flame of warmth and life inside Earth now. It will take weeks for that warmth and life to creep up to the surface, but it will come.”

He turned his back then, on Kenniston, on all of them. What he had to say was for the tired, waiting young men who had labored with him so long.

He said to them, “Here on this little Earth, long ago, one of our savage ancestors kindled a world. And there are all the others, all the cold, dying worlds out there...”

Kenniston heard no more. A babel had broken loose. Varn Allan was clinging to him, and Gorr Holl was shouting deafeningly, and he heard the stammering

questions of Mayor Garris and Hubble's shaking voice.

Over all came the surge of thousands of feet The thousands of Middletown were coming up the slope, scrambling, running, a life-or-death question on their white faces.

"Tell them, Ken," said Hubble, his voice thick.

Kenniston stood upon the ridge, and the crowd below froze tensely silent as he shouted down to them. "It has succeeded! All danger is over, and in weeks the heat of the core will begin to reach the surface..."

He stopped. These were not the words that could reach their hearts. Then he found those words, and called them to the thousands.

"It has been chill winter on Earth, for a million years. But now, soon, spring is coming back to Earth. Spring!"

They could understand that. They began to laugh, and to weep, and then to shout and shout.

They were still shouting when the great Control cruisers came humming swiftly down from the sky.

Chapter 21— waking world

Slowly, slowly, during all these weeks, the spring had come. It was not the spring of old Earth, but every day the wind blew a little more softly and now at last the first blades of grass were pushing upward, touching the other plains with green.

But only by hearsay did Kenniston know of that. Confined with the others in a building of New Middletown, it had seemed to him that the time would never end. The weeks of waiting for the special Committee of Governors to come from Vega, the weeks of the hearing itself, the slow gathering of testimony and careful sifting of motives. And now, the days they had waited for the final verdict.

Arnol was not worried. He was a happy man. He said very little, but he had had a triumph in his eyes all through the hearing. His lifework was justified, and he was content.

Nor were Gorr Holl and Magro worried. The big Capellan, even now when they awaited the decision, was still jubilant.

“Hell, what can they do?” he said to Kenniston, for the twentieth time. “The thing’s done. The Arnol process is proved practicable, and by now the whole galaxy knows of it. They can’t refuse now to let the humanoids’ dying worlds make use of it. They wouldn’t dare!”

Magro added, “Nor can they force your people to evacuate Earth now that it is getting warmer. It wouldn’t make sense.”

Kenniston said, “They can keep us locked up for the rest of our lives, and I wouldn’t enjoy that.”

Gorr Holl grinned widely at him. “Remember, man, we’re only emotional primitives, and they’ll have to make allowances for that.”

When they were led back into the big room for the verdict, Kenniston’s eyes swung, not to the group of three men and a humanoid that sat behind the table, but to Varn Allan. He knew that her own career was at stake in this hearing. She did not look upset, and she met his gaze with a grave little smile.

Lund, beside her, looked alert and faintly worried now. He shot a hard glance at Kenniston, but Kenniston had to turn his gaze as the reading of the verdict began.

The aging man who read it, the oldest of the four Governors, had no friendliness in his face. He spoke as one who reluctantly performs an unpleasant duty.

“You, the ringleaders in this thing, have rendered yourselves liable to the extremest penalties of Federation law by your direct defiance of the Governors,” he said. “It would be quite in order to direct a sentence of life imprisonment”

He looked down at them coldly. Gorr Holl whispered, “Just trying to scare us—” but he did not sound very confident now.

The old Governor continued. “But in this case it is quite impossible to reach a verdict on purely legalistic grounds. We must admit that your fait accompli has created a new situation. The Board of Governors has now given approval to the use of the Arnol process on certain other planets—”

Kenniston found it hard, hard, to realize that a long, great battle for the survival of worlds was ending in these phrases.

“— on certain other planets, and that presents us with a legal impasse. To punish you now for your use of it here would be, morally if not legally, punishing you for infraction of a no-longer-existing law.”

Gorr Holl uttered such a long and noisy exhalation of relief that he was promptly glared into silence.

“We are unable, therefore, to do other than dismiss you with the official reprimand of the Board of Governors for your behavior.”

Now that the moment had come, now that it was over, Kenniston found that he felt very little emotion, after all. The issues had been so vast that they had dwarfed his personal fate. He knew that that feeling would pass, that later he would be glad and thankful, but now—

The Governor, though, had not finished. He was speaking directly now to Varn Allan.

“Over and above the main issue, there remains the conduct of the responsible officials in dealing with it We are forced to express official censure of what appears to be inexcusable bungling of a psychological problem by the Administrator in charge, and—” here he looked toward Norden Lund— “and on the part of the Sub-Administrator, obvious attempts to hamper his superior for selfish reasons.”

The cold voice ended with the brief, hard phrases,

“We recommend, for Administrator Allan: Demotion one grade. For Sub-Administrator Lund: Demotion one grade. This hearing is concluded.”

Kenniston looked across the big room at Varn Allan. Her face had not changed, and silently she turned to go.

Gorr Holl was slapping him mightily on the back, Magro was saying something excitedly, but he wrenched away from them and went after her. She saw him coming, and waited. But Norden Lund was between them.

Lund’s face was white with controlled rage, and his voice was thick as he told Kenniston, “So you primitives have ruined my career?”

Varn Allan cut in contemptuously. “You ruined it yourself, Norden, with your ambitious plotting.”

He turned and strode away from them. Varn Allan, looking after him, sighed and said, “You have made a deadly enemy.”

He was not thinking of that. He waited until she turned back toward him, and he asked, “Are you my enemy too, for what I’ve done to you?”

She shook her head gravely. “No. That was not your doing. In a new and confused situation, I failed. That is all.”

“The hell it is!” he burst out. “They were unfair to you! You did your best, and —”

“And it wasn’t quite good enough,” she finished. And then she smiled a little at him. “It’s not a tragedy. An Administrator’s burden is not easy. I shall not be entirely sorry.”

He had never admired her courage so much as now. He wanted to say so, he wanted to say many things, but she turned away from him a little, and said, “This is a great day for you, Kenniston. For this is the day when they are allowing those of your people who wish to, to return to your old town.”

“Yes, I heard that it was today.”

“And you will be going back there, with your Carol. She will be very happy.”

He said, “Varn—”

But she would not face him. She said, “This is not goodbye. You’ll come back before we leave Earth.”

He stood, oppressed by emotions he could not define, and finally he said, “Yes. Yes, I’ll come back before then.”

She left, and he looked after her until she was gone. Then, slowly, he went back through the big, empty hall and out through the building into the street.

A tremendous, brassy clamor and uproar hit him in the face. The plaza was crowded, but a wide lane was open through the crowd to the boulevard that led to the portal. And the Middletown High School Band, brave for the occasion in its retrieved scarlet uniforms, with its drum majorettes prancing and horns blating, and cymbals banging and big drums booming, was marching through the lane toward the portal.

Behind it came a glistening, open green convertible, with Mayor Garris standing up on the back seat, hatless, his plump face beaming sunlike, waving his hat joyfully to the cheering throngs. And behind his car rolled a long line of other cars—the ancient jalopies, the shining station wagons, the family sedans, crowded with excited men and sobbing women, the first of the long caravan forming up to go back to old Middletown.

Kenniston saw the cheering people who surrounded Jon Arnol, and Hubble, and Gorr Holl and Magro, nearby. He knew that he would be drawn into that group, and he went back and circled around the plaza, going by temporarily abandoned streets to the quarters of Carol and her aunt.

Carol leaped up with a glad cry when he entered. “Oh, Ken, then you’re free!

They said it would be today, and I was waiting and hoping—”

“Yes, it’s all done with,” he said. He stood, not knowing quite what to say to her, until Mrs. Adams came up.

“Then we can leave here now, like the others?” Mrs. Adams said anxiously. “We can go back to Middletown now?”

“Just as soon as you can pack up and I can get the jeep,” he said.

“I’ve been packed for days,” she told him. “I wouldn’t stay in this unearthly place for one minute longer than I have to! Just imagine, they tell me a lot of the young people are going to stay here from choice! They say they like it better than Middletown, now!”

Kenniston felt a curious sense of unreality as he got the jeep, and packed their things into it, and then joined the slow, bottlenecked traffic that was now steadily rolling out of the domed city.

Could it all be ending like this? Could it be true that he was going back to the old town, the old life, after all that he had done and seen?

Down the wide boulevard, between the lofty white towers, through the portal, out from underneath the dome— The red Sun still shone dully, but a softer wind than Earth had felt for a million years was blowing across the plain, stirring the timid little shoots of new grass, bringing a breath of warm new life.

Cars ahead of them and cars behind them, rolling toward the ridge, eager for sight of the old city. And now they were passing Jon Arnol’s small cruiser, and then the titan black bulks of the great starships, brooding upon the plain, wrapped in the majesty of giants who knew the secrets of infinity. He looked back at the great ships, and he thought of the vast, star-shot spaces whither they would go, and then he looked on ahead.

And at last the eager cars topped the ridge and went hurrying joyously down into old Middletown.

All along the familiar streets, houses were already beginning to come to life. Shutters flung open, storm windows raised, doors standing wide to the soft wind, women busy with brooms on dust-drifted porches. The shrill voices of children

and barking of dogs mingled with the noisy impatience of the auto horns.

Down Mill Street to Main Street, and on. And finally, the old grey house, just as they had left it.

Kenniston stopped the jeep at the curb. Mrs. Adams got out. She went slowly up the steps and unlocked the door. She stood for a moment, looking in.

“Nothing is changed,” she whispered. But all this dust. I’ll have to clean—”

Suddenly she sat down in her chair by the window and began to cry.

Carol did not go in at once. Feeling an odd sense of strain, Kenniston asked, “Are you happy too, Carol?”

She nodded, half smiling, looking out along the awakening street. “Yes, Ken.”

He said, “Well— I want to return to New Middletown to see Gorr and the others before they leave. But I’ll be back soon.”

She looked at him now, and she said, “No, Ken. Don’t come back to me.”

He stared at her, astonished. “Carol, what do you mean?”

Her soft face was quite steady. “I mean that you don’t altogether belong here now, Ken. You changed when you went out there. You’ll change more in the days ahead— will turn more and more toward the strange new life.” She added, “And I can’t change. Not like that. You’d be miserable with me, clinging to the old things.”

He knew she spoke truth, and yet he must protest. “But the plans we made together, Carol—”

She shook her head. “I made those plans with another man, a man who isn’t quite here any more, and won’t ever be here again.”

She reached up and kissed him, and then she went inside and closed the door.

Kenniston stood a moment, hesitating. Then, slowly, he climbed back into the jeep and drove out of Middletown.

From the ridge he could see again the starships that rested on the plain by the domed city. And the city itself still lived. It was the younger folk of Middletown who had chosen to stay in it— the young in mind who could still look forward to the new.

The starships would continue to come, now the Earth was habitable again. The people of far stars would mingle with the people of Middletown, and the young men here would go out to other Suns, and gradually the whole strange story of Middletown would be absorbed into the stream of history.

Kenniston sent the jeep speeding toward the domed city. He felt now a sense of new freedom, and a deep gratitude toward Carol, who had not tried to hold him back. But he felt, too, an uncertainty, a shrinking. Vast new horizons stretched before him now, the boundless horizons of space, the endless avenues of new thought. He was still a child of older Earth, and it would be strange and lonely.

He found the others still in the plaza, talking together— Gorr Holl and Magro and Arnol. And with them, Varn Allan. They saw him, Gorr waved and bawled to him. As he drove toward them, he saw Varn Allan's eager eyes awaiting him, and he knew suddenly that he was wrong and that in all the strangeness of the years to come, he would not be alone.

THE END