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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ONENESS ***

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ONENESS

At that, you know the power to enforce
the Golden Rule would make a terrible
weapon!

by **JAMES H. SCHMITZ**

ILLUSTRATED BY LEO SUMMERS

Menesee felt excitement surge like a living tide about him as he came with the other directors into the vast Tribunal Hall. Sixty years ago, inexcusable carelessness had deprived Earth of its first chance to obtain a true interstellar drive. Now, within a few hours, Earth, or more specifically, the upper echelons of that great political organization called the Machine which had controlled the affairs of Earth for the past century and a half, should learn enough of the secrets of the drive to insure that it would soon be in their possession.

Menesee entered his box between those of Directors Cornelius and Ojeda, immediately to the right of the Spokesman's Platform and with an excellent view of the prisoner. When Administrator Bradshaw and Spokesman Dorn had taken their places on the platform, Menesee seated himself, drawing the transcript of the day's proceedings towards him. However, instead of glancing over it at once, he spent some seconds in a study of the prisoner.

The fellow appeared to be still young. He was a magnificent physical specimen, tall and strongly muscled, easily surpassing in this respect any of the hard-trained directors present. His face showed alert intelligence, giving no indication of the fact that for two of the three days since his

capture he had been drugged and subject to constant hypnotic suggestion. He had given his name as Rainbolt, acknowledged freely that he was a member of the group of malcontent deserters known in the records of the Machine as the Mars Convicts, but described himself as being a "missionary of Oneness" whose purpose was to bring the benefits of some of the principles of "Oneness" to Earth. He had refused to state whether he had any understanding of the stardrive by the use of which the Mars Convicts had made their mass escape from the penal settlements of the Fourth Planet sixty years before, though the drive obviously had been employed in bringing him out of the depths of interstellar space to the Solar System and Earth. At the moment, while the significance of the bank of torture instruments on his right could hardly have escaped him, his expression was serious but not detectably concerned.

"Here is an interesting point!" Director Ojeda's voice said on Menesee's right.

Menesee glanced over at him. Ojeda was tapping the transcript with a finger.

"This Rainbolt," he said, "hasn't slept since he was captured! He states, furthermore, that he has never slept since he became an adult—"

Menesee frowned slightly, failing to see any great significance in the fact. That the fellow belonged to some curious cult which had developed among the Mars Convicts following their flight from the Solar System was already known. Earth's science had methods of inducing permanent sleeplessness but knew, too, that in most instances the condition eventually gave rise to very serious side effects which more than offset any advantages to be gained from it.

He picked up his transcript, indicating that he did not wish to be drawn into conversation. His eyes scanned quickly over the pages. Most of it was information he already had. Rainbolt's ship had been detected four days earlier, probing the outermost of the multiple globes of force screens which had enclosed Earth for fifty years as a defense both against faster-than-light missiles and Mars Convict spies. The ship was alone. A procedure had been planned for such an event, and it was now followed. The ship was permitted to penetrate the first two screens which were closed again behind it.

Rainbolt's ship, for all its incredible speed, was then a prisoner. Unhurriedly, it was worked closer to Earth until it came within range of giant scanners. For an instant, a large section of its interior was visible to the instruments of the watchers on Earth; then the picture blurred and vanished again. Presumably automatic anti-scanning devices had gone into action.

The photographed view was disappointing in that it revealed no details of the engines or their instruments. It did show, however, that the ship had been designed for the use of one man, and that it was neither armored or armed. Its hull was therefore bathed with paralytics, which in theory should have left the pilot helpless, and ships of the Machine were then sent up to tow the interstellar captive down to Earth.

At that point, the procedure collapsed. The ship was in atmosphere when an escape capsule was suddenly ejected from it, which later was found to contain Rainbolt, alert and obviously not affected by the paralysis beams. A moment later, the ship itself became a cloud of swiftly dissipating hot gas.

The partial failure of the capture might have been unavoidable in any case. But the manner in which it occurred still reflected very poorly, Menesee thought, on the thoroughness with which the plans had been prepared. The directors who had been in charge of the operation would not be dealt with lightly—

He became aware suddenly that the proceedings of the day had begun and hastily put down the transcript.

Spokesman Dorn, the Machine's executive officer, sitting beside Administrator Bradshaw at a transparent desk on the raised platform to Menesee's left, had enclosed the area about the prisoner with a sound block and was giving a brief verbal resume of the background of the situation. Few of the directors in the Tribunal Hall would have needed such information; but the matter was being carried on the Grand Assembly Circuit, and in hundreds of auditoriums on Earth the first and second echelons of the officials of the Machine had gathered to witness the interrogation of the Mars Convict spy.

The penal settlements on Mars had been established almost a century earlier, for the dual purpose of mining the mineral riches of the Fourth Planet and of utilizing the talents of political dissidents with a scientific background too valuable to be wasted in research and experimental work considered either too dangerous to be conducted on Earth or requiring more space than could easily be made available there. One of these projects had been precisely the development of more efficient spacedrives to do away with the costly and tedious manoeuverings required for travel even among the inner planets.

Work of such importance, of course, was supposed to be carried out only under close guard and under the direct supervision of reliable upper-echelon scientists of the Machine. Even allowing for criminal negligence, the fact that the Mars Convicts were able to develop and test their stardrive under such circumstances without being detected suggested that it could not be a complicated device. They did, at any rate, develop it, armed themselves and the miners of the

other penal settlements and overwhelmed their guards in surprise attack. When the next ship arrived from Earth, two giant ore carriers and a number of smaller guard ships had been outfitted with the drive, and the Mars Convicts had disappeared in them. Their speed was such that only the faintest and briefest of disturbances had been registered on the tracking screens of space stations near Mars, the cause of which remained unsuspected until the news came out.

Anything which could have thrown any light on the nature of the drive naturally had been destroyed by the deserters before they left; and the few Machine scientists who had survived the fighting were unable to provide information though they were questioned intensively for several years before being executed. What it added up to was that some eighteen thousand sworn enemies of the Machine had disappeared into space, equipped with an instrument of unknown type which plainly could be turned into one of the deadliest of all known weapons.

The superb organization of the Machine swung into action instantly to meet the threat, though the situation became complicated by the fact that rumors of the manner in which the Mars Convicts had disappeared filtered out to the politically dissatisfied on Earth and set off an unprecedented series of local uprisings which took over a decade to quell. In spite of such difficulties, the planet's economy was geared over to the new task; and presently defenses were devised and being constructed which would stop missiles arriving at speeds greater than that of light. Simultaneously, the greatest research project in history had begun to investigate the possibilities of either duplicating the fantastic drive some scientific minds on Mars had come upon—chiefly, it was concluded, by an improbable stroke of good luck—or of matching its effects through a different approach. Since it had been demonstrated that it could be done, there was no question that in time the trained men of the Machine would achieve their goal. Then the armed might of the Machine would move into space to take control of any colony established by the Mars Convicts and their descendants.

That was the basic plan. The task of developing a stardrive remained a huge one because of the complete lack of information about the direction organized research should take. That difficulty would be overcome easily only by a second unpredictable twist of fortune—unless one of the Mars Convicts' FTL ships ventured close enough to Earth to be captured.

The last had now happened. The ship had been destroyed before it could be investigated, so that advantage was again lost. The ship's pilot, however, remained in their hands. The fact that he disclaimed having information pertinent to the drive meant nothing. So far as he knew, he might very well be speaking the truth. But he had piloted a ship that employed the stardrive, was familiar with instruments which controlled it, had been schooled in their use. A detailed investigation of his memories could not fail to provide literally hundreds of meaningful clues. And the Machine's scientists, in their superficially still fruitless search for the nature of the drive, had, in fact, covered basic possibilities with such comprehensive thoroughness that a few indisputably valid clues would show them now what it *must* be.

The prisoner, still demonstrating an extraordinary degree of obliviousness to what lay in store for him, appeared to welcome the opportunity to be heard by the directors of the Machine. Menesee, leaning back in his chair, studied the man thoughtfully, giving only partial attention to what was said. This was the standard opening stage of a Tribunal interrogation, an underplayed exchange of questions and answers. Innocuous as it seemed, it was part of a procedure which had become refined almost to an unvarying ritual—a ritual of beautiful and terrible precision which never failed to achieve its goals. Every man watching and listening in the Machine's auditoriums across the world was familiar with the swift processes by which a normal human being was transformed into a babbling puppet, his every significant thought becoming available for the upper echelons to regard and evaluate.

They would, of course, use torture. It was part of the interlocking mechanisms of interrogation, no more to be omitted than the preliminary conditioning by drug and hypnosis. Menesee was not unduly squeamish, but he felt some relief that it would not be the crude instruments ranked beside the prisoner which would be used. They were reserved as a rule for offending members of the organization, providing a salutary warning for any others who might be tempted to act against the interests of the Machine or fail culpably in their duties. This prisoner, as an individual, meant nothing to the Machine. He was simply a source of valuable information. Therefore, only direct nerve stimulation would be employed, in the manipulation of which Spokesman Dorn was a master.

So far the Spokesman had restricted himself to asking the prisoner questions, his voice and manner gravely courteous. To Menesee's surprised interest, he had just inquired whether two men of the last Earth ship to visit Mars, who had disappeared there, might not have been captured by Mars Convicts operating secretly within the Solar System.

"Yes, sir," Rainbolt replied readily, "they were. I'm happy to say that they're still alive and well."

Menesee recalled the incident now. After the mass escape of the Mars Convicts, the penal settlements had been closed down and the mining operations abandoned. To guard the desert planet against FTL raiders as Earth was guarded was technically infeasible. But twice each decade a patrol ship went there to look for signs that the Mars Convicts had returned. The last of these patrols had been conducted two years before. The missing men were believed to have been

inspecting a deserted settlement in a ground vehicle when they vanished, but no trace of them or the vehicle could be discovered.

Administrator Bradshaw, seated to the spokesman's left, leaned forward as if to speak, but then sat back again. Menesee thought that Rainbolt's blunt admission had angered him. Bradshaw, white-haired and huge in build, had been for many years the nominal head of the Machine; but in practice the powers of the administrator were less than those of the spokesman, and it would have been a breach of protocol for Bradshaw to intervene in the interrogation.

Dorn appeared to have noticed nothing. He went on. "What was the reason for capturing these men?" "It was necessary," Rainbolt explained, "to find out what the conditions on Earth were like at present. At the time we didn't want to risk discovery by coming too close to Earth itself. And your two men were able to tell us all we needed to know."

"What was that?" the spokesman said.

Rainbolt was silent a moment, then said, "You see, sir, most of the past sixty years have been spent in finding new worlds on which human beings can live without encountering too many difficulties. But then—"

Dorn interrupted quietly, "You found such worlds?"

"Yes, sir, we did," Rainbolt said. "We're established, in about equal numbers, on planets of three star systems. Of course, I'm not allowed to give you more precise information on that at present."

"Quite understandable," the spokesman agreed dryly.

Menesee was conscious of a stir of intense interest among the listening directors in the hall. This was news, indeed! Mingled with the interest was surprised amusement at the prisoner's artless assumption that he had any choice about what he would or would not tell.

"But now that we're established," Rainbolt went on, apparently unaware of the sensation he had created, "our next immediate concern is to resume contact with Earth. Naturally, we can't do that freely while your Machine remains in political control of the planet. We found out from the two captured men that it still is in control. We'd hoped that after sixty years government in such a form would have become obsolete here."

Menesee heard an astonished murmuring from the director boxes on his right, and felt himself that the fellow's impudent last remark might well have been answered by a pulse of nerve stimulation. Spokesman Dorn, however, replied calmly that the Machine happened to be indispensable to Earth. A planetary economy, and one on the verge of becoming an interplanetary and even interstellar economy, was simply too intricate and precariously balanced a structure to maintain without the assistance of a very tightly organized governing class.

"If the Machine were to vanish today," he explained, "Earth would approach a state of complete chaos before the month was out. In a year, a billion human beings would be starving to death. There would be fighting ... wars—" He shrugged, "You name it. No, my friend, the Machine is here to stay. And the Mars Convicts may as well resign themselves to the fact."

Rainbolt replied earnestly that he was not too well informed in economics, that not being his field. However, he had been told and believed that while the situation described by the spokesman would be true today, it should not take many years to train the populations of Earth to run their affairs quite as efficiently as the Machine had done, and without loss of personal and political liberties.

At any rate, the Mars Convicts and their descendants did not intend to give up the independence they had acquired. On the other hand, they had two vital reasons for wanting to come to an agreement with Earth. One was that they might waste centuries in attempting to accomplish by themselves what they could now do immediately if Earth's vast resources were made available to them. And the other, of course, was the obvious fact that Earth would not remain indefinitely without a stardrive of its own. If an unfriendly government was in control when it obtained one, the Mars Convicts would be forced either to abandon their newly settled planets and retreat farther into the galaxy or submit to Earth's superior strength.

Meanwhile, however, they had developed the principles of Oneness. Oneness was in essence a philosophy, but it had many practical applications; and it was in such practical applications that he, Rainbolt, was a trained specialist. He had, therefore, been dispatched to Earth to introduce the principles, which would in time bring about the orderly disintegration of the system of the Machine, to be followed by the establishment of an Earth government with which the Mars Convicts could deal without detriment to themselves.

Menesee had listened with a sense of growing angry incredulity. The fellow couldn't be as much of a fool as he seemed! Therefore, he had devised this hoax after he realised he would be captured, to cover up his real purpose which could only be that of a spy. Menesee saw that Administrator Bradshaw was saying something in a low voice to the spokesman, his face stony. Dorn glanced over at him, then looked back at the prisoner and said impassively, "So the goal of your missionary work here is the disintegration of the Machine?"

Rainbolt nodded, with an air almost of eagerness. "Yes, sir, it is! And if I will now be permitted to —"

"I am afraid you will be permitted to do nothing," Spokesman Dorn said dryly, "except, of course, to answer the number of questions we intend to ask you."

Rainbolt checked himself, looking startled. The spokesman's hand had moved very slightly on the desk before him and Rainbolt had just had his first experience with direct nerve stimulation. He stood kneading his right hand with his left, staring up at the spokesman, mouth half open.

Menesee smiled in grim amusement. It would have been a low-level pulse, of course; but even a low-level pulse, arriving unexpectedly, was a very unpleasant surprise. He had foreseen the spokesman's action, had, in fact, felt a sympathetic imaginary twinge in his own right hand as the pulse reached the prisoner.

Rainbolt swallowed, said in a changed voice, "Sir, we heard from the two captured men that the Machine has retained its practice of torture during interrogations. It isn't necessary to convince me that you are serious about this. Do the questions you referred to have to do with the stardrive?"

The spokesman nodded. "Of course."

Rainbolt said stubbornly, "Then, sir, it can do you no good at all to torture me. I simply don't have such information. We do plan to make the stardrive freely available to Earth. But not while Earth is ruled by the organization of the Machine."

This time, Menesee did not observe the motion of the spokesman's hand. Instead he saw Rainbolt jerk violently to the right. At the same moment, a blast of intense, fiery, almost unbearable pain shot up his own arm. As he grasped his arm, sweat spurting out on his face, he heard screams from the box on his left and realized it was Director Cornelius who screamed.

There were answering screams from around the hall.

Then the pain suddenly subsided.

Menesee started about, breathing raggedly. The pain-reaction had been severe enough to affect his vision; the great hall looked momentarily darker than it should have been. And although the actual pain had ended, the muscles of his arm and shoulder were still trying to cramp into knots.

There was no more screaming. From the right came Director Ojeda's gasping voice. "What happened? Did something go wrong with the stimulating devices? We might all have been killed—!"

Menesee didn't reply. Wherever he looked, he saw faces whitened with shock. Apparently everyone in the Tribunal Hall, from the administrator and Spokesman Dorn on down to the directors' attendants and the two guards flanking the prisoner's area, had felt the same thing. Here and there, men who had collapsed were struggling awkwardly back to their feet. He heard a hoarse whisper behind him. "Sir, Director Cornelius appears to have fainted!"

Menesee glanced around, saw Cornelius' attendant behind the box, then Cornelius himself, slumped forward, face down and motionless, sprawling half across his table. "Let him lie there and keep quiet, fool!" Menesee ordered the man sharply. He returned his attention to the center of the hall as Spokesman Dorn announced in a voice which held more of an edge than was normal but had lost none of its strength and steadiness, "Before any moves are suggested, I shall tell you what has been done.

"The Tribunal Hall has been sealed and further events in it will be monitored from without. No one will be able to leave until the matter with which we are now concerned here has been settled to the satisfaction of the Machine.

"Next, any of you who believe that an instrument failure was involved in the experience we shared can disabuse themselves. The same effect was reported immediately from two other auditoriums on the Great Circuit, and it is quite possible that it was repeated in all of them."

Rainbolt, grimacing and massaging his right arm vigorously, nodded. "It was repeated in all of them, sir!"

The spokesman ignored him, went on. "The Tribunal Hall has, therefore, been cut out of the Grand Assembly Circuit. How circuit energies could have been employed to transmit such



physical sensations is not clear. But they will not be used in that manner again."

Menesee felt a flash of admiration. His own thoughts had been turning in the same direction, but he couldn't have approached Spokesman Dorn's decisive speed of action.

Dorn turned his attention now to Rainbolt. "What happened," he said, "apparently was caused by yourself."

Rainbolt nodded. "Yes, sir. It was. It was an application of Oneness. At present, I'm acting as a focal point of Oneness. Until that condition is changed, whatever I experience here will be simultaneously experienced by yourselves."

Menesee thought that the effects of the Machine's discipline became splendidly apparent at that point. No one stirred in the great hall though it must have been obvious to every man present that Rainbolt's words might have doomed them along with himself.

Rainbolt went on, addressing Spokesman Dorn.

"There is only one mistake in your reasoning, sir. The demonstrated effect of Oneness is not carried by the energies of the Grand Assembly Circuit, though I made use of those energies in establishing an initial connection with the other auditoriums and the people in them.

"You see, sir, we learned from the two men captured on Mars about your practice of having the two highest echelons of your organization attend significant hearings in the Tribunal Hall through the Assembly Circuit. Our plan was based on that. We knew that if anything was to be accomplished with the Oneness principles on Earth, it would have to be through a situation in which they could be applied simultaneously to the entire leadership of the Machine. That has now been done, and the fact that you had the Tribunal Hall taken out of the Assembly Circuit did not change the Oneness contact. It remains in full effect."

Spokesman Dorn stared at him for an instant, said, "We can test the truth of that statement immediately, of course; and we shall!" His hand moved on the desk.

Menesee felt pain surge through his left arm. It was not nearly as acute a sensation as the previous pulse had been, but it lasted longer—a good ten seconds. Menesee let his breath out carefully as it again ebbed away.

He heard the spokesman saying, "Rainbolt's claim appears to be verified. I've received a report that the pulse was being experienced in one of the auditoriums ... and, yes ... now in several."

Rainbolt nodded. "It was a valid claim, believe me, sir!" he said earnestly. "The applications of our principles have been very thoroughly explored, and the effects are invariable. Naturally, our strategem would have been useless if I'd been able to maintain contact only long enough to provide you with a demonstration of Oneness. Such a contact can be broken again, of course. But until I act deliberately to break it, it maintains itself automatically.

"To make that clear, I should explain that distance, direction and intervening shielding materials do not change the strength of the contact. Distance at least does not until it is extended to approximately fifty thousand miles."

"And what happens then?" the spokesman asked, watching him.

"At that point," Rainbolt acknowledged, "Oneness contacts do become tenuous and begin to dissolve." He added, almost apologetically, "However, that offers you no practical solution to your problem."

"Why not?" Dorn asked. He smiled faintly. "Why shouldn't we simply lock you into a spaceship and direct the ship through the defense fields and out into the solar system on automatic control?"

"I sincerely hope you don't try it, sir! Experiments in dissolving contacts in that manner have been invariably fatal to all connected individuals."

The spokesman hesitated. "You and every member of the Machine with whom you are now in contact would die together if that were done?"

"Yes, sir. That is certain what the results of those experiments show."

Administrator Bradshaw, who had been staring coldly at Rainbolt, asked in a hard, flat voice, "If you do nothing to break the contact, how long will this situation continue?"

Rainbolt looked at him. "Indefinitely, sir," he said. "There is nothing I need to do about it. It is a static condition."

"In that case," Bradshaw said icily, "*this* should serve to break the contact through you!"

As his hand came up, leveling a gun, Menesee was half out of his chair, hands raised in alarmed protest. "Stop him!" Menesee shouted.

But Administrator Bradshaw already was sagging sideways over the armrest of this chair, head

lolling backwards. The gun slid from his hand, dropped to the platform.

"Director Menesee," Dorn said coolly from beside Bradshaw, "I thank you for your intended warning! Since the administrator and the spokesman are the only persons permitted to bear arms in the Tribunal Hall, I was naturally prepared to paralyze Administrator Bradshaw if he showed intentions of resorting to thoughtless action." He looked down at Rainbolt. "Are Director Menesee and I correct in assuming that if you died violently the persons with whom you are in contact would again suffer the same experience?"

"Yes, sir," Rainbolt said. "That is implicit in the principles of Oneness." He shrugged. "Under most circumstances, it is a very undesirable effect. But here we have made use of it—"

"The situation," Spokesman Dorn told the directors in the Tribunal Hall some minutes later, "is then this. There has been nothing haphazard about the Mars Convicts' plan to coerce us into accepting their terms. Considering the probable quality of the type of minds which developed both the stardrive and the extraordinary 'philosophy' we have encountered today, that could be taken for granted from the start. We cannot kill their emissary here, or subject him to serious pain or injury, since we would pay a completely disproportionate penalty in doing it.

"However, that doesn't mean that we should surrender to the Mars Convicts. In fact, for all their cleverness, they appear to be acting out of something very close to desperation. They have gained no essential advantage through their trick, and we must assume they made the mistake of underestimating us. This gentleman they sent to Earth has been given thorough physical examinations. They show him to be in excellent health. He is also younger by many years than most of us.

"So he will be confined to quarters where he will be comfortable and provided with whatever he wishes ... but where he will not be provided with any way of doing harm to himself. And then, I believe, we can simply forget about him. He will receive the best of attention, including medical care. Under such circumstances, we can expect his natural life span to exceed our own.

"Meanwhile, we shall continue our program of developing our own spacedrive. As the Mars Convicts themselves foresee, we'll gain it eventually and will then be more than a match for them. Until then the defense fields around Earth will remain closed. No ship will leave Earth and no ship will be admitted to it. And in the long run we will win."

The spokesman paused, added, "If there are no other suggestions, this man will now be conducted to the hospital of the Machine where he is to be detained for the remainder of his days."

Across the hall from Menesee, a figure arose deliberately in one of the boxes. A heavy voice said, "Spokesman Dorn, I very definitely do have a suggestion."

Dorn looked over, nodded warily. "Go ahead, Director Squires!"

Menesee grimaced in distaste. He had no liking for Squires, a harsh, arrogant man, notorious for his relentless persecution of any director or officer who, in Squires' opinion, had become slack in his duties to the Machine. But he had a large following in the upper echelons, and his words carried weight.

Squires folded his arms, said unhurriedly as if savoring each word, "As you pointed out, Spokesman Dorn, we cannot hurt the person of this prisoner. His immediate accomplices also remain beyond our reach at present. However, our hands are not—as you seem to imply—so completely tied that we cannot strike back at these rascals at once. There are camps on Earth filled with people of the same political stripe—potential supporters of the Mars Convicts who would be in fullest sympathy with their goals if they learned of them.

"I suggest that these people serve now as an object lesson to show the Mars Convicts the full measure of our determination to submit to no threats of force! Let this prisoner and the other convicts who doubtless are lurking in nearby space beyond Earth's defense fields know that *for every day* their obscene threat against the high officers of the Machine continues hundreds of malcontents who would welcome them on Earth will be painfully executed! Let them—"

Pain doubled Menesee abruptly over the table before him. A savage, compressing pain, very different from the fiery touch of the nerve stimulators, which held him immobile, unable to cry out or draw breath.

It relaxed almost as instantaneously as it had come on. Menesee slumped back in his chair, shaken and choking, fighting down bitter nausea. His eyes refocused painfully on Rainbolt, gray-faced but on his feet, in the prisoner's area.

"You will find," Rainbolt was saying, "that Director Squires is dead. And so, I'm very much afraid, is every other member of the upper echelons whose heart was in no better condition than his. This was a demonstration I had not intended to give you. But since it has been given, it should serve as a reminder that while it is true we could not force you directly to do as we wish, there are things we are resolved not to tolerate."

Ojeda was whispering shakily near Menesee, "He controls his body to the extent that he was able

to bring on a heart attack in himself and project it to all of us! He counted on his own superb physical condition to pull him through it unharmed. *That* is why he didn't seem frightened when the administrator threatened him with a gun. Even if the spokesman hadn't acted, that gun never would have been fired.

"Menese, no precautions we could take will stop that monster from killing us all whenever he finally chooses—simply by committing suicide through an act of will!"

Spokesman Dorn's voice seemed to answer Ojeda.

"Director Squires," Dorn's voice said, still thinned by pain but oddly triumphant, "became a victim of his own pointless vindictiveness. It was a mistake which, I am certain, no member of the Machine will care to repeat.

"Otherwise, this incident has merely served to confirm that the Mars Convicts operate under definite limitations. They *could* kill us but can't afford to do it. If they are to thrive in space, they need Earth, and Earth's resources. They are aware that if the Machine's leadership dies, Earth will lapse into utter anarchy and turn its tremendous weapons upon itself.

"The Mars Convicts could gain nothing from a ruined and depopulated planet. Therefore, the situation as it stands remains a draw. We shall devote every effort to turn it into a victory for us. The agreement we come to eventually with the Mars Convicts will be on our terms—and there is essentially nothing they or this man, with all his powers, can do to prevent it."

The Missionary of Oneness swung his bronzed, well-muscled legs over the side of the hammock and sat up. With an expression of great interest, he watched Spokesman Dorn coming across the sun room towards him from the entrance corridor of his hospital suite. It was the first visit he'd had from any member of the organization of the Machine in the two years he had been confined here.

For Spokesman Dorn it had been, to judge by his appearance, a strenuous two years. He had lost weight and there were dark smudges of fatigue under his eyes. At the moment, however, his face appeared relaxed. It might have been the relaxation a man feels who has been emptied out by a hard stint of work, but knows he has accomplished everything that could possibly have been done.

Dorn came to a stop a dozen feet from the hammock. For some seconds, the two men regarded each other without speaking.

"On my way here," Dorn remarked then, "I was wondering whether you mightn't already know what I've come to tell you."

Rainbolt shook his head.

"No," he said. "I think I could guess what it is—I pick up generalized impressions from outside—but I don't really know."

Spokesman Dorn considered that a moment, chewing his lower lip reflectively. Then he shrugged.

"So actual mind-reading doesn't happen to be one of your talents," he said. "I was rather sure of that, though others had a different opinion. Of course, considering what you are able to do, it wouldn't really make much difference.

"Well ... this morning we sent out a general call by space radio to any Mars Convict ships which might be in the Solar System to come in. The call was answered. Earth's defense fields have been shut down, and the first FTL ships will land within an hour."

"For what purpose?" Rainbolt said curiously.

"There's a strong popular feeling," Spokesman Dorn said, "that your colleagues should take part in deciding what pattern Earth's permanent form of government will take. In recent months we've handled things in a rather provisional and haphazard manner, but the situation is straightened out well enough now to permit giving attention to such legalistic details. Incidentally, you will naturally be free to leave when I do. Transportation is available for you if you wish to welcome your friends at the spaceport."

"Thank you," said Rainbolt. "I believe I will."

Spokesman Dorn shrugged. "What could we do?" he said, almost disinterestedly. "You never slept. In the beginning you were drugged a number of times, as you probably know, but we soon discovered that drugging you seemed to make no difference at all."

"It doesn't," Rainbolt agreed.

"Day after day," Dorn went on, "we'd find thoughts and inclinations coming into our minds we'd never wanted there. It was an eerie experience—though personally I found it even more disconcerting to awaken in the morning and discover that my attitudes had changed in some particular or other, and as a rule changed irrevocably."

Rainbolt said, "In a sense, those weren't really your attitudes, you know. They were results of the conditioning of the Machine. It was the conditioning I was undermining."

"Perhaps it was that," Dorn said. "It seems to make very little difference now." He paused, frowned. "When the first talk of initiating change began in the councils, there were numerous executions. I know now that we were badly frightened men. Then those of us who had ordered the executions found themselves wanting similar changes. Presently we had a majority, and the changes began to be brought about. Reforms, you would call them—and reforms I suppose they actually were. There was considerable general disturbance, of course, but we retained the organization to keep that within reasonable bounds."

"We expected that you would," Rainbolt said.

"It hasn't really been too bad," Spokesman Dorn said reflectively. "It was simply an extraordinary amount of work to change the structure of things that had been imposed on Earth by the Machine for the past century and a half. And the curious part of it is, you know, that now it's done we don't even feel resentment! We actually wouldn't want to go back to what we had before. You've obtained an incredible hold on our minds—and frankly I expect that when at last you do relinquish your control, we'll commit suicide or go mad."

Rainbolt shook his head. "There's been just one mistake in what you've said," he remarked.

Spokesman Dorn looked at him with tired eyes. "What's that?" he asked.

"I said I was undermining the conditioning of the Machine. I did—and after that I did nothing. You people simply have been doing what most of you always would have preferred to do, Spokesman. I relinquished control of the last of you over six months ago."

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