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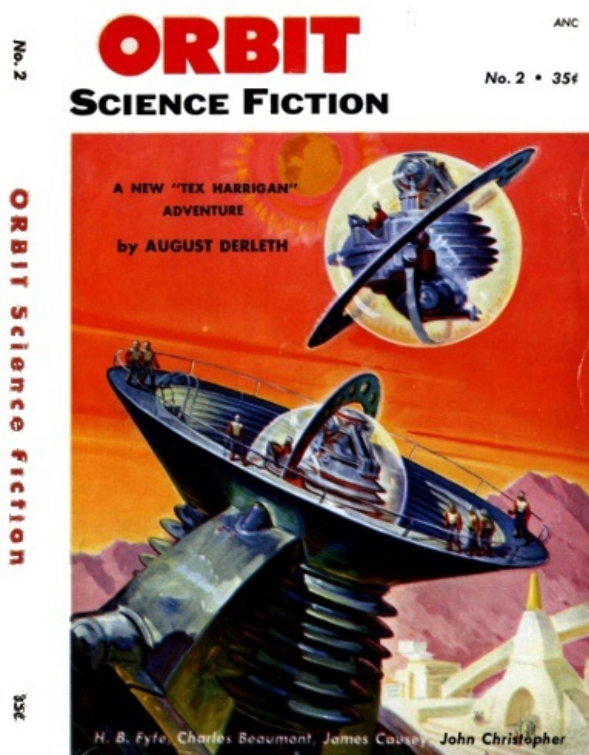
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK EXPLOITER'S END ***



EXPLOITER'S END

by James Causey

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We time-studied the Term. It moved with a pliant, liquid grace, its four arms flickering over the instrument panel, installing studs, tightening screws, its antennae glowing with the lambent yellow that denoted an agony of effort.

"See?" Harvey's freckled face was smug. "He rates an easy hundred and ten. Whoever took that first study—"

"I took it," I said, squinting at the stop watch.

You could hear him bite his lip. After only two weeks on the job, on a strange planet ninety light-years from home, you don't tell your boss he's cockeyed.

The Term hurried. Its faceted termite eyes were expressionless diamonds, but the antennae gleamed a desperate saffron. *If bugs could sweat*, I thought wryly. Now the quartz panel installation. Those four arms moved in a blinding frenzy.

But the stop watch was faster. The second hand caught up with the Term. It passed him. Rating: Seventy-four per cent.

I tucked the clipboard under my arm, squeezed through the airlock, and down the ramp. Harvey followed sullenly. The conveyor groaned on, bringing up the next unit, a sleek little cruiser. The Term seized a fifty-pound air wrench, fled up the ramp to the airlock.

"A dozen feet back to the operation," I pointed out. "After the next job he'll have to return forty feet. Then sixty. He's in the hole."

Harvey looked at his shoes. John Barry, the trim superintendent, came puffing down the line, his jowled face anxious about direct labor cost, the way every good super should be. "Anything wrong, Jake?"

"He can't cut it," I said.

Barry frowned up through the airlock at the Term. Those antennae now shone the soft sad purple of despair.

We walked past the body jigs. The air was a haze of blue smoke, punctuated with yellow splashes of flame from the electronic welding guns. Terms scuttled like gigantic spiders over the great silver hulls, their antennae glowing in a pattern of swift bright harmony, right on standard, good cost. Harvey's face was rapt as he watched them. I said harshly:

"Give me your third Production Axiom."

Harvey's shoulders squared. He said stiffly: "Beauty is functional. The quintessence of grace is the clean, soaring beauty of a spaceship's hull—"

"Extrapolate, Harvey."

His lips were tight. "What I see is ugly. Terms must be taught individuality. What I see is a fascinating, deadly beauty—deadly because it's useless. We must sublimate it, grind it down, hammer it out into a useful pattern. Waste motion is a sin...."

"Excellent."

We turned into the administration lift, leaving the iron roar behind us, and on the way up Harvey didn't say a word. I listened for the tinkle of shattering ideals, and said patiently, "You're here to build spaceships. To build them better and cheaper than Consolidated or Solar. Hell, we've even set up a village for the Terms! Electricity, plumbing, luxuries they wouldn't normally enjoy for the next million years—"

"Will they fire him?" Harvey's voice was flat.

My temper was shredding. "Four-day layoff. His third this month. Terms kick in most of their salary for village maintenance. They can't afford a part-time producer."

I could see that Term read out of the gang, leaving the company village, stoically, while his fellows played a wailing dirge of color on their antennae. The farewell song. I could see him

PEOPLE OR
TERMITES, IT'S ALL
THE SAME.

THERE'S A LIMIT TO
HOW FAR YOU CAN
DRIVE THEM!

trudging over the windswept peak of Cobalt Mountain, staring down at his native village, and shaking with the impact of the *Stammverstand*, the tribe-mind, the ache and the longing. A wheel, shaken out of orbit. The lonely cog, searching for its lost slot. I could see that Term returning to his tribe. And how they'd tear him to pieces because he was a thing apart, now, an alien.

We walked down the gray corridor, past Psych, past the conference hall, to the silver door marked *Methods and Standards*. Harvey's blue eyes were remote, stubborn. I clapped him paternally on the shoulder. "Anyone can call one wrong, lad. Forget it."

Harvey slumped down at a computer, and I walked into my private office and shut the door. Harvey's personnel dossier was in my desk. I.Q. 178, fair. Stability quotient two point eight, very bad. Adaptability rating point seven, borderline. Those idiots in Psych! Couldn't they indoctrinate a new man properly?

I waited.

In a moment Harvey came in without knocking and said, "Mr. Eagan, I want to quit."

I took my time lighting a cigar, not raising my head.

His defiant, pleading look.

I blew smoke rings at the visicom and finally said, "Since you were sixteen, you've dreamed of this. Elimination tests, the weeding out, ten thousand other smart, hungry kids fighting you for this job." I tasted the words. "When your contract's up you can write your own ticket anywhere in the system."

He blurted: "I came here full of ideas about the wonderful work Amalgamated was doing to advance backward civilizations. Sure, the Terms have a union. They're paid at standard galactic rates for spacecraft assembly. But you make them live in that village. It costs to run that village. You give it to them with one hand and take it back with the other. All the time you're holding out the promise of racial advancement, individuality, some day the Terms will reach the stars. Nuts!"

"That's Guild propaganda," I said softly.

"The Guild is just a bogey you created to keep the Intersolar Spacecrafters Union in line. There's a Venusport liner due in next week. When it leaves I'll be on it!"

I played Dutch Uncle. I told him he wasn't used to Terminorb's one-and-a-half gravs, that this was just a hangover from the three to five oxygen ratio he wasn't used to. But he said no. Finally I shrugged, scribbled something on an AVO and handed it to him. "All right, Harvey," I said mildly. "Take this down to Carmody, in Psych. He'll give you a clearance."

Harvey's face went white. "Since when do you go to Psych for a clearance?"

I pressed a stud under the desk and two Analysts came in. I told them what to do and Harvey screamed; he fought and bit and clawed, he mouthed unutterable things about what we were doing to the Terms until I chopped him mercifully behind the ear.

"Poor devil," panted one of the Analysts. "Obviously insufficient indoctrination, sir. Would you mind if I spent an hour in Psych for reorientation? He—he upset me."

My eyes stung with pride. Sam had loyalty plus. "Sure thing, Sam. You'd better go too, Barney. He said some pretty ugly things."

They dragged Harvey out and I went over to the visicom, punched a button. I was trembling with an icy rage as Carmody's lean hawk face swam into view. "Hello, Jake," he said languidly. "How's Cost?"

I told him curtly about Harvey. "Another weak sister," I rasped. "Can't you screen them any more? Didn't you note his stability index? I'm going to report this to Starza, Don."

"Relax," Carmody smiled. "Those things happen, Jake. We'll do a few gentle things with scalpel and narcosynthesis, and he'll be back in a week, real eager, the perfect cost analyst."

I'd never liked Carmody. He was so smug; he didn't realize the *sacredness* of his position. I said coldly, "Put Miss Davis on."

Carmody's grin was knowing. The screen flickered, and Fern's face came into focus. Her moist red lips parted, and I shivered, looking at her, even on a visicom screen. The shining glory of her hair, those cool green eyes. Three months hadn't made a difference.

"How was little old Earth?" I said awkwardly.

"Wonderful!" She was radiant. "I'll see you for lunch."

"Today's grievance day. Dinner?"

"I promised Don," she said demurely.

I swallowed hard. "How about the Term festival tomorrow night?"

"Well, Don sort of asked—"

I tried to laugh it off and Fern said she'd see me later and the screen went blank and I sat there shaking.

The screen flickered again. Starza's great moon face smiled at me and said sweetly, "We're ready to start grieving."

I picked up the time studies that were death sentences for two Terms, and went down the hall to ulcer gulch, the conference room.

Lure a termite away from his tribe. Promise him the stars. Make him bust his thorax on an assembly line. He makes a wonderful worker, with reflexes twice as fast as a human's, but he still isn't an individual. Even when putting a spaceship together, he's still part of the tribe, part of a glowing symphony of color and motion. That's bad for production. Accent on individuality, that was the keynote. The Terms and their union representatives could argue a grievance right to the letter of the contract, but when it came to production standards we had them. Terminorb IV was ninety light-years from the system, and the Terms couldn't afford a home office time and motion analyst. It wasn't worth it. Terms were expendable.

Los Tichnat was committeeman at large for the Term local. He sat regally at the head of the conference table, seven gleaming chitinous feet of him, with his softly pulsating antennae and faceted eyes, and said in a clicking, humorless voice, "The first item is a second-stage grievance. Brother Nadkek, in final assembly, was laid off for one day. Reason: He missed an operation. The grievance, of course, is a mere formality. You will deny it."

Dave Starza winked at me from behind horn-rimmed glasses. He sat like some great bland Buddha, Director of Industrial Relations, genius in outer psychology, ruthless, soft-spoken, anticipator of alien trends. He said in that beautiful velvet voice, "Ordinarily, yes. In this case Nadkek wished to ask his foreman about omitting a welding phase of the operation. While the suggestion was declined, Nadkek showed unmistakable initiative." Starza stressed the word. "We appreciate his interest in the job. He will receive pay for the lost day."

Around the table, antennae flashed amazed colors. A precedent had been set. Interest in the job transcended even the Contract.

"Management *sustains* the grievance?" Tichnat droned incredulously.

"Of course," Starza said.

Nadkek left the conference room, his antennae a puzzled mauve.

"Next," Starza said pontifically.

The next grievance was simply that a foreman had spoken harshly to a Term. The Term resented it. In his tribe he had been a fighter, prime guardian of the Queen-Mother. Fighters could not be reprimanded as could spinners or workers.

Starza and Tichnat split hairs while I dozed and thought about Fern.

Starza finally promised to reprimand the foreman. It was lovely, the way he thumped on the table, aflame with righteousness, his voice golden thunder, the martyr, hurt by Tichnat's unfairness, yet so eager to compromise, to be fair. The next grievance was work standards. Starza looked at me. This one mattered. This was cost.

I pulled out my study proofs, said, "Radnor, in final assembly. Consistently in the hole. Rating, seventy-four percent—"

"The operation was too tight, Jake. Admit it!"

The thought uncoiled darkly, thundering and reverberating in the horrified caverns of my brain.

A thoughtcaster. So the Guild had thoughtcasters now. The Guild had finally come.

I sat in the dank silence, shaking. A drop of ice crawled slowly down my temple. I stared around the conference table at Starza's frown, at those Term faces, the great faceted eyes.

"We gave this worker every chance," I said, licking my lips. "We put him on another operation. He still couldn't cut it. Even though we've got production to meet, we still give as many chances—"

The thought slashed. It grew into a soundless roar.

"Stop it, Jake! Tell them how Amalgamated, under the cloak of liberation, is strangling the Terms with an alien culture. Tell them what a mockery their contract really is! Tell them about that Term you condemned this morning!"

I fought it. Feeling the blood run from my lip, I fought it. I'd seen strong men driven insane by a thoughtcaster within seconds. My stability index was six point three. Damned high. I fought it. I got to my feet. The room reeled. Those damned Term faces. The shining antennae. I stumbled towards the door. The thought became a whiplash of molten fury.

"Uphold that grievance, Jake! Tell them the truth. Admit the standard was impossible to meet—"

I slammed the door. The voice stopped.

My skull was a

shattered fly-wheel, a sunburst of agony. I was retching. I stumbled down the corridor to Psych. Fern was there. I was screaming at her. The Guild was here. They had thoughtcasters. My brain was melting. Fern was white-faced. She had a hypo. I didn't feel it. The last thing I saw was the glimmer of tears in her green eyes.



"... the neuron flow." Starza's voice. "No two alike. Like fingerprints. What a pity they can't refine the transmittal waves."

I tried to open my eyes.

"The Guild atomized Solar's plant on Proycon," Carmody's voice said quietly. "It's just a question of time, Dave."

"No," Starza said thoughtfully. "Proycon was a sweatshop. I think maybe they're hinting that our production standards are a trifle rough. Look, his eyelids fluttered. Bet you he takes refuge in amnesia."

"You lose." My voice was an iron groan.

We were in Starza's office. Carmody peered at me with a clinical eye. "I took the liberty of narcosynthesis while you were out, Jake. You told us all about it. How do you feel?"

I told them how I felt, in spades.

"I want my vacation now," I said. "I've accrued seven months. I'm going to Venus," I said.

"Now, now," Starza said. "Mustn't desert the sinking ship, Jake." I shut my eyes. His voice was soothing oil. "Jake, the Guild as a whole doesn't know of this plant. Guild agents are free-lancers, in the full sense of the word. They exercise their own initiative, and only report to Guild HQ when the job is done."

"Then," Carmody said, "if we can find out who—"

"Precisely." Starza's eyes were veiled. "Incidentally, Don, you've been gone the last four days. Why?"

Carmody regarded him steadily. "Recruiting. You knew that."

"Yet you brought back only a dozen Terms."

Carmody drew a slow deep breath. "Word's gotten around, Dave. The tribes have finally forgotten their petty wars and united against a common enemy. Us! Any Term that exhibits undesirable traits of individuality is now destroyed. I think a dozen was a good haul."

"You had the whole planet."

Carmody's grin was diamond hard. "You think maybe I spent a few hours under a Guild mind-control? Is that it?"

Starza said, "On your way out, send Los Tichnat in."

Carmody flushed. "Tichnat's the one and you know it! But if he's not—if you haven't run down the spy by tomorrow—you can accept my resignation. I saw what they left of Proycon."

The door slammed behind him. Starza smiled at me. "What do you think, Jake?"

"Tichnat. The second I got out of there, the thoughtcaster stopped."

"Doesn't mean a thing. They can beam through solid rock. Hundred-foot radius."

"No exploitation," I mused.

"Fanatics," Starza said. "They'd impede the progress of man. Sacrifice man's rightful place in the cosmos for the sake of—crawling things! We'll fight them, Jake!"

Tichnat entered. He stood stiffly before Starza's desk, his antennae a cheerful emerald.

Starza said carefully, "What do you know about the Guild?"

"Impractical visionaries," Tichnat clicked. "Lovers of stasis, well-meaning fools. They approached me yesterday."

A vein throbbed purple in Starza's forehead. Yet he kept his voice soft. "And you didn't report it?"

"And precipitate a crisis?" Tichnat sounded amused. "I was asked if my people were being persecuted. Had I answered in the affirmative there might have been repercussions, perhaps a sequel to Proycon. Oh yes, we know of Proycon. Your foremen are sometimes indiscreet."

"Who was the agent?" Starza breathed.

"Should I tell you, and disrupt the status quo? You would destroy the agent. In retaliation, the Guild might destroy this plant."

"Impossible! Guild agents have no such authority—"

"A chance I cannot afford to take." Tichnat was adamant.

"Amalgamated," Starza prodded, "offers a standing reward of one hundred thousand solar credits for apprehension of any Guild agent. Your village could use those credits. You could equip an atomic lab. You could maintain your own research staff—"

"Stop it." The antennae throbbed brilliantly.

"We are your friends, Tichnat."

"Symbiosis, I believe is the word," Tichnat clicked dryly. "You need us. We need your science. We need your terrifying concept of individuality. We need to lose our old ways. The dance of harvest time. The Queen-Mother. One by one the rituals drop away. The old life, the good tribal life, is dying. You sift out us misfits who chafe at tribal oneness, you offer us the planets!"

The antennae flashed an angry scarlet. "You think to keep us chained a millennium. A hundred years will suffice. We will leave you. We exiles you have made, we who would be destroyed if we dared return to the tribe, we shall rule this world! You aliens drive a hard bargain, but the dream is worth it!"

Prometheus, in a bug's body. The shining strength, and the dark terrible pride.

"It is no dream," Starza said gently. "But perhaps you go about achieving it the wrong way. You still refuse to divulge the spy?"

"I am sorry. Good day."

Starza brooded after him.

"He's a fool. But he's grasping mankind's concepts, Jake. I'd give my right eye for a good semanticist! Basic English does it. *Self, want, mine*, selfish ego-words, the cornerstones of grasping humanity. Sure, we'll raise hell with their esthetic sense, but in the end they'll thank us."

I sat, worrying about a secret fanatic somewhere in the plant who, in the holy interests of Mars-for-the-Martians, Terminorb-for-the-Terms, might soon plant an atomic warhead in our body shop. I finally said, "What are we going to *do*?"

"Do?" Starza chuckled. "Why, slacken line speeds, lower production standards, fifty percent at least. By tomorrow we'll be down to forty jobs an hour. They want loose standards, we'll give it to them."

"But my *cost*?"

"Obscenity your cost. Look, Jake, no matter how you set an operation up, the Terms manage to work in some glittering little ritual. They *have* to create beauty. Their esthetic sense must be fed. They can't adjust to quick change. Supposing you cut line speeds by ten per cent. They adjust, but it almost kills them. Then drop thirty per cent. Their ritual loses timing, becomes discordant. What happens?"

I blinked. "They go mad."

"And our little Guild saboteur will be guilty of a few Term deaths. He'll have violated a basic Guild tenet. He'll go home with his tail between his legs. Catch?"

I caught.

By midafternoon we had the conveyor speeds down thirty per cent. The red line on my cost chart soared precariously. The entire production line slowed to a crawl. We waited.

At five o'clock it happened. Three Terms in the body shop went mad. It started a chain reaction throughout the trim line. Six more Terms ran amuck and had to be destroyed. Final assembly became a shambles. Starza called me on the visicom, delighted. "Our Guild agent played right into our hands, Jake. In forcing a production slump he's harming the workers. His next move will probably be a bluff."

I wasn't so sure.

That evening the executive dining room was choked with a tight, gnawing tension. Department heads spoke in hushed whispers, eyes darting. The man across the table could be a mindless-controlled, a Guild pawn. Smile at him politely and keep your mouth shut. I ordered *thar*, a Terminorb arthapod that was usually more delicious than Venusian lobster, but tonight it tasted like broiled leather. It was like eating in a morgue.

I saw Carmody, at the next table. I nodded coolly to him and he hitched his chair over and said, "By the way, Jake, I'm sorry about Harvey. He's going back to Earth next week."

"Why?"

"His stability index was too low," Carmody said smoothly. "Sure, we could have given him the works, but you didn't want a robot."

I said deliberately, "I needed that boy, Don."

Carmody got up, his smile infinitely contemptuous. "We don't all have your stability index, Jake."

I stared after him, and the thought suddenly struck me that not once had *I* considered quitting, ever. Somehow, the thought disturbed me.

Abruptly the public address speaker boomed.

"Attention," Starza's voice crackled. "To the Guild agent, wherever he may be. Today you murdered thirty-seven Terms. Is this your altruism? Is this your vaunted justice?" He went on, his voice like organ music, sweeping away all doubt, making you proud and glad to be a part of Amalgamated, part of Production, when quite suddenly his voice choked off. Simultaneously another voice ripped through the hall. A cold ironic whisper, lashing at the mind.

"Altruism, yes. But not as you conceive it. Today you passed your own judgment. You have twenty-four hours to evacuate before this Plant is destroyed. The verdict is final."

The dining hall echoed with moans. Hands leaned to agonized temples. The thoughtcaster again, on a wide band frequency. Through the pain I was conscious of Starza's voice. The Guild was trying to bluff us. We wouldn't let them. I stumbled out of the hall, my teeth chattering, took the lift down to the first level, and got outside, to walk free in the park.

Here was Eden. Giant conifers and ferns wove a cool green pattern of delight, and the laughter of the crystal fountains soothed. Terms had fashioned this garden, had created a poem in living green, a quiet fugue of *oneness*, each leaf blending exquisitely with the next, the unity, the perfect whole. For one weak moment I let the pattern seep insidiously into me, and then, ashamed, focused my eyes on that jarring splash of white in the center of the garden. The ten-foot model of the Amalgamated X-3M, squat with power, lifting on her stern jets. A symbol of Amalgamated's strength, the indomitable spirit of mankind, beauty born of pure utility. Oddly, a half-remembered poem of the Ancients flitted through my brain:

*Dirty British Coaster with her salt-caked smokestack,
Butting through the Channel on the mad March days—*

That was man.

On an infinity of planets he had met resistance, through force, through guile—even through beauty. And he had conquered. I drew a slow deep breath and sat on one of the benches, staring up at the gigantic horseshoe of the factory, hearing the muted hum of the atomics. Twenty-four hours.

I tried to run through my axioms, and I was suddenly terrified. I couldn't remember them! That damned thoughtcaster. Twice in one day. Perhaps there was some gradual neural disintegration. My head hurt terribly. Tomorrow I'd go to Psych for a checkup. I thought about that marble villa in Venusport, and about my bank account. Not enough. Another year, just one more year, and I could retire, at thirty-four. I thought about the Venusian twilights, and the turquoise mists off the Deeps, and wondered dully if I'd ever see Venus or the Earth again.

I saw Fern, walking among the conifers, her face a pale mask of strain. "You heard it, Jake?"

I nodded.

We sat in the aquamarine twilight, and Fern was shivering, and I put my arm around her.

"Looks like altruism is a relative thing," I said. "What *do* they want?"

"Uncontaminated Terms," she said bitterly. "No science, no stars, no wars and no progress. A big beautiful planet-mind, the Term mind, forever static, forever dead."

"It's a bluff," I said. "Our little fanatic's stalling for time, hoping to stampede us while he finds

another way."

"For example?"

"Why do you think we insist on basic English for all Terms? Supposing a foreman should start jabbering Terminese during an operation. The Terms would revert, we'd have a line shutdown. They can't adjust—say!" A random thought was nibbling at my brain. "Where was Carmody this morning? Just before I reeled in?"

Her fine brows knitted. "Why, he went—oh, Jake, surely you don't think—?"

"Went where?"

"Down the hall. Towards Personnel."

"Towards the conference hall, you mean. He never even examined Harvey!"

"It wasn't necessary," she said uncomfortably. "Don just wanted to verify his stability index."

"Sure! So he stood outside the conference hall and put a whammy on me—"

Fern was smiling. I scowled. "It fits. It has to be him."

"Or Tichnat," she said. "Or Starza. Or me."

I stared at her. "You'd do." My voice shook. "You were gone three months. They could have got to you."

Her rich, warm laughter sifted through the twilight, and I wanted to hit her. "They did," she gurgled, "but I've decided to relent, Jake. I'll spare the plant on one condition—that you take me to the Term festival tomorrow night."

I grunted. "Carmody working overtime, I suppose?"

"If the plant's still standing."

I changed the subject.

Two hours later Starza called a council of war.

The conference room was crammed with quivering executives. Starza carefully let the tension build to a shrill crescendo before he said:

"One of you gentlemen is a Guild mindless-controlled."

Ragged silence. Starza's smile was very faint.

"You gave us an ultimatum. But destroying this plant is an admission of failure you're not willing to make—yet. You'll try another tack. You're just beginning to discover that this environment we've created for the Terms is superior to the primitive jungle. Tichnat!"

Tichnat stepped forward. His antennae were a proud, brilliant gold.

"Do you want a shutdown?" Starza asked softly.

"Are we fools?" Tichnat clicked. "To lose what we've gained? To return to our tribe? To be destroyed?"

Starza's calm gaze caressed each face, probing. "You see? Stalemate. Whoever you are, *you're bluffing*. Tomorrow our conveyor speeds return to normal. You'll do nothing. You may try to agitate the Terms, but they're satisfied—"

One of the superintendents cleared his throat. "Look," he said unsteadily, "sometimes you can't afford to call a bluff."

Starza said pleasantly, "Any resignations will be accepted right now. You can wait safely in the Term village until next week's freighter arrives. No repercussions, I promise."

The lie was blatant. Carmody stood by the door, his smile strained. It was all too obvious what would happen to any resignees.

"None?" Starza's brows rose. "I'm proud of you. That's it, gentlemen."

The next day was a frenetic nightmare. My cost dropped, but it didn't matter. That was one day when the best company man became a clock-watcher. Line foremen, department heads, cracked under the strain, and were summarily removed to Psych. Carmody and staff worked overtime.

I toiled feverishly over operation schedules, the crazily fluctuating cost charts. My headache was gone, but I still couldn't remember my axioms! I felt guilty over not going to Psych, but there just wasn't the time.

Hell, *I'd* never needed indoctrination. I was an Amalgamated man through and through. Finally I grabbed an engineering manual, leafed angrily through it—and sat there, empty and shaking.

I'd gone insane.

The words were gibberish. Oh, I could read them all right, but they didn't make *sense*. What a filthy trick. Semantic block, Starza would call it. I kept staring at the meaningless words, conscious of a tearing sense of loss. And I wanted to cry.

Six o'clock was zero hour.

Six o'clock came, and the factory held its collective breath while nothing happened.

At six-thirty Starza made a long speech over the public address. About the selfless spirit of man, helping the Terms reach the stars, about how we would never admit defeat, and about how, after tonight, the Term festival would be discontinued. The Terms had adopted mankind's culture, they had no further need of their effete native customs.

At seven, Fern and I were walking past Administration towards the lighted square-mile enclosure of the Term village. Fern had never seen a festival.

"A throwback," I said, "to their old tribal days. Their harvest, when they pay tribute to the Queen-Mother and pray for good crops and work well done. It's their yearly substitute for *Stammverstand*. Back in the native villages, whenever a Term's in trouble, he goes to the council hut and the others join him in a silent, group telepathy. But we've just about weaned them, angel! They'll be individuals soon."

We walked down the deserted row of Term huts, past the council hall, to the great stone amphitheatre, and sat with the other execs. Fern was very gay and cheerful, but I kept thinking about my axioms, trying to bring them back to life. I felt dead, all dead inside.

Starza came up, frowning, and I congratulated him.

"It's too pat, Jake, it worries me. Where's Carmody?"

"Setting up those semantic reaction tests you gave him," Fern said.

"But I never gave him—"

Abruptly the lights snuffed out. At one end of the arena loomed a twelve-foot statue of a bloated Term, limned in a soft pale glow. The Queen-Mother.

The hush. Then the radiance.

Slowly the Terms filed into the arena, rank upon rank of living flame. First the fighters, their antennae shining crimson and splendid against the tall night. Then the twins glows of blue that denoted the spinners, the weavers. The golden blaze of the harvesters. The lambent colors crept through the air like a mood, like a dream, and deepened into a shimmering cataract of rainbow fire, a paean of light and glory that whirled and spun in a joyous rhythm as old as the race itself.

Then—chaos.

A blinding flare cascaded from the six-foot antennae of the statue. The radiance grew, brighter than an atomic flare, more terrible than the sun. The Terms stood frozen. Beside me, Starza swore.

This wasn't in the script.

That colossal voice.

Ear-snapping clicks, and liquid vowels. Terminese. The forbidden tongue. The voice blared. I caught most of it.

"Children, you have sinned. You are defiled with the taint of alien monsters. You have failed the Queen-Mother. Return, my children, return to your tribes. Return to the tabernacle of unity, the one-in-all, the Queen-Mother! For in death there is life, and there is joy in immolation. Return!"

Lastly, the climax. That last shattering hunk of propagandea that would have been so tritely amusing if it hadn't been so terrifying.

"You have nothing to lose but your chains."

The giant antennae faded to a liquid silver. The silver of hope, of forgiveness.

For a moment I was blind. I felt Fern trembling against me. The execs were chattering like frightened sheep. Then I could see. I saw Starza. He was moving down the aisle, cursing in a tight, dull monotone.

I followed him down into the arena. The Terms stood shriveled, mute. Starza was fumbling at the base of the statue, and he said in a thick horrible voice, "Look." The loudspeaker. The coiled wiring.

The Terms stirred.

Starza leaped to the lap of the statue. He bawled, "Listen! This is sacrilege! You have been victims of a hoax—"

Not listening, they filed in silent groups out of the arena. Their antennae were the color of ashes.

Starza jumped down. He pounded after them. He was shouting at Los Tichnat.

"I know," Tichnat droned. He kept walking. "You are right. It does not matter that you are right. The Queen-Mother called."

"Listen," Starza mouthed. "It was a fraud, a trick. You can't—"

"We must." Tichnat paused. For a long moment the great faceted eyes stared somberly. "It was a splendid dream, the thing you offered us. But this is the final reality. And yours is but a dream."

He tramped stolidly on, after the others. The council hall door closed.

Starza clawed at the door. It opened. He was too late. They sat silently around the great table, the faceted eyes dead, the antennae coruscating indigo, now green, now rose. Communion. The meshing of minds. Starza shouted at them. Stillness.

Starza looked blindly at me. He was shaking. "Carmody," he said. "Carmody knows the Term mind. He can do something. Come on," he said.

We found Carmody in his quarters, methodically packing. His eyebrows rose as we burst in. "Did you gentlemen ever try knocking?"

Starza just looked at him. Carmody drew a long breath. "You'll find my resignation on your desk, Dave."

"Ah?" Starza's voice was very soft.

"It's only a question of time," Carmody said. "Call it the rat deserting the ship if you like, but I'm through."



Starza was smiling, a fat man's smile. "So you really think you can pull it off," he whispered.

Carmody shrugged, and Starza calmly took out a sonic pistol and shot him in the belly.

A sonic blast hemorrhages. It rends the capillaries, ploughs the flesh into a flaccid collection of shattered nerve fibers and ruined arteries. It's a rotten way to die.

Starza watched Carmody thrash himself to death on the floor. I turned away.

"For the record, Jake, he made a full confession. We both heard him."

"Just for the record," I said.

"It had to be him," Starza said. "That thoughtcaster blast yesterday morning made reference to your study on the Term. Only Harvey and Carmody knew about that. It couldn't have been Harvey. He cut his throat this morning.

"I've decided," Starza said. "This is a Type L planet, after all. The natives are chronically unstable. Hostile, in fact. Pursuant to Solar Regulation 3, we have the right to enforce martial law. It should be six months before an investigation. Meanwhile—"

"We'll get production," I said.

"We'll get production." He wiped his forehead, relaxed. "I'll send in a full report tonight. Better turn in, Jake," he said kindly. "I'll need

you in the morning."

I turned in.

You lie awake, staring into the blackness. It gnaws.

My head throbbed. I should have felt a triumphant relief, but I could not remember my axioms, and I felt a sick dull hate for the thing the Guild spy Carmody had done to me. What happens when you strip a man of everything he believes in?

He remembers other things.

Those memories came trooping back like ghosts and I fought them, sweating, but they came. Once upon a time, there was a starry-eyed young engineer who started out to set the galaxy on fire. But he got squeamish, somewhere along the way. So Carmody operated on him. Carmody did things to his brain, made a good production man out of him.

I remembered now.

That time I had argued with Starza about standards, nine years ago. And I had resigned. And

Starza sent me to Psych.

Good old Carmody.

There never would be a white marble villa on Venus. It was a harmless dream, a substitute for what I had lost. But it didn't matter! Those superimposed patterns had been removed, that thoughtcaster had crippled my thinking, but, by Heaven, I was still an Amalgamated man! They couldn't take that away.

But Starza had been wrong about Carmody.

Nothing definite. But when you dedicate your life into extrapolating curves, frozen chunks of time and motion, into the thunder of jets lifting Amalgamated ships from Terminorb, your mind becomes a very efficient analogue computer, if you know how to use. I used it now. I fed little things, facts, variables, into that computer, and it told me three times. Probability: sixty percent at least.

I got up, dressed stiffly. I was trembling. I could still serve, after all.

I took the lift up to Administration, and walked down that long gray corridor on leaden feet towards the illuminated rectangle of Starza's office.

I opened the door.

"Hello, darling," Fern said.

She was unhurriedly burning Starza's report. Starza sat mutely in his chair, head tilted back at an impossible angle, staring at nothing.

"It had to be you." I had never felt so tired. "You would have destroyed the plant, wouldn't you? Only I showed you another way. Make the Terms revert. And you had that hypo all ready when I reeled into Psych." I moved towards her carefully. "You're so damned altruistic. A Guild mindless-controlled," I said.

Fern's smile was compassionate. She methodically ground the ashes to powder, lifted that calm green gaze.

"Stupid words to frighten children, Jake. Yes, they kidnapped me. I never reached Earth, three months ago. I was indoctrinated—oh, they didn't have far to go. *Each race to its own fulfillment.*" Her eyes were shining. "Look out the window."

Numbly, I moved past her. I stared. In the distant blackness, a column of living flame flickered up the slope of Cobalt Mountain. Ice-green, ruby, silver and blue. The Terms were leaving.

"They're not ready for individuality yet," Fern breathed. "In a million years perhaps. Not now. They're going home."

"To die."

"The race will live. Individuality isn't the penultimate, darling. You'll find out." I moved towards her. "You've got a very tough mind, Jake. You'll make a wonderful Guild agent—"

I got both hands on her throat.

Fern moved. Her right arm was a snake striking, and a steel strength lifted me, turning, against one and a half gravities, and the floor wavered up to hit me in the face. Something broke. I tasted blood.

Through the agony, I moved. I crawled towards her.

"They gave me six weeks of hand combat under two gravs," she said. "Soon you'll be one of us, Jake. One of the Guild!"

I stared up at her in a dull horror. I kept crawling.

"We'll heal you," Fern said. "We'll give you back the dream. We may even work together! Maybe I'll fall in love with you again, who knows?" Her eyes were brimming. She took out a sonic pistol. "It's all right, darling. I'll adjust it for knockout. In three hours we'll be on a Guild flier. Please, darling," she said, and I kept crawling. And Fern's smile was a benediction as she pulled the trigger.

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