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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHAPTER ENDS ***



THE CHAPTER ENDS

Novelet of Latter Years

by Poul Anderson

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Julith clasped the star-man's arm with one hand, while her other arm gripped his waist. The generator in Jorun's skull responded to his will ... they rose quietly and went slowly seaward....

"No," said the old man.

"But you don't realize what it means," said Jorun. "You don't know what you're saying."

The old man, Kormt of Huerdar, Gerlaug's son, and Speaker for Solis Township, shook his head till the long, grizzled locks swirled around his wide shoulders. "I have thought it through," he said. His voice was deep and slow and implacable. "You gave me five years to think about it. And my answer is no."

Jorun felt a weariness rise within him. It had been like this for days now, weeks, and it was like trying to knock down a mountain. You beat on its rocky flanks till your hands were bloody, and still the mountain stood there, sunlight on its high snow-fields and in the forests that rustled up its slopes, and it did not really notice you. You were a brief thin buzz between two long nights, but the mountain was forever.

"You haven't thought at all," he said with a rudeness born of exhaustion. "You've only reacted unthinkingly to a dead symbol. It's not a human reaction, even, it's a verbal reflex."

Kormt's eyes, meshed in crow's-feet, were serene and steady under the thick gray brows. He smiled a little in his long beard, but made no other reply. Had he simply let the insult glide off him, or had he not understood it at all? There was no real talking to these peasants; too many millennia lay between, and you couldn't shout across that gulf.

"Well," said Jorun, "the ships will be here tomorrow or the next day, and it'll take another day or so to get all your people aboard. You have that long to decide, but after that it'll be too late. Think about it, I beg of you. As for me, I'll be too busy to argue further."

"You are a good man," said Kormt, "and a wise one in your fashion. But you are blind. There is something dead inside you."

He waved one huge gnarled hand. "Look around you, Jorun of Fulkhis. This is *Earth*. This is the old home of all humankind. You cannot go off and forget it. Man cannot do so. It is in him, in his blood and bones and soul; he will carry Earth within him forever."

Jorun's eyes traveled along the arc of the hand. He stood on the edge of the town. Behind him were its houses—low, white, half-timbered, roofed with thatch or red tile, smoke rising from the chimneys; carved galleries overhung the narrow, cobbled, crazily-twisting streets; he heard the noise of wheels and wooden clogs, the shouts of children at play. Beyond that were trees and the incredible ruined walls of Sol City. In front of him, the wooded hills were cleared and a gentle landscape of neat fields and orchards rolled down toward the distant glitter of the sea: scattered farm buildings, drowsy cattle, winding gravel roads, fence-walls of ancient marble and granite, all dreaming under the sun.

"Look around you, Jorun of Fulkhis. This is *Earth*. This is the old home of all mankind. You cannot go off and forget it. Man cannot do so. It is in him, in his blood and bones and soul; he will carry Earth within him forever."

He drew a deep breath. It was pungent in his nostrils. It smelled of leaf-mould, plowed earth baking in the warmth, summery trees and gardens, a remote ocean odor of salt and kelp and fish. He thought that no two planets ever had quite the same smell, and that none was as rich as Terra's.

"This is a fair world," he said slowly.

"It is the only one," said Kormt. "Man came from here; and to this, in the end, he must return."

"I wonder—" Jorun sighed. "Take me; not one atom of my body was from this soil before I landed. My people lived on Fulkhis for ages, and changed to meet its conditions. They would not be happy on Terra."

"The atoms are nothing," said Kormt. "It is the form which matters, and that was given to you by Earth."

Jorun studied him for a moment. Kormt was like most of this planet's ten million or so people—a dark, stocky folk, though there were more blond and red-haired throwbacks here than in the rest of the Galaxy. He was old for a primitive untreated by medical science—he must be almost two hundred years old—but his back was straight, and his stride firm. The coarse, jut-nosed face held an odd strength. Jorun was nearing his thousandth birthday, but couldn't help feeling like a child in Kormt's presence.

That didn't make sense. These few dwellers on Terra were a backward and impoverished race of peasants and handicraftsmen; they were ignorant and unadventurous; they had been static for more thousands of years than anyone knew. What could they have to say to the ancient and mighty civilization which had almost forgotten their little planet?

Kormt looked at the declining sun. "I must go now," he said. "There are the evening chores to do. I will be in town tonight if you should wish to see me."

"I probably will," said Jorun. "There's a lot to do, readying the evacuation, and you're a big help."

The old man bowed with grave courtesy, turned, and walked off down the road. He wore the common costume of Terran men, as archaic in style as in its woven-fabric material: hat, jacket, loose trousers, a long staff in his hand. Contrasting the drab blue of Kormt's dress, Jorun's vivid tunic of shifting rainbow hues was like a flame.

The psychotechnician sighed again, watching him go. He liked the old fellow. It would be criminal to leave him here alone, but the law forbade force—physical or mental—and the Integrator on Corazuno wasn't going to care whether or not one aged man stayed behind. The job was to get the *race* off Terra.

A lovely world. Jorun's thin mobile features, pale-skinned and large-eyed, turned around the horizon. *A fair world we came from.*

There were more beautiful planets in the Galaxy's swarming myriads—the indigo world-ocean of Loa, jeweled with islands; the heaven-defying mountains of Sharang; the sky of Jareb, that seemed to drip light—oh, many and many, but there was only one Earth.

Jorun remembered his first sight of this world, hanging free in space to watch it after the gruelling ten-day run, thirty thousand light-years, from Corazuno. It was blue as it turned before his eyes, a burnished turquoise shield blazoned with the living green and brown of its lands, and the poles were crowned with a flimmering haze of aurora. The belts that streaked its face and blurred the continents were cloud, wind and water and the gray rush of rain, like a benediction from heaven. Beyond the planet hung its moon, a scarred golden crescent, and he had wondered how many generations of men had looked up to it, or watched its light like a broken bridge across moving waters. Against the enormous cold of the sky—utter black out to the distant coils of the nebulae, thronging with a million frosty points of diamond-hard blaze that were the stars—Earth had stood as a sign of haven. To Jorun, who came from Galactic center and its uncountable hosts of suns, heaven was bare, this was the outer fringe where the stars thinned away toward hideous immensity. He had shivered a little, drawn the envelope of air and warmth closer about him, with a convulsive movement. The silence drummed in his head. Then he streaked for the north-pole rendezvous of his group.

Well, he thought now, we have a pretty routine job. The first expedition here, five years ago, prepared the natives for the fact they'd have to go. Our party simply has to organize these docile peasants in time for the ships. But it had meant a lot of hard work, and he was tired. It would be good to finish the job and get back home.

Or would it?

He thought of flying with Zarek, his team-mate, from the rendezvous to this area assigned as theirs. Plains like oceans of grass, wind-rippled, darkened with the herds of wild cattle whose hoofbeats were a thunder in the earth; forests, hundreds of kilometers of old and mighty trees, rivers piercing them in a long steel gleam; lakes where fish leaped; spilling sunshine like warm rain, radiance so bright it hurt his eyes, cloud-shadows swift across the land. It had all been empty of man, but still there was a vitality here which was almost frightening to Jorun. His own

grim world of moors and crags and spin-drift seas was a niggard beside this; here life covered the earth, filled the oceans, and made the heavens clangerous around him. He wondered if the driving energy within man, the force which had raised him to the stars, made him half-god and half-demon, if that was a legacy of Terra.

Well—man had changed; over the thousands of years, natural and controlled adaptation had fitted him to the worlds he had colonized, and most of his many races could not now feel at home here. Jorun thought of his own party: round, amber-skinned Chuli from a tropic world, complaining bitterly about the cold and dryness; gay young Cluthe, gangling and bulge-chested; sophisticated Taliuvenna of the flowing dark hair and the lustrous eyes—no, to them Earth was only one more planet, out of thousands they had seen in their long lives.

And I'm a sentimental fool.

2

He could have willed the vague regret out of his trained nervous system, but he didn't want to. This was the last time human eyes would ever look on Earth, and somehow Jorun felt that it should be more to him than just another psychotechnic job.

"Hello, good sir."

He turned at the voice and forced his tired lips into a friendly smile. "Hello, Julith," he said. It was a wise policy to learn the names of the townspeople, at least, and she was a great-great-granddaughter of the Speaker.

She was some thirteen or fourteen years old, a freckle-faced child with a shy smile, and steady green eyes. There was a certain awkward grace about her, and she seemed more imaginative than most of her stolid race. She curtsied quaintly for him, her bare foot reaching out under the long smock which was daily female dress here.

"Are you busy, good sir?" she asked.

"Well, not too much," said Jorun. He was glad of a chance to talk; it silenced his thoughts. "What can I do for you?"

"I wondered—" She hesitated, then, breathlessly: "I wonder if you could give me a lift down to the beach? Only for an hour or two. It's too far to walk there before I have to be home, and I can't borrow a car, or even a horse. If it won't be any trouble, sir."

"Mmmm—shouldn't you be at home now? Isn't there milking and so on to do?"

"Oh, I don't live on a farm, good sir. My father is a baker."

"Yes, yes, so he is. I should have remembered." Jorun considered for an instant. There was enough to do in town, and it wasn't fair for him to play hooky while Zarek worked alone. "Why do you want to go to the beach, Julith?"

"We'll be busy packing up," she said. "Starting tomorrow, I guess. This is my last chance to see it."

Jorun's mouth twisted a little. "All right," he said; "I'll take you."

"You are very kind, good sir," she said gravely.

He didn't reply, but held out his arm, and she clasped it with one hand while her other arm gripped his waist. The generator inside his skull responded to his will, reaching out and clawing itself to the fabric of forces and energies which was physical space. They rose quietly, and went so slowly seaward that he didn't have to raise a wind-screen.

"Will we be able to fly like this when we get to the stars?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, Julith," he said. "You see, the people of my civilization are born this way. Thousands of years ago, men learned how to control the great basic forces of the cosmos with only a small bit of energy. Finally they used artificial mutation—that is, they changed themselves, slowly, over many generations, until their brains grew a new part that could generate this controlling force. We can now even, fly between the stars, by this power. But your people don't have that brain, so we had to build spaceships to take you away."

"I see," she said.

"Your great-great-great-grandchildren can be like us, if your people want to be changed thus," he said.

"They didn't want to change before," she answered. "I don't think they'll do it now, even in their new home." Her voice held no bitterness; it was an acceptance.

Privately, Jorun doubted it. The psychic shock of this uprooting would be bound to destroy the old traditions of the Terrans; it would not take many centuries before they were culturally assimilated by Galactic civilization.

Assimilated—nice euphemism. Why not just say—eaten?

They landed on the beach. It was broad and white, running in dunes from the thin, harsh, salt-streaked grass to the roar and tumble of surf. The sun was low over the watery horizon, filling the damp, blowing air with gold. Jorun could almost look directly at its huge disc.

He sat down. The sand gritted tinily under him, and the wind ruffled his hair and filled his nostrils with its sharp wet smell. He picked up a conch and turned it over in his fingers, wondering at the intricate architecture of it.

"If you hold it to your ear," said Julith, "you can hear the sea." Her childish voice was curiously tender around the rough syllables of Earth's language.

He nodded and obeyed her hint. It was only the small pulse of blood within him—you heard the same thing out in the great hollow silence of space—but it did sing of restless immensities, wind and foam, and the long waves marching under the moon.

"I have two of them myself," said Julith. "I want them so I can always remember this beach. And my children and their children will hold them, too, and hear our sea talking." She folded his fingers around the shell. "You keep this one for yourself."

"Thank you," he said. "I will." The combers rolled in, booming and spouting against the land. The Terrans called them the horses of God. A thin cloud in the west was turning rose and gold.

"Are there oceans on our new planet?" asked Julith.

"Yes," he said. "It's the most Earth-like world we could find that wasn't already inhabited. You'll be happy there."

But the trees and grasses, the soil and the fruits thereof, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the waters beneath, form and color, smell and sound, taste and texture, everything is different. Is alien. The difference is small, subtle, but it is the abyss of two billion years of separate evolution, and no other world can ever quite be Earth.

Julith looked straight at him with solemn eyes. "Are you folk afraid of Hulduvians?" she asked.

"Why, no," he said. "Of course not."

"Then why are you giving Earth to them?" It was a soft question, but it trembled just a little.

"I thought all your people understood the reason by now," said Jorun. "Civilization—the civilization of man and his nonhuman allies—has moved inward, toward the great star-clusters of Galactic center. This part of space means nothing to us any more; it's almost a desert. You haven't seen starlight till you've been by Sagittarius. Now the Hulduvians are another civilization. They are not the least bit like us; they live on big, poisonous worlds like Jupiter and Saturn. I think they would seem like pretty nice monsters if they weren't so alien to us that neither side can really understand the other. They use the cosmic energies too, but in a different way—and their way interferes with ours just as ours interferes with theirs. Different brains, you see.

"Anyway, it was decided that the two civilizations would get along best by just staying away from each other. If they divided up the Galaxy between them, there would be no interference; it would be too far from one civilization to the other. The Hulduvians were, really, very nice about it. They're willing to take the outer rim, even if there are fewer stars, and let us have the center.

"So by the agreement, we've got to have all men and manlike beings out of their territory before they come to settle it, just as they'll move out of ours. Their colonists won't be coming to Jupiter and Saturn for centuries yet; but even so, we have to clear the Sirius Sector now, because there'll be a lot of work to do elsewhere. Fortunately, there are only a few people living in this whole part of space. The Sirius Sector has been an isolated, primi—ah—quiet region since the First Empire fell, fifty thousand years ago."

Julith's voice rose a little. "But those people are *us*!"

"And the folk of Alpha Centauri and Procyon and Sirius and—oh, hundreds of other stars. Yet all of you together are only one tiny drop in the quadrillions of the Galaxy. Don't you see, Julith, you have to move for the good of all of us?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I know all that."

She got up, shaking herself. "Let's go swimming."

Jorun smiled and shook his head. "No, I'll wait for you if you want to go."

She nodded and ran off down the beach, sheltering behind a dune to put on a bathing-suit. The Terrans had a nudity taboo, in spite of the mild interglacial climate; typical primitive irrationality. Jorun lay back, folding his arms behind his head, and looked up at the darkening sky. The evening star twinkled forth, low and white on the dusk-blue horizon. Venus—or was it Mercury? He wasn't sure. He wished he knew more about the early history of the Solar System, the first men to ride their thunderous rockets out to die on unknown hell-worlds—the first clumsy steps toward the

stars. He could look it up in the archives of Corazuno, but he knew he never would. Too much else to do, too much to remember. Probably less than one percent of mankind's throngs even knew where Earth was, today—though, for a while, it had been quite a tourist-center. But that was perhaps thirty thousand years ago.

Because this world, out of all the billions, has certain physical characteristics, he thought, my race has made them into standards. Our basic units of length and time and acceleration, our comparisons by which we classify the swarming planets of the Galaxy, they all go back ultimately to Earth. We bear that unspoken memorial to our birthplace within our whole civilization, and will bear it forever. But has she given us more than that? Are our own selves, bodies and minds and dreams, are they also the children of Earth?

Now he was thinking like Kormt, stubborn old Kormt who clung with such a blind strength to this land simply because it was his. When you considered all the races of this wander-footed species—how many of them there were, how many kinds of man between the stars! And yet they all walked upright; they all had two eyes and a nose between and a mouth below; they were all cells of that great and ancient culture which had begun here, eons past, with the first hairy half-man who kindled a fire against night. If Earth had not had darkness and cold and prowling beasts, oxygen and cellulose and flint, that culture might never have gestated.

I'm getting unlogical. Too tired, nerves worn too thin, psychosomatic control slipping. Now Earth is becoming some obscure mother-symbol for me.

Or has she always been one, for the whole race of us?

A seagull cried harshly overhead and soared from view.

The sunset was smoldering away and dusk rose like fog out of the ground. Julith came running back to him, her face indistinct in the gloom. She was breathing hard, and he couldn't tell if the catch in her voice was laughter or weeping.

"I'd better be getting home," she said.

3

They flew slowly back. The town was a yellow twinkle of lights, warmth gleaming from windows across many empty kilometers. Jorun set the girl down outside her home.

"Thank you, good sir," she said, curtsying. "Won't you come in to dinner?"

"Well—"

The door opened, etching the girl black against the ruddiness inside. Jorun's luminous tunic made him like a torch in the dark. "Why, it's the star-man," said a woman's voice.

"I took your daughter for a swim," he explained. "I hope you don't mind."

"And if we did, what would it matter?" grumbled a bass tone. Jorun recognized Kormt; the old man must have come as a guest from his farm on the outskirts. "What could we do about it?"

"Now, Granther, that's no way to talk to the gentleman," said the woman. "He's been very kind. Won't you come eat with us, good sir?"

Jorun refused twice, in case they were only being polite, then accepted gladly enough. He was tired of cookery at the inn where he and Zarek boarded. "Thank you."

He entered, ducking under the low door. A single long, smoky-raftered room was kitchen, diningroom, and parlor; doors led off to the sleeping quarters. It was furnished with a clumsy elegance, skin rugs, oak wainscoting, carved pillars, glowing ornaments of hammered copper. A radium clock, which must be incredibly old, stood on the stone mantel, above a snapping fire; a chemical-powered gun, obviously of local manufacture, hung over it. Julith's parents, a plain, quiet peasant couple, conducted him to the end of the wooden table, while half a dozen children watched him with large eyes. The younger children were the only Terrans who seemed to find this removal an adventure.

The meal was good and plentiful: meat, vegetables, bread, beer, milk, ice cream, coffee, all of it from the farms hereabouts. There wasn't much trade between the few thousand communities of Earth; they were practically self-sufficient. The company ate in silence, as was the custom here. When they were finished, Jorun wanted to go, but it would have been rude to leave immediately. He went over to a chair by the fireplace, across from the one in which Kormt sprawled.

The old man took out a big-bowled pipe and began stuffing it. Shadows wove across his seamed brown face, his eyes were a gleam out of darkness. "I'll go down to City Hall with you soon," he said; "I imagine that's where the work is going on."

"Yes," said Jorun, "I can relieve Zarek at it. I'd appreciate it if you did come, good sir. Your influence is very steadying on these people."

"It should be," said Kormt. "I've been their Speaker for almost a hundred years. And my father Gerlaug was before me, and his father Kormt was before him." He took a brand from the fire and held it over his pipe, puffing hard, looking up at Jorun through tangled brows. "Who was your

great-grandfather?"

"Why—I don't know. I imagine he's still alive somewhere, but—"

"I thought so. No marriage. No family. No home. No tradition." Kormt shook, his massive head, slowly, "I pity you Galactics!"

"Now please, good sir—" Damn it all, the old clodhopper could get as irritating as a faulty computer. "We have records that go back to before man left this planet. Records of everything. It is you who have forgotten."

Kormt smiled and puffed blue clouds at him. "That's not what I meant."

"Do you mean you think it is good for men to live a life that is unchanging, that is just the same from century to century—no new dreams, no new triumphs, always the same grubbing rounds of days? I cannot agree."

Jorun's mind flickered over history, trying to evaluate the basic motivations of his opponent. Partly cultural, partly biological, that must be it. Once Terra had been the center of the civilized universe. But the long migration starward, especially after the fall of the First Empire, drained off the most venturesome elements of the population. That drain went on for thousands of years. Sol was backward, ruined and impoverished by the remorseless price of empire, helpless before the storms of barbarian conquest that swept back and forth between the stars. Even after peace was restored, there was nothing to hold a young man or woman of vitality and imagination here—not when you could go toward Galactic center and join the new civilization building out there. Space-traffic came ever less frequently to Sol; old machines rusted away and were not replaced; best to get out while there was still time.

Eventually there was a fixed psychosomatic type, one which lived close to the land, in primitive changeless communities and isolated farmsteads—a type content to gain its simple needs by the labor of hand, horse, or an occasional battered engine. A culture grew up which increased that rigidity. So few had visited Earth in the last several thousand years—perhaps one outsider a century, stopping briefly off on his way to somewhere else—that there was no challenge or encouragement to alter. The Terrans didn't *want* more people, more machines, more anything; they wished only to remain as they were.

You couldn't call them stagnant. Their life was too healthy, their civilization too rich in its own way—folk art, folk music, ceremony, religion, the intimacy of family life which the Galactics had lost—for that term. But to one who flew between the streaming suns, it was a small existence.

Kormt's voice broke in on his reverie. "Dreams, triumphs, work, deeds, love and life and finally death and the long sleep in the earth," he said. "Why should we want to change them? They never grow old; they are new for each child that is born."

"Well," said Jorun, and stopped. You couldn't really answer that kind of logic. It wasn't logic at all, but something deeper.

"Well," he started over, after a while, "as you know, this evacuation was forced on us, too. We don't want to move you, but we must."

"Oh, yes," said Kormt. "You have been very nice about it. It would have been easier, in a way, if you'd come with fire and gun and chains for us, like the barbarians did long ago. We could have understood you better then."

"At best, it will be hard for your people," said Jorun. "It will be a shock, and they'll need leaders to guide them through it. You have a duty to help them out there, good sir."

"Maybe." Kormt blew a series of smoke rings at his youngest descendant, three years old, who crowed with laughter and climbed up on his knee. "But they'll manage."

"You can't seem to realize," said Jorun, "that you are the *last man on Earth* who refuses to go. You will be *alone*. For the rest of your life! We couldn't come back for you later under any circumstances, because there'll be Hulduvian colonies between Sol and Sagittarius which we would disturb in passage. You'll be alone, I say!"

Kormt shrugged. "I'm too old to change my ways; there can't be many years left me, anyway. I can live well, just off the food-stores that'll be left here." He ruffled the child's hair, but his face drew into a scowl. "Now, no more of that, good sir, if you please; I'm tired of this argument."

Jorun nodded and fell into the silence that held the rest. Terrans would sometimes sit for hours without talking, content to be in each other's nearness. He thought of Kormt, Gerlaug's son, last man on Earth, altogether alone, living alone and dying alone; and yet, he reflected, was that solitude any greater than the one in which all men dwelt all their days?

Presently the Speaker set the child down, knocked out his pipe, and rose. "Come, good sir," he said, reaching for his staff. "Let us go."

They walked side by side down the street, under the dim lamps and past the yellow windows. The cobbles gave back their footfalls in a dull clatter. Once in a while they passed someone else, a vague figure which bowed to Kormt. Only one did not notice them, an old woman who walked crying between the high walls.

"They say it is never night on your worlds," said Kormt.

Jorun threw him a sidelong glance. His face was a strong jutting of highlights from sliding shadow. "Some planets have been given luminous skies," said the technician, "and a few still have cities, too, where it is always light. But when every man can control the cosmic energies, there is no real reason for us to live together; most of us dwell far apart. There are very dark nights on my own world, and I cannot see any other home from my own—just the moors."

"It must be a strange life," said Kormt. "Belonging to no one."

They came out on the market-square, a broad paved space walled in by houses. There was a fountain in its middle, and a statue dug out of the ruins had been placed there. It was broken, one arm gone—but still the white slim figure of the dancing girl stood with youth and laughter, forever under the sky of Earth. Jorun knew that lovers were wont to meet here, and briefly, irrationally, he wondered how lonely the girl would be in all the millions of years to come.

The City Hall lay at the farther end of the square, big and dark, its eaves carved with dragons, and the gables topped with wing-spreading birds. It was an old building; nobody knew how many generations of men had gathered here. A long, patient line of folk stood outside it, shuffling in one by one to the registry desk; emerging, they went off quietly into the darkness, toward the temporary shelters erected for them.

Walking by the line, Jorun picked faces out of the shadows. There was a young mother holding a crying child, her head bent over it in a timeless pose, murmuring to soothe it. There was a mechanic, still sooty from his work, smiling wearily at some tired joke of the man behind him. There was a scowling, black-browed peasant who muttered a curse as Jorun went by; the rest seemed to accept their fate meekly enough. There was a priest, his head bowed, alone with his God. There was a younger man, his hands clenching and unclenching, big helpless hands, and Jorun heard him saying to someone else: "—if they could have waited till after harvest. I hate to let good grain stand in the field."

Jorun went into the main room, toward the desk at the head of the line. Hulking hairless Zarek was patiently questioning each of the hundreds who came hat in hand before him: name, age, sex, occupation, dependents, special needs or desires. He punches the answers out on the recorder machine, half a million lives were held in its electronic memory.

"Oh, there you are," his bass rumbled. "Where've you been?"

"I had to do some concy work," said Jorun. That was a private code term, among others: concy, conciliation, anything to make the evacuation go smoothly. "Sorry to be so late. I'll take over now."

"All right. I think we can wind the whole thing up by midnight." Zarek smiled at Kormt. "Glad you came, good sir. There are a few people I'd like you to talk to." He gestured at half a dozen seated in the rear of the room. Certain complaints were best handled by native leaders.

Kormt nodded and strode over to the folk. Jorun heard a man begin some long-winded explanation: he wanted to take his own plow along, he'd made it himself and there was no better plow in the universe, but the star-man said there wouldn't be room.

"They'll furnish us with all the stuff we need, son," said Kormt.

"But it's *my* plow!" said the man. His fingers twisted his cap.

Kormt sat down and began soothing him.

The head of the line waited a few meters off while Jorun took Zarek's place. "Been a long grind," said the latter. "About done now, though. And will I be glad to see the last of this planet!"

"I don't know," said Jorun. "It's a lovely world. I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful one."

Zarek snorted. "Me for Thonnvar! I can't wait to sit on the terrace by the Scarlet Sea, fern-trees and red grass all around, a glass of oehl in my hand and the crystal geysers in front of me. You're a funny one, Jorun."

The Fulkhisian shrugged slender shoulders. Zarek clapped him on the back and went out for supper and sleep. Jorun beckoned to the next Terran and settled down to the long, almost mindless routine of registration. He was interrupted once by Kormt, who yawned mightily and bade him goodnight; otherwise it was a steady, half-conscious interval in which one anonymous face after another passed by. He was dimly surprised when the last one came up. This was a plump, cheerful, middle-aged fellow with small shrewd eyes, a little more colorfully dressed than the others. He gave his occupation as merchant—a minor tradesman, he explained, dealing in the little things it was more convenient for the peasants to buy than to manufacture themselves.

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long," said Jorun. Concy statement.

"Oh, no." The merchant grinned. "I knew those dumb farmers would be here for hours, so I just went to bed and got up half an hour ago, when it was about over."

"Clever." Jorun rose, sighed, and stretched. The big room was cavernously empty, its lights a harsh glare. It was very quiet here.

"Well, sir, I'm a middling smart chap, if I say it as shouldn't. And you know, I'd like to express my appreciation of all you're doing for us."

"Can't say we're doing much." Jorun locked the machine.

"Oh, the apple-knockers may not like it, but really, good sir, this hasn't been any place for a man of enterprise. It's dead. I'd have got out long ago if there'd been any transportation. Now, when we're getting back into civilization, there'll be some real opportunities. I'll make my pile inside of five years, you bet."

Jorun smiled, but there was a bleakness in him. What chance would this barbarian have even to get near the gigantic work of civilization—let alone comprehend it or take part in it. He hoped the little fellow wouldn't break his heart trying.

"Well," he said, "goodnight, and good luck to you."

"Goodnight, sir. We'll meet again, I trust."

Jorun switched off the lights and went out into the square. It was completely deserted. The moon was up now, almost full, and its cold radiance dimmed the lamps. He heard a dog howling far off. The dogs of Earth—such as weren't taken along—would be lonely, too.

Well, he thought, the job's over. Tomorrow, or the next day, the ships come.

4

He felt very tired, but didn't want to sleep, and willed himself back to alertness. There hadn't been much chance to inspect the ruins, and he felt it would be appropriate to see them by moonlight.

Rising into the air, he ghosted above roofs and trees until he came to the dead city. For a while he hovered in a sky like dark velvet, a faint breeze murmured around him, and he heard the remote noise of crickets and the sea. But stillness enveloped it all, there was no real sound.

Sol City, capital of the legendary First Empire, had been enormous. It must have sprawled over forty or fifty thousand square kilometers when it was in its prime, when it was the gay and wicked heart of human civilization and swollen with the lifeblood of the stars. And yet those who built it had been men of taste, they had sought out genius to create for them. The city was not a collection of buildings; it was a balanced whole, radiating from the mighty peaks of the central palace, through colonnades and parks and leaping skyways, out to the temple-like villas of the rulers. For all its monstrous size, it had been a fairy sight, a woven lace of polished metal and white, black, red stone, colored plastic, music and light—everywhere light.

Bombarded from space; sacked again and again by the barbarian hordes who swarmed maggot-like through the bones of the slain Empire; weathered, shaken by the slow sliding of Earth's crust; pried apart by patient, delicate roots; dug over by hundreds of generations of archaeologists, treasure-seekers, the idly curious; made a quarry of metal and stone for the ignorant peasants who finally huddled about it—still its empty walls and blind windows, crumbling arches and toppled pillars held a ghost of beauty and magnificence which was like a half-remembered dream. A dream the whole race had once had.

And now we're waking up.

Jorun moved silently over the ruins. Trees growing between tumbled blocks dappled them with moonlight and shadow; the marble was very white and fair against darkness. He hovered by a broken caryatid, marveling at its exquisite leaping liteness; that girl had borne tons of stone like a flower in her hair. Further on, across a street that was a lane of woods, beyond a park that was thick with forest, lay the nearly complete outline of a house. Only its rain-blurred walls stood, but he could trace the separate rooms: here a noble had entertained his friends, robes that were fluid rainbows, jewels dripping fire, swift cynical interplay of wits like sharpened swords rising above music and the clear sweet laughter of dancing-girls; here people whose flesh was now dust had slept and made love and lain side-by-side in darkness to watch the moving pageant of the city; here the slaves had lived and worked and sometimes wept; here the children had played their ageless games under willows, between banks of roses. Oh, it had been a hard and cruel time; it was well gone but it had lived. It had embodied man, all that was noble and splendid and evil and merely wistful in the race, and now its late children had forgotten.

A cat sprang up on one of the walls and flowed noiselessly along it, hunting. Jorun shook himself and flew toward the center of the city, the imperial palace. An owl hooted somewhere, and a bat fluttered out of his way like a small damned soul blackened by hellfire. He didn't raise a wind-screen, but let the air blow around him, the air of Earth.

The palace was almost completely wrecked, a mountain of heaped rocks, bare bones of "eternal" metal gnawed thin by steady ages of wind and rain and frost, but once it must have been gigantic. Men rarely built that big nowadays, they didn't need to; and the whole human spirit had changed, become ever more abstract, finding its treasures within itself. But there had been an elemental magnificence about early man and the works he raised to challenge the sky.

One tower still stood—a gutted shell, white under the stars, rising in a filigree of columns and arches which seemed impossibly airy, as if it were built of moonlight. Jorun settled on its broken upper balcony, dizzily high above the black-and-white fantasy of the ruins. A hawk flew shrieking from its nest, then there was silence.

No—wait—another yell, ringing down the star ways, a dark streak across the moon's face. "Hai-ah!" Jorun recognized the joyful shout of young Cluthe, rushing through heaven like a demon on a broomstick, and scowled in annoyance. He didn't want to be bothered now.

Well, they had as much right here as he. He repressed the emotion, and even managed a smile. After all, he would have liked to feel gay and reckless at times, but he had never been able to. Jorun was little older than Cluthe—a few centuries at most—but he came of a melancholy folk; he had been born old.

Another form pursued the first. As they neared, Jorun recognized Taliuvenna's supple outline. Those two had been teamed up for one of the African districts, but—

They sensed him and came wildly out of the sky to perch on the balcony railing and swing their legs above the heights. "How're you?" asked Cluthe. His lean face laughed in the moonlight. "Whoo-oo, what a flight!"

"I'm all right," said Jorun. "You through in your sector?"

"Uh-huh. So we thought we'd just duck over and look in here. Last chance anyone'll ever have to do some sight-seeing on Earth."

Taliuvenna's full lips drooped a bit as she looked over the ruins. She came from Yunith, one of the few planets where they still kept cities, and was as much a child of their soaring arrogance as Jorun of his hills and tundras and great empty seas. "I thought it would be bigger," she said.

"Well, they were building this fifty or sixty thousand years ago," said Cluthe. "Can't expect too much."

"There is good art left here," said Jorun. "Pieces which for one reason or another weren't carried off. But you have to look around for it."

"I've seen a lot of it already, in museums," said Taliuvenna. "Not bad."

"C'mon, Tally," cried Cluthe. He touched her shoulder and sprang into the air. "Tag! You're it!"

She screamed with laughter and shot off after him. They rushed across the wilderness, weaving in and out of empty windows and broken colonnades, and their shouts woke a clamor of echoes.

Jorun sighed. *I'd better go to bed*, he thought. *It's late.*

The spaceship was a steely pillar against a low gray sky. Now and then a fine rain would drizzle down, blurring it from sight; then that would end, and the ship's flanks would glisten as if they were polished. Clouds scudded overhead like flying smoke, and the wind was loud in the trees.

The line of Terrans moving slowly into the vessel seemed to go on forever. A couple of the ship's crew flew above them, throwing out a shield against the rain. They shuffled without much talk or expression, pushing carts filled with their little possessions. Jorun stood to one side, watching them go by, one face after another—scored and darkened by the sun of Earth, the winds of Earth, hands still grimy with the soil of Earth.

Well, he thought, *there they go. They aren't being as emotional about it as I thought they would. I wonder if they really do care.*

Julith went past with her parents. She saw him and darted from the line and curtsied before him.

"Goodbye, good sir," she said. Looking up, she showed him a small and serious face. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Well," he lied, "I might look in on you sometime."

"Please do! In a few years, maybe, when you can."

It takes many generations to raise a people like this to our standard. In a few years—to me—she'll be in her grave.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy," he said.

She gulped. "Yes," she said, so low he could barely hear her. "Yes, I know I will." She turned and

ran back to her mother. The raindrops glistened in her hair.

Zarek came up behind Jorun. "I made a last-minute sweep of the whole area," he said. "Detected no sign of human life. So it's all taken care of, except your old man."

"Good," said Jorun tonelessly.

"I wish you could do something about him."

"So do I."

Zarek strolled off again.

A young man and woman, walking hand in hand, turned out of the line not far away and stood for a little while. A spaceman zoomed over to them. "Better get back," he warned. "You'll get rained on."

"That's what we wanted," said the young man.

The spaceman shrugged and resumed his hovering. Presently the couple re-entered the line.

The tail of the procession went by Jorun and the ship swallowed it fast. The rain fell harder, bouncing off his force-shield like silver spears. Lightning winked in the west, and he heard the distant exuberance of thunder.

Kornt came walking slowly toward him. Rain streamed off his clothes and matted his long gray hair and beard. His wooden shoes made a wet sound in the mud. Jorun extended the force-shield to cover him. "I hope you've changed your mind," said the Fulkhisian.

"No, I haven't," said Kornt. "I just stayed away till everybody was aboard. Don't like goodbyes."

"You don't know what you're doing," said Jorun for the—thousandth?—time. "It's plain madness to stay here alone."

"I told you I don't like goodbyes," said Kornt harshly.

"I have to go advise the captain of the ship," said Jorun. "You have maybe half an hour before she lifts. Nobody will laugh at you for changing your mind."

"I won't." Kornt smiled without warmth. "You people are the future, I guess. Why can't you leave the past alone? I'm the past." He looked toward the far hills, hidden by the noisy rain. "I like it here, Galactic. That should be enough for you."

"Well, then—" Jorun held out his hand in the archaic gesture of Earth. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye." Kornt took the hand with a brief, indifferent clasp. Then he turned and walked off toward the village. Jorun watched him till he was out of sight.

The technician paused in the air-lock door, looking over the gray landscape and the village from whose chimneys no smoke rose. *Farewell, my mother*, he thought. And then, surprising himself: *Maybe Kornt is doing the right thing after all.*

He entered the ship and the door closed behind him.

Toward evening, the clouds lifted and the sky showed a clear pale blue—as if it had been washed clean—and the grass and leaves glistened. Kornt came out of the house to watch the sunset. It was a good one, all flame and gold. A pity little Julith wasn't here to see it; she'd always liked sunsets. But Julith was so far away now that if she sent a call to him, calling with the speed of light, it would not come before he was dead.

Nothing would come to him. Not ever again.

He tamped his pipe with a horny thumb and lit it and drew a deep cloud into his lungs. Hands in pockets, he strolled down the wet streets. The sound of his clogs was unexpectedly loud.

Well, son, he thought, *now you've got a whole world all to yourself, to do with just as you like. You're the richest man who ever lived.*

There was no problem in keeping alive. Enough food of all kinds was stored in the town's freezervault to support a hundred men for the ten or twenty years remaining to him. But he'd want to stay busy. He could maybe keep three farms from going to seed—watch over fields and orchards and livestock, repair the buildings, dust and wash and light up in the evening. A man ought to keep busy.

He came to the end of the street, where it turned into a graveled road winding up toward a high hill, and followed that. Dusk was creeping over the fields, the sea was a metal streak very far away and a few early stars blinked forth. A wind was springing up, a soft murmurous wind that talked in the trees. But how quiet things were!

On top of the hill stood the chapel, a small steepled building of ancient stone. He let himself in the gate and walked around to the graveyard behind. There were many of the demure white

tombstones—thousands of years of Solis Township men and women who had lived and worked and begotten, laughed and wept and died. Someone had put a wreath on one grave only this morning; it brushed against his leg as he went by. Tomorrow it would be withered, and weeds would start to grow. He'd have to tend the chapel yard, too. Only fitting.

He found his family plot and stood with feet spread apart, fists on hips, smoking and looking down at the markers Gerlaug Kormt's son, Tarna Huwan's daughter, these hundred years had they lain in the earth. Hello, Dad, hello, Mother. His fingers reached out and stroked the headstone of his wife. And so many of his children were here, too; sometimes he found it hard to believe that tall Gerlaug and laughing Stamm and shy, gentle Huwan were gone. He'd outlived too many people.

I had to stay, he thought. This is my land, I am of it and I couldn't go. Someone had to stay and keep the land, if only for a little while. I can give it ten more years before the forest comes and takes it.

Darkness grew around him. The woods beyond the hill loomed like a wall. Once he started violently, he thought he heard a child crying. No, only a bird. He cursed himself for the senseless pounding of his heart.

Gloomy place here, he thought. Better get back to the house.

He groped slowly out of the yard, toward the road. The stars were out now. Kormt looked up and thought he had never seen them so bright. Too bright; he didn't like it.

Go away, stars, he thought. You took my people, but I'm staying here. This is my land. He reached down to touch it, but the grass was cold and wet under his palm.

The gravel scrunched loudly as he walked, and the wind mumbled in the hedges, but there was no other sound. Not a voice called; not an engine turned; not a dog barked. No, he hadn't thought it would be so quiet.

And dark. No lights. Have to tend the street lamps himself—it was no fun, not being able to see the town from here, not being able to see anything except the stars. Should have remembered to bring a flashlight, but he was old and absentminded, and there was no one to remind him. When he died, there would be no one to hold his hands; no one to close his eyes and lay him in the earth—and the forests would grow in over the land and wild beasts would nuzzle his bones.

But I knew that. What of it? I'm tough enough to take it.

The stars flashed and flashed above him. Looking up, against his own will, Kormt saw how bright they were, how bright and quiet. And how very far away! He was seeing light that had left its home before he was born.

He stopped, sucking in his breath between his teeth. "No," he whispered.

This was his land. This was Earth, the home of man; it was his and he was its. This was the *land*, and not a single dust-mote, crazily reeling and spinning through an endlessness of dark and silence, cold and immensity. Earth could not be so alone!

The last man alive. The last man in all the world!

He screamed, then, and began to run. His feet clattered loud on the road; the small sound was quickly swallowed by silence, and he covered his face against the relentless blaze of the stars. But there was no place to run to, no place at all.

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