

PLANET OF THE DAMNED

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HARRY HARRISON



CruGuru

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For my Mother and Father--
RIA AND LEO HARRISON

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	5
CHAPTER 3	8
CHAPTER 4	18
CHAPTER 5	23
CHAPTER 6	28
CHAPTER 7	33
CHAPTER 8	42
CHAPTER 9	51
CHAPTER 10	60
CHAPTER 11	67
CHAPTER 12	74
CHAPTER 13	80
CHAPTER 14	89
CHAPTER 15	97
CHAPTER 16	105
CHAPTER 17	111
CHAPTER 18	119
CHAPTER 19	124

CHAPTER 1

A man said to the universe: "Sir, I exist!" "However" replied the universe, "The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation."

STEPHEN CRANE

Sweat covered Brion's body, trickling into the tight loincloth that was the only garment he wore. The light fencing foil in his hand felt as heavy as a bar of lead to his exhausted muscles, worn out by a month of continual exercise. These things were of no importance. The cut on his chest, still dripping blood, the ache of his overstrained eyes--even the soaring arena around him with the thousands of spectators--were trivialities not worth thinking about. There was only one thing in his universe: the button-tipped length of shining steel that hovered before him, engaging his own weapon. He felt the quiver and scrape of its life, knew when it moved and moved himself to counteract it. And when he attacked, it was always there to beat him aside.

A sudden motion. He reacted--but his blade just met air. His instant of panic was followed by a small sharp blow high on his chest.

"Touch!" A world-shaking voice bellowed the word to a million waiting loudspeakers, and the applause of the audience echoed back in a wave of sound.

"One minute," a voice said, and the time buzzer sounded.

Brion had carefully conditioned the reflex in himself. A minute is not a very large measure of time and his body needed every fraction of it. The buzzer's whirr triggered his muscles into complete relaxation. Only his heart and lungs worked on at a strong, measured rate. His eyes closed and he was only distantly aware of his handlers catching him as he fell, carrying him to his bench. While they massaged his limp body and cleansed the wound, all of his attention was turned inward. He was in

reverie, sliding along the borders of consciousness. The nagging memory of the previous night loomed up then, and he turned it over and over in his mind, examining it from all sides.

It was the very unexpectedness of the event that had been so unusual. The contestants in the Twenties needed undisturbed rest, therefore nights in the dormitories were as quiet as death. During the first few days, of course, the rule wasn't observed too closely. The men themselves were too keyed up and excited to rest easily. But as soon as the scores began to mount and eliminations cut into their ranks, there was complete silence after dark. Particularly so on this last night, when only two of the little cubicles were occupied, the thousands of others standing with dark, empty doors.

Angry words had dragged Brion from a deep and exhausted sleep. The words were whispered but clear--two voices, just outside the thin metal of his door. Someone spoke his name.

"... Brion Brandd. Of course not. Whoever said you could was making a big mistake and there is going to be trouble--"

"Don't talk like an idiot!" The other voice snapped with a harsh urgency, clearly used to command. "I'm here because the matter is of utmost importance, and Brandd is the one I must see. Now stand aside!"

"The Twenties--"

"I don't give a damn about your games, hearty cheers and physical exercises. This is important, or I wouldn't be here!"

The other didn't speak--he was surely one of the officials--and Brion could sense his outraged anger. He must have drawn his gun, because the intruder said quickly, "Put that away. You're being a fool!"

"Out!" was the single snarled word of the response. There was silence then and, still wondering, Brion was once more asleep.

"Ten seconds."

The voice chopped away Brion's memories and he let awareness seep back into his body. He was unhappily conscious of his total exhaustion. The month of continuous mental and physical combat had taken its toll. It would be hard to stay on his feet, much less summon the strength and skill to fight and win a touch.

"How do we stand?" he asked the handler who was kneading his aching muscles.

"Four-four. All you need is a touch to win!"

"That's all he needs too," Brion grunted, opening his eyes to look at the wiry length of the man at the other end of the long mat. No one who had reached the finals in the Twenties could possibly be a weak opponent, but this one, Irolg, was the pick of the lot. A red-haired mountain of a man, with an apparently inexhaustible store of energy. That was really all that counted now. There could be little art in this last and final round of fencing. Just thrust and parry, and victory to the stronger.

Brion closed his eyes again and knew the moment he had been hoping to avoid had arrived.

Every man who entered the Twenties had his own training tricks. Brion had a few individual ones that had helped him so far. He was a moderately strong chess player, but he had moved to quick victory in the chess rounds by playing incredibly unorthodox games. This was no accident, but the result of years of work. He had a standing order with off-planet agents for archaic chess books, the older the better. He had memorized thousands of these ancient games and openings. This was allowed. Anything was allowed that didn't involve drugs or machines. Self-hypnosis was an accepted tool.

It had taken Brion over two years to find a way to tap the sources of hysterical strength. Common as the phenomenon seemed to be in the textbooks, it proved impossible to duplicate. There appeared to be an immediate association with the death-trauma, as if the two were inextricably linked into one. Berserkers and juramentados continue to fight and kill though carved by scores of mortal wounds. Men with bullets in the heart or brain fight on, though already clinically dead. Death seemed an inescapable part of this kind of strength. But there was another type that could easily be brought about in any deep trance--hypnotic rigidity. The strength that enables someone in a trance to hold his body stiff and unsupported except at two points, the head and heels. This is physically impossible when conscious. Working with this as a clue, Brion had developed a self-hypnotic technique that allowed him to tap this reservoir of unknown strength--the source of "second wind," the survival strength that made the difference between life and death.

It could also kill--exhaust the body beyond hope of recovery, particularly when in a weakened condition as his was now. But that wasn't important. Others had died before during the Twenties, and death during the last round was in some ways easier than defeat.

Breathing deeply, Brion softly spoke the auto-hypnotic phrases that triggered the process. Fatigue fell softly from him, as did all sensations of heat, cold and pain. He could feel with acute sensitivity, hear, and see clearly when he opened his eyes.

With each passing second the power drew at the basic reserves of life, draining it from his body.

When the buzzer sounded he pulled his foil from his second's startled grasp, and ran forward. Irolg had barely time to grab up his own weapon and parry Brion's first thrust. The force of his rush was so great that the guards on their weapons locked, and their bodies crashed together. Irolg looked amazed at the sudden fury of the attack--then smiled. He thought it was a last burst of energy, he knew how close they both were to exhaustion. This must be the end for Brion.

They disengaged and Irolg put up a solid defense. He didn't attempt to attack, just let Brion wear himself out against the firm shield of his defense.

Brion saw something close to panic on his opponent's face when the man finally recognized his error. Brion wasn't tiring. If anything, he was pressing the attack. A wave of despair rolled out from Irolg--Brion sensed it and knew the fifth point was his.

Thrust--thrust--and each time the parrying sword a little slower to return. Then the powerful twist that thrust it aside. In and under the guard. The slap of the button on flesh and the arc of steel that reached out and ended on Irolg's chest over his heart.

Waves of sound--cheering and screaming--lapped against Brion's private world, but he was only remotely aware of their existence. Irolg dropped his foil, and tried to shake Brion's hand, but his legs suddenly gave way. Brion had an arm around him, holding him up, walking towards the rushing handlers. Then Irolg was gone and he waved off his own men, walking slowly by himself.

Except that something was wrong and it was like walking through warm glue. Walking on his knees. No, not walking, falling. At last. He was able to let go and fall.

CHAPTER 2

Ihjel gave the doctors exactly one day before he went to the hospital. Brion wasn't dead, though there had been some doubt about that the night before. Now, a full day later, he was on the mend and that was all Ihjel wanted to know. He bullied and strong-armed his way to the new Winner's room, meeting his first stiff resistance at the door.

"You're out of order, Winner Ihjel," the doctor said. "And if you keep on forcing yourself in here, where you are not wanted, rank or no rank, I shall be obliged to break your head."

Ihjel had just begun to tell him, in some detail, just how slim his chances were of accomplishing that, when Brion interrupted them both. He recognized the newcomer's voice from the final night in the barracks.

"Let him in, Dr. Caulry," he said. "I want to meet a man who thinks there is something more important than the Twenties."

While the doctor stood undecided, Ihjel moved quickly around him and closed the door in his flushed face. He looked down at the Winner in the bed. There was a drip plugged into each one of Brion's arms. His eyes peered from sooty hollows; the eyeballs were a network of red veins. The silent battle he fought against death had left its mark. His square, jutting jaw now seemed all bone, as did his long nose and high cheekbones. They were prominent landmarks rising from the limp greyness of his skin. Only the erect bristle of his close-cropped hair was unchanged. He had the appearance of having suffered a long and wasting illness.

"You look like sin," Ihjel said. "But congratulations on your victory."

"You don't look so very good yourself--for a Winner," Brion snapped back. His exhaustion and sudden peevish anger at this man let the insulting words slip out. Ihjel ignored them.

But it was true; Winner Ihjel looked very little like a Winner, or even an Anvharian. He had the height and the frame all right, but it was

draped in billows of fat--rounded, soft tissue that hung loosely from his limbs and made little limp rolls on his neck and under his eyes. There were no fat men on Anvhar, and it was incredible that a man so gross could ever have been a Winner. If there was muscle under the fat it couldn't be seen. Only his eyes appeared to still hold the strength that had once bested every man on the planet to win the annual games. Brion turned away from their burning stare, sorry now he had insulted the man without good reason. He was too sick, though, to bother about apologizing.

Ihjel didn't care either. Brion looked at him again and felt the impression of things so important that he himself, his insults, even the Twenties were of no more interest than dust motes in the air. It was only a fantasy of a sick mind, Brion knew, and he tried to shake the feeling off. The two men stared at each other, sharing a common emotion.

The door opened soundlessly behind Ihjel and he wheeled about, moving as only an athlete of Anvhar can move. Dr. Caulry was halfway through the door, off balance. Two men in uniform came close behind him. Ihjel's body pushed against them, his speed and the mountainous mass of his flesh sending them back in a tangle of arms and legs. He slammed the door and locked it in their faces.

"I have to talk to you," he said, turning back to Brion. "Privately," he added, bending over and ripping out the communicator with a sweep of one hand.

"Get out," Brion told him. "If I were able--"

"Well, you're not, so you're just going to have to lie there and listen. I imagine we have about five minutes before they decide to break the door down, and I don't want to waste any more of that. Will you come with me offworld? There's a job that must be done; it's my job, but I'm going to need help. You're the only one who can give me that help.

"Now refuse," he added as Brion started to answer.

"Of course I refuse," Brion said, feeling a little foolish and slightly angry, as if the other man had put the words into his mouth. "Anvhar is my planet--why should I leave? My life is here and so is my work. I also might add that I have just won the Twenties. I have a responsibility to remain."

"Nonsense. I'm a Winner, and I left. What you really mean is you would like to enjoy a little of the ego-inflation you have worked so hard to get. Off Anvhar no one even knows what a Winner is--much less respects one. You will have to face a big universe out there, and I don't blame you for being a little frightened."

Someone was hammering loudly on the door.

"I haven't the strength to get angry," Brion said hoarsely. "And I can't bring myself to admire your ideas when they permit you to insult a man too ill to defend himself."

"I apologize," Ihjel said, with no hint of apology or sympathy in his voice. "But there are more desperate issues involved than your hurt feelings. We don't have much time now, so I want to impress you with an idea."

"An idea that will convince me to go offplanet with you? That's expecting a lot."

"No, this idea won't convince you--but thinking about it will. If you really consider it you will find a lot of your illusions shattered. Like everyone else on Anvhar, you're a scientific humanist, with your faith firmly planted in the Twenties. You accept both of these noble institutions without an instant's thought. All of you haven't a single thought for the past, for the untold billions who led the bad life as mankind slowly built up the good life for you to lead. Do you ever think of all the people who suffered and died in misery and superstition while civilization was clicking forward one more slow notch?"

"Of course I don't think about them," Brion retorted. "Why should I? I can't change the past."

"But you can change the future!" Ihjel said. "You owe something to the suffering ancestors who got you where you are today. If Scientific Humanism means anything more than just words to you, you must possess a sense of responsibility. Don't you want to try and pay off a bit of this debt by helping others who are just as backward and disease-ridden today as great-grandfather Troglodyte ever was?"

The hammering on the door was louder. This and the drug-induced buzzing in Brion's ear made thinking difficult. "Abstractly, I of course agree with you," he said haltingly. "But you know there is nothing I can do personally without being emotionally involved. A logical decision is valueless for action without personal meaning."

"Then we have reached the crux of the matter," Ihjel said gently. His back was braced against the door, absorbing the thudding blows of some heavy object on the outside. "They're knocking, so I must be going soon. I have no time for details, but I can assure you upon my word of honor as a Winner that there is something you can do. Only you. If you help me we might save seven million human lives. That is a fact."

The lock burst and the door started to open. Ihjel shouldered it back into the frame for a final instant.

"Here is the idea I want you to consider. Why is it that the people of Anvhar, in a galaxy filled with warring, hate-filled, backward planets, should be the only ones who base their entire existence on a complicated series of games?"

CHAPTER 3

This time there was no way to hold the door. Ihjel didn't try. He stepped aside and two men stumbled into the room. He walked out behind their backs without saying a word.

"What happened? What did he do?" the doctor asked, rushing in through the ruined door. He swept a glance over the continuous recording dials at the foot of Brion's bed. Respiration, temperature, heart, blood pressure--all were normal. The patient lay quietly and didn't answer him.

For the rest of that day, Brion had much to think about. It was difficult. The fatigue, mixed with the tranquilizers and other drugs, had softened his contact with reality. His thoughts kept echoing back and forth in his mind, unable to escape. What had Ihjel meant? What was that nonsense about Anvhar? Anvhar was that way because--well, it just was. It had come about naturally. Or had it?

The planet had a very simple history. From the very beginning there had never been anything of real commercial interest on Anvhar. Well off the interstellar trade routes, there were no minerals worth digging and transporting the immense distances to the nearest inhabited worlds. Hunting the winter beasts for their pelts was a profitable but very minor enterprise, never sufficient for mass markets. Therefore no organized attempt had ever been made to colonize the planet. In the end it had been settled completely by chance. A number of offplanet scientific groups had established observation and research stations, finding unlimited data to observe and record during Anvhar's unusual yearly cycle. The long-duration observations encouraged the scientific workers to bring their families and, slowly but steadily, small settlements grew up. Many of the fur hunters settled there as well, adding to the small population. This had been the beginning.

Few records existed of those early days, and the first six centuries of Anvharian history were more speculation than fact. The Breakdown occurred about that time, and in the galaxy-wide disruption Anvhar had to fight its own internal battle. When the Earth Empire collapsed it was the end of more than an era. Many of the observation stations found themselves representing institutions that no longer existed. The professional hunters no longer had markets for their furs, since Anvhar possessed no interstellar ships of its own. There had been no real physical hardship involved in the Breakdown as it affected Anvhar, since the planet was completely self-sufficient. Once they had made the mental adjustment to the fact that they were now a sovereign world, not a collection of casual visitors with various loyalties, life continued unchanged. Not easy--living on Anvhar is never easy--but at least without difference on the surface.

The thoughts and attitudes of the people were, however, going through a great transformation. Many attempts were made to develop some form of stable society and social relationship. Again, little record exists of these early trials, other than the fact of their culmination in the Twenties.

To understand the Twenties, you have to understand the unusual orbit that Anvhar tracks around its sun, 70 Ophiuchi. There are other planets in this system, all of them more or less conforming to the plane of the ecliptic. Anvhar is obviously a rogue, perhaps a captured planet of another sun. For the greatest part of its 780-day year it arcs far out from its primary, in a high-angled sweeping cometary orbit. When it returns there is a brief, hot summer of approximately eighty days before the long winter sets in once more. This severe difference in seasonal change has caused profound adaptations in the native life forms. During the winter most of the animals hibernate, the vegetable life lying dormant as spores or seeds. Some of the warm-blooded herbivores stay active in the snow-covered tropics, preyed upon by fur-insulated carnivores. Though unbelievably cold, the winter is a season of peace in comparison to the summer.

For summer is a time of mad growth. Plants burst into life with a strength that cracks rocks, growing fast enough for the motion to be seen. The snowfields melt into mud and within days a jungle stretches high into the air. Everything grows, swells, proliferates. Plants climb on top of plants, fighting for the life-energy of the sun. Everything is eat and be eaten, grow and thrive in that short season. Because when the first snow of winter falls again, ninety per cent of the year must pass until the next coming of warmth.

Mankind has had to adapt to the Anvharian cycle in order to stay alive. Food must be gathered and stored, enough to last out the long winter. Generation after generation had adapted until they look on the mad seasonal imbalance as something quite ordinary. The first thaw of

the almost nonexistent spring triggers a wide-reaching metabolic change in the humans. Layers of subcutaneous fat vanish and half-dormant sweat glands come to life. Other changes are more subtle than the temperature adjustment, but equally important. The sleep center of the brain is depressed. Short naps or a night's rest every third or fourth day becomes enough. Life takes on a hectic and hysterical quality that is perfectly suited to the environment. By the time of the first frost, rapid-growing crops have been raised and harvested, sides of meat either preserved or frozen in mammoth lockers. With this supreme talent of adaptability mankind has become part of the ecology and guaranteed his own survival during the long winter.

Physical survival has been guaranteed. But what about mental survival? Primitive Earth Eskimos can fall into a long doze of half-conscious hibernation. Civilized men might be able to do this, but only for the few cold months of terrestrial midwinter. It would be impossible to do during a winter that is longer than an Earth year. With all the physical needs taken care of, boredom became the enemy of any Anvharian who was not a hunter. And even the hunters could not stay out on solitary trek all winter. Drink was one answer, and violence another. Alcoholism and murder were the twin terrors of the cold season, after the Breakdown.

It was the Twenties that ended all that. When they became a part of normal life the summer was considered just an interlude between games. The Twenties were more than just a contest--they became a way of life that satisfied all the physical, competitive and intellectual needs of this unusual planet. They were a decathlon--rather a double decathlon--raised to its highest power, where contests in chess and poetry composition held equal place with those in ski-jumping and archery. Each year there were two planet-wide contests held, one for men and one for women. This was not an attempt at sexual discrimination, but a logical facing of facts. Inherent differences prevented fair contests--for example, it is impossible for a woman to win a large chess tournament--and this fact was recognized. Anyone could enter for any number of years. There were no scoring handicaps.

When the best man won he was really the best man. A complicated series of playoffs and eliminations kept contestants and observers busy for half the winter. They were only preliminary to the final encounter that lasted a month, and picked a single winner. That was the title he was awarded. Winner. The man--and woman--who had bested every other contestant on the entire planet and who would remain unchallenged until the following year.

Winner. It was a title to take pride in. Brion stirred weakly on his bed and managed to turn so he could look out of the window. Winner of Anvhar. His name was already slated for the history books, one of the handful of planetary heroes. School children would be studying him now, just as he had read of the Winners of the past. Weaving daydreams and

imaginary adventures around Brion's victories, hoping and fighting to equal them someday. To be a Winner was the greatest honor in the universe.

Outside, the afternoon sun shimmered weakly in a dark sky. The endless icefields soaked up the dim light, reflecting it back as a colder and harsher illumination. A single figure on skis cut a line across the empty plain; nothing else moved. The depression of the ultimate fatigue fell on Brion and everything changed, as if he looked in a mirror at a previously hidden side.

He saw suddenly--with terrible clarity--that to be a Winner was to be absolutely nothing. Like being the best flea, among all the fleas on a single dog.

What was Anvhar after all? An ice-locked planet, inhabited by a few million human fleas, unknown and unconsidered by the rest of the galaxy. There was nothing here worth fighting for; the wars after the Breakdown had left them untouched. The Anvharians had always taken pride in this--as if being so unimportant that no one else even wanted to come near you could possibly be a source of pride. All the other worlds of man grew, fought, won, lost, changed. Only on Anvhar did life repeat its sameness endlessly, like a loop of tape in a player....

Brion's eyes were moist; he blinked. Tears! Realization of this incredible fact wiped the maudlin pity from his mind and replaced it with fear. Had his mind snapped in the strain of the last match? These thoughts weren't his. Self-pity hadn't made him a Winner--why was he feeling it now? Anvhar was his universe--how could he even imagine it as a tag-end planet at the outer limb of creation? What had come over him and induced this inverse thinking?

As he thought the question, the answer appeared at the same instant. Winner Ihjel. The fat man with the strange pronouncements and probing questions. Had he cast a spell like some sorcerer--or the devil in Faust? No, that was pure nonsense. But he had done something. Perhaps planted a suggestion when Brion's resistance was low. Or used subliminal vocalization like the villain in *Cerebrus Chained*. Brion could find no adequate reason on which to base his suspicions. But he knew, with sure positiveness, that Ihjel was responsible.

He whistled at the sound-switch next to his pillow and the repaired communicator came to life. The duty nurse appeared in the small screen.

"The man who was here today," Brion said, "Winner Ihjel. Do you know where he is? I must contact him."

For some reason this flustered her professional calm. The nurse started to answer, excused herself, and blanked the screen. When it lit again a man in guard's uniform had taken her place.

"You made an inquiry," the guard said, "about Winner Ihjel. We are holding him here in the hospital, following the disgraceful way in which he broke into your room."

"I have no charges to make. Will you ask him to come and see me at once?"

The guard controlled his shock. "I'm sorry, Winner--I don't see how we can. Dr. Caulry left specific orders that you were not to be--"

"The doctor has no control over my personal life." Brion interrupted. "I'm not infectious, nor ill with anything more than extreme fatigue. I want to see that man. At once."

The guard took a deep breath, and made a quick decision. "He is on the way up now," he said, and rung off.

"What did you do to me?" Brion asked as soon as Ihjel had entered and they were alone. "You won't deny that you have put alien thoughts in my head?"

"No, I won't deny it. Because the whole point of my being here is to get those 'alien' thoughts across to you."

"Tell me how you did it," Brion insisted. "I must know."

"I'll tell you--but there are many things you should understand first, before you decide to leave Anvhar. You must not only hear them, you will have to believe them. The primary thing, the clue to the rest, is the true nature of your life here. How do you think the Twenties originated?"

Before he answered, Brion carefully took a double dose of the mild stimulant he was allowed. "I don't think," he said; "I know. It's a matter of historical record. The founder of the games was Giroldi, the first contest was held in 378 A.B. The Twenties have been held every year since then. They were strictly local affairs in the beginning, but were soon well established on a planet-wide scale."

"True enough," Ihjel said. "But you're describing what happened. I asked you how the Twenties originated. How could any single man take a barbarian planet, lightly inhabited by half-mad hunters and alcoholic farmers, and turn it into a smooth-running social machine built around the artificial structure of the Twenties? It just couldn't be done."

"But it was done!" Brion insisted. "You can't deny that. And there is nothing artificial about the Twenties. They are a logical way to live a life on a planet like this."

Ihjel laughed, a short ironic bark. "Very logical," he said; "but how often does logic have anything to do with the organization of social groups and governments? You're not thinking. Put yourself in founder Giroldi's place. Imagine that you have glimpsed the great idea of the Twenties and you want to convince others. So you walk up to the nearest louse-ridden, brawling, superstitious, booze-embalmed hunter and explain clearly. How a program of his favorite sports--things like poetry, archery and chess--can make his life that much more interesting and virtuous. You do that. But keep your eyes open at the same time, and be ready for a fast draw."

Even Brion had to smile at the absurdity of the suggestion. Of course it couldn't happen that way. Yet, since it had happened, there must be a simple explanation.

"We can beat this back and forth all day," Ihjel told him, "and you won't get the right idea unless--" He broke off suddenly, staring at the communicator. The operation light had come on, though the screen stayed dark. Ihjel reached down a meaty hand and pulled loose the recently connected wires. "That doctor of yours is very curious--and he's going to stay that way. The truth behind the Twenties is none of his business. But it's going to be yours. You must come to realize that the life you lead here is a complete and artificial construction, developed by Societics experts and put into application by skilled field workers."

"Nonsense!" Brion broke in. "Systems of society can't be dreamed up and forced on people like that. Not without bloodshed and violence."

"Nonsense, yourself," Ihjel told him. "That may have been true in the dawn of history, but not any more. You have been reading too many of the old Earth classics; you imagine that we still live in the Ages of Superstition. Just because fascism and communism were once forced on reluctant populations, you think this holds true for all time. Go back to your books. In exactly the same era democracy and self-government were adapted by former colonial states, like India and the Union of North Africa, and the only violence was between local religious groups. Change is the lifeblood of mankind. Everything we today accept as normal was at one time an innovation. And one of the most recent innovations is the attempt to guide the societies of mankind into something more consistent with the personal happiness of individuals."

"The god complex," Brion said; "forcing human lives into a mold whether they want to be fitted into it or not."

"Societies can be that," Ihjel agreed. "It was in the beginning, and there were some disastrous results of attempts to force populations into a political climate where they didn't belong. They weren't all failures--Anvhar here is a striking example of how good the technique can be when correctly applied. It's not done this way any more, though. As with all of the other sciences, we have found out that the more we know, the more there is to know. We no longer attempt to guide cultures towards what we consider a beneficial goal. There are too many goals, and from our limited vantage point it is hard to tell the good ones from the bad ones. All we do now is try to protect the growing cultures, give a little jolt to the stagnating ones--and bury the dead ones. When the work was first done here on Anvhar the theory hadn't progressed that far. The understandably complex equations that determine just where in the scale from a Type I to a Type V a culture is, had not yet been completed. The technique then was to work out an artificial culture that would be most beneficial for a planet, then bend it into the mold."

"How can that be done?" Brion asked. "How was it done here?"

"We've made some progress--you're finally asking 'how.' The technique here took a good number of agents, and a great deal of money. Personal honor was emphasized in order to encourage dueling, and this led to a heightened interest in the technique of personal combat. When this was well entrenched Giroldi was brought in, and he showed how organized competitions could be more interesting than haphazard encounters. Tying the intellectual aspects onto the framework of competitive sports was a little more difficult, but not overwhelmingly so. The details aren't important; all we are considering now is the end product. Which is you. You're needed very much."

"Why me?" Brion asked. "Why am I special? Because I won the Twenties? I can't believe that. Taken objectively, there isn't that much difference between myself and the ten runner-ups. Why don't you ask one of them? They could do your job as well as I."

"No, they couldn't. I'll tell you later why you are the only man I can use. Our time is running out and I must convince you of some other things first." Ihjel glanced at his watch. "We have less than three hours to dead-deadline. Before that time I must explain enough of our work to you to enable you to decide voluntarily to join us."

"A very tall order," Brion said. "You might begin by telling me just who this mysterious 'we' is that you keep referring to."

"The Cultural Relationships Foundation. A non-governmental body, privately endowed, existing to promote peace and ensure the sovereign welfare of independent planets, so that all will prosper from the good will and commerce thereby engendered."

"Sounds as if you're quoting," Brion told him. "No one could possibly make up something that sounds like that on the spur of the moment."

"I was quoting, from our charter of organization. Which is all very fine in a general sense, but I'm talking specifically now. About you. You are the product of a tightly knit and very advanced society. Your individuality has been encouraged by your growing up in a society so small in population that a mild form of government control is necessary. The normal Anvharian education is an excellent one, and participation in the Twenties has given you a general and advanced education second to none in the galaxy. It would be a complete waste of your entire life if you now took all this training and wasted it on some rustic farm."

"You give me very little credit. I plan to teach--"

"Forget Anvhar!" Ihjel cut him off with a chop of his hand. "This world will roll on quite successfully whether you are here or not. You must forget it, think of its relative unimportance on a galactic scale, and consider instead the existing, suffering hordes of mankind. You must think what you can do to help them."

"But what can I do--as an individual? The day is long past when a single man, like Caesar or Alexander, could bring about world-shaking changes."

"True--but not true," Ihjel said. "There are key men in every conflict of forces, men who act like catalysts applied at the right instant to start a chemical reaction. You might be one of these men, but I must be honest and say that I can't prove it yet. So in order to save time and endless discussion, I think I will have to spark your personal sense of obligation."

"Obligation to whom?"

"To mankind, of course, to the countless billions of dead who kept the whole machine rolling along that allows you the full, long and happy life you enjoy today. What they gave to you, you must pass on to others. This is the keystone of humanistic morals."

"Agreed. And a very good argument in the long run. But not one that is going to tempt me out of this bed within the next three hours."

"A point of success," Ihjel said. "You agree with the general argument. Now I apply it specifically to you. Here is the statement I intend to prove. There exists a planet with a population of seven million people. Unless I can prevent it, this planet will be completely destroyed. It is my job to stop that destruction, so that is where I am going now. I won't be able to do the job alone. In addition to others, I need you. Not anyone like you--but you, and you alone."

"You have precious little time left to convince me of all that," Brion told him, "so let me make the job easier for you. The work you do, this planet, the imminent danger of the people there--these are all facts that you can undoubtedly supply. I'll take a chance that this whole thing is not a colossal bluff, and admit that given time, you could verify them all. This brings the argument back to me again. How can you possibly prove that I am the only person in the galaxy who can help you?"

"I can prove it by your singular ability, the thing I came here to find."

"Ability? I am different in no way from the other men on my planet."

"You're wrong," Ihjel said. "You are the embodied proof of evolution. Rare individuals with specific talents occur constantly in any species, man included. It has been two generations since an empathetic was last born on Anvhar, and I have been watching carefully most of that time."

"What in blazes is an empathetic--and how do you recognize it when you have found it?" Brion chuckled, this talk was getting preposterous.

"I can recognize one because I'm one myself--there is no other way. As to how projective empathy works, you had a demonstration of that a little earlier, when you felt those strange thoughts about Anvhar. It will be a long time before you can master that, but receptive empathy is your natural trait. This is mentally entering into the feeling, or what could be called the spirit of another person. Empathy is not thought perception; it might better be described as the sensing of someone else's emotional makeup, feelings and attitudes. You can't lie to a trained empathetic, because he can sense the real attitude behind the verbal lies. Even your undeveloped talent has proved immensely useful in the Twenties. You can outguess your opponent because you know his movements even as

his body tenses to make them. You accept this without ever questioning it."

"How do you know?" This was Brion's understood, but never voiced secret.

Ihjel smiled. "Just guessing. But I won the Twenties too, remember, also without knowing a thing about empathy at the time. On top of our normal training, it's a wonderful trait to have. Which brings me to the proof we mentioned a minute ago. When you said you would be convinced if I could prove you were the only person who could help me. I believe you are--and that is one thing I cannot lie about. It's possible to lie about a belief verbally, to have a falsely based belief, or to change a belief. But you can't lie about it to yourself.

"Equally important--you can't lie about a belief to an empathetic. Would you like to see how I feel about this? 'See' is a bad word--there is no vocabulary yet for this kind of thing. Better, would you join me in my feelings? Sense my attitudes, memories and emotions just as I do?"

Brion tried to protest, but he was too late. The doors of his senses were pushed wide and he was overwhelmed.

"Dis ..." Ihjel said aloud. "Seven million people ... hydrogen bombs ... Brion Brandd." These were just key words, landmarks of association. With each one Brion felt the rushing wave of the other man's emotions.

There could be no lies here--Ihjel was right in that. This was the raw stuff that feelings are made of, the basic reactions to the things and symbols of memory.

DIS ... DIS ... DIS ... it was a word it was a planet and the word thundered like a drum a drum the sound of its thunder surrounded and was a wasteland a planet of death a planet where living was dying and dying was very better than living

crude barbaric DIS hot burning scorching backward miserable wasteland of sands dirty beneath and sands and sands and consideration sands that burned had planet burned will burn forever the people of this planet so crude dirty miserable barbaric sub-human in-human less-than-human but they were going to be DEAD

and DEAD they would be seven million blackened corpses that would blacken your dreams all dreams dreams forever because those H Y D R O G E N B O M B S were waiting to kill them unless .. unless .. unless .. you Ihjel stopped it you Ihjel (DEATH) you (DEATH) you (DEATH) alone couldn't do it you (DEATH) must have BRION BRANDD wet-behind-the-ears-raw-untrained- Brion-Brandd-to-help-you he was the only one in the galaxy who could finish the job.....

As the flow of sensation died away, Brion realized he was sprawled back weakly on his pillows, soaked with sweat, washed with the memory of the raw emotion. Across from him Ihjel sat with his face bowed in his hands. When he lifted his head Brion saw within his eyes a shadow of the blackness he had just experienced.

"Death," Brion said. "That terrible feeling of death. It wasn't just the people of Dis who would die. It was something more personal."

"Myself," Ihjel said, and behind this simple word were the repeated echoes of night that Brion had been made aware of with his newly recognized ability. "My own death, not too far away. This is the wonderfully terrible price you must pay for your talent. Angst is an inescapable part of empathy. It is a part of the whole unknown field of psi phenomena that seems to be independent of time. Death is so traumatic and final that it reverberates back along the time line. The closer I get, the more aware of it I am. There is no exact feeling of date, just a rough location in time. That is the horror of it. I know I will die soon after I get to Dis--and long before the work there is finished. I know the job to be done there, and I know the men who have already failed at it. I also know you are the only person who can possibly complete the work I have started. Do you agree now? Will you come with me?"

"Yes, of course," Brion said. "I'll go with you."