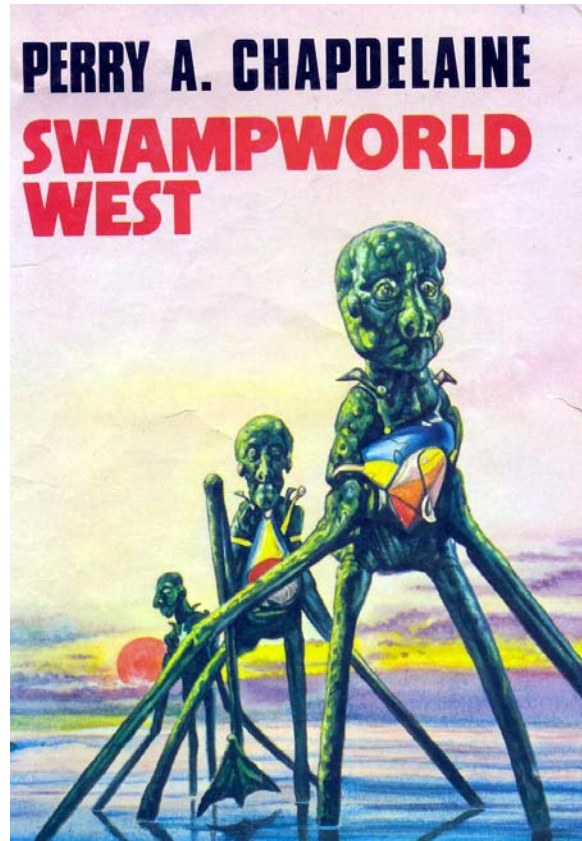




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SWAMPWORLD WEST

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Swampworld West

by
Perry A. Chapdelaine, Sr.

Adapted from the story Swampworld West (hc) published in The Elmfield Press, United Kingdom (1974), Swampworld West (pb) Coronet Books, United Kingdom (1976), and L'Inferno Nelle Pauludi, (pb), Mondadori, Italy (1977) all rights reserved by author.

From the English edition:

Earth is offloading its surplus population as fast as the spacecraft will carry it away. Poorly prepared and equipped, the immigrants are landed on newly discovered planets and sent, protected by a token armed force, to colonise new and inhospitable lands.

Swampworld West is such a planet, inhabited by strange but rational beings who live in comparative peace among the pioneers from earth, until some inexplicable urge for self-destruction creates havoc in the settlements and brings the constant fear of death to the pioneers.

Perry A. Chapdelaine, Sr.

Swampworld West is for the reader who likes his science fiction with the i's dotted and the t's crossed. The man or woman who appreciated Frank Herbert's *Dune* or Hal Clement's *Iceworld*. It is a long, detailed and moving story of immigrants from earth fighting and dying for the survival of their race on a world as full of threats as of promise: it is the story of the Connestoga waggon retold in terms of outer space. But just as nowadays tales of the Wild West are as concerned with the Indians and their lifestyle as they are with the cowboys and the homesteaders, so here the author has dwelled upon the biology and the psychology of the natives of the settlers' planet, and on the interplay between the races, both for good and evil.

Perry Chapdelaine's published work in the United States shows him to be both a scientific headliner and a man willing to experiment, not just with new ideas, but with new approaches to the science fiction tale. Here, he has taken the story of the pioneer and set it out among the stars. The idea intrigues, but it is the fulness and range of his detail work that really brings the thing off. You will be astonished, in reading this novel, how real and solid Swampworld will become to you. Would that one could say as much of all imaginary worlds.

George Hay, Vice President, Science Fiction Foundation (England)

From the Italian edition (translation):

Renamed "*Hell in the Marshes*":

Robert Heinlein, creator of the unforgettable "Universe," finds a time to arbitrate in a discussion between supporters of sociological science fiction and partisans of space.

When you have expressed your personal opinion it remains a lengthy uncertainty.

We begin at last to recognize diplomatically the merits of the sociological kind "more solidly anchored to the reality of our world . . ."

But here is the interpretation with a pause, and accents this historical verdict in favor of space. "Our world is old and worn out. We had better go look for another!" Sainted words. Only when a new space author writes, he reckons with a million other worlds that other authors have searched and found before him. The risk is that the new world re-examines the "old and worn out" for the reader, long before the protagonists put there feet there.

But in this story of Perry Chapdelaine no one fears: the reader (like the hell that waits in the marshes) goes there quietly.

Editor



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INTRODUCTION

The light-years long promenade of interacting glitter called the Milky Way was already eight billion years old with its principal features and main sequences already decided, when one small globular cluster cooled, breaking into suns, planets and moons.

One of those cooled clumps, nothing when compared to giant gas planets, or other exotic planets with their differences in atmosphere, chemistries, densities, shapes and positions, was slightly larger than six-tenths of the earth's radius. It spun on a tether nearly one hundred and fifty-three million miles from its own sun, also a by-product of the same globular cluster.

Traversing an invisible path through a restless ever-changing sea of forces, it completed one orbit every six hundred and seventy-two earth days. Since its sun, a main F5 white—perhaps a third larger than Sol—was so distant, the small planet's day was short of earth's by nine hours.

Invisible forces shrouding the tiny planet were spun from the complex weaving of twin moons which would shape its destiny more than any other factor. These two motes would one day be called Pearl and Opal.

At first the planet's bowels released thunderous volumes of gases. Some molecules, given quick energy and apparent freedom, fought against the jealous three-quarters earth gravity, escaping into space where there was found a harsher environment created by subtle force-blends, and the molecules disassociated to atomic forms, some atoms then losing or gaining energy according to their disposition and nature.

Other gases bounded between the planet's unfinished surface and an invisible line five miles high within which their relatively peaceful habits created a thick, shiny blanket, itself a pearl against the deeps of space.

Pearl and Opal danced their asymmetries, mixing and churning the various gas compositions into new forms which impregnated the raw rocks, channelling new chemicals, new forms into new abundances.

Millions of years passed, the volcanoes cooled and the thousands upon thousands of tons of hydrogen and oxygen joined together in a two-to-one marriage, creating oceans, lakes, rivers, clouds, rain, ice, steam and humidities throughout the planet.

While water-soluble minerals placidly intermingled with the tons of salt-hungry waters, Pearl and Opal tortured the fluids further. The planet's crust, too, was strained into new, weird shapes. Sometimes unusually high tidal waves swept around the globe in mere hours. At other times, in certain places, cross-raging currents fought, and water twisted in a grotesque dance, smoothing the land everywhere.

Here and there over the next million years or so, volcanoes reappeared, some capable of building glowing red tunnels higher than the twisted tides could reach, and again the stench of sulphur and burning earth was flung into the air. Pearl and Opal, still allied in jealous juxtaposition, sheared the burning cones—often as rapidly as they thrust themselves through a shifting surface.

Hundreds of millions of years passed during which the two unhappy moons settled some differences, learning to follow one another across the sky in a pleasing ballet of balance. The sea still followed each moon at command, but gently, ever so gently. Temperature gradients joined with the moving moons to create strong, deep flows of water which pushed together bars of sand and chunks of rock until dark wiggly lines appeared, as though etched on to the brighter blue water sharply contrasted by cloud-studded atmosphere.

The islands of sand and rock were nothing. As transient shapes of pleasing design, they only symbolized the land's patient striving for dominance, and, like a doomed species thought long-gone, they



appeared again and again. Rumbling volcanoes joined the struggle, impregnating hot lava into the clear blue water. Steam and newly divorced hydrogen and oxygen hissed upwards.

Gases mixed with water for hundreds of thousands of years more, creating a frothy white from the water's new, deep blue-green. As happens with most conflicts, this one too was compromised. The sea grudgingly yielded space to the earth and the earth cooled. This wordless peace-pact was destined to last for hundreds of millions of years; and, in the shadow of this fragile treaty was born a new kind of molecule capable of reproduction, growth, and evolution.

Born in the shallows of the warm seas, swept upwards into the lands, and downwards into the deeps, life changed, soon filling every ecological niche. Swift, slick forms swam beneath the planet's waters; delicate, soaring birds flew in the oxygen rich atmosphere. Across the lowlands which stretched in wide, moon-shaped swaths across the planet's face scuttled many armoured creatures and varied mammals.

But the differences between Pearl and Opal could not be contained. Like the tension between two quarrelling mates that builds to a crescendo, then snaps in fury, the moons' angers again affected the land.

Mountains flooded and wore flat. Mammals, insects, birds—nearly all higher forms perished. The seas churned until only the smallest, most adaptable species survived to evolve during another era.

Geologic time pressed inexorably onwards; the planet's surface divided into huge tectonic plates that slowly, implacably moved. Where they had spread apart at the ocean ridges, hot basaltic material from the mantle rose up and joined their trailing edges. Frequently these edges broke into sections creating faults perpendicular to the ridges, and along these fault lines plates moved in opposite directions to rub together, creating shuddering earthquakes which vibrated the spheroid as would the clapper in a bell.

In places the lithospheric plates had pressed downwards into the warmer asthenosphere, creating great ocean trenches. The impact of plates had also re-created island chains and volcanoes and island arcs.

Then, as though to seal a new bargain, the seas had permitted their deep trenches to fill and narrow channels of sand and dirt to be painted in short quarter-moon arcs across its face. The land had permitted the seas to fill in everywhere, creating an oddly homogeneous water-height nearly four feet deep. A geologically stable era had begun.

The new peace was to last for millions of years. Life increased its complexity within the four-foot shallows and upwards across the narrow land-strips. Plants and animals thrived on the strips as well as in and on the shallows, everywhere.

Never satisfied, these forms intermeshed and fused to achieve a stable ecological balance, and the evolution of Swampworld's highest, most complex species. In appearance, this species grossly resembled the human form. It was rational, capable of learning, but apparently doomed to die as a viable species, doomed to become a mockery along one of life's silent, dead branches.

Their webbed feet and hands permitted easy movement through the marshy waters and the muddy bottoms. Their double-lidded eyes and double-valved nostrils permitted comfortable passage above or below the murky waters. They stood tall, like terrestrial storks, for their long legs lifted them above the water's surface. Their long arms extended from their waist to the bottom of the marsh, like two pairs of sticks with thickly padded handles.

The Splurges, as they would one day be called, had inherited a sickness which, though not directly of the earth-water feuds, nevertheless, stemmed from them. Periodically with a blind thrashing, they destroyed all that moved, including themselves, leaving uneducated young by chance only.

Rightly or wrongly, Terran Emigration Authority had declared Swampworld fit to accommodate part of the yeast-like rise in human population, its appointed specialists having studied charts, records, graphs, computer formulae and a thousand other pertinent factors. Swampworld became a certified Terran frontier world. Humans would go there.



Tens of light years from Swampworld was *Trippert's Planet*, already over-burdened with the residues of population excesses following the peculiar deviations of behaviour which excessive populations produce. It was a world of gladiators; a world where death-dealers were bought for amusement's sake; a world where the physically healthy criminal—or those men filled with self-pity— could run from society or self.

Jester, small, dark, and quick, narrowed his eyes as he thoughtfully inspected Robert Carseegan, current beamer favourite. Carseegan was fast and steady. Jester's survival might have depended upon what he observed and memorized at the time, for he was also a modern gladiator. But it didn't. He would choose emigration to Swampworld instead.

Robert Carseegan might have continued in favour with the hundreds of millions of beamer addicts. Later, he would have been dead or disgraced, a choice given to every champion at some time. Neither of those things happened. He would choose emigration to the newly-opened Swampworld.

There were thousands of others. Some wanted the lighter gravity; some, like Dak Storey, the trader, had come early, adjusted easily, and now called Swampworld home; some, like Doctor Kester Whiting, searched for a righteous cause, restlessly shifting with the pressures of human tides; some wanted a new home, a new start in life; some wanted simple relief from population densities, a return to the heroic life of Beowulf and other imagined champions; some came to solve old problems, as did General Newton, who also brought his problem—Elizabeth, his wife; some were ordered to Swampworld as 'volunteers', recruits for Eemay, the name for Emigration Army which was always charged with the peace on every frontier planet. A few, a very, very few, like Marcelia Anne Johanson, could give no stirring reason, it was just a place to go at a time that was right with an ailing parent who never should have attempted the trip.

Then, of course, there were those who could not leave Swampworld even had they desired it, such as the indigenous Splurgs: Marjac, Cobcoth and Lomach.

ONE

There is an illusion of vast emptiness almost everywhere on Swampworld. But no sooner has that void engulfed the eye and the heart than the salt marsh comes vividly alive with the rustle and flutter and gurgle of life: fish, insects, small mammals crawling on land-strips, scuttling shell life, sucking soft life.

All thrive in this lacework of needle-pointed grass-green, where the northeast winds whip down through the swamp grass, and stir among stark reminders of the hourly struggle for survival: breached skeletons, grinning and eyeless skulls, shredded dry strands across fast growing reeds.

Always there is the whisper of wind as green needle point scratches needle point, bringing the illusion of global surf to human ear, and at the same time there is a cleansing of organic rot as biology and chemistry join forces, permitting fresh, vigorous life to consummate the sharing and re-distribution of molecular wealth. Here and there is viewed an island beach, with high-rise bluffs, or thin, low-lying sand-strips where both wind and wave might caress, smash, shout, murmur.

Here the island itself seems to float, as the eye crosses from horizon to horizon; and beyond the horizon lies only more of the same—grass-green needle-pointed laceworks—a sphere of it, fifteen thousand, eight hundred miles around.

Man's predecessor must have evolved from marshes like these.

The nose crinkles, ears listen, eyes peer, skin shivers, heart throbs. Is it a going home?

Riding high behind the swamp cow's long, undulating neck, he faced the western-setting sun with close squinting eyes. White clouds helped to reflect white sunlight over the green, sharp spears of rolling water grass.

The bright red of his tunic was discoloured by the ever-present mud. Torn from some past encounter, his trousers, once blue, were now faded, threadbare at the seat and knees. The sponge-fibre arranged around his neck like a bandanna was a dirty, brownish white.



He looked tired and harassed, rather than careless and naturally sloppy. His unshaven face did not hide his dark tan, the sharp lines of his chin and the quick deliberate motions of his eyes. The slump of his shoulders and the careless way in which he held the sensitive swamp cow horns betrayed his fatigue.

The swamp cow, a dahrero, narrow and long-legged as was the Splurg, stretched its sinuous neck high over a specially dark green clump of swamp grass, guiding its own trail around the sharp stone which suddenly protruded from the floor of the never ending swamp. The rider kept his head low near the swamp cow's horns, his eyes straight ahead waiting for the four-mile distant horizon to push a brown land-strip above the sea of green.

The sun dipped further down, the horizon now covering nearly half its diameter, when the rider jerked his head up. Perhaps one mile away, maybe two, was the thin brown line indicating the expected strip of land. He turned to look back at the trail he had made behind, carefully searching the emptiness as tall reeds slowly recovered their position.

It would soon be dark. He placed pressure outward against the dahrero's horns, and the beast moved faster towards the thin brown line.

The trader's hut was hard to see, huddled as it was against the lower banks of the island strip. Built of dark stone, doors and windows shaped irregularly, it blended well into the natural landscape. Probably the trader's permanent home was on higher ground, he thought. Large clumps of extra tall swamp grass bordered the landstrips, as well as scattered, sharp-edged granite boulders partially covered by green bladed moss, crawling vine and small red and blue orchid-like flowers.

He dismounted, carefully tying a long, strong cord to one of its horns and to a waiting projection at swamp level next to two other animals. Except for the swish of water from his boots and the quiet munching click of masticating teeth from the nearby beasts, there was no sound. Nor did anyone enter or leave the hut opening.

He was tempted to remove the twin sacks tied around the beast's long neck but changed his mind. Even minutes could be valuable. He circled around the hut, peering into both windows. In the back was a broad, level space which showed the oily runners of perhaps hundreds of light-alloy boats which emigrants used to cross both the land-strips and the reedy marshes. One dented, acid-pocked boat lay against the slow-rising slope behind the hut; probably for trade or personal use, he thought.

Satisfied, he shoved the irregularly shaped door open and entered the room, which reeked of swampjuice and contained, as he already knew, the proprietor and two strangers.

Along one wall hung a Mercator Chart of Swampworld. The meridians and parallels of latitude were familiar orthogonal families of parallel straight lines. Except for the extreme north and south, it showed a good representation of Swampworld strips and the area of interest to him. Straight lines would represent the globe's rhumb lines; angles read from the intersections with parallels of latitude would determine a sufficiently accurate course.

Black pins and red threads showed the general boundary of known Splurg concentrations. The top of the map was marked NORTH the bottom, SOUTH. Across the second quadrant, starting from due north and moving southwest, was shown the scattering of these crescent shaped land-strips. One circle was labelled HERE. Due east of HERE was shown a large black pin stuck into the outlines of an unusually large island. It was labelled PORT AUTHORITY. West-north-west of HERE was another large black pin labelled FORT WEST. Blue letters across the more irregularly shaped islands north said, NORTHERN TERRITORIES. Similar lettering marked the regular, crescent-shaped islands west, saying WESTERN TERRITORIES.

The proprietor, a fat man with white tufts of hair springing belligerently from above his ears, looked up and waved him to a stone seat at the counter between them. He moved warily to the end seat so that at least half of his face could observe the other two sitting at the lone table. Charts, graphs and books lined one wall in a stone bookcase, and store goods, staples of food, seed, fertilizer and spare parts for



the emigrant boats lined the other wall. An old calendar tied to a reed-woven peg protruding from the rock wall at his right fluttered gently in the breeze that crossed the narrow space from window to window.

This was the last trading post between emigration port—Port Authority—and the open land-strips. A small radio built into the stone wall behind the proprietor was probably the last official communication link between the Terran space-port and the new frontier. It was difficult to imagine where the two at the table could live. According to the maps and his personal knowledge, no other land-strip could be found less than fifty miles back. Certainly the two would not travel to this dingy hut for an evening out. Still it was good to relax in the wine-sweet smell again after so many miles riding on the twisting neck of the dahrero.

The rainy season would soon be along, so the westward emigrant traffic was gone for another season, that would be about one hundred and twenty Terran days. The last group was probably ahead of him by at least two Terran weeks—twenty-two point four Swampworld days. He would have to begin thinking in Swampworld terms, one Terran year to point five-five of Swampworld's. Unless he could obtain a boat, there was no chance that his slow dahrero would ever catch the emigrants.

According to Terran Emigration Bureau, peace was expected across the swamps this year. Emigration always predicted peace, here, there, everywhere. No military movements of consequence were forecast. Too bad the Eemay's, Emigration Army Troopers, didn't read the same travel-guides, he thought.

The red-nosed proprietor finished wiping his hands on a dirty towel and turned his attention back to the newcomer. An embroidered name on his grey apron told the visitor he was Jared Simmers. What this man did during the periodic rainy season was open to speculation. Behind the proprietor's fat shoulders were standard power-pac terminals indicating the presence of nuclear power-pacs somewhere behind the hut. Probably on high ground. The owner was comfortable. Power from pac-fusion to last for years, sweet water from pac-evaporation, no worry or fear of Eemay. He heard a quiet rumble of voices from the table.

Shifting his position to ease the sharp line of pain made by the edge of the stone seat, he turned his head towards the noise. The two at the single stone table had only briefly glanced at the visitor. One wore the red Eemay swamprat shirt and combination red-blue rain helmet, but the rest of his attire was clearly that of the civilian. Besides, his helmet was pitted and his shirt buttons open. Not even the sloppiest patrol officer would permit this during off-duty hours.

The other man was different, having the bearing and alertness of a new officer from Terra. Every movement spelled army training. That one would have to be watched closely.

Jared Simmers, the proprietor, was about to speak when one of the native Splurgs stilt-walked into the building on its long, spindly legs and arms. It was small, male, relatively clean for its kind. Probably it lived on this land-strip. He caught the sharp, oily odour peculiar to the species.

The Splurg jerked its way to the table and said something too low for the visitor to hear. Both men waved the Splurg away with scornful looks and threatening arms.

The young Splurg stumbled over to Carseegan and begged for sugar in its normal cracked voice and halting Splurg manner. 'Pp-le-sse, ss-uh-rr. Cc-a-nn yy-o-uu ss-p-arre ss-ugh-arr?' Every word was croaked, each syllable separated by the Splurg's natural voice patterns.

The men at the table noted his interference of the proprietor's sweeping hand and turned their heads to laugh. Carseegan's jaw muscles tightened and his eye creases deepened with sudden stubbornness. His eyes pierced into theirs, silencing the sudden laughter. They turned back to their own business, as any Swampworld citizen might do in like circumstances.

'No cluster?' he asked the small Splurg, keeping his voice pleasant.

Only vacant eyes stared back. Jared Simmers leaned over to his ear and explained, 'The *amok* took his parents' parents, his parents and his cluster.'

The visitor understood. With no softening of his tightened facial muscles he untied his swamp helmet



and laid it across his lap. His hair was bright red, reminiscent of the colour of the setting sun when the air is dense with vegetable oils, or the brilliant red often seen in Swampworld's frequent auroras. He reached into a small inside pouch of his shirt and carefully opened the waterproof zipper. The small Splurg's double-valved nostrils fibrillated as it gave out an overwhelming spicy scent. The visitor pushed his hand along the inside of the pouch along the lines of his tight stomach muscles and, with thumb and forefinger, pulled out a single sugar cube.

'Make it last, orphan,' his breath whispered like a breeze between his tightly held teeth.

The Splurg's double lids opened and closed twice before it snatched the huge quantity of sugar and ran in its clown-like stilt-walk towards the jagged-shaped doorway. Probably it was afraid the whole incident was a joke. At any moment the strange Terran would take away its enormous prize.

A delicate burned odour reached him as Jared Simmers placed a bottle of home-brewed reed drink before the visitor. Inside lights automatically brightened as the sun-lit window darkened.

'Have a free one on me.' The proprietor's voice reminded him of a whining dog. 'I haven't seen such generosity since settling, over twenty-eight Terran years ago. Time moves faster here—well, anyway the days are faster though the years are much longer. Been about fifteen and a third Swampworld years.' The proprietor noted the steady gaze which met his eyes as he talked. The whining-dog voice changed suddenly. 'I guess you know that sugar cube would have been good for a month's trade with the Splurgs when cut? Whole clusters have satiated themselves with a single cube. You aren't a recent emigrant by looks.' Everything was matter-of-fact, but the visitor could feel the pressures of questions behind each statement.

The visitor made no response.

'Eemay, aren't you?' The proprietor's question was not extremely shrewd. Either one belonged to the Emigration Army or one was an emigrant. When Terrans began their broad-fronted move for living room, transportation, farm implements, power-fusion pac, and some other essentials were made available but only in bare minimum quantities and qualities. Terrans, even with their population billions—or perhaps because of their billions—could not afford the luxury of grandly equipped, magnanimously supported colonies.

Emigrants paid their way. Members of the Emigration Army worked their way. Some lucky ones were chosen to service and care for the usually single space-port, a very expensive Terran investment. Others, like Jared Simmers, became proprietors of Terran-owned businesses, using indigenous labour and materials as far as possible, buying all the available Eemay labour. Still others, like Eemay troopers, became protective guardians of emigrants and, where necessary, peace keepers until the transplanted culture was strong enough for its own security force. A large number, like the visitor, used the Emigration Army as a device to gain free transportation to another habitable world and, once there, deserted to the wide, uninhabited places of the world. Capture often meant long imprisonment, sometimes instant death.

The proprietor's eyes still bored into the visitor's whose eyes remained unflinching, too. 'I'll lay odds against the remainder of your sugar that you're jumping Eemay.'

The visitor remained quiet. A bell tolled slowly outside. 'Soon's you came through the door, I knew it. So did they.' Jared's thumb pointed towards the two men still engaged in quiet conversation. 'I could raise my voice and the mike in back would switch to Eemay Control Headquarters. They'd have swampboats around this whole strip in hours. Even the kid Splurg guessed. You can't hide Eemay body training and discipline so quickly. Probably just out of basic. What should I call you?'

'Carseegan.'

'That's a new one, anyway. Usually its Johnson or Jones or Ivanovitch or Billy or some such. Usually they haven't anything to trade, either.' Jared's eyes finally broke and wandered to the bulge of the money belt round Carseegan's waist. 'We trade anything here. I'm freeman now. Took me ten Swampworld years to pay off Eemay costs. By then I liked the life so well, I stayed on at the same



location. Farm, like everyone else. This strip is about thirty miles long and two to three miles wide at different points. Doesn't rise higher than twenty-two, twenty-three feet. Family lives above, about two hundred yards back. Got three kids, nice house, and with the trade I make I can usually pay for fertilizer. Leaches from the soil, you know—from the heavy rains. *Amok* wiped most of the Splurges out just before I came. Nearest ones are hundreds of miles further west. What can I sell you? Anything within reason if you got the money, or goods.' Jared Simmers' voice had become friendly, conversational.

'I can pay—some sugar, some script. I need a good, fast swamp boat. Is the one at the back the best you've got?'

'Careful one, aren't you? Yea! That's the best. Private. Can't trade it. Need it. You must have seen it before you decided to come in. Probably looked through the windows, too. I can get you a new one if you want to wait a week.' Jared's eyes narrowed slightly. A door closed somewhere.

'I need different clothes, too. I'll trade my dahrero and these Eemay issues along with some sugar and script for your swamp boat, provided the power plant is reasonably fresh. I also want some supplies, vegetables and fruit. I've got my own distiller, fishing gear.'

Jared shook his head as Carseegan finished his free reed drink. 'Going all the way out, huh? If the Eemay doesn't catch you, and the rains, you've still got the *amok*.' Jared shook his head in wonder. 'Don't know what drives men like you. Don't know how many ever made it after passing this door. Can't let out the swamp boat at any price. And, I don't need more swamp cows. Got several dozen on the strip's other side. They make good meat and trade items. Gentle, easy to ride; one more won't help me much.'

'When did the last emigrant boats go through?'

'Two, two and a half Terran weeks ago,' Jared answered. 'Held up by Dak Storey, trader outfit. Promised to meet the boats here some weeks earlier than he did. Emigrants would have gone without him except for rumours of the *amok* further north, and they needed Dak Storey's experienced help. They'll push to make up time. Smart move, joining the regular emigrant outfit *after* leaving the port. Think you can pull it off?'

Carseegan ignored the query, 'What about supplies and clothes?'

Jared's eyes narrowed again. 'Sure, I can trade with you. Better stay here with me and wait out the rains, though. I could use a little extra help around the strip.'

'No, I'll catch up with the emigrant boats even if it's at the other end, where they settle.'

'It's your business, of course. I wonder, though, why you don't angle off towards the Northern Territories.' Jared partially turned towards the wall decorated by the Mercator Chart. He traced an unbounded region with his pudgy forefinger. 'Strips are thinner, shorter. Hard for a colony to make a start there. Singles can make it though. Only problem is bringing in fertilizer. One family has a hard time staying on one strip. They clear off the foliage, plant their garden, then, within four or five Terran years, the rain has leached all the decent minerals. You'd think Eemay would build a distiller which would also separate nitrates from the other salts. The man who does it on Swampworld is going to get rich, I'll tell you.'

'I planned on going there.' Carseegan wondered if Jared was as innocent as he sounded. 'But I decided my kind of misery likes company. Besides, I've heard the Eemay patrols usually head in that direction.'

The man at the table in the tattered army helmet waved to Jared who moved from behind his bar to attend them. While the low-voiced orders were given, Carseegan kept his hand very close to his hidden twin-laser. Jared moved back behind his bar where he reached into a skimming sack, pulling out one of the more common varieties of clam-like edibles. He cracked its tough hide and brought it raw back to the table. A familiar, sharp, oily scent followed the plate.

Carseegan relaxed again, gratefully taking his second free reed drink. It seemed obvious that Jared was buttering Carseegan up for more favourable trade agreement, or something else. He wasn't worried.



‘As I said, I don’t mind other people’s business. Where you want to go is up to you. But you ought to know that a couple of days back there was an Eemay general with several troops through. Went through fast. He was red-haired, like you, and gave his name as John Newton. He’s got orders to take over Fort West. He’s going to stop at Sandspit 12 which you can see outlined in red there, a small Eemay garrison set up to keep tabs on Splurgs and sort of give the signal when *amok* starts again. The emigrant boats are following the same trail. Maybe you’d better stop here, wait ‘til the season is over and things clear’.

He made no response to the news of General Newton. General Newton! The *Amok General* they had called him at Eemay. General Newton’s fame had grown.

‘Sound’s as though he’ll be between me and the boats. Can’t catch either one with just a slow swamp cow.’

Jared would have made a very poor poker player. His eyes narrowed again as he asked, ‘Are you two related?’

Carseegan slowly raised his drink back to his lips while he gave every external evidence of pondering the question. He let the coarse fluid burn his throat. ‘Did they have a woman with them?’

‘She was in the boats. Did you know her, too?’

Carseegan was about to answer the curious proprietor when the door banged open. The small Splurg jerked its way partially inside and croaked, ‘Ee-m-a-yy bb-oa-tss cc-omm-ingg!’

Carseegan slammed his helmet on his head and dashed outside. As far out as the reflected light permitted him to see was nothing but the sharp-pointed swamp grass gently waving. It was true that Splurgs could sense movement further than humans. He probably still had time to escape if he were to go now.

Jumping back through the doorway he threw three sugar cubes on the counter in front of the chagrined proprietor. ‘Vegetables and fruit. Quick, grab a pack of dried.’

Jared Simmers carefully placed the three cubes into a waiting receptacle and just as carefully scraped several loose grains of the sugar into the sack. Then, more rapidly than Carseegan was prepared to imagine, he threw packages of dried fruit and vegetables into a waterproof sack, tied the sack with a double fold, and threw it to Carseegan.

By the time Carseegan had located his dahrero, untied it and was again mounted behind its neck, he could hear the angry buzz of propeller blades as a covey of three or four Eemay boats pushed their way towards him. A bright light stabbed from one of the boats bathing the trading post first, then sweeping down the slight strip-rise at the shore, catching the three swamp cows tethered there.

Carseegan’s brilliant red shirt and blue trousers, both Eemay issue, couldn’t help but attract attention. The boats increased their speed. Carseegan could hear a loud, magnified voice shout, ‘Halt! Eemay business!’

He turned his dahrero to the right, directing it to lumber past and around a tall stand of swamp grass at his right. Once behind the grass, he forced the beast back towards the shore and along on the right side of the trader’s low building. The going was slower and certainly more dangerous, but the brilliant spears of light that stabbed through the tall grass were far more dangerous. Had Carseegan stayed behind the grass, or in it, or even had he gone away from it in a straight line, heavy boat-based laser pulses would have seared several holes through his body.

The strip rose suddenly. He pulled himself over the five foot rise, then hooked lines over the dahrero’s sensitive horns. Pulling on them with every bit of his strength, he forced the beast to climb over the natural barrier.

Its skeleton-like legs slipped. Carseegan cursed to himself as he heard the boats move around the tall clump of swamp grass. Again he pulled and finally the beast’s flabby stomach scraped over the edge. He snubbed the horn lines around a rock and dropped back to guide its spindly rear legs.

Moving was easier now. The land sloped upwards for a few more feet, levelled off and stayed level. Carseegan found few trees or shrubs on the strip. Whereas the animal’s non-grazing speed was no more



than two or three miles an hour, on strips it was more like a quarter to half a mile an hour. Carseegan sweated and cursed to himself as he prodded the awkward animal towards the strip's opposite shore.

The downward slope was also gentle. He could see the reedy grass long before he and his animal were able to enter the water. Inside a permanently fenced area were several dozen dahrero slowly grazing in random directions. Within a matter of several Swampworld days, the cropped reeds would be wind-swayed again. He could now understand Jared Simmers' reluctance to trade for another swampcow. Additional animals meant building a larger water-surfaced enclosure, not a pleasant task.

He pushed the dahrero's sensitive horns forward, urging it back to the water as swiftly as possible, though, considering the beast's natural dislike for and awkwardness on land, he should not have had to urge very hard. The beast jerked its way downwards, using its thin legs and webbed claws to push against the murky bottom.

The twin orbs overhead cast too much light, though both were small discs compared to *Trippert Planet's*, or even to Terra's. Another hour, maybe more, and he would be able to move through the darkness, he hoped.

Carseegan directed his beast to intermingle in the herd just in time. Lights were flashing on the strip's crest, searching.

TWO

He was lucky, for the bobbing lights on the high ground were not searching for him; and the wet dahrero trail was not spotted by the Eemay patrol which was probably still dragging the swamp's murky bottom vainly searching for a peculiarly small swamp cow and an equally small human carcass.

Though Pearl and Opal still dominated the night, morning would not be long in coming; it never was on Swampworld with its fifteen hour day.

Lying against his dahrero's neck, he encouraged it to graze close to the far gate which he unhooked and rode through, dismounting long enough to re-attach the lines. The merging of dark sky and dark grasses was welcomed as he rode quietly westward.

Daylight exploded with unusual colours—blue and violet, deep reds, oranges and pinks. From his high weaving perch he saw a sea of tall grasses undulating, quavering, stirring out with each breeze.

He pulled the fabric of his muddy uniform tighter, buttoning another opening near his throat. Even his brilliant red hair was caked with the ever-present mud, and his temper also became crusty and irritable.

He by-passed Splurg clusters. Too friendly, even to Eemay. His appetite for Restle had waned long ago, as had his appetite for the delicate dahrero flesh.

Several days further, when the sun, about a fourth smaller than Terra's, beat heavily upon his neck and back, he pushed his dahrero on to a strip with some rise and overlooking the taller grass clumps. The reeds had closed behind him, leaving no trail. The narrow hump of dirt beneath him stretched perhaps three hundred feet northeast and the same distance southwest. To the west, however, was a scene which set his heart beating and gave him a sense of foreboding.

He couldn't see the acid sprays, nor could he hear the cow's bellows of pain at his distance. Red blood, shining in contrast to the ever-present greenery, was barely visible; but some vagary of wind brought to his ears the shrill cry of the calf as acid bit through skin and muscle.

Behind the dahrero herd, and to the right, were dozens of the rolling, green and white striped cylinders of flesh, each with large flapping, leaf-like ears that rolled over and over as they swept inexorably towards their prey.

Within minutes after the mother and calf had been downed, Carseegan saw the slow, strangely beautiful green and white stripes arrayed like flower blooms being pushed by a soft wind. An insect had jumped to his nose. Sweet perfume from low-hanging blue and yellow flowers wafted to his nostrils. A seed fell from one of the low bushes by his head.



Swampworld was generally a quiet world, with its hundreds of thousands of lives subdued, or murmuring low, like the noises of buzzing insects or the soft wave of reed rustling against reed.

Carseegan avoided the large cleared areas, where herds had grazed, and whenever he crossed a sand strip, he carefully searched for signs of boat wheels or human passage, though chances of finding any were small until he reached the westward passes. Somewhere ahead, between him and the emigrant boats, was General Newton.

When the first rains finally fell, he could only bow to the inevitable and direct his beast onward, uncomplaining of either wet or cold, as his beast munched its way at its standard one and a half miles per hour. Carseegan rarely left his mount.

In thirty Terran days he would have travelled one thousand and eighty miles, in ten months, ten thousand eight hundred miles—nearly two-thirds of the planet's circumference—not that he actually planned such a trip.

Rain fell again that night, though he was in luck to find a sand strip ahead. Disregarding the water, he jumped on to it and pulled his animal forward. Only then did he see the flickering light ahead.

He felt his way toward the dim, dancing light until he walked suddenly into a quiet camp site, finding a small lantern-pac glaring awkwardly up into the dark sky on the other side of a flapping canvas tent. Nearest to him were blurs which outlined several swamp boats resting on their retractable wheels.

Holes had been punctured in the supply boat's sides. The canvas tent was ripped, and rain poured on the single, stabbing spear of light. Here and there he could make out a booted figure or a bright red shirt.

Inside the nearest boat, supplies were scrambled and tossed into meaningless heaps. The scent of humus mixed with that of Terran spices was strong. Boxes had been left unopened and sharp rocks and ragged clam-shells were everywhere.

One man, probably the supply-boat's driver, was lying face up with half of his face torn away.

A low groan forced its way through the lashing, cold rain. He dropped to the ground. Three more troopers were found lying together in a scramble of arms and legs. Splurges were also lying among them, torn and disfigured in similar manner.

The low moan came again. He ran from body to body, now freely using the lantern's light. It seemed forever before he found one with guts spilled in chaotic profusion, and living. It was General Newton.

The General's eyes opened. 'Who—who are you?'

'Private Carseegan, Twenty-first Eemay Swampboats, Sir,' he answered, giving his Eemay name. The light was behind, and he was sure the general couldn't see his face.

'That's fine, Swamprat. Where—where are the others?'

'I'll have to move you and call back to port if you're to live, Sir.'

'You with Intelligence?' The General was persistent, as Carseegan moved his body from the rain to partial protection under one of the boat tents.

'I asked you a question, trooper. Are you with Intelligence?'

'No Sir. I'm a deserter.'

Carseegan's answer was like a whip-lash against the dying General's hide. The General remained silent, then turned his eyes back to him. 'Put the light on yourself,' he ordered.

Carseegan reluctantly complied.

'As I thought. I guess we were bound together from the beginning—at least until my end,' the General growled.

'We'll get you back and sewn up, John.' The gentleness in his voice told the lie.

'You know there'll be no patching up, Bob. Funny, isn't it? Had I found you earlier, I'd have scorched your ear, like any other deserter. Had you found me alone, unwounded, you probably would have scorched mine. Well, looks like the end of a grand feud, Bob.'

Carseegan rummaged around the boat's spilled materials until he found a small cannister of reed alcohol. He lifted the General's head and poured just enough to wet the tongue and throat. The General



coughed feebly from the chest up. Rain battered its way beneath the canvas.

For a moment the General's eyes closed, then opened slowly. 'You don't look any older, Bob. An easier life. Suppose you're stronger, younger—haven't lived to the point of exhaustion by the day, as I have.'

Carseegan permitted painful memories to be stirred open. Two red-haired boys—double fights, double spankings. His eyes shifted; he hung his head when a tear glistened.

'My life's been wilder, John. You look much younger than me,' he lied. 'You've been on the frontier worlds for several seasons now, that accounts for some of your tiredness. Didn't you know *amok* cycle was predicted this year?'

'How do you know I've been here for years?'

Carseegan didn't answer.

'First the girl, then odd jobs across the face of Terra, feeling sorry for yourself, then flight into Eemay at a moment when broke. Used Eemay just for travel money, huh! That's pretty low, Bob. Really low. But why Swampworld? Emigration gives first, second and third priorities. This one is low. Just luck? Or some hidden force, Bob?'

'I was a pencil fighter on *Trippert's Planet*, John. Had to leave. Managed to get back to Terra. Used another name to get into Eemay. They don't check records very well. Too many people in too much of a hurry.'

'A pencil fighter? God! You've certainly been around. I suppose you could beam the eye out of a man at two hundred paces in only two or three short spurts!' The General's voice was growing weaker, but still it displayed its deep sarcasm for Carseegan's former life.

'So—what are you doing this way?'

'I thought I'd start a new life with the emigrants.'

The General looked at the deserter and listened to the rain, the wind and the creaking of boat hulls as they rubbed against one another. A rough life had scored marks on Carseegan, but the truth was there to see. The General *was* much older. His eyes were more haunted. Carseegan may have been running away from memories, but the General, too, in his own way, had also been running.

'Couldn't take it when Elizabeth married me, could you Bob?' The General's soft comment stung him like roller acid. That was one memory which he did not care to open.

'You were always a poor loser, Bob. Couldn't take life and its hardships. That's why you ran. That's why you became a beam fighter, then a deserter. What next, Bob?'

Carseegan maintained his calm, though he knew the General was not telling quite the whole truth. They were too much alike. He was running in his own way; he was too hurt to look into his own wounds and his own motivations. Besides, what point was there in arguing with a dead man?

There was a girl, yes! She had been a beauty. There hadn't been another like her in—well, dozens and dozens later. First she had played one off against the other. Then, when her choice had seemed to settle on him, and he had become sure in his own mind of the decision, she had married John. That part had been bad enough. When he had confronted her with his emotions, and how they had been toyed with, she had laughed, brazenly, openly, sadistically.

Even that he might have taken. When he had explained the whole picture to John, he, too, had laughed at him. 'Jealous loser, aren't you?' he had said.

There was John Newton. Lying dead on a narrow strip of Swampworld. Why shouldn't he accept John's distorted perceptions of life. Who could it hurt? 'I guess I've never had quite the internal strength you have had, John.'

The General grunted.

'How is Elizabeth?'

The slight tightening of jaw muscles around the General's mouth warned Carseegan his questioning was wrong. John had always been slightly poorer at poker than him. Rumour had it that John had joined



Eemay to get away from a bitching career woman. When post after post had fallen to her wiles, and probably man after man, the General had probably moved her to the most isolated, poorest environment known to Eemay—Swampworld. One small port of technicians, about two hundred in number, and about ten thousand ‘swamprats’ scattered over the whole planet’s surface. What could such a woman do? Eventually she would be ostracized by the inevitable pioneer mores. Then, he supposed, the General would finally conquer his woman. In the meantime, of course, the General could keep everything well under control inside himself by dashing off to help settlers.

Others would have worked just as hard to get transferred out of this mud world. The General, bright, alert and aggressive, a perfect Eemay team man, would shine even brighter once he had had an opportunity to show his spots on such a world as this one. *Newton’s Raiders*, they had been called. Whenever Terran emigrants gave trouble—and there were always some—or the Splurgs broke into their *amok* cycle—a call to Port Authority would bring the General and his raiders. Probably he had been through his first *amok* ten earth years ago; that was the time of the General’s first arrival according to Carseegan’s information. If all settlers could not be saved, at least all were not destroyed. That was more than any other general assigned to this hell-hole had been able to do.

‘*Amoks* caught us,’ the General changed the subject. ‘They caught us—they caught *Newton’s Raiders* by surprise. You know why?’

Carseegan shook his head in the negative, then followed with a verbal ‘No.’ Until this moment, he hadn’t really thought about the desolation around him. A platoon or more of soldiers destroyed and nothing else touched except, so to speak, by accident. Of course! It was the *amok*. He turned back the reed drink and swallowed half the cannister, revelling in the burning sensation as the fluid passed down his throat.

‘There are a dozen or so strips around us. Good land, good foliage. The Splurgs have lived peacefully here for ten years. We had a small contingent set up with a radio to give warning of unusual Splurg activity. There were a couple of scientists here, too. Trying to learn enough about the Splurgs to predict their next *amok* more accurately. ‘Everything was so peaceful; everyone forgot security except *Newton’s Raiders*. Trouble is, *Newton’s Raiders* had become a farce. Eemay needed the experienced ones elsewhere. I wouldn’t go. Thought *amok* cycle too close. They left me the scrub-backs.

‘Couldn’t even finish their training programmes. Got ordered to follow the last boats. See them safe. Had to teach the scrub-backs everything on the run, in the rain, in the middle of an *amok*.’

Carseegan could understand the General’s pride and the reasons for his failure. It was ironical that the Great *Newton* and his *Raiders* should be brought down so easily.

‘The Splurg *Ssandshun* lived here. Did you know he scouted this whole planet with me? Together we traversed this whole stinking swamp at its equator. Later we pushed through the livethorns at the North pole and the related species at the South. I gave him a medal for his distinguished services to Eemay.’ The General’s laughter had become racked with coughing.

‘He greeted me here like an old friend. Had pomp and ceremony. Used little Splurgs to line the path with garden vegetables. Great honour, you know. Would have been an insult to use swampfood, land-food being more valued. We camped and set up watch.

‘What’s here to watch?’ That’s what the young scrub-backs thought. They’d never seen *amok*. Thought I was crazy when I kept going from post to post to ask for reports. Must have had some system of warning one another about my coming.’

The General looked thoughtful. ‘Anyway, I suppose the first or second Splurg to go *amok* reminded the scrub-backs of a couple of human drunks. *Amok* spreads like wildfire, just as fast. Before the scrub-backs knew what had happened, even *Ssandshun* was running wildly from Splurg to Splurg, cutting, breaking, slitting, stabbing, burning, drowning and- murdering everything and everyone as fast as possible.

‘Another funny thing. I slipped in the mud. Wasn’t hurt at all. The scrub-backs were running with



their pants half on and half off and the Splurges were everywhere stabbing and jabbing. One stopped over me with a sharp rock and I expected it to drop into me. You know what it did?’

Carseegan said, ‘No’.

‘It slit its own throat, then dropped the rock. I lost consciousness. When I awoke, I found my belly ripped open and my guts hanging loose in the mud. Blood was gone; sight was poor.

‘Mates, children, respected lifetime friends, all went in a blood-lust that didn’t end until everything that moved was still.’

Carseegan gave the General another mouth-moistening sip from the cannister of reed juice.

‘John, there’s an emigrant convoy ahead somewhere. Doesn’t *amok* usually start somewhere then spread across the swamps almost like some kind of wind-blown disease?’

‘Can’t live with the responsibility, can you Bob ? Knew it was there. Just buried deep,’ he rasped. ‘Sure. We’ve mapped out the regions in which it spreads. Each Splurg group grows from accidentally surviving children scattered here and there. They live for about ten years—sometimes individuals live longer—but the grown colonies eventually *amok*. If they move to land, they plant their food. Even uneducated Splurg children instinctively move to land and plant seed. They adore land vegetables and honour some hidden spirit under dirt.

‘They seem to commute in natural boundaries, only occasionally passing from one to the other. When *amok* starts in one region, it seems to spread across that region faster than swamp boats can travel. Bob, it’s started here and I was following the boats west.’

The General blindly scratched under his rainjacket for writing materials. Carseegan helped him and held a pad while he wrote.

‘There’s a new outpost ahead. Filled with scrub-backs. Can’t fight, can’t see beyond their noses. The swamp boats ought to be near them. You’ve got to take this message there and see that the contingent is alerted. Some have got to go all the way to Fort West and warn them. Settlers have got to take cover and wait out the *amok*.’

‘Fort West can be warned by radio, John; and what makes you think I’ll take the note ? You realize it will probably mean death for me?’

‘Sure it will. I’m betting you’ll choose death against the slaughter of all the emigrants as well as the green Eemay troops.’

‘In other words you want me to ride through dozens of strips filled with *amoks*, bring the emigrant train into an outpost filled with scrub-backs and starry-eyed officers just come from Terra, then to see that Fort West is warned in sufficient time to save all the settlers, old and new?’

‘That’s about right.’

‘You must be crazy on your death bed, John.’

‘I’m betting you’ll be crazier,’ the dying man said firmly. He had almost finished writing his message when his head moved, lifting up his chin. His cheeks had become sunken hollows and his hand shook as with palsy. His lids seemed heavier when he spoke. ‘Elizabeth is on the train, Bob.’

Carseegan’s iron control broke. Elizabeth! Elizabeth Sandison! Would she appear as old as her husband. Probably not. Her life was one of gay parties and servants while John’s had been one of harsh social service, under severe handicaps.

‘You’ve got to remember women and children in those boats,’ the General said. ‘No one knows anything about *amok*, or, if they’ve heard, they won’t understand. Neither do the green troops and officers.’

He waited for his expected affirmative, but died before any answer was made.

Carseegan sat next to the General for a long time. The note he had been writing was unsigned. Twenty minutes later he had prepared one of the boats, loading it with food, weapons and ammunition; he walked back to his tethered dahrero, untied it, took off its saddle and patted it affectionately as it slowly waddled its way back into the swamp.



Turning the propeller's pitch slowly, he passed at least a dozen more Splurg corpses before reaching swamp's edge. Retracting the wheels, he aimed the boat westward, changing the pitch to achieve the greatest speed and efficiency.

Only then did he cry.

THREE

Thin tendril-like leaves fluttered like silent fingers before the salt-heavy breezes. Ropy vines, thick-bristled hairy arms, crawled upwards, wafting a sweet and sour perfume over adjacent swamp waters. Small insects and mammals jumped, crawled, scuttled beneath the tight-carpeted grasses, creating whirrs and snaps that also echoed across the thin land-strip as the soft wind blew westward.

The taller trees bent, pointing Christmas tree shaped hands towards the west, and the wind passed silently, gently, on its way.

Tall, green clumps of swamp grass standing proudly, almost aloof from smaller relatives nearby, bowed westward, too. As though in perpetual fealty to an invisible feudal lord, the tallest spears bent and recovered, bobbing again and again, spring-wound, tight. When the lesser grass spears began their dance, rolling, cyclical waves of green washed across the open swamps.

Trembling, like the flutter of the thin, long leaves found on trees whose roots drank deep humus on the proud land, MarJac swayed in time with the rhythm of the breezes, hand and feet pads pressed flat against the bottom mud. Muted waves lapped back and forth against his pumpkin-shaped head. Located a third of the distance from his double-lidded eyes, his double-valved nostrils automatically opened and closed as each water spray touched the end of his long, thick, sausage-shaped nose.

His ears, thin, drum-tight membranes, were set against his head like two small mushrooms huddled close to the ground.

When MarJac was born, Karenjac, his mother, had instinctively, carefully, unfolded his thin, spindly legs and arms to their natural four-foot lengths, placing their pads with their tiny creases against the soft ooze on the swamp floor. This act, the equivalent of a newborn's spanking, had started his life processes.

The female Splurg is fully conscious while giving birth. Like her kind, Karenjac had watched with pride as the ovular fluid-filled sack containing Marjac had dropped easily, and his pointed elbows and knees had punctured it, leaving him unbreathing, floating, arms and legs folded, until her instinctive response.

Consciousness had burst upon MarJac, quick-flowered, virginal, sending sweet rhythms up and down his miniature form. His double-lidded eyes had opened, as had his double-valved nose. Ear-cup membranes responded. Lids, valves and membranes came under semi-conscious control. He peered at the large-looming shape, his mother, and his mind yet free from imprints, swiftly formed connections and associations, tying his brain and nervous structure with semantic content from a new world. Already he had learned to associate feelings of comfort with her nearness.

Marjac had followed his nature—eating, sleeping, playing, learning. He had been able to curb excesses—probably better than most—to strengthen his weaknesses, and he had grown. Bound by instinct and deeply embedded cultural patterns dictated by his cluster, he would mature to experience a soft internal force that would call him shoreward, like the caress of a tender kiss.

Other instincts also prevailed, such as facing westward during the heavy seasonal rains when he would bob with the oily waters, double-ridded eyes and double-valved nostrils closed; but the landward push would be stronger.

When fully mature the two instincts would conflict. 'Crawl to land,' one would whisper, like an ever-present breeze persuasive in its persistence. 'Stay! The water is your mistress,' the other would admonish, not unlike an old friend who is thoughtful of needs and comforts.

Those who moved to land became the land-livers and the others, who remained, the swamp-livers.



Karenjac, like other members of the Jac cluster, spent much of her time weaving sledge-like shelters from reeds, or in search of the edible invertebrates called Restle and similar to Terran mollusks.

Restle could be sensed by their delicate fronds which had struggled through the bottom muck and water boundary. Her palm or foot pads pressed into the soft bottom muck formed by organic decay, sand and clay, and followed the fronds to their source buried in the sucking ooze. It was harvested with a quick snap and thrown into her reed-woven basket.

Had she wished to expend the effort, she could have collected the small, bitter tasting cephalopod-like Chinos, a slow-moving arthropod, or certain colourful growths not unlike Terran corral, but soft and spongy like mushrooms.

His father, Krejac, had obeyed the whisper to land. No one knew where he was, nor would they learn. Slow, sporadic communication between clusters was the rule. Psychological? Prejudicial? Hardly.

Distances between clusters was great; hundreds of miles of open swamp inhabited by packs of acid-throwing swamp-rollers, quiet herds of lumbering swamp cows, vast regions of warm-bubbling, noxious and often fatal hydrogen-sulphide fumes, and periodic inclement weather discouraged frequent social intercourse.

Though during the past several Swampworld years members of the Jac cluster had heard vague stories about those who could ride swiftly across tall reed grass in thin shelled vessels.

In a matter of days Marjac's muscles had firmed. His nervous processes, more active than would ever again be the case, had already formed hundreds of thousands of meaningful associations, creating references for both physical activities and mental abstractions. The purpose and function of language was known, and a highly inflected double-trilled language was learned which exactly fitted his vocal apparatus and hearing. The sounds he made were formed within a thin bellow-shaped tissue-sack that ballooned outwards during speech but which was hidden beneath long tufts of dark-green pendulums of mottled skin.

At an age far earlier than would have been true for the human, Marjac was capable of looking after himself. His long feet and arms, already the necessary length for reaching Restle at birth, were supplemented by flint-hard teeth within days. Only weeks later he was independently engaged in Splurg play, though still attached by strong familial ties, as would be the case during the remainder of his life.

Marjac was normal Splurg, having no distinguishing characteristics to make him different from the thousands of other Splurgs born about the same time elsewhere on Swampworld. Destiny would change circumstance, and circumstance would change his responses—Marjac would be different.

When his skin had thickened and turned dark green with irregular splotches, as befitted his five years, he attended an evening cluster meeting that would be long remembered. Overhead the deep sky had been dense with tiny sparkles stretching from horizon to horizon, lively colours had swirled and pulsed in long columnar streamers. Two tiny moons were to be seen tugging at one another from opposite horizons.

With one lid closed because of the light's intensity—almost as bright as the early morning's daylight—Marjac remembered Suressjac's deep booming voice as he spoke with a cluster leader's assurance, saying, 'Long ago, before this cluster, there was another. I am from that other. It's name, too, was Jac. When the cluster ended, there were only the females Wikjac, Klajac, the male child Terjac and myself.

'As many died then as live now—nearly two hundred and fifty.

'Later, others who had survived from other clusters and had joined with us were adopted. Rentsrecjac and Gelesrecjac were among these.

'The sickness destroyed both the Jac and Srec clusters.'

Marjac remembered the silence which had fallen when even the slight bending and rubbing together of swamp reed could be heard.

Tiny wriggly scavengers had tickled his foot pads as they burrowed through the mud, unconcerned with



the frozen emotions above the water line. The clapping of chitinous membranes, sharp and raspy had sprinkled the silence as male insects darted after the females from reed to reed. Even smaller Splurgs had stopped moving in emulation of their elders, and the cluster had waited, silent, still, as though a storm of hurricane proportions had been announced and was about to spring.

Marjac had been old enough to understand the dread and terror that self-slaughter brought to mind. It was a thing, an idea, a distant concept which affected others, like Suressjac, Wikjac or Klajac. But why should it happen to him or to the others assembled here ?

A single Layoree fish with a protruberance of hard bone and friendly luminescent eyes had prodded his left knee-joint at the water line, and Marjac remembered caressing the long fish's back with long, scratchy strokes as the cluster leader continued.

'There was an old one—another cluster-leader like myself—who belonged to the Srecs. He also remembered the terror. He also told stories in cluster assembly. He told of an older member who had survived the sickness and who had told stories of earlier survivors, and they had told of earlier survivors who told stories in cluster meetings.'

Suressjac's concept had been a long one, like swamp grass that grows on swamp grass only further back. That idea had stayed with Marjac.

One unseen member had asked, 'Does the sickness continue forever, lapping wave against wave, as seen in clear water after the passing of swamp cows?'

'The matter has not yet been settled,' Suressjac had answered fairly. 'Our language passes down from survivor to survivor, as does the growth and swelling of clusters. From all that can be learned within ourselves, and from cluster leaders who usually represent earlier survivors of the sickness, or from rare visitors, it has been so from the beginning, and seems to be so everywhere.'

The feeling had turned into one of frustration, and each one had felt it, as though quietly huddled in a huge storm, together, yet alone.

Solutions to the sickness continued to defy their keenest efforts, creating both a need and an obstacle at one and the same moment. But Surressjac had again explained that those ideas which survived the sickness were thought to carry the clues for survival of individuals.

'The very fact of cluster-leader survival assures that our ideas, which also survived, must contain the seeds to that survival. Cluster meetings,' he had reminded, 'have the purpose of passing ideas down to the young in the hope that some will accept them, and thereby use these important ideas for their own survival during the next period.'

Momentarily Marjac had forgotten those around him and he had stared at the shivering streamers of colour ribboning from the shimmering aurora borealis. For the first time he had felt a certain inner compulsion to question, and in a profound manner; he had been deeply stirred. Something about the lapping of wave upon wave, endlessly—forever—the need to propagate, to grow, to reason and create—superiority of Splurg over every Swampworld species, and death, early—insanity—the futility of life, and dreams that come and go with each successive cluster, never to be fulfilled—life like the wind, only briefly visiting, never to stay.

The curly miasma had been broken by another caller's voice, and his cry of 'Swamp rollers! The new young have yet to be taught!'

Others carried on the call. With great patience Suressjac redirected the cluster's attention, calling out with authority, 'Prejac! Crelijac! Take the young aside. Teach them now.'

Certain protective arts which, sickness notwithstanding, had passed through thousands of generations were taught to the young. Marjac had already learned the trick. The large-shelled Rglo was found and taken from the thick swamp ooze and cracked open. Inside each shell was a tasteless meat, and a small fluid-filled sac attached to the inner shell by thin layers of flesh. These sacs were left inside while the remaining flesh was carefully scraped out.

It was usually much harder to find the acrid-tasting, flat-podded plant growth which usually grew



within the centre of the tallest, darkest green clusters. Marjac had learned to feel along the stems with his hands, pushing upward slowly from the bottom of the grass growths, slicing through the grass mounds again and again until he felt the tiny pods attached to the side of one of the thin reed stems and floating perhaps an inch or more below the water's surface.

One by one these Ous pods were snapped off and collected in the pink-streaked Rglo shell-bowl. No one knew how the count had been discovered but when the ratio of ten Ous pods to one Rglo sac were counted, the pods and the sac were burst permitting union of the two fluids. A turmoiled boiling began inside the shell where frothy bubbles joined with heat to create a most distasteful smell, almost as powerful as the hydrogen-sulphide boils.

The purple salt that layered inside the pink and cream coloured shell only minutes later was ousrglo, used to frighten away the dangerous swamp roller.

Flat reed shoots, young, tender, sticky, were gathered and pressed into other shell bottoms to form a water-proof pouch within which the ousrglo was kept dry until needed. Every Splurg carried such a pouch.

With Marjac's maturation came knowledge and an increased ability to observe and draw inferences. His cluster, too, grew, strengthened.

The thoughtful Splurg might have pondered on the purpose of cluster growth, where strength and knowledge is stored only to be dissipated suddenly by purposeless community death. And if innovations were to be encouraged during the interim period, only to be torn apart by unreasoning behaviour, wild, unpredictable, like the rain and wind during its season, then what point in cluster talks?

Convinced that the community had but one important goal, and that, to solve the sickness, Marjac had spoken of his conviction during his brief adolescence.

'But that is what we do during each cluster meeting,' was the leader's surprised response. 'Those who have survived the earlier sickness teach the younger. We guide innovation; we seek new ideas, bringing them to the attention of cluster members.'

'But do you teach how to survive the sickness?' Marjac had impertinently asked.

Suressjac pressed his thick arm in paternal friendliness. 'It is the call to land,' he said. 'You are growing older.'

Suressjac's answer, though well intended, was too patronizing, the wrong approach to an early adolescent. Still this was not the trigger which finally moved Marjac to leave his cluster in search of the sickness cure, like some bizzarre Don Quixote in search of imaginary dragons. Probably no one, especially Marjac, would ever know how his feelings were moved, little by little each day, until the idea had come full-blown in his mind.

Few females attracted him in his own cluster, and this may have been a prime contributor, though easily hidden. Friends, relatives, each were there in plenty. So maybe Suressjac told the truth better than could be known when he spoke of Marjac's silent urge to land, and perhaps all the rest was clever rationalization which only one mind can do to itself when its own motives are in doubt.

Whatever the case, Marjac, young, small, alone, slightly out of phase with his elders, had decided to make a search for Swampworld's equivalent of the Holy Grail.

He remembered how tiny he had felt against the broad sea of green, and the jagged thrust of lost empathy as loneliness gradually crept inwards from every point of his circular horizon. Even the leagues of emptiness joined with his loneliness to bring a matching, thumping rhythm to his heart as he plodded stilt-like, hour by hour in the big openness.

Scents heavy with moisture warned of the nearness of the rainy season and so had broad-leafed plants that were shouldering their way among slim reeds, tiny flowers at each leaf's centre: red, blue, gold. Already the flowers were crowded with pollen-carrying insects, each bloom fully prepared for the heavy winds and waters which would push their tough seeds westward. There were other signs; small green and tan flying insects had already left their temporary dwellings made of hard-spun layers. Cut-



ting through their elliptical bundles, they had already metamorphosed and dropped through to the swamp-water below where they could survive beneath the waters in fish-like behaviour.

Marjac was impressed with the swamp's magnitude—living room easily for hundreds of thousands of clusters.

In time he captured a dahrero, and in time he came to the cluster of land-living Splurgs called Noaut; and in time—a time of chemistry—a time of love—he came to something else invisible, fine, right. It hadn't leaped forward sudden, challenging, as would recognition of a new toy previously unseen. It was more a realization, perhaps a revelation, of unseen bindings late come to light but which had always been there, tying the two together as one. Her name was Ginoaut, and she became his mate.

Marjacnoaut's life, like his name, stretched. And Ginoaut—delicate in posture and thought, pale-green of skin, considerate and attentive to his needs, tolerant of his primitive background, sweet as land vegetables, who filled his internal voids, released his pressures, who provided a steady companionship for life's quest—she, Ginoaut—was all. She and the sweet land.

Cenoaut was born, a dark green-skinned male, quiet, reserved, in the manner of Ginoaut; and Marjacnoaut's activities stretched again with pride. Each day became a coloured symphony where hidden pressures derived from his persistent instincts were satisfied, bringing pleasure unbounded.

Family ties became stronger, though already strong. He had learned to plant and to grow; he had dug stones for buildings and had split the fibrous inner growth of tall trees, using the semi-flattened boards for many purposes. When the rains came, they had been sheltered, warm, comfortable.

Then Nenoaut was born. Unlike her tiny brother, she had been tiny and inquisitive like her father. And she grew fast, strong, healthy, filling his days with a colour and a beauty far more striking than Swampworld's brightest aurora borealis.

But with or without his family, his curiosity was not fully contained; his intellect probed every cranny and crevice of their large island strip, studying, conjecturing, picking up small polished stones that seemed to glimmer with their own light. Sometimes he had found larger stones reminding him of Restle, though coal-black, streaked with white lines, rather than the delicate pink lacing through the white.

It had been during one such lonely search that he had paused to muse high above the cluster compound almost at the tree line. He breathed deeply of the oil-salt-scented air blowing from the adjacent waters, and was then gazing far out at the rolling greenery surrounding the island which receded into a distance merged with dull blues and greys.

The hot sun had not yet reached its zenith. His skin was moistureslick as his body adjusted easily to the brisk breeze and heat. Inside he had felt good, a sense of rightness, of belonging.

Only vaguely had he felt a sinister presence of the Splurg sickness, like childhood dreams seen only from peaks of age, where absurdities mix with nonsense.

The full comforts, the full realization of responsible adulthood and mating were even then flushing through his mind and body as he heard the sudden whistling screams.

At first his mind had compared the sound to a Terran sled's angry buzzing, thinking perhaps traders had returned before their time. Then the screams had taken on their natural staccato punctuation, leaving in his mind no room for further doubt. His carefully collected bag of pretty stones forgotten, he rushed home, heart and glands pumping chemicals rich with terror.

The going was steep, rough, slowing him even as his mind leaped ahead, creating images drawn from hidden recesses.

Again and again the shrieks wailed upwards, a nightmarish song of tortured life, like animals milling to and fro as they gore one another.

He had finally pushed at the thick, tangled thorn-brush standing before his home, panting, muscles trembling with a fast fibrillation. How does one describe the emotion, the stark naked, frozen fear which comes to a father who must watch his beloved children cruelly clubbed to their deaths?



The distance was still too great. He could only run—to try— shambling, stumbling, bent stick-like, gasping with an icicle-like grief over an event already come. Neonaut, so clever, so young; Cenonaut, so pretty, so silent: both were already beneath heavy rocks, crushed.

In Ginoaut's hands another rock plunged, ready to treat him likewise. Both of her double eyelids were open as she stared blindly into the harsh sun, her pure green pupils wide, round.

His love had been too deep, too much part of himself. He could not bring himself to kill her, even as he forced himself to watch another do so, the latter being killed in turn by yet a third crazed member.

In the morning he found that death had filled the land-strip—by rock, fire, spear, drowning, strangling, crushing, dismemberment. Everywhere was found death's reeking stench.

If survivors remained, Marjac had been unable to find them. Perhaps by chance several of the young were hidden somewhere between bushes or rocks, who, like their former cluster leaders, would grow, breed, and again begin another cycle of Noauts who would be grotesquely free for another five and a half Swampworld years before the insane cycle repeated.

He had turned his heart, head and body away from the once beautiful flower-decked land, propelling himself on stilt-long legs, mile after weary mile and away from a Splurg hell to anywhere.

Could thoughts about beauty, or even comforts, have meaning within this vicious cycle? Splurges grow, find beauty and love, they form unions, one with the other, and communities with each other, they free themselves from the tyrannies of the swamp; then, as would some delicate water-flower kept too long in the sun's harsh rays and which dies suddenly without consideration for its attributes— powerful colours and symmetries—even the bed-rock of the Splurg soul, the family, is crushed, defeated, dead.

What use love?

What use life?

What use emotional attachments without the answer?

He wasn't ready to put the thought into words, but his life's goal had been formulated.

FOUR

There is a sameness to life which repeats: the seasonal eastern winds, heavy with rain, burst in turmoil upon a ready scene where small insects and plants have again prepared for change; tall, green, healthy reeds are shorn, denied the sun's radiation by close-cropping mammalia, but freely regenerate, proud-standing again; the calf is born, to grow, to breed, to die of age or acid or as circumstance dictates; and the long-nosed fish, sweet-scented flower, the shell fishes and other lives that scuttle close to mud or ground, trees, bushes and fine water-free grass, and small skulking things that hide in tiny holes, soft bellied worms and even tiny mites—they all follow their ways, know their place, are content with purpose.

But what of the Splurg?

Had their intellect been less keen, understanding more dull, life less precious—well, perhaps the tragedy would not have been so great.

But are Splurges bound into Swampworld's greater design for some rational purpose only to provide food for scavengers, perhaps? Or more likely part of an inharmonious jest created by some equally imbalanced god?

In community cluster there is a beginning to the consummation of life, true. But what of the consummation of intellect? Or even of spirit?

And what of the individual? What, for example, of particular individuals—those who live through their species' allotted cycle, to grieve, and be alone.

What of Marjac?

At first he had plodded westward, unconcerned, unthinking, hardly noting round circles of stones surrounding ashes and deep wheel depressions in sandy clays, both old, gullied by rains.

Some sorrows can be so deep that mechanical actions of the body, once begun, continue, as would Sir Isaac Newton's moving bodies not subject to external forces. Until the swamp roller's stench had



forced his valves closed, Marjac might have continued indeterminately onwards, never to arrive at a personalized purpose for living.

Suddenly the smack of green and white flaps sounded against open water where a dahrero herd had already grazed. Marjac's heart jumped, chemicals flowed and his attention was forced outwards again, almost against his will. The predators were sweeping towards him at full speed in a long semi-circular line.

Behind were calmly grazing cows, and he was caught between them and the rollers. Their speed was an order of magnitude above the swiftest dahrero.

His ousrglo? His hands touched the small woven-basket at his side. Too small, not enough to deter such large numbers. Had there been a dozen or so Splurgs, each armed with the chemical, the rollers would certainly pass by. But their speed, and numbers, his tiny form, the small package of ousrglo, their position—all factors pointed to death, and soon.

Even as he unhooked the pouch to spread the pungent chemical around the water's surface, he wondered about his purpose; or indeed, if there were purpose to any act that he might make, for or against survival.

A large female and calf at his side squalled from brown-staining acid as rolling petals surrounded the pair and brought them down. Fuming brown patches quickly stained blood red. The female fought back, prodded by its intense pain, and the small calf whistled with a high quivering squeak.

Though one roller was crushed by the female's falling body, dozens of other green and white petals swept over the carcasses to feed. Then seconds later, as Marjac knew would happen, the striped tide reformed its semi-circular corral.

He had begun to wade away from them, but too late. With deft movements he opened his ousrglo shell, swirling the powder in a broad swath around him.

The green and white rollers came swiftly over and around him. Water thrashed, acid and blood sprayed, his skin burned and his body was plunged beneath the waters. The hungry tide surged over him and past. He lost consciousness.

Marjac had known heat and cold before, and these his body could easily handle. This was different. His face lay pointing towards a sun burning deeply, like red coals from a Noaut fire. Below, his back to water, he shivered with a cold that tasted of death. Even the soft wind against his skin pierced him like tiny pointed sticks. How long? Hours? Minutes? Days?

Blissful darkness came again.

Can a hot body shiver? Blurred canvas outlines clouded the sun from his eyes; beneath his shivering body was the feel of smooth rock or metal; in his ears the steady, high-pitched throb of—what? An irregular rocking platform—thump, thump, thumpity, thump, thump, thump—reminded of—something—but what? His legs were doubled beneath him; his stomach churned. The *amok*?

Cool darkness again.

Where had he heard the strangely familiar language before? Then, later, two human shapes, and odd, unfamiliar things were viewed hanging from or lying against walls. His legs were laid straight out, parallel to his arms. A soft cloth—Terran?—was over his bulging torso, covering part way down his long legs. Soft paddings of some kind had been placed around his body to compensate for his rotundness, making a kind of nestled hollow. Then came strange scents that passed silently causing his double-valved nostrils to twitch with indecision.

Secure darkness, again.

They said his vocal chords were not properly constructed for proper enunciation of their language. Neither were the tongue, teeth, palate. Before its complete mastery, though, were days of wavering weaknesses—fever and chills, mind spinning with amorphous images and smells, contrasting cruel-happy memories, vividly depicting two small children throbbing with vitality, and a mate who was fair, right.

But while his mind was tortured, his body had repaired. Later his skin would peel, fresh growth



would disguise the acid burns. Could they furnish a similar ointment for that other wound, a deeply encysted memory which should not belong to any Splurg?

They had called themselves old timers. Marjac supposed that anyone who had lived through more than one *amok* could be given the title. Her name was Martha, his, Robert, and they both had a common name which, like Jac or Noaut, designated their cluster derivation. He had heard it spoken once during convalescence, then had forgotten it. They never used the cluster name when they spoke to one another.

Her age had been sixty Terran—thirty-three Swampworld years— three and one third Splurg sicknesses—yet she remained surprisingly alive, healthy!

Her hair had been dark black, eyes bright with blue circles around a black, circular pit. Although her skin was smooth, it was slightly darker than was his. Tanned deeply from Swampworld's abundance of ultra-violet, they had explained.

His hairline—as they had called it—was further back and the hair, like hers, was dark black. It wasn't until later that he had learned that the numerous crow's feet sprinkled around the eyes meant Terran age.

Their land strip, at least ten miles distant from where they had found him, had high ground studded with lofty growing trees and was dimpled with pleasant, fertile valleys. Their home, stone sides, leaf roof, was surrounded by several smaller huts used mostly for tools. One contained chickens, a strange mammal with wings to fly like an insect, but was unable to do so. The whole assemblage faced the swamp from the rim of a high cliff, where breezes could be caught as well as the tempering warmth of the waters.

In most ways they appeared ignorant of the sickness, acting day by day in ways analogous to the blissful ignorance he had seen among the Noauts. He had asked about their beliefs.

'Certainly we believe *amok is real!*' the male, Robert, had answered. 'Martha and I were among the first settlers—well over eighteen Terran years ago. We haven't seen *amok* personally but traders and scientists have told us about it.

'Watch out for Splurgs!' they warned us. 'Don't ever let your guard down. Something happens which makes them go berserk.'

'Isn't that right, Martha?'

The female, Martha, was not old by their standards. She planned on at least another sixty Terran—thirty-three Swampworld—years. Puttering around the small electric heater, she had fixed tea for herself and her husband, and a more natural but mild reed juice for Marjac. She poured the liquid for him, then nodded her head to answer, 'That's right, Robert. I've heard them say it many times.'

'Do you know what it's all about?' she had asked MarJac.

Their world and ways were alien, but he could feel nothing but strong empathy—strong love—for and between them. Their mode of speech and consideration for his ideas and opinions spoke to him of a race which holds multitudes of thoughts, as the waters hold reeds.

When Marjac healed, his new world was bounded inside by three small rooms, and outside, by another of the narrow, undistinguished land-strips. His mental horizons, however, expanded infinitely as he became increasingly exposed to human speech, human thought, and, especially, human textbooks so easily available from dense molecular memories.

'You learn unusually fast, Marjac!' Robert would say often.

Or, 'Did you see the way Marjac swept through the third grade reader?'

Martha's pride, too, was not unlike that of a mother fussing over her own offspring after his day by day success.

'Isn't science the Terran tool for problem solving?' Marjac had asked one day.

Robert's affirmative answer was quickly followed by 'What does science teach of the *amok* ?'

Robert's pause was long, thoughtful. 'I don't know. We—humans could solve the *amok*, had we the interest—I suppose—or the time or motive.' It was a damning statement about his own race. Robert



had looked to Marjac for sympathy then.

‘Do you know how far Terra is from Swampworld, MarJac?’ The question was rhetorical. Speed of light, radio signals, faster-than-light techniques, all blended uneasily into Marjac’s usually plastic mind.

‘There has been the great immigration push for fifty of our Terran years. Hundreds of ships are flying between the stars, carrying emigrants like Martha and me. Earth is bulging from its population pressure and space and other planets are nearly empty. Oh, here and there we find some that are populated, and I’m sure that some kind of communication or interaction is beginning between them and us.

‘Sometimes, like Swampworld, we find an ecology analogous to yours which has almost evolved, an intelligent species except for some fatal flaw.

‘We need space—living room—Marjac. And we need time. All of this costs—in materials, energy and time. Because of our population pressures and our urgent rush, we haven’t always taken the time to find answers to the fatal flaws of alien species.’

Marjac had often reflected on this explanation, trying now and then to find concepts and analogies from his own experiences. There were unsuitable Swampworld analogies: Suppose the Jac cluster needed fire, and a safe place to build it. Would the Noaut cluster be too far away? Would it lack interest in providing the comfort? Would the fire be too costly in Splurgpower and materials to transport across the watery swamp waters ?

Once each year the Terrans had made trips some fifty miles away to trade for fertilizer, a salt-like material which was spread over gardens, and for other sundries. ‘This time you’ll go with us,’ Robert commented one night. ‘We’ll trade off valuable stones which we’ve collected in the valley below the falls, as well as dahrero hides and some vegetables. We don’t have much, but usually don’t have to dip into our savings for the difference.

They stored their small trade goods in the boat, placing other necessary items—food, blankets, rain-coats—into conveniently reached positions. Martha always carried a bottle of drinking water. She knew the water was purified from the same source and in the same manner no matter where they were. Irrationally, she always insisted the water from home tasted better, didn’t upset her so much.

Marjac still remembered how he had doubled his long arms and legs beneath him against the boat’s thin hull, and how the boat had vibrated when the propeller’s pitch changed. With an angry buzz warning of bites taken from the air in thick slices, the boat shot forward, faster than any other creatures of Swampworld. Martha and Robert had described birds—true mammals that could wheel and dive, or fly through the thin air in fast darting motions. His first ride was like that, he had imagined.

The inevitable swamp roller stench came upon them, but by the time he had shouted ‘Rr-oll-e-rrs!’ Robert had already seen them. ‘Hang on,’ he shouted. ‘I’ll have to nick their edge. If we go through that pack, they’ll get us for sure.’ Robert swung the boat around sharply, sending Marjac against the far side.

Several of the striped predators raised their acid-throwing petals when spears of intensely hot light cut through the fans, slicing them into wilting ribbons. ‘Keep after the fans, Martha. It won’t do any good to kill them if acid gets on us.’ Robert was increasing the boat’s speed.

Marjac instinctively reached for his ousrglo—which he did not have—before ducking his bulbous head below the boat’s protective side.

What little acid hit the boat was easily washed away. ‘Cc-ou-l-dd-n’tt you ss-me-ll tt-he-mm?’ Marjac croaked in wonder.

The humans looked at one another before Robert replied, shaking his head, ‘No.’

‘Splurgs can smell them from a distance, or can taste their acids in the water. Next time, turn the way I point.’

They were so powerful, so knowing, Marjac had thought at the time, but with simple weaknesses. After that it had become easier for him to accept their knowledge; they were not quite so god-like, nor so filled with morality. And that, too, had turned out for the best.

He was instrumental in helping them to skirt several more packs of the green and white terrors before



they reached the trading island.

Robert parked on the smooth, sandy beach where they also pitched a gaily decorated red and orange tent that covered the boat and extended over the sand another five feet.

Three hundred feet higher were the plains of the Ucou cluster, and back as far as ten miles inland, stretching for twenty miles in length, the island sheltered a most profuse tangle of growing things. Long hanging vines climbed steep cliff walls, imparting an unnatural greenery to the otherwise drab, grey cliffs. Thick purple, black and green bush grew high over smaller varieties. Other different species grew in looping arches and gracefully splayed decorations.

When they finished tying down the tent corners, Robert waved to Marjac, saying, 'We'll walk up the road. There's no point in carrying our goods both ways.' He pointed to other swamp boats, some dozen, tied up in similar manner. 'There's fertilizer in those boats for trading. Probably belongs to Dak Storey. He usually comes on this trip.'

Martha had already begun her climb up, following a sloping ramp which showed marks of the wheels from many boats. She turned to Marjac and smiled. 'This is an anniversary of sorts, Marjac.' She tightened her gold and red sun bonnet again. 'This is our seventeenth trip. Traders made this island a regular stopping point, even before the Ucou cluster had regrown. Every six months there's at least one trader here but we can usually manage much longer, so we come less often.'

Splurgs came down the slope towards them, one directly to Robert where the two shook hands in human style. 'This is Rtuou who claims to have survived two *amoks*. You may have questions to ask, Marjac.'

Rtuou impressed MarJac by his stance and patience. He was taller by perhaps half a foot, his skin was more mottled with varying shades of green. His larger voice-sac hung from his bulbous head giving his tone a deeper rumble, though it was mostly hidden by skinfolds and an especially pendulous nose. Later, while the two Terrans were wandering in greeting from friend to friend, and were giving out small gifts, MarJac had indeed talked to him. 'I have also lived through the *amok*,' Rtuou began. 'My mate and two fine children are dead, as well as those of my adopted cluster. They say this is the season for its renewal, and that it sweeps along the landstrips like the wind.'

There was an unspoken empathy between the two Splurgs, and a kind of mutually given pity, too. 'It's an old story. Twice I have seen the Ucou grow on this plateau. Before the Terrans came, there was *amok*. After the Terrans came, there was *amok*. Once I believed in unseen spirits, or invisible animals; now I don't know,' Rtuou had closed his two lids in sadness.

Marjac questioned Rtuou closely about unseen spirits, though the idea was not new. 'How sure are you that humans have not caused the *amok*?' he asked. 'They claim knowledge of invisible life-forms that ride on the air as their boats ride over the swamp; and there is some feeling that sickness follows the winds.'

'I have heard of birds,' Rtuou replied.

'No! Not birds. Those are large animals which could be seen by all. I speak of bacteria, one-celled animals so small that a special glass is needed to see them even when both lids are open. Terrans could have brought them to our world and unknowingly passed these tiny animals into the air where, riding silently with the winds and the rains, they would settle among us and kill us by causing our insanity. Even the air we now breathe could be dangerous to us.'

'That is a strange and passable idea, friend Marjac. But it is wrong. Although I have lived through two *amoks*, others before me have lived through two or even three. Add up the age, young one. Three plus two makes almost fifty Terran years. These humans did not know of our planet then.'

Marjac had had to cross-check; even Terran science had adopted checks and cross-checks. He loved the Terrans, Martha and Robert, and had Rtuou answered otherwise the world would have suddenly appeared flatter, duller

Very well! *Amok* had come before the Terran. It had to begin somewhere, sometime. They reached



Rtucou's hut freshly covered with broad, green leaves taken from shrubs thick along the ground, and usually found nestled between other shrubs with red-speckled flowers. A sweet scent filled the air. 'How do you spend your time?' Marjac asked.

'As cluster-leader I once spoke to the young every evening. Now they laugh at my stories. It was like that the first time, too.' Rtucou's voice was sad. He reached a flowering yellow-plum garnished by the black and green flowering vines that circled high overhead in loops following stems of the broad-branching tree before his hut. Rtucou seated himself, still twisting the yellow-plum between his fingers, and Marjac was invited to sit, also. Somehow Rtucou's sadness passed invisibly to Marjac.

'There is my female-mate, Weecou, and five small ones. We tend our garden, and rest with the peace of the soil and the comforts you see around us.'

Marjac looked carefully but couldn't see the female through the hut's doorway although he could hear the sounds of her movement. There had to be a difference between Rtucou and himself, and other Splurges, Marjac thought. Finding that difference was important. 'Tell me about yourself. The little things—what you do, how you sleep, what you eat, what you like best, how you relax.'

Rtucou, long resigned to the sickness and its inevitability, became stirred by Marjac's intense manner. 'Occasionally I travel again, as in my youth, moving from island to island and living off Restle and swamp water. I enjoy the silence and the occasional flight away from danger, though I'm not as swift as before.' He gave a short staccato burst of laughter.

'But I always come back to till the sweet soil. Land! Land is where all Splurges belong, not the swamps!' Rtucou's eyes shone even through his closed single lid.

They talked until Pearl and Opal set and the night darkened, until even fire-embers were dead.

Morning, a luminescent jewel shining pleasingly with moving shafts of coloured lights rooted to low, rounded clouds, found MarJac standing behind Rtucou's hut, near the cliff's edge. Far below he viewed the wide, green-waving reeds, and near the pink and red horizon blended with grey, was the faintest tinge of a late aurora borealis. Lattice works of rainbow-coloured tubes danced there almost perpendicularly against the thicker haze. He loved the dull reds and bright pinks as the morning's sun danced through haze formed from organic oils, humidity and dust.

He unfolded his long legs, stretching them, and leaned his back against the bole of a thick tree. Rested, saturated with colour and the soft sibilance of insects among the foliage, soft, damp humus pressed against his moist skin, he was unready for the *amok* cry which had throbbed its way to his ears, thence inward.

Above the growing screams had come another voice. Perhaps even Marjac did not recognize his own, screaming louder and shriller than all the rest, blending in a cacophony of staccato torture cries. He scrambled down the slope shouting 'Rr-ob-err-tt! Mm-aa-rth-aa!'

Using his long stilted legs, as would a running circus clown, he took large grotesque steps, covering unreasonable distances with each sudden jerk. Past screaming, bleeding vacuous faces—dodging a stone here, a thrown knife there—hiding from one—back again, and around the burning thatches—on and on, through an insanity of faces and behaviour already burned into his soul. It spread, they had said. When one region begins, another soon follows. About every five and a half Swampworld years, they had said. This Splurg year was to renew the cycle, they had said.

He was late—far too late! In twisted mockery, their faces had looked up at his, blood still streaming from cut throats and open eye-sockets, black, wet. Oh! Where was his resentment for those who still butchered at their dead bodies?

Later, there was just Rtucou and himself.

'There must be a difference,' Marjac had said.

'There is no difference—no difference at all' Rtucou shook his head.

Neither had capacity for grief.

Could there ever have been such capacity?



FIVE

Unlike the dahrero's plodding pace, Carseegan's newly acquired boat sped swiftly, easily making seven or eight knots. He turned the propeller pitch until the sound was right, forcing the semi-flat sledge to leap over the greenery.

Fast moving grasses festooned with snail-like crustaceans fled by his eyes. Hopping, crawling, strand-making and wriggling creatures moved aside not too unlike sprays of sand arcing away from the boat's bow.

He wondered about the lack of birds, apparently an unfilled ecological niche. Emigration Authority was so careful in screening imports. Chickens, yes; flying birds, no. Strange world! Imagine what several dozen insect-consuming birds could do to upset the planet's checks and balances.

As one travelled west, the strips became taller, wider, longer, and presumably more attractive to homesteaders. Larger, more frequent Splurg concentrations could be expected too.

He rather expected small farm settlers to appear first. These would be the stubborn individualists who reverted easily to the lonely life, preferring it to the close-structured, crowded communities. He could hardly blame them after living with earth's allotted five square feet. He was a lot like them.

Every settler was tied to the Authority by lack of nitrates. Had this need been foreseen and deliberately built into their controls? Probably not. It was an oversight, he was sure, and merely went to prove that the Authority might be all-powerful but was not all knowing.

Unlike earth's sea denizens, Swampworld's was unsuitable for fertilizer. Some chemical imbalance—or was it decomposition into undesirable salts? Most strips were sandy, filigreed with thin ecological networks. Once disturbed, their balances lost, only artificial replacements restored the soil, or human wastes. How long before the cityfied settlers came to such an obvious conclusion?

Import of leguminous plants, such as clover, would solve the problem, but there again was the heavy, perhaps wise, hand of Eemay. No predicting what such crops would do to Swampworld's checks and balances. Where was it? *Lopex III*? Or was it *L'Culus* where a small bamboo shoot had upset the surface cycle; spreading like flames before a heavy wind, the thin shoots had shouldered aside indigent forms, creating a desert of both plant and animal life within twenty years.

Liveable worlds were too few, too far between stars to permit that happening again. Maybe it was right for Eemay to assume all power.

He had rounded one clump of darker-green grass spiring above neighbours when his speculations were suddenly interrupted. At first his mind refused to properly interpret the sea of white and green stripes waving around him. Large, broad, lacy, paddle-wheel appendages had already opened from dozens of swamp rollers.

He was a quarter of the way through the vicious lake of stripes before he actually perceived his personal danger, and the killers had become disturbed by his motion. Acid began to spray towards the boat.

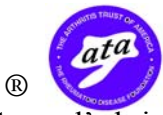
He swung in an arc calculated to take him away from the sea of death. His best weapon was the needle beam, he thought. Raising it with a beam-fighter's reflex action, he used it to cut through lacy leaves with concentrated spurts of fire that raised white puffs of steam.

Large holes appeared in the flowing ranks before him, where whole carcasses exploded in a burst of ragged, leathery white and green striped pieces; but other rollers filled the gaps from the boundless presences around.

He cries-crossed his beams, slicing thin narrow ribbons across the face of the pack, to no avail. There were too many. Their very numbers piled roller upon roller in mere seconds, filling holes which he had created in minutes.

In abrupt organized pack formation, they concentrated on Carseegan and his boat, aligning themselves in a semi-circular corral as they would do for the dahrero.

Acid flew, creating bronze-red marks on the boat. Pits formed in his heavy duty uniform, though the



General's bright buttons and stars miraculously escaped the fine sprays. His hands and face, deeply browned from actinic rays, became acid pitted, tiny pustules of red.

He finally put his needle-beam away as ineffective and groped beneath his seat for the sack of army grenades he remembered placing there, steeling himself for a methodical search.

The grenade was the simple safety-lever type known to armies for generations. He pulled the pin and threw far ahead of his boat, throttling back in his next act. The heavy grenade sank between two demons and exploded, forcing a geyser of water dozens of feet wide, and carrying pieces of torn rollers and long, ragged streamers of fluids high over his head.

Gradually the grenades created gaps in the sea of predators too great to be easily filled, and through those gaps he navigated his way clear, by now finding individual rollers dazed from the concussions.

Afterwards, boat, body and clothes washed, burns treated—when the sun was low again, and reds dominated his view—he rested. Certain small unnamed insects were beginning their evening stir, their buzzing growing louder as dusk approached. The scent of roller, an acrid odour, drifted by, masking all other scents.

A large dun-coloured fish with black speckles along its back, broke surface near his boat, its long snout just barely able to reach parasites clinging to the grasses. A flying insect with eight wing pairs landed at his feet and stretched arm-levers similar to small fiddler crabs.

A star appeared from the south—no—southwest. Terra was colonizing perhaps two thousand worlds within a radius of a million light years. The star he saw was even further away, he knew. When the population densities were considered, and the all-out effort to solve the pressures by colonization, he could almost appreciate Eemay's rigid, military-like control. The human effort was great, almost too great. It required every resource—energy, materials, time—and co-ordination beyond past experiences.

The single star he had seen from the south-west disappeared by the time his dinner ended, and heavy-booted clouds filled in every gap, making the night dark, humid, foreboding.

Rain drops were sparse, spattering the boat with hard, noisy lumps. He pulled out the small bow-canvas for shelter and checked the anchors, prepared in long-practice to wait out the coming downpour with his customary patience.

Eemay was like the rain, he thought. Profuse, scattered, confused. Carseegan had been able to operate successfully at the law's fringes and independent of Terran convention because of it. The same confusion had placed metal-alloyed boats on a salt water world filled with acid-throwers. It had also sent raw recruits, virtually untrained, to protect equally ignorant emigrants; and had sent the larger share of troopers north in search of innocuous deserters, but only tiny units to protect the more valuable boat train. Carseegan shook his head. There would be more. There always had been.

He waited three days before moving on. Rain had battered at the boat. Virtually unsinkable short of destruction, it had a shallow draft, and he thanked the unknown designer who had built the sumpump into the power-pact

The heavy rain was a forerunner of its kind, announcing in its own way the short rainy season to come. He started in the early morning's sunlight wet and chilled from a cold wind blowing behind his back. There was steady progress north, north-west for half a day before he sighted a dahrero herd, so large it stretched beyond the visible four-mile horizon, and large enough to explain the heavy concentration of rollers he had encountered.

Females were usually larger, bulkier. Otherwise male and female looked much alike, heads swaying side to side, heavy-lidded eyes, the same dun-coloured horns of the same size and shape. They stretched their long sinuous necks in idle curiosity as he steered a deliberate course through them, barely moving when he neared the thickest concentration.

Towards early evening, and the return of sun-reds, he came to Sandspit 12, which was not a Sandspit at all as its name seemed to designate. He had entered a narrow passage between two high-rising



mounds covered with tall trees which, from a distance, reminded him of live-oaks laced with Spanish Moss.

Both of the peaks were isolated islets too steep for habitation and forming a cliff-side gateway to the land within. He directed his craft between the narrows, pushing his way into what appeared to be a large grass-covered bay because of the way the two tree-shrouded islands curved.

Near the shoreline was a man-made roadway which had been carved from the strip's steep banks, snaking five hundred feet up, where trees again fringed the land.

He extended his wheels, turning the craft into the twisting roadway. The last heavy rain had washed down trees and branches, and gullies had formed. The roadway should have been repaired by the Sandspit 12 Eemay garrison by now, but he missed its significance.

What should he say to convince green troops he was really General Newton? Emigrants surely passed this way; otherwise they would have had to detour several hundred miles in either north-east or south-west directions to by-pass the sharp cliff-edges.

By the time he had wound his way to the top, the sun had dipped low and the clouds had closed with an abruptness he had learned to expect, and the rains had come again.

He pulled up his collar and turned on the sump-pump even as he halted on the ridge overlooking the valley where the Eemay encampment could barely be seen as an ambiguous blur of squares. Squalls filled with hard-driving rain began blowing so hard he dared not risk the down-slope.

He lurched his way over the boat's edge and fastened it to ridgetrees at four points, using the rings built into the boat's hull, then, tired and getting wetter—even when scrunched far beneath the boat's bow-canvas—he slept fitfully through one of the heaviest storms of the beginning rainy season.

When in the morning large open cloud patches permitted some sunlight to filter through, the blurry rectangles which he had seen the evening before proved to be swamp boats lined up in proper military array on the gentle down-slope of the valley before him. He could not see campfire or other activity, which was strange.

One washout had to be filled by hand before he could safely navigate his boat. A narrow depression at his right had served as funnel for some of the night's heavy rains where, gathering up stones, sticks and other debris, the mixture had cut through hard-packed down-trail.

Two hours of back-breaking sweat later he was snaking down from side to side in exaggerated s's so that he lost sight of his goal. An hour of such travel passed when a familiar offensive odour reached him, bringing to mind images that he preferred not to visualise.

The wet red and blue Eemay flag, with round green inset, fluttered weakly under the slow morning breezes from the end of a singularly tall, proud pole, erected in the middle of the boat quadrangles.

Burned and smashed vessels told the story. Red and blue Eemay uniforms, with their grizzly corpses, lay everywhere, as did those of Splurges, skin now reddened or muddied-over. 'Scrub-backs!' He cursed aloud. 'Not enough sense to guard their own camp this far inside Splurg territory.'

Carseegan reeled under the shock of decaying flesh when he pushed his boat up closer. He noted openings in the quadrangle, concluding that at least a handful of boats had escaped the carnage. Perhaps they had joined the train, he speculated.

Now the smell staggered him. Some Splurges had fallen at a distance from the troopers, burned through by pencil beam, while others had dragged themselves up to and inside the quadrangle of boats to die there for one reason or another. He cleared his throat and spat.

Lord, what had happened to Eemay's meticulous planning? *Amok*—a borrowed Terran word for a strange outworld ritual of a strange outworld species whose only apparent place in the scheme of things was to spread death at inopportune times. Or were all times for death inopportune?

It was difficult to imagine the rows of boats and silent bodies as parts of a bustling military camp. Each boat should have been exactly aligned with another, as though done with transit and tape. There should have been a hustle and bustle of fresh, young, strong men carrying firewood, washing uniforms,



checking and counting food supplies, repairing machinery and all the other routines that went with military movements of men and equipment. The thought of radios filtered to his disgusted mind. At least Port Authority could be notified, and his trek would be over, he thought.

For no good reason that he could think of, he tied a large square of cloth over his nose and mouth, reluctantly entering the scene of carnage. There should have been several operating radios easily available, but, as in General Newton's camp, the larger, more powerful ones had been placed in the open where they were damaged. He located a sealed emergency radio cannister and throttled up to move out, thankfully breathing easier again. Just contact Port Authority, tell them to warn the emigrants of *amok*; after which he could leave Eemay and the settlers to their own problems. There were implications in pulling the cannister's tab. He was a long way from Swampworld's only port. Would Port Authority risk their only plane, and valuable fuel, merely to locate one deserter? It was improbable, but it could happen.

If he could convince Port Authority officials he was General Newton, and they could contact the emigrants as well as Fort West, his way would be made easier when he did arrive among them.

On the other hand, he could easily lose by lack of knowledge of proper military protocol when using radio.

He had almost decided not to call but for the thought of Elizabeth and the other women and children. What was it John had said, 'You'll do it, Bob!' So final; so sure!

He pulled the cannister's tab. One of the nearby trees served as a convenient platform from which to launch the small, orange-coloured balloon that carried the thin, wire aerial aloft. Swampworld's ozone layer was closer to ground, and its circumference smaller than earth's. Electrical storms were more frequent and there was a wider spectrum of electrical activity. Still, all in all, he hadn't heard of trouble with the emergency radios before.

He climbed up the tree through its swirling, arching branches, and the thick almost pod-like leaves characteristic of it, acknowledging again how alien the planet must be. The balloon filled quickly, finally tugging gently against his hand. He released it, and watched, as its bright orange contrasted against the snowy-white clouds still piling high in thunder-cloud formations.

He attached the thin wire to the oddly shaped branches and descended back to ground where, by the pressing of a button, the radio was activated. 'Swampworld, Port Authority—this is General John Newton. Come in please.'

The call was repeated five times, at ten to fifteen second intervals before the answer came. 'Swampworld, Port Authority here, General. Commissioner Grigsby, John. Are you receiving?'

What was the Commissioner's name? Hamilton? Sneedby? Wasn't there a nickname? Carseegan's mind searched in vain. He would have to bluff it through. 'I hear you, Grigsby. Are any of the troops back, yet?'

'Still on special mission. General Widlyse followed later with a smaller contingent. Eemay headquarters is still placing priority on deserters.' Only faint cracklings could be heard during the transmission; voices were loud, clear.

Carseegan relayed all that had happened to him in his *alter ego*, placing special emphasis on the massacre at Sandspit 12 and the danger to both the emigrant groups and the scrub-backs sent out from Fort West. Pleading extreme fatigue, he excused the timbre of his voice. He had to suppose that Commissioner Grigsby and the General had had many occasions together, but the Commissioner's civilian protocol would not necessarily be the same as the military's. Maybe he was in luck, Carseegan thought.

'I've made detailed notes, John. As you know, the Commandant called everyone to the Northern Territories, except you and your men. Expect to make a grand-sweep there—fact is, they've already started and its no longer much of a secret. Calls back daily as pre-arranged.

'You know how short-handed we were before you left, John. Well, imagine, if you can, pulling out the regulars as well as the para-regulars, including the cooks and bakers. Port Authority is stripped to



the skeleton's skeleton and I couldn't justify use of our single plane that far west, especially during the rainy season, and that's all I've got.

'Come to think of it, I haven't seen the pilot for a few days anyway; maybe he was taken for the round-up, too.

'After all, John, Swampworld was advertised as a frontier planet and by God that's the way it sure is right now. Sorry I can't help. Probably can't for weeks. You'll have to do with what you've got.

'How's Elizabeth?'

The question was thrown fast, almost out of context. Carseegan paused only momentarily. 'She's on the emigrant train.'

'Oh—yes! yes! I'd forgotten.'

In a way, Carseegan was elated by the callous reply. If he could get a message through to the boats and the fort, then his job would be through. Also, he was more than grateful that some instinct had kept him from going on the Northern Territories route, as other deserters had done. 'Call the emigrants and the Fort,' he requested.

'Will do, General. Feel free to call back any time, any time between six and seven A.M. our time, that is. I've reserved the rest of my hours for Port problems. Besides, there's another ship due within a few more days.

'Out!'

Carseegan almost tore the stars from his coat. He actually withdrew the identification papers he had taken from General Newton. Freedom from his responsibility gave him a lift, a new mobility of thought—for just a while. Then the visual memory of *amok* as he had twice experienced it, the useless dead and dying, the sudden attacks without warning, the unpredictable, unbelievable behaviour, the stench—had made its mark. Port Authority couldn't help. Probably wouldn't if it could. Frontier worlds were advertised to be the frontier, and settlers got exactly what they had bought, or that was the feeling.

Cursing under his breath, he methodically looked through some of the other boats, holding his stomach in check again. Finding no good excuse to change boats, he reloaded supplies, throwing bundles and cartons on to his shallow platform without studying their contents, storing new ones next to others which seemed to look alike. He didn't need more guns or explosives but he did refill his supply of water filters. Later, when he could think of no more reason for delay, he aimed his boat west, cursing under his breath just as the drizzle began again.

The strips were wider, longer, higher, more liveable after Sandspit 12. No one knew how most of the strips had got names like Horn's Bottom and Luke's Short. Probably they were named after, and by, early explorers. It would have been even more difficult to explain how one of the most lofty, Sandspit 12, with its stately trees, fine fertile valleys and high bluffs had got its misnomer. The number twelve after the name just added mystery, although it probably came from the numbers placed on original survey maps.

Squinting his eyes under the near vertical drizzle, Carseegan steered his way easily, following the tortuous turnings down without difficulty. He retracted the wheels at the shore and pushed his airspeed upwards, pointing the boat in the general direction of the emigrant's probable trail.

Strips would become higher, more difficult to cross from here on, he knew; and he would have to watch his navigation closely. Some of the land strips rose high, like emerging mountain peaks along a chain. In some few places roads had been constructed. In most, only certain passes were crossable. He took great pains with watch and compass and the identification of proper reference points.

Later, after another day of heavy rain, he found a deep, dry cave near the shore. Dry wood was hard to find but any wood once ignited burned hotter, faster than most Terran woods. He stripped himself naked, drying his clothes and blankets for the first time in days.

He was still asleep when the Splurges found him.

Their scurrying around his craft woke him. Butchered forms, both human and Splurg, were still fresh



in his memory, though these visitors seemed merely curious, friendly. He checked his needle beams, dressed and hurried out.

Already they had torn one of the boxes open and hundreds were fighting for the opportunity to taste its contents. Afraid they would hurt one another, and not knowing the nature of their unusual behaviour, Carseegan forced them away with difficulty. To his surprise, the box did not contain sugar, but some other white ingredient which, if anything, had a slightly salty taste.

The crowd of Splurges closed in again, so he scattered handfuls of the white powder around the ground. Everywhere the Splurges scabbled. Half the box of chemicals had disappeared along with most of the daylight before the last of the cluster had gone. Shrugging his shoulders, he filed the experience away as just another manifestation of the alien world and of alien behaviour. So, shuddering at his mental image of possibly worse manifestations to come, he left the strip at night, travelling by dim cloud-shrouded moonlight as both Pearl and Opal strove vainly to penetrate the thin veils.

Insanity also filled the next strip—children, a few in shock, drifted aimlessly. He dropped food hoping they would survive to begin a new cluster.

Regularly tended garden plots were empty of caretakers, their bodies chopped, or stabbed, or maimed in some way. He shrugged deeper into his jacket, turning up the collar just as rain sprinkled again. There was stillness everywhere as rain began to thump on the thatched roofs nearby. Raindrops accumulated on his forehead, built up along his eyebrows, grew larger, then dropped to roll along his nose, mixing easily with salt-water there. Fatigue was heavy on his shoulders.

Miles and hours later, when he had tried to sleep and his eyes were closed, he could still hear the soft staccato cries of weeping Splurg children. He opened his map again, tracing the Splurg density outline with his finger from southwest to northeast and noted that perhaps fifty, sixty miles from his present position was a gap apparently representing the absence of Splurges. He shuddered again at the thought of travelling through more of them, and more of the butchery. At least no population numbers were recorded in that direction. He concluded that the extra miles of detour would be worth it—almost anything would be worth doing to avoid another *amok*. With the resolution came sleep, and fitful dreams.

Morning was dull, shadow-light grey. He knew the heavy overcast clouds meant drizzle or heavy rain again soon. He checked his compass setting for the supposed Splurg-free detour, resigned himself to the extra hours of travel, started the propellers and adjusted the throttle, letting the vibration and hum fill his body with purpose and direction. His thoughts became muted half-thoughts as he steered his new course.

By afternoon he could see a smudgy plume northwards that spread from horizon to horizon darker than the usual haze and certainly darker than the greycloud formations overhead. Too widely distributed to be a campfire, he idly dismissed it as a forest fire on a distant land-strip.

At his left, fast approaching, another land-strip had appeared fringed by green grassy needles, white sandy beaches and chalky bluffs. The clear crack of an old-fashioned rifle stimulated Carseegan to full attention. There! He heard it again. Cautiously, straining for sound over the muted propeller strokes, he inched his way forward. Imagine! An old-fashioned pellet projector on Swampworld.

When he was closer, he also heard screams, eerie, almost familiar. Shots continued, like a repeating rifle, they hurtled from the wooded strip which he could now vaguely distinguish. A little farther, by straining, he could see hundreds of fighting, *amok* Splurges, and beyond them a wooden stockade. He didn't have to guess about the nature of either.

Carseegan's first inclination was to avoid the *amok*, but shots, barricades and rich land meant Terran settlers, who probably needed help. Somewhat reluctantly, he headed towards the carnage, needlebeam in hand, pockets loaded with grenades, heavy at heart.

Some, wild-staring, both lids opened, had already noticed the boat's motion, and were attracted to it. He beamed the close ones; then, deliberately, he pulled the grenade pin and threw it into their midst. It was a sickening act. Pure slaughter—but swifter, cleaner, and surer than the acts that Splurges were



performing on one another and themselves.

Within the barricade, an elderly Terran, perhaps eighty or eighty-five years old, gray-haired, with heavy beard, sharp clear eyes and dressed in rough homespun fibre joined with dahrero hide, shook his hand. 'Indeed, thank you for the help, stranger,' he said. 'I'm George Motlow, and this is my wife, Sandy.'

The smaller woman, equally grey of hair, had smooth facial features, and only a hint of the wrinkles soon to crowd around her eyes. She, too, wore homespun and dahrero hide, though of one-piece, woven, rather than of two. She nodded quietly to Carseegan, but continued her magazine loading.

Carseegan noted the polish and care that had been given to the ancient pieces.

Behind both of the Motlows, and to their right, were eight Splurges who had also helped to load rifles. The old man waved at them. 'These boys are all right. Been through an earlier *amok* with Sandy and me.

'What's your name, General? I didn't see your stars and uniform through the mud.'

Carseegan started momentarily. He had almost forgotten his assumed role. The Motlows were in the prime of their lives—shared another eighty, ninety years to go.

He introduced himself as General John Newton, briefly explaining his mission. 'Most of the troops are green. I've got to get to them before they permit themselves the luxury of carelessness.' Carseegan's eyes swept the small compound as he talked, noting how carefully the Motlows had built up their protective wall over the years. Stone, wood, thick banks of mud had been skilfully blended to form an all but impassable barricade.

Within the compound were several neatly-kept buildings. Their house must have been the small one with actual shingles on the roof. Except for the background sheds, showing the mixture of wood and stone so common among the Splurges, with reed roof or wide-leaf thatched roof, he could have been looking at a movie set of the American west in the 1890s.

'Why don't your Splurges *amok*? he asked'.

'They've been with us for years. Sandy and I came here on one of the first ships. We've been pretty well isolated since. No one wants to pass near one of the boils.' Motlow's hand waved towards the northeast. 'We like to be private. That's what we came for. We started working this strip; we like this strip; and we intend to die on this strip.

'Some of these boys was just little ones when we came. They are like our own children. Wouldn't think of leaving them, and they wouldn't leave us. Don't know why they don't *amok*,' he finished abruptly.

The Motlow's garden, also inside the small compound, appeared blacker, more humus-rich than others he had seen. It also contrasted greatly with the soil around. Carseegan, whose final interest in Swampworld was in settling his own strip was more than interested in their techniques, and he would have liked to stay to learn.

'The emigrants can't be far ahead,' Motlow advised. 'Shouldn't be more than two or three days away from your original direction, but you'll have to go back on your tracks. Which way were you heading?'

Carseegan explained that his plan to avoid heavy Splurge concentrations called for outflanking the main islands by this northern move.

'Sorry, General. Your maps ought to show where the heavy boils are.'

Carseegan was puzzled, but dared not show it. Thinking quickly, he fabricated what seemed a reasonable answer, 'I've studied our maps before. Are new boils here?'

Motlow took Carseegan to the back of the small compound where they climbed an inner-wall stairway to a platform overlooking the swamp, approximately north-north-east. 'That heavy haze that spreads for—oh—about twenty fingers along the horizon is a boil. Started last year but there are other old ones behind. You can't get through.' Motlow had stretched his right arm about half-way from his body and measured the haze with his fingers in an ancient manner.



Carseegan still didn't understand. He also used his fingers to measure the length of the haze. 'I've got to get to those emigrants!' he exclaimed.

Motlow looked puzzled for a moment; then, in some disgust, said, 'General, you've been on Swampworld long enough to know that a boil half that size kills the air around it for miles. You couldn't breathe. If the hydrogen sulphide stink didn't make your body vomit itself dry, the lack of oxygen would kill you sooner.

'There's no life in the water for miles around. Don't try it!' he advised. 'Amok or not, you're safer going through the Splurgs.'

When the light behind the heavy clouds had dimmed, and Pearl and Opal chased one another in secret behind the same clouds, Carseegan turned on his boat's lights, feeling a deep sense of *deja vu* as swamp grass flickered by his boat.

Swamp grass, with its large, dark green mounds scattered randomly here and there in the meadows of smaller, lighter reeds, looked the same, day or night. The *deja vu* was a frequent visitor of late. Reeds of reeds; dahrero of dahrero; amok of amok.

But George Motlow, and his wife, were another matter. They knew. They knew he was not General Newton. Nobody, especially the famed General Newton of the Newton Raiders would have been ignorant of hydrogen sulphide boils, and how to spot them.

Marjac was not the first Splurg to wend his way to Port Authority, nor would he be the last. The strip—technically a large island—rose out of the swampland far to the east of the thin northeast-southwest running islands so attractive to settlers. He was probably the first of his kind to come as though on some pilgrimage to a sacred city, consciously seeking a solution to his species' sickness.

'Hey boy!' Marjac heard the shout from above, but had not yet associated it with himself. His stilt-long legs had taken him onto the beach where only his wide, splayed feet were hidden beneath the water.

It had been a long time since Marjac had associated with humans. Martha and Robert had befriended him, saved him from roller attacks right after his own beloved mate and two children had suffered from the disease. Loss of the two humans to the same cause had been almost more than his emotional system could tolerate. He had wandered. For five and a half Swampworld years he had followed wind, or wave, or insect, whatever satisfied his bent at the moment.

Gradually his will was restored, his convictions firmed, his goal set. He became his kin's first truth seeker.

Another of the cyclic rainy seasons had started during his thousand mile trek, and more days had been spent huddled, facing westward during an early storm's worst rain.

But now he had arrived; the worst was over. His emotions would never again go lower, his losses would never be greater. And, he was mated to his cause.

'Hey boy!' The shout came louder this time. Marjac looked up. The head and shoulders of a long-haired Terran peered down from the cliff's edge, perhaps two hundred feet above. A long fibrous rope extended from there to a package lying at the foot of the cliff. The package was lumpy and wet, maybe three feet by three feet by four.

'Yy-e-ss?' Marjac answered.

'Come on up. Help me pull this package. Can't get it by myself. Too heavy—give ye' sugar!' The last was said with an up-lift in the voice as though appealing to a small child, or irresponsible adult.

Marjac waved back in the way he had learned meant acceptance or acquiescence. As he pushed the package he noted the fine lines which webbed the material. It was dahrero hide, certainly. His sensitive nose also verified the thought—organic matter away from the presence of water was sharp, distasteful. Hides had been well scraped but not sterilized.

Marjac plodded up the familiar twisting roadway with some difficulty. He reached only the first turn when he heard the Terran again. 'Hurry up, will ye' boy? I haven't got all day!'



Marjac was inwardly amused. Did this Terran believe Splurg chronological age also identified level of maturity? Had he wanted to hurry, though, he could have done no better, so he kept his silence, plodding steadily but shakily upwards.

The high plateau was similar to other strip lands—black soil, lofty breeze-swept trees. There were some slight differences. Decorative trees, trimmed, well-kept, bordered the island boundary as far as his eye was able to view. Within the fringe of trees, land had been cleared of all but the occasional large shrub or tree. The soil was black, fertile, carpeted by thin, fine grasses recognizable as miniature adaptations of swamp grass.

Momentarily his stick-bent figure straightened, vertigo affected his senses so long used to swamp levels. The sun shone hot against his slick skin, his pores opened wide, permitting moisture to reach his skin faster.

The human figure who had beckoned him on was even more hairy than at first sight. Strange garments, glistening almost as brightly as the fine-lined green hide from which they were made, were cut tight to the chest and waist. Strips of the cow-hide had been sewn at arms and legs to wave with each motion or with the breezes. Long, black hair curled at ends in half-loops, dark skin, almost brown-black, face unshaven, whiskery, surrounded clean, white teeth and a ready smile.

‘Get ahold this rope and pull with me, boy. Or did you go *amok* too? Lost my boys couple weeks ago. They would’ve toted that bundle of green-hide without trouble. Tried to get it myself. Too heavy; too thick; too many hides in it. Not used to the weight!’

‘*You amok* proof?’

Taking MarJac for granted, as he had from the beginning, the hairy Terran thrust the rope into his hand at the same time as he snapped the last question.

‘I-ffyy-o-uu mean by *amok*-proof, one who has survived an *amok*, I suppose you could call me that.’

Except for his natural Splurg staccato, Marjac’s tone was cool, precise, accurate.

‘Well, well! An educated Splurg! I ain’t met one o’ those before! C’mon now. We’ve got to pull if you’re going to get sugar.’ Though all Terrans appeared small, thin of face, MarJac was sure this one’s was smaller than the norm.

They stretched their muscles, making the chain of bundles swing pendulously along the cliff’s walls. They inched it along slowly, finally pulling it to the top. ‘I can drag it on boards the rest of the way,’ the strange Terran explained. Sweat was wiped carefully from beneath his eyes and from around his wrinkled forehead.

‘Couldn’t find an unused swamp boat anywhere in Port, and the Eemay wouldn’t loan a trader a fresh drink of water. No sir! Wouldn’t leave valuable hides down on the beach, either.’ The last words were grunted out.

Kicking one of the boxy bundles with his foot, the Terran had pushed it onto a wide board which was to be used to drag them. There were another dozen, smaller bundles behind the nearest decorative bushes.

‘Have to leave them here ‘til Charlie gets a lift. Glad they didn’t sink when *amok* got the boat.’ He rolled the bundles into a group before stopping again to mop his forehead.

Mariac tensed when the Terran’s hand fumbled for sugar in his waterproof pouch. ‘Here’s the sugar I promised ye!’

‘Nn-oo t-hh-aan-kk yy-o-uu.’ Many would have grabbed the cube and ran, hoarding the fine grains for later personal use.

‘What? Refuse sugar?’ The Terran’s surprise, as big as his now wide-opened eyes, showed in every expression and movement.

The path to Port Authority was one of those infrequently used ones that occur initially by reason of natural rock and flora formations. Dozens of years of use by both Splurg and human feet had cut through the miniature reed-grasses, leaving the winding path bare except for still-struggling sprouts



infrequently scattered. Low bushes, probably of second or third growth, scrubby, without flowers, lined both sides. When they rounded one such clump of foliage, and had climbed a short distance to the low-rising crest, Marjac viewed for the first time the heterogeneous grouping of metal, stone and wooden buildings surrounding a large concrete apron below.

Eight years of association with Terrans had accustomed Marjac to strange, alien artifacts—light-weight metal boats, power-pace, unusual architecture, clothing materials and varying styles, mini-libraries and their vast store of knowledge, and so on. He was still totally unprepared for his first sight of Port Authority—its overwhelming size most of all.

In Terran eyes, the administration building was grubby, a little make-shift structure no more than three stories high. To Marjac, it was the tallest building in the world, put together by strange, unknown tools. Surely *amok* sickness could be cured by men who made such buildings as these!

The skeleton of steel-work, shaped like the ribs of a fat ship, stood squat, awkward in Terran eyes. To Marjac, the spires of interlaced steel girders standing without visible means of support were light, airy artworks. Next to this three dimensional tapestry was a towering steel crane used to service the ship's cradle, taller than the tallest building in the world.

Crude sheds sprawled along the far side of the tallest building extending from a windowless building which had thick pipes protruding towards the swamp on the far shore to the ship's cradle. Each row of such structures had been laid in semi-circular arcs.

Another structure, longer, wider than any Marjac had heretofore seen, was a cheap shed-like building open on all sides.

Finally, for hundreds of acres around the whole, but mostly closer to them, was seen a flat, dark plain upon which was seen no tree, bush, or grass. Unknown to Marjac at the time, that heavy concrete apron had been the costliest item to build. He could not yet imagine its use.

'Kinda gets ye', don't it?' The strange Terran was not unfamiliar with Port Authority's first impact on Splurges, how easily the Terran seemed to read his thoughts.

Below, and perhaps two miles away on a separate hill, was the dominating radio tower with its flat dish facing skyward. Terrans talked to their home world from there, Martha and Robert had said. Next to it, and only feet away, was a second tower. Swampworld's inner communications, via radio, would come from there.

The mid-morning sun reflected sharp pin-points of light from many of the metal-roofed buildings, reminding Marjac of the sun's dancing sparkles along wave crests on open water after the passage of a dahrero.

All around the flat concrete apron wooden posts marched up and down the hilly terrain. Small dots appeared in the streets moving as they watched.

Beyond the pipes that extended from the windowless building into the water at swamp's side was open water. On the far right of the cleared water were rectangular arrays of docks, low boat-sheds and swamp boats.

The central point of Marjac's panorama was the tall ship which seemed to dominate everything, rising at least as high as the hill upon which they stood. It shone golden yellow. Standing on thin tripod legs, much like Splurg stilt legs, broad of base and narrow like a spear of water grass, it was counterbalanced by two sets of four fish-like fins symmetrically arranged near head and tail. Except for the Swampworld fish, there were no counterparts to this design within his whole experience.

Marjac had had no definite goal to be reached within the largest of Terran settlements. Vaguely he felt that this race could and would cure Splurg insanity. Terrans travelled between stars in the emptiness separating planet from planet as swiftly as their mysteriously powered swamp boats glided over swamp and soil. They had invented and used powerful engines of destruction that could burn flesh from even Swampworld's mightiest. Knowledge, technique so vast, would surely have his answers.

The gate to Port Authority, composed of Swampworld logs and Terran plastics and metals, was thick,



built of the largest trees bound together with strong lashings. The door consisted of two parts, one narrow—a smaller door bordered by the larger—the larger inset into sturdy posts at least twice the diameter of the others. The smaller door was open when he arrived, and the Terran stepped quickly, easily through without hesitation. A powerful arm shot out to block Marjac, however. ‘Where’s your work imprint, boy?’

Marjac was confused, but he answered at once, ‘Aa-nn imm-prinn-tt to ww-or-kk?’

‘Is he new here?’ The guard’s question sounded neutral, yet the way he turned to the Terran, and its context, made it sound prejudicial.

‘Yea! He’s new alright. You’ll have to explain the set-up to him.’ His companion Terran turned round, a half smile on his face.

As though speaking to a child the guard explained, ‘Terran Port Authority is not open to Splurgs except under carefully controlled conditions. All those who work here must have work permits, and are kept under close watch by sponsoring Terrans.’ Marjac couldn’t help but stare at the bright red shirt and deep blue trousers which made up the Eemay guard’s uniform.

‘I don’t want to work; I only wish to learn,’ he answered with some anxiety. The Terrans he had known were friendly. They had accepted him in their homes and elsewhere.

‘Sorry! Orders—standing orders! Follow that trail behind you. You’ll find a Splurg community behind the hill. Terrans go there to find workers when needed.’

MarJac had no clear idea of how to respond to such treatment. Perhaps deep in his subconscious he thought about Terrans who dominantly assumed ownership of Splurg territory. It is hardly likely that such thoughts interfered with his thinking at the time. Besides, Marjac was unusual. Where other Splurgs might have been interested in satiation of their present-time needs and desires, MarJac’s maturity cried for another form of relief.

He thought of his hard, long search. Port Authority, Swampworld’s citadel of Terran super-knowledge, a constantly growing symbol of his quest, was here. Would he succeed? Or would time stretch, distance expand, to include endless cycles of *amok*? ‘It is important. I must solve the sickness for my brethren,’ was his very weak response.

Laughter burst from the guard. ‘You came here? Just to solve *amok*?’ The two Terrans looked at one another.

‘Yy-ee-ss.’

‘Let me get this straight. You travelled here? Alone? Away from your cluster? In the hopes that Terrans would, or could help to solve the sickness?’

Marjac briefly explained how his cluster as well as his adopted one had been destroyed, and his close human friends, Martha and Robert. He described all his experiences in his bursting speech, including his knowledge of Splurgs who were immune to the disease. His goal, he had said, was to solve the problem so that Splurgs could grow, become wise like Terrans.

A cruder guard might have chuckled during the naive description. Very few could take the Splurg defect so lightly, once they had experienced its effects themselves.

‘I’m Dak Storey,’ the Terran companion whom he had befriended shook his hands in earth style. ‘In many years of swamp travel, trading with Splurg and Terran alike, you’re the first I’ve run across actively interested in searching for a cure.’ His voice was highpitched, but sincere.

‘Oh, there’ve been a few one and two generation survivors who started new clusters. That should have been your pattern, too.’

‘I’m starting a new trading company and may need several workers soon. Wait in the outside camp until I can get things arranged, then I’ll invite you in during work periods.’

Turning back to the guard, the Terran, Dak Storey, added, ‘He turned down sugar, too!’

The outside camp for Splurgs was surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs and jutting rocks. It had the appearance more of a guarded camp than a Splurg cluster community. Even the camp’s front wooden



gate was too high for climbing, and the barriers could be swiftly raised or lowered at the narrow gorge's neck to trap those inside.

No guard challenged Marjac. Dry-reed huts—reeds on sides and tops—were the only shelters, and some of those were ragged, torn from misuse and age. A large fire burned at the compound's centre, sending smoke in cloud-smothering layers along the poorly vented ground. Splurgs sat there, doublejointed, listless, before an open pot hung over the fire by metal stakes and a cross-bar.

Lack of shade added to the sun's heat, spreading a glowing blanket of hot air over the gorge. Marjac always remembered his grateful feeling when he encountered a small breeze, occasionally, almost reluctantly, wafting through the camp.

Where most Splurg clusters were characterized by hustling children moving rapidly in and out of the older members like insects buzzing through swamp-reed, here was total lethargy, and only few children. Every cluster he had known had recognizable cluster leaders except this one.

Many had the sugar habit, as he soon learned by meeting their eyes which wavered and dropped easily. It was as though they were ashamed of some deed, and they did not wish to acknowledge even what the deed was. Every adult had a small, yellow tattoo on the right upper arm, identifying each as would the printed marks on Terran canned goods.

This was degradation of another kind. It's recognition and his frustration during the wait combined to make his stay intolerable. It shattered some of his naivety, and especially shattered his halo-image of Terrans.

Each day he waited outside the Terran gate as others passed freely in and out, once their tattoo was checked. Before nightfall they came out, often carrying bundles of old clothing, food, or that peculiar clutch of hand which meant sugar. Usually the clothing was ungainly, unsuited for Splurg physique, and made a grotesque parody of Splurgs. Food could have been found almost anywhere in the swamp. Yet Splurgs worked for food?

There were no proper thoughts for it. Sugar had to be the basis for their degradation.

When he was finally processed through, his upper arm held the unique number 73756. The number of Splurgs given service to date? A rather uncouth, shambling earthman, with coarse hair and skin a broad, pocked brow, escorted him beyond the fence. Dak Storey had sent him, he said.

The ground was little different from outside. Dust blew up in small eddies. He remembered thinking how early the rainy season had come, and how soon it would be before the next furious rains would dissolve the ground into layers of mud, making a thick clay-like ooze.

Dak Storey's job was not complex. In one way his new employer maintained an attitude of restrained amusement, giving precise, curt orders. He wasn't sadistic, merely watchful, faintly amused, perhaps even well-wishing. At least he assured Marjac an easy set of tasks, giving him complete co-operation in his search.

'It'll take only a little of your time,' Dak explained. 'Give you an excuse to be inside the compound. If you really have an itch to learn about Terrans, and their ways, you'll need personal notes from me authorizing you to move about.'

'Do what I ask in the mornings, and I'll give you notes for the afternoons.'

Mainly he opened swamp cow hides, treated them in various chemical solutions, counted them, dried them and folded them into neat, condensed bundles. Three other Splurgs had similar tasks, but they worked throughout the afternoon too.

Port Authority, like others of its kind, had been established with haste and was an incomplete reflection of man's culture. A single bacterium would make a poor sample for study if knowledge of the elephant were desired, yet that was Port Authority. Shipment of settlers from thousands of light years distance cost energy, leaving little for shipment of man's non-essentials or even many of his essentials.

Emigration Authority derived strictly from immigrant law established on Terra, reinforced by universe-standardized Eemay, or Emigration Army, to be found wherever man travelled for the purpose



of peaceful settlement. If the Eemay authorities felt that one kind of shipment held priority over another, that's the way they were made. No civilian authority could overrule Eemay in such decisions, and the civilians who worked for Eemay were as much a part of the military team as those who were sworn in.

Dak Storey was one of the earliest of emigrants, coming of his own free will, at his own expense, to trade under contract for the Eemay. They purchased all of his hides for shipment elsewhere, hopefully to defray some of the costs. Since Terra's goal was to siphon civilians from earth's teeming billions, fast, not to expand its technological base, there seemed little purpose in the establishment of imported, complex technologies.

From Marjac's viewpoint, Terra meant Port Authority; and Terra's technology to such a primitive was everywhere evident. A ship taller than the tallest building on Swampworld could carry hundreds of humans each trip; giant nuclear power stations—really quite small by Terran standards—provided power, light and pure water for the Terran community. Near the power-pac, the long, low, open-sided sheds packed hundreds of white powdered chemicals called fertilizers for shipment to the settlers inland. Marjac listened carefully when Dak Storey explained how the power plant used resins to separate different chemicals from the swamp water. In fact, on his out-going trips he usually filled up with certain chemicals for trade with those who needed the fertilizer or salts, and in return, gave stones of value, swamp hides from dahrero, or produce.

At Port Authority Marjac had the opportunity to extend his knowledge of garden-growing by the use of hydroponics. Thanks to Dak Storey, he was able to follow the process from seeds to finished produce, including the growing of giant tomatoes, potatoes, squash and other foods that were strange to him.

He was not permitted near the schools. 'Too afraid of *amok*—Port Authority policy,' one elderly woman explained.

In time he gained access to more film-books from a retired male teacher. He persisted with his learning, eagerly searching through generations of human knowledge for clues to Swampworld's sickness. Eventually he had to convince himself of his own inadequacies. There was no description in Terran terms to explain *amok* and he was untrained for more subtle forms of research. There had to be another way, so he sought it.

By earth standards Port Authority was crude, and its people, primarily soldiers and civilians who worked for the military, were also crude. Many assumed a kind of dominant air over those who had the yellow tattoo. However, those who had arrived most recently, and also expected to live among the Splurges, tended to be more understanding, more curious and trusting. It was an accident, therefore, that brought Port Authority's only physician to Marjac's attention, a fortuitous meeting which was to help bring vast changes to Swampworld.

Dr. Kester Whiting was naturally busy. Marjac had to wait patiently through several broken appointments before meeting the gray-haired Terran.

Dr. Whiting was old, crusty, critical, independent of view and habit, idealistic. The latter quality had caused him to move frequently from place to place, and his other qualities were endurable only to small groups of intimates. Perhaps working for Eemay was best for him. Usually in disagreement with his own colleagues on many issues of the day, he had found himself on a kind of crusade, unappreciated by most, often appreciated too well by those he criticized.

His age had been duly recorded in Eemay files, placing him younger than he actually was—there was a strong possibility of error. White hair, fine-lined facial features with large crow-footed eyes' a slightly stooped, worried expression which might characterize his profession, or his attitudes were the truth known—he was a crusty character. On public record he had fought for and lost more social causes than possibly any other human of his generation.

Even retirement was fought, as could be witnessed by the distortions to references to his age given in



public documents. Here he was, he often argued, in the prime of health, in the prime of his profession, and by God no one, government regulations or not, was going to make him retire.

After years reduced to the treating of small pets brought to him by children and some adults—he was often fined for treating humans after his compulsory retirement—he joined Eemay, somehow. Out as far as Swampworld no one would care. What they would want to know was, could he do his job effectively, and he could.

So again he practiced medicine, treating emigrants, Eemay personnel and Splurgs. Almost happy—or, at least as happy as he could be without a cause to fight—he worked long, hard, patiently. For him money was of little interest. Long ago he had paid his fees, carrying Eemay rank by custom rather than compulsion.

Marjac knew that Terrans could live perhaps one hundred and eighty to ninety years on alien planets, often ascribed to conditions of lesser gravity and non-transmittable diseases. Dr. Whiting had to be nearing the top end of his life-scale, even so.

When Marjac explained his purpose, Dr. Whiting's interest was almost immediately won, at least to an extent where he willed himself to listen more carefully and longer. There was a certain feeling stirring inside the physician again—another challenge, another goal.

'Yy-o-uu tell about the mm-an-yy diseases and sicknesses that humans have conquered, Dr. Whiting. Yy-o-uu have also mentioned the curing of sick animals on earth and elsewhere. Ww-hh-yy can't you do the same for Splurgs?'

Dr. Whiting's ears had long been attuned to Splurg staccato speech, easily screening the meanings without excessive effort.

'I'm sorry, Marjac,' his voice answered with obvious empathy. 'Terrans are rushed. They want to solve their population problems, usually in the wrong ways. Emigration authorities have officially requested research on Splurg *amok*. They're unlikely to get it until it's too late for the Splurgs.'

The soft cushions beneath Marjac were so close to the floor, his pumpkin-shaped head had to peer between long-bent legs to see the other's face. 'Ww-h-yy should that be so?'

'You mean, "Why did they ask for help for Splurgs?"', or, "Why will it be too late?"'

'Ww-h-yy should they ask for help if they know it will be too late?'

Dr. Whiting scratched his head with the longest finger on his right hand, fluffing the hard-grained grey hair upward during the process. 'I guess it's because of human conscience. We've got to feel that we've done everything possible to help where we can. It's a kind of self lie.'

Marjac was puzzled, then. Not a very good student of human psychology, he had not met another earthman who talked so freely either.

'My guess is that requests of that type usually get lost in paper work. Bureaucracy, you know—just like my requests for better drugs, and surgical instruments.'

'How can requests get lost?' Marjac innocently asked. What does paperwork have to do with needs? Marjac understood the physician's tones, but not their meaning.

The physician merely shook his head.

'Have you seen *amok*?' Marjac asked suddenly.

Dr. Whiting paused, struck by Marjac's persistence and intense manner. 'No! I guess I've been derelict myself!'

Marjac described in detail how family fought family, friend fought friend, stranger fought stranger, how mothers, daughters, sons, fathers,—everyone, and all—got caught in a kind of frenzy of bloodletting. He described how thousands upon thousands of otherwise intelligent, friendly beings like himself would die for no apparent reason or motive. He spared no details when describing his personal losses, his mate, his children, his adopted Terran parents, Martha and Robert, and how they had all died of the insanity.

Dr. Whiting had known these things, but never from the mouth of one who had been hurt so person-



ally, so deeply.

Marjac's visit ended in disappointment; nothing learned, nothing gained toward his objective. What he did not know was that Dr. Whiting had begun to make personal plans, that he had been deeply stirred, that he had found another worthy cause, another banner, that he would do battle.

Marjac, barely conscious of the dust swirling and stirring around him, walked back to Dak Storey's with his head bent low. Almost too late, he successfully dodged a stream of red and blue uniforms marching double-file through the same street in a direction facing him. *Newton's Raiders*, the group was called. General Newton and his men double-filed along the inner circle also, passing Marjac without pause or glance, unaware of his tortured soul.

Marjac finally accepted Dak Storey's offer of work, joining with three long-employed Splurgs and several new, rough-cut humans who were destined to last the season only, as was he.

Work with the trader would not prove demanding, and it would have the benefit of permitting contacts with varied Terran settlers as well as far-spread Splurg clusters.

There came, eventually, a new sense of *deja'vu* to his mind. It crept slowly, as had his last five and a half years, forcing his growth, taking quick advantage of his exceptional interests, his native wisdom and his unique goal.

Dak Storey was by nature an explorer. Port Authority provided his supplies, a permanent home-base and an excuse to travel. Swampworld provided his travelogue. Dak had become a well-known frontier figure, reputed to be an expert guide.

But even Dak was inexperienced with *amok*. How easily the mind could forget!

The cycle was here again; Marjac's generation had grown, and died during the last. He tightened inside like a spring-coil made of fine steel when they approached Jared Simmers' trading post, knowing that beyond this point would be Splurgs of his children's generation, and that they, too, were doomed by his species' cyclical pact with death.

Dak agreed to guide a late emigrant train to Fort West, a new Eemay outpost deep within the new Terran land settlements. They were already about two and a half weeks late, and the rains were coming soon. The night was dark, lacking moons and stars, but Dak Storey pushed them, explaining the need to arrive at the trading post before dawn. 'Scranton McCuen is waiting for us,' he argued against his new partner's surliness. 'They've got settlers to get through.'

Unknown to either Marjac or his employer, another small expedition had been launched only days earlier. It contained the total sum of one boat, heavy with supplies, equipments, records and charts, and one stubborn, idealistic, white-haired, elderly physician who was just as crusty as ever.

Dr. Kester Whiting had spent his interim days charting the drift of the sickness from old records, trader's reports and those of other travellers. He had collected anecdotes, early pioneer medical reports, weather reports, swamp soundings, medical data on Splurg physiology, drugs and bandages, ecological notes—in short, every possible, conceivable thing which might help him in his new crusade. For how could a man with his disposition, his pioneering indomitable spirit, and rugged individualism have passed such an opportunity for do-gooding?

According to his notes, and as was widely known, another *amok* cycle had begun.

SEVEN

The tall spears swept by Carseegan with monotonous regularity. He had eaten, slept, eaten again, cleaned out water filters, checked compass readings, eaten and slept again. It was a dull-gray, cloud-filled morning, and already from a distance he had seen several packs of dahrero and the ever-present predators.

Some of the strips he had crossed had been low, sandy spits, though many had foliage. His eyes continually followed the horizon's blurred line for the first sign of those lofty peaks signalling the westward gateway.

Rains had increased in frequency and intensity; wind and water had formed a greater burden than he



had expected, the sump-pump speed was adjusted more frequently than he had planned.

But there had been clear periods, too. During those, he revelled in the swamp's open feeling, its loneliness, its freedom from human convention. Where earth had required exaggerated modes for human behaviour based upon conventions which had grown fat, *Trippert's Planet* had required trigger-fast muscles and nerves, based primarily upon human callousness and degradation. Swampworld, even with its sickness and rollers, its boils and seasons, was a silent, soft, peaceful, undemanding, almost understanding world. And that's how he wanted it.

Sooner or later he would stop longer to study an island, learn its strengths and weaknesses, its temperament and nature. Several nice ones had been passed too swiftly, but there would be more, further west.

During the torrential rains, when the wind whirled and he made anchor through necessity, his mind sometimes found a sameness of stimuli brought in from the drabness of the cold wetness and the grayness, and it presented old problems yet unsolved. Elizabeth, of course, and General John Newton—the young John Newton, really—was there. His mental self-image was of shame, a retreat which also triggered self-disgust. Then his self-pity—a hard driving-force inside—would grab his mind's helm and life would turn sour-gray, like the sky around.

But these pastiches occurred less frequently—between peaked, green, happy hummocks, past wind-rolled waving needles, and on to another of the brushy, low sandy spits. Men of action can be unsuited for self-realization, or the mental-therapist's art, sometimes coming to it only when life is lived, their physically-tuned bodies having concentrated on another kind of activity for so long.

Wheel marks were absent from the next low-lying sand spit, but his eye caught the red and blue Eemay colours barely visible behind a scraggy bush. The uniform was tattered. Mud and blood soaked the trooper who was not quite dead. His neck had been sliced; one arm was bound by a crude tourniquet. A sharp stick protruded from the trooper's side. Loss of blood was evident, serious. His head moved slowly from side to side, as though stirred by random breezes, and his eyes were closed.

When Carseegan jumped from the boat to the dying trooper's side, eyes fluttered weakly. A thin voice, almost indistinguishable in the hushed rain, said, '*Amok!* Attack—boats—Fort West!'

The trooper squirmed silently when Carseegan cut away his bloody shirt, loosening the tourniquet. 'Where are they?' he asked.

For several minutes it appeared as though the stricken man had lost all perceptive contact with his surroundings. Carseegan repeated his question several times, shaking the trooper between times.

'East—east! Seven, eight strips!' Eyes closed, muscles went slack. Carseegan could learn no more.

What had the dying trooper meant by *east*? Had Carseegan missed the convoy? One unusually high strip lay behind, most were small, shallow, scrub-covered sand strips. He had heard nothing, seen nothing while crossing them because of the winds and rains. If he accepted the dying statement as something other than hallucination, Carseegan could waste days in a fruitless search, meanwhile the boats would be getting further away, and in more danger every mile.

He finally concluded there was little choice but to go back and follow each strip length-wise until he either found the boat-train or determined the falsehood. Cursing under his breath at the thought of more days of delay, he re-set his compass and pushed the boat eastwards, prepared for extended hours of search.

When he found them they were huddled together against the natural contours of one of the sand strips. Reeds had been cleared away by dahrero several days earlier, so he knew they hadn't been in their present location long.

He nudged his boat between two others, filling in a gap, and anchored.

Several men lay on the sand. A single glance told him these were some of those recently wounded. A sergeant with his ear bandaged was helping a small boy to bind up the leg of an emigrant. There was an open Red Cross box and small surgical tools, including burn and puncture-wound sealers. Beside the



box was a small pile of blood-stained rags and a muddy container filled with dark, reddish-brown water. There was the smell of sweat and fear mixed with the eternal swamp-scent: a fusion of organic rot, salt-spray, pungent reed-oils and now and then a tinge of rotten eggs.

The boy did not look up when Carseegan dropped from his boat into the open square. He had dark hair cut short like most settler children. Carseegan couldn't see the boy's face as he bent over his task.

The Eemay sergeant was an old timer. He had probably been on Swampworld for several generations, Carseegan guessed, and his manner suggested practice in taking care of wounds. His expression was matter-of-fact; his eyes showed lines of age. He was one of the old troopers, no doubt, and, as such, would probably have seen or have met General Newton.

Carseegan's stare was unnatural as might be the case with a man long away from society. The sergeant's returning stare was a simple case of fatigue.

Suddenly aware of the General's stars, the Sergeant snapped to attention. Even before a salute could be made, a young Major accompanied by an attractive woman moved into their immediate vicinity. 'Sergeant! Take this—!'

Whatever the Major was about to say, it was bitten off when he noticed the stranger and the General's stars. He came quickly to attention, saluted, and said, 'Major Ashley, Sir.'

Carseegan continued to stare, as though the tableau was really outside his sensory envelope. Suddenly aware that everyone was watching—the boy, the wounded settler, the Sergeant, Major, and the new woman—he remembered who he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to represent. 'Newton,' Carseegan said deliberately, returning the salute.

His eyes stayed on the woman beside Major Ashley. She was an emigrant, indeed. Her hair was brown and long, tied neatly behind with something he couldn't quite make out. Her face, though streaked with mud, was evidently clear; her nose was full and straight, but not too large when compared with her full-boned face. Her legs, now mostly bare, were well-turned and full-fleshed; her bosom was full and in the right proportion. Even as the tension of his silence and the awkwardness of the moment built up, he continued to look.

'General Newton, Sir?' the Major broke the silence. Carseegan wondered if there was an emotional tie between him and the woman.

'What's the situation, Major?' Carseegan's mind grudgingly snapped back to difficulties at hand.

'All officers dead, Sir. Eemay Troop 976 was attacked by seemingly friendly Splurgs on Sandspit 12 some days back. Those of us who escaped joined the boats to provide what protection we could. It was the *amok*, Sir.'

Carseegan wondered at the stupidity of Eemay to place young, untried officers in charge of more experienced men such as the sergeant. Probably had the sergeant been in command, he would have been sufficiently experienced with the irrational behaviour of Splurgs to guard the camp against an attack. Splurgs didn't operate in exactly predictable cycles, but everyone who had been on Swampworld long knew that every day without an *amok* was just that one day closer to one. On the other hand, even General Newton had been unable to keep his green troops disciplined.

'You are the ranking commander?'

The Major's eyes continued to seek behind the general. He was probably looking for the General's troops. 'Yes sir!'

Carseegan would have bet a large sum that Major Ashley had been trained in all of the latest exobiological discoveries. Interesting survival points on, say, *Adelpixy VII* or *Gogon II* would have filled his classroom time on Terra. Faced with a new post on a new planet without sufficient preparation was a short-cut to suicide. The Major wasn't new to Eemay service but Carseegan was willing to lay odds he was new to any kind of emigrant world. He turned his eyes back to the sergeant. Yes, definitely, he had the marks of the old soldier on him. Not a leader, though. He probably could advise the officers well, were they to ask, but he would never volunteer information. He appeared to be insecure, as though



Eemay had let him down; probably all of the troopers would feel the same. They had come from one massacre to protect the emigrants and had found themselves wanting in something. The Major sensed it too and that might also explain his own hesitations.

‘And?—Major,’ Carseegan lashed at him.

Now totally official, the Major’s report sounded efficient but hopeless. ‘When we joined the boats we felt we could provide protection on the *amok* through to Fort West. I—ah—understand from old timers that once *amok* starts in a given region, it sweeps through the whole region until all are either dead or dispersed.’

Carseegan nodded for him to continue.

‘We made good progress for a while. Saw nothing but dahreros, grass and a few rollers. We by-passed an old boil, but then I guess we got careless. At least the boat-train master did. I tried to talk them into going on to a strip with better protective ground but the settlers refused—said they were tired—stopped right here.’

‘Were Splurgs here when you stopped?’ Carseegan could understand the Major’s concern. Somehow, though, the Major should have taken command of the civilians under emergency rules.

‘We saw none. A standard scouting pattern was used, according to the manual.’

There it was, Carseegan thought. *According to the manual*. Had no one bothered to inform the Major that Splurgs were equally at home in swamp or on land? Or, that there was a very good reason for the Splurg’s leg and arm lengths, having evolved from water conditions, whose height averaged four feet? Certainly the nature of the hand palms and foot soles should have given the fresh Major clues to the Splurg’s natural habits and habitats.

‘All right, so the Splurgs were in the swamp all around the strip,’ Carseegan stated, the disgust showing in his voice.

‘They came up to the edge of the boats and trading began. There were only seven or eight at first, then more came in, intermingled with us, seemingly at peace with themselves and us.’

‘We noticed several of the Splurgs holding others in bindings, but thought they were simply anti-social individuals placed in some sort of temporary custody.’

God! Carseegan wondered if exobiological training had forgotten to inform students not to impute anthropoidal customs on other essentially dissimilar life forms. They had seen signs of the *amok* from the start. Nothing was done about it. No one had noticed.

‘Some of the Splurgs made attempts to break into supplies. They acted peculiarly, throwing packages in every direction as though hunting for something. Others traded in the usual fashion for sugar.’

‘I’m not trying to shirk my responsibility in the matter, General, but it is a fact that all of this was going on without the knowledge of the Eemay.’

Carseegan raised his eyebrows, questioningly.

‘I had most of the men on patrol checking out parallel strips. They moved out in the standard search-spiral manoeuvre to insure the maximum coverage in the least time. Fast motion by swamp boat kept the lines closed.’

‘But the Splurgs were in the swamp?’ Carseegan reminded in a questioning way.

‘The Splurgs were in the swamp,’ the Major grudgingly conceded.

‘Those who were throwing our supplies around were placed under adequate control by the settlers. I left the standard number of peripheral troopers on guard. When I came back from the line check, I found that *amok* had started among those inside our camp.’

Our position was untenable. They were inside our protective boundary, inside the inner circle of boats, and they attacked without warning. We were walking into the compound when five or six of the Splurgs struck at the nearest, whether one of them or one of us,’ Major Ashley tightened his lips. He didn’t want to report on casualties.

‘How many, Major?’



‘We lost one hundred; there must be seventy-five Splurgs dead. Never saw anything like it, General. They would kill whatever was next to them, then stand there, letting themselves be killed.’

‘When we came in, we beamed them down as fast as we could see them. There were too many, and they were mixed in with the settlers. We couldn’t do it cleanly.’

There it was. All by the book; the Major had performed wonderfully. Morale was bound to be weakened among both the troopers and civilians. They would also have learned to distrust one another.

Carseegan looked around. There was some movement among the boats but not much. He walked along one side of the inside quadrangle, noting exhausted and weeping men and women everywhere. ‘How many troopers remain?’ he asked of the Major pacing by his side.

‘Thirty-five, Sir.’

‘And emigrants?’

‘About three hundred and sixty, Sir.’

God! Nearly two out of every nine wiped out, Carseegan thought.

‘Who is the emigrant leader? Where is he?’

Major Ashley noticeably hesitated. ‘There seems to be two, Sir. There is Scranton McCuen who has always been with the emigrants, and Dak Storey who joined them at one of the trading posts. Each claims to have the say over his own people. They’ve got this far without too much argument or trouble, except for Splurgs, so they must like their arrangement. Dak Storey is actually the guide, but his men are troublesome.’

The young lady who had originally accompanied the Major on Carseegan’s arrival approached the Major again. Carseegan freely looked at her from top to bottom embarrassing both the young lady and the rule-book Major.

‘Ah—er—this is Miss Marcelia Ann Johanson. Ah—Miss Johanson. This is General Newton.’ It appeared that the Major did not relish his introductory role.

Strange how emotional rivalries could be nurtured under even the most trying of conditions, Carseegan thought. ‘What guards do you have out, Major?’

‘The four-square, according to manual.’ The Major was proud of his foresight.

‘I want every man, wounded or not, limping or not, drawn up before the quadrangle within half an hour, Major. We’re moving on to better ground.’

‘Don’t you think it better if we recover ourselves first, General. We’ve taken a terrible beating and—’

‘Major!’ Carseegan interrupted with fire in his throat. ‘I’m taking over command here. Like most Generals, I am completely unaccustomed to discussing my decisions with subservients.’ He knew he would get a plus from the Sergeant who was within their hearing, and immediate obedience from the desk-bound book Major. He wondered if he had used such rough tactics for those valid reasons or because he wanted to impress the young Miss Johanson, or perhaps because he had to hide his own lack of military protocol. Probably he would never know.

Carseegan’s face softened and he explained as to a child, ‘Major Ashley, when the *amok* begins it usually covers a whole region, eventually sweeping round Swampworld within roughly a ten-Terran-year cycle. If we are in the middle of seventy-five Splurgs, we are probably also in the middle of thousands. Every land-strip, whether sand or humus, will either have Splurgs on them or around them. Splurgs don’t usually grow in isolation, except by accident. Whether they’re here or not, we’ve got to act as though they are, and as though they are ready to *amok* again.’

‘Another thing. Since most of your troopers are green, probably as green as the emigrants themselves, no one has yet emotionally accepted the idea that a whole alien species is about to commit their own genocide and will slaughter any moving object near them during the process.’

‘On the move, we can keep everyone reasonably alert. When we find a defensible strip, with some high ground, we can let part of the people rest while the other part watches.’



‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes sir,’ the Major was visibly relieved to have responsibility taken from him. ‘I’ve sent a messenger to Fort West, Sir. When we find a defensible place, we can wait for help.’

‘Sorry, Major. Your messenger died some seven strips towards the west. Also the reason you couldn’t raise Port Authority—and I assume you tried to convey a message through them—they are short of help and answer their radio only at an early morning hour.’

Major Ashley was visibly shaken.

Carseegan stepped between two boats to find himself in a kind of inner quadrangle. The place was crowded with wounded and crying. He scanned the group, noting rather easily how his suspicions were confirmed. A knot of three men were drinking swamp liquor rather heavily. An open fire burned—spluttered rather—in the centre. Why anyone would want to create such a smoky disturbance at such a time was a puzzle. Probably there were many unusual things going on right now in the *amok’s* aftermath, he thought.

One woman was futilely spading sand into the air. With each shovel-full, she found herself with a widening hole, but no deeper, as sand continued to fill with water undercutting the hole’s sides. Her dead husband lay by her. Here and there were dead bodies, both Splurges and humans. Carseegan turned to the Major, ‘Send for Scranton McCuen and Dak Storey, if they are still alive.’

In a moment the Major returned, this time with a slight smile on his face. ‘Good news, General. Your wife is safe and is on her way!’

EIGHT

A single figure, alone, in a land already aeons old, less than a small flea on the giant Moa bird, or a mite on the great woolly mammoth, stirred the long green fur during his passage, leaving no tracks, no records, so unimportant did he appear to Swampworld and its denizens.

Dr. Kester Whiting, elderly iconoclast, former Eemay physician at Port Authority, idealist, a single-mindedly stubborn, devoted-to lost causes Terran, directed his boat towards the southernmost tip of the Northern Territories, where weather patterns correlated well with his methodically gathered statistics.

Other than a few low-lying sand spits, few land-strips lay between his starting point and his initial goal, and he easily passed over these, leaving a rutted trail soon to be washed away by rain or high tide.

Day followed day in simple routine, and voids were filled which had been unknown, covered by years of self-discipline and harsh social service, though now and then loneliness drifted in and out of his heart as easily as did the pungent swamp scents.

He slept soundly for seven hours, rose at dawn crisply awake, prepared easy-to-mix packaged foods, washed, checked his position and distance, and then steered his little craft through a blizzard of crawling, hopping, flying life-forms.

Against his own advice, he napped after lunch, letting his mind sink deeply into an old man’s thick-syrupy memories until the evening light waned. Dinner was taken slowly, as had always been his habit, and at night, when the buzzings and whirrs had begun to be replaced by tic-sacs, snaps and chircurdas, he studied his notes and books until his body called him to sleep and dreams again.

In time he approached his destination, though it was late in the day with the hot sun already melting below the reed-broken horizon. Dark rocky crags, strong and thrusting, loomed before him. He circled the island, finally locating a shore-piercing beach.

Now all professional, he used the remaining daylight to begin what was to become a long series of note-takings: radio-activity was no greater than an earth background. Insects, worms, bacteria, moulds and equivalent creatures grew in abundance, ecologically balanced. The absence of birds of the air was a puzzle, really an anomaly. Insects, he found, controlled one another, and fish and other mammalia also kept insect populations down.

He cross-checked his medical scrawls against findings of earlier explorers and scientists where pos-



sible, and against standard Swampworld textbooks, or encyclopedias.

The flora fauna was strange, but not unexpectedly so. Using the standard comparability and analogue tests, he had already discovered enough biological puzzles to keep most people content for a life time.

His taxonomic and morphological guesses, no matter how shrewd, could not replace hundreds of thousands of observations by many people, taken over many years, a requirement before Swampworld's tree-of-life could be successfully patterned. Using the comparability and analogue tests he could compare each Swampworld subject against Terra's well-known structure, and at least gross differences were then easily spotted. These major differences could be used as deviations from which new hypotheses developed for a new planet might be created.

By knowing earth's interlocking structure well—and his books and films were well-endowed with such knowledge—he at least had a starting point from which hypotheses could be made in *vacua*, so to speak.

First-order approximations were better than no framework at all, xenobiologists had stressed.

Among those peculiarities he found were such as these: An algae which seemed to dominate the briny swamp water, yet also lived equally well in fresh water. Though chiefly uni-cellular, as was Terra's, it also could be found in multi-cellular groupings with some primitive forms of cellular specialization. As with earth's cellular walls, its cell-walls consisted of overlapping halves rich in silica, with finely sculptured walls. They also provided food for fish and other aquatic animals.

Unlike the most closely resembled Terran species, this algae was sexual by isogamy and heterogamy, having definite alternation of generations.

He scraped tree-fungi from some of the oily-resinous species finding similar comparisons and dissimilarities. One such, reminding him very closely of phylum *Myxomycophyta*, was saprophytic; yet the same species had parasitic tendencies more closely resembling those to be found in *Schizomycophyta*.

They certainly aided in decomposing dead bark, wood, and leaves in the same manner as did earth's fungi, but the same species also could destroy the living. Moreover, the fungi seemed to go through two phases which were virtually impossible to relate to Terran structures. Chlorophyll gave the fungi a decided brown-greenish cast until some further point in its maturation when it lost every portion of the chemical to become a whitish-gray colour.

Strong roots could be found in most foliage, roots which dug deep into the soil, and branched far out. Similarly puzzling, the same plants were sporophytic, which should have meant that roots were unnecessary, as were the large leaves. The taller trees, in addition to oil-rich wood structures which burned easily, seemed to reproduce by almost any means known to separate species on Terra—seed, stem, leaf, root, spore.

It was an alien world indeed.

When the small island's resources and newness were exhausted days later, he secured his voluminous notes in a sealed waterproof cannister, making only a final weather recording in his scrawly script before he pushed southwest to follow his pre-determined course.

His route was filled with other tests—water samples, reed analyses, bottom cores, shell-life and fish tests, their variety and stomach contents, aerobic and anaerobic algae, and so on.

He carefully noted the large, dark-green clumps of swamp reed, tallying their frequency, spacing and measuring their heights. He also tested their chlorophyll content, empirical percentages of oxygen, phosphorus and carbon, as well as the nature and structure of complex compounds, including trace elements and their effects.

Naturally his pace was slow, and when the rains began, he shrouded himself under a tight-fitting canopy, patiently waiting out the heaviest downpour as he soaked in the warmth of the boat's small power-pac. Unless the rain was exceptionally bad, he stayed dogged in his determination to follow his course and routines. At such times, one who knew Dr. Whiting's ancestral stock would have only lightly commented on a great-great-grandfather known as 'Old-Rain-Or-Shine,' or equally affection-



ately, as 'Old-Yellow', because of a similarly dogged determination to plough the good earth, he and his mule, come rain-or-shine, usually in an old, yellow raincoat that could be seen for miles.

His was a strange mission for an earthmen. Where others might have worked to dominate the planet, at Splurg expense, he sought to return a heritage.

Eventually he worked his way into a cluster of swamp-livers. Traditional greetings were made. Though somewhat against custom, they gathered together during daylight hours.

While they satisfied their almost simian curiosity, inspecting him, his clothing, artifacts and screen projectors, he, in purely professional, methodical manner, tested blood characteristics, thickness and moistness of skin, thinness of feet and hand-webbing, softness of toes, degree of virility and dozens of other characteristics.

The heart, though two-chambered in most members, was obviously three-chambered in individuals here and there, including cluster leaders. Genetic sport? Evolutionary change? Natural metamorphosis? Most of the Splurges he had examined at Port Authority were three-chambered. Indeed, he could recall none who were not.

The closest analogue to Terra was the amphibia, bringing to mind metamorphosis of the frog, salamander or toad.

Several weeks of activity filled one of his note-pads, whence, again, he made a final weather notation before pressing on. At the next strip he would find a physician's place of torment, a Splurg's hell!

NINE

Confrontation with Elizabeth had to occur, Carseegan supposed. Here was personal danger; he was not General Newton, and she would know.

Carseegan's thoughts flashed back over years, bringing to mind a younger, vivacious woman, a woman who, within months had captured the hearts and minds of both John Newton and himself. What was she wearing that last day? She had laughed at his reproaches for her behaviour. Was it dark red? Or was the dark dress worn on the night they had attended the opening of Gregson Municipal Art Centre? Strange how the mind hid little things like that.

She would know the fraud. Would she give it away? It could only mean death were she to do so. Carseegan checked his twin-barrelled needle beam, increasing the gas pressures which, when the gases mixed, spontaneously drove alternating beams of intense light. He checked various escape routes and escape factors, a habit learned on *Trippert's Planet*, another world now, far away both in time and distance.

She dashed into the inner quadrangle, not joyously, but certainly with expected familiarity. She paused momentarily. Was Carseegan correct in thinking she felt something wrong at such a distance? She swept her eyes around in a circle then headed directly for him. She slowed again then flung herself into his arms. 'Oh John! It's so good to see you again. Those terrible, terrible Splurges. They're everywhere.'

She kissed him full on the mouth, held her head back to better look at him and he could see the sudden pallor flash over her white skin. She dropped her hold on him and placed herself about one foot away, close enough to seem to talk intimately. By now all the wounded and curious were watching the meeting. Her eyes widened, her right hand flew to her mouth. Carseegan quickly closed the gap, saying, 'Elizabeth'.

As he pulled her to him, he whispered between his teeth, 'I'll explain later.' He covered her mouth with his. His mind was working fast to solve the immediate problem; even so, the kiss was flat, bringing no surge of triumph to his muscles and emotions.

She trembled in his arms as would a young girl being kissed on her first date. He could feel her muscles suddenly tighten, then relax when the implications of his masquerade sunk into her mind so completely orientated to high society.

Once the expected motions were completed in front of the watching group, Carseegan rushed her out of the enclosure and outside both quadrangles to his own boat. He turned her back to the swamp so that



he could watch as he talked, idly noting the approach of several swamp boats. 'I'm sorry, Elizabeth. John is dead. I found him dying of the *amok* many days ago. His troops were green, too. He made me promise that I'd come to protect the settlers and get them safely to Fort West.'

For a moment his body wanted to respond as though completing a vow from earlier times. Here was the girl—now a woman—whom he had used as the object of his self-pity. The General was dead. She was free again. If rumours he had picked up on distant worlds were true, there had been no love between them. Why not pick her up and push off into the wild swamps? Then his fantasy withered, leaving him with the cold hard truth that he had matured far beyond emotional need for a socialite such as Elizabeth Newton, widow.

Her ways had always been coy, effeminate. A twist of her face, a motion of her fingers or arms, a positioning of her body had all contributed to the overall effect. She had another kind of coldness in her, though an egocentric kind. All her little twists and pirouettes were aimed at one single facet of man-woman relations, to dominate. Unable to accept life any other way, her internal feeling of insecurity caused her to move on from conquest to conquest. 'Bob!—Bob! It's you!'

'Yes, Elizabeth. It's Bob Carseegan now, alias General John Newton for a period.' He held her two hands in his. 'Don't tell the others. You've got to trust me for John's sake. He was about to give me orders for this group to follow. He died first. Were I to explain who I am and what happened to John, they would be at my throat instantly.'

'I've heard some things about you during the years, Bob.' She was hesitant in her speech again. Carseegan could almost hear her high society training click into place.

'Probably a lot of it was true, Elizabeth. I was a professional killer on another world. By joining the Emigrant Army I had hoped to escape some of my past, make a new life here. I did desert for that purpose.'

A break in the seasonal cloud cover occurred, splitting the sky into a long, vaulting canyon of clouds. At each end could be seen the two shining orbs, Pearl and Opal, near the opposite lower horizons. It was nearly sunset; the light would soon be gone and he had to get the boats moving. One part of his mind tempted him, questioned him for his unnatural role; the other part calculated, working out ways and means of getting the naive emigrants started.

John had been her husband but there had been no love in her for him. Society said the widow should grieve, so grieve she would. Her face wrinkled and her tears became torrents. 'John, oh John! You're gone,' she cried in proper imagery.

He let her put her head against his chest and held her there while she sobbed. Her sobs and tears were real but not convincing. For the first time he wondered at John's misfortune and his own fortune. Life was change; living was change. A personal liaison with the right person could be wonderful, like that elderly couple he had helped against the *amok*; was it years back? General John Newton, proud, upright, always military and socially correct, would never have admitted to a mistake in such a liaison. His life must have been hell.

'John wanted us to start again on Swampworld,' Elizabeth stated matter-of-factly. 'It wouldn't have worked, Bob. We were too far from each other.'

'Oh how often I've regretted my treatment of you.' She wiped her eyes and drew back a little from him. 'A day or so after our wedding we knew it was a mistake but refused to admit it to one another. His career would have been ruined and the scandal would have caused grave repercussions among the relatives.'

'You were gone, Bob. I knew then I had mistreated you and chosen the wrong man.'

He hadn't wanted to think of it again, but there was that laughter still ringing in his mind. The ultimate rejection.

Strange, too, how little he really cared. The memories were there. They both shared them. But were memories of that kind useful any longer? Would such a memory sustain him during the methodical task



of beam-fighting? Could it sustain him, and the boats, during this trek through *amok* territory? He thought not.

Elizabeth was about to say more but was stopped by the noise of approaching boats. Some of the Major's screening force was coming in. 'Don't expose me, Elizabeth. I'm doing what has to be done.'

She nodded in agreement as he stepped back towards the boats.

Major Ashley had rounded up most of his troopers. One aide near the Major was using a small pocket radio to call in the remainder. The radio reminded Carseegan of an obvious point which it seemed everyone, including himself, had overlooked. 'Make plans to contact Port Authority early in the morning. See they pass our troubles along to Fort West. Tell them I plan to find a defensible position and we'll be in contact again, then.'

'Yes, Sir,' Major Ashley pulled out a small pad and wrote himself a note.

Two men came up to them. One was large boned and heavy set. He was at least as tall as Carseegan though his raincap and cape hid most of his bulk. Eyes were wrinkled, blue, watery. The second man was small. He was perhaps a foot shorter than Carseegan. Long brown hair, curled at the ends, hung from his head, nearly covering the collar of his green swamp-hide jacket. His clothes were neat, clean. Where others had mud, blood or other evidence of work and struggle, this man was clean from head to foot. Undoubtedly he had changed, Carseegan thought.

'This is Mr. Scranton McCuen and Dak Storey. Scranton is in charge of emigrants,' the Major pointed with his thumb to the taller of the two, 'and Dak Storey has the trading boats.' The Major turned back to his troops as soon as his introduction was completed.

Dak Storey stepped between Scranton McCuen and Carseegan, 'Let's get something straight from the start, General. This is a—,' the slighter man stopped short. The trader had seen or known General Newton, Carseegan was sure. He tensed himself, ready for any statement or movement. '—civilized outfit,' the trader finished. 'We run things our way, not yours. If you want to tag along, fine. Otherwise stay out of our way.'

Scranton McCuen stepped forward also, saying, 'To begin with we stay here tonight. The people want to.'

Carseegan turned to Dak Storey, 'And you?'

'Well, I'm not sure it's such a good idea to stay here. That's where Scranton and I disagree. I've been on Swampworld a lot longer. Don't think it's safe.' The trader shrugged his shoulders. 'It's their life!'

Carseegan shifted back to the taller man, 'And you, Scranton McCuen?'

He shifted his head to the other, taller man, temporarily ignoring the trader's insistent gaze. 'The civilians aren't too crazy about travel right now, General. Think it's too dangerous in the swamps at night, what with the rain and all. Besides, they'd have to leave their dead. They must have a civilized burial, you know.'

From Scranton's attitude and vocal tones, Carseegan could understand that this man was really impartial one way or another. He was probably a good organizer and could keep people united during physical and emotional trials, but he also had the presence of mind to recognize his own lack of knowledge of Swampworld and its inhabitants. 'Place the dead on the boats, McCuen. Tell the people we'll bury them in decent ground tomorrow, or as soon as we reach defensible territory. Besides Splurges who might *amok*, there are swamp rollers. Tell them that.'

Dismissing Scranton, he turned back to Dak Storey. He motioned for the man to step out of range of hearing of others. By now the clouds had closed again and sunlight was not only heavily filtered but almost below the horizon. Turning, Carseegan asked, 'What's the problem, Mr. Storey?' He watched the man's eyes when he spoke and they stayed steady.

Maybe it was Carseegan's familiar stance or just arbitrary whimsy. Anyway, Dak chose to tell a truthful story. 'Yes, I've been across these swamps before. I've seen the *amok* come and go. I've got six men with me hauling fertilizer and some sugar to the settlements in the west. *Those* men don't feel like



going. I only own part of my outfit. They own the rest. We always work that way, to get free help. Besides, we've got four Splurgs doing some of the heavy work for us. They're sure to get killed by these hysterical, green troopers of yours during the trip.'

'Where are your Splurgs now?' Carseegan was naturally surprised they hadn't already been killed.

'We have them hidden in one of the fertilizer boats. They're the large boats with three tail-fins between two of the stabilizer pontoons.'

'All right, I'd like to talk to your six other men. Leave the Splurgs where they are for the time being.' Carseegan had assumed the mantle of leadership easily. He turned to go, stopping when Dak Storey touched his arm.

'Another thing, *General*. The last word had emphasis. Carseegan tensed, again.

'You aren't General Newton. I've known John since he arrived.'

Carseegan turned, looking squarely into the trader's face, and waited. The pause seemed long, but probably wasn't.

'I'll stay with you, whoever you are, unless things go wrong. Understand?'

Carseegan's walk through the boats increased his sympathy with the people and their grief while it confirmed his resolve to see them safe. A small girl with yellow-taloned hair and clear skin and face, probably not more than six years old, was lying with ugly-brown acid burns on her face and arms. Plastic surgery and new tissue-growth stimulators were a long way off. Eventually the little girl would be helped; in the meantime, she had to live with senseless disfiguration.

Further on he saw two bodies lying side by side, one a small boy, the other an adult woman. A sad faced man stood still, dry-eyed and apathetic over both.

When Carseegan reached the Dak Storey traders his mind was firm. His mind was also jolted by the contrast between the appearance of the traders and the other emigrants and soldiers. The men were clean; their clothes had either been recently changed, or—and he felt absurdly foolish for thinking it—they had hid during the massacre. Looming before him were four large boats. Each had three tail-fins and each had a large canvas covering over metal frame resting on a flat platform that in turn rested on four pontoons designed especially to cut easily through swamp grass.

It was easy to understand how the men could keep dry within their frame-covered shelter. Their open rain-coats clearly showed clean and relatively fresh clothes compared to other settlers. Probably the Splurgs did the dirty work in moving through the swamp while the seven men stayed within the tents which surely covered their supplies well. The real problem to be considered was how they had managed to maintain their civilized composure and their tent structures during the recent *amok*. The thought that the Dak Storey traders had hidden in their tents during the massacre, thus not attracting *amoking* Splurg's attention, nibbled at his mind even more.

One of the men was lying on the edge of the boat's platform, feet barely dangling above the water's surface. In his hand could be seen a container which could have held swamp liquor, and from the surrounding smells, probably did. The head of another could be seen dying at the far edge, his body hidden by the tent. Three men played cards at one of the tent openings on the second closest boat. The sixth man was not to be seen.

'Where's the sixth man, Dak?' Carseegan deliberately ignored the greetings from two of the three card players.

'Probably inside, sleeping it off. Jump over to boat three and shake up Rawley, will you Jester? the General, here, wants to talk to all of us for a minute.'

The one called Jester studiously waited to finish the round of cards, then, with an easy leisurely manner, jumped over to the next boat. Carseegan could hear the rumble of discussion taking place within the distant tent, but no details. Within what seemed like minutes, but was probably only seconds, the shaggy head and beard of Rawley appeared behind the one called Jester. Meanwhile Dak had been able to move the two drinking men around so that Carseegan now faced all seven.



‘I understand you men don’t wish to move tonight. You think you’re better protected from *amok* than the emigrants are.’ Carseegan used his best I-am-the-General stare as he searched each eye, one by one.

There was no response. The bearded, shaggy one sat back, hands behind, holding his body at an angle, and faintly smiled. He was the only one without rain-cape and hat. The two drinking men simply raised their containers to their lips and drank again. One of the card players fidgeted and the other two looked into the swamp at their feet.

‘If you men have nothing reasonable to say, expect to move out in about thirty minutes from now. I’ll take no further excuses.’ Carseegan turned to leave but broke his wading when he heard one of the six say, ‘Naow ain’t thet jest like a Gen’l. Thinks he kin order peac’ful civilians ‘round?’ Several others laughed.

Carseegan fingered his twin-barrelled beamer hidden beneath his cloak, and faced the men, prepared for any eventuality. In his most steely voice—a voice once part of his weaponry on another far distant planet in another far distant past—Carseegan answered, ‘Gentlemen, you’ve got a choice. Either give me a good reason for not following my orders, or face my troops. Whether or not I am legally authorized to order around peaceful civilians, we can discuss at our leisure, after *amok* ends.’ He was almost sure that one of the drinking men had made the comment, but follow-on laughter had indicated they were all together. ‘Put Splurgs inside the tents and ride outside like the settlers,’ he added.

One of the card players held up his hand to the remainder, signalling a stop to their asides. Were they guilty of past behaviour by hiding during the attack?

‘Maybe we can go along with the General. How far you expectin’ us t’ travel ‘night?’

‘About six strips further west. We’ll have good ground there and good protection from attack. Keep your Splurgs hidden until I give the word. Your boats are the biggest and will provide the most protection against further attacks. Place them on the outside. Major Ashley will give you directions on where to place them.’ He looked at each of the traders with a penetrating, scornful glance, then turned to wade away again.

‘Wait, General!’ A shaggy-haired one called suddenly. ‘I’ll walk with you.’

Carseegan noted the quick, deft movements of this trader. Unlike the others, his eyes seemed clear and his hands quick. He paused and waited.

Side by side they walked back to the emigrants who could be seen bustling now with directed, meaningful activity under the Major’s deft directions. Only part of Carseegan’s mind was on the hulking man at his side. Every possibility had to be thought out and prepared against: Splurgs in the tall swamp grass, unseen, unheard; careful guards at each strip crossing; guards up and down ridges and along the passes of the foliage-covered strips; keeping the boats closed—God! They’ve probably been strung out for miles during the pre-*amok* trip; better check with Scranton McCuen on that—and the emotionally disturbed—maybe fear and pressure will drive them on; and rain—what if it rains another forty, fifty inches per hour as it had already—the rainy season was merely beginning.

He felt a stubby beamer pushing through his back. They had waded ashore and were circling around the boats in a dark portion of the sand strip. Rain-cape, Eemay tunic, no matter, he could feel it and he knew its strength. How naive he had been to assume the mantle of generalship; and where was his ability to impress Swampworld old-timers?

He stopped, stood still for a moment, then turned his head to face the shaggy one, meeting the man’s clear eyes full on. It was now obvious to Carseegan the man was also a former beam-fighter, he was dangerous. What was his name? Called Jester, wasn’t he?

‘I was on *Trippert’s Planet*.’ Jester spoke softly, letting his words penetrate into Carseegan’s soul. He waited.

Trippert’s Planet! The man knew his position, knew him as an mposter! Or did he? Did he merely recognize another beam handler? They trained their gladiators in certain quick responses and mannerisms. Had Carseegan given himself away to the man so easily? Or was he merely using the words to put



a genuine scare into the General he saw before him?

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ he asked severely, still maintaining his fictional front, now that of a bull-headed, never-say-die general.

‘I saw you in the finals. Memorized you well. Thought maybe I’d have to take you on one day. That’s good for the memory.’

His past was out. Somehow, in spite of all the fortuitous circumstances which had permitted him to masquerade as the red-haired, stubborn General Newton of Eemay, this one-in-a-trillion event foreshadowed all.

‘Where’s the General? Explain yourself, Carseegan!’ The words shot out of the bearded face like brown spittle.

‘Killed. Splurgs got him. All green scrub-backs just like these. He was about to write a note ordering the green Major Ashley to do what I’m doing. And to get word to Fort West for help. I drove around all of you and found Ashley’s messenger—Ashley had thought to send for help himself—he was dead. That was Splurgs too.’

Radio ?’

‘Port Authority has sent all spare troops—mostly scrub-backs—to the Northern Territories after deserters. Thought they’d make an example of them, I suppose, and also give their troops a taste of blood. *Amok* began and Port Authority has its own hands full. Anyway, it’s all up to us, they said. Promised a frontier planet; given a frontier planet, they said.’

‘What do you get out of this ?’

There it was. If Carseegan could make this hardened fighter and trader understand that his motives were pure, that he got nothing at all out of it, he would be some kind of modern super-salesman. No! He wasn’t that good. A lie would do, he guessed.

‘I knew the General’s wife when we were younger. I loved her; was going to marry her. The General beat me to it. That’s why she didn’t give me away when I arrived.’

‘How do I know you didn’t kill the General yourself?’

Carseegan could feel the gun’s flat crystal against his back. It stayed steady. One short cycle of intensified photons could end his life immediately. ‘You’ll have to take my word for it.’ He tensed himself. Would his abrupt gamble pay off?

The two men stood still without moving or speaking for a moment. Jester, the shaggy one, finally lowered his gun. ‘I’ll play your game so long as it means you get the boats through. If I see you’re getting us into worse trouble, I’ll get you. Understand ? Even if its from the back, I’ll get you. Corpses don’t float long in the swamp, and there’s always swamp rollers to clean up the mess. Remember that. Always rollers.’

Now that the advantage had been lost by his assailant, Carseegan probably could have taken the man. He was more recent from *Trippert’s*, his training sharper. Yet he had no grudge against this man. Indeed, the man had acted very fairly considering the circumstances. ‘All right—Jester, isn’t it?—I’ll need your help. Keep the other traders in line. We need their knowledge and abilities as we move out.’

Jester squinted his eyes briefly when he put away his gun. ‘Well, now, I can keep some of them in line. They’re a pretty independent bunch, though. Don’t like fighting Splurgs or anything else that might hurt them.’

Another confirmation of Carseegan’s suspicions?

Major Ashley came out of the darkness. ‘Ah, there you are, General. I believe we’ll be ready to go in about twenty minutes. Your wife is also looking for you. Says she has some sort of trouble with her boat and wants you to join her.’

Jester looked thoughtfully at Carseegan.

‘Give her my compliments, Major. Tell her I’ve got to stay with my own boat. Also see that the trader’s boats are used to best advantage around the periphery.’



‘I want a v-shaped spear of trooper boats, your most experienced, in front. Scatter the others around the periphery. Have them drive their boats in circular formation around the whole in timed intervals with check points at each side.

‘I want all boat lights on and pointed on swamp grass. The outside boats will shine their lights in overlapping patterns outwards. Tell them if I see a single boat shining their light on another, I’ll flay them alive.

‘That’ll mean at least two to each boat. One to watch lights and the other to watch driving.’ The Major’s notebook was out again and he was scribbling in it rapidly.

‘Give instructions to each boat. They are to use Standard Port Authority radio band; that’ll save all the otherwise inevitable adjustments. I want the radios *all* on—emigrants and Eemay—send and receive. They must use them according to my orders. No noise; no talk-back unless an emergency occurs.’ Carseegan had an idea that attention focused on the radios might serve as a unifying element.

‘Won’t that interfere with Port Authority transmissions, General ? Even at this distance the boat radios wi—.’

‘Damn Port Authority, Major Ashley. We’re here. They’re there. They’re probably busy doing something else anyway. If they have a complaint, they can take it up with me later.’

Jester must have been sufficiently impressed with Carseegan’s orders. ‘I’ll get back to the traders now, General.’ He waved his hand in a gesture, friendly but not overly so.

‘Another thing, Major,’ Carseegan continued. ‘I want a small group of men to specialize in keeping the boats closed up.’

‘We can remind them by radio, Sir.’

‘No, Major. I want the radios reserved only for my directions and for emergencies, understand ?’

‘Yes sir: I’ll have three men ride in and out.’

Carseegan finished his other instructions then drove his boat to the head of the line. He decided he would take point position himself.

At first the boats swung out from the narrow sand spit in a long string, looking probably very much like they had when they arrived, just a gang of settlers leisurely pacing their way across a new, paradise planet.

Carseegan swore when he saw the long line of lights. If Splurges were around them, and triggered to *amok*, emigrants would die. Scranton McCuen!’ he shouted through the radio. ‘Hold your boat to form an anchor point. Civilians, sight on Scranton and close in behind; make rows not more than five abreast. This will be confusing for a while but getting it sorted out now will pay off in the long run.’

A single front-running light quickly floated to a stop and other lights began to bunch together near it. Some over-passed, circled back. Others bunched together in no recognizable patterns and confusion did seem to reign for a while. ‘Major Ashley! Herd the trader boats to outside peripheral positions at four points, then get your troopers to begin their circling.’ Behind the background of cursing, groaning and crying, he could hear a faint, ‘Yes, sir!’

Troopers assigned to the point with him came up. One was the veteran sergeant he had first met on his arrival. Two others were also sergeants; one was a corporal. Must have used most of his non-coms, Carseegan speculated.

For a moment he was blinded when a light swept over him, then he could see the bunching and jockeying for position behind. Already a steady stream of about twenty-five lights had begun to circle around the whole. Gaps existed in their lines but even the scrub-backs, with their small amount of military drill, were doing better than the emigrants.

The background hum of propellers grew louder in his receiver. He learned to strain out the sound as he concentrated on both radio messages and lights. The shriek of an hysterical woman drowned the other noises suddenly.

‘All emigrants, your attention, please. One of your members is hysterical. We can’t find her without



your help. Please maintain radio silence and those who are nearest the woman, do what you can to shut her up. Turn off her radio and control the boat yourself if necessary.'

He heaved a heavy sigh releasing his tension when the screeching was stopped. Now all except the tail section of the three hundred odd emigrants, probably up to one hundred and fifty boats not counting the four heavier fertilizer boats, had assembled into proper position. He could see the long trail of lights moving behind the rear boats, slowly but surely closing them up. Rain began to drizzle again, and he cursed himself for not having had the presence of mind to borrow a rain cape.

One of the boats with a trooper came near and slowly moved up to his side. 'Sergeant Duhaney, Sir. Major Ashley sent a message by one of the perimeter boats. Says we could probably close up faster now, if we were to start.' The sergeant respectfully touched his cap.

Carseegan's returning salute was symbolic at best. He wasn't capable of saluting properly because he lacked the training. 'Very good, Sergeant. Thank you.'

'All right everybody. This is General Newton again.' His voice raised itself above the hum of propellers and rasping swamp grasses. We are going to move out. Remember to keep radio silence unless an emergency occurs, then shout loud. I'll relay orders to Scranton, Major Ashley or the Traders. Major Ashley will have a small group of boats moving in and out of your formation to help where needed. Anyone have a question?'

The radio remained silent, except for the background noise, a low buzzing.

'Keep your speed down and direct the lights outwards. Watch for movement. We've got things to watch for. Swamp rollers and Splurges. Don't get beam-happy. Working together, we'll all pull through.' It wasn't much of a pep-talk but it sounded right to Carseegan at the time.

'Now! Follow me!' His voice lashed out bright, snapping.

He checked his compass and directed his boat's front almost due west. Miles of identical swamp everywhere about four feet deep, tall grass, sharp, reed-like; dangerous, poorly understood swamp rollers hunting in packs; and small, narrow dirt strips lay between them and protection. How long does *amok* usually run, he wondered?

TEN

The seventy rows of boat lights stretched in strangely twisted rarefactions and pulsations, throbbing inwardly and outwardly as would some long, slinky set of luminescent domino-constructed snakes. Carseegan was grateful to see the tail finally sweeping inward to close as the troopers brought their own boats into ever-tighter circles at the rear.

Usually the boats rode five abreast, sometimes four. In either case, the outer boats kept their lights directed outwards while the other two gave light directly in front. Whenever the lights of the rearmost boats began to infringe on boats ahead, the drivers slowed. That, and the opposite actions, furnished the source of the pulsations.

Occasionally the voice of one or another trooper from the column's rear, or from inside ranks, came through his speaker when they shouted at some laggard.

The emigrants were ordinary men and women who wished to find room to live, after years of crowded earth or earth-like colonial conditions. Those who did leave civilization, moreover, were in great measure individualists. Many could not understand the reasons for keeping in line, or even staying within the caravan boundaries. Major Ashley's troopers had problems for they couldn't very well be alert to outside dangers while herding those inside. In fact, from what Carseegan could see, the troopers' attention was being split so badly that flank security would be difficult at best.

One man, probably a drunk, fell out of one of the boats and several others slowed to help. Had the slow-down been permitted, the whole last half of the boat-train would have jammed itself into one haphazardly confused pile of throbbing skimmers. Then goodbye control! He could hear voices shouting warnings to one another as boats began to mix and push at one another.

'Major Ashley! Get your man in. Unjam that pack! Shoot and pull the boats out if necessary. We can't



endanger the whole group for the sake of one person.'

Changing his voice pitch, he directed his next comments to the emigrants. 'I've ordered my troops to shoot anyone who refuses to pull back into line. Leave the man overboard. If he's sober, he can't drown, you all know the swamp is too shallow. If he's drunk, the troopers will pick him up.'

Seconds later Major Ashley was on the radio directing his troops by name and rank. Carseegan wondered if the Major had also taken meticulous notes during his latest orders.

He watched as the long column split around two stationary lights then joined again on the upstream side. Like ribbons in an airstream he thought. Then the shout of swamp rollers cut through his musings.

'Where?' he flashed back.

'Left flank. Whole lake of 'em.'

'Are they moving yet? Will any part of the line reach them?' He was concerned with his own lack of knowledge over the strange water life. Would they attack at night? Presumably if any of the boats, snake-like, lashed into a pack, they would come alive and boiling, as they did during the day. Even the present armada of troops and weaponry would be hard pressed to stop serious damage from those acid-throwers, particularly if the boats were mixed too closely with animals for the use of grenades.

'General, we've got an emergency. A woman's going to have a baby!' The call came from a man but the voice was high-pitched, scared. God! Was everything going to hit at once?

In the background of this louder voice was the barely heard word, '... soon,' as the trooper answered his first question.

'Trooper, say it again. Emigrant interruption.' His voice was hard and biting. Callous, they would call him. He couldn't blame them but then, was it better to be dead?

'The way the line is whipping back and forth, one of the boats is sure to hit them soon. They aren't moving yet.' Good man, that trooper; his voice was steady as a rock, as though he were reporting on a matter-of-fact happening.

'Major Ashley, here are the priorities. Set up three boats and anchor near your trooper at the edge of the rollers. Every emigrant boat must note the positioning and stay clear. Swamp rollers, if you don't already know, are ten times worse than *amok* Splurges.

'Secondly, Major, detail off two troopers. Take care of the woman in labour. If you can, pick one or two with some training. Out!'

There was more he could do. 'Scranton McCuen there?'

The reply came almost at once. 'Scranton here.'

He saw a light flash on and off about halfway down the line indicating the position of the woman in labour. His troopers had reached the roller's edge. 'Hold it Scranton. I'll be back to you in a moment.' Locate the doctor. Another item, another detail. 'OK. Everyone can see the troopers standing by near swamp roller territory. We're starting to skirt it nicely. Stay grouped and don't stop.' Back to the doctor.

'Scranton! Is there a physician in your group?'

'Doctor Helgeson, General,' was the radio's quick reply.

'Doctor Helgeson, move out of your position. Go to the boat with the blinking lights about half-way along the chain. You'll see the two troopers converging there now.' Why hadn't he saved time by asking for the doctor in the first place?

A voice heavy with fatigue said, 'I'll move into the indicated position at once.'

Carseegan wondered about a physician's motive for shipping off-world to a primitive colonial planet. No company. Poorly supplied with drugs. What motive? He also wondered about the motives of others, like himself, then his mind slipped uneasily into its tiring routine.

Hours passed and the boat-train crawled on. Every once in a while radio silence was broken by a sharp cry or curse. He couldn't blame them. From a soft, easy but overcrowded world to a semi-harsh, primitive, dangerous environment, through the channels of a slapdash emigrant training; that was a thoroughly confused jump for anyone. Most pioneer literature discussed the benefits: land of your own,



fences and animals to care for, plenty of help from Good Old Terra. Had there been but one or two colonies those advertisements might have been truthful. With thousands of colonists being supported at the same time, not even an over-productive mother-world could provide a fraction of the necessary material support or comforts implied by the persuasive literature. He wondered just how many emigrants had been caught by the spurious logic in the advertisements. *Be a pioneer on a frontier world*, one shouted. And right beside it they would explain how well mother-earth would care for them. True, a kind of accuracy was there. Emigrants were promised a Virgo world, and that life would be harsh. Also the promise of individual freedom was made; but never was there emphasis on freedom from help until they had arrived and had been processed.

The rains came again. He huddled at the front of his boat, under shelter, and still got soaked; this new rain was a true prelude to the rainy season. Drop by drop, each was larger than the last, or so it seemed.

Slowly the ranks of lights began to disappear as the deluge moved closer to him.

What a storm!

'I'm going to slow down now,' he called out. 'Everybody must close up to the one in front. If everyone hangs on to the lights in front, we'll keep our line.'

'Splurgs can't attack during this downpour,' he was shouting now. 'Everybody give your attention to steering and staying in line.'

'Major Ashley, get your troopers' attention on the boats. There's no use in looking out now.'

'Dak Storey, close up your boats in file, but carefully.'

More cursing spouted from the drenched radio as Major Ashley's new orders poured swiftly forth.

Carseegan slowed down to a crawl and again wondered for the tenth, twentieth, or perhaps thirtieth time: just what *was* his percentage. Elizabeth? Hardly!

He corrected his compass reading. Sooner or later they would hit the first sand spit. He pushed his head under the prow's cover and the drenching increased. No help for it. If his forward scouts missed the sand-strip, he had to catch it. The light metal of their semi-flat boats would be gouged by sand and rocks.

The wind rose in intensity; rain pressed heavily against his face. To some extent the ever-present swamp grass soaked up the action of the waves. Still, it was rough enough and he feathered the prop to handle changing vector forces.

'General, this is Private West at the rear. One of the boats has turned over. I got to them too late. They're both dead!' The voice was all but audible.

'Leave it, Private West. We haven't time now. The live ones are important.' He knew points had been lost with the emigrants. God only knew what they thought was supposed to be done in this waterfall.

What was once an intense and unbearable rain, and whipping gusts, now became a stream of water from high pressure hoses. Even the stream changed from torrential to full blown river. God! Wouldn't the swamp rise under such a soaking?

Afterwards, dawn, milky, surly, came, and so did the switch from rain to sudden calm. A foggy mist, not at all annoying, brought air and the pleasure of breathing.

Carseegan looked with some pride at the tight formation of lights. They would see things differently now. Ahead he could sense the flat strip, a slight bulging across the horizon. He ordered the troopers' attention back to Splurgs, asking Scranton McCuen and Dak Storey to meet him ahead on the rising sand-spit.

Wheels down, his boat rolled smoothly up the sandy slope. The light had become stronger; the air, washed clean, smelled musky. Like thousands of others, the spit was smooth, except for scrubby bushes and an occasional sprig of grass. His stomach churned, still rolling to the toss of wave and wind. Peering between his tired eyelids, he saw slim spears of grass fringing the strip's far side. Still there was enough space between the opposite shores for boat ranks to form. Heat began to build up between cloud and surface layers. His red and blue uniform was soaked, he noted, as he removed his rain-cape. Was it



getting dry? Should they take the time? Probably not, he thought. When had he borrowed the cape? During the downpour? God! He was tired.

The pitch and throb of boats was far behind, like muted beehives. The full-throated roars of Scranton McCuen and Dak Storey overwhelmed the others, their boats flinging sand outwards as they dashed up the beach. Both newcomers quietly removed their rainhoods and capes. Scranton McCuen pushed his thickened fingers through long, flying hair, pressing the strands back against his head. Dak Storey, stubbled growth following outlines of an older beard, stepped beside him.

‘Thank you for coming, gentlemen.’ Carseegan extended his hand to each in turn. ‘We only have a few minutes. I want you to know what I plan.’ His eyes searched each man for signs of revolt or resentment. He couldn’t be sure but their fatigue seemed to be as great as his. Probably the others would be in equally bad condition.

‘I’ve only thirty-five troopers, some wounded badly. They’ll be as tired as the colonists. I don’t want to be put into a position where I’m directly ordering the civilians to stand guard. I need your cooperation.’ He waited for each to speak.

Dak Storey waited in silence, as though biding his time until some critical point had been reached. Scranton McCuen spoke first, ‘I can only ask for volunteers.’

‘Out of three hundred or so emigrants, do you think you can find thirty-five who will watch for three hours while the others rest? We’ll trade off, then, three hours of watch for each trooper and three hours of sleep for the volunteers.’

‘How long are we staying? Six hours?’ Scranton asked.

‘That’s right. I want you to arrange for volunteers as quickly as possible, it’s top priority. Then see that everyone cleans his filter, checks his boat and goods, eats and performs other necessary functions during his sleeping period. See that everything is done in that order. We’ve got to be prepared to move out without delay.’

‘Kind of hard on them, aren’t you, General?’ Scranton commented.

‘How long have you been taking settlers through?’ Carseegan snapped.

‘Four years.’

‘Have you been through *amok*?’

‘No, General. I’ve been through the rains, but never *amok*.’

‘I’m sure your volunteers will be careful.’ His tone and manner, almost imperious, dismissed the leader. He turned to the slightly built trader. The background hum of propellers was louder, easily filling the silence between the two men.

Scranton was already moving out before Carseegan spoke again. ‘All right Dak. What’s the men’s grumble this time?’

The nominal trader leader tightened his lips only slightly. The men don’t like riding a protective screen for a bunch of emmies. They joined us; we didn’t join them. We’ve got our business in the boats, good trade goods. We’re not being paid for this job. I don’t think you’ll get the men to follow your orders again. Last night was the last!’ Everything Dak Storey had said was without emotion, without resentment, a kind of matter-of-fact tone, as though quoting others. It couldn’t have been just fatigue.

Radios on both boats were now sounding with Scranton McCuen’s request for volunteers. Carseegan was sure Major Ashley would insist on maintenance of tight formation. Sometimes it was good to have a Major with a black book, he thought. It was particularly good when he himself knew so little of army nomenclature and patterns of behaviour.

All right, Dak. You’ve said your piece. Order your boats to stay in formation on the strip for the time being and ask your men to assemble for private discussions with me.’ He looked along in both directions to the end of the strip, seeing only sand humps topped by scraggy bush. ‘I’ll be about two hundred yards down there,’ he said. ‘This meeting will be *really* private.’

Dak crinkled his eyes again, then nodded and turned back to his own boat. The others were only a few



thousand feet away and coming in fast, now that the light was brighter and visibility surer.

God he was tired! Should he give up? Move on ahead and go his own way? Death if his deception were found out. One disgruntled trader could bring it about. Dak knew he wasn't General Newton. Had to. So did Jester. They were dangerous men, he thought, and very, very selfish, indeed. Probably what Terran screening called excellent pioneering stock, he maliciously joked to himself.

He waved the men behind to go on across the spit, past his boat, and walked a lonely, tired walk. Boats were now rolling up the sand, propellers changing pitch and hum accordingly. Streams of water ran off his clothes as he walked; his body heat, and the synthetic fibres combined to quicken drying time.

He rounded the tall hummock where, crouching down out of sight, he checked the double-barrelled needle beam at his side, and rested, as he had learned to do so patiently so many years ago.

They came as a group: the two drinkers, the three card players, Dak Storey trailing the bearded one called Jester, and probably the most dangerous in a fight. They half circled him. One of the card players spoke first, saying, 'Well, Gen'l. Dak talked us int' comin. Agin our nature. Get your say out 'cause we're leavin in minutes.'

It was difficult watching all six in their semi-circle. His eyes looked steadily at the speaker but his internal attention shifted backwards and forwards, sweeping however lightly across every face in turn.

'All right. I'll level with you men. You know the region ahead. We're still out of touch with Port Authority and Fort West. They won't help us anyway. You've got the training, knowledge and skill to help get these people through. They've got to be pushed and pushed hard. Every inch west, the thicker Splurges will be; and the more likely to meet the *amok*. Also, because of our late start, the rains get heavier and more dangerous.' He risked moving his eyes, glancing fully at each one. He could see that the argument made sense to Dak Storey, two of the card players and the bearded Jester. The drinkers appeared confused. Or was it indifference? Hard core objection came only from the speaker.

'That's no problem to us, Gen'l. We's plain ordinary bus'ness folks. Emigrants got troubles, let them cure 'em themselves.'

'That's a selfish attitude, Mister. What do you think will happen to your lucrative trade when the emigrants tell of their abandonment? Some will get through to tell the story, you know.' He was hoping to drive a wedge through the surly group. They didn't appear too close anyway.

The belligerent speaker, rightly or not, felt he had all the backing he needed, 'Don't try to blackmail us, Gen'l. We're a ways from your troops naow. It'd be easy as pie to cut you up and t' leave 'fore anyone was wiser, ye' know?'

Had he been less tired or more of a General he probably could have chosen another alternative. He was tired and he had a different pattern of reflexes.

'Do you want to try it yourself, Mister?' His body tensed in familiar beam-fighter stance.

For the emotionally immature, there is usually no easy, graceful way to back from a direct counter-challenge. The trader reached for his needle-beam. Carseegan's was simply faster, as Jester might have been able to warn. The dense photons pulsed twice, one in each tube, and two, small, closely spaced holes suddenly appeared in the chest over the heart. The trader fell, gun still half out.

Even before the trader had fallen, Carseegan had the others covered; no one else had moved. The tense tableau was silent as a still movie held for seconds. Carseegan slowly straightened, pushed his gun back into his military holster, and fastened its cover. 'Carry the body to be buried if you want to.'

'I'm not threatening anyone. I do want you to know how seriously I view the question of co-operation. You and I both know what can be expected, and what Splurg slaughter or rollers can do to the settlers. We need every skilled man. But hot-heads aren't needed.'

'Think of yourselves, if you will, gentlemen. What if a Splurg colony surrounds you during *amok* stages—one too large for your small group to handle. You, too, need protection, and the emigrants, by their numbers, will provide it.'



It was Jester who broke the stalemate. 'I'm with you, General.' The last word was unduly underlined. Enough so that Carseegan knew what he really meant, but not enough to disturb the others. 'Just so long as you give the right orders, I'll stay. What do you want us to do?'

Carseegan looked at the others. The two former card players nodded in agreement. The two drinkers looked at their former companion's body and nodded theirs. 'OK', Dak Storey echoed.

'Which of you knows the route and dangers best?'

Several pointed to Dak.

'I'll need you later, after we've reached our protective encampment.'

He turned back to Jester, 'Can you keep the volunteers under control? Help them? Give them advice? Scranton McCuen should have about thirty-five organized by now.'

Jester nodded his head, affirmatively.

'Tell Scranton I sent you.' Turning to the remaining men, he continued, 'That leaves four of you to run your boats. If you need help, ask Jester.' He dismissed them with a wave of his hand, turning his next comment toward Dak Storey, 'I'd like to talk to you in private a moment.'

God he was tired! There was one other thing bothering him, he had had it on his mind all night. Best if he got it sorted out now. 'Dak, I've got to know something about your four Splurgs.' His voice was pleasant and even. No accusations now; that would spoil his approach. 'Why won't they *amok*?' He crouched over the wet, sandy soil, pulling a tri-bladed grass stem, twisting it around and around, ostensibly keeping his eyes focused on it as though it were a curious creation.

To his surprise, Dak Storey also crouched down, and pulled at a similar weed.

'Don't know, General. We've had two of those Splurgs a long time. I've been with them on Swampworld since the last *amok*—they're survivors you know. They've had no diseases, no spells of *amok*, and we get along well. One, named Marjac, searches everywhere for knowledge—wants to find an *amok* cure—intelligent, almost civilized. I wouldn't leave them, and they wouldn't leave me.'

'Sometimes some of my trading partners treat them like some kind of slaves. I won't tolerate anything like that. Partners come and go,' he shrugged his shoulders, 'but not good Splurgs. They're friends—gentle, hard-working and more than partners to me. Frankly, General Newton, I'm more afraid that one of the emigrants will see them and shoot than of their going *amok*. It's a greater risk. I'd rather go on without the settlers, by myself, if necessary.'

Part of the trader's long speech made sense. The part about shooting the Splurgs out of hand was likely.

But how could Splurgs—some of them—live so long? There was a farmer and his wife, old—no, ancient—dozens of storms back, who had said much the same as Dak. Long-established friends—trusted—loyal—intelligent—one of the family. Neither Eemay handbooks or Eemay basic training mentioned this anomaly. Was some key factor being overlooked?

'I'll dig out some bright, red army shirts to tie over their chests. Everyone will be warned not to shoot or hurt them. We'll use them up front as scouts. You'll be there with me. Does that sound ok?'

Carseegan may have been mistaken, but it did seem that Dak Storey became more human at that moment, no, closer, somehow friendlier. 'That's fine, General; just fine! Start on it now, will you? Before they all doze off. Everyone's tired, you know. Everyone!'

Carseegan could feel it. Everyone's tiredness was inside himself.

ELEVEN

Dr. Kester Whiting, ancient even for a Terran, had seen bloodshed done under both noble and ignoble banners. To him, the taking of life was a standard of life, for sometimes life had to be taken to give life to another. But there is an ethic in living the physician's life, however illusory, which causes personal identification of one's own blood and guts with those whose blood is lost. Dr. Whiting had been—still was—that kind of person; the kind who felt the patient's pain, who lived their grief and pathos, who ended or tortured their own *psyche* whenever the patient's life drained.



Before him was an inferno beyond Dante's ability to imagine. Not more than forty-eight hours earlier there had been gaiety, the normal interactive pressures of community growth. The dead now lay everywhere. To one devoted to the promotion of health and well being in any sentient being, the scene was miserable, foreboding.

Decomposition had begun as he saw from their skin colour and smell. He concentrated on his tests, forcing the stench from his consciousness. The skin was mostly dry, cracked, incapable of even minimum moisture ratings. He accumulated a few blood samples, measuring certain characteristics, unable to measure everything he would have liked due to the advanced state of decomposition. It was later, when he had left the odor and his tasks were completed, that he mentally noted how these land-livers had changed from carnivorous to herbivorous, and that the three-chambered heart was in the majority while the two-chambered was found only in the minority.

Routine soil tests, weather notations, samples of plant and other animal life were almost desultorily made. Heavy of heart, aged of spirit, he left.

Colourful light streamers came through new cloud breaks during the first hours of his travel the next morning. The clouds closed again after lunch and during his nap. Too thick for travel, the afternoon haze took on the character of a syrupy ground fog which caused him to anchor for the next thirty hours. Later, after more than intense concentration on his studies and notes—anything to keep the field of butchery from his thoughts—he was able to pull up anchor to resume his journey.

A light breeze blew from the east; the sun had begun to glimmer faintly in a tight red-yellow band through the thin haze at his back; he could hear the susurrations of thin reeds rubbing against the boat as it rocked and the scratch of certain small insects that flung themselves from stem to stem in their natural habitat.

Here and there a long-spouted fish poked through the water-air boundary, the new light permitting it to forage for delicate, small, snail-like parasites seen hanging from the thicker reeds. It was fortunate that he paused so long, stretching, gazing musingly into the new dawn, adjusting the filters, setting and reading the boat's compass, almost as though something foreign to his nature had taken root and grown overnight.

He finally pushed his boat along slowly, barely moving, and that, too, was fortunate. Ahead, and to his left, was a curious thing, floating. And then, as though his impulsive inquisitiveness could no longer be contained, he throttled the engine back and moved directly towards the object.

It was a female Splurg floating on her back, arms and legs asprawl. Thinking her dead, he turned the body over, noting the long gash in its side which had exposed the stomach lining. A small shiver ran through the body, and the nose valves automatically closed. A reflex after death? More curious still, the body lacked the stomach wrenching smell of decomposition. He brought it aboard. It breathed.

Since Dr. Whiting had seen only the effects of *amok*, never the disease itself, he reasoned that her returning consciousness could be dangerous. He therefore taped her hands and long, slender legs together before beginning attempts to save her life. He also reasoned that she was part of the cluster recently viewed in death nearby, and, would probably provide additional, valuable medical clues to the sickness whether or not he was successful in effecting the saving of her life. Not that he intended to be any less considerate or humane, of course.

Several hours later he washed his hands, clearing them of the life-fluid stains unavoidably made during the emergency operations.

Very much like earth's amphibia, he thought. When was it? One hundred and seventy, one hundred and eighty, Terran years ago? With her three-valved, stomach-sac filled with plant-life, she had to have come from the land-liver colony. There were differences. Earth's amphibia might have chosen insects, of course, or evolved to feed on other higher-protein diets. He knew he had to be careful not to draw too close an analogy between earth's forms and Swampworld's.

An injection of the proper drugs would fight bacteria while stimulating the Splurg's system and



would also direct the wounds to repair themselves swiftly. He also decided to inject a general nutrient containing a mixture of salts and sugar-related compounds that he had learned to use effectively while administering at Port Authority. He made other tests while he waited for his patient's recovery.

Her skin moisture matched that of one who lived in water, probably reflecting a certain autonomic action of skin cells during the recent exposure to water. The webbing was slightly dryer and thicker on both feet and hands. Blood tests could be made complete, and other chemical measures.

When the rain fell again, and the sky was darkened, almost black, his patient responded. 'Ww-hh-y act-mm T tt-i-edd ?' He was delighted to hear the croaking voice speak Terran, but he was even more pleased to find sanity in the speech.

'Tell me what happened to you,' he prodded softly. 'You've been injured and I've repaired you. I'm known as a healer, and I've learned to do such things.'

Instinctively pulling her long, tied legs under her as though to stand, she fell back against the platform, helpless. 'I act-mm kk-now-nn as Lomach of the Mach cluster. I remember the terror, the *amok* had begun, then I know nothing until here.'

Her tone was calm; her answer direct and measured, to the point. There seemed no reason to continue her restrictions, so he cut her bonds.

TWELVE

There hadn't been many days like this one. Clouds broke into fleecy-white rafts and the sun poured through the gaps, drying out boats, clothes, people and sand. There were only scattered fans of golden light, and the horizon's edges still hid Pearl and Opal by vast, scudding ramps; yet the clouds were not too thick and the heat of the golden rays came through whenever the rays themselves were blunted.

Sleep though short had dispersed some of the gloom. Where once was confusion, crying, bitterness and frustration, there were now orders, at least there was a willing compliance, and a kind of relief in having orders to follow.

Carseegan had slept little. Was it one or two hours? Major Ashley was shaking him; he pushed hot swamp juice into his hands. The acrid odour shocked his system, preparing him for the sour flow of fire which followed across his tongue and down his throat. Less fresh it would have been pungently acrid. He usually refrained from alcohol in any form, as would any beam fighter, but he needed that extra jolt this morning, finding himself grateful to the record-keeping Major for the thought.

Elizabeth, the General's wife, social prude, former sweetheart and former object of Carseegan's self-pity—that Elizabeth Newton—had come up behind the Major. 'Oh John! I've missed you so. Why can't we take my boat to the column's head?' At least she was carrying on the charade. Did she really feel they were to live as General and wife?

'I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Elizabeth. We had a hard night. We've got a harder day or so ahead. You've got to put up with it for a while longer.' He rose, held her hands and looked over her shoulder to spot the volunteers and his troopers. Much more of this kind of military discipline—and there was sure to be more—and they wouldn't be scrub-backs any longer. Another bonus for Eemay. The emigrants would know Swampworld better, be more confident, feel a thread binding them to this world of water and mud. Was that Eemay's conscious strategy? Hardly. Too cumbersome; too bureaucratic.

Major Ashley was out of earshot by now. 'I'm trying to do what John would want and what he would do. Please! Let's get through to Fort West before we talk about it any more.'

She pouted just like the little girl tease she once was. How many little boys had fallen for the same selfish expression?

She turned back to her boat giving him the impression of a furious woman lately scorned. Another act? He was pushing himself into his borrowed rain-cape—must remember to borrow a cap, he thought—when another woman came forward. It was the blonde-haired one—or had it been red? or muddy?—he had met with Major Ashley on his arrival. Her hair, at least now, was golden blonde, her eyes bright blue and her nose still full and straight, not too big, not too small. It may have been unseemly, but he



stared, as he had the first time. Her face turned light pink and her bosom rose and fell, once.

‘I’m sorry, General. I—I thought I’d find Major Ashley here.’

‘You are a nurse?’ he asked with a small boy’s constricted throat. How many years ago had he felt the same?

‘Yes, I’m Marcelia Anne Johanson. I came with Doctor Johanson, my father.’

She partly turned her head so that he could see the long, golden hair neatly tied behind her back. God! If he could only leave the General Newton, husband-of-Elizabeth-Newton image—!

His mind raced like a schoolboy’s. What he’d like to say and do were not exactly related to what he should say and do. His emotions were in conflict with his image. Probably he appeared grumpy, surly, uncommunicative, uninterested—anyway, she broke the silence. ‘I—I’ve got to find Major Ashley, General.’ Then she was gone. Twice he had seen her; twice he had stared and lost the battle of his tongue and wits. Lord, this General’s job was a thing!

Eemay wet-backs were on guard again. The thirty-five troopers, some limping, others with arms in slings and bodies bandaged, were slowly circling around the grounded pioneers. Scranton McCuen had done better than he had expected. There were forty volunteers each paired with an Eemay trooper. Grumbling increased when the emigrants learned they were to move immediately, but the effort to prepare for their trek diverted some attention. Major Ashley, by cajolery and military bull-headedness, had got the people started on time. Good man, that Major! Maybe there was something in having a notebook-Major.

Carseegan swore at one of Dak Storey’s boats when its driver narrowly missed another. Fine mess that would have been. The boat hulls being so thin, and the heavy trader boat going so fast, a whole row of shells might have crunched up like hollow dominoes. In the background he could plainly hear the profanity when the man caught control of his craft again.

Ashley pulled up to Carseegan just as his wheels retracted and his boat free-floated in the greenery and muck again. ‘You took too great a chance with the traders, General Newton!’ His voice was clearly tinged with a kind of respectful hero-worship. Apparently his short fight had been described throughout the group and the Major, who had never been off earth before, felt the supposed thrill and romance and glory of needle-fighting. Carseegan didn’t feel it.

Dak Storey came up next; pulling his boat up to Carseegan’s, Dak motioned for the radio to be turned off. After Carseegan had complied, Dak shouted, ‘I’ve got the Splurgs dressed. When do you want them up here?’

Carseegan shouted back, ‘Now!’ then thumbed the radio to send-receive again. Though background noises continued to build up, the level was not as high as the night before. He waited until all of the snake-line was off the sand spit and he could see Eemay troopers circling the whole, this time with one inner circle of emigrant volunteers circling inside.

When they had cleared the sand spit, he spoke. ‘This is General Newton again. We will *not*, I repeat, we will *not* stop again except for dire emergency.’

By now Dak Storey had almost reached one of his large boats. He paused several seconds, then finished his statement. ‘I’ll explain in a moment. In the meantime, all of last night’s rules still hold. Don’t break radio silence unless absolutely necessary.’

‘Dak Storey, under my orders, is bringing out four Splurgs all of whom will be identified by red army shirts. These Splurgs are part of the Eemay army. They are scouts and are not subject to *amok*.’ The lie would pass if only the words could be made to sound reasonable. Some of the old timers among both the civilians and Eemay would know. Would they keep their minds and mouths shut? Certainly they would understand the need for his subterfuge! ‘We may very well be plunged into turmoil far more difficult than anything yet experienced. Whatever happens, don’t shoot the red-dressed Splurgs! Remember, no matter how bad things get, and how crazy the *amok* Splurgs become, the red-dressed ones will be on our side.’



The line was beginning its slow accordion-like snake wiggle, so he increased the propeller pitch, biting more air, lurching the craft forward faster. ‘Does anyone have any questions?’

He waited for thirty seconds until he saw Dak Storey’s boat pulling away from the larger one. ‘I’ll explain why we can’t stop. We’re only five more land strips from a defensible base. *Amok* begins somewhere in a region and seems to spread in some unknown manner. The region we’re now going through is heavily populated with Splurgs. Once *amok* has swept through them, like some disease, the lucky survivors breed again to begin a new generation. This area hasn’t seen the *amok* for about ten Terran years. It’s heavily populated with Splurgs and it’s ripe for *amok*.’

Strange, Carseegan thought. I should be lecturing on Splurgs and the *amok*? I only know what I learned in basic Eemay lectures and what I’ve picked up on the run. More than the rest? Hardly!

‘You can be sure we’ll run into Splurgs, now or later. No one knows all of the ways in which they behave or why they behave as they do. We have no defensible positions, as you learned during their last insanity.’ Dak Storey’s boat was nearing his, he noted. ‘Besides, we’ve got the rains to worry us. What we went through last night was a small rain. It gets worse, lasting for several weeks longer. We can’t stay on the swamp or on the shallow sand spits. We’ve got to get to a higher, defensible position at all costs as soon as possible.’

His short question period brought forth only stifled sobs from those who still cried over the loss of loved ones. ‘We’ll bury our dead in safer ground, too,’ he added, closing his talk.

Their sand spit was soon out of sight, and only the broad circle of green, spear-like swamp grass surrounded them, an undulating carpet. Dak Storey transferred two of the Splurgs to Carseegan’s boat. Their awkwardness changed to functional utility only when they stepped from the flat decks where they had hunched over their doubled-up legs and long arms into the waters. To Carseegan, both Splurgs looked alike. The Eemay blood-red was tied awkwardly around each of their barrel-like chests. They had bent long, knobby, stick-like legs almost double during their transfer, when they dropped first one twig-like leg and arm into the swamp, then the other. With arms close together, and barrel body nearly afloat, they looked for all the world like two sausage growths, thick, attached to a thickly built pumpkin, and their heads held another downward sloping sausage growth, a nose. Double-lidded eyes high up on foreheads peered from each side of their over-long proboscis. Their mouths were well-muscled, built, he supposed, for crunching open the tough Restle. The nearest one crawled awkwardly into the boat, spindly legs and arms bent high. He could see the yellow tattoo—number 73756—and small, corrugated, pucker-mouths crisscrossing the hand palms.

‘Ww-ee tt-han-kk yy-ou-uu,’ the second one slurred its broken-reed voice. Carseegan was astonished at its gentleness and tranquillity. No wonder they were so dangerous. Living with one like this for years, then suddenly, with no warning, *amok*. Almost like a polite family member suddenly turning on everyone. God! What a horrible evolutionary freak! Or was it disease?

One Splurg volunteered to guide the boat by compass. The other was placed as forward lookout. Carseegan rummaged through his supplies, finding and offering each a sugar cube. They twittered and thunked among themselves, but surprisingly returned the gifts with human thanks.

The sun still shone miraculously; the humidity, the heat and relaxation joined with his fatigue, and he slept. It may have been an hour, or only minutes, when he felt the nudge at his shoulder and heard the broken voice say, ‘Cc-oo-wws. Bb-i-gg he-rr-dd!’

Thousands of animals, all placid and munching great tracks to leave a temporary illusion of clear water, bounded the horizon. ‘A path!’ he muttered to one of the Splurgs. ‘We need a path through that herd. Any one of those wild animals could plunge our chain into fragments, had it the will or reason. There must be ten miles of them.’

It was only seconds later when the thought of swamp rollers, and their certain presence hit. ‘Rollers! Where in hell are the rollers?’

He still had no plan in mind when Dak Storey pulled alongside, motioning for the radio to be turned



off again. At least he had more presence of mind than the Great General Newton, Carseegan thought.

‘Let the Splurgs take the direction. They know where the rollers are. We may have to beam a few cows to follow their path. Splurgs smell rollers. They know how to avoid them.’ Dak’s voice carried well above the water. Carseegan waved to his point men and when they also had reached his side, he directed them to ride circle around the small point, prepared to make effective fire-power, if needed.

Problem. Would Splurgs live among the cows? Didn’t know. Couldn’t ask. Had to chance it. He switched the radio back on, breaking silence for the first time during their early morning ride. ‘We’re heading into a large dahrero herd. Major Ashley, stop your circling, ride stationary. Close ranks to tight columns. Everyone watch for occasional, blundering cows, and kill them at once if they threaten.’

He motioned to the Splurg on the boat’s prow and asked, ‘Can you keep us away from swamp rollers?’

The Splurg’s head turned at an angle and he could see its barrel chest rise and fall with great expansions while air sucked in and out of its long nose.

‘Yy-ee-ss!’

Minutes later the Splurg pointed a long, tree-jointed arm in a new direction, though still in their general direction of travel, and the steering Splurg followed. Keen intelligence! Carseegan thought. What this species could do if free of *amok*!

Looking back, Carseegan could view the column of boats pulsing like a caterpillar. Thank God the rains still held. Several times the Splurg’s thin arm pointed and the boat’s direction was changed. One large dahrero blundered towards their point, peering curiously but peacefully at them. One of the boat out-riders beamed the unfortunate animal before it could accidentally hurt them.

Others were beaming animals on both sides for similar reasons. All that meat—wasted!

A misty rain appeared suddenly but visibility was still good enough to see the whole line. Only an hour had passed before they slithered through the huge herd. To Carseegan it seemed more like three or four. He heaved a great sigh and ordered the boats back to their earlier circling formation.

That afternoon they crossed another sand spit; not until later that evening, when the third appeared, did he order a two-hour rest.

Carseegan stepped out of his boat after the train pulled to ground, and stood leaning against its side, staring at the ground, hardly aware of the swift looks from others gathered about. The burden of command had begun to press upon him. He ached as did the others. He was fatigued, as were the others. Heavy was the burden of responsibility, a cup which he knew should not be his. And because of these things, he felt a sense of unsureness. But even permitting his body and mind to rest, he knew, would create a guilt that somehow he was shirking his duty. The thing he had taken on was a simple thing. Accomplishing it through inclement weather, rollers, and *amok* might require a miracle or two.

Radio silence was supposed to continue during the rest period but Carseegan could hear a shrill voice rising above the other background noises, ‘I don’t care! He’s not an emperor! He’s not a dictator! We aren’t under his domination. They aren’t under yours either. All of you—all Eemay is crude, inconsiderate, intolerable.’

Tired, but now out of his mood, Carseegan turned the volume up. ‘A whole family is crying over there. Religious. They want to bury their dead. Why can’t they do it now?’

Major Ashley’s voice, which had been indistinct before, could be heard to say, ‘I’m sorry it has to be like this Miss Johanson, but those are our orders. Please see what you can do to make their lot easier.’

Carseegan could understand the crying woman. She had a dread of carrying her loved one on and on. Trained and taught the ethics of decent burial, loaded with the poisons of fatigue, tired, irrational, unreasonable, religious and lonely with even greater pains from a sudden death, what else could a pioneer do? Bury the dead, at least!

‘Major Ashley! Bring the crying woman here, please. This is General Newton.’

She was stocky, big-boned, with a peasant’s sturdy body. Her features, though not pretty, were not



ugly. She had black hair, tied back in a bun-knot, dark brown tear-filled eyes partially covered by her hands. Her sobbing was of the dry, racking kind which makes one feel that death has come, gone and left nothing but dry, endless futures of nothing very important. He hated every second of it.

‘This is Mrs. Cancilkin, recently of Terra, General. Her husband was killed during the *amok*. She has two small children, aged three and seven.

‘She wants to bury her husband here. Says she won’t go on unless we permit it. I’ve tried to explain your order but she refuses to listen. Just cries and calls us heathens.’

Evidently the Major expected Carseegan to admonish the woman and place her under military care. Instead, ‘We’ll be glad to help you bury him, Ma’m! That is, if you *really* want his body to float off in these swamps.’

Her response was quick, ‘Oh, thank you so much, Gen—, ah—, what do you mean? Float off in these swamps?’

‘Well, M’am, we can bury your husband here if you wish. Look around. Notice how flat and sandy everything is? Sooner or later the twin moons of Swampworld are going to join their forces, bringing a tide which will float over the strip, dragging everything away. It may move the whole strip several feet, wash it away or change its contours. It happens every three months with a very high tide. I had thought you would be interested in a permanent burial place on high ground, a place where your children can come back to their father’s grave.

‘Of course, if you want, if you think it best for your children . . .’ His voice trailed off, waiting expectantly for her response.

‘Oh, oh, I’m so sorry, General; I didn’t realize—I’m sorry.’ Her tears began again. Carseegan waved to the Major. His face indicated further surprise at the General and the General’s way.

They moved out in two hours on the minute. Night lights returned, giving the snake a sparkling dance of life. The rains held off, at least for the moment, and he gave humble thanks for the Splurg assistance.

Their speed was fast. Within four more hours they were over the next sand strip and on another within two more hours. By morning, he knew, they would find high land and rest. The dead would be buried, protective barriers started, precautionary routines defined. The next step to Fort West could then be considered.

He supposed his mind was deadened from the exertion, as was everyone’s. Images danced within, almost hallucinatory in character. Elizabeth—Elizabeth as a young girl, a woman of youth—at the dance—with bright flashing lights of many colours, loud music and scurrying, hurrying motions—Elizabeth—at the drive-in—big juicy hamburgers, a treat, real beef, smiles, talk—Elizabeth—at home, watching the late shows together, picking through old albums of naked, small relatives now old and bent, shaking hands with relatives—Elizabeth—Marcelia—standing by the soldier wrapping his ear, fighting for the right of a mother’s burial—John won her, Elizabeth promised, laughter—Elizabeth—more laughter—‘You’re naive!’ she had shouted, then John laughed—leave, kill, shoot fast, fight, kill—Marcelia—Marcelia ? Beam—fighter poor ending, dead—Marcelia—

‘Splurgs! Splurgs! Splurgs!’

Carseegan’s deep reverie broke. Rain was still imminent, but slots of moonshine cut through cloud gaps, plotting large pools of light shimmering across the black swamp.

A quick glance assured him of the red-bannered Splurgs. Lights from the crawling caterpillar behind were well-ordered displaying sweeping arcs circling out towards the troop and volunteer team. He turned the speaker element up, saying, ‘It is vitally important that radio silence be maintained now. The one who gave the Splurg alarm, please report.’

God, if the emigrants panicked now, everything could be lost!

‘Corporal Stanley Ubiksky here, General. There’s just a pumpkin shaped body, two thick arms and no eyes. Must be sleeping. All the same colour. Blends right into the grass.’

‘We’ve probably wakened them by now. They aren’t *amok* stage. No change in orders. Outer-periphery



riders make a survey and report a count to Major Ashley at the end of the hour.' He spoke as much for the settlers' sake as he did for his troops.

'Everyone else! Look closely ahead of your boat. We don't want to kill Splurgs unnecessarily; *amok* is bad enough without risking the additional resentments.

'While you're watching ahead, keep a sharp look out for signs of *amok* or boarding. Slow down to avoid trouble.'

Carseegan throttled back, suiting action to words. He noted the quick glance that passed between the two Splurgs during his short speech. They *were* a sentient, intelligent species. Did they have feelings towards one another, valuing life, as did humans? By human standards they were ugly, almost-sea almost-land things, less than primitive because of their recurring sickness, yet capable of high levels of organizational thought and behaviour, not to speak of high grades for human-like empathy, including loyalty and gratitude. Sometimes he felt they were more human than certain humans he had known.

Minutes passed. He counted six Splurgs within the narrow vision of his own boat light. Waves lapping slowly up and down the black-green fringes combined with their pumpkin-shaped heads presented the strong illusion that swollen, distorted basket-balls were bobbing up and down in a weed-strewn pond. Probably several thousand here, he thought. Strange how some chose to live on strips, some in swamps and some frequently both. Had anyone yet studied their relative desires? Did anyone know, other than in a very general way, their purpose for choosing one place over another?

Swampworld—a world of opportunity for earth's teeming trillions. Perhaps ten thousand million would find a new home here. Probably by then the four to five foot water level would be dyked back and land built from mud and grass. He could visualize the teeming industry which was sure to follow these early pioneers: first the small trading posts, light manufacturing and transportation facilities, such as the production of swamp boats, then the dykes and the broadening of the land-strips would follow.

Small land-strips would join together politically, as they had already joined in co-operatives to bring in low cost fertilizers. Later these smaller political groupings would form stronger political bonds, voting for establishment of regional representations.

As the land filled, and the political bonds became strong, island domains, then tiny continents would dominate. At first no one would notice the disappearance of swamps; each land-fill would deepen portions, killing grasses, changing local ecologies. Splurgs would find it impossible to live in those regions.

The half-projected images in Carseegan's eyes seemed to bring him to the conviction that, one way or another, by *amok* or by advanced Terran technology, the swamp-liver would die. A kind of empathy, a feeling of pity and sorrow, a kind of identification-with-sorrows-for-things-to-come reached out towards the two sitting at his boat front so trustingly.

Major Ashley's men counted three hundred and forty-five Splurgs at the end of the hour. Considering the relatively small area covered by the boats' lights, the number of Splurgs must have been in the thousands.

There hadn't been any reported now for several hours. Carseegan kept his light directed almost parallel to the swamp's surface, searching for the first sight of the tall banks which must come soon. The map called it strip one-seven-three, using a regional numbering system. Westward moving emigrants had called it High-point, not a very original name, but adequately descriptive.

Light filtered through the thick cloud layer from the morning sun which had to be almost in line with his back and the expected island strip according to calculations and his present compass reading. He could see a fine, dark edge on the horizon ahead. He watched it for minutes before committing himself entirely to his belief. 'High-point is ahead,' he said. Breaking the silence with good news was a genuine relief.

'According to maps, the rise upwards was about five hundred feet. The trail probably needs clearing before all boats can roll up. Major Ashley, wake half your resting team. Send them ahead to clear the



route. Again I want to caution everyone to keep watch. We aren't—we can't be safe until *amok* runs its course. We *will* be safer when we are on the plateau and have built our protective barriers.

'Any questions?'

'When will we be able to bury our dead, General?' The voice was weak, quavering, probably empty of emotion and energy but still filled with faith.

Carseegan's answer was ready, 'As soon as the heights have been reached and our initial guard laid out. Those on guard now will continue their function until more permanent arrangements can be made.

'Any further questions?' When several seconds passed in silence, he turned the communications over to Major Ashley.

Wheels down, they rolled onto the sandy beach, pushing their way in single-file up the primitive, sloping roadway. Earth-like trees lined each side.

Carseegan led, and the cool, wind-swept plateau was a heavenly place to the tired travellers. They circled their boats, nose to tail, in a manner reminiscent of frontier travellers in another western land so many hundreds of years before. Had Carseegan studied all the history of all the Terran wars, he would have found no better protective plan or one more likely to give feelings of security.

Even the central bonfire, made of sweet-smelling dead logs, which cast a fire that wavered and sputtered in the early morning light, was useful, comforting to the community.

They would not be the first to bury their human dead on Swampworld. One day, Carseegan thought, land will be priced too high, as it had been on earth for generations. Then will come the cremation specialists, and others.

They parked high above the waving greenery among Swampworld trees with long, thin arms that spread thick bundles of limbs over black, centuries-old humus and filigreed sub-ecologies. The strip was two miles long by half a mile wide, and reminded the weary travellers of precious park lands open to visitors at a price. Curved in a crescent-shaped arc, it symbolized to them the rich, thicker lands which soon would be theirs beyond Fort West, each man a millionaire, counting space and natural foliage as his main assets.

Marcelia Anna Johanson gave Carseegan a list of the dead. He ordered volunteers and guards to maintain strict watch before speaking to the petitioners. Finally, when he did face them, he asked, 'Does anyone object to holding joint services when daylight comes? You've got to rest. More wind and rain will come and there is still the danger of attack.'

There was no objection; most had become numb with their grief, and their physical energies, too, were drained.

Carseegan lay back under his flimsy canvas, resting his head on wet, sodden clothes. He could hear the sputtering of the open campfire and the soft shuffling of feet as people prepared, in their tired way, for rest. Even so, weighed by foot-dragging, eye-closing tiredness, he could hear their soft voices among which one stood out, saying, 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . .' and, 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....'

He waved his Splurg guides to join with the two already with Dak Storey at his right, his last thoughts mixing shapes and motions of Marcelia Anne Johanson and the decisions which must come in the morning.

Two bright moons momentarily spread twin golden beams on the Terran camp through rifts in the heavy cloud blanket.

THIRTEEN

Their lofty camp site rose high above the eastward swamp where shoulders fell away rapidly, forming a natural barrier against attack from that direction. Shallow slopes permitted easy access to the prominence from the west.

It might have been the best, most defensible camp site between Port Authority and Fort West, except for its lack of water. Long ropes were passed down the eastern cliff, old-fashioned water buckets swung



down until they sank of their own weight beneath the muddy liquid at the cliff's base. Boat distillers filtered and purified it for drinking purposes.

Dak Storey's four heavier boats were placed at the gateway, a narrow passage on the western slope huddled between two igneous-like outcroppings. The remaining boats were arranged in concentric circles from the gateway to the arbitrary centre, where the comforting campfire blazed continuously.

Major Ashley's men, joined by the Scranton McCuen volunteers, had done a good job of bringing the boats to this safe haven, but human flesh and blood was constructed to withstand only so many hours of stress. Exhaustion had set in, and in spite of military discipline, guards were lax.

Carseegan's last motion had been a wave to the borrowed Splurges. One had obeyed his gesture, returning to Dak Storey. The other, Marjac, of more than usual independence, folded his long stilt legs together and squatted nearby throughout the night. Rain was again falling in slightly greater droplets than the earlier mist, but still somewhat below that of a full-grown rain; visibility was poor; smoke rose up lazily in thin flat layers.

Carseegan's dreams, where two women alternately substituted themselves for one another, was summarily interrupted by MarJac's soft touch and low-croaking voice. 'Th-he-yy are a-tt-acc-kin-gg. I-tt is the *amok*.'

Sizzling splutters from lasers and high-pitched female-like shrieks were scattered among the lower-pitched shouts of men. 'My God in heaven! They're among us again!' he heard shouted above the din.

Carseegan's mouth was dry, his head ached and his body was suffering from other aches and pains from the long, hard trek. Wishing desperately for food and water, and knowing it must be denied, he rose quickly to his feet and reached under the boat's cowling to check the radio switch. 'Major Ashley!' he thundered loudly. 'This is General Newton. Report!'

The radio silence stretched forebodingly. Noises came louder as did the cursing of men when they struggled awake to defend themselves. 'General Newton again! Who is next in command after Major Ashley? Report quickly—any officer!'

Silence again stretched overlong before a hesitant voice came through, 'Sergeant Bannerdon here, General Newton. I was left with six men to guard the east cliff. I don't know where the Major or the other officers are, sir. All fighting seems to be at the western slope.'

It wasn't much, but it gave Carseegan a start. 'Thank you, Sergeant Bannerdon. Carry on.'

He brushed hair from his eyes, ploughing his strong fingers through the strands. He couldn't see beyond the first concentric ring of boats, visibility was so poor; no motion there. Marjac, standing next to him, seemed unaware of his own personal danger.

Carseegan grabbed the Splurg by his tattooed upper arm, pulled him into his boat and pushed him beneath a canvas lying there. Marjac dragged himself out and pointed to his ill-fitting red shirt which gave him the appearance of a child's large doll dressed in too small a doll's dress. 'I ww-ii-ll ss-ta-yy with you. The shirt will protect me.'

Carseegan could appreciate the Splurg's bravery but under the circumstances wasn't it foolish? He turned towards the sound of battle, too late for concern over Splurges who risk instant death from trigger-happy humans.

Beyond the third concentric ring of boats he could discern the source of fighting. In one swift motion, he passed between the outermost ring of boats to squat at the base of a cluster of bushes, only half-noting Marjac's imitation of his action. If fighting, it was indeed strange.

Soldiers and civilians were arrayed in double and, in some places, in triple ranks, shooting out double-pencil beams. Rushing, dense waves of organic flesh pressed across ranks of the dead, which, even in dying, forced the unnatural barricade closer to the human line. An occasional individual broke through, to be brought swiftly down by several pencils of light.

The weapons wielded by the Terrans were more than adequate to handle the mad, insensible indi-



viduals. The main danger seemed to lie with the numbers in the attacking groups. Carseegan could not determine how many lay beyond the pile of corpses.

Another thing puzzled him. Having survived similar attacks, he should have spotted both the peculiarity and the similarity of the present behaviour patterns, but fatigue was too great, dulling his senses, leaving only a faint mental itch.

MarJac's eyes, better adapted to fog and rain, could see Splurgs milling together behind the barricade of flesh, and sporadically charging in concerted efforts. This was not *amok!*

Even the rare break-throughs did not attack the men, or try to break into the ring of boats. No, this was not *amok*. The pattern was different, wrong. He tugged at Carseegan's jacket, 'Nn-o-tt *amok!*'

Carseegan turned tired eyes to stare at Marjac's double-lidded ones before the message carried significance. 'Of course not!' he shouted. 'I've seen it before. They're after Dak Storey's wagons.'

It made sense. Had this been an *amok*, there would have been no milling, no concerted actions, and the attacks would have been more direct, against anything that moved. He should have recognized it from the first.

Dak Storey was among those at the line but Carseegan could not spot the other five remaining co-owners. He cautioned Marjac to lie still, then dashed towards the small figure. Some stones and sticks flew through the defences, and several men had scalp wounds which bled freely but probably were not dangerous.

A single woman stood behind the charred trunk of a tree. Major Ashley could not be seen, though some of his troopers were strung sparsely along the defensive line. Scranton McCuen and some of his volunteers were also there, but not in great force either. Carseegan wondered how long the noise and excitement would continue before most of the emigrants awoke. When Dak turned to him, he was unable to interpret the man's grin, whether for joy or agony under present circumstances.

'What's in your boats, Dak?' Carseegan asked.

'Told you that some time ago, General.' The last word was heavily emphasized. Was Carseegan's position being challenged again ?

'Is there some point you want to make, Dak, or can it wait ?'

'It can wait, General; I'm tired.'

'All right, Dak. Let's take the subject up another time, as you said. Now, what's in your boats?'

Dak slowly wiped a glob of mud off his pant-leg before answering. 'It's the truth. Mostly fertilizer for trade at Fort West and surrounding territory.' He narrowed his eyes, letting his face grimace again, forming his peculiar half-grin. 'That and—oh no; I see Jester over there by McCuen—well, that and probably four of the most cowardly partners I have ever had the displeasure of joining with.' He spat.

'I've got to have the boats. At least one of them. It'll save us from the Splurgs.'

'Reason?'

'I've got to have the fertilizer, Dak. That's what the Splurgs must be after. They're only half conscious. It's not the *amok*. Even Marjac pointed that out to me. I've seen this before, and I've licked it before. They're after the fertilizer and, once they've got it, they'll straighten out again, leave us alone.'

Dak Storey was thoughtful, but resistant. 'I've been on Swampworld a whole lot longer than anyone else here, including you, General, and I've never heard of Splurgs going for fertilizer. What do they want it for? They don't need it except for gardens, and most of them don't use it for that? Only Terrans fertilize.'

'Will you agree it's not *amok*?'

Dak looked out into the gloom. Here and there attack was forced by a lone figure. 'Never thought of it before, but I guess you're right. *Amok* wouldn't be so direct. They'd be fighting one another, not trying to get in here.

'Suppose I agree? It isn't *amok*. Now what?'

Carseegan wiped rain water from his eyebrows and eyes, pulling his rain-cape over his head for the



first time. 'I tell you I've been through this kind of thing with them before. Maybe it's a new kind of sickness; I don't know. I do know that they will quit once the ingredients over there are available to them. Don't you see they're always heading that way?'

Dak looked out, then nodded his head in agreement. 'It's O.K. with me, but you've got five others to convince. They own part of the load. Always take partners; it keeps investment down; provides free labour.'

Carseegan called Sergeant Bannerdon, ordering him to send two men to replace Jester and Dak Storey. The three advanced together on the boat indicated by Dak as containing his other partners. MarJac followed from behind.

Dak Storey stepped onto the platform before the entrance to the large tent, lifted the rain curtain and called within. 'Rawley! Get the other three off their bunks; General wants to talk.'

'Tell the tinman we ain't havin none.' The voice that came back was slurred.

'We've got to have your boat and fertilizer, Rawley. Get the other three out of there or I'll send men to fetch you.' Carseegan was cool yet each minute's delay was forcing his temper.

Three men slowly stumbled out. They all had bloodshot eyes and a mean, swampjuice-filled demeanour. One carried a plastic bottle probably filled with the alcoholic juices.

'Where's Kline?' Dak asked.

One mumbled something that sounded like, 'Back there.' The others simply hunched their shoulders to indicate they did not know. Marjac had already stepped behind the first two, but now Jester stepped back by his side for no apparent reason.

Dak was about to lift himself on to the boat's platform again to call for Kline when Jester spoke a single word, 'Hold!'

A sharp spurt of light sprang from the far left corner of the boat, near the ground, cutting into Carseegan's leg. He felt a sharp burn across his right calf and dropped to the ground, protecting the injured leg the best he could, already swinging his own beamer forward. Jester had been ready and faster. A second beam split the air immediately after the first, hitting Kline directly through the top of his head. The odour of cooked flesh reached their nostrils.

Dak Storey swore. MarJac had already reached Carseegan, peeling back his muddy trouser leg to inspect the wound. 'What kind of trick was that?' Dak asked. 'Whose idea was that?'

The big man known as Rawley seemed to speak for the group. 'We didn't know nothin about it, Dak. Honest. All we know is we heard th' Gen'l here speak at us. Kline said, "Tell 'em to go t' hell, I'm sleepin", then we came out.'

It had to be a lie, Dak thought. What else could it be? Still they would stick together. In some two generations of Swampworld trading, Dak felt he had never joined with a worse crew of cut throats.

'Thanks, Jester.' Carseegan was able to wipe the mud from the wound. It had only scorched the surface. Like any ordinary burn the pain was increasing by degrees.

Marjac helped him to his feet. 'All right, the rest of you sit down. Better still, let's get on the other side of these boats to discuss a matter. Might as well be safe while talking.' He led them past two rows of boats before turning to discuss the issue of fertilizers and the Splurgs' unusual behaviour.

Looking directly into Rawley's eyes, he said, 'We've got to have the fertilizer to stop the attacks.'

A loud guffaw attracted his attention to other emigrants who had gathered around to listen. One, still holding trousers in hand, and dressed only in long, protective underwear, said, 'Fertilizer ain't goin' t' stop no *amok*. Is it boys? Are you some kind o' green-horn, General? What happened to the Great General Newton and his Raiders from Port Authority that we heard so much about?'

Carseegan wondered if these gentlemen also knew his false role? If so, it would only be a matter of minutes before the whole community knew. His life, then, wouldn't last even to Port West where, at the least, he could expect a quick military death.

Still, why would Jester have saved his life, if he had told the others? One way or another—known or



unknown—he had to play the game as though he were General Newton and he *had* to get the fertilizer.

‘How much is the load worth to you men?’

The figure named was a surprise. He could understand why men would brave the rains as well as *amok* for such a figure, even considering the inflated values common to a frontier planet. More than \$10,000 a load, they said. Dak confirmed the figure.

‘I’d like you men to donate it towards saving all of our lives, including your own,’ he emphasized. Warm fluid had begun to drip down his leg. Probably the self-cauterized wound had broken its crust, he thought.

Rawley took a long swig of swampjuice before answering. ‘Gen’l,’ he said slowly, deliberately, ‘I’ve got all my savings tied up in that load. There’s emigrants out Fort West that need it. I’m not about to give up my share for some cock-eyed dream of stopping a Splurg *amok*.

‘Not *amok*,’ Marjac interjected, probably unwisely.

Carseegan could feel the emigrants’ hostility build. Their ability to reason, like his own, had been dulled by lack of sleep and overwork. The appeal to settlers who needed fertilizer had been a shrewd exaggeration, he was sure; yet it was just the right way to sway the crowd now gathered near Rawley’s side.

‘I’ll go along,’ Jester stated quietly.

‘Take my share too,’ Dak nodded.

Some of the hostility must have diminished after the last two offers, Carseegan felt. He turned back to Rawley and the other two, ‘That makes your shares worth about \$6,000. I’ll sign a personal draft for it myself.’

Rawley, who was all prepared to fight against the stealing of his shares, shook his head in disbelief. ‘O.K.,’ he roared. ‘Give me the cheque and it’s yours to do as you wish. You’re a damn fool, but it’s your money.’

There were three who knew the cheque was useless. Carseegan, Jester, and Dak Storey. Oh yes, and Elizabeth, too, he thought.

They were standing near his own boat where Marcelia Anne Johanson sheared away the blood-caked trouser material from his exposed, burned leg gash. Her hands were facile, sure, though Carseegan noted the slight tremble of exhaustion in her every motion. He raised his eyes to her face, noting the clean lines, the clear eyes.

She had organized a woman’s group from among the pioneers to tear bandages and to help care for the wounded. But, as the only trained nurse, the brunt of work had fallen upon her.

‘How many hurt?’ he asked her.

Under his directions, tarpaulins had been hauled from one of Dak Storey’s boats and the boat had been shoved downhill towards the Splurgs. No further attacks followed, as he had expected. He was sure that the next morning would find normal cluster members at the bottom of the slope, eager, friendly. He made a mental note to keep Splurgs away from humans tomorrow.

He lay on the ground on a canvas sheet that had been placed over the mud and tied down by means of stakes at each corner. The rain had stopped again; but surely it would begin before morning. The skies were still dark, the wind slight. This was the command post outside his boat. Marjac squatted in the mud beside the canvas. The Terran Emigrant Army flag waved slowly over his left shoulder. The whole camp was like this, quiet, too weary to pay attention to the occasional shouts of guards or the Dak Storey drunks.

‘Today ? Seven were wounded. Major Ashley was found unconscious on the other side of the Splurg bodies. He had a bump on his head. He should be up and around soon.’ Marcelia bent close to examine his wound. ‘It’s a clean shot. Cauterized closed except for one spot. Looks as though no veins or arteries are touched and there’s a scab over the bleeding spot, now.’

He thought of the Major, and wondered if there was a tie between Marcelia and him. She was kneel-



ing on the canvas, and she raised her head and met his eyes. Their eyes locked. Her breasts rose tightly in her dress, and colour washed high on her cheeks, while her lips pressed bloodlessly. Carseegan could barely restrain himself. He had almost, in a very natural way, leaned over to kiss her.

Elizabeth Newton, his supposed wife, would have gone pale, perhaps even have fainted, at the sight of blood. He had successfully evaded her this far. Could he do so any further?

Their moment had passed, though not their thoughts. Carseegan mopped his brow with his muddy handkerchief; he watched Marcelia bind up his leg after cleansing the wound. 'Where did you learn your trade?' he asked.

'Terra, of course.'

'And your reason for coming to Swampworld?' Carseegan couldn't hide the concern in his voice. Human lovers from time immemorial were well aware of meanings behind culturally accepted but arbitrary symbols of behaviour. This time was no exception.

'We—we lost mother. Dad was old. He thought he'd live longer on Swampworld. Couldn't pass the deceleration barrier. He—he died at Port Authority. Earth was, well—crowded. I just wanted to be useful, that's all.' She finished tying the bandages, deftly testing the knot for strictures.

He stared so intently into her face that she grew self-conscious. Should he tell her the truth about himself? Needle beamer from another world. Imposter, not a general at all? Deserter from Eemay? What would she say when she had learned those bitter truths? Could he trust her to know them?

The tableau was interrupted by Elizabeth Newton, an older, more crafty woman than Carseegan had contained in his memories.

'Well, *General*, isn't this a pretty scene. Marcelia, I do believe you're after my husband. Oh yes, some of the emigrants have been asking for you, dearie.'

Marcelia rose in embarrassment, and went quickly to the centre of the encampment.

Elizabeth's tone changed, again becoming silky, smooth, as he had long remembered. 'People are beginning to talk, Bob. We just can't stay apart any longer. Here, I'll stay with you tonight.' She spread a second canvas down by Carseegan, then looked around for someone to hammer in the stakes and tie down the corners.

Carseegan rose on his injured leg, saying, 'I'm sorry, Elizabeth, I just can't do it yet. There is still Splurg danger,' he lied. 'I've got to spend every effort on the problem. Be a good girl. Go back to your boat, won't you?'

'Marcelia wasn't sent away,' she pouted.

'She took care of an injured leg, that's all,' he said. 'Just an injured leg.'

Much later that night, Carseegan slept, dreaming of a young, lithe, claw-sharpened Elizabeth who had changed suddenly into a gentle, loving Marcelia. Dreams were unimportant usually, but this one recurred.

FOURTEEN

Marjac couldn't and didn't sleep. There was an *amok* key in recent behaviour patterns. Not yet sure of what it was or what he had learned, he stretched his mind, giving rein to all forms of imaginings. Carseegan had said that he had seen this new form of Splurg behaviour before. Then it was not new? Not even Dak Storey had seen it. It must be new. What did it mean? Was there a relationship between the recent attacks for Terran fertilizer and *amok*?

His mind continued, passing over the same thoughts like some wheel which crossed the same ruts, again and again, accomplishing nothing but digging craters of deeper channels.

Clouds cleared briefly, then closed again. The campfire flared up once when someone dropped another log on it and the sputtering of the damp wood became explosive. Except for the guards, the encampment's members slept heavily, even groggily, restoring their energies for another day. Marjac rose from his doubled position and strode purposefully towards one of the guards, an Eemay man. 'I'm gg-o-in-gg out to learn what I can,' he said.



FIFTEEN

After the gusty winds had eased, and the pelting rains had ceased, Lomach directed Dr. Whiting's craft away from its compass point, explaining in her broken voice that 'Ss-ww-ampp R-oll-err-ss' were ahead. Had Dr. Whiting been less persistent in his cause, he might have plotted a more direct route to Fort West, and thereby have pushed himself into earlier dangers, not the least of which were the rollers which were to be found more frequently at lower latitudes. Had he been less persistent, he probably would not have been Dr. Kester Whiting—or so his many friends had told him over the years—and therefore he would not have been among the dangers anyway.

He used Lomach's knowledge, re-routing briefly around the dangerous animals, but stubbornly restoring his path along his planned route. Mist-laden skies heavy with low clouds hid the sign of boils, usually a dark curtain of leaden smoke that merged sky and horizon into blended greys. The hydrogen sulphide was there, but a nose too long used for smelling chemicals of the exotic would not react the same as the layman's.

Dr. Kester Whiting first noticed the boils when his craft passed into frothing black foam. Oily, boiling, they belched large noxious fumes reminding him of giant-sized egg rot. He passed between two of the smaller boils no larger in diameter than the boat's length and fringing the main sequence of turbulations. He thrust out his hand, grappling with the steering mechanism to steer the boat out of the fulminant, using his other hand to cover his mouth when his stomach rolled under nausea.

The boat swung out where he soon recovered with no apparent ill effects. Lomach's two nostrils had closed, and Dr. Whiting noted how easily she had been able to hold her breath during their brief hazard.

Professional curiosity now aroused, he swung close to the smaller boils and made tests, filling small sample vials with both liquids and gases.

His maps had shown the region and its boils, but did not show the shallow sand pits which they began to encounter during the detour. These were no more than sandy rills or ridges that probably formed from interactions of currents and weather, building low sand bars in one place momentarily, tearing them apart at another time or place. Their speed was necessarily reduced in adapting to these frequent irregularities of depth.

Tragedy struck hours later. Lomach had directed him away from rollers again, and his route followed through an unusually large dahrero herd, Dr. Whiting's first. He had just pushed the craft through unusually high grass that towered over his head even when he was standing up, and he blundered directly into a female with calf. The ungainly animal, in instinctive fear, bolted into another standing placidly nearby; and the second animal reared up high to land with its forefeet on the boat's propeller cage.

The cage burst easily, and the foot pushed into the rapidly rotating blade which cut through the poor animal's thickened skin, bone and cartilage, also snapping the propeller blade and causing the well-balanced rotor to break, itself flying thousands of feet out where it sank beyond sight.

By now the boat had entered the herd's mainstream where it floated to a quick stop against the ever-present swamp grasses. They had power in plenty, a safe platform for rest and sitting, food and medicine to last for a time, but no way to move.

His first impulse seemed most reasonable, and normally would have been so to any civilized community. He opened the emergency radio cannister, sent the bright-orange balloon bobbing skyward to hold its aerial, and unhesitatingly pressed the emergency distress signal. Many hours later—too long—the laconic reply came, 'Sorry! No planes, boats or spare troopers, Doc. You knew the hazards when you left us. Didn't anyone tell you of the rainy season? The frontier territory begins outside Port Authority.'

Had he been a lesser individual, he might have cursed the speaker, and turned in on himself in self-pity. Being the individualist he was, he merely cursed the speaker even as he turned off the radio, then set out to prepare more test specimens while he gave thought to his problem.

Fifty miles, he mused. Too far to walk—every foot about four feet—can't make it—swamp cows still



around us—ride? He knew that both humans and Splurgs often harnessed the animals by simple pressures of hand on their sensitive horns. But, how to salvage the medicine, books, notes, samples and water distiller which accompanied the heavy power-pac?

Hours later, while he was still pondering the problem, Lomach approached and spoke, ‘Yy-ou aa-re ww-orr-ied over your medicines and notes?’

Surprised at her perceptiveness, he nodded, ‘Yes’.

‘Let the dahrero pull us.’

‘I’ve thought of it; it’s a good idea, Lomach. The trouble is, I don’t have any lines long enough or strong enough to attach to our boat.’ His estimate of Splurg intelligence, already high, continued to rise. Their ease in learning languages, though poorly enunciated, was nothing short of genius, as all claimed. This was his first observation of their ability to review problems spontaneously and to evolve logical solutions.

‘I will weave it,’ she announced with alacrity.

Her webbed fingers worked more swiftly than Dr. Whiting had felt possible. Here again was a new aspect of Splurgs; and he took careful notes, counting the number and type of knots and twists with great care.

She plaited the strands, each twenty-five feet long. These were attached to the boat. The other ends were tied to a thicker collar-like plait which circled the throat of one of the docile dahrero. Then using the boat’s pole, usually attached to the hull’s side, they climbed the tall dahrero side, there to tie other lines to the sensitive horns.

When the sun rifted through the heavy overcast sky early the next morning, she, riding high on the swamp cow’s neck, he, guiding the boat from behind, they moved steadily albeit slowly, on, towards the next island sanctuary. The skies blessed them with yellow light and heavy, rolling clouds all that day.

SIXTEEN

On Carseegan’s last day among the pioneers several surprises came his way. He was satisfied that they could safely wait out the storms, that water would be plentiful so long as their boat-stills had power, which was predictably a long time; and he knew that actual starvation, or even severe malnutrition, could not occur anywhere near healthy swamp water.

The thought of personal danger forcefully hovered in his mind more frequently. Troops sweeping the Northern Territories for deserters would soon return to Port Authority. Then normal radio contacts would resume; more knowledge and possible assistance to this large convoy of civilians would be given. His masquerade could not last much longer. Besides, there was the growing problem of Elizabeth Newton.

She had approached him that same morning, swampjuice and all; the liquid hadn’t been her basic stimulus. ‘Bob, we’ve got to begin living together now. People are gossiping.’ Her tone this time was conciliatory, even propitiative.

‘I’m sorry, Elizabeth,’ he answered. ‘I’ve been too busy to talk this out with you. When you and John married, I *was* hurt—deeply so. I think I also felt sorry for myself and that led to needle fighting.’ He had hoped his tone of voice would soften the break. It was hard for him to remain restrained. Emotion exploded, wanting to force its way in with the terrible frustrations and feelings of his early youth. He wanted to tell about their lies—her lies—and her laughter, about his victimization, his becoming so easily duped.

‘John’s dead now, Bob, and there should be nothing more between us.’ Her old tone had come back, condescending, almost as though he were to be grateful just for her attention.

‘I’m sorry, Elizabeth. The fires have gone. Time has passed. We have memories, some in common, but we are both different people now, more mature,—’

‘Don’t talk to me like that,’ her eyes flashed, chest heaved, her voice became a dissonant shriek in



Carseegan's ears. 'You're talking just like John. Oh, how I hate it. I'm not old. There are many men who would like to lie with me. Only last night Sergeant Crowder came to my boat; he—' She stopped short, realizing only then what she was saying and how she must sound.

It was like clean water washing soothingly over bruised, muddy tissues; Carseegan lost the last vestiges of his internal hell, then. No longer did he wish retribution or to give pain. His image of Elizabeth Newton, constructed from old memories and nurtured by his selfsympathy did not, never had, matched reality. He fully realized that Elizabeth and John had never hurt him, he had hurt himself. With that realization sweeping through even the lower cells of his being, Robert Carseegan, alias John Newton, matured. 'There can be nothing between us, Elizabeth,' he had said as gently as possible.

She threw herself at him, clutching his face with her hands, pressing her body against him, pumping. Her lips reached for his. Carseegan moved her hands away with an easy, strong motion and stepped back away from her.

Her face contorted with hate, 'I'll tell them,' she hissed between tightly held lips. She swivelled on her heels, turning her back to him, and half-walking, half-running, she left.

Carseegan watched her departure until she had swung around the boat's end. In a habit early acquired by any beam-fighter who wished to survive, his eyes swung in a wide arc, first right, then left, stopping suddenly on Marcelia, who stood there. 'You overheard? You know?' he asked.

There was an almost imperceptible nod. That was all. She motioned to his bandaged leg. Stooping, she kept her eyes on what she was doing. The bandage came off; she inspected the wound, washed it lightly, then bound the clean bandage on, placing it evenly and firmly.

'I'd better tell you about it.'

She glanced at him quickly—too quickly.

'General Newton is dead. Been dead for a long time. *Amok* got to him and his detail. All green men except him. I took his place. He wanted it. There were obligations between us. Dak Storey knows. So does Jester. We had to get the boats through to safety regardless of the risk to me. They approved. What is your verdict, Marcelia?' The words rushed forward flat, fast. Inside his heart jumped, emotions seethed, frustratingly, uncontrolled, anxious.

This time she raised her eyes to his for a longer period, steady. Lowering them again to the bandage in her hands, she asked, 'Who are you? Why would you take the General's place?'

'I go by the name of Carseegan,' he slowly answered. 'John Newton was my twin brother: my real name is Robert Newton. We look alike except for small differences which have crept in over the years. John joined Eemay—stayed with it—became General. I, like a young fool, followed the needle beamer's path.' He paused. She tightened the last knot and straightened.

'Like John, I was programmed for an army career. You know the strict protocol of job training, job placement and citizen's rights acts which select training according to benefit for the state. We were trained for the military. I felt that Elizabeth was to marry me—I was wrong, even then—she married John. I—I thought they made fun of me—maybe not. Anyway I became rebellious; couldn't follow earth's man-in-a-slot philosophy any more. Applied for and got the *Trippert's Planet* job. My military training qualified me, and their agents completed the task of making me a needle fighter. I, I suppose I reached the top of the hero's list there before I started to grow up.'

His voice quavered, torn between the need to tell the truth and his instinctive reaching for sympathy. Would she understand? All at once his narrative became the most important of his life.

'If I killed someone, I sort of took revenge—a vicarious revenge—on John and Elizabeth. If I got killed, I reasoned, someone would feel the pain, but not me.'

'Finally, when I outgrew that phase, I came here to Swampworld without money. Used the Eemay as a means of free passage, then deserted. Hoped to find a new life at Fort West. Didn't expect to find my brother—the place was too big. Elizabeth was his problem. I had heard of it—drink—men—back on *Trippert's Planet*. He had asked for an assignment here thinking a new, frontier world would force her



into a different mould from what she was. She does appear difficult to handle—.’

His voice trailed out, used up. He watched for a softening in her face, and he saw it come. But what else to reveal? Under sworn oath, a man was not required to incriminate himself. Should he continue detailing past deeds for which he was now ashamed? Probably not.

Marcelia stood gazing out across the boats. The fog had finally dissipated for the day, but even so, he believed he would have been able to see her clear eyes, lost in a soft, womanly expression. It held no condemnation of him. At last she said quietly, ‘It doesn’t matter who you were or what you’ve been. After what you’ve done for us, only that counts. I have faith in you.’

That got to him, hit him like a club. ‘Don’t have that kind of faith in me, Marcelia. I’ve been a lying cheat, an army deserter, scared. I didn’t have the guts to face myself when Elizabeth married my brother.’

She brought her clear gaze to him for the first time, holding it steady. Carseegan dropped even this last presence. Unthought, unplanned, he grasped her to his chest and pressed his lips against hers. They clung tightly to one another for minutes, though it must have seemed more like seconds at the time.

SEVENTEEN

Marjac’s search was interesting but not too informative. Splurgs who had survived the evening’s strange behaviour awoke in the morning without visible evidence of insanity. Certainly *amok* had not visited them, but something had. He would notify Dak Storey of the boat and its mostly full contents on his return.

At the village, cluster leaders were busy. He waited patiently for one, finally saying, ‘You are Slacu?’

The old cluster leader, survivor of two *amoks* answered his questions resignedly. A loved one, his mate, Relcu, had been *amok*, if that’s what the sickness was last night, though it differed in so many ways he was also somewhat confused.

‘What did she feel?’ MarJac asked.

‘A—push—a physical thing inside of her. It reacted to smell.’

‘I didn’t smell anything at the wagons. Did you?’ Marjac said.

Slacu shook his head in agreement. ‘Part of her, she said, seemed to become crowded into a small place. There was the odour—stronger than food—stronger than the mating. All other thoughts crowded themselves from her mind and she fled in the wagon’s direction, she said.’

‘Did she fight?’

‘She only remembers struggling through the crowd, then she lost consciousness, waking only at dawn with her body beneath many, and her mouth pressed against the white powder which no longer gave a scent.’

When Marjac returned to Carseegan’s boat, he pinched a small amount of white powder into his hand. It was odourless, tasteless. Puzzled, he walked towards the campfire to sit, lost deeply in thought, and every once in a while he touched the pouch at his side which now contained a generous handful of the mystery.

EIGHTEEN

Someone had started a crackling campfire again and flames leapt high. Clothes hung from tree branches, on boat sides, over hastily planted sticks, everywhere blowing with a wet-wash flutter. The sun peeped through clouds for several minutes, raising much steam from soggy surfaces, as well as spirits. The return to sanity among Splurgs was widely known. Another bucket could be heard clanging its way up the cliff side, and several men staggered towards the pyramid-shaped fuel pile, arms loaded with freshly cut tree-limbs.

Carseegan also washed his clothes and hung them to dry during the brief dry period. He cleaned the boat, checked the filters and did those other chores which he knew to be necessary for his departure that evening. He had also moved his boat outside Dak Storey’s protective barriers.

Now everything was done, and he catnapped lightly through the warm, moderately humidity-free afternoon, his mind only touching his emotional psyche now and then, when Major Ashley’s voice



broke his reverie. He demanded crustily, 'What's wrong now, Major?'

'It's the Dak Storey crew, Sir.' The Major's voice was crisp, correct as usual. A large, white bandage was bound around the top of his head. 'They've got drunk and have started to threaten the women. Started fights with the men, too. They're quite a disruptive element, General. I'd like your permission to arrest them and lock them up.'

'I don't see why the men can't fight their own battles, Major. What will they do to protect their women when the army is no longer around?'

'That's an excellent point, Sir. However, some of these women have no protector.'

'We will mind our own business, Major!' Carseegan turned over, pushing his borrowed rain cap over his eyes to shut out the light.

'Yes Sir. I'm doing this to the best of our ability, Sir. It's just— well, Miss Marcelia Anne Johanson is—or was—ah—almost part of the army, Sir. She has been our only—ah—medical aide—our whole medical assistance, so to speak.'

Carseegan jumped to his feet. 'Good point, again, Major. I'll attend to it.'

Was Carseegan wrong?

Was there a smile on the Major's face?

'Yes, Sir!' The Major led the way back to Dak Storey's boats. Carseegan saw only about a third of the cargo missing from the load which he had purchased with General Newton's forged cheque. The big boats were arranged in a new position almost as if they were in a camp site by themselves. These men knew that Splurg *amok* was past, or so they acted.

Their boats were uncared for, showing dirt and streaks of dried swamp reed sticking in long, brown lines. Bottles of swamp reed juice were strewn everywhere. Mud caked the boat's sides as well as the usually sleek-shining propeller blades. One canvas was slashed open from top to bottom.

Traders were needed in frontier worlds. They helped to open new land, broke trail for pioneers, provided some services and communications, brought wealth and dignity to hard-working communities. Dak Storey, for example, was well known and trusted. His new partners were not the usual traders. As Carseegan approached the hulking boats, he heard a woman's scream, as though attacked.

He jumped on to the boat's platform and cut directly into the semi-compound formed by the four boats. The Major followed. Rawley held Marcelia by the back of her dress, at the collar, and he was keeping her from running with one hand while laughing uproariously. She struggled to break the grip at her neck.

In hundreds of fights Carseegan had maintained a coolness, a poise which was unmatched anywhere by other needle beamers. Those lessons should have stuck and worked now. They didn't. He was too suddenly, too deeply involved. When he landed, one of the drinking men had him and the Major covered with a needle beam. The drunken Rawley grinned when he saw the sudden, frozen tableau. Slowly, carefully, he tied Marcelia's hands behind her and to a projection from one of the boats. Then, like the cat which has caught the wounded bird and now turns to play, he took off his coat, turning just as slowly, studiously towards Carseegan. 'Keep 'em covered,' he growled.

When the blow came, Carseegan turned his head, following it along; but still the speed and power of such a hay-maker could not be easily absorbed. He went down into the mud, head stinging. Just in time, he saw the knee coming. He instinctively grabbed and twisted. Rawley went down with Carseegan on top. No one had yet made a noise within the small encampment.

It soon became apparent that Rawley was an old hand at rough and tumble. Probably he was unaware of Carseegan's early days on another planet. Had he been, he would never have challenged the false General. Carseegan's hands reached for Rawley's throat and were shrugged off only by Rawley's backward somersault, where the power and leverage of his thick leg muscles had already given him an advantage.

Rawley, now on top, began gouging Carseegan's eyes, pressing the thumbs with great force into



corners of the eye-sockets. In a rather learned, casual manner, Carseegan ignored the sudden pain and jabbed back with his sharp elbows. Rawley loosened his hold sufficiently for Carseegan to slip forward and back, pressing the back of his head hard against Rawley's nose. Tears flowed from Carseegan's eyes, as well as Rawley's. Carseegan began a short, punching rhythm with the back of his head against Rawley's nose. Rawley let loose with a grunt, then staggered backwards.

Carseegan twisted around fast, like a cat, and stepped directly into Rawley's reach, plunging a fist deep within his fat gut. Rawley again went back, making only the sound that air makes as it expels rapidly outwards. Carseegan followed his advantage with a quick uppercut that partially straightened the man; then a hard piston-driven right landed directly on Rawley's jaw, breaking at least one tooth, glazing his eyes, and ending the fight.

Even as Rawley fell, Carseegan was diving behind his husky frame for protection from the expected needle beams. He looked up quickly, then pushed himself out from behind the body when he saw Dak Storey there with the others' guns, his own pointed at the sullen, drunken partners.

Major Ashley moved to untie Marcelia while Carseegan wiped the mud off his face and uniform.

'I guess I got some bad partners this time, General.' Dak's tone was firm, but apologetic. The emphasis on the last word was also gone. 'Guess we'll have to part from them, now. Major, call on the radio for Jester. We're going to settle partnerships—now!'

Dak Storey wrote a cheque which adequately covered his former partner's investments.

Jester declined the offer. Carseegan's false cheque was recovered from the beaten Rawley.

Both Dak and Jester must have known what Carseegan had planned. The four boats were polished, provisioned, and placed beyond the outer gateway, as though on guard again—or ready to travel at a moment's notice.

Even stranger behaviour came from Major Ashley. He called the troops together for the General's inspection, forcing Carseegan to make boot-and-polish decisions on nearly everything; this seemed to have the side-effect of fully employing the men in spit and shine duties during the next twenty-four hours. Scranton McCuen's men were the only ones who had stayed on watch. Coincidences?

Carseegan hardly thought so.

When dusk came, a thoughtful Carseegan invited Major Ashley to his boat. The Major had his notebook, of course. Carseegan poured a small tumbler of swamp reed juice, 'Major Ashley,' he began. 'I want you to know that your ability as an officer has been raised in my eyes during the last several days of trial.'

The Major's stiffness lessened as he took both the juice and the compliment.

'I've written an account of your performance for Port Authority, and later Terran perusal. I've, ah, injured my writing hand and would like witnesses to my signature.'

The Major's *aide*, a young sergeant, was summoned from nearby who sent for another trooper. Carseegan poured all a small tumbler of swamp juice before explaining his purpose.

He and John had always confused people during their youth. Most identical twins can do so. His signature was almost, but not quite, as good as John's original. It was that small residue that he guarded against. He read the commendation to Major Ashley and his men. Afterwards, he signed *General John Newton* with John's usual flourish, leaving space for witnesses and dates.

'Take this, Major. The emigrants are safe if you stay here until after the rains, and after *amok* has run its course. My orders call for me to go ahead.'

'But Sir,' the very impressed Major argued, 'I, we knew nothing of your orders. I'll have to call men to accompany you. How many will you require?'

If Major Ashley was aware of his imminent departure, then why the act now? To impress his staff? Major Ashley must have some idea that he was not actually the general. Some little thing, military protocol, former acquaintances, talk from those who knew—Marcelia? Elizabeth? Had there been a slight quickening in the Major's voice. Certainly his attempt to keep all army men busy was not done



circumstantially. ‘None, Major. The men assigned to me perished before we could reach this group. You still need every one. No! I’ve made arrangements to travel with Dak Storey and Jester. They are old Swampworld hands, and will probably survive better than your men.’ Their afternoon offer had been a welcome surprise. Naturally they would have guessed his intentions, knowing his deception. But the Major?

There was a final thing for Carseegan to do. He had checked earlier and had learned that Elizabeth was finding emotional release by the joint efforts of another young soldier in her bed and a never-empty plastic of swampjuice. He could only feel sorrow and a new kind of sympathy for her. Yet there was Marcelia.

Had Carseegan known love before? Not really. A case of young infatuation—puppy-love, overly extended into middle-age—was not love. He was sure this time. Furthermore, he was positive his feelings were reciprocated, being a far more mature judge of his own and others’ character. No turning away from adolescent laughter and scorn, this time, drowning himself in death and death-wishes. There was only the practical matter of arranging for a home and livelihood for the two.

His mind leaped ahead. Before them were Splurges and *amok*. Behind him was the army and the deserter charges. He couldn’t stay with the settlers, though this spot meant safety for them. How he wanted to extricate Marcelia from the camp site and dash off into the lonely world with her!

Her place was still here, tending the wounded and helping where she could. Beyond Fort West was another land, another opportunity and now a rendezvous had to be arranged for that time and place.

He sent the Major’s aide to find Marcelia, pretending some difficulty with his bandages. She came, gladly, expectantly. As though in their honour, the stars broke through, glistening and sparkling during their togetherness. Clouds closed again long before they parted.

During a late evening fringed with small insect noises and the quiet shuffling of guards’ feet, Carseegan rolled his boat downhill under gravity’s pull. He waved at the camp’s two civilian guards stationed at the western gateway, and rolled quietly into the Splurg village. Off to one side he saw them in their hundreds, alive, rational, and assembled for their evening learning sessions, the age-old rite continuing on as though words and ideas alone would prevent the next cycle’s sickness. How symbolic of human character!

MarJac waited in the same square, easily recognized by his absurdly fitting red Eemay shirt and his yellow tattoo numbers. Just like Dak, he thought, to send someone to wait.

MarJac jumped aboard. ‘Tt-im-ee to gg-oo, yy-e-ss?’

Carseegan nodded his head and started his motor. The roar drowned the speaker’s words but soon they were beyond the village and sweeping down the western bank.

Dak’s four large boats were riding easily in the still swamp water. All four thundered grudgingly forward as their blades caught the air and pushed. A light drizzle started again. Carseegan turned his cape over his head and looked back at the receding dark shore line that represented Marcelia. Jester and Dak Storey crawled under their craft’s canvas to sleep, leaving the navigation to the Splurges.

MarJac sat awake with Carseegan all evening. One touched memories made only recently, the other touched a pouch filled with an apparently tasteless white powder.

NINETEEN

With morning came the fickle sun, big and shiny. Clouds, also big, brazen, puffed out with pride, still scudded across the clean blue sky. But they noticed the sun most, which shone solid white-yellow streaks between open spaces. Steam wafted away from the ground; streams seen on the far valley floor, glistened as would chromium ribbons. ‘We’ll stop for drying,’ Dak Storey commented, and all agreed.

Boats were emptied of every wet or mildewed scrap. Marjac and the other Splurges strung strong plastic lines from tree to tree until every cloth was flapping good-naturedly in the high breezes that keened over the steep ridge. The rest felt good, and their naked skin soaked up the heat and dry air. Thoroughly stimulated by the smell of an open fire and the aroma of fresh bubbling coffee, their flesh



nonetheless relaxed, and they slept.

Three more kindly, heat-soaked days darkened their skins again, and were followed by another of the great gusty rains of the season. Heavy grey fog prevented them from seeing more than several feet ahead, but the down slope, carved by explosives and smoothed by pick and shovel was easy to follow. Carseegan took the lead again, letting brakes off slowly as gravity pulled his boat down the long, winding ramp. It was monotonous work. Eyes strained ahead for the sharp hair-pin turns and fingers closed and opened on the brake control as the need was realized. Whenever the fog broke into patches, he could permit speed to build up.

The silent, green, swamp grass loomed ahead before he was aware of having finished the descent. Trees lined the beach area, as did rocks, and between double rows of rocks, the boat train stretched out into a single file. Sometimes rest, peace and quiet, as well as comfort, can make the best of men careless. Whatever the case, another sudden drizzle began at the same moment as Carseegan pulled into the rock-lined beachway. He slowed. Short spurts of deadly radiation passed near him, burning through a tree branch at his back, dropping it with a crushing sound familiar to the woodsman, but out of place here.

By the time the tree had fallen, Jester's and Carseegan's reflexes had already triggered. On a highly-trained, non-aware level, their bodies already knew they had been shot at, the approximate distance and direction of the shot, and had made preliminary calculations which estimated the presence of an expensive tripod-mounted beam, much larger than one man would normally operate by hand.

When the first flash of heat passed over their heads, Carseegan dropped to the ground where, by signs and motions, he managed to signal the more awkward Splurges to do likewise. Jester, too, managed to get Dak Storey and another Splurg down.

Brilliant lights, like condensed pencil-rays with halos surrounding the lights in concentric circles, now came from the opposite side where a barricade of natural stone formations, small bushes and taller trees rose. Shots came from between boulders and the distance was a good seven hundred feet. Jester turned his beam to tight needle-point, in a vain attempt to reach the distance.

The heavy gun facing them would very shortly pierce the boats and their bodies alike. 'Someone's got to dig them out,' Jester muttered.

'I've not seen hijackers for years,' Dak grumbled. He also had his gun out, a long, old-fashioned pellet projector that made a sharp explosive sound whenever the trigger was pulled.

'Are there any more long range pieces in your boats?' Carseegan asked of Dak. Carseegan's boat was nearest to the water's edge, half in and half out; Jester's followed, then Dak's four. Blades were still turning, and though idling, the buzz was louder than their muted talk. Dak shook his head negative.

Carseegan and Jester were used to tight situations. Both thought for an advantage, no matter how small. Who the attackers were and what they wanted concerned them not at all for the moment. To go up the trail, following their wheel-marks, was certain death. To their backs was a ridge of unscalable rocks and rock projections. Besides, anyone climbing would be shot. Their front was clear, all the way to the attacker's position; and to their left was swamp water, close to four feet deep and certainly deeper further out.

'One of us could rush with a boat,' Jester commented. Carseegan had recognized the possibility, too. But the attackers had found the range and an easy sweep across any of the boats was sure to kill any volunteer at once. It looked as though an ideal trap had been set. Jester and Carseegan settled back to think. There would be a weakness, they both knew. There always had been before. Even if they were wrong in their assumption, their training would forbid them to act differently.

Dak Storey and the Splurges were nervous, both unused to this kind of experience. Water began to run down their pathway, and the skies gushed torrents; visibility closed. For a moment they hoped that fog would become thick enough to permit a flank attack, but this was not to be. Hour passed hour until, near evening, Dak was out of bullets, and a heavy stream of photons was cutting Carseegan's lead boat in



two.

Whatever had governed the still rotating propeller blade was cut first, permitting the blade's speed to rise exponentially until its design limits were exceeded, and the blade flew apart like shrapnel, striking rock and bush with an explosive impact. Afterwards the photons melted through the boat until nothing was left for them to hide behind.

Carseegan cursed and crawled behind the next boat in line. Marjac, who had been lying near the damaged boat, crawled near to Carseegan, his long legs almost stretching beyond the craft's dubious shelter. 'I mm-us-tt have your gun,' he staccatoed.

'Are you crazy? This is the only protection we have. You can't go out there either. You're too clumsy on land.' Carseegan was puzzled, even confused by the request. Splurgs were instinctively peaceful; he doubted if Marjac could fire a gun, even in self-defence.

Marjac pointed to the water, describing a path from the water on their left toward the attackers. Carseegan understood then. He handed his needle beam to the Splurg, saying, 'Good luck.'

They watched as Marjac propelled his way slowly on belly and hand, palms flat, but deep in the sand and increasing mud which faced the water's edge. Carseegan held his breath while Marjac slithered across the side of the fuming swamp boat, but his body was sufficiently engineered to permit passage without danger.

Did the Splurg know how to operate the beam? He had forgotten to ask. Too late. He could only watch, and pray, as the long stick-like body and bulbous head and nose slowly crawled to the water's edge and sunk below its surface. He couldn't see a ripple on the water's face.

Their second boat was now taking the brunt of the heavy beam. Carseegan held his breath as he counted, imagining the time it must take for a Splurg to crawl, or walk, or swim, or whatever they did under four feet of water. He imagined certain green reeds trembling or twisting along the imagined path, pushed aside by Marjac's webbed fingers. His timing was bad. He had imagined only the halfway point when flashes of light speared down from higher ground behind the attackers.

'Now, Jester!' he shouted.

Jester had no need for the vocal prod. This was the moment, and both knew it. He was halfway there, zig-zagging every foot. He bounded over the lower bushes, scrambled up the rock facing, and dropped behind the stone barricade. Curses and thuds came from behind the rocks just as Carseegan, Dak Storey and several of the Splurgs reached the bushes.

Jester had Rawley on the ground when they arrived, dead, shot through the forehead. Two others lay dead next to the large photon gun. They were all that remained of Dak Storey's old partners.

'Where do you suppose those fellows hid the gun?' Dak asked. His comments referred to the large, military-type beamer with special cryogenic generators, the whole mounted on tripods.

'They were planning on more than simple trading,' Carseegan added.

Behind them, and above, Marjac was vomiting. Carseegan's pencil gun had been dropped; Marjac's organic response had taken control. Killing was foreign to his and other Splurg's conscious nature. When he finally rose, his legs were wobbly, his arms weak. It would be many days before his system recovered from the necessary violence.

The act had been simple. Crawl under water in the thick natural-to-him mud carrying the Terran's needle beam, climb to vantage point behind the attacking Terrans, aim the small, hand-sized weapon, and squeeze the trigger, gently. Tight, hot packets of energy had spurting out as the gas-mixing chambers were opened, photon packets they were called. After that Jester, Dak Storey and Carseegan, as well as the other Splurgs and himself, would live. Especially he would be free to continue his search for the *amok* cure, especially that.

His was not just a conflict of conscience or soul; his was a conflict of organic self in a violation of age-old instinct.

Dak Storey's former partners were buried in soft loam on the top ridge before they moved on. Prob-



ably they were no further than three hundred miles from the general regions designated as the Western Territories, and the Fort West station.

Strips in the Western Territories were similar to the lush valley behind the running water, broad grass lands and thick virgin timber. Carseegan was anxious to go.

Jardo, one of Dak's Splurgs, cared for Marjac who showed every sign of shock. Since little was known about his condition, little could be done. The stimulant of sugar was tried without change; only later, after sleep, food, and rest, especially through the curative powers of time, did MarJac become active again, though silent, broody.

Periods of good weather were more frequent now, the sun warming the days, and Pearl and Opal traversing in a silent ballet among brilliant sparkles at night. The eastern winds had eased, occasionally bent back by western or northwestern breezes. They travelled easily, comfortably, stopping for rest and food at regular intervals.

It was during one such stop when MarJac, along with the other three Splurgs, approached Carseegan to say, 'Ww-h-nn I lived with Robert and Martha, I learned many things.'

It was an oblique approach, out of character for Splurgs in most matters. Jester set down his plate, moving closer to hear. Dak Storey shoved his boots under his canvas covering, having decided to clean them another time. Carseegan opened his eyes and pushed his muscular frame into a squatting position. None of the Terrans spoke.

'Terran thought follows man, forming different, even peculiar patterns,' Marjac continued. All the Splurgs except him had doubled their jointed legs to sit. Marjac pointed away from the boats and said, 'Like the water of our world, Terran thought casts out in gentle crests and troughs; interactions occur, sometimes interfering one with the other, and often there are hooks that catch one thing, changing it thereby.' His long arms continued to emphasize in the concrete his abstract ideas.

'Terrans speak of conjectures and conclusions. When they speak of conjectures, they speak of an idea which is imagined in their thoughts and which may or may not be true where the waves of thought truly travel.'

It was indeed a strange speech for Marjac, wholly captivating the men.

'Our cluster lesson-makers teach only those thoughts which have survived with them, whether true or not, holding that every thought which survives must have value. Terrans claim that ideas are valuable only when tested against what is truly there, is that not so?'

Dak Storey, perhaps more philosophical than most, recovered to answer first. 'That's not universally true, Marjac, but it is a good description of what Terrans call the scientific method. Such thinking by men built our civilization and the tools that we use.'

Marjac paused long enough to check Dak's statements back against his thoughts, then said, 'If Terrans were to solve the *amok*, how would they begin?'

'They would bring in and establish a scientific colony dedicated to the study of the whole ecology,' Carseegan answered. 'They would look at how things operate, what makes Splurgs behave normally and what makes them behave abnormally. It would take much time and cost enormous resources.'

Marjac had heard the method and the excuse before. He nodded his bulbous head, peering at Jester next.

'I guess with limited resources, they would hire one or two xenobiologists, set them down on the planet with some equipment, and let them come up with something if they could,' Jester said.

They could always take a small colony of Splurgs back to earth for intensive study, but they won't,' Dak added lamely.

'But in all the ways mentioned, man conjectures to causes and effects?' Marjac's question was directed to all three. His inner eyelids opened and closed as the sunlight came and went in response to low, rolling clouds.

'That's right, Marjac. But what are you getting at?' Earth probably could cure the Splurg sickness,



and probably would, were it not for her own over-population, red-tape, distance, lack of desire and a whole lot of other things.'

Marjac nodded his head in agreement with the new listing. 'Splurgs can think and conjecture between causes and effects, too!'

It was enough to wonder over Marjac's unusual lead in the conversation, and the pressing of philosophical abstractions. Was he still suffering from shock after taking life? 'I'll agree to that,' Dak Storey interrupted. 'I've been on Swampworld most of my life and Splurgs have keen, quick, analytical minds.'

'I have conjectures on the *amok*.' Spoken quietly, the words emphasized on the whole point of Marjac's unusual behaviour.

The other three Splurgs who had sat back on doubled legs so quietly, jostled one another, speaking rapidly in their own croaking sounds, as though having forgotten the presence of Terrans.

'We'd like to hear your conjectures, Marjac,' Carseegan said.

'Facts must come first. Is that correct?'

All three Terrans nodded in the affirmative.

'Splurgs feel a strong urge to live on land; an instinct, you call it?' The men looked at one another as Marjac continued. 'Then, every Splurg cluster that lives on land goes *amok* after about ten Terran or about five and a half Swampworld years, just when we have become full grown and are ready to produce another generation.' Thinking of his own small children brought pain to his face as he spoke the words.

'None of us has seen *amok* occur among swamp-livers, is that not so?'

Even the other Splurgs nodded this time.

'I conjecture a difference between swamp-water living and land-living, for Splurgs,' Marjac concluded.

'How can that be?' Dak Storey was puzzled. 'Those Splurgs who stay in the swamp and who also resist an urge to land-live would breed children of similar nature, until no desire for the land was left. *Amok* then would die of its own weight, that is, lack of applicants, if land-living were its chief cause.'

Salinodo, another of the Splurgs, answered for Marjac. 'There are no Splurgs who do not feel the pull of the land, and some do resist.'

Except for lack of knowledge regarding *amok* among swamplivers, the facts seemed obvious once Marjac had pulled them together. His conjecture, at first a mere mental toy, had suddenly blossomed.

'There is another fact which must be looked at,' MarJac continued. 'Fertilizer used by Terrans to grow food, to restore the earth, cures a certain kind of Splurg sickness. I would conj—.'

'Nitrates!' Carseegan interrupted with a shout. 'There must be a relationship between the leaching of nitrates from the strips and the absence of nitrates in the Splurg's physical make-up. What's in the boats, Dak?'

'Sodium nitrate. Commercially pure. Essential for the farms.'

'And it comes from the Port Authority water purification process, doesn't it?'

'Yes. Through resin separation, before pumping water through the large fusion pack.'

'All facts seem to fit!' Carseegan was excited.

Even the more reserved Jester banged his fist on his hand.

'Terrans test conjectures, do they not?' MarJac continued in his quiet, implacable manner.

'Yes.'

'I have a plan to test my conjecture.' His right hand reached for and unconsciously patted the small pouch containing sodium nitrate at his side.

Marjac's selling job proved tough. He had had to spend hours longer pleading, persuading for a given course of action which would adequately test his conjecture. Nothing less would satisfy him. They promised proper studies by Port Authority's staff, not being aware of Dr. Kester Whiting's commitment. They also mentioned correspondence with earth's xenobiologists, and later verifications at other



times and places.

Marjac was insistent, cajoling. In the end, they weighed his saving of their lives in the balance, and found a debt still owed. Finally, they agreed to deliberately seek out a community of Splurgs who were actively engaged in self-butchery and butchery of anything else that moved.

TWENTY

The military map which lay before them had belonged to General Newton and showed concentric circles extending out from Port Authority. The Northern Territories, consisting of only roughly crescent-shaped strips, was scattered asymmetrically in a broad band about thirty degrees wide and about one thousand miles at its thickest point. Land there was known to be rugged, unproductive, generally inhabited by Eemay deserters, such as Carseegan, or other outlaws. Splurgs lived there, too, but in very small numbers.

To the east of Port Authority were wide open swamps, with only scatterings of land strips for several thousands of miles.

To the south were strips in abundance, and probably Splurgs, too, but it still represented unexplored territory.

Their present position was some ten concentric circles out, representing about 2,500 miles from Port Authority. Fort West, the second largest concentration of Terran population on Swampworld, was identified as being another two hundred and fifty miles away; from its position another set of concentric circles expanded out, intersecting with those stemming from Port Authority. Lighter red-coloured hyperbolic curves were over-printed on the radial measures from both Port Authority and Port West, as well as a small weather station located about half-way through the Northern Territories at about twenty degrees from zero line, a line which extended from Port Authority and which followed North-South longitudinal lines as defined from there. These hyperbolic curves represented a crude radio navigational system adequate for large, unpopulated spaces but not yet operating.

They ignored the radio frequencies indicated on the map, attempting to trace out and correlate the pattern of *amok* as they knew it. Small circles were placed in regions where *amok* activity was definitely known, small x's where only second or third hand knowledge was available. Based on their knowledge, a sparse scattering of x's and o's followed an almost inward spiralling curve, with Port Authority at the concave side. Their eyes followed the marks from the Northern Territories down and out to their present position.

'Seems like I've seen similar maps at Port Authority,' Dak Storey mused. 'I'd forgotten what the pattern looked like. Take out this dot which Jester added, and push in several of those at the bottom, and you'll have about what I remember.'

Carseegan did as directed, making the curve somewhat more regular. 'If that's the way *amok* starts—or, I should say, how it progresses—there must be some correlating factor,' he said.

Jester suggested a wind-born disease, following the eastern storms; Dak Storey wondered about an unknown swamp current which followed the path. No one guessed that weather, the amount and pattern of annual rainfall, might be a significant clue, though Carseegan had mentioned the leaching of nitrates earlier.

Their map did serve as a crude predictor of *amok* activity. As Carseegan wryly commented, 'It seems like a Terran-type conjecture, so, lacking anything better, we should use it.'

Their original path had been almost ninety degrees of north, due west of Port Authority, now they turned to fifteen degrees north of west.

They crossed the boundary which defined swamp from colony past an outer row of neat, reed-huts, into the wide-open compound. Splurg children were everywhere. Large domesticated swamp cows seemed to mix, intermingling with huts, adults and children, and giving the whole a feeling of an unusual, large, viable new kind of swamp organism filled with motion, thrashing and many other energetic activities. The whole was so big, so new, so filled with motion, the Terrans could not at first



comprehend its true nature. It was Marjac who, in a very shrill, very tired, croaking voice, strained to shout, 'Aa-mm-okk!'

Already his warning came too late!

Children were not pushing through the waters in pleasure or play, or in delight over the carefree prospects of visitors; they were screaming, tearing one another apart, provided an adult was not already doing the same.

Those swamp cows unfortunate enough to be living within the boundary of carnage were lacerated, or punctured, painfully tortured in various ways. They thrashed their huge bulks around, rearing often through reed-huts and fighting Splurgs alike, emitting a quiet, half-hiss, half-croak with their scream of terror, and their blood painted the green reed-spears a gory hue sweeping through the water in broad swirls the colours of Easter eggs.

By the time recognition of danger, and the warning had come, they were deep inside the compound and the zone of danger. Splurgs, difficult to see in the swamp at best, were in terror-soaked motion, moving and destroying all that moved.

Jester and Dak Storey, far ahead of the others, began to circle back out of the reign of terror. A long pole suddenly thrust out from the swamp and into Jester's chest. He was pushed overboard, falling behind by several boat lengths. His whole body plunged below the swamp's surface before his legs gripped the muddy bottom and he could push his face to the surface again. One male Splurg, his arm trailing behind and held on by a thin thread of skin, reached towards Jester with a claw-like instrument.

'Duck!' Dak shouted, his pencilbeam already out and aimed towards the new danger. The energy-packs caught the Splurg fullface, stopping him suddenly and with great mercy.

Dak circled back to pick up Jester, placing him even with the next boat which contained Jarodo. A female, face contorted in pain, had dragged herself aboard behind the driver. By the time Dak noticed Jarodo's danger, a sharp object thrust through Jarodo's back, killing him instantly.

When Jarodo fell forward, his hand caught the boat's throttle, pushing it to high speed. The boat, unguided, added to the carnage, slicing through several struggling Splurgs, directly impacting against a wounded swamp cow. The beast reared up, landing its bulk on the boat and sending the shallow craft under water, its propeller still churning, mixing mud, blood, reeds, air and water in a giant coloured water-fountain.

Salinodo and Wardodo pulled even to Dak's boat just as another form rose from Dak's rear. Salinodo jumped across, throwing himself at the *amok*, tumbling both over the far side. Dak and Wardodo circled the spot, but never saw Salinodo again.

Side by side, now, Dak and Wardodo reached another of the reed-huts when a wounded dahrero appeared, lurching suddenly from the hut's far side. It lunged into Wardodo's boat, knocking the protective screen from the propeller, driving it up and forward; the whirling blade cut into its sensitive horns and a wailing hiss wavered in the air.

Wardodo's boat was pushed into Dak's crushing the thin metal hull of both craft and pressing them both against one of the larger huts. A dozen biting, scratching, fighting Splurgs rolled from the hut on to the boats, covering Wardodo, Dak Storey and Jester with writhing insanities.

By the time Carseegan and Marjac had arrived, nothing could be found of Dak, Jester, Salinodo, or Wardodo. Carseegan turned his boat in a tight circle, beaming beast and Splurg indiscriminately in his rage. Finally, sick with blood and grief, he sped out of the Swampworld hell in giant jogging motions, even as Marjac netted one of the *amok* Splurgs.

It was a high price to pay for one insane Splurg, Carseegan thought. Dak Storey, Jester, three long-lived, amok-free Splurgs. Probably—most certainly—Marjac felt the same. Or did he?

The latter held tight to a twisting, writhing bundle that bounded in all directions. Carseegan had to stop soon to help hold and tie down the expensive package.



He stopped beyond the horizon, having travelled more than five miles meanwhile. By then he noticed the heavy strain on Marjac, and knew his fellow survivor had indeed felt the others' deaths. 'They helped pay for this chance,' he reminded Marjac grimly, 'Let's use him.'

Marjac could only nod.

Carseegan reached his powerful earth arms around the captive and the net, taking care to keep his body away from fingers, toes and teeth. Marjac opened his pouch, extracting a pinch of white powder. He manoeuvred it over the captive's mouth, which was still opening and closing in sudden spasms, and dropped it in, watching carefully as the swallowing reflex caught. They waited.

Minutes later Carseegan could feel the Splurg's body shudder with waves of jerks from top to bottom. Both eyelids closed and the captive lost consciousness. As a safety measure, he tied the sick Splurg with care. 'Something is working, Marjac. Your theory may be correct, or you may have killed it.'

Cobcoth of the Coth cluster was neither a cluster leader, nor a significant person. Born of average Splurg parents, he always participated in both evening teachings and the gathering of food. He got along well with other Splurg children, grew to maturity in his allotted ten years, mated and produced two children of his own.

He could remember how the water had become lighter in colour around the community over past years. He remembered how once the waters had been dark, even murky, a swamp-mix of small green algae; and the profusion of hard-shell Restle which once lay everywhere on swamp's bottom was no longer. These, the main diet were found smaller and farther away from the village.

During one of the evening lessons he also remembered how his friend Plicoth had suggested that the colony move. 'We find the gathering of food too time-consuming, having to walk miles for the gathering. And Restle have become smaller.

'The swamps are wide. We can easily move and rebuild,' he had continued.

'Why not to land?' Someone had suggested, and the question was inevitable.

Srancoth, three-times *amok* survivor, and a very wise Splurg, would not permit this.

The usual mutters had occurred until Srancoth gave his arguments against the move. 'My father's father built our hut. My father built at his spot twice. I myself have added three times over my father's. Underneath my hut lies the crushed and rotting reeds of generations, extending the swamp's surface to swamp's bottom harmoniously.

'Others have moved to land and to sickness. Those who live here now will remember my lessons. Three times the village has gone to land, except me. I survive.

'Others here, like myself, have built huts upon valued memories providing rich ties, strong, traditional ties, to our parents and their parents; and successful survival of *amok* is also to be found when those traditions are honoured.

'What other community can boast of similar stabilities?'

There it was. Even Cobcoth was swayed by the weight of parental tradition, though land-moving was a strong instinct, beating hard in his chest and throbbing through his veins with heavy pulse.

Others had argued that much work would be needed to duplicate their reed houses, each of great size and complex weaving.

Looking back on the experience, Cobcoth would one day realize how little sense Srancoth and the others had actually made.

The day had dawned murky; a light mist suspended in the air cast rainbows of colours. Cobcoth could not see beyond one row of reed houses, the air was that dense. He had selected the small basket hanging on his hut's wall, and, placing it over his shoulder by the woven strap, unlimbered his long legs from underneath and stepped into the morning's silent water. Small insects had buzzed and twirled as he walked, though most were quiet awaiting the stronger light or resting from the long night's cries.

Few others faced the morning as early as did Cobcoth. He held the theory that Restle faced early



tasted better. Besides, the underwater growths had become harder to find, as everyone knew, especially after the bottom had been well-searched by the whole community.

Several miles away from his home he began plucking the fast growing Restle from the swamp's bottom. He noted that even at his present distance the waters had become clear.

It was later in the afternoon when Cobcoth, his mate Pooth, his two small children, Rlcoth and Toncoth had finished their lunch when he thought to gather more of the reeds which grew tall, green, fresh so far away. He had turned to face away from the village centre when his body had frozen, as though with self-volition, and the fearful cry of 'amok!' pierced the humid air.

His mind wanted to deny it. Hadn't Srancoth and others protected them, always? Yet he stood stiff, shivering, waiting, in fearful anticipation of what was to come. A strange sense of awareness came to him, and his senses strove in search of something which it could not find. Sounds, voices, sights, became louder, stronger; several Splurgs burst through the side of one of the huts, struggling.

Like a spreading fire, the sickness grew; all around were heard cries and thrashings, and for a moment he had felt both cursed and blessed. He remembered thinking about his mate and children. They were not sick, and he was certainly healthy. Then, like some giant gravity flow, his conscious thoughts pushed below his skin, down, down, and still down, to sudden blackness.

He woke, bound tightly, rocking easily, in Carseegan's boat.

'He's awake,' Carseegan shouted above the propeller's hum.

Marjac slowed the boat, fastening the tiller tightly before speaking. 'His eyes behave normally.'

Speaking directly to their prisoner in Splurg croaks, he asked, 'Do you understand me?' He noted the struggles were also gone.

'Wh-h-h-at has h-h-a-appened to me?' the prisoner asked, in typical Splurg speech. 'All was *amok* around me; now I am here. Why did I not also become sick? Where is my mate? My children?'

With Carseegan in full agreement, Marjac untied the ropes and removed the reed netting, though Carseegan's hand stayed close to his weapon for some time.

They were on a direct route now: Carseegan, Marjac and Cobcoth. Ahead would be a land flowing with clear, pure water, fertile, and his for the registering. 'How was it said?' he mused. 'Unto a land flowing with milk and honey?' There was also something about 'Ye are a stiffnecked people' but that seemed to apply only in satire.

There was a slight chance that his desertion would be discovered before he could pay for his passage, but only a small one.

Gone were the images of a desolated Swampworld. Where once he imagined a swarming Terran population destroying the very swamp itself, there were now prospects of a burgeoning Splurg population living side by side with a handful of lucky Terrans.

With the advantages of technology, the quick Splurg mentality would permit a swift rise in culture at least equivalent to man's.

Even the all-powerful Emigration Bureau, and its ranks of divisions on earth, would not resist for long the pressures of opinion once *amok* was learned to have a cure.

It would take time—maybe years—but soon Eemay would stop the inflow of Terrans, beginning liaison with governmental representatives of the rightful Swampworld rulers.

Carseegan was glad he had come to Swampworld.

TWENTY-ONE

Of late Marjac's hand seemed to hover near his small reed pouch. Once or twice Carseegan had seen him take a tiny pinch of the white powder, taste it, and shake his head in perplexity. What of Marjac? Would settlers be friendly to one who knew how to cure *amok*? Would emigration cease? 'What will you do?' he asked Marjac.

'I mm-us-tt learn about the Terran fertilizer—what it is, how to obtain it in quantity, and how to



® distribute it.'

It was a logical answer. Carseegan could easily visualize obstacles which perhaps Marjac was unaware existed. True, not much nitrate was needed for the medical protection of each Splurg, yet it was formed only as a by-product of Port Authority water purification. Most Terran farmers used it in large quantities, and when the newly stable culture learned of its value in crop raising, Splurgs, too, would generate a demand. Then what would they use for trade goods? Swamp hide? Seemed like a poor bargaining position, not even considering the huge monetary investment required to bring in a greater nitrate-producing capacity.

'Long ago I spread the white powder on Martha's and Robert's garden,' Marjac continued.

'Did you eat the nitrate then?' Carseegan had wondered about Marjac's immunity to the disease, and this seemed to be its source, or at least one of the sources.

'No.'

'But you did eat from the garden?'

Marjac nodded. Both were quiet, thoughtful. 'I will buy the Terran powder for my race,' Marjac announced suddenly.

'What will you pay the Terrans for it?'

Marjac sat, silent. It was later—much later—when the sun had died and Opal and Pearl cast twin tunnels along the black spear-studded waters that Marjac answered, 'With our land, if necessary!'

That statement summarized the nub of Marjac's problem—a problem not unknown to those of the conquered, those who are summarily dispossessed, or those who are exploited by expansionists, First he had to convince the authorities—earth authorities—that *amok* could be cured by his white crystal; second he had to convince them it should be cured; third he had to obtain the powder and to distribute it; fourth, he had to take possession from an armed empire thousands of years in advance of his own society. He, Carseegan, Terran deserter, could not do these things for him.

Finally, having accomplished all of the above, there was still the turtle-like bureaucracy upon which so much would depend. Most likely, even with the best of intentions, Marjac's case would creak slowly along by inches, where light-years were needed. And with earth's population pressures seeking easy solutions, shortcuts, the last remaining Splurgs would likely find themselves in a smog-filled zoo, too tiny to hold the press of curious human visitors.

Carseegan could not think of alternatives.

When the cold, heavy rains began again, they had pushed their way south towards one of the larger strips now only one hundred and eighty miles away from Fort West. The plush island before them, very similar to others encountered, rose high out of the water like some giant Terran tanker, with cargo and ballast both absent.

Once beyond the green reeds, they could see shallow, sandy slopes bordering the jutting sides; and, colourful flowers, pink, yellow, with black flecks, bright orange streaked with blood-red, flowed over the highland's edges in rivers of sharp-tangled thornvines.

Their propeller sounded against the steep walls, flushing thousands of insects from the down-sloping vine tangles and creating a vibrating black cloud blanket that competed for sound dominance.

Cobcoth walked ahead to clear the pathway. Marjac watched from inside the boat. Carseegan steered.

Even before they pushed over the cliff's edge they saw the dance of light, yellow, flickering, a campfire set openly on the mesa. Carseegan stalled the blade. Followed by Marjac, he pushed his way through stubborn bushes along the road's side, quietly scouting the camp site, beamer unlimbered.

Pushing aside a final dangling barrier of leaf-covered limbs, he viewed the circle of light, spotting a bent figure, white-haired, craggy of feature, and by his side, a young female Splurg. Further away, but still within the spluttering light's boundary, was seen a tethered dahrero, now quietly resting. A boat, without propeller blade and housing guard, lay to his right between the seated figures and the dahrero. Trickle of water poured into his shirt collar, and he shivered.



Carseegan, remembering Dak Storey's former partners, narrowed his eyes and probed the black boundary in search of others. Marjac tugged his arm, saying, 'Tt-hh-a-tt is Doctor Kester Whiting. Pp-or-tt Authority physician.'

Trusting in his memory of the kindly physician, Marjac stepped into the circle of light, startling both members.

Carseegan followed soon, introducing himself. They were invited to sit before a warm fire, reflecting radiation from the sloping ceiling of the lean-to type tent which also kept the spattering rain away while the fire sputtered, dancing and leaping crazily with each tiny steam explosion.

Dr. Kester Whiting, in characteristic bluntness, studied Marjac, while only the very blind would have failed to notice Marjac's uncharacteristic attentions towards Lomach. 'Aren't you the same Splurg who came to my office at Port Authority?—worried about *amok*, weren't you?' Dr. Whiting had finally placed the visitor.

Marjac nodded his head affirmatively.

'I've got some notes and ideas that might interest you,' the crusty physician continued. 'Lomach, here, seems to have been cured of the sickness, though I can't guess why, yet.'

Hidden excitement stirred MarJac, and flutterings passed across his usually placid over-sized face. 'Tt-e-ll me, please.'

Dr. Kester Whiting's conscience had been stirred by Marjac's visit at Port Authority. How could man be so callous? He spread his own seed recklessly, without forethought or planning, taking every star and their fertile planets while caring little for the plight of other viable species such as the Splurgs of Swampworld. Terrans could have solved the *amok* long ago, had they the desire. Well, he, as a representative of the human race, would seek its solution, bending every technical knowledge at his hand to the task.

He had made charts, gathered statistics and had pondered the *amok* cycle. Then armed with knowledge and a plan, he had gone forth, alone, to do battle: a mite of his kind, self-organized and self-dedicated towards the solution, a problem only hundreds of thousands of years old among an alien race.

He had made some progress, in spite of handicaps, and with luck, he might make more. 'Splurgs,' he continued, 'are amphibian, analogous to Terran frogs, salamanders, or toads; count the characteristics which each have in common. One, they each have a moist, flexible skin, and this is true whether or not the Splurg lives on land or in the swamp. Two, feet and hands are webbed. Three, toes are soft, without claws. Four—and this was the difficult part for me to classify—usually the immature or larval form of Terran amphibian is vegetarian, while the adult is carnivorous. There isn't any clear-cut distinction between Splurg immaturity and adulthood with respect to form and size as there is with Terran analogues, but certainly the Splurg seems to have an instinctive drive towards land and at that time his diet changes. He turns then from being chiefly carnivorous to herbivorous—just the opposite of the Terran analogy.

'Other points can be ticked off which earth's amphibia have in common, however. The immature Splurg has a two-chambered heart, so does the mature Terran amphibia. In fact, the change from two to three chambers is so pronounced that I would at this time use it as the dividing line between childhood and maturity.'

Long shadows danced across their faces as flames from one log leapt high, then sneaked to hide below another unlit branch. Carseegan pushed his collar up when he stepped out near the fire to rearrange the burning logs. On his return, he said, 'Terran amphibia go through a pronounced physical change, Doctor Whiting. What would Swampworld's equivalent be?'

'It's subtle. The instinctive drive from swamp to land represents the equivalent. If internal chemistry could be sufficiently well studied, I'm sure there would be a distinct correlation between their subjective drive towards land, and the physiological changes which correspond to change from water-liver to land-liver. As I now see it, Splurgs lived on land thousands of years ago. They unquestionably evolved



from water animals, as did man, and in the same sense. Much later, they found it necessary to re-adapt to swamp living. Their feet and arms, their legs and hands, their double-valved nostrils and double-lidded eyes, all give evidence of a kind of over-specialization, just as man's foot is over specialized.

'They had to come from the sea, to land, then from land, back to the sea. Oh yes, our large whales have a similar, though more exaggerated history; and our white polar bear has been going through similar re-adaptations for thousands of years. So, you see the idea is not new to Terra either. A species adapts to given environmental conditions; the conditions change. The species either adapts to the new conditions or dies. In the case of Swampworld's Splurges, most islands formed parts of some continents at one time, and Splurges or their ancestors who had come from the sea, lived on the continents. When the continents split, leaving mostly swamp water for living area, a re-adaptation took place. Our present Splurges are caught in a double-transient state. To go to land or not—that is the question,' he paraphrased, smiling.

'But what about metamorphosis?' Carseegan insisted. Cobcoth refuelled their fire, and the blaze momentarily darkened under the wet wood, then sprang forth when the flames first evaporated the wetness then bit into the easily burned wood.

'Ah yes. I'm coming to it. First get the picture that Splurges have re-adapted from land back to water. Re-metamorphosis, if not complete, would permit some activities in the water; but not all survival patterns would be found there. The Terran polar bear, for example, can live under water for long periods, as does the whale and the sea otter. But it can't take oxygen from the water. Maybe someday it will learn to do so. The characteristics which must be selected come slowly, birth by birth, followed, of course by many deaths.

'The immature Splurg form—with double-chambered hearts—live primarily in the swamp, if they can. As they mature, their internal chemistry seeks to drive them towards the land where their diet changes, their skin thickens, the sense of balance is improved and their heart becomes three-chambered.

'But their counter-drive, probably on a level below their conscious threshold, drives them back towards the water. Now what of their successful land adaptations? What characteristics must they re-discover, or re-invent if they are to be most successful? I haven't isolated these yet—still working on the idea—but I believe I have some clues in their blood chemistry and in the effects of diet when the three-chambered eats protein or the two-chambered eats, vegetables.'

MarJac moved closer to Lomach; she was returning his attentions. Cobcoth closed his double-lids and now held his two doublejointed legs by both hands. Any outsider might have concluded that only the two Terrans were interested in the conversation. It was not true. Contrary to appearances, the Splurges were most attentive, and waiting.

'But Splurg children are born and raised on land, too,' Carseegan said.

'Yes. That's what delayed my theory for a while. Think of a catastrophe occurring hundreds of thousands of years ago which destroyed most liveable land and made it necessary, for racial survival, that Splurges or their ancestors re-adapt to the water. Prior to the event, the immature form had successfully adapted to land, though retaining neutral survival characteristics one of which was the two-chambered heart. I say "neutral". Probably there was some negative selection involved, but the Splurg society is not naturally stressful to the adult or child, so the characteristic would not have weighed heavily.'

Carseegan was now warm enough to shed his rain-cape. He stood momentarily, hanging it inside the lean-to to dry. 'Looks like a blind alley, Doc. You've now got to account for changes which make land-livers better able to live in the water, and you've just run out of characteristics, by your own account.'

'Ah, but don't you see?' Dr. Whiting's face pushed forward. 'The process is going on. Re-adaptation is still in process. The *amok is* merely one of the symptoms of those physiological adjustments which must take place for re-adaptation!'

Carseegan deliberated. It wasn't satisfactory yet, but he couldn't put his mind on the flaw. His private



thoughts were soon broken by Marjac's natural croak, 'According to your cc-onnjecc-ture, Dr. Whiting, the amok should produce some Splurgs who long for the swamp. Is that correct?'

'Well, that's about correct. Actually, those who survive the attacks will probably be those who, for some reason unknown, prefer to stay in the water. From a biological point of view, they will be adults whose genetic pre-disposition leads them to favour the swamp. Genetic drift, the ability of uncommon recessive genes to multiply rapidly from small surviving groups, should eventually bring about only those Splurgs who, from instinct or not, prefer the swamp.'

It was Marjac's turn to pause in thought. 'There are some, it is true. I remember many cluster leaders who loved the swamp, who travelled periodically through the swamp at intervals, gaining pleasure from such a trek. There were Suressjac, Lanout, Rtucou, and Slacu.' He looked at the doctor, puzzled. 'But they also long for land.'

'I uncovered an important datum at Port Authority,' the physician continued. 'According to records accumulated there, *amok* has never occurred in the water.'

Carseegan and Marjac looked at one another, the latter lifting both eye-lids in spite of the growing glare from the open fire. If *amok* had never occurred in swamp water, a conjecture once held by Marjac, then who or what had killed Dak Storey, Jester, Jarodo, Salinodo and Wardodo? Where had Cobcoth come from? 'Marjac has some unusual facts for you,' Carseegan stated quietly.

After Marjac had explained his conjectures, he pointed to Cobcoth who was still sitting, eyes closed. 'He was *amok*. We captured him, tied him, then placed this powder, called fertilizer, in his mouth. Carseegan calls it nitrates.' He removed a small amount of the chemical from his pouch while talking, and passed it to the doctor.

'I'll be damned!' The physician's expletive was loud. 'This wraps it up. Let me ask Cobcoth some questions.'

Large shadows again leaped against the tent's slanting wall as Doctor Whiting moved, slowly unbending his gnarled arms and legs, and placed himself between Carseegan and Cobcoth. 'What was the water around your cluster like, Cobcoth? Green? Like most waters? Filled with dark, strong reed strands? Or maybe dark brown and muddy? Or, maybe clear with a sandy bottom and weak light-green reeds?'

'It was clear, like sandy bottom. We had to travel a long way for strong reeds. Those around the village were yellowish or light green. Restle were small, quite hard to find without going a long distance. There was always talk of moving, but most of the cluster, and especially the cluster leader, resisted.'

'Was the water swift-flowing or slow moving, perhaps even stagnant?' Dr. Whiting asked.

'Very slow moving.'

'There you have it,' Dr. Whiting spread his arms open towards Carseegan.

'I'm not with you, Doc. What does it mean?'

'Normally nitrates, being water soluble for the most part, permeate the swamps. Some condition of water current, or biological disease caused the normal reeds to be weak, yellowish, lacking a good supply of proper chemicals. He described difficulties in finding Restle, which is almost sure to grow to a size dependent upon the amount of available nitrates, though indirectly through a complex ecological chain.

'All in all, Cobcoth described a swamp-living cluster which had the bad fortune to be tied down to a nitrate-poor zone, probably unusual, but not out of the realm of possibility. Should a cluster refuse to move for long periods, their own wastes will eventually foul the area, but we don't know if that was the cause as yet.'

Carseegan nodded. 'According to the facts, when nitrates have been leached from the soil, land strips would normally stop providing the chemical, too.'

'That might explain why Splurgs were increasingly attracted to high concentrations of nitrates—our fertilizer wagons—probably just beginning their *amok* sickness, and their body-chemistry was striving



for its restoration.’ He explained their findings to Dr. Kester Whiting, who excitedly recorded them in his notebook.

Carseegan stood with back to a rain that he ignored during the stimulating interchange. ‘That also explains the weather correlations,’ he continued. ‘Leaching of nitrates from the soils probably occurs over about a ten Terran year interval. Whenever a cluster moves on to a strip, they destroy the fine tangle of interacting life structures which would normally furnish sufficient nitrates for land strip foliage if left undisturbed—like our South American jungles, where farming went unsupported for lack of knowledge of the ecological cycle—natives burned away the jungle growth, also killing the sub-structures, planted crops which thrived for several years, then found they had to move on because plants would no longer grow in a healthy manner. It wasn’t until the Amazon River was used and the population pressures forced it, that technology was able to stimulate the natural cycles there.

‘Lack of nitrates on the strips, after Splurg farming, must be related to turning-over of the soil, then leaching from the heavy rains during the five and a half Swampworld year rain cycle. Terrans replace nitrates almost by habit, so those Splurgs who lived with and around Terrans, eating foods from their lands, usually remained unaffected.’

By now Dr. Whiting had shrugged into his rain-cape and all the Splurgs were also on their feet. ‘I gave Lomach an injection of nutrients which included nitrates,’ he explained. ‘That would cure her according to our theory. I learned during my practice at Port Authority that those Splurgs who received an injection consisting of a large mixture of various minerals and nutrients usually got well faster. As a standard practice, I always give the same mixture to any sick Splurg’. He unfolded a large map which was held across Carseegan’s chest, facing the fire. All crowded around to see, unmindful of the cold drizzle now beating against their backs and the lazy spluttering of the receding fire.

‘See this weather front?’ He had drawn standard weather symbols across the land strips. ‘I’ve tried to show a correlation between weather and dates of *amok*, from old records. Heavy rains would leach the soil along this arc.’ He pointed first to the Northern Territories, then swung his finger down along the strips in a southwesterly direction.

‘We should find a similar *amok* pattern, following the weather, on the planet’s other side.’

‘I’ve got the mate to your map,’ Carseegan reached into his own boat, bringing forth the map that he and Dak Storey had designed, with its x’s and o’s. His and the physician’s map were almost a perfect match, except that the doctor’s had more data culled over a longer time.

‘Doesn’t this throw out your re-adaptation conjecture?’ Carseegan asked.

‘Not at all. It helps to fill in some of the details. There are many complex chemical reactions which must take place between directions given by genes and the gross physical actions and bodily requirements.

‘Don’t think of re-adaptation as having a conscious goal or conscious mind, driving towards some known goal. Splurgs could very well perish in their attempts to conquer their dual drives. Hundreds of thousands of Terran species did.

‘The fact that we don’t yet know the precise chemical interactions doesn’t defeat our hypothesis—and --,’ he turned to Marjac, ‘-- I’m elevating the nitrate deficiency conjecture to the level of a hypothesis right now. Too many facts seem to fit. He looked over at Marjac and smiled. They were seated again, the Splurgs in a group and the Terrans face to face. Cobcoth placed another log on the fire which caught, almost exploding as heat split the volatile wood.

Dr. Whiting continued: ‘But even if our idea of re-adaptation is wrong, and I don’t think it is, then we still have a deficiency in either the Splurg biological workings or in instinct. Examples of human genetic deficiencies abound and can serve as examples for the former; the drive for war and conquest when no threat is apparent, is an example of a defective instinct in man.’

‘Birds!’ Carseegan snapped his fingers. ‘No birds! No bats! No flying mammals! No build-up of nitrate deposits, such as earth’s guano.’



Doctor Whiting nodded his head in agreement. ‘I think more probably, with Marjac’s data and mine put together, we have both a re-adaptation and a simple case of nutrient deficiency. In some way we will soon discover, the lack of nitrates produces loss of awareness and an instinctive, primitive, uncontrolled urge to destroy any moving object, almost like a frenzied, wounded, Terran shark. Somehow the lack of nitrates drives the Splurg organism to a reflexive primitive brain level which represents an early development in their evolutionary history—on the order of a blind, wounded animal—instinct to slash and struggle until lying dead.’

Lomach stirred slightly. She began to speak, then stopped. Dr. Whiting noted the female’s hesitation. ‘What is it Lomach? Feel free to speak.’

Timidly, she said, ‘When the *amok* came, I saw it happen to others before it took me. Would all have the same deficiency at the same time?’

Cobcoth verified the experience.

‘I think we will find that available nutrition was approximately the same for everyone in a cluster. But adults and children would certainly differ in their particular physiological demands, as Lomach has brilliantly guessed. So, there must also be a trigger mechanism which springs whenever *amok* begins in some, provided certain physiological thresholds have been breached by lack of certain chemicals. This would give the effect of *amok* sweeping across the camps like an evil wind, particularly if it started slowly, with just a vague demand for some unknown diet—as seems to be the case here—then crossing a threshold barrier suddenly.

‘Consider the Terran shark’s behaviour again. A little blood in the water will trigger it to attack; while the motion of the attacking shark is all that’s needed to stimulate others to behave similarly.’

Doctor Whiting smiled, pleased with his own research and that of the others. ‘I don’t know all the answers, but I think we’ve got a framework for finding them.’

Later, when long tongues of fire had slipped back into wet, hollow shadows, and fog had rolled across the camp site in ghostly whiteness, while Terrans slept, Lomach, Marjac and Cobcoth talked together in low tones—long into morning.

Carseegan, too, had his dream, of Marcellia and a valley with a nestled home built strongly, surrounded by green-growing grasses living symbiotically from a peace-loving stream which bubbled its pleasures in tinkly, hushed tones across the valley’s floor.

Someday, and *soon*, Marjac and Carseegan both silently dreamed; while Pearl and Opal danced their asymmetries, an ancient dance indeed.