

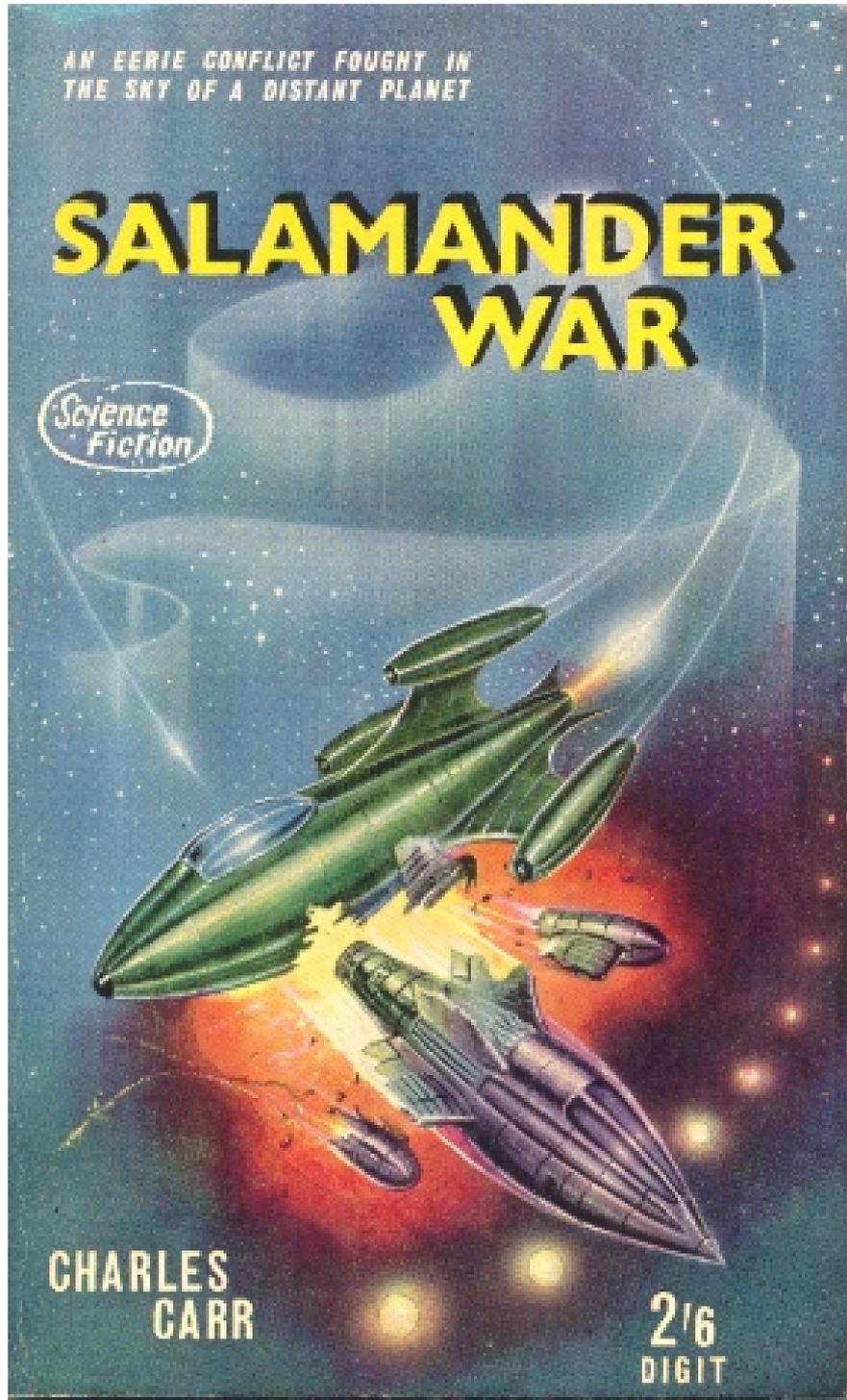
AN EERIE CONFLICT FOUGHT IN  
THE SKY OF A DISTANT PLANET

# SALAMANDER WAR

Science  
Fiction

CHARLES  
CARR

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DIGIT



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SALAMANDER WAR

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"More!" he had cried eagerly. "More!"

Back there, on one of the hills of Earth, he had held his mother's hand tightly, watching one bright spark after another climb the sky and burst into the coloured stars that enchanted him as they floated lazily down. There were other fireworks, but it was the rockets that he loved and for which he cried, "More! More!" till the show was ended and he was coaxed protesting, away. Next day he had come back to search the ground and find the fallen cases, sad, empty cylinders of cardboard, soaked by the dew, blackened and sour-smelling.

For him the attraction of such displays did not pall as he grew. When he was a college student he had still watched them. Even after he had graduated and secured his first spaceship appointment, he had gone to watch. There had been a girl with him. What was her name? Molly - that was it. They had stood arm in arm, looking at the show organised as a celebration for victory in World War III. It was not so long ago, though very far away.

Remembering this, Taylor, the assistant engineer, had for a while almost forgotten the threatening present. He lay on his couch, a dark, slim, virile young man; in the dimness he could just see the ceiling of his hut. Through one wide window stars showed in thick clusters above the dark side of the planet; through another window he could just see the spaceship *Colonist*, whose long voyage had ended here. It stood like a slim monument out there beyond the village of huts that had been built by the hundred-odd members of its crew in the reservation that had been allotted to them by those whom they had found in possession.

He lay quite still, summoning up that vision, seeing rockets that were not the power units of spaceships with which his training had made him familiar, but things of fleeting beauty.

He was relaxed in body, but his mind was unquiet. On this planet, Bel, sleep was unknown. But rest was still necessary, especially for the latest arrivals, and periods of repose had been arranged by their Captain, Lyon. Taylor had found that during these periods he could induce a dreamlike state that was sometimes comforting. This time, however, it seemed to have been a mistake. He was moving among disturbing memories. It would have been better to have forgotten.

But how could he forget that time with Molly? It had a special poignancy, because for him it had been the last time. Before the next anniversary he had himself climbed the sky in a rocket on the first stage of the journey that had ended here. And for Molly, as for all those on Earth, all victory days were ended. There had been the final day of defeat, when the whole globe had become a firework, a burnt-offering to the genius of destructive Man. Now it was a dead cinder that circled the Sun, with sterile winds that blew aimlessly across its surface, driving the mingled, uneasy dust.

He sighed and then filled his lungs with the unsatisfying air. Why must he think of these things? To escape he tried to retrace the steps that his mind had taken. Was it the analogy between rockets of different kinds, or that between the burnt scraps of cardboard and...?

But that was not how he came to pursue the train of thought. No, it was the light - the half-light. Of course, that was it.

Back there on Earth there had always been a pause, a thrilling period of suspense when the sky had dimmed, and yet it was still a little too light for fireworks. In that time of impatient

waiting, until the darkness deepened a further shade, one could still see faces clearly enough. In a moment the fireworks would show to advantage.

That was it. The light here on Bel had just that same grey quality, but the balance was held; it was perpetual. Here in the temperate belt of the planet it was always twilight. One could see quite well out of doors; inside a building one needed artificial light to work by.

Bel was his home now, a planet chosen for colonisation because on a small part of its surface conditions approximated to those on dead Earth. Here Man, his animals and plants could live. Elements existed in roughly the same proportions as on Earth. Gravity was so little less that hardly any adaptation was needed.

But there were differences, of which the impossibility of sleeping was only one. Children grew to be adults in the equivalent of three years of obsolete Earth time. In the narrow belt occupied by the human race there was neither night nor day. On one side of them lay a hemisphere of everlasting night, and the other a hemisphere of everlasting day - the cold side and the hot.

No sleep, thought Taylor, and little joy in living. Laughter had died out already among the grave Swiss pioneers whom the crew of *Colonist* had found on Bel. Their unresting minds had extended and developed in mental power. The kindly contempt of the Swiss towards the newcomers was imperfectly concealed and hard to bear. Taylor writhed at the thought that he was treated almost as one of a band of savages, confined to a reservation far from Una, the capital city.

To him it was a humiliation to be dependent for the air he breathed upon those brilliant and unsmiling scientists and technicians. Their great system of oxygen plants had enriched the atmosphere and made it breathable without distress, until recently.

Worst of all to him was the impotence of knowing so little of what happened beyond the confines of the reservation. For the last two hundred hours it had been difficult to breathe. That would not have been so bad if only he knew the reason.

He fought his fears, taking deep, regular breaths. It would be ridiculous to panic, for the discomfort was not really bad except when physical exertion was necessary. The oxygen content of the air was declining gradually; it could not fall suddenly. And there were masks and cylinders that could be used if necessary.

And there was the personality of Lyon, the Captain. Surely he would not tamely allow disaster to overtake his people.

Taylor's hopes and fears seesawed. Yes, he thought, but what could even Lyon do, if he did not know the reason for the impoverished air? Lyon's powers, too, might have deteriorated. For too long the man had been harnessed to an insufficient load.

But surely this emergency must have roused the Captain. Else why had he sent Kraft, the Chief Scientist, to Una by the periodical liaison 'plane? Surely it was to find out what was the cause of failure in the oxygen plants, and whether it was only a temporary breakdown or not.

Taylor heard an approaching scream in the sky. Looking up, he saw the trails of jets and a flash of silver. The rays of the sun, which never touched the reservation, caught the wings of the 'plane at its high altitude. So Kraft was coming back. He must be aboard the 'plane. Now they would soon know their fate.

As soon as he left the hut he saw the 'plane. It was circling, coming down to land. Staring up at it, he collided with a huge animal mass which yielded slightly from the impact.

This was a shug, a creeping thing, one of the larger ones, three metres long and nearly a metre high. The foolish creatures usually kept away from the huts, browsing among the tall ferns. It was lost here - the one that Taylor had encountered, its greedy snout snuffling in its instinctive search for food.

There was no vice in these shugs, but they had been known to damage buildings in their heavy, stupid blunderings. Taylor held his hand over one side of the shug's single, many-faceted eyes.

That was the quickest way to steer a shug out of trouble. This one now turned docily towards the uninterrupted light.

Taylor left the shug to crawl back to its pasture. The incident had take a little time, however. He began to hurry towards the landing-ground, and quickly became aware again of the shortage of oxygen in the air. He stopped, sucked in more air, and then went on more slowly.

The plane was down by the time he arrived. Pratt, the mechanic on duty, helped to open the door.

"Can't 'ardly breave," he announced. "What a bloomin' climate!"

But no shortage of oxygen could tame Pratt.

"Welcome 'ome, cock!" Taylor heard him say. And then, "No, mate, 'tain't you I mean."

For it was the pilot who first appeared in the doorway. He was a young man, fit, hard and of good physique. Probably his age was not more than fifty thousand hours, but maturity came quick on Bel. This man had the usual appearance of one of the Swiss born on the planet - very intelligent but glum. He wore a light woollen robe belted at the waist.

The pilot disregarded Taylor and Pratt as he spoke over his shoulder to someone behind him.

"I can no actefity see." He came evidently from a German-speaking family.

Kraft appeared beside the young man. Kraft was stout, rather bald, and middle-aged. Unlike the pilot he wore overalls; these were the uniform of the *Colonist* men. "It's the time for repose," he pointed out.

"Repose!" the pilot said contemptuously. His contempt, however, was not directed at his passenger. Kraft, as Chief Scientist of the reservation, was respected even by the intelligentsia of Una.

Kraft resented the implication that his people were lazy. Taylor saw him prepare to make an angry retort to the pilot. But the scientist though better of it, and spoke instead to Taylor.

"I must see Lyon at once," Kraft said as he climbed down from the 'plane.

He thanked the pilot. Pratt, puffing stertorously, was heaving into the 'plane a number of heavy sacks which clanked metallicly.

"Ere's the bagwash comin' aboard," Pratt panted. "Light as a fevver, I don't think."

"What is it you say?" The pilot stooped and felt the contents of a sack. "But these are not washing, but oxygen cylinders."

"My mistake, mate." Pratt kept a straight face, then winked at Taylor as he turned away.

Already, before Kraft and Taylor reached Lyon's office, the 'plane had taken off and was climbing to gain elevation for the return flight to Una.

Kraft opened the office door, and Taylor saw that the interior was brightly lit. Lyon, the Captain, was there with Harper, his deputy, and Loddon, the engineer. Lyon, white-haired, vigorous, but with his face now set in lines of bitterness, caught sight of Taylor and called out to him.

"Taylor!"

"Sir."

"Find Hyde, and ask him to come back here with you."

"Yes, sir."

Taylor found Hyde, the doctor, in the hut that he occupied with his wife, Eleanor, and their three-thousand-hour-old baby boy.

"What does Lyon want me for?" Hyde asked. He was Taylor's age and markedly cheerful. The responsibilities of marriage and paternity in the novel conditions of this Planet seemed not to weigh upon him.

"Kraft's back from Una."

Hyde whistled. "Now we may hear what's happening to the oxygen. You know that's what Lyon sent him about?"

"I guessed it."

"So Lyon's holding a conference? Are you sitting on it, young Taylor?"

"I don't know. He told me to come back with you."

Lyon did, in fact, invite Taylor to stay. There were now six of them at the table. Harper's face was expressionless. Loddon was grinning youthfully, showing his excellent third set of teeth. The engineer was much older than he looked; acceleration on the voyage to Bel had strangely rejuvenated him.

Lyon was giving some instructions to Harper.

"There's to be no panic an any account. Understand? And you can help there, Hyde. We're all a bit short of breath, but that won't kill us. If you get complaints you can tell 'em it's only like being up a mountain on Earth."

"A pretty high mountain," Hyde said. "About five thousand metres."

"Even so, it's bearable."

"Unless it gets worse."

"Kraft can tell us all about that," said Lyon. "Well, Kraft, what did you find out? You've been a long time away."

"That's true," Kraft admitted. "But it was unavoidable, sir. 'Planes, cars - everything goes slower because of the oxygen shortage. We go slower too. Besides, I wasn't in Una all the time. They took me out to one of the oxygen plants -"

"Yes?" said Lyon. "And what did you find? What's behind the oxygen decrease? Is it going to last, or will things improve?"

"So far as I can foretell, sir, it may be checked for a short while. Then the oxygen will decrease slowly again. But later there's reason to hope that the supply will go back to normal."

"Can I tell our people that?" Lyon asked. "I don't want them to live in apprehension, but if I give them hopeful news I must be sure it's true."

"I understand, sir," the scientist said. "I think you should be very cautious in any announcement you make. Let me explain. There were several oxygen plants out of action. Now, for a time, they will be working again."

"Why only for a time?"

"Because the reason for failure was not mechanical. Those plants ran out of material - fissionable material. They have overcome the difficulty temporarily by borrowing from the stocks of other plants."

Kraft paused. It was Lyon who, at once grasped the significance of what the Chief Scientist had said.

"And there's no central stock?" asked Lyon.

Kraft nodded. "They used to mine the stuff from the edge of the hot side. That source of supply has petered out. Let me say at once that they plan to push deeper into the hot side. There should be plenty of the stuff there, and it should be in a more easily workable state if it comes from where the temperature is very high. But it won't be easy to reach it."

"And meanwhile -?"

"At the worst, sir, we could live in big air-conditioned chambers."

"We could *exist* like that," said Lyon wryly. "It wouldn't be living. And what of the vegetation and animals from Earth that the Swiss have farmed and bred? All that part of their work would be destroyed."

"Yes, that's why they're prepared to risk a lot to keep up the supply of oxygen in the temperate belt."

"Is it such a risk, Kraft? If they know where to get this fissionable material -"

"It's partly the question of the temperature on the hot side. It would be unbearable for human beings without protection."

"Then they'd better arrange protection."

"They've done that sir. They've proofed vehicles and 'planes. They're preparing quite a big expedition. Oh yes, they're going; and I'm to go too."

"With my permission," Lyon snapped.

"With your permission, of course, sir. I meant that I've been invited."

"Then it looks as though the difficulty is well on the way to being overcome?"

Kraft hesitated.

"There's one other thing," he said. "I don't take it seriously myself. But I've spoken to the men who are organising the expedition, and they fear - they're worried about - the salamanders."

"The things that inhabit the hot side," Lyon. He sniffed sceptically.

"The Swiss swear that they exist, sir."

"I suppose they breathe volcanic gases and live on lava. I'll believe in salamanders when I see them, Kraft."

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"I'm thinking," said Lyon, "of sending you to Una with Kraft."

Taylor asked eagerly, "To go with the expedition, sir?"

"Perhaps, if there's room for you. The numbers are likely to be limited. But that's not why I want to send you to Una. Kraft will have plenty to think about without worrying over details. Your job would be to make things easier for him - act as his assistant and secretary. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, sir. Does Loddon know?"

"No, but you needn't worry about that. He can spare you easily enough." Lyon was becoming irritable, as he often did now. With his white hair and a frown of discontent, he looked old. "You engineers haven't enough to do. Though that's true of all of us, I suppose."

"Since you've mentioned it, sir, may I say that we're busier than usual? We have all the oxygen masks and cylinders to -"

"True, but you worked longer shifts on the voyage, didn't you? Never mind about that, Taylor. If there's a crisis while you're away, young Pitt can do your job. The point is: do you want to go? If you don't, I can easily find someone else."

"Of course I do, sir. I'd like to help Kraft, and the change'll be welcome."

"You're right there." A smile flickered over Lyon's firm lips. "I'll get Kraft over."

There was silence then till the Chief Scientist came to the office.

"Taylor is going to Una with you," Lyon said. "You told me you needed an assistant."

"Thank you, sir," Kraft said. "That'll be splendid."

"Splendid for you," Lyon grumbled. "Not so much fun for the rest of us. I wish," he added restlessly, "that I could have gone myself. But Leblanc hasn't invited me. And he's right, of course. You'll profit - you'll learn more than I should. You're a scientist, and this is a scientific job, or so it seems. When's the next 'plane due?"

"In about thirty hours," Taylor said.

"Well, you'll both get ready. Don't talk about what's going on, except to Harper or Loddon. That's all."

Taylor made ready for the journey to Una. When his preparations were complete he returned to his engineering duties under Loddon. Work went on in the settlement; the necessary mechanical maintenance and the supply of power for light and heating had to continue. Crops and vegetables were still cultivated.

But there was no hiding the fact that the air they breathed was now in the forefront of everybody's thoughts. No longer could it be taken for granted. The oxygen content of the atmosphere was held steady, but only for a few hours. Then it fell again, very slowly.

It was the younger adults in the little community who had least difficulty in breathing. They could still live and work without artificial oxygen, but they worked more slowly, and their periods of enforced rest became longer. The older men needed oxygen masks occasionally. Loddon improvised them from the helmets and cylinders of the spacesuits that were kept, carefully stored, in the spaceship *Colonist*. Even when the pressing demands for masks had been satisfied, Loddon kept his assistants at the work of conversion. Finally he was able to report to Lyon that an apparatus was ready for every man, woman and child on the reservation.

"It's time you wore a mask yourself, isn't it?" Lyon suggested. His own breathing was laboured.

Loddon grinned confidently. "I'll need one last of all, sir." He was proud of his rejuvenated appearance. Acceleration acts freakishly on human subjects. The Chief Engineer had finished the voyage with a new head of hair, a third set of admirable teeth, and all his organs correspondingly refreshed and restored.

"The youngest of the babies will have to be provided for. Though they grow so quickly, the newly born ones can't manage in a mask."

"They can look after themselves at two thousand hours," Loddon said. "It's wonderful how they develop. Hyde's child is the only one who's needed a special apparatus."

A plastic oxygen tent had already been made for the child of the doctor and Eleanor Hyde, who was the geologist of the expedition. In the tent baby passed most of his time and began to thrive.

Loddon made a check of the oxygen cylinders. He told Lyon that there were enough for all likely needs, and that none had deteriorated.

"All the same," said Lyon, "I'll ask Una to let us have more cylinders."

"They might prefer to refill some of our empty ones, sir. The service plane could take them in."

"Yes," Lyon agreed. "Try that. And there's another thing. We may need an air chamber."

Loddon stared at him. "But I thought the shortage was only temporary."

"I believe in being prepared. Keep what I say to yourself."

"Yes, sir," Loddon replied. He looked troubled and uneasy. "How big is the chamber to be?"

"Big enough for all of us. We hope things won't get much worse, but if they do it'll be a relief to take off the masks, get rid of the weight of the cylinders, and breathe normally for a spell."

"We could seal a big hut," Loddon suggested. "Fix an airlock in the doorway -"

"No, that isn't what I have in mind."

"Or we could use *Colonist* sir." Loddon nodded to where the spaceship stood like a graceful spire. "That would be more economical; it's airtight, and the conditioning plant is still -"

"This chamber is to be made underground," said Lyon. "And inconspicuous. Well hidden."

"A shelter!" Loddon exclaimed. "But what are we to shelter from, sir? Air raids? If you could tell me rather more it would help me."

"Just make an underground chamber with good air-conditioning in the middle of the huts. Until it's ready you can pretend it's going to be an oxygen plant of our own."

Lyon was beginning to drive his men harder, as hard as their oxygen-starved lungs would allow. So long as they were working all was well; in their sleepless periods of rest some of them thought and feared.

But Taylor's fears had gone. He had too much to occupy his thoughts. He was, he hoped, going to be in a privileged position. He would be at the hub of affairs; he would see history being made.

Excavation of a chamber under the centre of the settlement began before he and Kraft left for Una. Taylor did not for a moment believe the story that Loddon circulated to account for the work. Lyon's colony was in no position to start producing oxygen on a large scale.

But the other men seemed to accept without question the reason given for their new and strenuous task. Loddon improvised some excavating machinery, but once the soil was dug out it had to be moved by hand. After a bout of this toil Pratt, the red-haired mechanic, puffed a good-humoured protest.

"Poof! Reckon I'd rarer keep me own oxygen than sweat like this for the sike o' mikin' more!"

There was a murmur of laughter from the other panting labourers. Loddon understood his men. Pratt was a licensed humorist, and the Chief let the laughter end before he warned the man not to waste still more oxygen by talking.

Taylor had felt his own face crease into an unaccustomed and rather painful grin. The laugh had done them all good, he thought; but how seldom they laughed, or even smiled. Their new life was as grim and grey as the light on their region of Bel. Yes, it was time he had a change.

Lyon purposely did not go to the 'plane to see off his two envoys. He did not want to draw attention to the urgency of their mission. But before they left they were summoned to his office.

"You'll be back in a hundred hours?" he asked.

"Rather more, I understand, sir," Kraft said.

Lyon spoke in short sentences. He had some difficulty with his breathing as he spoke.

"Envy you the adventure, Kraft. You too, Taylor. Look forward to hearing all about what you see."

"I hope the expedition will be successful, sir."

"Yes, we can't go on like this. Perhaps you'll catch sight of these fabulous salamanders."

Lyon seemed to mean this as a joke, but Kraft answered him solemnly.

"If they exist, sir. But I'm almost convinced that the thing is some sort of hallucination."

Taylor had looked forward to the flight. The pilot warned his two passengers that the journey would be slower than usual, for the shortage of oxygen affected the jet engines. But the cabin was warmed, and pressurised with air of the normal oxygen content. Taylor settled down to enjoy himself.

When they were in the air he leaned from his seat, peering round the saturnine pilot and trying to read his instruments. Undoubtedly they were flying lower than usual, but they were high enough to see beyond the belt of perpetual twilight that circled the planet. Seated as he was on the starboard side of the 'plane, he could see through a small plastic panel the darkness of the frozen hemisphere. On the port side the panels were covered. But he knew that if the shutters were drawn back from them the cabin would be filled with the harsh, almost unbearable light of Bel's sun.

From directly below them an observer in the shadow would see the body and short wings of the 'plane shine silver, like a message of hope.

Kraft was silent, deep in thought. After a glance at him, Taylor drew a deep, luxurious breath and leaned back in his seat, remembering. He remembered flights on Earth, when he had seen just such a belt of twilight stretching across Europe. And on voyages to and from the Moon he had seen it far more clearly. That shadow had moved, unlike the shadow here on Bel. Even from the satellite stations he had been able to trace its slow movement on the revolving Earth.

What, he wondered, had happened to the satellite stations when the mad militarists unleashed the forces that blasted all life on Earth? Had the stations in their orbits been licked with flame and engulfed in the ruin? Could their crews have survived? And for how long?

The 'plane dipped. They were descending to the busy little airport of Una. Far away, silhouetted against the bright sky of the hot side, Taylor caught a glimpse of one of the oxygen plants. He lost sight of it as the 'plane continued to circle. A few minutes later they had touched down smoothly on the runway.

Kraft roused himself and led the way from the 'plane. He had forgotten his case, and Taylor carried it as well as his own. As soon as the door was opened they experienced the now familiar difficulty in breathing, of which they had been relieved during the flight. They were dressed as usual in the overalls that were worn by the inhabitants of the *Colonist* reservation. A few bystanders, robed like all the Swiss, stared at them curiously. Taylor grew impatient as they stood and waited beside the 'plane. These people were not helpful, and he thought he detected a chilly superiority in the way they looked at him.

A tall, dark girl who had been speaking to the pilot turned to Kraft.

"You are Kraft, the scientist from the reservation?" she asked, and when she had finished the sentence she was panting.

"Yes."

"Nesina," she said, introducing herself.

"This," Kraft told her, "is my assistant, Taylor."

Nesina looked at the younger man with concern.

"We had prepared only for *you*," she said to Kraft. "We did not expect another. But first I am to tell you that you are to see Camisse, the leader, as soon as you have collected your equipment. There is much to do."

"Then I shall need Taylor's help all the more," Kraft said. "No doubt you can fit him in."

But the girl looked uncertain.

"Come with me," was all that she said.

They walked slowly towards some low buildings. At the end of these, clear of the runways, a group of odd-looking vehicles was parked.

"Are those for the expedition?" Kraft asked. "Yes, they must be," he went on, without waiting for her reply. "Those are the excavators," he said, pointing them out to Taylor. "And those are the transporters; all of them are tracked, you see, and screened and insulated. And those 'planes -"

"They, too, are for the expedition," Nesina said. "Everything is concentrated here."

"Can the 'planes carry all that shielding?" Kraft asked doubtfully.

"Yes," she replied. "But only the pilots will fly - no passengers."

Taylor asked, "What's the use of the 'planes?"

"For survey," Kraft told him, "and intercommunication if necessary."

Before they entered the building to which Nesina had led them, Kraft pointed to a vehicle which looked lighter and faster than the others.

"The control vehicle, I suppose."

"Yes, that is what you will travel in," said the girl.

"It is not very large," Kraft commented.

Inside the building a busy clerk explained to Kraft that he must get a set of equipment, including a heat-suit.

But Kraft was impatient and paid but little heed to what the man said.

"That's something you can do for me, Taylor. Collect those things for me; I haven't time. Find my room and leave the stuff there. Nesina will take me to Camisse."

Taylor was directed to a small store, where he drew the heat-suit. It was a heavy, gas-proof garment to which a fitted helmet and air cylinder could be attached.

"And another set for me," he asked the storewoman hopefully.

But she shook her head. "I have no instructions," she said.

On his way back to the entrance Taylor was met by Nesina.

"I will take you to Kraft's room," she said.

It was a very small cubicle to which she led him.

"There is little space left," she explained. "All members of the expedition stay here. Everywhere is full."

Taylor placed the equipment on the couch and added Kraft's case to the pile.

"Where do I go?" he asked.

"There is no reservation for you here. I must take you to my home -"

He looked at her grave face, puzzled.

"That is too kind of you. But I ought to stay here. Kraft may need me."

"He is busy for a long time. You can return when you have eaten. I am sorry, but the organisation is exact, and you were not expected."

Taylor followed her, thinking that it would not be easy for him to travel with the expedition.

#### 4

Nesina's home, it appeared, was some distance from the airport, and they were driven there in one of the comfortless little cars that were used for short journeys round the city. Taylor noticed as they went that many people in the streets wore oxygen masks. These were presumably the older folk. The younger ones walked slowly economising energy, but their faces were drawn and many of them seemed on the verge of collapse.

"They look as though they couldn't endure much more," Taylor said.

"That is only because of the oxygen shortage. Our endurance is increasing. You knew of our campaign to dispense altogether with repose?"

He nodded, still looking at the busy, sick-looking pedestrians with a horror that he did not allow to appear in his expression.

"All our time is to be given to activity and mental development," she said proudly, "so that intelligence will be raised individually and collectively to the highest possible level. This difficulty in breathing has caused a delay, but soon we shall succeed. It will be a great advance for the race. Do you not agree?"

"They look unhappy," he could not help saying.

She shook her head uncomprehendingly. Taylor thought resentfully: She won't argue with me about it. She thinks I'm a being of an inferior order. But what a fate - a life of everlasting ant-like activity!

Nesina's home was a characterless set of rooms in one of the box-like buildings of the capital. He was introduced to her mother and father, who accepted his presence incuriously. They were tired people, grey and quiet.

The contrast between the parents and their child was striking. Nesina was vigorous and glowing. It was odd to work out that in earthly years her age would have been only four. For the last quarter of her life she had been marriageable. She had the card that every adult carried, assessing her physical, mental and psychological ratings, and giving her final grade. A marriage that was not arranged for her, or one outside the permitted class, would be unthinkable.

They ate together, speaking but little. Then the father and mother returned to their work. Nesina took Taylor back to the assembly place of the expedition.

"You like my home?" she asked on the way. There was something anxious and puzzled in her manner.

He thought there had been nothing homelike about it, but he nodded and thanked her.

They found Kraft waiting in his cubicle.

"We start in six hours," he said.

"Am I to come with you?" Taylor asked eagerly.

"What? Oh no, that is impossible. All those excavators and transporters we saw are carefully planned, and there's no room in the cabins except for the trained crews."

"But the control vehicle -?"

"There's only just room for me in that, in addition to Camisse and his crew." Kraft made no reference to Taylor's disappointment. Perhaps he did not notice it.

"Now," the scientist went on hurriedly, "I'll sort out the notes I've made and dictate a report to you."

It was a long report, and much of it was too technical for Taylor to understand.

"Time to go," Kraft said when it was finished. "Keep these papers for me till I come back. Or if I don't come back, hand them to Lyon yourself."

"Yes," said Taylor. "You'll need that equipment," he reminded Kraft. The scientist grabbed the heat-suit, but left the helmet behind. Taylor hurried after him with it.

Accompanying Kraft, he was able to approach the tracked control vehicle, but it was so heavily shielded and the observation panels were so small that he could see nothing of the interior. Camisse, the leader of the expedition, hurried over from the column of transporters. He was a dark, nervous man, driving his crews hard and himself harder. After a few minutes he led all the members of the expedition to a rostrum.

The President, Philippe Leblanc, stepped on to the rostrum and made a short address. Taylor had been separated from Kraft, and from the outskirts of the crowd of spectators he heard only a few phrases - "material a necessity to the well-being and development of the community," "all the safeguards that science can evolve," "historic occasion," "safe return."

The crews climbed into their cabins, engines purred, tracks revolved, and the expedition to the hot side moved off in single file.

Taylor watched the departure, feeling moody and disappointed. He saw Nesina not far away and joined her.

"When are the 'planes starting?" he asked.

"It is not expected that any of them will take off for about sixty hours, when the expedition has penetrated deep into the hot side."

"There will be reports coming in before long," he said. "Kraft said I was to keep in touch."

"I will arrange for you to hear them."

"Thank you. And there will be plenty of rooms empty, here now, won't there? May I have one?"

She had spoken confidently hitherto as she gave him information. Now she looked hurt and uncertain.

"You want to come here to stay? You don't like my home?"

"No, it isn't that."

"But you said -"

"It is very good of you. But I don't like to trouble you or your mother and father."

"Trouble? That is no trouble." Now she seemed greatly relieved. "I must come here for my work, and you can come with me."

He accepted the invitation out of politeness, but soon he was glad that he had done so. The hours of inactivity and suspense would have been unbearable without the periodic journeys into Una and back. He envied the girl, who was fully occupied in the administrative office. The first routine reports from the expedition gave him nothing much to do. He sent a radio message to Lyon. "Progress continues uneventful. Taylor." After that there was nothing to do except wait for Nesina to finish a spell of duty and take him to Una for a meal.

The meal, too, was uneventful, sufficient in quantity, scientifically balanced, but uninspiring. When it was over her parents left, but the girl had a task to do, binding the edge of a robe. They had not spoken much, for the shortage of oxygen made people disinclined to talk unnecessarily. Taylor lay back comfortably against his back-rest. For once he felt peaceful and relaxed, watching Nesina's dark hair and her absorbed expression.

"You're beautiful," he told her suddenly.

"Why do you say that?" She was puzzled - not shy.

"It's true."

"Yes, but my mind? What do you think of it?"

"You have a splendid intellect."

"That is better." She was quite solemn. "My intellect is not splendid, but it is above the average."

"That's all that matters, of course."

At once he felt repentant. It was too easy to ridicule her, and even her seriousness was sweet.

"How can you say that?" she exclaimed. He had not seen her look indignant before. "More important is the psycho-"

A penetrating buzz interrupted her. She went over to the radio telephone in the corner and listened to a message.

"We must go back to the office," she told him. "A long report is coming in."

They drove in silence, but as they neared their destination Taylor counted the little fleet of special shielded 'planes.

"Two of them have gone," he said.

In the office Nesina secured a copy of Camisse's latest message. It began with the latitude and longitude that the expedition had reached, and the "outside temperature," which was the highest hitherto recorded.

"You see?" she said. "They have found some of the fissionable material, and the first transporters will be back here with it in about forty hours."

"And richer deposits are indicated ahead. It seems that they're pushing on," Taylor said.

The end of the message was distorted.

"They must have moved," Nesina guessed, "and that would mean radio interference. But the planes are patrolling now; they will bring messages if necessary."

Together they waited for several hours, but no further report came. Taylor sent a message to Lyon at the reservation, and then accompanied Nesina to her home once more. He was worried; he did not know why. But Nesina evidently assumed that the success of the expedition was now certain.

"Soon the air will be strong and good again. Progress can be made everywhere. It is splendid, is it not?"

He had never seen her so radiant before, and a second later his arms were round her and he was kissing her. She hugged him inexpertly; then, with a cry of horror, she broke away and stood staring at him with wide-eyed dismay.

"You look so lovely," he said. It took him a little while to understand that she needed neither compliments nor apologies from him. It was her own instinctive reaction that had shocked her. But it had fascinated her at the same time.

"I cannot understand it," she said. "When you held me I felt so - it is an atavistic sensation, no doubt. And yet there was nothing in my psychological analysis to indicate any danger."

"I wish," he said, "that you wouldn't talk of yourself as if you could be taken to pieces in a laboratory."

She shook her head in reproof. "Do it again," she said.

"No, Nesina. How can I - now?"

"You must."

He held her unwillingly, and kissed her without passion. It did not surprise him that she remained inert in his arms; and she seemed perversely satisfied.

"Thank you," she said as he let her go. "That was better. I had complete control that time. It was quite easy. The other was some sort of accident."

"I liked the accident better," he replied crossly, "atavistic or not. But so long as you're happy, that's all that matters, isn't it? Perhaps we'd better go back to the office."

"I will go," she said, "but it is time you had some repose."

"All right. Quite maternal, aren't you?"

"Of course. Every woman has in her -"

"Yes," he agreed hastily, "you've every right to feel like a mother to me. After all, you must be nearly a tenth of my age."

The idea made him laugh. She recoiled in a way that showed she was not used to mirth.

"I'm sorry, Nesina," he gasped. "I was a brute just now."

"But it doesn't matter," she told him solemnly. "For a little I was worried, but afterwards I concentrated on full control, and succeeded. I am satisfied with myself."

"You look it," he said, so significantly that before she left the room she studied her reflection gravely in a mirror. He had thought to see in her a new brightness, such as he had seen in no other inhabitant of Una. Perhaps she was conscious of some change in her appearance, for the puzzled look was on her face again as she went out.

Left alone, he lay on a couch, but he was unable to achieve any sort of mental repose, because he was thinking of Nesina. She had disturbed him badly. She was more beautiful than any of the women on the reservation; probably she was the most beautiful in Una. He guessed that she had never laughed in her life.

What's happened? he thought uneasily. Nothing that mattered. She was a beautiful, solemn owl. Oh, it was hopeless!

But he remained restless. His period of repose was doing him no good. He was not sorry when the buzzer sounded a few hours later. When he went to the instrument he heard Nesina speak.

"Come quickly, Taylor. I have sent a car."

"Is there more news?"

"Yes."

"Is it good?"

"I could not get a copy of the last message," she said. "but I think it is not good. You must judge for yourself when you come here."

When he arrived at the office it was the general atmosphere that made him suspect disaster, rather than the few broken and partly indecipherable messages that he was allowed to see.

"'Attack'," he read out. "What can that mean?"

"A mistake," Nesina suggested. "The radio is very bad. Perhaps they mean accident. We are waiting for the 'planes to bring news."

After that there was complete silence on the radio. Later a 'plane was heard. It flew in very low, landed heavily and bumped to a standstill. A crowd of men and women rushed towards it, Taylor and Nesina among them; but only a few senior officials were allowed near the cockpit. The pilot scrambled out and almost fell. He recovered himself and ran to the tail of the 'plane, stooping to examine it. Then a little group of officials surrounded him. A few minutes later they led him away.

"He is going to hospital," said Nesina, who had overheard some instructions given.

The pilot passed close to them. His face was pale and his eyes staring. He was muttering, and Taylor heard his say, "So it happened. It did happen. And yet it was impossible..."

"What happened?" Taylor asked. "What was he looking at?"

He pushed his way towards the tail 'plane. In one place it was scratched and bent, but not badly enough to affect flight.

After a long period of suspense, radio messages started to come in again. Nesina went to the news-room. When she came back she was weeping.

"I could not get a copy of the last message," she said. "It is confused. But I think there have been many losses."

"Not Kraft?" asked Taylor.

"No. At least - he is still alive. That is all I can tell you."

"But what happened?"

She had dried her eyes. Now she held his arm with a warm, comforting grasp.

"Nobody knows yet. You must wait and be patient."

Forgetful of food and repose, he waited there with her. The other 'planes returned one by one, and brought news that the column of vehicles was heading for Una. What else the pilots reported Taylor did not know. There was a further wait, broken by rumours of "casualties" and "survivors."

"They are arriving now," said Nesina after one of her visits to another part of the building. "Come with me."

She led him by a stairway to the flat roof. It was high enough above the surrounding plain for them to see the approaching column a long way off.

"Half of them are not in sight - yet," Taylor said.

"Those are transporters. I see no excavators."

"The control vehicle is there, at least. I must meet it. That's where Kraft is."

Taylor did not make allowances for the poverty of the air. The run to the vehicle park almost exhausted him; when he arrived his heart was thudding painfully, and his vision was so blurred that he barely recognised the first man to step down to the ground as Camisse himself.

"No statement," somebody called out warningly, and Camisse departed in a car.

Taylor was recovering. He saw an ambulance approach the control vehicle. A figure was being lifted awkwardly out of the door that Camisse had opened - a bandaged, helpless figure. The bandages did not entirely cover that bald head.

"Kraft!" Taylor called instinctively, and sprang forward. He saw the Chief Scientist stir and open his eyes.

"Taylor," said Kraft, grinning painfully, "get me back. Must tell Lyon. Get me back."

His eyes closed again.

Lyon gave Taylor a smile when the young engineer hurried into the office. That smile heartened Taylor. In the emergency Lyon's irritability and occasional lassitude seemed to have been swept away. He was again the cool and competent leader whom Taylor remembered during the voyage of *Colonist*. Perhaps, the young man thought, the trouble had been that since their landing on Bel there had been no problem big enough to exercise Lyon's full powers; the

formidable engines of his mind and will had been idling. Now there should be enough to occupy him to the full - perhaps more than enough.

"Yes?" said Lyon. "Where's Kraft?"

He had been working by the light of a shaded tube on his desk. Now he switched on the full illumination of the room, so that he could see Taylor's trouble face.

"He's back, sir," said Taylor. "I brought him back."

"I want to see him."

"He wanted to come, sir, but he's had a bad time. He's not fit yet, so I thought -"

"What's happened, Taylor?"

"I don't really know, sir. I tried to find out. They said in Una - they talked so wildly - I couldn't believe -"

"Steady, now," Lyon said. "Just tell me what you're sure of."

"Kraft was almost unconscious when they came back from the hot side," Taylor began.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He was burnt."

"Burnt? And that's all you know?"

"I didn't like to question him, sir, in the state he was in. But he's better now, and he seems anxious to report."

"We'd better go and see him, then," Lyon said, rising.

"Has Hyde had a look at him?"

"Yes, sir. I fetched him at once."

"Good," said Lyon, and he went with Taylor to the scientist's hut. The doctor was leaving as they approached, and Lyon stopped to question him.

"He's been pretty extensively burnt," Hyde said. "It'll be some time before he can move. And he's had a mental shock as well as physical one."

"Is he fit to talk? I want to find out what happened."

Hyde nodded. "Yes, he's eager to see you, sir. I think it'll be a relief to him to say whatever it is he has to say. It may set his mind at rest and make him easier to deal with."

"Thanks," said Lyon, and entered Kraft's hut.

Taylor, following, saw in the dim light of the interior that Kraft's dressings had been changed. The bandaged figure on the couch stirred and spoke.

"No lights, please," said Kraft, as Lyon reached for the switch. "My eyes -"

"Of course," Lyon replied cheerfully. "Make yourself comfortable, and tell me all about it. I must say I'm curious to know what happened."

He moved a small chair close to the head of Kraft's couch, so that the scientist would not have to raise his voice. Taylor found a stool and sat beside Lyon. If Kraft was still in pain, he did not show it. He had pulled himself together, and after a few moments he began to make his

report. He spoke logically and calmly at first, but towards the end of his story he was stirred to excitement and made awkward gesticulations.

"You know I'm burnt, sir," he began. "It was the salamanders that burnt me."

"Really, Kraft? And you were dubious about salamanders.."

"More than that, sir. I didn't believe they existed really. I couldn't credit them as a serious danger. Well, now I believe. Now I have no doubts at all." He sighed deeply and went on.

"The Swiss had organised their expedition well," he said. "There were screened and air-conditioned vehicles and 'planes. The sunlight was like a tonic when first we passed into it. Later it was oppressive. Within fifty hours we had found big deposits of fissionable material. Some men had to leave the shelter of the vehicles to take samples. The excavation in bulk can be done by the crews from inside the vehicles. But to narrow down the search and make sure that the richest deposits were used, a few men had to go out. They wore heat-resisting suits, but the suits were heavy, so that part of the work went on very slowly."

"What was the heat like?" Lyon asked. "I remember Leblanc telling me it was hot enough to melt lead."

"It may be at the very hottest point," Kraft said, "right up at the pole. Even there - well, it's only a guess. Nobody's been there to see. But we were nowhere near that point. It was hot enough, though; too hot for human life without complete protection.

"I wasn't in one of the excavators. They had given me a place in the control vehicle with the leader of the expedition. There was a lot of radio apparatus inside, and at first it had been interesting enough, with a lot of swift movement and messages being sent and received. But now the whole column had halted, I could see what was going on through the observation panels. There they were, those few men in thick, clumsy suits, moving round and testing. When they found any specially good samples, they took them back to the excavators. Some 'planes were flying steadily to and fro overhead. It all seemed most uneventful, and it went on like that for a long time, till I became bored."

Kraft gave a bitter little cackle of laughter. "That was the last time I was bored," he said. "After that - well, they settled on the richest deposit. The excavators started working; the stuff was transferred to big transporters - they could be built big, because only the drivers' cabs had to be insulated against heat. Some of the transporters had started back. The rest of the vehicles were standing round. Some of the crew of the control vehicle were taking observations and plotting magnetic bearings to fix the position of the deposit. And then - the salamanders came.

"It was one of the surveyors who gave the alarm. He'd been peering through a telescopic instrument when suddenly he called to the leader. Just then, too, one of the 'planes started to report on the radio, warning us of sonic movement on the ground near us. It was a vague report, but it added to the panic - no, it was not yet panic - it added to the excitement in the control vehicle.

"The leader - he was a man called Camisse - was giving orders to his people, grouping the excavators and telling the transporters that were already on the move to increase their speed. Everybody was occupied except me. I had been invited as an observer, but there was nothing for me to observe - nothing near at hand yet, and Camisse was monopolising the only effective telescope. I stared through a panel, but I couldn't see anything clearly. It wasn't till later that I saw a salamander. Even then -"

"What did it look like?" asked Lyon.

Taylor leaned forward eagerly to catch Kraft's reply.

"That is the obvious question, is it not? I must try to answer it. And yet - it is so hard to say. My sight is not very good, and the light was strong. The sun seemed blinding after the dimness here. There was some distortion, too, from the observation panel, because it was thick and slightly curved. And the salamander itself was surrounded by an atmosphere that it seemed to carry with it - an atmosphere that was - how shall I express it?"

"Incandescent?" Taylor suggested.

"No, not that. Not incandescent, but shimmering, like the gas over a flame. Though there was no flame...." Kraft's voice faded away. He took several deep breaths before he went on.

"I fear that is not explicit. But what am I to say? The thing moved upright. It made me think not quite of a human being, but at least of the wraith of a human being. It looked unsubstantial, but there must have been substance there."

Lyon spoke as Kraft stopped again. "It doesn't sound much like a shug. We understood, didn't we, that the salamander, if it existed, was an adaptation of the shug?"

"That may still be so," Kraft said. "A shug adapted to extreme heat would have no meaty tissue. It might be a light carapace or skeleton - light enough to rear up and travel upright. Yes, the things I saw might still be basically shugs.

"The only one that I saw clearly was moving quite fast, with about the speed of a man running. It seemed to slide. But it was some of the men in the excavators who had the best view."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing that helped. I only heard one side of the radio conversations, and the crews were reporting that they were being attacked. Naturally they weren't concerned just then with observing or describing the salamanders."

"No," said Lyon, "of course not. But afterwards, when they got back to Una -"

"They didn't get back," Kraft replied flatly. "I'm speaking still of the excavators. The control vehicle was about two hundred metres from them. It was on a slight elevation above the rock and slag - conspicuous, one would have said. But in the confusion the one clear impression I got was that the salamanders were concentrating on the excavators. A voice came screaming over the radio, 'It's touching the turret -' There was a hiss and a scream, and nothing more came from that crew. One of the 'planes went over low, and the pilot reported that the metal side of the excavator's turret had been cut open. That meant that all the crew were dead. There were heat-suits and helmets for them all, but they wouldn't have had time to get into them.

"Camisse was rattled and excitable, but he was full of pluck. He was doing all he could to organise his column, getting the excavators on the move, and he found time to order all of us in his own vehicle to get into our heatsuits and have our helmets ready."

"Did they try using blast-guns?" Lyon asked.

"Blast-guns!" Kraft repeated bitterly. "There wasn't a gun in the whole column. You know their principles. They're pacifists; they don't believe in guns, but one thing Camisse tried. I couldn't believe it when I heard him give the order. My suit was half on, and I sat there with the top half of it round my waist, and forgot all about it. He had one of those hypnotists that they

use as police - law-men is what they call them. I don't know why he'd been brought on the expedition. But he was there, in one of the excavators, and Camisse ordered him to -"

"To hypnotise the salamanders," Taylor burst out incredulously.

"Madness!" murmured Kraft. "What madness! But it was all mad. Yes, that is what Camisse ordered, and the man obeyed. He looked extraordinarily solid and distinct in his heat-suit and helmet, compared with those vague, shimmering things. He raised his arm, starting the usual passes. There was no result. I suppose he might as well have tried to influence a hot cinder. He must have lost confidence then, because he turned and tried to get away. But the nearest salamander moved over and seemed to envelop him. It was like an embrace, but grotesque, horrible. The man dropped in a heap, and the salamander made for the nearest excavator, which was driving away by then, getting up speed. It passed between us and the salamander, and then it stopped. It didn't move again. And the other excavators were stopping, one by one.

"Camisse was on the brink of breaking down; his voice was hoarse from yelling into his microphone. By now he was preparing to move, and I don't blame him. There wasn't anything else he could do, except join the transporters. The last thing he did before starting back was to order one of the 'planes to fly low over where the hypnotist was lying, and see whether the man was still alive. While Camisse was giving the order I looked out and saw some more things that certainly weren't salamanders."

"You mean living creatures?" Lyon asked.

"I don't know. I doubt it. They had no real substance, so far as I could see - or very little. They moved slowly over the ground, and yet there was a suggestion of speed about them. You know how a dust-devil travels? Its relative speed is often quite slow, but at the same time it is revolving fast. It was rather like that, but I could see these things only because they had a different refraction. Their temperature must have been even higher than their surroundings."

"Heat-devils?" suggested Taylor.

"Yes, the name fits. One of them crept along the side of an excavator, and the excavator started to pour out smoke and fumes. Then we were off, working up to full speed to catch up with the transporters. At first there was a lot of jolting from the tracks; then we were on a more level surface. Camisse ordered the driver to reduce speed so that we could watch the movements of the 'plane.

"The pilot did more than he had been ordered. He actually landed close beside where the body lay. He must have been near enough to look down from his cabin, because he reported over the radio.

"'He is dead,' he told Camisse. 'His suit is torn open and his body is black - charred.'

"Camisse started to acknowledge the report, but then he saw something that made him yell a warning into the microphone instead.

"'Take off, take off! One of them is close behind you. No! Don't look for it. If it touches your 'plane -"

"We could see through the panel what was happening - the single salamander gliding towards the 'plane. Just as it seemed that the thing must touch the rear fuselage the pilot got his jets going and began to taxi away. And still the salamander gained. But that was only for an instant. Then the salamander was gone - disappeared.

"I believe," Kraft said slowly, "that the blast from the jet disintegrated the salamander. If I am right, those things are vulnerable. The idea of using a blast against them may be worth something. I have thought about it since.

"But just then all I had time to realise was that we were being attacked ourselves. We were watching the 'plane take off when something passed across one of our observation panels, and it was then that I had my closest view of a salamander. Though it was still vague - even seen close to - it seemed without doubt to have life and purpose. I think that movement attracts the salamanders. The excavators had been standing still, but their belts and grabs had been working. Our vehicle had been disregarded as long as it stayed still. Now that it was in motion this salamander came.

"The observation panel was fragile compared with the metal casing. It was our weakest point, but the salamander passed it by and went out of sight. That was a nasty moment, when we couldn't see what the thing was doing. But we weren't left long in suspense. There was a dry, rattling, rasping sound. I remembered my heat-suit then, and struggled to get my arms into the sleeves. While I was doing that the metal side opposite me bulged inward and then split open. A blast of heat came in and burnt me.

"I can't remember exactly what happened next. I think I may have fastened up my suit - too late - and someone else put my helmet on my head. It seems we had shaken off the salamander and outdistanced it; there's a limit to their speed apparently. We were close behind the transporters. After an hour Camisse halted and reorganised the column."

"Were the salamanders following?" Lyon asked.

"No. At least, we didn't see them again. After that I had a bad time, because the heat-suit was oppressive on top of my burns. When we got near enough to the temperate belt for the suit to be taken off, I collapsed. And so we got back to Una, with the loss of the excavators and their crews."

Kraft's voice had grown weaker. He was very tired. But he roused himself with an effort and spoke more vigorously.

"Taylor may have given you an impression of disaster, sir."

"But I didn't. I didn't know enough to -" Taylor began to protest.

"It wasn't disaster. It wasn't as bad as that," Kraft went on. "The object of the expedition was to get fissionable material. Well, they got it."

"At a price," said Lyon drily.

"But they got it," Kraft insisted. "They brought back enough to keep all the oxygen plants working for a long time. You'll soon notice the difference in the air. Breathing will be more comfortable again."

"Yes," said Lyon, "but in the end they'll have to go back for more of their fissionable material, if the salamanders let them."

"Next time," Kraft replied, "there'll be better preparation - heavier armour, blast-guns -"

Lyon stood up. "I don't like it," he said. "Our pacifist friends in Una have started a war. Yes, war. They've invaded the salamanders' territory, and that's equivalent to declaring war. To me it seems dangerous to assume that our side will develop and the salamanders won't."

"But you're crediting them with intelligence."

"Why not? I'm only guessing, but in war it doesn't do to assume that the enemy is more stupid than oneself."

"But these - things!" Kraft protested, while Taylor, with mounting excitement and horror, stared first at one man and then at the other - at Lyon, erect and vigorous in the shadowy room, and at Kraft, bandaged and prostrate on the couch.

"I hope I'm wrong," Lyon said. "But the salamanders seem to have reacted quickly. You're saying that Leblanc's men can take their time and start the next operation when it suits them. Isn't that a dangerous assumption?"

"I don't see what -"

"Suppose the salamanders take the initiative. Your raid seems to have stirred them up. Who knows what may happen? I hope," Lyon added grimly, "that Leblanc is taking precautions."

Kraft sighed. "All this is beyond me. I hadn't thought -"

"Don't let it worry you," Lyon told him quickly. "It isn't your problem. I'm grateful to you for going with the expedition and bringing back this warning. It's as well that I can't thank you publicly. You must realise that the less our people know of this, the better."

"I told Hyde something about it," Kraft said uneasily.

"Hyde must keep his mouth shut," said Lyon. "Taylor."

"Sir."

"Remember, that applies to you as well. The result of the expedition is that the proportion of oxygen in the air will increase till it's back to normal. I'm right in saying that, Kraft?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then that's all that anyone in the reservation need know. Understand, Taylor?"

"Sir."

## 6

Lyon was now delegating much of the administrative control on the reservation to Harper. It was to Harper's office, some two hundred hours later, that the engineers and assistant scientists were called for a conference. Kraft was still unfit to leave his couch, but he was already able to advise his subordinates.

"Are we all here?" Harper asked.

One of the scientists said that Wells, the senior assistant, was getting some instructions from Kraft.

While they waited Taylor studied the man who sat at the head of the table. Harper had been the greatest astronavigator that Earth had produced. As such he had been one of the heroes of Taylor's youth. It was strange to see him now, the mayor, in effect, of this small town. There was no denying his efficiency in work which must have been strange, and at times irksome, to him. He had, however, gained much experience of administration on the long voyage to Bel, after Lyon appointed him second-in-command. He was still a lonely man, but his responsibilities did not weigh too heavily upon him. His fair hair was no thinner than when he first set foot on Bel, and his once hollow cheeks had filled out.

Wells appeared in the doorway, a heavily built, earnest man. He apologised to Harper for being late and took a seat at the table.

"We can all guess," said Harper, "that the proportion of oxygen in the air has risen. But we need some facts and figures before we take any action. What's your report?"

Wells said, "We know that within twenty hours of the expedition's return from the hot side all the oxygen stations were working again."

"At normal production?" Harper asked.

"Better than that. They worked up to something like fifteen per cent above normal output. That had to be done if they were to make good the recent wastage. We had some radio messages from Una about it, and our tests confirmed the improvement. An hour ago the oxygen content was two per cent above the figure that we have established as normal. No doubt that accounts for the exhilaration that we have all been feeling."

Taylor thought that the solemn scientist looked singularly unexhilarated as he made this announcement.

"Thank you, Wells," said Harper. "Kraft knows of this?"

"Yes. He checked the calculations and approved of what I have just said when I saw him a short while ago."

Harper turned to Loddon. "This affects you and your engineers. Nobody will need masks for the present, and the Hyde child can stay out of its oxygen tent."

Loddon nodded. "But we'll keep all the equipment ready," he said. "We don't want to be caught unprepared again."

"Yes," Harper agreed. "You'd better start a system of regular checks and tests."

"Is another emergency likely to arise?" asked Wells.

"We hope not," Harper said in a tone that did not encourage further speculation on that point.

Loddon said, "There should be a celebration now. We all need to express our relief."

"Speak for yourself," Harper told him with a smile. "We know how you like to dance and make merry, and you haven't been able to kick up your heels on a half-ration of oxygen. If there's to be a celebration, you'd better organise it, as it's your idea."

"I always have to do the organising," Loddon said. "Well, this is a big occasion, so I don't mind."

A feeling of relief and rejoicing was evident now at the conference table. Harper gave out a few instructions and discussed more administrative matters. Then the meeting broke up. Taylor walked beside Pitt, who was his closest friend among the engineers.

"It's wonderful what uncertainty and discomfort will do," said Pitt. "Or rather their removal. I've not felt as light-hearted for thousands of hours."

"I wish I could say the same," Taylor replied gloomily.

"What's wrong with you? The oxygen level's higher than it's ever been before. It's a tonic. I can't see what's worrying you."

Taylor hesitated. He could not speak freely to Pitt any more. He must even try to lull any suspicions that he might have roused.

"I'm seeing too much of old Kraft," he said at last. "He's suffering still, lying there -"

"Yes, poor devil! He seems to have had a bad time. But the Swiss brought back the stuff, didn't they? There's proof of that in every breath we take. I don't see why they need make such a mystery of it. If people go to the hot side they're likely to get burnt. Unless there was anything else..."

He paused temptingly, but Taylor did not answer.

"Well," said Pitt, "on the facts as I know them, I don't see why I should worry. And I don't see why you need hang round old Kraft. They're a depressing lot - these scientists. You're getting out of your depth. You should stick to your own crowd, and let Kraft worry his own assistants."

Taylor could make no reply to that suggestion either.

In preparing for the celebration Loddon was vigorous and thorough. He arranged for music over amplifiers, for drinks and a dance floor. It all took place in the open, and to relieve the grey light that never dimmed or grew brighter there were strings of small coloured bulbs suspended from tall posts.

Taylor went, but only to look on. He did not want to dance with any of the flushed and laughing women. Then he found himself thinking of Nesina. He could not imagine her dancing. In her stern, joyless existence dancing would have no place. Perhaps she had never heard of it. He grew even more morose, and moved farther back from the lights and music.

"So it's you, Taylor." Lyon was standing there beside him.

"You know too much to dance," Lyon said. "That's it, eh? Well, let them enjoy themselves while they can. They'll have to be warned later. But how much are they to be told?"

It was not a question that invited an answer from Taylor. Lyon was now thinking aloud. There was a worried, brooding look on his face. Presently he moved away, unnoticed except by Taylor, who saw him walk swiftly through the huts and away towards where the tall spaceship stood. The figure that climbed the gangway looked very small and lonely.

Wondering what compulsion had drawn the Captain back to his empty, gutted ship, the young engineer shivered. He turned to look at the dance floor. The music from the amplifiers had ceased and everybody was crowding round Pratt. The red-haired mechanic slung on his accordion and then began to play tunes he had brought from Earth - familiar tunes. Soon they were all singing.

But one man was walking round searching for someone. It was Foster, the radio operator. Guessing what he wanted, Taylor called to him.

"Are you looking for the Captain, Foster?"

"Yes, there's an urgent message from Una for him."

"I know where he is. I'll take it to him."

Foster handed over the slip of paper, and Taylor followed Lyon to the spaceship. There the lighting had been switched on. It was all very bare and comfortless. Cabins and saloons had been stripped of all their fittings and luxuries in order to furnish the settlement.

Taylor wasted no time in searching, for he guessed where Lyon would be. And he found him, as he had expected, in the control cabin, high up in the nose of *Colonist*. There Lyon sat, in the same chair and behind the same desk that he had used throughout the long voyage from Lunar Station. But now his head rested in his hands, and his eyes were downcast.

"Sir," Taylor began.

Lyon sprang to his feet. "What do you mean by following me here, Taylor?"

He spoke with such anger that Taylor recoiled.

"I brought an urgent radio message, sir. I thought you'd rather I came than the operator."

"What business had you -?" Lyon began. Then he controlled himself. "I'm sorry, Taylor. Coming back here's had a bad effect on me, I'm afraid. I don't know what made me do it, but I'm sorry now that I came. It made me remember too much. I did a man's job - a useful job in here."

"You still do, sir."

Lyon shook his head. "It's too tame - dragging out the existence of a shug. Well, let me see the message."

He took the paper and studied it.

"It's from the President," he said, "from Leblanc himself. He wants me there in Una; he's sending a special 'plane. We'll be leaving in an hour."

"We ?"

"Yes. I'll take you, Taylor. You seem to have become a kind of liaison officer. I may as well have you with me."

His expression became grim again and, as they left the control-room and started to walk round a succession of circular corridors and stairways, he began to grumble.

"You know, Taylor, this dependence on Una is hard to bear. There's no choice but to use *their* 'plane for the journey. Loddon could turn out a better 'plane than theirs, if we had the tools and materials. Perhaps we could borrow - but that would be dependence too. I can't avoid it. And if we fly high enough I shall see *their* oxygen plants, just to remind me that we owe them the air we breathe. Parasites - that's what Leblanc thinks we are. There's no reason why we should be, and if I have a chance I'll tell Leblanc so."

Lyon and Taylor were hurried from the airport to the Government building in Una. Soon Taylor found himself in the big conference room next to the President's office. Leblanc himself had not appeared. As they waited for him, Taylor, who had never before attended a meeting of such high level, felt ill at ease sitting beside Lyon at the foot of the table.

Nesina had not met the 'plane at the airport; there was no reason why she should have been there, he told himself, and his feeling of disappointment was not justified.

If he was to make himself useful by taking notes for Lyon, he thought, he must learn the names of the other men who had been called to this meeting. Lyon had relapsed into one of his stern and unapproachable moods. In any case, it was seldom that he came to Una, and it was unlikely that he knew anything more of these men than Taylor himself.

There were only three of them, grouped at the other end of the conference table; they spoke to one another in low tones, glancing curiously at Lyon and himself. Taylor realised that he knew one of them already. This was Camisse, the leader of the recent expedition to the hot side. He seemed to have aged in the short interval since Taylor had seen him. His face was more drawn; there was grey in his hair; and his hands fluttered nervously or made a muffled drumming on the plastic surface of the table.

Of the two remaining men, one had a long, bony face with deep-set, fanatical eyes. The other was plumper, with black, tightly curling hair. He was serious enough now, but he looked as though he was capable of laughter. That was sufficiently remarkable among the sullen-looking citizens of Una to make Taylor glance at him again with curiosity.

With a murmur of apology to Lyon, Taylor left his place and went to a smaller table at the side of the room where three men and a woman sat. He took them to be secretaries; and in a low tone he asked them the names of the group at the head of the conference table.

"Camisse," he was told, "Sanger and Manzoni."

Sanger, he learned, was the man with the fierce, bony face. Manzoni was the stout one. Both were senior delegates.

Taylor had just sat down in his place again when the President entered. Everyone in the room rose respectfully when he appeared, and they remained standing until he had seated himself at the head of the table. Philippe Leblanc, whom Taylor had never seen close at hand before, was grey-haired. His face seemed schooled to express the minimum of emotion. He looked immensely solid and dependable.

"We are glad," he said, "to see Captain Lyon here with us. He has travelled at short notice from the reservation with his assistant."

But Sanger looked anything but glad. He asked brusquely, "Before we begin, President, may we know in what capacity Lyon is acting?"

"That is surely obvious. He is a delegate from the reservation."

"In that case he represents only a hundred-odd people, whereas we represent tens of thousands," said Sanger. "That is disproportionate, President."

Leblanc replied patiently, "That does not arise now. We are going to discuss a certain problem, but there is no question of voting on it now. Let me remind you that there are two groups of the human race on this planet. It is fitting that the later arrivals should be represented here."

"I am relieved at least, President," said Sanger, "that there is no question of voting. If there were, it is surely plain that these few people of inferior culture and intellectual development would not be entitled -"

Lyon had been chafing while Sanger spoke. At this point he broke in angrily.

"Mr. President, I don't yet know the object of our meeting. But I cannot let the statement that has just been made go unchallenged. I must ask once again that the equality of my people with yours should be recognised. We are civilised -"

"Men of violence, drunkards," Sanger interjected.

"This discussion Leblanc began.

"Allow me to answer, Mr. President," said Lyon, who now spoke more coolly. "It is true that there were unfortunate happenings soon after our arrival. But the two men responsible were not typical of us - far from it. They were malefactors whom I had arrested. It was at your wish that they were released and brought here, and they paid the penalty for their misdeeds. The rest of us have caused no trouble. Surely by now we have earned the right of full membership of this community."

Camisse was staring across the table, seeming unconscious of what was said. Manzoni cleared his throat and was about to speak.

But Sanger got his word in first.

"This is not the time for such a request."

"I was addressing the President," said Lyon coldly, "not you."

"What you have said, Captain Lyon, deserves consideration." Leblanc spoke cautiously, trying to find a middle way between the contestants. "But I agree with Sanger that it would be best to defer the matter until later."

Lyon bowed to show he deferred to the President's ruling. The matter might have been dropped for the time at that point. But Sanger could not refrain from a further taunt.

"Something more than good behaviour is needed in members of our community," he said. "The intellectual level of Lyon's people should surely be raised before -"

"I cannot let that go without reply," said Lyon. "Sanger believes, or professes for reasons of his own to believe, that we are savages. I do not admit that for one moment. But even if we were, why don't you raise our level by sharing these intellectual resources of yours? And intelligence is not all that matters. I believe that we have qualities to offer - that in some respects we excel your people."

"For instance?" snapped Sanger.

"Broadly speaking, in humanity - in warmth of feeling. We are individuals - not machines."

Manzoni said, with an evidently peaceable intention, "What Captain Lyon says is of interest."

Camisse suddenly said, "Machines! I wish I were a machine. Then I should not be thinking of..."

His voice died away. There was an embarrassed silence. Then Leblanc spoke, determined evidently to end the argument that had developed. For the first time he used the full weight of his authority.

"Enough!" he said. "Let us not waste time and strength on an internal quarrel. The object of this meeting is to achieve solidarity in the face of danger."

Lyon nodded, and Taylor heard him murmur, "Reasonable!" From Lyon's point of view the President's announcement was a step in the right direction. If solidarity were the aim, equality might soon follow.

Sanger accepted the change of subject.

"What danger do you refer to, President? The oxygen shortage - is that all?"

"I did not say that," Leblanc replied.

"It must be so," Sanger went on. "My advice is to prepare plastic covers under which we can live. We have done so before."

"Yes," the President said, "and we had hoped - had we not? - never again to live under such roofs, carrying always those oxygen masks, because the plastic might be punctured - pricked like a great bubble."

"We have done it all before," Sanger persisted. "We can do it again."

"You forget the moral effect, Sanger," another voice answered. Taylor had been taking notes; he looked up and saw that the speaker was Manzoni. "Yes, we could live under those airtight covers then because we were working towards something better. We were inspired by that great conception of making a breathable atmosphere in this temperate belt. Think of the difficulties that were overcome! And we succeeded. That work is our pride as a people. Much was sacrificed to it. If we go back to those early conditions it will be a retreat - a defeat, even. The people will not endure again so willingly."

Sanger shook his head. "I do not see the difficulty. It is an unpleasant necessity, but it must be faced. If oxygen shortage is the only danger, as you admitted, President -"

"I did not say that," Leblanc interrupted.

"No," said Camisse, his voice high and unsteady, "and you *could* not say that. You could not."

Leblanc looked uneasily at the last speaker. The other men waited for the President to speak. But there was an interruption. A pale-faced young man entered the room. He almost ran to the president's side and whispered urgently to him. Leblanc's expression did not change. When the young man had finished he was dismissed from the room. Then the President spoke gravely.

"It seems that there has been a bad fire at Station Eight."

"They have sent a radio message?" Sanger asked.

"No," said Leblanc. "The radio seems to have broken down. One of the staff brought the message. He was an eyewitness, I understand, and he is outside. Let us see him now."

## 8

The messenger was a small man, middle-aged and badly scared. His robe was sweat-soaked, foul and blackened. He stood just inside the door, gasping.

Leblanc beckoned him forward.

"So Station Eight is damaged?" he asked as the man advanced.

"It is destroyed," the man said hoarsely.

At that a low, wordless murmur arose from his hearers. Camisse half rose from the table, then sank back again, covering his eyes.

But Leblanc's reaction was what surprised and shocked Taylor. The President bowed his head; in that position he seemed defenceless and old. Lyon looked at him and gave a slight shake of the head at what he saw. If Lyon had sat in Leblanc's place he would not have sagged like that. Never, at such a moment, would he have shown weakness, however short-lived.

And though in a few seconds Leblanc braced himself to receive whatever bad tidings might come, the confidence he had previously shown was now gone. Never after that did he regain his former control of the meeting.

"Sit down," he invited the messenger wearily.

The man lowered himself into a seat near the President's end of the table. He stretched his tired legs gratefully. Sanger glared at him with contempt. Manzeni looked sympathetic.

"It is unfortunate," Leblanc said at last, "that this - accident should take place."

The President had obviously chosen the word "accident" with care. There was no comment from any of the other men seated at the council table. But on the messenger the word had a surprising effect. It seemed to galvanise the little man. His arms jerked up in a convulsive gesture, as of protest.

"Accident!" he cried. "But there was no accident. We were attacked. Yes, Mr. President. Attacked."

Leblanc coughed warningly. He glanced round the room almost furtively.

"To avoid embarrassment," he announced, "the remainder of this meeting will be held in secret session."

The three men and the woman who had sat at the side of the room rose reluctantly. Leblanc waited till the door closed behind the last of them.

"Now," he said, "tell us what happened at Station Eight."

His tone was odd. To Taylor it seemed to threaten the unfortunate messenger. It was as though Leblanc had added, "And let your report not be disquieting, or it will go hard with you."

If there was a threat, the small man had not noticed it. But he seemed near the end of his strength; he looked as though he despaired of conveying all his meaning. Nevertheless, very haltingly, he began. At first he was allowed to speak almost unchecked. This encouraged him, and after a while he spoke more eloquently.

It was a strange tale that he gasped out, so strange that at intervals Taylor looked through the windows into the gloomy street. The grey, dreary activity out there in the centre of Una was real enough, and, for once, strangely reassuring to him.

"I am -" the little man began; and then stopped with a groan, as though he had just seen yet another consequence of the disaster.

"I *was*," he went on. "That is more correct, gentlemen. I *was* an assistant engineer at Station Eight. Though I myself still exist, as you see, my employment does not.

"But I was there on duty, keeping the records, watching the dials - those dials that I know so well, which seemed so permanent. And yet they also -" He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know what drew my attention to the window. Some movement, perhaps. I cannot remember. But certainly I looked out. There was a - a sort of glow from somewhere beneath the window, and I made out a shimmer of hot air. All the scene was blurred after that.

"Then the window split, and the fumes of burning filled the control room. The wall beneath the window was on fire. I was surprised at the time that such material should burn. I had not thought it inflammable.

"I sounded the alarm. We had a fire drill; we had tested it, and it had worked well. So I was confident then that the flames could be put out without trouble. I was still without fear - then. For the last time I was without fear.

"The duty mechanics were alert and prompt. They made no mistakes. They were quickly in the control room, pumping foam. Soon they had mastered the fire. The fumes were unpleasant, and the oxygen shortage was noticeable; we had enjoyed a pressurised atmosphere - before that.

"And yet things did not seem so bad - not so terribly bad. With the chief of the fire squad I prepared, or we began to prepare, the report that must be made in case of fire. That report was never made. Or perhaps one may say that I am making it now. Gentlemen, you are hearing the original report on the first outbreak of fire at Station Eight."

The little man gave a cackle of wild laughter.

"Control yourself," Leblanc told him sternly.

"I regret infinitely, Mr. President." The man was suddenly subdued again. "But control is difficult when I think of what I have seen. Well, we searched - the chief of the fire squad and I. We began looking for the cause of the fire. Then, in a moment, I was alone again. The fire squad had not deserted me. They had already been called to another fire. I heard the alarm.

"After that it was a nightmare - a nightmare that grew more and more horrible - a nightmare indeed! I was there, panting, with the fumes of the fire stinging my nose and throat. The instruments were still intact; the needles shook and moved on the dials. And the fire alarm sounded again and again. It sounded, I knew, long before the squad could have put out the second fire.

"Then, indeed, I was afraid. There was a fire on the opposite side of the station, then another in the engineers' quarters. Soon there were more fires still - fires everywhere. The fire squad split up; the firemen leapt from one fire to another. But from the first the fires gained on them; and soon the men were exhausted and the fires raged unchecked."

"The Head of the station had taken charge by then," the little man went on. "He got all of us - everyone who could be collected - away as far as we could get from the plant. We took cover in some high vegetation."

Camisse groaned.

"Silence!" said Leblanc.

"Mr. President," Camisse said, shivering slightly. "This talk of fires - I cannot -"

"Silence! Let the man finish."

"Took cover from what?" Sanger demanded harshly.

"From the explosions that were coming. There were a lot of big holders filled with gas. He knew they were likely to explode, and they did. The whole station was wrecked. Some men were killed and a lot more injured by heavy masses of metal.

"We had expected explosions, and we had been right about that. But there was another point on which we were wrong. We had hoped that the blast of the explosions might put out the fires, so that we could salvage something from the wreck, and perhaps get through by radio to Una.

"But no; there was still a ring of flame right round the place. And then we all began to notice that there was something unnatural - wrong. Until that time we had given little thought to how the fire started. It had all happened so quickly; there had been no time to consider till then.

"We stood peering out from among the tall ferns, and what we saw puzzled us. For there seemed to be a queer sort of movement going on there. Yes, gentlemen, you will not believe me, but columns of heat were whirling away from the burning building. Other columns - and they seemed to be hotter still, with incandescent cores - were whirling in and joining the circle. Oh, how shall I describe it? The thing was like a hellish, infernal dance, with those shining, flaming -"

There was a crash, interrupting the speaker. Camisse had lurched to his feet, overturning his chair. He looked sick and faint as he reeled towards the door. Over his shoulder he called wildly, "You see! They have followed us - the devils! What have we done to deserve -?"

The door closed behind him. Leblanc glanced from Sanger's harsh features to Manzoni, who looked grave but composed.

"Go after him," the President said. Manzoni followed Camisse from the room. The little man leaned back exhausted. He did not speak again until Manzoni returned and nodded reassuringly at Leblanc.

"They are looking after him," said Manzoni.

The little man was near the end of his story. He gabbled it out hastily and then was silent.

"We shall need prompt relief measures," Leblanc said, but he spoke absent-mindedly, as though he was concentrating on other things.

"If you will disclose your policy, President," Sanger suggested insolently.

"Above all," Manzoni declared, "we need unity and courage."

They began to discuss the action that was needed to bring in the staff of Station Eight to Una - those of them who had survived. And then the output of all other oxygen plants must be increased to compensate for the one that had been destroyed.

They sit and talk, thought Taylor, in what seemed to him a moment of despairing vision. They sit and they talk. Soon they may be broken men, fleeing from - what?

It was clear that nothing that was now being said was of much consequence to Lyon or his people. Very soon Taylor was accompanying his chief on the return flight to the *Colonist* reservation.

"I didn't think much of the way that Leblanc handled the situation, sir."

"Didn't you?" Lyon replied indifferently, without at first understanding the sense of Taylor's remark. A moment later he had roused himself to say something more. "I'm sorry for Leblanc - shouldn't like to be in his position. Just think, young man. What can a pacifist president do when he's confronted with war - and such a war? He can't grasp the situation. It needs a fighting man to cope."

Lyon was not talkative for the rest of the journey. Immediately they landed on their own airfield he went to Kraft's hut. The Chief Scientist was still bandaged, but he was working again; his hut was brightly lit, and he was busy with some sheets of calculations. He looked questioningly at Lyon and nodded a welcome to Taylor.

"Kraft," said Lyon abruptly, "I don't know whether you're fit to stand this. But there's nobody else that I can consult - nobody who can even begin to understand the story, or say whether it's true."

He told Kraft what they had heard in Una.

"It seems that the head man of the station led them all away and made a camp in the barns of a small agricultural settlement. It was from there that he sent the messenger to report. The Head himself went back to observe. He's a brave man."

Lyon paused and sighed. "Well," he continued, "that's what the eyewitness told us, and to me it seems fantastic. I may not have given you a fair impression of what he said. Perhaps Taylor can correct me?"

But Taylor shook his head.

"No, sir. It was just as you said."

"Even as I sat there in the conference room listening," Lyon said, "I didn't understand all that wretched little man was trying to convey. Now - I'm further than ever from grasping it. But one thing I'm sure of: it didn't sound like your impressions of the salamanders. Do you see what I mean? The two versions - yours and his - don't tally."

"I wish," said Kraft, "that I could have seen all that happened at Station Eight."

"You mightn't have liked it if you had. The man who brought the report was in a bad way, and merely listening to what he said was too much for Camisse. But what do you make of it, Kraft?"

"First of all, these things were not salamanders, sir."

"Then what were they?"

"A sort of weapon, or device," said Kraft, who was choosing his words with care, "directed by salamanders. They set fire to the buildings. When their heat died away they withdrew, or they were withdrawn."

"H'm. You didn't see anything like this when you were with Camisse on the hot side."

"But I did, sir. Don't you remember? Somebody called them heat-devils, and it isn't a bad name for them. They'll always be difficult to see. And the hotter the air about them, the more nearly invisible they'll be. I needn't remind you that where the excavators started working, out there on the hot side, it was very hot indeed. The colder air in our zone would show these heat-devils more distinctly; but close to the burning station they'd be very hard to see again."

Lyon nodded and said sombrely, "This maybe only the beginning. Suppose the salamanders themselves invade us. What then?"

"How can I say? How can anyone say - yet? They may be more vulnerable than these weapons they use, if one can call the heat-devils that. Perhaps the salamanders themselves can never leave the hot side."

"That would be something," said Lyon.

"No doubt," Kraft said. "But to me the importance of the report you heard is that it shows planning - direction. We know something that we did not know before. The salamanders can think."

"It's beyond my comprehension," Lyon said angrily.

"Whatever their powers may be," Kraft concluded, "three things are certain. The salamanders have been roused by the expedition. They are aggressive; and they have scored an initial success."

## 9

"I asked them to keep us informed," said Lyon, "but they seem to have forgotten us. We must know what's going on."

He was speaking to Harper and Taylor.

"There are the bulletins," Harper suggested.

"I don't trust their radio. It doesn't touch on what must be in all their minds as well as ours. Leblanc may be justified in putting on a censorship, but he oughtn't to apply it to me."

"There's bound to be some secrecy," said Harper. "Secrecy or reserve - call it what you will. After all, we're keeping quite a lot from our own people here on the reservation; and we're doing so on your orders."

"I believe that's justified as far as the mass of people is concerned. When we have a clear-cut situation, when we know exactly what we're facing, then I'll see that all our men know all about it. Till then, in a time of doubt and rumour, it would only shake their confidence to spread a lot of wild tales. But what applies to the lower grades shouldn't apply to the senior men - the leaders."

"In that case," Harper said with a smile, "perhaps I should be justified in asking you for enlightenment about your plans. Not that I mean to claim the right, or to press you to tell me more, than you want."

"Yes, you make a point there, Harper."

There was a short silence. Taylor thought that, but for his presence, more might have been said by the other two men. Lyon was certainly working harder than he had for a long time. It seemed clear that he was preparing some plan. He had long conversations with his experts, but he saw them separately. Taylor had been unable to piece together the complete design. Now he knew that Harper also was equally in the dark.

"But," Lyon continued, "the cases aren't quite the same. Without telling me what his plans are, Leblanc should at least let me have all the information that he has to work on. That isn't asking too much. It's only fair."

"Perhaps," Taylor ventured, "there's no more to tell you since you came back from Una."

Lyon frowned and shook his head.

"Leblanc must be doing something," he said. "Watching the hot side reconnoitring.... He can't surely, be waiting, just doing nothing."

"Why not?" asked Harper. "Aren't you assuming that he'll act as you would, if you expect that of him - that he'll 'do something'? Remember, he's different, like his people. They regard themselves as more civilised than we are. Certainly their mentality, their ideals, aren't ours."

"They may be more civilised," Lyon said slowly, "but what use is their civilisation to them in a case like this? If it paralyses them in face of an attack, if it exposes them to annihilation - then it seems to me the equivalent of degeneracy. Man is a fighter."

"You'd horrify the Swiss by saying that to them," Harper answered.

"But it's true. Man need no longer fight against man. That's something achieved. Perhaps in the infinitely distant future there'll be complete, universal peace. To me that seems an equilibrium of death." Lyon paused and laughed. "I ought to leave that sort of speculation to old Kraft," he said. "And you, Taylor, don't tell them in Una of my heresy. They'd think I was an unregerate savage. Perhaps I am. But if to survive we must fight, then let's fight wholeheartedly."

"We're all with you there," Harper told him.

"Good! Now what I need at present is information - all that's known of the salamanders. The only way to get it is to go to Una."

"Will you stay there for long?" Harper asked.

"I don't mean to go myself, and I can't spare you. Kraft isn't fit yet, and Loddon's too much of a specialist. So it must be Taylor here. You go in on the next 'plane, Taylor."

"If it comes," said Harper.

"They've kept to the schedule pretty well so far," Taylor said. He was glad to be given this new assignment, and he was proud when he found that Lyon's instructions left him a good deal of discretion. That was Lyon's way when he trusted a subordinate.

"Information," said Lyon. "That's what I want from you. All the information you can get that would help with our own plans. Because our own defence must come first in importance. What are the Swiss doing? Have they thought up anything that might help us? How's their morale? That's important. They've plenty of technical resources, if they aren't too paralysed to develop them."

Taylor asked, "May I make what contacts I see fit?"

"I leave it to you what methods you use, within reason. Only remember that those men in Una don't regard us always as friends. They're sure to have some secrets. So don't cause trouble by letting them think that you're a spy."

"I'd better make the first move," Taylor suggested. "If I speak to some of their officials as soon as I get to Una, they'll be less likely to suspect me."

"Yes, do that. Report to their central Government office. Say that I sent you to be at their disposal, in case they want any information about us and what we can do. That's the best way to put it - the most tactful way. Try to persuade them that we can be of use. That's all, I think, Taylor. Is there anything else that you want to know?"

"No, sir, not from you."

Taylor thought, however, that he would consult some of the experts before he left. He wanted to have as clear a picture as possible of the problems of the colony and its potentialities.

First he went to see Loddon. The Chief Engineer was busy with drawings and sheets of calculations. These he covered hastily before he spoke to Taylor.

"What's the big work, Chief?" Taylor asked. "A new invention?"

"A job for the Captain," Loddon replied. "If you want to know more about it, ask him, but he told me it was between him and me."

"Is it defensive or offensive? Surely you can tell me that?"

"Why should it be either? Don't be so inquisitive, my lad."

Loddon was evidently giving nothing away, and Taylor left him and sought out Hyde. The doctor was more communicative. Health was nearly normal again, he said, as a result of the increased proportion of oxygen in the air.

"Things ought to improve still more," Hyde said, "when our people are all taking their sun-ray treatment again. Nearly everyone forgot it when they were worrying about how hard it was to breathe. They're paying for it now, but most of them don't realise that. They think they can live indefinitely without sun or its substitute."

"The Swiss actually do so," Taylor pointed out.

"I know that; and they've cut down their repose periods to almost nothing. But I'm convinced they're wrong. Their minds may develop wonderfully, but they'll be overdriven minds. I believe that in the long run we're better if we keep to the old plan of alternating activity and rest. And it will be many generations before the human body is conditioned to live healthily without sun rays."

Taylor accompanied the doctor as he inspected the carcasses of some shugs that were to be prepared as food. They were small ones, less than a metre long.

"Good nourishing stuff," said Hyde with satisfaction. "Plenty of protein and no waste. Amazing, isn't it, how these little fellows are related to the big, useless brutes?"

"And the salamanders are their cousins, apparently. That's what I find so hard to believe."

"I wish I could get a specimen of those salamanders," Hyde said wistfully.

"If I ever have a chance, I'll bring you one in a heatproof case."

"Don't get your fingers scorched when you're pushing him in," Hyde said.

Pratt, the mechanic, was the most cheerful person that Taylor spoke to before he left for Una.

"Goin' to tahn, are you?" he remarked as he lifted Taylor's small case into the 'plane. "Wouldn't mind a bit o' city life meself. But my missus is 'appy 'ere, an' the kid ain't doin' too bad neither."

Taylor's heart rose as his journey continued. Not even the suspicions and non-committal answers of the stern young pilot of the 'plane could depress him. The jets roared full-throatedly, high up in the improved atmosphere, and soon the airfield of Una came into sight.

As soon as they had landed, Taylor walked over to the block of buildings nearby, where Nesina worked. He thought that a suspicion of a smile appeared on her face when she saw him, but if so she instantly dismissed it. She gave him a warm welcome, however.

"I must go into the town now," he told her. "Let me come back and see you later."

"You will find me here or at my home," she said. "Will you not stay there again?"

"If my instructions allow," he told her cautiously. "I may find that I cannot stay in the town. How do things go here?"

"Very well," she said. But her tone lacked conviction, and she turned away her head so that he could not see her face.

Mindful of Lyon's wishes, he told the car-driver to travel slowly on the way to the Government office. This gave Taylor a chance to observe the people in the streets more closely than he could have done otherwise.

To his surprise the first impression he gained was that the men and women in Una were more animated than when he had last seen them. Yet the effect was far from reassuring. His further conclusion was that the commonest expression had formerly been serious, heavy and sullen. This was no longer the case. Sadness and fear prevailed instead. These people were frightened; that was why their reserve and self-control had broken down. They were talking of their fears.

A clerk at the entrance to the Government office asked Taylor his business. The man was clearly a pompous and unimaginative official, and Taylor jibbed at the notion of explaining to him what had brought him to the city.

On the spur of the moment he asked to see Manzoni.

"That will be impossible."

"But why?" Taylor asked. He suspected that the man was being obstructive.

"Because he is busy," the clerk muttered. A moment later he exclaimed, "See, there is Manzoni, just leaving!"

Manzoni turned. "Who called me?" he asked.

Taylor took a few paces forward and they stood face to face.

"I remember you," Manzoni said. "You come from the reservation."

"Yes. Captain Lyon ordered me to report to you. And Taylor delivered a speech in the terms that Lyon had suggested.

Manzoni nodded. "You are welcome, Taylor. But I must ask you to come back in ten hours. As you see, I am leaving now." He was walking out of the building as he spoke. Seeing that Taylor accompanied him, he added in a low voice, "I am going to inspect the damage at Station Four."

"You mean Station Eight," Taylor amended automatically. "I'm sorry, but surely Number Eight was the station that was mentioned at the President's meeting?"

"That is so," Manzoni said, his dark eyes expressing tragedy, "but since then there as been more bad news."

"Not another fire?"

"Yes, another fire, and at another oxygen plant."

"I think," said Taylor "that Lyon foresaw this. Manzoni, may I come with you?"

"It would be distressing for you."

"Lyon wants all the information you will allow me to collect, whether it is painful or not."

"Then come!" said Manzoni, who seemed, unlike his fellows, capable of an impulsive action.

There were a few experts travelling with Manzoni. Taylor never discovered what were their particular subjects. Together they drove to the airport and boarded a 'plane fitted for vertical take-off or landing. On their departure, however, they used the normal runway.

"What happened," Taylor asked when they were in flight, "to the men at Station Eight?"

"They were brought in. The place is deserted now."

"The Head of the station must have had a lot of useful information for you?"

"He was consumed," Manzoni said, a spasm of grief twitching his face. "So we learned little from that incident. Perhaps this time..."

They dropped in a vertical descent, as there was no landing-ground near the oxygen plant. Taylor had never before seen one of these installations close at hand. Now, as they walked cautiously forward, the enormous scale of the conception awed him. There were towering skeletons of metal which had once supported the holders. From these an enormous network of pipes led to near and distant vents.

It was all very quiet now. Taylor had expected to see buildings that had burnt themselves out. But here it was truer to say of both buildings and machinery that it had *been burnt*. Intense heat must have been needed, for both metal and plastics were non-inflammable. No ordinary application of heat could have reduced such materials to the tortured wreckage that he saw now.

Taylor noticed that the other members of the party were nervous, glancing round fearfully as they checked and made notes amid the destruction. It was Manzoni himself who led Taylor away from the ruins and pointed out to him certain marks on the ground.

"The tracks of the things," said Manzoni.

It was as though great blowlamps had been passed erratically over the soil. Over a width of about two metres all vegetation had been blasted. More than that, the grains of the very soil had been melted and fused into crystalline beads and pebbles. There were many such tracks, all coming from the hot side and going towards the station. The return tracks could be distinguished from the approaching ones.

The heat of the retreating heat-devils, Taylor concluded, had not been so intense.

Close to what had been a doorway of the largest building Manzoni halted and looked at a small patch of heavy-looking ash.

"The law-man," he said with a sigh.

Taylor said angrily, "The waste of it! How could he have been expected to influence a mindless thing?"

"He could not," Manzoni said. "But first it had to be established that the things were mindless."

"As mindless as flames," said Taylor. "You know that now, at least."

"Yes; we shall have to think of other methods."

## 10

Taylor sat with Nesina in the comfortable but characterless apartment that was her home.

"Do your parents dislike my coming here,?" he asked.

"No. What makes you ask that?"

"I never see them now. I thought that perhaps they stayed away deliberately when they knew I should be here."

"You should riot imagine such things," she told him reproachfully. "They are no longer in Una. They have been sent to work at a farm settlement."

"A long way from here?"

"Yes, it is nearer to the cold side. Lately many of the non-essential workers have been sent away from Una to such settlements."

"I see," said Taylor. "In other words, they're being moved out of any danger that may threaten you from the hot side."

"That is not the reason that is given."

"No, but it is understood."

"You may draw your conclusions. Taylor," she added quickly, "why was it you asked about my parents? Was it because you wanted to know whether we should be disturbed?"

"No. I really thought they might wish me not to come here. You see, I know of your laws, and it might be said of you that you were associating with a man outside your group. If it were known -"

"It is true," she broke in, "that we - that I might be reported. But just now the chance is not so great. We may not be noticed; or, if we are noticed, the matter may be overlooked. People are thinking of other things."

"Of fearful things," he suggested.

"You have noticed the change?"

"One would have to be very stupid not to."

She nodded as though he had confirmed her in a judgment that pleased her.

"Yes," she said, "you have a good brain. You are studious. Your group *could* be the complementary one of - well, of someone like me."

"But I have no group. We don't believe in your mating system."

"It would depend on your blood," she went on, as though she had not heard his interruption. "Nobody can guess what that may be until it is tested. But if you applied for classification, it is possible -"

"Nesina," he said swiftly, "I am surprised at you."

"Why? What have I done?"

"You've been telling people some story to try and explain me away."

"You are very quick. Well, perhaps it is so. But why are you surprised?"

"It is so unlike you. I thought deception was against your principles."

She sighed. "This is a very small deception."

"And that's a very womanly excuse."

"But I am a woman. You know that."

It was his turn to sigh. "You are a human unit, graded, classified, grouped, and of high intelligence. But are you really a *woman*?"

"I have invented this story for your sake," she said. "Why not? You like to come here, don't you?"

"Of course."

"And since I am sure that I have full control, and there is no danger of atavistic attraction, there is no reason why you should not come."

"You dear idiot!" Taylor said.

"*What* did you say?"

"You should test your control."

She looked at him suspiciously. "There is no need to do that."

"You are confident?"

"Completely."

"Then you should not fear a test."

"I do not fear."

"Then -"

He held her and kissed her. And, whether or not she had feared the test, she was not reluctant when she was in his arms. She was not reluctant at all - for a time. And then she was dismayed and angry.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Why must this happen?"

"Atavism," he said solemnly. "I think it's wonderful."

"You must not say that."

"But I do. And I believe that you think it's rather wonderful too."

"Pleasant, perhaps. Not - I don't know.... Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm smiling. You aren't used to smiles."

"No." But her own lips twitched reluctantly.

"You beautiful statue!" he said. "Don't you know what's happening to you? You're coming to life."

"What shall I do?" she asked in bewilderment.

"This."

"You like that?" she said when he had kissed her.

"Yes, Nesina. But better than your kisses, your smile, just now. And better than all, I'd love your laughter."

"But I do not laugh." She spoke as though he had accused her of a vice.

"No, but you have laughter in you. Some day I shall hear it."

"I would not mind," she said slowly, "if it were only you. But suppose others heard -"

She stood up abruptly.

"I must go," she said.

"Go where?"

"To my work. And I need to think - away from you."

Repose, he thought, when she had gone. Repose. But how can I repose?

He stayed there in the apartment, writing up notes on his visit to the burnt-out station.

"All the tracks I saw," he wrote, "kept to level ground. When there was a rise in the ground the tracks went round it; they did not move over it. This, if confirmed by other observations, suggests -"

The door opened and Nesina came in hurriedly.

"You're back early," he said.

"I came to tell you - it is only a rumour, Taylor - but you ought to know. Another -"

"Another oxygen plant attacked?"

"Yes, that is what is being said. It is not announced officially yet."

"I don't expect it ever will be," he said. "Your people are hushing up the bad news now, aren't they?"

"But this is not confirmed yet, so far as I know."

"Even when it is... But we won't waste time arguing about that, Nesina. I'm going to see Manzoni. He should know the truth."

"He is very highly placed," she said doubtfully. "And he will be too busy, perhaps, to -"

"He's more approachable than the rest of your chiefs."

"At least do not tell him you heard this from me. In my position I ought not to repeat such rumours."

"Oh, Nesina! As though I would do anything that might get you into trouble! Don't worry. Now I must go."

At the central Government office the minor officials were distracted and inattentive. Taylor walked unchallenged and unannounced into Manzoni's room.

"So you have heard the rumour? Yes, it is true," Manzoni admitted. His round, kindly face was creased with perplexity. "Station Fifteen is destroyed. It is more distant than the other two."

"And the station staff?" asked Taylor.

"Most of them escaped. They were prepared."

"That's better news."

"Yes, but things are not so good. I think you should know this, Taylor. There may be trouble. Our people are getting restive."

"I had noticed that, but thank you for telling me."

"The President said you were to be told all that might affect you on the reservation. Your people, it seems, are not so liable to - to -"

"Panic," Taylor suggested.

Manzoni shook his head at the word.

"At least you have means of controlling your people if they should get out of order," said Taylor. "You can use your law-men."

"We hoped so," Manzoni replied unhappily. "But now - the law-men have less authority. They have lost confidence in themselves."

"That must be because of their failure against salamanders and heat-devils. If you don't mind my saying so, Manzoni they should never have been used in that way."

"You don't understand." Manzoni spoke more vigorously. "They had to be used so. It is our faith. The possibility had to be tested."

Taylor shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "For a highly intelligent community your innocence is fantastic."

"It is strange to hear such criticism from you," said Manzoni. "There may be some justification for what you say. You bring a fresh mind to our problems. But you don't know all the facts. How can you? You are not one of us."

Taylor was beginning to like Manzoni. But here, he thought, was Manzoni adopting the usual air of superiority which the men from the reservation found so insufferable.

"You think us primitive," he retorted hotly. "But I am not so primitive that I can endure wastefulness of human life. Now *that*, if you like, is a strange criticism, coming from me to you."

Another voice spoke harshly.

"What do those few lives matter when so many thousands - all our people - are in peril?"

The speaker was Sanger. He had come in unnoticed by the two other men. There was no sign of fear in him, but he was angry and fanatically earnest.

"I have told Leblanc," he said, "that there is only one thing for us to do. We must leave Bel - get off the planet."

"But why?" Manzoni demanded. "And how?"

"Because if we do not we shall be destroyed. We must retreat, abandon our settlements - buy time to build spaceships, and go - all of us."

A secretary came in.

"The President wishes to see you," he told Sanger and Manzoni.

Taylor was left alone, but not for long. The secretary returned and summoned him also to the President's office.

Leblanc was showing papers to the two officials. He looked worn and worried.

"I was about to send for you," he said to Taylor, "when I heard you were here. Go now to Lyon. Tell him what you have heard and seen. Don't minimise the gravity of events. And then ask him from me to come here at once. You understand?"

"Yes, Mr. President. If speed is essential I could send a message by radio."

"Others might learn of it. No, go yourself. I will let you have a 'plane."

So Taylor left Una with his heavy tidings and Leblanc's message. For himself there was a gleam of brightness in the memory of Nesina's dawning smile, so reluctant and unpractised. But that would be of no interest or comfort to Lyon.

Lyon was conferring with Harper when Taylor made his report on the state of affairs in Una and delivered Leblanc's message.

"Again?" asked Lyon. "What does Leblanc want this time?"

"He didn't say, sir."

"I hope it's worth the journey."

Taylor thought he detected in his leader a natural curiosity, in spite of his sceptical tone. Lyon was rapidly giving instructions to Harper.

"Kraft's better now. You can make more use of him. But leave Loddon to himself as much as you can. I think he may produce something good. Taylor, I'm taking with me again. I hear he has some nice contacts in Una."

The look that he gave Taylor made the young man wonder whether Lyon had heard anything concerning Nesina.

"You can play at being my aide or staff officer," Lyon went on. "And, as we fly back to the town, you can go over all you said just now. I want all the detail you can give me, and I'm especially interested in the notes you made about the tracks of the heat-devils."

The 'plane that had brought Taylor was waiting, and they were soon on their way. Throughout the flight Lyon questioned Taylor closely on what he had seen at the burnt-out oxygen plant.

When they arrived at the Government building in Una there was no conference in progress. Leblanc received Lyon at once, while Taylor waited in an ante-room.

Lyon came out from the President's office looking more satisfied.

"I'm to have the run of the place," he told Taylor. "This time there are to be no secrets as far as I'm concerned. I'm to have access to all sorts of experts, and they're to tell me all I want to know. Later there's to be a big meeting."

"Shall I come with you, sir?"

"Not during the preliminaries. I asked Leblanc, but he says they're relaxing their security rules only for me personally. But I shall want you for the big show."

"Is that another of their conferences, sir?"

"Leblanc called it a meeting. I'm not sure what he meant by that. Personally, Taylor, I'm not in favour if the way they try to salve all their troubles by conferences. It's time they did

something, instead of just talking about what they may or may not do. They need unity now, and leadership. Leblanc understands that."

"Has anything happened since I left?"

"There've been no more distasters, but there's panic just under the surface here, and it wouldn't take much to start it. Anything might do it - the oxygen, for instance."

"But the oxygen supply's keeping up, sir."

"I know. But to maintain the level the staffs of the remaining stations will have to increase their output. That wouldn't be easy under any circumstances; and now all the men are looking over their shoulders most of the time. If the level did drop again, and breathing got difficult, on top of everything else, I wouldn't be in Leblanc's place for a good deal."

"You said that before, sir," Taylor pointed out.

"So I did; and it's truer than ever now. Some of his senior officials are catching the infection - starting to panic."

"They should be the last of all to do that, sir; because they're among the very few who know all that's happening."

"It doesn't seem to reassure them," Lyon said grimly. "Taylor, from what you've seen, which of the lot do you think could be relied on if things got really bad?"

"I'd say that Manzoni's sound, sir. And he seems to have a glimmering of humour - I mean our sort of humour. One can imagine him laughing."

Lyon said impatiently, "Laughing? What has laughter to do with it? I don't know what you're getting at, young man. In any case, these people never laugh. I believe they think it's indecent."

Taylor stood in some awe of his formidable chief, and he took a deep breath before he answered. But he spoke firmly.

"I hope, sir, you don't think I'm being fanciful, but I see laughter as a weapon in this war."

Lyon's impatience vanished as he thought this over.

"It's good for morale, of course," he said at length. "But I should have said that applied only to a race to whom humour comes naturally. It's been bred out of these people."

"I don't think so, sir. I believe it's still there."

"If so," said Lyon drily, "it's very deep down and well covered up. Still, it's worth thinking about. But I can't believe that a crank like Sanger has a gramme of humour in his whole make-up. That man's a menace. Another menace, a collective one, is the state of mind of the mass of people here in Una and out at the oxygen plants and farming settlements. They seem to be living in an atmosphere of illicit rumours and fear."

"If only they could be given a lead and taught to laugh at their fears -" Taylor began.

Lyon shook his head doubtfully.

"You can study that possibility," he said, "while I start my round of visits."

Taylor's first step after he had left Lyon was to seek out Nesina. He thought that she turned to him with relief, as though she relied on him to exercise her fears. But she was so weary and anxious that he could do but little to comfort her.

"No," she said sadly. "I wish you could comfort me, but things are too bad."

"Not so bad that there is no hope."

"Indeed they are. There are things I dare not tell you; but you may learn later. Then you will know."

There were to be no kisses during this meeting, he saw; and her grave, lovely face was far, indeed from smiling.

"Rest for a moment," he said, and he drew her gently to him till her head rested on his shoulder. She yielded with a tired sigh, and they sat thus for a long time in silence. He willed her to regain her courage, with some success, apparently. For when she spoke at last she seemed steady and composed.

"I will try not to be foolish again," she said. "Thank you for helping me."

He asked doubtfully, feeling that virtue had gone out of him, "*Have* I helped you?"

"Yes," Nesina said. "You have always an effect on me. Sometimes it is good. Sometimes I do not understand it, and I think perhaps it is bad; but I do not know. This time I am sure it was good."

"Then I am glad," he told her.

And they separated, she to the office out at the airport, he to meet Lyon at the Government building. Lyon and he were conducted to the conference room where they had sat before. There was nobody else there yet, but they were told that Leblanc and others would soon join them.

Lyon for a while sat silent, lost in thought; he was arranging his ideas and preparing for what was to come. When this process was ended he turned to Taylor.

"How did your investigation go?" he asked.

"It wasn't encouraging," Taylor confessed. He was thinking of Nesina, and for the moment laughter seemed unattainable.

"My investigations - if you can call them that -" said Lyon, "were fairly successful. I spent a good deal of time with their head topographer. Yes," he went on, noting Taylor's look of surprise, "I've been studying their best maps. Ah, here's Leblanc."

The President was followed by Sanger and Manzoni. When all were seated at the table, he welcomed Lyon and Taylor.

"I am glad to be here in accordance with your wishes, Mr. President," Lyon said formally. "Let us hope that, whatever the object of this conference, it will be a success."

"Thank you," Leblanc replied. "But this time I think the term conference is hardly the correct title for our gathering. It is more like a council of war."

The short pause that followed the President's announcement seemed to Taylor more significant than many speeches. Lyon, he guessed, was not only surprised but pleased.

"A council of war," Lyon repeated slowly. "You are facing the facts then, Mr, President."

Leblanc nodded, and then followed his opening remark with an even more striking one.

"Captain Lyon," he said, "you know the situation now, I believe. What is your advice to us?"

Lyon was drawing from his case a number of papers. He now spread them before him on the table. But instead of consulting them he glanced quickly at the faces of Sanger and Manzoni, then addressed Leblanc again.

"Mr. President, I am honoured by your invitation. I was glad, too, to hear what you have just said, because it seems to me to mark an advance. It destroys the barrier between your people and mine. I am aware of the reason, of course; it is our common danger that has led you to invite our help. You shall have it."

Sanger broke in with a curt aside.

"I don't understand this talk of Lyon's. Do you understand, Manzoni?"

Manzoni made a deprecating gesture.

"I am sure at least that the President understands," Lyon said. "Hitherto you have thought of me and my people as primitive and warlike. It is the present crisis that has made pugnacity a virtue."

"No!" exclaimed Sanger. "That is not so. That can never be so. Why are we here? Why did we leave Earth? It is against our principles to fight."

"Sanger," said Lyon coldly, "is as aggressive as most pacifists. I understand his principles. But you fought - you all fought - from the time you reached this planet."

Manzoni frowned, shaking his head.

"I do not comprehend," he began.

"You fought the conditions you found here. You fought the lack of oxygen in the atmosphere of Bel. And you won."

"Conditions," said Sanger angrily. "We adjusted conditions, but they are mindless. They cannot suffer. The salamanders are beings."

Leblanc intervened.

"That is a point that we can discuss and settle later, Sanger. I will ask Lyon again: if you were our leader, what would you do?"

Lyon replied, "Let me say first of all that I don't presume to dictate a policy to you. If you will not fight the salamanders, there is little to be said. But as for me, there is no doubt in my mind. My people and I are fighters; we shall fight. And I am ready to tell you how we should fight if we were in your place and if we had your resources."

"I invite you to tell us," Leblanc said.

Sanger scowled, but was silent.

"I should do three things," Lyon explained. "First, I should study the enemy, his tactics and his strategy. Second, I should organise a defence against his attacks. Third, I should, as soon as possible, pass to the attack myself."

"You see?" Sanger said triumphantly. "Suppose we agreed to defend ourselves, that is not enough for Lyon. He must have an offensive too."

"Sanger," said Lyon, "has sufficiently shown that he can be offensive - very offensive. His instincts are sound, if his convictions are not."

Sanger glared across the table. "If that means anything, I do not understand it."

"Then I must explain. No struggle can be won by remaining on the defensive. The only chance, whether on a battlefield or at a council of war, is to attack."

"Lyon is provocative. Must we listen to him?" asked Sanger furiously.

"I think," said Manzoni, "that we should hear him."

"Of course," Leblanc said firmly. "Captain Lyon, you are here at my invitation, and I regret the dispute that has arisen, though we must accept the sincerity of the views that have been expressed. Please go on, Captain Lyon. We don't promise to take your advice, but let us hear it."

Lyon bowed. He signed to Taylor to unfold the papers on the table. While this was being done Lyon addressed Leblanc.

"Very well, Mr. President. I said that one should first study, the enemy. Forgive me if my information is not complete. I have had but little time to collect it, and I have not heard all the reports. But I have used as well as I could the facilities you gave me. And I had the benefit of Taylor's study of that wrecked plant. I have learned enough, I think, to make a plan.

"The first point I have to make is this. We must be clear that the salamanders have a weapon or device in the heat-devils. Those are two of the factors that we have to contend with - the salamanders who plan and the inanimate heat-devils that they control. These heat-devils can be used at a distance by the salamanders. Now even Sanger should not mind taking active measures against the inanimate heat-devils."

"You assume," Sanger said fiercely, "that they are mindless, soulless. But do you know?"

"I am sure," Lyon replied. "All the reports that I have heard prove to me that they are mere clouds of heated gas. They cause a sense of horror in men who see their effect, because they are new and unknown in human experience. No doubt they are deadly weapons, but they have at least one limitation. It is shown in this way. If in their progress they come to a change of level in the ground, they work round it."

"Then why," asked Sanger triumphantly, "do you call them mindless?"

"As mindless as the wind," Lyon went on. "The salamanders control them, but there are some things that they cannot cause the heat-devils to do. They can direct them, but the heat-devils must keep contact with the ground. There is no report that I have seen of these things travelling high in the air. They can move on a very gradual slope, but they cannot make a sudden leap either up or down."

Lyon leaned back in his seat, inviting comment.

"That's so sir," said Taylor eagerly. "That tallies with what I saw when I went out there with Manzoni."

"Yes," Manzoni agreed, "that is so. But -"

"But what does it lead to?" asked Leblanc. "You don't suggest that we should replace our whole system of oxygen plants, and other buildings, by new installations on high ground. That is impracticable. While we were doing it -"

"I don't suggest that," Lyon said. "But suppose you ringed your oxygen stations with deep trenches."

"It is conceivable," the President replied. "It could be done. But should we be given time to do it?"

"No, there would not be time to protect all the plants in that way. But you could entrench the next objective of the salamanders before they attack it."

Leblanc stared at Lyon. "Yes, if we knew their next objective. But how can we know? We cannot read their minds."

"If they have minds," said Sanger with a sneer.

Lyon bent over the papers that Taylor had put ready for him.

"I haven't been trying to read the minds of the salamanders," he said. "I've been reading maps. Here is one that your head topographer gave me. The land in this region isn't hilly, only undulating; the contours exaggerate the slopes a great deal, and that is a very good thing for our purpose."

He pushed the large map to the centre of the table, so that the others could see it.

"And here," he added, "is a rough sketch that I have made."

"What does it represent?" Manzoni asked.

"A strip of land along the border of the hot side. It shows the oxygen plants that have been destroyed and others that has not been destroyed - yet. Now look at these marks."

"Like fingers," suggested Manzoni.

"Yes, like fingers. And at the tips of these fingers" - he pointed as he spoke - "are the oxygen stations that have already been burnt. The fingers are the easiest approach for heat-devils coming from the hot side. They are easiest because they are almost level, valleys or ridges. If you were there on the ground you would hardly notice them, but, as I said, the contours on that map show them clearly."

"Yes?" said Leblanc.

"What then?" Manzoni asked.

"I will number them," Lyon went on, and he did so. "That was the easiest route of all. It led to the first station to be burnt. Then this; then this; then -"

"A guess," Sanger said contemptuously.

"Yes, if you like. A guess. But can you make a better one? I say that in all probability the next station to be attacked will be Number Nineteen."

"And so?" It was Leblanc who spoke.

"Rush all your excavators there. You may be in time. Dig a deep trench, and you will trap the heat-devils or turn them back."

"I see," said Manzoni eagerly. "It might succeed. But... should we not entrench this city first? It is very vulnerable."

"No," Lyon replied emphatically. "Look at the map. Una is farther from the hot side than most of your oxygen plants. And the contour lines show that there is not such an easy route to it for the heat-devils. Besides, you don't want to lose any more oxygen plants if you can help it. A normal air supply with enough oxygen to breathe will help you to avoid panic among your people."

"Yes," Leblanc said. "I see that. You need not argue any more on that point."

Lyon bowed again. "You asked for my advice, Mr. President. That is what I suggest."

"And I agree," said Leblanc.

"I also," Manzoni added.

Sanger sat hunched up and silent, staring down at the table.

"It shall be done, then." Leblanc rose as he spoke.

"Thank you," Lyon said. "But act quickly. We may know *where*, the next attack should come. We can't say *when*. It may be taking place now."

"Manzoni," Leblanc ordered, "send the excavators to Station Nineteen at full speed. And you, Captain Lyon, will you go there too? The plan is yours, and you can best supervise it."

"Of course."

As they were leaving the room, Sanger stood and spoke bitterly.

"So Lyon, you have won."

Lyon halted to answer him.

"It's the common enemy I'm fighting, Sanger, not you. So I claim no victory yet; and it will be a long time before I do. Whatever happens at Station Nineteen, it won't decide the campaign. But it may be an important battle."

"Those excavators should have been here an hour ago," said Taylor restlessly.

"Manzoni's bringing them along as fast as he can. He seems a good man," Lyon said, "and he knows the need for haste."

They were standing on the flat roof of Station Nineteen. A 'plane had brought them there. Lyon, using a large-scale plan supplied by the station Head, had planned the proposed trench and marked it on the ground. He had also asked by radio for fire-fighting teams and equipment to be flown out from Una. Now there was nothing that he and Taylor could do except watch and wait.

They were closer to the hot side here than on their reservation or in Una. The light was not so dim. In fact it looked to Taylor as though the sun was on the point of rising above the horizon, though he knew that it would never actually do so. It was warmer too, much warmer; and he had covered a lot of ground on foot, sometimes running. He unfastened the front of his overalls to the waist as he stared impatiently first towards the hot side and then back to where the excavators might be expected to appear.

"There's a 'plane," said Lyon a few minutes later.

"The fire-fighting teams," Taylor said. "They've lost no time."

"We'll get them organised." Lyon was already walking to the stairway that led down from the roof.

Three large 'planes brought the reinforcements, and the station Head was soon disposing the teams round his buildings. While this was being done Taylor saw the first of the excavators appear, and then another, until a whole column of the great tracked machines was in sight.

The leading one halted close to Lyon and Manzoni stepped out. He had been driving at himself, and his robe was drenched with sweat.

"These things aren't built for racing," he said ruefully.

"We've lost five on the way, broken down. But I have eleven with me."

"We'll divide the work among them," Lyon told him. "Now, Manzoni, this is the plan."

He showed the course of the trench and the marks that he had made.

"And we'll have the spoil - the excavated earth - thrown up on the outer side. Can you fix that?"

Manzoni nodded and signalled to the other drivers.

"How deep do they trench?" Lyon asked.

"About a metre on the first run. We can dig deeper afterwards."

"If there's time," Lyon said grimly.

He climbed to the roof again with Taylor, so that they could watch the operation.

"Yes," said Lyon with satisfaction a few minutes later, "your friend Manzoni's a good man. He got the idea quickly enough."

The excavators were working first on the roughly semicircular section of trench that lay between the buildings and the hot side. Manzoni had handed over his machine to another driver and was supervising the work. Each excavator had its allotted task. All were driving in the same direction, and their several lengths of trench would eventually join to form a connected whole. The engines roared; the tracks turned and clattered; earth poured from the chutes. But to Taylor their progress seemed agonisingly slow.

"It's a pity the buildings are so scattered, sir," he said. "They needn't have taken up half so much space."

"Yes, it's a big perimeter," Lyon replied. "But they didn't foresee this happening when they planned the place, and we can't blame them for that."

Taylor heard him sigh with relief when the first part of the task was accomplished. Manzoni looked up and gave a triumphant wave of the hand to Lyon. Then the excavators lumbered round to complete the circle of trench.

This part of the work, however, took longer. There were several metalled tracks and a wide concrete road approaching the station on that side. One of the excavators was equipped with drills for breaking up such surfaces, but progress was inevitably slow. Taylor turned his back to it, watching the bright horizon till his unaccustomed eyes ached. Several times he imagined that he saw a patch of shimmering haze moving, far away; but he could not be certain.

"Finished!" Lyon said at last.

The station was now encircled completely by a metre-deep trench, and the ridge of raw earth beyond it added height to the obstacle.

Manzoni parked the excavators close to the main building, and brought his crews inside. He himself joined Lyon and Taylor on the roof.

"That was well done," said Lyon. "You'd better eat and drink now, while you have time."

But Manzoni shook his head and sat on the parapet.

"Have you seen any signs of them?" he asked.

"Nothing certain," Lyon replied. "They may not come for hours yet."

"They may not come at all," Manzoni said dully.

Taylor guessed that he was feeling a sense of anti-climax. The man was exhausted by the intense effort he had been making.

"My guess," said Lyon, "is that it won't be long now. Judging by the intervals between the other attacks -"

"Look there!" shouted Taylor.

He had to point out to them what he had seen. But though it was distant, there was no doubt this time. A sector of ground midway to the horizon was distorted as though by a mirage.

"Yes," Lyon said, "it's the heat-devils - a line of them."

"I'll tell the station Head." Taylor sprang towards the stairway.

He found the Head waiting below. The alarm signal buzzed, and the staff withdrew to their prearranged positions, well away from the outer walls. Taylor was quickly on the roof again.

"Keep back," Lyon warned him. "Stay away from the edge."

From the centre of the roof they continued to watch. The things were perceptible now, not as a continuous line, but separately, as numerous columns of heat. They swept over the ground in complete silence where the soil was bare. Where there was any vegetation slight hisses and cracklings sounded; fumes of smoke rose; and ashes showed where they had passed.

"Now for it!" Taylor muttered, as the heat-devils approached the trench. He glanced at Manzoni, whose face was working with excitement; and at Lyon, whose jaw was clenched. A moment later he felt like cheering.

Lyon's plan had worked. The heat-devils checked at the curved ridge of soil. Then they parted, left and right, and travelled spinning round the obstacle. It was like the ballet of a nightmare, with evil spirits striving to break into a charmed circle.

And the circle held them out. The whirling columns swayed as they met and jostled on the other side of the station. Again they passed along the protecting trench. Then they were retreating, moving away from the station.

"See!" said Manzoni. "They are going. We have defeated them." He came towards Lyon, as though to embrace him in triumph.

"Let us wait a little before we decide that they've gone for good," suggested Lyon.

Taylor looked at his chief in surprise. He himself was confident that the attack was over and would not be renewed.

Yet it was Taylor, his eyes now accustomed to the brighter light, who reported the next development.

"They're coming back!" he exclaimed.

"Where?" demanded Lyon.

"Over there abain."

"Yes, I see. But there aren't a lot of them this time. Only one, I think."

"Or is it several close together?" said Manzoni.

"There's something else," Taylor said. "Not a heat-devil, but something else, moving with them. Can you see? It's - it must be a salamander."

His view was distorted by the hot air, but there was certainly an upright shape in the midst of the heat-devils. This shape, dim and vague as it appeared, had substance.

"It's crossing the trench," said Manzoni, clutching Taylor's arm.

"No," said Lyon, "the trench has stopped -"

"But it's doing something there," Taylor broke in. "What *is* it doing?"

They could not make out what were the actions of the thing, but suddenly a gap appeared in the ridge of earth. Some force had thrust through it, pushing the loose soil into the trench.

"It's filling up the trench again," Manzoni said desperately. "Now it will come and bring all the heat-devils. What can we do?"

"Wait," Lyon said. "It's coming no nearer, and the heat-devils -"

"They're staying there by the trench," Taylor pointed out. He felt hope again. "They're moving back."

"But one heat-devil's coming this way," Lyon told them quietly.

They saw then that a single heat-devil was coming towards them. As it crossed the trench by the narrow bridge of earth which had been made, it was far less conspicuous than the cluster that surrounded the retreating salamander. But as it glided, spinning on its axis, nearer to them, there could be no mistake as to its course.

"We must get inside," said Lyon coolly.

As they turned to leave the roof, Taylor though he could already feel radiation from the thing. It was like a hot breath on his back.

Inside the building they heard the crash and crackle as a section of the outer wall collapsed in ruin. But there was no panic. A party of fire-fighters wearing insulated suits localised the outbreak, smothering the incandescent fragments in foam. A few minutes passed without any further action.

"Come," said Lyon. "Let's see what is happening."

Instead of climbing to the roof, he led them through the breach that had been made in the wall.

"Gone," he announced. There's nothing left to see. But there's plenty for us to *do*."

"What do you make of it, sir?" Taylor asked.

But Lyon was too busy to reply. He was giving orders to Manzoni.

"Get your excavators to work. Dig out that section again. Then deepen the trench."

"I understand," said Manzoni eagerly, and turned to go.

"Wait! That isn't all. Shift the soil to the inner side of the trench. That's one lesson learnt. We won't give them material to bridge the trench another time, And, Manzoni, when that's done, send the excavators to do the same job at the other stations, in the order I gave you. Now I'm going to radio the President."

Taylor watched the station Head sending his staff back to their work again. They went about their tasks like men reprieved from death. To Taylor's surprise the Head turned to him and clasped both his hands. It was the first gesture of warmth and comradeship that the young man had ever known from one of the earlier occupants of the planet.

"It is magnificent, is it not?" the Head exclaimed.

"But it isn't conclusive," Taylor replied warningly.

"We know at least that those things" - the Head pointed towards the hot side - "are not invincible. Now we can continue with hope."

Lyon, who had just come from the radio-telephone, heard what the Head said.

"I agree," he told him, "and I'm glad to know that you think so. The President sends his congratulations to you and your staff on their behaviour, and may I add my own?"

The station Head thanked him.

"Shall you stay here?" he asked Lyon.

"No. I'm flying back at once to Una."

## 14

"You asked me," Lyon said to Taylor when they had taken off from Station Nineteen on their return to Una, "you asked me what I made of it. What did you mean? Weren't you satisfied with the result?"

"Yes," said Taylor, "but I couldn't understand it. Why didn't the salamander exploit that gap? Why didn't more heat-devils cross the trench? Was it just luck?"

"Perhaps; but I don't think so. My guess - it's only a guess, Taylor - is that the salamanders can't endure conditions way from the hot side for long. They need a screen of heat-devils round them. Even so, the temperature must fall, so that they can't stay for long; they have to get back quickly."

"Yes," said Taylor, "that would explain it."

"But it's only a guess," Lyon warned him. "I'm not going to claim that it's the only possible explanation until I have more proof. And I don't want you to speak to anybody about it yet. Nevertheless, if it is so, there are possibilities..."

What the possibilities were he did not say. For the rest of the flight he relaxed, and it was not till they landed at the airport that he made a further remark of any consequence.

"Leblanc wants to see me alone," he told Taylor. "He has more work for me. I think we can come to an understanding, especially if Sanger isn't there."

"Shall I come with you to the Government office, sir?" Taylor asked.

Lyon looked closely at him.

"No. You look used up. Take a spell of repose. Then get in touch with me, and I'll tell you what to do."

Taylor went at once to the office by the airport, where Nesina worked. She was not there. He took a car to her apartment in the town, and there he found her. She rushed across the room to greet him. Of her own accord she flung her arms round him and kissed him. She was in a mood that he had not seen before, reckless and exulting.

"I hoped you would look for me," she said, "so I came here. I did not want to meet you in the office. Are you not pleased?"

"Dear Nesina, yes."

They sat down and spoke more calmly.

"I'm glad because you are glad," he said. "That must mean that you've heard -"

"Yes. I heard what happened at Station Nineteen. The President made a radio announcement."

"What did he say?"

"That a means of protection had been found. He mentioned your Captain Lyon and you. It seems that the destruction of the heat-devils is justified. Now there is every hope for us. Oh, I am so grateful!"

"Yes," he told her, "there is every hope."

There was no reason why he should not say that. He still thought that her exultation was hardly justified; and his first instinct had been to warn her that nothing very decisive had happened. But her welcome had raised his spirits. She was radiant; there was joy in her tone as she spoke, and the smile that he had sometimes despaired of seeing was near her eyes and lips. He could not spoil this moment by uttering a warning.

Instead he said, "It sounds as though your people may see now that mine are not altogether" - he paused, searching for an inoffensive way to convey his meaning - "that they may now admit us as equals."

At that she really did smile, and the sight of her gaiety enchanted him.

"You are very diplomatic and tactful," she said.

"But what I said is true. There is more hope, you see, for me. And if my people are no longer treated by yours as they have been, you won't be blamed for -"

"For making you welcome in my home," she said, before he could complete the sentence. "Yes, that is a pleasant thought too. You want to rest now?"

"No," he said, "not now," and was surprised to find it true. He had felt exhausted and in need of repose, but that was so no longer. This interlude had invigorated and refreshed him more than any rest could have done. When Nesina went back to her work, he lost no time in going to the Government building.

There he inquired for Lyon.

"He is in his office," a clerk told him, giving him a number of a room.

Taylor found his chief seated at a desk and speaking to Manzoni. The conversation ceased as he entered.

"This," Lyon explained to Taylor, "is our new headquarters in Una. The President has been good enough to give me an office here. It looks as though there'll be plenty of work for you, if you're fit." He looked keenly at Taylor and smiled.

"I'm ready for anything, sir," Taylor said.

"I too," Manzoni told him. "I have asked the President to set me free from all other duties so that I may join -"

The door of the office was opened violently and a man came in. At first Taylor did not recognise him. Then he saw that it was Camisse, who had led the expedition to the hot side.

He was the wreck of what he once had been, barefooted, with a soiled robe all awry, his face worked in involuntary grimaces. At a shambling run he crossed the room and addressed Manzoni.

"You heard the news - the good news? The salamanders are settled. So I am justified. It was not in vain. Manzoni, you must tell them that now I can go back. Manzoni -"

"Of course," said Manzoni. "Come with me. I will arrange everything."

Camisse accompanied him docilely. Manzoni flashed a rueful look at Lyon. The door closed behind them.

Lyon sighed. "I'm sorry for the poor devil, but he's a liability; and there'll be others cracking up like him. These people don't give themselves a chance. They work incessantly, without relaxation or repose. It seems to make them unbalanced. They panic, or else they build too much hope on a small success. Most of them seem to think that the danger from the salamanders is ended already.

"But I was going to tell you about the President. He's a far-seeing man, Taylor, though he's handicapped by some of his senior officials. But he has a policy and he's working out a plan. I only hope his people will let him carry it through. And we are to play a big part in the scheme. Kraft and Loddon come into it. I'm sending for Loddon as soon as -"

There was another interruption. This time it was Sanger who entered.

"Have you seen the President?" he asked.

"He's in his office."

"Not at the moment."

"I can't help you."

"I came here," said Sanger maliciously, "because I understand he is collaborating so closely with you. I thought I might find him here."

"I attend the President in his office; he does not come to mine. You should know that, Sanger."

"How should I know what happens under this new régime?"

"I don't understand you," said Lyon curtly. "As you see, the President is not here; and I am busy."

"Then I will go. But allow me to congratulate you on your success at Station Nineteen. Your guess was a lucky one."

"It was not a guess."

"Then no doubt you also foresaw what has happened since."

Lyon made no reply.

"A report has just come. I was taking it to the President. There has been another disaster."

"To an oxygen plant?" Taylor asked quickly. He saw Lyon frowning at him, but he had been unable to resist putting the obvious question.

"No. This time it is one of the largest farm settlements. The place is burnt out."

"What caused the fire?" said Lyon. "Heat-devils?"

"The report speaks of balls of fire floating through the air," said Sanger. "It is not altogether clear to me what that means. No doubt you will understand, Captain Lyon."

Again there was no answer, and Lyon's face was expressionless. Sanger departed.

But as soon as he was out of the room Lyon sprang to his feet.

"There's a 'plane at my disposal now," he told Taylor. "Get through to the airport and tell them to have it ready. I'm going to find Leblanc."

He was back in the office five minutes later.

"Sanger's bent on making trouble," he said. "He doesn't mind how much panic he causes. Defeatism, despair, retreat, evacuation - that's his policy."

"Did you find the President?"

"Yes. He saw my point. This bad news isn't to be made known - at least until it's been checked and verified. I have the location of that farm settlement, and we're going there now."

## 15

From the air there was no mistaking the farm settlement that they had come to see. The blackened buildings and scorched vegetation stood out in conspicuous and ugly isolation. Two large relief 'planes had already arrived, and Lyon's 'plane touched down beside them.

Most of the activity seemed to be concentrated close to one of the relief 'planes. Taylor saw that a dressing-station had been improvised there. A doctor was treating a number of injured people.

"We'll see what we can find out," Lyon said, and they walked to the dressing-station. The smell of burning grew stronger as they neared the doctor and his cases.

He was bandaging an unconscious child. Lyon waited till the work was finished before he spoke to the doctor.

"Are any of them fit to talk?"

"Yes. There is one old man who isn't burnt at all."

"Where is he?"

"Katz took him away."

"Who is Katz?"

"He is our chief," said the doctor. "He is there by the buildings, trying to identify the dead."

Katz was a tall, gaunt man in a short grey robe. He and his helpers were working in an open space that had once been a quadrangle surrounded by the barns, sheds and living quarters of the

settlement. These buildings were now low heaps of ashes from which the twisted ends of girders and supports protruded. The sweet, sickly odour of roasting filled the air. Taylor was almost overcome. He retched and shivered striving to fight his nausea.

Silently Katz handed a flask to Lyon, who drank and passed it to Taylor. The spirit it contained tasted cool and strong. It gave Taylor strength to face the row of bodies, twelve or more of them, that lay there. Most of Katz's assistants were carefully searching in the ruins. But one of them was ticketing the bodies, helped by an old man.

Since the old man wore the heavy sandals and leggings of a farm-worker, Taylor knew that he must be the uninjured survivor to whom the doctor had referred.

"Tell me what happened," Lyon said.

The farm-worker straightened up.

"That was Anna," he said hoarsely. The assistant wrote the name neatly on a ticket.

"Tell me what happened," repeated Lyon, more loudly.

The old man stared at him stupidly for a moment, then sighed.

"All gone," he croaked. "People, animals, fodder - all gone."

"That was because of the fire, of course," said Lyon in a matter-of-fact tone. "You must tell me how the fire started."

"It was the sun."

"The sun? But you cannot see the sun here."

The old man shivered and looked round wanderingly. Then he seemed suddenly to return to full consciousness.

"Of course, there is no sun. Foolish of me." He looked up into the grey sky. "But when I was young, on Earth, I have seen the sun rise in a morning mist. That is what it was like. Red and glowing, but not too bright to look at. And I could feel its warmth as it came." His finger traced a path through the sky. "I was out in the field, and I stood and watched it. It was so beautiful."

"But it did this." Lyon pointed to the wreckage.

"Red and warm and beautiful," the old farm-worker insisted. "And it did no harm. It passed over - that first one. And the next, and the next. There were many of them."

"Yes?" said Lyon. He looked at Taylor as though to make sure that he was alert and aware of the significance of what he heard. "Which way did they go?"

"Which way?" The old man considered deeply. Then he held out his hand with the fingers spread. "Like that" he said, "across the sky. I was watching them, but I did not see how far they went. Because this other came."

"Was it like the first?"

"Yes, but it came a little lower, and it struck the roof of the barn. It burst and pieces of it flew everywhere."

"Did it make a noise when it burst?"

"Yes, a loud noise. I was a kilometre away, and I heard it - a loud noise. And the heat grew greater still and the light was not red anymore but white. For a long time I could not get near. I

knew that nearly all the workers were in the barn, stacking fodder. But what could I do? Some ran out and were saved. The rest are here." He looked at the row of bodies and then turned his sore eyes away.

"That is what one fireball did. Where have the others gone? What have they done?"

"That," said Lyon to Taylor, "is what we must find out."

He made an examination of the ruins and questioned others of the survivors who were now conscious. Then, abruptly, he announced that he would fly back at once to Una.

"Fly high," he ordered. "We have to look for other fires."

"None have been reported," the pilot said.

"There may still be fires," Lyon insisted. "In lonely parts of the country, perhaps - out of sight of any settlement or station."

They did, in fact, find the scars of two fires, and the pilot went down low enough for them to see that these had occurred in areas of tall fern-forest. The vegetation at these two points had evidently been too damp for the fire to spread, but thin wisps of smoke still rose in the calm air.

Finally, within a hundred kilometres of Una, a forest fire had taken hold and was blazing strongly.

"Can you pin-point that location?" Lyon asked.

The pilot nodded. He marked his map.

"Then report the fire to the authorities," Lyon told him. "Besides dealing with that one, they should send air patrols to look for others. I leave it to you to ask for immediate action. I have something else to do."

What Lyon did, as soon as they landed, was to report to Leblanc. He took Taylor with him.

"It is as well," said Leblanc at last, when he had heard Lyon's statement, "that you gained a success at Station Nineteen, because this is a heavy blow. Heavy and unexpected. Our people, livestock, foodstuffs - all destroyed."

"You will publish the news?" Lyon asked.

"Oh, yes. Now that the truth is known we must not keep it secret."

"I agree," Lyon said. "It is better that you should announce the facts than that the story should leak out as a rumour. Because the facts are not too bad."

"To me," said Leblanc, "it seems that they could hardly be worse."

"But surely you see, Mr. President, that these fireballs aren't so effective as the heat-devils. From what we have learnt so far, they are not so easily directed. They seem usually to float at a height of from twenty to fifty metres. They don't explode until they touch an obstruction. They'd pass harmlessly over most of your buildings."

"They'd fire an oxygen station."

"Yes, but the stations could cope with the fire that started. They have their fire-fighting teams and equipment."

Leblanc sighed.

"To me it is a nightmare," he said. "What becomes of our plan now?"

"It continues, surely, Mr. President. I hope you will not allow yourself to be turned from the main purpose. It is possible that other devices may be used by the salamanders. We must watch for them and deal with them as they occur."

"And meanwhile go on entrenching the oxygen stations?"

"Most certainly," Lyon said impressively. Taylor saw that he was exerting all his formidable strength of character to hearten Leblanc.

"Remember the loss of an oxygen station throws an extra strain on the remaining stations," Lyon insisted. "You can't afford to let the oxygen level drop again now. It would be a big blow to morale. If the salamanders try to fill in our trenches and restore the level, so that their heat-devils can cross, then the salamanders must be fought, that is all."

Leblanc winced.

"You know that is a political issue. I am under pressure....."

"Then you must forgive my applying a contrary pressure," Lyon said with a smile. "My advice is to continue the work that is going on at present. In addition you should get plenty of fire-fighting equipment distributed to all the farm settlements. Perhaps your 'planes will be to give warning of fireballs that look likely to set alight any of your settlements or stations."

"Or this town?"

Lyon nodded. "Locating the fireballs won't be enough. We must find a means of destroying them. If you think ahead you will see the need for novel weapons. This is a great deal that I am asking you to organise, Mr. President."

"It is," said Leblanc, with a rare gleam of humour. "Nevertheless, I agree to your demands. I agree the more easily, Captain Lyon, because it is, in effect, you and not I who must carry out this reorganisation."

## 16

Taylor was astounded. He had, as usual been seated unobtrusively beside Lyon, taking notes of what was said. Now he stared at Leblanc. Could he mean to hand over the presidency to Lyon? It was incredible, and yet it had sounded like that.

But Leblanc hastened to make his meaning clear.

"I believe," he said, "that I can now take a step that I resolved on some time ago. It is a fateful step for the head of a pacifist state, but it is surely justified now. I ask you to take charge, under me, of all operations that become necessary."

Lyon expressed no surprise.

"You speak of 'taking charge' and of 'operations,' Mr. President. You ask me, in fact, to become the military leader of your people, responsible only to you?"

Leblanc sighed. "Those words would have seemed blasphemous to me a short time ago. Now our existence is threatened. Here on Bel we are the last survivors of the human race, and I can see that our principles must be sacrificed. I believe that we understand each other very well - you and I, Lyon."

"Yes," Lyon said. "I've understood your problems for a long time now, and I've sympathised with you."

"One of my problems," Leblanc said, "was to choose the right time to present you to my people as" - he hesitated, and then went on deliberately - "their war chief. It was difficult. But already they are apprehensive. And now, when they are told of this new threat of the salamanders, they *must* accept what I propose."

"Why don't you take command yourself?" Lyon asked bluntly.

"I cannot. You say you have sympathised with me, and I am grateful. But how can you - the fighter - understand the true pacifist - the pacifist by birth and conviction? I see the need to fight, but my feelings go too deep for me to direct the fighting. There would be a conflict within me, and I should fail. But you - you have the qualities we need - the drive, the steadfastness, the will to attack."

"You flatter me." Lyon said. "I need not tell you that it is a hard task you offer me. But I accept it."

Leblanc gave a sigh of relief. "I can perhaps lighten that task to some extent. I will give you what political support I can. There will be opposition, of course, from the extremists."

"From the fanatics." Lyon shrugged his shoulders. "They must be dealt with if they become troublesome."

"I will do what I can."

"There is another matter," Lyon went on. "You have been generous in ascribing certain qualities to me. But, for what they are worth, those qualities are common to all my men out on the reservation. You must recognise that I have gifted scientists and technicians among my people. I would match them against yours at any time, and in the war we are fighting they will contribute more than yours to victory."

Leblanc was embarrassed. "Since you say so," he began. "But I find it difficult to believe -"

He was staring doubtfully at Taylor, who reddened under his gaze.

"You must try to rid yourself, please said Lyon, "of all notions of racial superiority. It has stood between us ever since I landed with my crew. Taylor here is a very well-qualified engineer. But I am giving him other duties now. I wasn't referring to him, but to men such as Kraft, my Chief Scientist. You know him already, though you have seen nothing of his work. It is good, I assure you. And there are others. They are busy already, working in your cause."

"Yes," said Leblanc. "You are right, of course. We must close our ranks. We are one people now."

"If you can get others to see that, Mr. President, we shall succeed."

"I shall do my best," Leblanc promised. "Within an hour I shall give a broadcast talk. I shall speak of what we have said."

"Good!" said Lyon. "I suggest that you should introduce me, and let me speak after you."

"Yes, you must make yourself known to all the people."

"Not only that. I must tell them what I expect of them."

Leblanc and Lyon began hastily to prepare their speeches. Lyon dismissed Taylor.

"Speak to Harper at the reservation," he said. "Tell him to fly in with Kraft, if he's fit to travel, and Loddon."

Taylor passed the message to Harper, saying that he would send a 'plane.

"Thanks," said Harper. "Tell Lyon that Kraft will come with me. What's happening in Una?"

"The best news is that Lyon's been put in command against the salamanders. But he'll tell you all about that himself."

Harper chuckled over the radio.

"That's quick promotion," he said. "There's just one other thing. We sighted a queer object, something like a red star, passing over here. I thought you should know."

"They cause a fire if they touch anything," Taylor told him.

"You've seen others, then?"

"I'll leave Lyon to tell you about that, too. But you should organise fire-fighters. Foam extinguishers would be best."

After that Taylor rang Nesina, who said she was going home again. He joined her there, and they sat side by side to listen to the President's broadcast talk.

It was hard for Taylor to judge what the effect would be on the audience at whom the speech was aimed. But it seemed to him that Leblanc struck the right note.

He gave the listeners a factual and unemotional account of the fireball attack. He did not minimise the danger, but made it clear that the menace was neither supernatural nor invincible. So far his tone had been quiet and matter-of-fact. Next he spoke of the ethics involved, and in this he became more eloquent and persuasive.

They must ask themselves, he said, whether their faith allowed them to resist the attack of a power that already existed on Bel before they themselves arrived there. The answer was plain. The salamanders were living creatures, but their aggression came from hell - the hell of the hot side. The human race was justified in opposing the attack, not only by passive defence, but by more active measures.

"Defence," he concluded, "we can compass ourselves. But to go further than that, though it is vital to us, is something for which our lives hitherto have not prepared us. We need not feel ashamed, therefore, to seek guidance outside our own community. For this purpose, until the danger is passed from us, we need a leader. Happily one has been found. I shall now present him to you."

And after that Lyon spoke. He told of the steps that had already been taken, and of the success achieved. "You must prepare for a long struggle and a hard one," he said. "You must be organised to fight for yourselves and for each other. And since you must fight, fight wholeheartedly."

When it was over, Nesina switched off the radio. Taylor prepared to relax. He felt heartened and confident. When Nesina turned to him, however, he saw her stricken face with a shock of surprise and dismay.

"It is a declaration of war," she said. "War! We are going back into a dark age."

"The battle is joined," he replied. "We're all in it together. You must believe that we shall go through the darkness into the light again."

"You are so very sure," she said. For a moment she closed her eyes wearily. Then she looked at him again, bracing herself. "I feel that you will win."

He laughed. "I! I am a very small cog in the new war machine. But I rely on my leader. I know him. He is -"

"*You* may rely on him. But I rely on you," she said. "You are my hope. Mine."

Taylor had to leave soon after that. As he left the building, a tall man passed him, going in the opposite direction. It was Sanger. He stared inquisitively at Taylor, but he did not speak.

## 17

"I'm ready now," said Loddon.

With Taylor and Kraft he stood beside an intricate apparatus of coiled tubes surmounted by a long cylinder.

"All ready for the Skipper," Loddon went on with cheerful irreverence. "We could try it before he comes."

"You'd better wait for him," Taylor said.

He turned and stared back along the road to the city. An area of open country had been chosen for the tests. It was flat ground, clear of all high vegetation, a desolate place under the grey sky. But for all that it was barely fifteen kilometres from Una; and Lyon, when he joined them, would come not by 'plane but by car.

Loddon squatted easily on his heels. He still loved to test the suppleness of limbs that once had been stiff with age, and now felt young again. He grinned up at Taylor.

"You're the boss now. Queer to think there was a time when I could give you orders."

Taylor grinned back at him. "I'm one of the boss's assistants, Chief, and a long way down the list at that - too far down to get conceited."

"You must explain that headquarters organisation of yours to me some time," Loddon said. Then he looked up at the Chief Scientist and spoke more seriously.

"This target practice, Kraft," he said. "It may show us something, but not a lot. What I need to test the thing on is a real live salamander - if they are alive."

Kraft had been making adjustments to an instrument like a large camera. It was evidently heavy. He set down his burden before he replied to the engineer.

"There's no doubt that they're alive," said Kraft. "If you'd seen them, as I have -"

"All right, all right! But what are they made of? Metal, silicon - or what? If I knew that it would be easier."

Kraft shrugged his shoulders. "I saw one of them blown to dust by blast. And they move quite fast."

"That may help *you*," said Loddon. "It doesn't help me much. What do they think with? How do they see?"

"They don't see."

"Then how do they locate the oxygen plants?" Loddon argued. "They don't grope round blindly for them, by all accounts. They make straight for them, and then set the Heat-devils on to them. They've never made a mistake."

"They must have something - some organ of perception," Kraft said. "But probably it's outside our experience; it might even be outside our comprehension."

"In other words," grumbled the engineer, "you don't understand 'em. I'm glad to hear that, because I don't understand 'em either. Another thing I don't see is why they don't burn out, so to speak. Whatever they're made of, surely the temperature -"

Kraft shook his head. "I wouldn't start theorising, if I were you. There's not enough to go on. And you're thinking of them in terms of human beings. You shouldn't. I mean that you want them to have eyes like ours -"

"Not like ours," Loddon interrupted. "I think of them as animals of a sort. What else can I do? They're an adaptation of the shug, aren't they? And the shug has an eye, and lives nearly as long as a man."

"But anything like an eye must disappear on the hot side," Kraft said. "And it isn't necessary that they should live for long. Their individual lives may be infinitely short compared with ours, or compared with that of a shug in the temperate belt. They may have some sort of collective consciousness, inherited intelligence -"

"Who's theorising without data now?" Loddon said derisively. He stood up, quickly. "Here's the Skipper coming."

A car drew near to them, and Lyon stepped out and joined them.

"Ready?" he asked. "What are you going to show me?"

Loddon answered. "Stationary targets first, sir."

"Wait," said Lyon quickly. "Who's that man?"

He pointed to a robed figure standing by one of the cars.

"He's my driver, sir," Taylor said. "I know you want no spectators, but we shall need him for the moving targets and the other test. He won't talk."

"He'd better not," said Lyon. "Now, Chief."

Standing about a hundred metres away were the metal screens, each two metres high. Loddon aligned his cylinder and pressed a button. With an angry hiss the blast shot out in a thin, straight stream. The right-hand screen became incandescent. Loddon shifted his aim. The centre screen flashed white hot, buckled and fell. So did that on the left.

"H'm. Now double the range," said Lyon.

"No use, sir," Loddon told him.

"I want to see."

Taylor signalled to the man in the robe. A screen was set up at two hundred metres. But at that distance Loddon's cylinder was ineffective.

"I didn't claim any more than a hundred and twenty metres for the thing at the outside, sir," Loddon protested.

Lyon nodded. "I know. I'm not blaming you. Let's see it hit something moving."

Taylor was ready for that test. He had a screen mounted on a metal sled and harnessed to his car by means of a long cable. At the shorter range Loddon demonstrated the efficiency of his weapon.

"H'm," said Lyon again. "Now let's see *your* box of tricks, Kraft."

"It registers and locates movement," the Chief Scientist explained. He opened the instrument to reveal a viewing panel.

"What sort of movement?" Lyon asked.

"It depends on the distance," Kraft said. "But any reasonably large body, of any solidity."

"A salamander?"

"Yes, certainly a salamander."

"A heat-devil?"

"No."

"Try with that driver of yours, Taylor. Tell him he won't be in any danger."

The man, as soon as he began walking, was registered on the screen.

"Now," Lyon directed, "we'll use your car. Tell the driver to go over that way, about five kilometres, and then turn in a wide circle and drive back here."

"Good work!" said Loddon approvingly, when the test was over.

But Lyon was still not satisfied.

"We'll have another run, with the car towing a sled. And you, Taylor, take a walk over in that direction."

Thus Taylor did not witness the test, but when he returned to the little group Lyon was summing up the results.

"I'm disappointed with your blast device, Loddon."

"It's limited, I know, sir," said the engineer. "I might narrow the jet and increase the distance, but even so -"

Lyon nodded. "I'm not blaming you. Don't think that. But you can get fifty metres with a small blast-gun, which is a lot lighter and handier than this. Don't waste more time on this thing. We'll have it put into production, though. It could be used on tracked and armoured vehicles. Go on working at the other thing we discussed."

"Sir," said Loddon.

Lyon turned to Kraft.

"This indicator of yours is something like what we want. It's good for a single moving object, but you saw what happened when there were several in the field. There were some confused images. Can you make it more selective?"

"I think so, sir," the Chief Scientist replied, "given time."

"That's something I can't give you," said Lyon curtly. "Or rather, something that the salamanders won't give any of us. We'll get back to headquarters now, and see what reports they've collected. There was a lot of news coming in when I left. We'll see whether the staff have sorted it out yet."

## 18

The new operations room in Una had been planned by Lyon, and Manzoni was in charge of it. There was a large staff, working under bright light. Some of them were recording radio messages from the frontier sectors; others were marking the numerous charts with code symbols.

Loddon had gone to hand over his blast-tube device to the head of the Government factory that was to produce it in quantity. After that the Chief Engineer was returning to the reservation. He said that, for the time being, he could work better there in his own workshop and with his own tools.

But Taylor and Kraft accompanied Lyon when he went back to the operations room. Manzoni came over from his desk at the end of the room and stood by him while he surveyed the regional maps. Each of these represented one of the sectors of his command. In addition to the movable symbols that were scattered across them there were light bulbs set at certain points.

Lyon's interest was concentrated upon two maps on which the bulbs glowed red, and he turned to question Manzoni.

"It is bad news again," said Manzoni. "Stations Seven and Fifteen -"

"Not burnt out?"

"No, but badly damaged."

"How did it happen?"

Manzoni told the story that he had pieced together from radio conversations with badly shaken men and the reports of pilots of patrolling 'planes.

"Both stations were attacked by heat-devils. At Fifteen the trench was not finished, and some of them got up to the walls. There was a lot of damage before the heat-devils left and the fire-fighters got the flames under control. They say it can be repaired, but the station can't produce oxygen again for a long time. And an excavator was destroyed, with its crew."

"And Station Seven?" Lyon asked. "Did the same thing happen there?"

"No. At Seven the trench kept out the heat-devils, and no salamanders were seen. But some fireballs came over at the same time. One of them struck the control tower, and one the outer wall. Both of them burst. Apart from the damage to the building, the heat was so intense that a lot of the station staff were killed. They had found nine bodies, and they were still searching when we last heard from them."

"Have they put out all the fires yet?"

"Yes," Manzoni replied. "But the station's out of action. And they say there are areas of radio-activity all round where the fireballs burst."

"They have a decontamination squad?"

"Yes. They're working on it."

"Kraft," said Lyon, "you heard that? This radio-activity seems to be something new. What do you make of it?"

Kraft had been studying the maps and diagrams and making notes.

"The salamanders," he said, "have never yet appeared more than fifty kilometres from the border of the hot zone."

"You think they can't come any farther into the temperate belt than that?"

"I hope so." But Kraft added cautiously, "We can't be sure. We can't guess how their minds work; their thought processes may be quite different from ours. But it's possible that their plan is to make a slow, patient advance right along the front. They may regard the oxygen plants as our first line of defence, because they happen to be ranged in the positions nearest to the hot side."

"You mean," Lyon asked, "that they're trying to reduce the oxygen plants first, before they drive deeper?"

"I think that's a possibility," Kraft replied. "You see, there are these fireballs too. They seem intended to strike farther into our zone, to soften up our defence - isn't that the right phrase? Some of them have drifted right over into the cold side."

"I wish," said Lyon, "that we knew what principle they work on - the fireballs, I mean. You talk of them drifting, but it isn't any wind that carries them. They seem to fly on independent courses."

Kraft nodded. "And the increased heat they develop on impact - it suggests nuclear fission, or else it's something quite beyond our knowledge."

Lyon traced the courses that had been marked on the map in front of which he stood.

"Yes," he said. "They're wasteful because so few of them ever explode effectively. But when they do their destructive power is more than you'd think was possible. To that extent

they're economical - and clever. But how are they made, Kraft? Can you tell me that? Have I got to believe that the salamanders have munitions factories?"

Kraft shook his head. "We know scarcely anything of what happens in the salamanders' country. When we went there, on that expedition, we saw nothing to suggest that they have buildings. It isn't impossible, I suppose. But, to my mind, it isn't necessary to credit them with manufacturing these things in any sense that we can understand. These devices that they use may be quite elementary to them, like the use of fire by early man on Earth. It may be just a simple use that they make of the material that's available to them. We know that fissionable elements do exist on the hot side, probably in large quantities, ready for -"

"Wait a moment," Lyon said. "What's this?"

A messenger had entered the operations room hastily and was whispering to Manzoni.

"A fireball has been reported," said Manzoni excitedly. "It's passed the outskirts of the town."

"I want to see this."

"We could go to the tower," Manzoni suggested.

He led them to what he had called the tower. It was a squat erection over the entrance to the building, but none of the houses in the city were high, and the slight additional elevation gave them a sufficiently commanding view.

"There it is," Manzoni said.

But there was no need for him to point out the approaching fireball to them. It floated noiselessly, glowing a dull, angry red; and its pace was so slow that the pilot of a 'plane that was observing it had to circle round it continuously. If he had followed a straight course he would have overshoot it.

"About fifty kilometres an hour," Lyon guessed. "And it's less than a hundred metres above the roof-tops. It'll clear the town."

"It ought to," Taylor agreed.

Nevertheless he watched apprehensively the progress of the red-hot sphere. He was sweating, and then, as the thing came nearer, the heat that radiated from it dried his face. He judged it to be less than a metre in diameter.

"Lodden's blast tube would probably destroy the thing," Kraft suggested.

"It might," Lyon agreed. "But I think that would be a technique for use over open country. Over the town the thing would probably scatter widely and start more fires than if we left it alone."

The fireball was now almost clear of the buildings. Lyon turned to go, and came face to face with Leblanc, who had only just arrived at the top of the tower.

"Is the city safe?" he asked. His face was impassive, but Taylor thought his voice shook a little.

"Quite safe," Lyon reassured him.

"I was receiving the reports on those two stations," said Leblanc, "when I heard of the fireball. What next?"

Lyon seemed purposely to misconstrue the question.

"The alarm's over, as you see, Mr. President. People are coming out from shelter."

Taylor followed Leblanc's worried look down into the street. It was true that some people were venturing out from doorways here and there, but only a few of them, and they looked badly scared.

"And the pilot of that 'plane," Lyon continued, "will report its course by radio, and whether it comes down or starts a fire."

"He can't destroy it - give it the blast of his jet?"

"His 'plane would be too near the burst if he did that. But we'll fit 'planes with blast tubes; fire them from the rear, so that the 'planes are flying away from the burst, not into it." Lyon turned to Taylor and said in a swift aside, "See to that. Get hold of Loddon and tell him about it. Ask him if he can see any way of using the jets of the planes to boost the blast."

Leblanc was saying. "Would old-fashioned firearms be any use?"

"You mean machine-guns?" asked Lyon.

"Yes, or cannon."

"Perhaps," Lyon said. "It's certainly a good idea. I don't know how soon they could be produced; we've no model to work on. And our idea is to simplify production by turning out weapons that can be used against the salamanders, and possibly against the heat-devils as well. We do know that the salamander can be destroyed by blast. They mightn't be knocked out by bullets. They've no blood to shed."

Leblanc shuddered.

"Let us go down," he said. "I must see the full report on those last two stations that were attacked."

They returned together to the operations room, Taylor and Kraft following the President and Lyon. After studying the reports and maps it was plain that Leblanc was greatly moved.

"It is bad, very bad," he began.

Lyon glanced at him warningly. The junior members of the staff were neglecting their work to stare at the President.

"Can you clear the room, Captain Lyon?" he said. "With these men present I cannot -"

Lyon replied in a low voice, "It is better that they should stay. There are reports coming in constantly; the latest information must be shown on the maps. Besides, it is as well that they shouldn't have time for idle speculation. May I suggest that we go to my office?"

Leblanc nodded, and the four men went to the office close by. Once the door was closed, the President no longer tried to conceal his distress.

"Yes, it is bad, very bad," he repeated. "These losses of life. And now two more stations knocked out."

"But not destroyed," said Lyon steadily. "They can be repaired."

"It will take time." Leblanc passed his hand over his eyes with a gesture of weariness. "Already it was difficult to keep up the oxygen supply with the stations that were working. And now..."

"If necessary we must live on less oxygen for a time."

"Yes," said Leblanc dully. "You and I can do that. But the people - above all, the staffs of the oxygen stations and the farms - what of them? Already I am having great difficulties. They need heartening by success."

Lyon smiled. "You mean that you must be able to tell them of victories, Mr. President."

"What can you do?" demanded Leblanc. "Can you do anything?"

"We have done a good deal already. There are new weapons being made. As I told you, the scientists and technicians are the key men in this war. I'm pressing them for quick results. Also Mr. President, I'm sending now for Harper, my second-in-command on the reservation, and all the available men from there."

"You would leave your town there undefended? I admire your confidence."

"It is hardly a town," said Lyon. "It is a small, compact village. And I believe it will be sufficiently defended. We must all accept risks, in any case."

"But what will you do with these men?"

"They will form my reserve," Lyon said. "Any commander in war needs a reserve. Your people are mostly committed already. Besides, they are not yet trained to fighting; and, if I may say so, their morale is not as high as we could wish. So I shall bring these men of mine here to Una."

"To defend Una?"

"If necessary. But I hope to use them elsewhere first. This reserve of mine is to be highly mobile. We shall need 'planes for them, as well as cars and armoured vehicles. Taylor."

"Sir."

"You will see to that. And so," said Lyon, addressing the President once more, "we shall make a move of our own when the salamanders advance again."

"But surely this is - incautious," Leblanc objected unhappily. "If you have strengthened our defence I should have agreed -"

"No," said Lyon positively. "You gave me this task, Mr. President, and you must let me carry it out as I think best. You need successes - victories - and so do I. Now I've reached a stage in the planning of the campaign when it is necessary to defend by attacking."

Leblanc sighed. He still looked doubtful.

"You are very sure," he said.

"I am planning an operation on a very small scale," Lyon said. "A modest local counter-attack. But it will be a beginning."

"Pouf!" exclaimed Pratt, the red-haired mechanic. "Ope I don't 'ave to spend much o' me time in them asbestos trahsers." He flung down the suit of protective clothing that he had been trying on, and picked up a short blast-gun with a grin.

"What, me a soldier!" he went on, turning from his overalled mates to some of the robed workers of Una who stood by. Well, you never, know what yer can do till you try."

The men in robes were unresponsive. Their faces were drawn, and their eyes were seldom still. They glanced up at the sky frequently, and they turned their heads to look over their shoulders.

"Appy band of 'eroes, I don't fink!" murmured Pratt, with a wink at his friends.

The men from the *Colonist* reservation had been flown in to Una. They were gathered now on the open ground beside the airport, the same area in which the expedition to the hot side had formed up. To Taylor who had just come from Lyon's office, the recollection came of how he had watched Kraft depart, under the command of Camisse. It all seemed a very long time ago, and poor Camisse was now mad, and said to be incurably so.

There were sixty men under Harper's command, and Taylor felt proud of them. He knew them all, the sturdy mechanics and the junior scientists and engineers. They were not careworn, like the men of Una, and it was good to hear laughter again as he passed through their formation on his way to Harper.

He had come to assist at the transfer to the *Colonist* party of a number of cars and tracked vehicles, as well as such weapons as were available. Harper had brought a stock of blast-guns, but they were light weapons, effective only at short range. There were also half a dozen blast-tubes, hastily made to Loddon's specification; and Kraft had come with four of his detectors, which he was preparing to demonstrate.

"If we don't count the drivers," Harper said to Taylor, "there'll be weapons of sorts for everybody. They'll need some practice with the blast-tubes."

"And with this," said Kraft, indicating one of the detectors.

"Is that a new model?" Taylor asked him.

"No," the Chief Scientist said. "I'm still working on the improvements that Lyon wants. They're going to give me trouble, but it'll be worth while. Still, this model's better than nothing. Let me show you, Harper."

"This is where your astronomical training's going to help you," said Taylor. "It'll be child's play to you."

"A child could understand it," Kraft claimed, rather stiffly.

When he had demonstrated the detector, Taylor and Harper discussed plans for training the men in driving and in the use of weapons and other devices with which they were to be supplied.

"Lyon's coming out himself to talk about movement and tactics," said Taylor. "You'll have three large 'planes allotted to you. But the idea is that normally you'll move in your own vehicles."

It was time for him to return to headquarters, and again his way took him close to the group, in which Pratt's red head was conspicuous. The men from Una were preparing to hand over vehicles to the *Colonists*, but still there was no mingling between the robes and the overalls - the strained, weary men and the more carefree ones.

"Baht fifteen fahsand hours old, 'e is, this kid o' mine. I works it aht 'e'd be twenty munce old, if we 'ad munce any more. An' there 'e is - big as dad already, nearly. Some kid! Promised I'd take 'ome somepn for 'im arter this trip. Might take 'im a salamander."

"Salamander!" cried a worried little man in a robe, rousing himself from a trance to look round in terror.

"Don't you fret, mate," said Pratt kindly, seeing the consternation that he had caused. "There ain't no salamanders treadin' on yer skirt. I was only sayin' - 'ere, mate, s'pose yer can't tell me 'ow ter stuff a salamander?"

"Stuff a -! He-he-he!" The little man screamed with high-pitched, hysterical laughter. Some of his companions laughed almost normally. But others of the men in robes scowled angrily.

"They are like beasts," Taylor heard one man say to another as he passed by. The reference was evidently to the *Colonist* crew. "Among themselves they marry as they like."

"Outside their grades?" another man asked in horror.

"They have no grades."

"They had better not try to start anythin like that here," said another voice apprehensively. "I heard that they have only a few women of their own on their reservation. Suppose they want to take ours..."

The words struck Taylor at the time; and he was reminded of them forcibly later on, when his duties were over for a time, and he was sitting, as he did whenever he could get away, with Nesina.

He noticed that she had shifted some of the furniture in the room, and the altered arrangement seemed to make the place more comfortable and more characteristic of her. Taylor thought of it now as *her* home exclusively. Her parents were already very dim memories to him. She never referred to them, and he wondered whether she took much interest in them, or in what was happening to them out on the distant settlement to which they had been evacuated.

"I have been told that I should not have you here," she said suddenly.

"But I thought people were not concerned now with - with such things."

"That is what I thought too," said Nesina. "It was not official - this warning. But I think it may mean that someone is going to lodge a complaint, unless -"

"Unless you send me away?" he asked. "Would you do that, Nesina? Not long ago you said dut I was your's. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. I don't want you to go away. You mustn't leave me. It is only that I am a little frightened. Who could be interested enough, with things as they are, to make a complaint?"

He did not answer, but he himself felt a twinge of sick apprehension. To distract her, he told her of the arrival of Harper and his men, and how Pratt had talked of stuffing a salamander. She gave a doubtful little laugh.

But there was no doubt about the kiss she gave him when the time came for them to part and go back to their work.

"You are mine," she murmured.

"And you are mine," said Taylor. "Don't be afraid any more."

## 20

"What news?" Lyon asked, when Taylor returned to his headquarters. "How is the army?"

"Harper's army? They'll soon be ready, sir."

"We'll have to use them as soon as they are," said Lyon. "Now," he went on, "I've a few things to tell you, and I want you to take note of what I say."

"Sir."

"First of all, there's this. You've accompanied me everywhere I've been since this business started. But, from now on, there'll be times when I shan't take you along with me."

Taylor was both puzzled and hurt at this opening.

"I hope you don't think, sir, that I can't be trusted with any information, however secret it -"

Lyon interrupted him impatiently. "You seem very touchy just now. Of course I trust you completely. Haven't I shown you that? If you'll let me finish, you'll see that's precisely why I'm saying this. When I go up to the forward sectors I want you to stay here. There's always a chance of being killed there, and the campaign must go on if I die. I'm going to give you my plans, so that if I fall foul of a heat-devil or a salamander there'll still be someone left who knows what has to be done. You understand already the principles that I work on, don't you?"

"I think so, sir."

"Then we'll start with the long-term plan, the attack - *our* attack - that's going to decide the war. I'd hate to think that if I died it would be delayed or not properly developed. So your job will be to keep the pressure up and hand over all details to my successor. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. But I hope - I'm sure that the necessity won't arise."

"We'll take the usual polite speeches for granted," Lyon told him. "Now, the factors to be considered are these: weapons - new weapons, I hope - man-power, speed of movement, surprise, and above all, the offensive spirit. Have you got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Lyon spent an hour instructing Taylor in all the details of the plan; and Taylor admired the foresight and thoroughness with which it had been conceived.

"This notion of waiting passively to be attacked is nonsense," Lyon said warmly. He got up from his desk and paced the floor, as though to demonstrate his need for action. "It's a certain way of being beaten. No dash - no initiative. I needn't enlarge on that, except to say that our allies can't easily be persuaded that the whole idea of everlasting passive defence is a fallacy. Even Leblanc - I've convinced him mentally, but his spirit revolts.... Well, enough of that."

He sat down again at his desk.

"Now for the short-term offensive," he said. "This is where Harper's force comes in. We have to get him and his men to a station that's being attacked, and we have to get them there in time. That may not be easy; it's becoming hard now to predict where the salamanders will strike next. But, provided Harper's within reasonable distance, my notion is this. He mustn't trouble about the defence of the station; that's to be left to the men inside it. No, he moves out as the heat-devils move in. He locates the salamanders and he destroys them. You see what I mean?"

"Yes, sir." Taylor felt an urgent wish to get away from the office for a time, to experience the reality of the war that he was helping to plan.

"Will you be going with Harper, sir?" he asked.

"No. It wouldn't be fair to him. He's quite capable of leading a counter-attack. I should only be in the way."

"Then may I go, sir?"

"You?" exclaimed Lyon. He shook his head.

But Taylor urged his claim with more emphasis than he normally used in speaking to his chief.

"I'm junior to Harper, sir, and he could probably make good use of me. There'd be no risk of the plans you've explained to me being forgotten, since you yourself would be here to see to them."

"That," said Lyon with a smile, "was hardly what I meant, and I believe you know it. I spoke of leaving *you* behind when *I* go forward not of *you* leaving *me*. But since you want a change, you may as well join in the first salamander hunt."

"Thank you, sir."

"Wait," said Lyon, as Taylor rose to go. "You can earn your place in the operation by helping me to work out the salamander's next move, or trying to."

They settled down to an intricate study of the attacks that had already been made. The work took them a long time.

"There does seem to be a sort of rhythm about their moves," Lyon said.

"A mathematical design," suggested Taylor.

"Something like that. What's your forecast?"

"Station Twenty-four or Station Thirteen, sir."

"Yes," Lyon agreed. He measured distances on the map. "They aren't too far apart - those two stations - though they're a long way from here. We'll have Harper so placed that he can cover them both."

"When shall we start, sir?" asked Taylor.

"In about thirty hours. But that doesn't apply to you. I'm not letting you waste your time trundling about in those vehicles of Harper's. You can put in your full share of work here, and then fly out and join him when he takes up his position."

Taylor wondered what Nesina would say when she knew.

## 21

What she did say was, "I knew you would go, to fight in this war, some time or other."

"You said you trusted me to win it," he told her. "Not single-handed, I hope."

"Do not laugh at me, when I am trying to be brave, as you are. And now that the time has come, it is not quite so bad as I feared. But it is bad enough. You must come back. Say that you will come back!"

'Oh, my dear!' he said hurriedly. "I'll try."

"When you come back - when the danger is over - then I shall be able to laugh, I think. But now I cannot laugh."

And he thought later that it would be worth while enduring any trial if, by doing so, he could win the right to return to her victorious and hear her lovely laughter.

He was resting beneath a tall clump of ferns when these thoughts passed through his mind. The 'plane that had flown him out from Una to join Harper had just taken off for the landing-ground at the nearest settlement, where it would wait for his orders on the radio. Harper and his men had camped in the cover of the jungle. Soon Harper, coming back from a reconnaissance, beckoned to Taylor to join him in the command vehicle. They sat there, listening for radio calls, but none came. The men who stood or sat nearby, close to their vehicles, had been waiting for a long time. They were tense already. As the time of waiting dragged on they grew more tense still.

They were about equidistant here from the two stations that were likely to be the objectives of the salamanders' next attack, according to calculation.

But were those calculations correct? Taylor wondered. And soon Harper showed that he, too, had his doubts.

"It must surely be one station or the other," he argued restlessly. "All the same, they might attack elsewhere. And if they did -"

"We'd be no worse off," Taylor replied, "except that we'd have lost some time. We'd have to wait for another chance, that's all."

"Yes, but all I want now is to come to grips with these things as soon as I can. Lyon has turned me into something like a soldier. The men are keyed up too. Lyon did a good job when he explained the plan to them. They feel now that they all have a stake in the game."

The radio call-sign sounded. It was the pilot of a patrolling 'plane making his report.

"Negative," said Harper as he switched off. "They're a good lot," he went on, referring again to his own men, "but they can't keep at fighting pitch indefinitely. It'll be a pity if their fire dies down."

Pratt and his comrades were cleaning their weapons as they waited, and making adjustments to their vehicles. These were excavators from which much of the machinery had been taken and to which heat-resistant armour had been added.

"I'm going to tell them to make a meal now," Harper said.

Preparing the food came as a welcome distraction. Pratt caught a small shug. He was a good cook, and he prepared and roasted the delicacy, which made a welcome addition to the rations that had been brought from Una.

Again, the call-sign on the radio. It was another report from a 'plane to the ground.

"Heat activity seen. Bearing from Station Twenty-four...."

"Distance?" Harper snapped back.

He was given that too. But he was leaving nothing to chance.

"Give me another bearing," he said.

Now the point was fixed on his map with only a small margin of error.

Harper started his engine. There was no need to give orders to the men. They followed him at full speed for fifteen kilometres.

"Can you check our position?" he asked Taylor, driving more slowly now and calculating distances on the map.

"There's Station Twenty-four," Taylor said. He gave the bearing.

"Is anything happening there?"

"It's too far to see if there are any heat-devils round it, but there's no sign of the place being on fire."

"Good. We're near enough now to the place the 'plane reported," Harper said, and halted. "Now for old Kraft's detector."

"You certainly need it." The plain in front of them was without definite features, save slight undulations. It was covered with a uniformly short growth of vegetation. Only by turning round again was Taylor able to see anything except a grey sameness in the scene. Back there the high walls of the oxygen plant known as Station Twenty-four was plainly visible, but they looked unsubstantial, as though they lacked thickness. The sight no longer gave him any reassurance, and he turned to Harper again.

Harper was swinging the detector slowly, turning the adjustment knobs as he did so. But so far nothing showed on the screen. The radio receiver beside Taylor started to hum as for an incoming message. Harper cursed.

"I can't work this thing with the radio active," he said. "It makes all sorts of oscillations. Who's calling?"

"It's local. Must be one of ours."

"Find out who it is and tell 'em to keep off the air," said Harper bitterly. "I said they were to shut down, didn't I?"

Taylor climbed to the top of the vehicle and signalled. The radio call ceased, and Pratt's head appeared flaming and unmistakable from the doorway of a vehicle a little way back in the column.

"Was that you calling, Pratt?" Taylor shouted.

"Yes, sir. Only wanted to say we sighted something back *there*."

Looking in the direction where Pratt was pointing, Taylor could see an unsubstantial disturbance of the air. He stared at it hard. It was caused by a procession of four heat-devils. They were gliding towards the oxygen plant.

"Keep watching," Taylor ordered. He dived back into the vehicle and reported to Harper what he had seen.

"Never mind them," said Harper. "I got something on this screen just then."

He swung the detector in an arc. The screen showed a clear reaction. He read the bearing and range.

"There's something else over on the edge of the screen," Taylor said.

"Never mind that either. It may be a single salamander moving up behind the heat-devils. But the main concentration must be *there*."

He adjusted the detector carefully till the screen showed a bright, clear dot. Then the dot blurred and shifted.

"Some kind of upward movement," said Harper. "But the salamanders can't have grown wings and started flying. What is it?"

"There is something rising," Taylor exclaimed.

Harper looked up from the instrument.

"It's a fireball."

Taylor's comment was unnecessary. The dull red of the rising globe was plain enough to be seen. Then it ceased to rise and floated sedately towards Station Twenty-four.

"And another. And another," said Harper.

There was a fascination in seeing the fireballs appear one by one. Harper began to count them, and then jerked his gaze back to the detector and the controls of the vehicle.

"Time we moved," he said.

The tactics that his little force were to use had already been worked out in detail and rehearsed. The vehicles split into two columns and then converged, timing their movements so that they should arrive simultaneously at the spot where the detector had first shown movement.

Harper, who was concentrating on his driving, asked Taylor what he could see of the salamanders.

"They're grouped round the point where the fireballs rise."

"That's what you'd expect," said Harper. "Are you ready?"

"Ready," Taylor replied as he braced himself for action. He was responsible for operating two weapons, the long tube and the short blast-gun.

"Here we go!" Harper said, and increased speed.

Taylor stared hard through the observation panel. There seemed to be something moving midway between them and their objective. He lost sight of it and then, for an instant, sighted it against the glow of another fireball which had not yet risen above ground-level. Taylor had an impression that the thing was a loose collection of hoops - a moving skeleton. Then, as the fireball rose higher, the outline of the salamander was lost, and it became ghostly and unsubstantial again.

But he kept it in sight and aligned the long tube on it as well as the vibration and plunging of the moving vehicle allowed. He pressed the operating stud and saw the jet shoot out. But it missed the salamander.

Immediately the thing swerved and sped in an arc round on Taylor's left. He turned and saw through another panel that the salamander was launching itself at the next vehicle in the line behind Harper's, about fifty metres away. It attached itself to the cabin. Instinctively Taylor's hand moved to the controls of the long tube. But he remembered in time that the effect of its use would be on the vehicle and its occupants, and he sighted with the blast-gun instead.

He missed once, and then again; but the third blast licked the side of the cabin, and the salamander fell from its position, disintegrating as it did so. The vehicle that it had attacked turned suddenly in its own length, one set of tracks jammed and the other racing. Then it stopped.

But the remaining vehicles wheeled round the broken-down one and followed in good order. Harper was still driving fast. Taylor turned back to the observation panel that faced forward. A red glow shone through it, for a fireball, just skimming the ground, was whirling straight at Harper's column.

The approaching peril forced Taylor to think quickly and coolly. The fireball must be hit, and when it burst Harper's vehicle must be as far from it as possible. And yet the longest effective range of the blast-tube was only about a hundred and twenty metres. Taylor's mind sorted the facts and figures so swiftly that he still had a second to spare. He employed it in

training the tube on the fireball, and while the thing was still two hundred metres away he felt that he would not miss.

The thin jet leapt from the tube straight into the glowing heart of the floating sphere. But for an awful moment Taylor feared that he had missed it after all. He had expected a loud explosion to follow his shot, but, amid the clatter of tracks and the thunder of racing engines, the only sound he heard was a faint, derisive *pop*, like the bursting of a plastic bag.

But the visible effect was spectacular and convincing. The small red seed of the fireball swelled into a monstrous, incandescent blossom that filled the sky; and shooting flames bathed the whole scene in evil glory.

To thrust on into the inferno seemed an act of madness. But Harper did so, trusting to his speed in conjunction with the armour and insulation of his vehicle. Taylor, his eyes shutting instinctively against the glare, felt a sudden increase of heat that was terrifying and threatened to become unbearable. But the experience was mercifully short. It lasted only for seconds. Then Harper had burst through the area of flame and won to the untormented plain beyond.

The other half of the force was now in sight again, converging from the opposite direction on the objective. This was clearly marked by another fireball. Taylor thought that he saw a number of salamanders grouped grotesquely against its glow. Then the fireball seemed to detach itself from the ground. It rose high in the air and flared away overhead. The salamanders remained. They were hard to see and already they were dispersing.

At the time it seemed to Taylor that the things moved without plan in all directions. Afterwards it occurred to him that their movements could have shown an intention; for, in effect, some of them fought a rearguard action which covered the retreat of the others. But while the skirmish lasted he was too fully occupied in dealing with each fleeting situation as it arose to puzzle over the salamanders' motives or intentions.

The general movement was now towards the hot side. Taylor used the long blast-tube several times; but whenever there was a danger of hitting another vehicle he operated the short gun instead. He concentrated savagely on his task, exulting to see salamanders blasted to nothingness. Once something warned him to turn to the rear observation panel. Through it he saw a salamander overtaking them, but before its destructive embrace seized upon the vehicle his blast-gun seared it.

What had begun as a fight became a pursuit. The speed of the salamanders increased, and it became harder to hit them. Taylor noticed that some of them, grazed by a blast jet instead of being struck squarely, writhed and recovered, continuing their flight. He saw, too, that there were heat-devils mingled with the salamanders, and that when a heat-devil was in front of them the blast weapons became ineffective. Screened by the heat-devil, the salamanders were then untouched.

Still the pace of the fleeing salamanders increased. They were drawing steadily away. Harper reluctantly stopped the pursuit. He slackened speed, wheeled round, and broke the radio silence that he had imposed by ordering all his vehicles to rendezvous at their original objective.

Taylor experienced a feeling of anticlimax as the weary drivers and gunners descended stiffly from their cabs, grotesque figures in their heavy protective clothing. But there was plenty still to do - casualties among the men to be treated and listed, and damage to vehicles to be assessed. On the ground near where the fireball had burst, the vegetation was still flaring,

and there was slight radioactivity. Taylor ordered some of the crews to decontaminate, and put out the fires. Then he went back to where he had left Harper.

"Would you say," Harper asked, "that this was where the fireballs came from?"

"Yes," said Taylor, "just about here."

"I was looking for some traces - anything to show how the things are made. The earth here looks different. Do you see?"

"Yes," Taylor said. "But that's the track of a heat-devil. I've seen something like it before - that same scorching, and what look like glass beads."

Harper flicked sweat from his face.

"Those fireballs can't be created out of nothing," he said, scanning the ground.

Some of the men were searching the area nearby. Pratt, who had been repairing some damage to his vehicle, came over to join them.

"Whatcher lookin' for, mate?" Taylor heard him say.

"Lookin' to see 'ow them fireballs was made."

"D'you know what I reckon?" Pratt muttered. "I reckon they wasn't never *made*. Some boss salamander pulled 'em aht of 'is 'at, like a bleedin' conjurer."

He searched diligently, none the less. At the same time he must have been keeping a watchful eye on the surrounding country, for it was he who raised the alarm soon afterwards. He pointed out what he saw to Harper.

"Heat-devils coming back," said Harper. "Get in your vehicles and stand by."

He was hoping to get a shot at any salamanders that might be escorted by the heat-devils. But instead of moving into the area that Harper and his men occupied, the heat-devils whirled swiftly round it and were gone. Taylor thought that he saw a salamander in the midst of them, but it was a long way out of range.

As soon as he left Harper's vehicle after this disappointment, Taylor looked back towards Station Twenty-Four. It was almost hidden by smoke. He drew Harper's attention to this.

"The station's on fire."

Harper glowered at the sight. He signalled at once for all available vehicles to follow him. Even as they raced towards the high buildings, however, the volume of smoke was decreasing. By the time they halted under the walls only thin fumes were rising. But the damage was considerable. Great holes yawned in the structure, and the destruction had not been confined to one spot.

"Where's the station Head?" Harper shouted.

"He is dead," a frantic voice answered. "Very many are dead."

"He is not dead. I saw him -"

There was a great deal of shouting inside the building, and then the station Head appeared. He was a small man, and at first he looked dazed. But by the time Harper and Taylor had dismounted and drawn near he was able to speak coherently.

"What have you done?" he asked.

"We have avenged you," Harper answered.

"Vengeance!" the Head exclaimed angrily. He controlled himself, and went on. "That is not what I wanted. I wanted my station to be protected."

"How did this happen?" Taylor asked, pointing to the damage. "Did the heat-devils cross the trench?"

"No. It looked as though the trench was being filled in -"

"By a salamander?"

"I do not know. It was hard to see. If it was a salamander, it left with the other things just as we saw you moving over *there*. But then a fireball hit here and blew up."

"Is the damage bad?" asked Harper.

The Head nodded. "We can just keep working, but our output is cut right down."

"You'd better radio to Una," Harper said.

"I can't. The radio is destroyed. Can you send a message for me?"

"No," Harper said. "The sets in my vehicles are all short range."

"Lyon must be told," said Taylor anxiously.

"Of course. And Leblanc too."

"I'll fly in and take a message." Taylor stared at a level track of land beside the oxygen station. "But where's the 'plane?" he asked.

"The pilot was watching," said the little man. "When the heat-devils drew near he took off. I did not see where he went."

"That pilot was wise," Harper commented. "He took no risks with your 'plane. I don't expect he's gone far. You'll be able to call him back by radio."

Taylor went back to the set in the vehicle. It was not long before he had got in touch with the pilot, and the 'plane was soon in sight.

"I'm sorry to pull out like this," Taylor apologised.

"You've plenty to do here. I wish I could have stayed to help."

"You have to go," said Harper. "Lyon must know what's happened. I'll tidy up here. There'll be some burials." He sighed. "Ask Lyon whether he wants me back in reserve at Una, or whether I'm to cover Station Thirteen. If the radio's no good, he'll have to send out a message by 'plane. Thanks for all you did, Taylor. I couldn't ask for a better gunner."

"It's been good to get back among men in overalls," said Taylor. "I get tired at times of the people in robes."

Harper grinned. "I dare say Lyon feels the same. You'd better hurry. He must be surrounded by robes now. That'll make him glad to see you, apart from your news."

Harper's whimsical prediction proved literally true. As soon as Taylor arrived at his headquarters he sought Lyon in his office, but he was not there.

Taylor tried the conference room, and there he found Lyon, a powerful overalled figure, seated at the head of the table. For the rest, the room was filled with robes, their wearers forming a jostling, gesticulating mob. They had all left their seats at the table.

Not only was Taylor half deafened, but he was unable to reach Lyon's side quickly, as he wished, in order to deliver his report. All he could do, from just inside the doorway, was to catch Lyon's eye and give a slight nod which he hoped would be taken as a signal of success. Then Taylor began to work his way through the throng. As he did so, he looked round to see whether any men whom he knew were present.

Neither Leblanc nor Manzoni was there, but he saw Sanger speaking loudly to a cluster of men. They were minor political delegates - all the men in robes - and they looked both angry and scared. Good material for Sanger to work on, thought Taylor. When he had entered the room he had felt weary. Now the sense of a crisis impending had made him alert and observant again.

Lyon had a powerful voice, and he used it now to secure the attention of the discordant assembly.

"If you've finished your discussion, let us go on."

They all obeyed him, at least to the extent of clustering round the table again, though none of them sat down Taylor continued his efforts to thread his way through to Lyon. But he paused instinctively as Sanger began to speak.

"They want to be sure of breathing," he said, beginning on a surprisingly reasonable note.

"But there's no shortage of oxygen yet."

"There will be. They demand bubbles."

Coming from Sanger, the closing words sounded comically incongruous.

Lyon gave a short laugh. "Bubbles" he asked. "Who are asking for bubbles?"

"These delegates," Sanger replied angrily, sweeping his arms out to indicate all the other men assembled in the room. "They represent all the people."

"Not my people," said Lyon proudly.

"Do not be too sure. In any case, your group is a very small minority. What is wanted now is a number of large protective covers, like we had before. You would not remember; it was before you came."

"I know what you mean. But who is to make them?" Lyon demanded. "Everybody is fully employed."

"That," said Sanger with relish, "is the point of our demand. You must release men - take them from your evil work of war."

"Why should I?"

"Because what you do is sinful. The salamanders are sent to drive us out. We should not resist them."

"I wonder," said Lyon scornfully, "why you try even to stay under cover. Why don't you all lie down and wait for death? You aren't consistent, Sanger."

"There is a difference," Sanger claimed, but he disconcerted. Lyon began to press his advantage, but Sanger became sourly insistent.

"I would abandon the planet entirely," he said, "and I hope to persuade all reasonable men that that is the best course. At present there are many here who hope for a compromise. They think there may be some area where the salamanders will allow them to stay. But whatever our opinions, we are not suicidal, as you pretend to think we are. And whether we move to another planet or to another part of this one, we need time to prepare for the next step. That is why we must be protected from the shortage of oxygen. How can you answer that argument? You cannot," Sanger claimed triumphantly.

There was a moment of dead silence. Everybody else in the room was conscious that the issue lay between two men. Taylor edged forward, a little closer to where his chief sat.

"You mean, I suppose," Lyon said to Sanger, "that I cannot give an answer that will satisfy you. That is true. But I still have a reply."

He paused skilfully at this point, and thus secured the unwavering attention of his hearers.

"I might say," he went on, "that oxygen helmets are ready if they are needed. But that is only a palliative; I don't offer it as a solution or even as a compromise. No. What you are going to have - whether you want it or not - is battles - not bubbles. This is a war, and you will have to accept danger and disaster as well as discomfort."

"It is a sin! " cried Sanger, his voice cracking.

"Do you believe," Lyon asked patiently, "that humanity has a mission in the universe? I do; and I believe, therefore, that it is our duty to survive, even if it means war."

Taylor saw that, after Lyon had spoken, some of the delegates nodded reluctantly. Others looked sideways at each other and began to discuss what had been said. Lyon's restrained manner had quietened the crowd; the threat of panic had receded.

But still Sanger made an effort to rally the delegates to support his own views.

"It is the anger of providence," he shouted, "the anger of providence at the disregard of moral laws."

"I don't understand," said Lyon, "what Sanger means. And I doubt whether he understands himself."

The delegates were looking puzzled also. They stared doubtfully at Sanger. And Sanger seemed, with an effort, to control his wrath as he sought for arguments. A look almost of triumph showed on his haggard features as he found the phrases that he needed.

"I say that the behaviour of your own people - your own staff - is undermining obedience to our laws."

Lyon frowned, uncomprehending.

"Be more precise," he said.

"So you do not understand?" Sanger sneered. "Look at him!" He pointed dramatically at Taylor. "He understands. But I will return to that later. For the present, Lyon, I will content myself with asking a question that you should be able to answer. Tell us, if you can, what has happened at Station Twenty-four."

To Taylor it seemed that there was confidence as well as malice in the question. He wondered whether Sanger had some intelligence system, some rapid means of communication of his own. It was clear at least that he hoped to embarrass Lyon.

Lyon answered at once, with no attempt at evasion.

"We have had no recent messages. The radio is out of action."

"So you don't know." Sanger looked round at the delegates, speaking now not to Lyon, but to them. "This is your war leader. He does not know."

"But," Lyon went on, unmoved, "Taylor is here, as you see. He has just come from Station Twenty-four to report to me. Let me share with you the news he brings!"

Attention was focussed now on Taylor, and the crowd opened so that he was able to pass through and take his stand at the table near Lyon. He gave his report without emotion, avoiding any expressions of encouragement that might have led to a belief that the struggle was virtually over and that no more effort was needed. But he left no doubt in his hearers' minds that a victory had been won.

When he had finished he looked at Lyon, hoping to read approval in his expression. It was Taylor's first attempt at influencing a large audience diplomatically. He felt that he had carried out his unexpected task reasonably well; and it was understandable that he should expect his meed of praise. But Lyon's eyes were turned calculatingly on his chief opponent.

Sanger was angry; there could be no doubt of that. It occurred to Taylor that the man's information must have been incomplete. He had counted upon a disaster at Station Twenty-four and a defeat for Harper's force. The news that had just been announced was by no means what he had hoped for.

"With Taylor's report," said Lyon, "I think we may close the meeting. You will have a good deal to think about, and I hope you are more optimistic than when you came here. You will realise that, if the best use is to be made of this advantage that we have gained, I shall now have plenty of work for my staff."

When he had ended his brief speech he turned to Taylor with the quick smile of approval for which the young man had been waiting. The delegates began to file out of the conference room, and Taylor moved closer to Lyon, expecting to receive instructions from him.

But before Lyon had spoken again, Sanger came to the table and leaned upon it.

"Ask him about Nesina." Sanger spoke to Lyon, pointing at Taylor as he did so. A few seconds later Lyon and Taylor were left alone.

Lyon gave a deep sigh. "I'm glad that's over," he said.

"Why did you hold this meeting, sir?" Taylor asked. "It was touch and go."

"Leblanc was doubtful about it too," Lyon said. "It was my idea. I thought it was better to meet them and answer their criticisms than to drive the discontent underground. I don't think any harm's been done. On the contrary, thanks to you, some good has come of it. And at least I know what they're thinking."

"Even what Sanger is thinking, sir?"

"Sanger," said Lyon. "Yes, he interprets pacificism to suit himself. He's certainly an efficient rabble-rouser. The only complete answer to him is success in our operations."

"I noticed that our men are beginning to get on well with the locals," Taylor said. "That, of course, is at a lower level than Sanger works on. But danger does humanise these people. If only they would relax! They need repose and laughter."

"You stick to your theory, Taylor; and I don't say you're wrong. But Sanger might just turn the scale. He's dangerous. What was it he said about you and - what was that name?"

"Nesina," said Taylor, flushing. He told Lyon frankly of his close association with the girl.

"So that's it," Lyon said. He leaned back in his chair and thought the matter over.

Finally he said, "Sanger's trying to hit at us in any way he can. Perhaps he expects me to dismiss you. But I've never liked that marriage law of theirs. In any case, he's stretching the interpretation of the law too far - the letter of the law, that is to say. You're offending against the spirit of it: that can't be denied."

Taylor found that his mouth was dry. "Do you want me to give up seeing Nesina, sir?" he asked.

Lyon shook his head.

"No. Why should I? But there's nothing else I can say or do to help you now." He paused again, and then said briskly, turning to more practical matters. "I'll have Loddon back here. It's time he showed some results. And I'll withdraw Harper's force to Una. You said he had some injured men, didn't you? They'll need attention."

"There's a doctor at Station Thirteen," Taylor said. "They could get treatment there, and Harper might be in a better position, in case the next attack -"

"No. They're to come back here. We may soon have better vehicles for them, and better weapons too. How soon? I can't say exactly," said Lyon, rising to his feet. "But we need to win, and victory depends on the scientists and technicians. I'll drive them harder still."

Taylor went to Lyon's office to make one of his periodical reports.

"Oxygen's down a little more, sir," he said. "Over the last twenty hours -"

"Never mind the figures," said Lyon. "I can feel the result for myself. Go and see how Loddon's doing in his new workshop. Tell him I expected his projector to be in production before this."

"Projector, sir?"

"Yes. He'll know what that means, if you don't."

Taylor knew better than to ask for further details.

"Yes, sir," he said, and went.

Loddon had been allotted a workshop in the basement of the Government laboratory, and Taylor expected to find him there. But his way was barred by a large metal door, like that of a great safe. It was shut, and he could find no means of opening it. In the rest of the basement there was nobody whom he could question. He went to look for Kraft, and found him working in a laboratory on the ground floor. There were a dozen robed assistants in the long, bare room.

"Where's Loddon?" Taylor asked.

"Eh?" said Kraft absent-mindedly. His head was still bent over his desk.

"Loddon," Taylor repeated. "His workshop's locked. Where's he gone?"

At that Kraft rose quickly. He frowned and made a slight gesture of warning.

"I'll try to get hold of him for you," he said.

Taylor remained puzzled, while Kraft shut himself in a 'phone cubicle. When he left it he nodded reassuringly to Taylor and led him from the laboratory.

"Loddon's down there. I spoke to him. He'll open for us."

"But we don't talk about him in front of the laboratory assistant," said Taylor. "Why the secrecy?"

"Necessary," murmured the Chief Scientist. "Lyon's orders."

He plunged clumsily down the stairway, with Taylor close behind him. The great metal door was opening. It swung just wide enough for Loddon to slip through. As soon as he was out he heaved the door shut again. While it was open a discordant hissing could be heard from inside - an angry, bestial sound. This was cut off abruptly by the closing of the door.

Loddon's expression was angry as he emerged. He managed with an effort to grin a welcome to Taylor, but then started at once to grumble.

"Cooped up in a cellar!" he exclaimed. "All because some madman might spoil the work I'm doing to save him among others. It's crazy. It would have been better if I'd stayed out on the reservation."

Kraft said soothingly, "You hadn't the facilities there - the compressors for the cylinders. And when it comes to production, you know the job must be done here. You've made a lot of progress."

Lodden shook his head unhappily. "Well, my progress has stopped now."

Taylor remembered the purpose of his visit.

"Lyon sent me to find how things were going with you," he said to the Chief Engineer. "It doesn't sound encouraging - what you've just said."

Loddon emerged suddenly from his mood of discontent.

"Oh, well, Lyon's got enough to worry him," he said. "Just tell him I've come up against another obstacle. It'll be all right. I'll get round it somehow - in time."

"Time," quoted Taylor, in a fair imitation of Lyon's tone and manner, "is what I can't allow you. But is there anything else you need - anything to speed up results?"

"A few live salamanders," Lodden said. "I want to see what makes them go and what can make them stop. Especially what can make 'em stop."

"Your projector, presumably," suggested Taylor. "Tell me, Chief, what makes *that* go?"

"Never mind his projector," Kraft broke in with affected jealousy. "Come and see the results we're getting with my detector."

He took them to the factory adjoining the laboratory. There he showed them how his detector, in an improved and more sensitive form, was being put into production in large numbers.

"That's a lot more than Harper can ever use," Taylor commented.

"Yes," Kraft said. "The settlements and oxygen plants are to have them too. They'll give fair warning of an emergency."

Kraft had dropped his voice. He looked round the factory workers with the same rather furtive expression that his face had worn when he looked at the laboratory assistants. And he did not speak freely till the three of them were back again in the basement.

"The President's been here himself to spur on the factory staff," Kraft said. "He's certainly doing his best for us. He's seen to it that we have all the facilities they can offer."

"So long," Loddon added, "as we don't ask for new tools and machines."

"Yes," agreed Kraft, "we're handicapped in that way."

"I don't understand," Taylor said.

"It means that my instruments are more primitive than I could wish. The same thing's true of Loddon's weapons. We have to adapt our ideas to existing plant. There isn't time to make new tools."

"No armament factories," Loddon added.

"That," Kraft went on, "was why Leblanc's own suggestion of making old-fashioned firearms fell through. The technique's been lost, and we haven't time to start again from the beginning."

Loddon nodded and sighed. "What's happening along the border?" he asked Taylor. "We never hear anything here."

"The attacks still go on," Taylor said. "There must be intelligence behind them, but it's such a queer intelligence that we can't always outguess it. The oxygen stations that aren't too badly damaged are being repaired. It's uphill work, but it should soon give us better air to breathe. Harper's been out again with his force. He's won some local successes - at a price. Lyon's hoping for better weapons and vehicles. But I needn't tell you that."

"Leblanc's men are working on the vehicles," Kraft told him. "They don't work badly, but there's no drive or inspiration among them. And I don't like the way the scientists are reacting."

"Are they panicking?" Taylor asked.

"I wouldn't say, that, but they seem to have given up hope."

"I thought Lyon's talks were doing good."

"They do, among the ordinary crowd. But they aren't designed to appeal to the intelligentsia."

"The trouble about your intelligentsia," said Loddon, "is that they suspect the salamanders are more intelligent still."

"Intelligence isn't enough, anyway," Kraft said. "These people aren't certain any longer that their beliefs have a good moral basis. They need common sense and humour."

Loddon broke off the conversation. As usual, he soon tired of discussing abstraction.

"That gets us nowhere," he said. "Now I'm going back to my infernal projector."

"Good luck, Chief!" said Taylor.

Loddon shrugged his shoulders, grinned ruefully, and turned away to enter his secret workshop once more. Kraft went back to his own task; and Taylor was left with the uneasy feeling that never since men landed on Bel had the fortunes of humanity reached such a low ebb as now. He was badly in need of reassurance himself as he made his way back to Lyon's headquarters. His need drove him to Nesina's apartment.

At the moment of seeing him she was glad, and he was grateful for the relief that her grace, and something new and gentler in her manner, gave him. But this relief did not last. Soon he grew conscious that some care was weighing heavily on her mind. In a little while she was telling him of it, reluctantly and as though she was ashamed.

"Someone called me a name in the street," she said.

He asked fiercely, "Who was it?"

"I do not know. I could not see. And there have been letters too. I have destroyed them."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. The chief of my department warned me to remember the ban."

"Nesina," he said, "do you want me to keep away from you?"

"Ah, no! I could not bear that."

"I hate to think of you being sneered at and threatened."

"Sometimes I think they are watching me," she said helplessly.

"They could see nothing that would help their plans." He thought hard for a moment. "You've broken no law, have you? And the ban, as they call it, hasn't the same force as the marriage law."

"It is understood," she replied. "It is a rule of behaviour that -"

"That you don't associate with anyone outside your complementary group. That's it, isn't it? But how can they prove you're doing that? Suppose I belonged to the right group?"

She said hopefully, "You could apply for classification."

"If I did, and if it happened that my group was the right one..."

She gave a little laugh of relief at the idea. "You'll try?"

"Perhaps."

"Only perhaps?"

"We have our own rules and standards," he said. "We're against your marriage system. But I'll ask Lyon's advice."

At that she exclaimed in dismay. "But must he know? He is such a stern man. It would make more trouble."

"I've told him already about you and me. He's sympathetic. Please believe that."

"Yes, I am glad," she said with a gentle patience that hurt him. But as he was leaving she said with a sigh, "How will it all end for us?"

He could not answer that question, and he carried it with him. Weary, breathing heavily (the oxygen was scarcer still), he thought of Nesina and himself, and then of mankind on Bel. They were all under attack, beset by enemies. How would it end for them?

## 25

"No," Lyon said instantly in reply to Taylor's suggestion. "I can't let you do that. To ask that you should be graded and brought within the scope of these marriage laws of theirs would be all wrong. It would imply that we agreed with them; and we don't. I know it's hard on you and this girl, but if even one of us gives way on that point it'll weaken our power for bargaining over the business later."

"I see that, sir. But to us it isn't a political matter; it's a human one. Our happiness is at stake."

"Exactly. Your emotions are involved, so you can't see clearly. You'll do as I say, Taylor."

"It doesn't leave much hope for us, sir."

"There's still the point that these people can't convict the girl of breaking the ban, let alone the law, unless they prove you're in the wrong group. That's a thing they could do easily enough with one of their own men, but I don't see how they can in your case. So long as there's a doubt.... Don't you see? It's a weapon that you hold."

"A very weak one, sir."

"It's better than none at all. And I won't forget you, Taylor, if I'm in a better position later on to influence Leblanc and his Government. You've served me well, and I'll do all I can for you."

"I'm very grateful, sir but -"

"There's something we might do immediately," said Lyon.

He called for Manzoni on the telephone. A minute later Manzoni came quickly into the room. He looked tired, and he had lost weight.

"You're having Sanger watched?" Lyon asked him.

"Yes," Manzoni replied. "More than that, my agents are trying to counteract his propaganda."

"With what success?"

Manzoni shrugged his shoulders. "They are succeeding to some extent," he said cautiously. "But morale generally is not good."

"I believe that Sanger is trying to rouse feeling against a friend of Taylor's called - what is her name?"

"Nesina," said Taylor.

"Nesina. Can your agents cover that aspect of Sanger's activities also, Manzoni?"

Manzoni said slowly, "I know what you mean. But I am not happy about this. It is different from the other matter. You must remember that the law of my people -"

"The law is not broken yet."

"Technically that may be so. But still -"

Lyon broke in quickly and persuasively. "Sanger is not harassing this girl because of his respect for the law. It is all part of his plan to create confusion and discontent - to ensure our defeat. Surely you see that?"

Manzoni thought it over.

"Very well," he said at last. "I am wholly with you now. I will do as you ask. Nesina shall be protected. But if things go badly I am lost."

"You're a good fellow, Manzoni." Lyon spoke more warmly than usual. "I'm grateful to you. We'll see to it that things don't go badly. You've given Taylor an incentive now."

Taylor added his thanks, and Manzoni left the two men together.

"And now," Lyon said briskly, "I want a lot of work from you. Forget this amount of yours for a time."

"It isn't that, sir," Taylor protested.

"Whatever it is," said Lyon tolerantly, "it must come second to your duty. Go straight away and see Harper. I have new plans for him. Leblanc's people have produced some smaller vehicles."

"Smaller, sir? But the others are all right, with the modifications that have been made."

"That may be so, but they can't be carried in 'planes. These new one can. Smaller vehicles and a fleet of large 'planes. You'll find 'em drawn up at the airfield."

"A real flying column!" Taylor exclaimed.

"Two columns, or even three. We shall be able to counter-attack anywhere within an hour or so of getting a warning."

"And the striking force goes fresh into action," said Taylor, growing still more enthusiastic. "No more twenty-hour drives for them. This - it's great, sir. It ought to turn the scale."

"It should help, anyway. But we have to make the best use of the new material. Harper must do more training straight away and see that his men learn to drive the new vehicles. They must practise boarding the 'planes with them and getting them out. You know my ideas. Go along now to Harper and help him prepare."

Out at the airfield Taylor found an atmosphere of renewed optimism spreading among Harper's men, and from them to all those who came in contact with them.

Leblanc's designers and engineers had done well, handicapped as they were by the need to use standard parts and engines in order to save time. The new vehicles were just what were needed by Harper and his men. For long drives across country they would have been tiring to the crews and generally unsuitable. But for easy transport by 'plane and for use in action they were as good in every way as the large vehicles that had been used hitherto. Each vehicle carried a crew of two, was well armoured and screened against radio-activity, and was readily manoeuvrable.

Harper surveyed them with satisfaction.

"They'll increase our effectiveness many times over," he said. "All we need now is weapons to match."

"You'll have to manage with what you've got for a bit longer," Taylor told him. "Are these things easy to drive?"

"They have standard controls and a simpler instrument panel. We'd better try one of them ourselves before we set the men to work."

Harper and Taylor drove in turns, testing the vehicle and acquiring the lighter touch that was necessary at the controls. Both of them were good teachers, and soon they had decided what sequence of practice was necessary for the men. They set the crews to work without delay.

The men had been introduced to war under unfavourable conditions, but had done a great deal better than might have been expected. In consequence they were by now aware of their own worth as fighting men. Their minds had been stimulated by their recent experiences, and they were quick to appreciate the advantages that would be given to them by the combination of light vehicles and carrier 'planes.

After some training on the ground the crews tried the more complicated series of actions involved in driving up the lowered ramps of the 'planes, securing their vehicles inside, making short flights, landing and driving down the ramps to the ground.

Pratt showed his usual cheerful efficiency, and, when his test was over, he got out sweating from the little cabin of a vehicle and addressed a number of men in robes who were standing by. They were the men who had driven the vehicles to the airfield, and they had stayed to watch how they were received, and how the men from the reservation succeeded in learning to drive them.

"If you ask me," said Pratt, "I wouldn't like to be a perishin' salamander from nah on. Soon as ever they show 'emselves, they're a-goin' ter be blasted all ter bits. No trouble at all! Fanks a lot, mates."

One or two of the robed men smiled uncertainly.

"Pitty you can't come along an' see 'ow we fix 'em up - them salamanders," Pratt went on. "Won't 'alf be a ter-do, mates."

The smiles broadened.

"You want me to come?" asked one of the robed men.

Pratt showed neither surprise nor hesitation.

"Course I do, cock. We all do. Only you'll 'ave ter ask the boss first."

The robed men had taken Pratt's light-hearted words in earnest. A deputation sought out Harper, who spoke to them for some time, leaving Taylor to control the training which was still going on.

"It's an amazing thing," Harper said when he came back. "Those men are volunteering to come with us all the way. They say they want to fight."

"They're good drivers," said Taylor. "They'd be useful to replace your casualties."

"It was Pratt's doing, apparently."

"I know. He's got a way with him. You'll have to promote him. Are you accepting these men's offer?"

"I want to," Harper said, "but I'll have to ask Lyon first. There's the political question, you see. I'll telephone to Lyon."

Taylor nodded. He was intent on the work now. The problem he was trying to solve was whether a 'plane could make a vertical take-off with a vehicle inside. It would need lashings that were secure, and yet they must be easily released. He was still experimenting when Harper returned.

"Lyon's cleared it with Leblanc," he said.

"You mean you can use those men?"

"As volunteer reinforcements. Yes."

Taylor grunted. He was still preoccupied with his problem. "Can *you* see," he asked, "how to get that take-off without tearing the fuselage wide open? You can land your force anywhere, but it would be useful if you could take off vertically with the vehicles aboard."

"It's not essential, though. Once the action was over the vehicles could be driven to a landing-ground. The 'planes could do their vertical take-off easily enough unloaded, and wait at the landing-ground to use the runway with the vehicles aboard."

"I know that, but you might save hours the other way."

Harper studied the problem for a while, then shook his head.

"We've gone stale," he said. "We'll all take some food and repose, and then try again."

A few hours later they all went back to work. While Harper experimented with mixed crews of his own men and the drivers from Una, Taylor wrestled mentally until he saw how a vehicle might be secured in a 'plane so that stresses during the short period of vertical ascent would be balanced. He translated theory into practice, and, though he was confident of the result, endured a few unpleasant seconds while the 'plane was below the height at which parachutes would have been effective in case of a break-up.

But there was no break-up. The 'plane rose steadily, flew in a level circle, and finally descended as it had risen - vertically.

Taylor was savouring this success when a messenger from the block of buildings said that Captain Lyon wanted to speak to him.

"Is Harper ready yet?" Lyon's voice said over the 'phone.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him to move at once. Activity in front of Station Nineteen."

"Again, sir? They attacked there once before."

"Yes, they're going back for another try. There's no doubt about it."

"Right, sir. I'll get them away. And - may I go too, sir?"

"Not this time. Come straight back here. You understand?"

"Sir."

Within two minutes Harper had selected his men. They numbered fewer than half of those available. Pratt was left in charge of the remainder.

Five minutes after receiving Lyon's orders Taylor was watching the big 'planes, already airborne and heading for the threatened station. The excitement of organising the column soon passed, and it was with a feeling of frustration that he returned to the headquarters office.

There were not many steps to climb on the way to Lyon's office in the Government building, but Taylor had to pause at the top of them with his heart jolting uncomfortably. The oxygen

level must, he thought, have fallen still further. He walked slowly along the bare, brightly lit corridor till he came to Lyon's room.

When he entered he found another man already there, seated with his back to the door and facing Lyon across the big desk.

"Go ahead with production, then," Lyon was saying. The man rose, and Taylor saw that it was Loddon. "No more tests, sir?" the Chief Engineer asked.

"No," Lyon replied. "The last test sounds good enough. We can't expect anything better."

"I know that, sir. But we might get something much worse. There may have been a fluke - some factor we don't understand yet."

"Yes, I know. It means taking a chance. Well, I accept the responsibility; that's my job. You go ahead with the manufacture; that's yours. I'll see you get all the stuff you need from the plants."

Loddon made no further comment. "I'll do my best, sir," he said, and went away to do it.

Lyon addressed Taylor. "You saw Harper get away?"

"Yes, sir."

"He seemed in good heart when he spoke."

"He is, sir; and so are all our men. But what astonished me was the way - those others reacted. They really are stiffening - getting quite primitive, as they call it. You heard about it from Harper, sir, didn't you? How they really want to fight."

"Yes, I heard. I'm not sure that it's so remarkable. The fighting spirit's infectious, and if our men are in such good heart they're quite likely to pass it on."

"I wish I could have gone with Harper," said Taylor. "But even though I couldn't, I feel a lot better for what I saw and heard while I was with him."

"That's as well," said Lyon drily. "It'll help to give you the right perspective, because now that you're back you'll see that all opposition isn't over yet; I mean internal opposition. We're still in a minority, you'll find."

"I was hoping, sir, that the rest of them in Una would begin to feel the same way as those drivers."

"In time they may, but not yet. Manzoni's fine; he's doing a lot. Leblanc's with us too, but he's having plenty of political trouble. His scientists, for instance; they'll work on protective stuff, but most of 'em won't touch anything connected with weapons." Lyon paused. He seldom, whatever he might think, uttered general or abstract reflections. But now he added sombrely, "There's something odd and pitiful about it all, Taylor. Here's the human race - what's left of it - threatened with extinction; and still it's divided against itself. Sanger alone is worth a lot to the salamanders. It's unfortunate that he has so much freedom."

"He ought to be -" Taylor burst out savagely.

"Restrained?" Lyon suggested with a wry smile. "Is that what you were going to say? But your motives are mixed, aren't they?"

Taylor flushed. "I've a private grudge - yes. But apart from that -"

"It wouldn't do." Lyon said. "Whatever you think of these people, you must admit that they've progressed a long way beyond dictatorship. Any suggestion of suppressing Sanger would antagonise Leblanc and all the moderates. Their support's worth a lot."

Taylor was unconvinced. "We seem to be doing a lot more than our share," he objected.

"We could do nothing without the equipment we've been given. Look at the way Harper's just been fitted out. That's far beyond anything we could do."

"We're as good as they are in every way, sir."

"Except," Lyon pointed out, "that we haven't their resources. It would take us thousands of hours to make a single 'plane."

Taylor sighed. "I suppose so."

"You know that's so. And the salamanders won't wait. Their strategy is clever. At one time I could foresee the next move every time. Now - it isn't so easy."

"You mean switching back to Station Nineteen again."

"Not only that," said Lyon. "I just heard of something worse; it happened while you were on the way here. Another of the farm settlements has been burnt out."

"But," Taylor said, puzzled, "we were prepared for that. Until they can all be entrenched some of them are bound to be destroyed. It's bad, of course, but so long as the people get away -"

,"They got away in this case, I gather - most of them. But," Lyon went on grimly, "the point is this. The settlement *was* entrenched. And it wasn't a fireball that did the damage."

"Then how -?"

"Yes, how? The reports aren't clear, but it looks as though a new sort of heat-devil was used - one that can cross a trench."

"Ah!" Taylor's exclamation was a half moan. "All that digging, all that work - wasted."

"No," said Lyon sharply. "It served its purpose for a time. Now we must think of something better."

He went to a cupboard from which he took some protective clothing. As he changed into the heavier overalls he said, "I'm going out to see for myself what happened. It's the only way. Manzoni knows what's happened. You and he will have to run things from here."

"Yes, sir." Taylor tried to speak with cheerfulness, but his throat was dry.

"And don't let yourself get depressed. This is a time to test a man, Taylor. Oxygen down again, Sanger fighting us in the only way he knows, the rest half-hearted, and the salamanders at the gate." He laughed harshly. "You want to know the answer? I'll tell you. Attack. Not digging trenches for protection. Not even counter-attacks. But attack- all out. Carry the war to the salamanders. There's something for you to think about and work on while I'm away. I may be gone for fifty hours."

More than the fifty hours that Lyon had estimated were gone, and still he had not returned. But a radio message said that he was flying back, and the staff at the headquarters office was waiting for him.

Taylor had remained on duty all the time. He was tired, but he felt a sense of exhilaration that was not due merely to the increased proportion of oxygen in the air. He had done a lot of work. Manzoni had helped when he could spare time from the supervision of his secret agents. But the main conception was Taylor's - a full administrative plan for an attack on the largest practicable scale. The strategy would be for Lyon to decide, but the rest of it was ready down to the last detail.

Lyon came in with the vigorous air of a man with much work in front of him. As he washed and changed into clean overalls Taylor could read nothing in his expression. Then Lyon sat at his desk and shot an abrupt question at Taylor.

"Fireballs?" he began. "Have we got them under control yet?"

"Not completely, sir, but they haven't started many fires - just a few that have been localised and put out. The majority of the fireballs have been detonated in the air. We've lost some pilots and 'planes - not many."

"Good!" said Lyon. "Now, I've seen a lot along the border. Some of it I didn't care to tell you about over the radio. The salamanders seem to be working on the same general plan, but there are new developments. The attacks, when they come, are more vicious; the salamanders are moving in closer, and pressing really hard. The new heat-devils make that possible. They can move clear of the ground, up to a height of ten metres."

"That takes them clear of any trenches or parapets that we can make," Taylor said.

"Yes, the excavators can't help us now. Another thing, Taylor, is that the salamanders don't destroy the shugs. I saw them go near a group of big shugs, and it looked as though they were communicating with them in some way."

"They're supposed to be related, of course."

"Yes, though it's hard to see the relationship. Perhaps the salamanders mean to hand over the temperate zone to the shugs when they've exterminated us humans."

Taylor looked at his chief. Lyon was smiling. His last remark could perhaps be taken as a grim joke.

"That's a guess, of course," Lyon continued. "We can't read their thoughts. I wish I could be sure that they can't read ours. There were times when they seemed to anticipate our moves in an uncanny way."

"It's strange you should say that, sir. Manzoni's been worrying on something - the transfer of thought, he calls it. He told me a little about it. But perhaps you'd better hear it from him. He asked if he might see you."

Lyon nodded. "Have you anything more for me?" he asked.

Taylor produced the file in which the administrative plan was neatly set out. He watched his chief study it, and saw his face clear.

"Yes," said Lyon with satisfaction, "this is going to save a lot of time. Thank you for it, Taylor. I'll see Manzoni next."

Manzoni was pacing his office impatiently when Taylor took the message to him.

"Your turn now," said Taylor. "The chief's ready to see you."

"It is my hour!" Manzoni exclaimed dramatically. "I can tell him what I have discovered - what I have done."

Then the man's enthusiasm and confidence seemed to wane.

"But will he approve?" he muttered, as he hastily smoothed his black, curling hair, caught up a sheaf of papers, and left the room. Taylor watched him go with affectionate anxiety. He liked the man and understood something of his problems and conflicting loyalties.

Back in his own office, Taylor studied the routine reports. Things weren't going so badly. More of the damaged oxygen stations had been repaired and were working again. Food stocks were down, however; there had been big losses in the stores of some farm settlements. But the situation was not acute yet so far as supplies were concerned. No new attacks had been reported. According to the rhythm of the salamanders' operations, a lull might now be expected for twenty hours or more. Harper's force was back at its base for reorganisation and repair. Loddon - there was no news of Loddon, and Taylor was about to inquire. Then he had a call from Lyon.

"The President wants to see me, Taylor. You will come with me."

Leblanc strode across the room to greet Lyon warmly. There was a new eagerness in the President's manner - the alertness and certainty of a man who has at last shed all doubts and decided on a course of action.

"Will your defences hold?" he asked at once. And then, before Lyon could reply, "The reason I ask is this: my people are ready at last to make weapons, and even to use them."

Lyon smiled. "I know what that means, Mr. President - all that it implies. You have worked hard for this."

"Yes, yes," said Philippe Leblanc impatiently, "but shall we be in time?"

"The spirit of the people will help, of course."

"You have not answered my question. I asked whether the defences will hold."

"The static defences - the earthworks - are useless now. The salamanders have found ways of piercing them."

Leblanc sighed. "Too late!"

"Please don't judge too hastily, Mr. President. Remember what I said before. The salvation of our people lies in attack. We have made progress too. Thanks to you, we have 'planes and vehicles for quick movement."

"But weapons? It is the weapons that lag behind, is it not?"

"That is so no longer," Lyon replied confidently. "My engineers have made their contribution. We are ready for the test."

"You are ready," Leblanc repeated wanderingly. "I believe you because I know you, and I know that I can rely on what you say. But I could have wished -"

Lyon said quickly, "More weapons will be welcome. They will be invaluable in time to come. But, very fortunately, we are in a position to begin the offensive at once."

"You have learned diplomacy, I see, Captain Lyon. The President went to his desk and motioned Lyon and Taylor to be seated. "Tell me how I and my people are to help," he said.

"My Chief Engineer can work closely with yours," Lyon replied. "We can safely leave the technical details to them."

"Is there nothing else?"

"There are two matters, Mr. President. We are about to fight a hard campaign, and it will help if we have the people as nearly unanimous as possible behind us. That is not quite the case at present, I gather, though you have indicated an enormous change for the better under your leadership."

"There are certainly elements that are not solidly behind us," said Leblanc. "Fortunately they are no longer large."

"But they are influential, are they not? What Manzoni calls the intelligentsia. It would be impossible for me to meet their criticism successfully. But you could do it, Mr. President."

"I will try. But to these people the mention of war is difficult."

"That is understood. To mention my plan of an offensive might rouse their antagonism. But, if I may suggest it, you could point to a certain amount of success. The repair of the damaged stations, the fact that oxygen is up again - those are benefits that can't be denied. Perhaps also the value and common humanity of the men from the reservation could be stressed in a way that would make our relationship easier in time to come."

"Diplomacy again." The President smiled slightly.

"Diplomacy?" said Lyon. "You are speaking to a rough and primitive warrior, Mr. President. I leave diplomacy to others."

"But you indicate in some details the lines that should be taken," Leblanc said. "Very well. I note your instructions."

Taylor looked anxiously at the President, but saw no signs of annoyance in his expression. Lyon was making a final request.

"The other matter," he said, "is Sanger and his influence. I should like to speak to that man myself."

The President hesitated. "Are you sure that will be for the best?"

"I am quite sure, Mr. President. My object, as I have said, is to neutralise opposition here before we carry the war to the salamanders."

"Very well," Leblanc said. "I will arrange it."

Lyon rose to go.

"I shall be interested to hear," Leblanc added. "how you - er - neutralise our friend."

"No doubt" said Sanger, "you feel proud of yourself, Lyon. Your position is stronger than when I saw you last. But do not think you can silence me."

"I have some information to give you," Lyon replied. "That is all."

The meeting of the two men had taken place on neutral ground, in a building not far from the airfield. Sanger had brought a secretary with him, and Taylor, as usual, accompanied Lyon.

Sanger, his long face thinner than before and his eyes deeper sunken, looked suspicious.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Indeed it is. I've been investigating the thought-processes of the salamanders, Sanger. The subject interests me, of course, because I like to know as much as possible of the mind of my enemy. It will interest you too."

"Why should it?"

"Because of your sympathy with the salamanders. Now, Sanger, there is a rather surprising discovery. It is possible for men to exchange ideas with these creatures."

Sanger stifled an exclamation. He recovered himself quickly. "Perhaps you have been conversing with them yourself?" he sneered.

"No. I haven't the necessary gift for doing that. Few men have it. I know for certain only of one." Lyon looked keenly at Sanger. "I thought this would interest you."

"It might, if I knew what you meant."

"Your law-men, the hypnotists, have been somewhat discredited of late, haven't they?" Lyon continued meditatively. "They failed to influence the salamanders, and as a result they lost their grip and their confidence. Most of them probably lost their powers also. No doubt they brooded over their failures. But one of them found that he had another power - the power to exchange ideas with the salamanders. He was *en rapport* with them. Like you, he found himself in sympathy with them. He felt that he had been slighted by people here. And so - I should say that his name is Neumann, and that he has a close friend at the main radio station, through which our messages and my orders passed. And so, Sanger, the salamanders came to know of our intentions. The results were sometimes unfortunate, though I cannot expect you to agree."

"I am not responsible for Neumann."

"In that case you won't be disturbed to hear that his peculiar gift can no longer be used. It is not in his power to do us any further harm."

"You have murdered him!" Sanger shouted.

"Not at all. Not murdered, but doped him. He is drugged, and he will stay drugged until the salamanders are no longer a danger."

"When I announce this," said Sanger furiously, "you will feel the anger of the people."

"You're very welcome to announce it, Sanger. But surely you've noticed a change in public opinion of late. The majority will be grateful for the precaution that's been taken. But don't let me deter you, if you think it's your duty."

Sanger glared at Lyon and turned to go.

"One moment, please," Lyon said. "I promised to give you information. Now I will tell you something of our plans. Look there."

He had gone to the window.

"Your army?" asked Sanger, choking over the phrase.

Harper's men were out there, busy with some vehicles, upon which they were mounting new attachments with long nozzles. It was the first time that Taylor had seen this equipment. In the grey light he could not make out the full details of it, but it looked heavy.

"No," said Lyon. "See there, in the sky."

Looking over his shoulder, Taylor saw that he was pointing up at a small, ghostly crescent. It was the nearest of the three satellites of Bel.

Sanger named it. "Kolos," he said uneasily. "What of it?"

"The plan," said Lyon, "is to use it in the campaign against the salamanders. It circles the hot side, so it can be used for observation, and perhaps even more actively than that. We must look well ahead; the scheme will take time, but I thought it would interest you."

Sanger made no effort to disguise his feelings now. For a few moments he was too disconcerted and angry to speak.

"Your spies!" he cried, turning from the window. "So they told you that -"

"It's a mistake, Sanger, to think that one has a monopoly of spies. Yes, I know your plan. You and your followers were to have occupied Kolos, turned it into a great spaceship, and left the rest of mankind to be consumed by the salamanders here."

"I always said we should leave Bel," Sanger said hoarsely. "I made no secret of that."

"No. Only the means to be used. It was a grandiose scheme, Sanger. I don't know whether it would have succeeded. But you made the mistake of not lodging a claim to Kolos. Now I have forestalled you."

Sanger stood there, struggling for self-control. Finally he was able to speak with dignity.

"There is no more to be said."

"I think not," Lyon replied. He stood squarely against the window and watched Sanger go with his follower. But when he was alone with Taylor he gave an involuntary sigh of relief.

"His claws are drawn," said Lyon. "He's powerless now, and he knows it."

Taylor asked. "How did you find out, sir?"

"I owe it all to Manzoni; but it was better that Sanger shouldn't know that, so I claimed the credit. And so, at last, we're ready for action, Taylor. No more political cares!"

He was preparing to leave in his turn.

"You'd better take a spell off duty now, while you have the chance," he told Taylor. "We'll be moving forward soon."

"All of us, sir?"

"Yes, every man."

Taylor was keen for action. His only doubt, on his way to see Nesina, was how he should break the news to her that he would be leaving. Fortunately he found her in a more carefree mood than ever before.

"They aren't watching me any more," she said joyously. "I'm sure of it. Is that your doing?"

"It's Lyon's," he told her, deciding that it was better not to mention Manzoni.

"But you asked him? You did that for me?"

"I'd do anything for you," he said.

"Can you have the law altered?"

"It might be altered - in time."

"Oh, I knew that was an impossibility. I was only teasing. You looked so solemn. But the law doesn't scare me any more."

"You're defying it? that's brave of you."

"But don't you see," she said, "it doesn't need much courage now? I can feel a change - can't you? People here are thinking more as you think. They are questioning the dogmas. And I'm glad. I feel more free than I ever felt in my life before. That is what you have done for me. See how much I owe to you!"

"Then I'm glad, Nesina. And now I must -"

"You must kiss me and go?"

"You guessed it?"

"Of course. Always you must go to this war of yours. That is your need."

"My duty," he said self-consciously.

"And my need is that you must come back. Until the war is over, and you come back and do not go any more. You have taught me happiness. You have taught me to laugh."

"Now," he said, "you must teach me. I think I was forgetting."

"But you must come back," she said again.

How many women, he thought, had said that to departing fighters! But she sounded confident, and her confidence warmed and steadied him, then and later.

The ground that Lyon had chosen with such care was desolate in the extreme. The soil was poor on the edge of the temperate belt, and a few kilometres away was complete desert. A straggling line of weedy fern-trees and a low ridge running roughly parallel to it were the only

landmarks. A detachment of Harper's small vehicles, flown there in the big transport 'planes, was in position behind the trees, and another just below the crest of the ridge. These two detachments formed the sides of Lyon's trap.

The bait in the trap, was an oxygen station about two kilometres farther back. Its high white walls showed clearly, for they reflected the brighter horizon of the hot side. Overhead the sky was grey, and the horizon behind the station was dark and scattered with stars.

Lyon had other forces under his command. There were light armed 'planes on the landing-ground in rear of the station; and all the heavy tracked vehicles that could be assembled were travelling from Una and would soon arrive. When the trap had closed on the nearest salamanders, the heavy vehicles were to continue the operation.

Lyon's command post was at the rear end of the ridge. From there he had a good view over the ground, and could control his subordinate commanders by radio.

"There's a detector broken, away on Harper's left," Lyon told Taylor. "Take a replacement for it."

No movement had yet been reported on their front, and Taylor went unescorted, driving himself in one of the small vehicles. As he descended the side of the ridge his view was restricted, but he kept his direction and had no difficulty in finding Harper, who showed him where the detector was needed.

For his return journey Taylor swung straight across to the extreme end of the ridge, and then drove back along the slope, checking the positions of the vehicles as he did so. A few men were on duty with the detectors and radio sets but most of the crews were free to relax. Among the resting men Pratt's red head stood out. Taylor stopped his vehicle and hoisted himself through the narrow opening of the cabin.

For the first time he noticed that there were blades of grass struggling for life on that unfertile surface. At some time an attempt must have been made to bind the loose soil by sowing seed there. The experiment had not succeeded, and had been abandoned, but the vestiges of the plants were still perceptible.

They were visible more clearly to anyone stretched at full length on the ground, as Pratt now was. He nibbled a stalk of grass as he held forth to his companions.

"Lovely stuff," he said. "I wish they'd grow more of it 'ere. Remember 'ow it used ter look, back there on Earf, in the spring?"

"Ah!" sighed one of the listeners.

"In the parks," said Pratt, "an' up on 'Ampstead 'Eaf. Lovely it was, up there. 'Course it used ter get bashed abart a bit, of a Bank 'Oliday. Why, I remember one time -"

He saw Taylor standing there, and jumped up to report to him with his usual cheerfulness.

Taylor, continuing on his way back to the command post, was thinking of the green fields of Earth, and of the seed, carried on the long voyage of a spaceship. Where the fields had been, he supposed, there must now be an expanse of slag. And the travelled seed had been planted to take precarious root from which sickly blades grew only to die.

He looked round, and the whole dreary scene repelled him. The brooding greyness of it filled him with foreboding. Lyon's plan had earlier seemed splendidly simple. But was victory to be won as easily as all that?

The period of waiting had ended even before he reached the command post. Messages were coming in showing the reactions of all detectors. The radio operators were busy, and other men were marking on the large chart the points where movement was reported.

Taylor saw at once that these points formed a line that overlapped the edges of the chart. Something was wrong. At first he thought dully that they should have a larger chart. Then, suddenly, his wits cleared. The width of the chart represented three kilometres. That should have been ample; half a kilometre should have covered the salamanders' front. Hitherto they had always moved in tight formations.

Even then he hoped that the markers had mistaken the scale. The thing couldn't be true!

But it was. They were fastening new sheets to the sides of the chart. And Lyon, who had been watching their work, turned away so abruptly that he almost collided with Taylor.

"Ten times the strength they've ever used before," said Lyon. "If it hadn't been for Kraft's detectors we'd have been the trapped instead of the trappers." He spoke rapidly but clearly.

Taylor, looking towards the bright horizon, saw the shimmer of approaching heat-devils. They were going to overlap Lyon's narrow front. The two detachments would be surrounded - stifled.

But Lyon was already at the microphone, giving the orders that might just avert defeat. Harper's crews were in their vehicles now, and moving. They began to race outwards from their previous positions, extending to three - four - five kilometres. It was the only possible move, but the extension was fantastic for a force of such small numbers.

Lyon was calling. "Taylor," he said, "I can't see Manzoni yet, but he's coming up on *that* bearing. I'll speak to him, but I don't want any mistake about this. You're to meet him and lead him round our right flank and then along the salamanders' line. We can't hold them long. Take a man with you - What's that?"

It was the red glow of a fireball rising from far across the plain. The ground that had lately been so dead was now a battlefield. Harper's men with their tubes and blast-guns were coming into action, fighting against desperate odds all along the front. That was the last glimpse that Taylor had as he slammed the heavy door of his cabin and drove at full speed to the rear. He felt a quick spasm of shame; this was like being a deserter, fleeing from the field. Then he remembered his orders and concentrated on carrying them out.

Manzoni, he knew, had expected to be held for some time in reserve with the heavy vehicles that he commanded. But by now he would have received Lyon's message, telling him of the improvised change from ambush to defence. And Manzoni was a quick thinker.

Taylor had covered four kilometres in as many minutes. Still he could see nothing of the reserve column. He checked the bearing. It was correct. Another kilometre and still there was no sign. He wondered whether to turn right or left. Then his gunner, perched higher than Taylor in the cabin, and using another observation panel, shouted something.

A moment later the head of Manzoni's column was in sight. Taylor wheeled through half a complete turn till he was leading the long file of vehicles. He shouted to his gunner, "Are they following?"

"Yes, sir."

Taylor drove back towards the ridge. As he neared it he saw that Harper had been driven back till his general line was not far in front of where the command post had been. Of Lyon

and his staff there was now no sign. They must have joined in the fight, but Taylor could not identify their vehicles. He had the impression that many of Harper's vehicles were now motionless, burnt out. Then he had to decide what course to steer.

He was near the end of his strength; the cabin was stifling hot; sweat was streaming down his face; and he was deafened by the roar of his overdriven engine and clattering tracks. But he thought he saw the flank that he was looking for, and he swept round it.

Now he was in advance of the foremost vehicle of Harper's line. He had not yet seen a salamander, but there could be no doubt about the heat-devils; there seemed to be hundreds of them. He had brought Manzoni's column to the right point. Now he was free to take part in the action.

He saw, or thought he saw, a salamander; and the gunner had used the long blast-tube once without effect, when a bright flash lit up the whole battlefield and a thunderous explosion made the ground shake.

"Got the fireballs," the gunner shouted down. "It was one of our 'planes. I saw it."

A heat-devil loomed up in front, with a gap of unheated air between it and the ground. Taylor tried to alter his course. For a moment he hoped the thing would pass overhead. But as the heat seemed to strike down at him from above, his vehicle swung violently to the left. A track had broken. The other track revolved wildly, digging deeply into the ground. He reacted swiftly, by switching off the engine, but the vehicle was now tilted at a dangerous angle.

And a salamander was gliding towards him. The gunner struggled to depress the blast-gun, but he could not bring it to bear.

One of Manzoni's vehicles roared towards the salamander. Taylor remembered that the heavier vehicles had all been fitted with the bulky equipment needed for Loddon's new weapon, the projector. He looked, powerless himself, to see it used.

A jet shot out from a long, thin nozzle, and the stream of liquid gas played over the salamander, striking it motionless. For a moment the haze that enveloped the thing cleared. A cindery skeleton jerked convulsively. Then it was gone, frozen to nothingness.

The gunner yelled again, and began to scramble down from his place. Probably his movement disturbed the balance of the tilted vehicle. Taylor felt it turning over. Heavy instruments, torn from their seatings, were falling around him. Instinctively his arms went up to protect his head. The sound of Manzoni's column, roaring past him to the attack, was loud in his ears as he dived into black unconsciousness.

He swung out of the dark into a light that hurt his eyes. Someone exclaimed. Then the bright lamp was switched off, leaving only a softly shaded one glowing beside the couch on which he lay. He was in a small hospital ward, and Nesina was there beside him.

"I came back," he muttered.

She answered quite gaily, "Yes, you came back, as I said you would. Back from the war."

Remembrance of the battle came crowding back to him. He struggled to sit up, and discovered that his head was bandaged.

"I must get back," he said.

"There's no need. The war is won."

"Lyon - he'll need me, out there."

"He can do without you. Your skull was cracked. And Lyon is back here in Una."

"I must see him," he said obstinately.

"You shall, only you must lie still. The nurse has gone to call his office. He said he was to be told as soon as you were fit to speak. He's coming to see you."

"Ah," he sighed with relief.

"Now tell me how you really feel," she said.

They spoke quietly until Lyon came into the ward. Taylor looked anxiously at his chief, and Lyon looked back reassuringly at him as he sat down beside the couch.

"He wanted to get back into the battle," Nesina said.

"How much have you told him?" Lyon asked her.

"I left it all to you."

Lyon leaned towards Taylor. "You'll want to know what happened. You've been out - unconscious - for less than a hundred hours. That's not long -"

"It was far too long for me," Nesina interposed.

"But a great deal has happened. We broke up the fireballs -"

"I knew that," Taylor said. "It was nearly the last thing I remember seeing."

"We broke up the heat-devils too. Loddon's projector made short work of them. Then the salamanders gave way and retreated, and we were in the position we'd planned originally. We

chased the salamanders back into their own territory. Loddon's projectors were splendid, and Kraft's detector helped. But it was Manzoni's triumph. He located another army of salamanders: he found they had buildings or fortifications of sorts. He scattered that army too. And still he went on, hunting them down. The heat was unendurable at last, and he had to turn back. But we know the salamanders won't attack again, so long as we give them no chance to recover."

"Then it's all over?" Taylor asked.

"That phase is over, at least. The problem now is simple. We have to exterminate them. It'll be a long job, and we need better insulation for 'planes and vehicles. But that's being taken care of."

"And the Kolos project?"

"That may not be necessary now. It's for Harper to decide. He's in charge of the whole operation."

"I'm glad he came through," said Taylor.

"Yes, he wasn't touched. Your friend Pratt's back with his family. We lost a lot of vehicles, but not many men."

"It might have been worse."

"Yes. It's hard to believe now how bad things were. The crisis is over. The worst of the war is over. They're working on the oxygen plants, and getting the farm settlements going again."

Nesina caught Lyon's eye. "He's getting tired," she said protectively.

"But he can stand hearing some good news," Lyon replied.

"I feel all right," Taylor protested.

"You'll feel better still when you've heard the rest. I've been fighting more battles - political ones this time. Everyone was amazingly grateful when the news was released that the salamanders were routed. But people have short memories; the opportunity had to be seized quickly.

"We've won equality, Taylor. These people - Nesina's people realise that we have our uses."

"I knew your qualities," she said.

"You had a good sample to study." Lyon grinned at Taylor. "You were the first convert, Nesina. Now things are easier. There's an atmosphere of liberality. You see smiles, now and then. Remember your theory, Taylor? And so, through Leblanc, I've managed to get a few other concessions. One of them affects you - your romance."

"Is it -?" began Nesina. She could not finish the question.

"Yes, they're reconsidering the marriage law. I don't think you need worry about it any more. That was just one item in the bargaining. Oh, and Manzoni's to have a better appointment. He deserves it."

Lyon paused, realising that Nesina and Taylor were no longer listening. Simultaneously they had sighed, and now they were looking into each other's eyes, unconscious of all else.

"Time I went," Lyon murmured.

The movement he made in rising broke the spell. Taylor blinked and stared up at the stalwart figure of his chief.

"Sanger?" exclaimed Taylor. "I forgot to ask about him."

"It's all arranged, quite painlessly. There's not room for him and his fellow-malcontents on Bel. So Leblanc is speeding their departure. I think they'll be given the use of Kolos, if they want to turn it into a super spaceship."

"Poor devils!" said Taylor.

"I don't know." Lyon stared out of the window. "Think of it - a navigable world! Think of the adventure! I envy Sanger."

He recalled himself, to smile down on the lovers.

"But you, of course, are starting an adventure of your own, together. What do you care for Kolos?"

**THE END**