

A Short Story

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TINY WINDOWS

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What value has a promise when you make
it to the Father of Evil? To slay him, I
could promise anything—and still be free
of sin. Indeed, his death would make me holier.

My leg itched. The knitting fracture beneath the cast was letting me know in no uncertain terms that a simple fracture is simple in name only. There is nothing like a nagging, unscratchable itch. It doesn't really hurt, but after awhile it can become unadulterated torture,—and all you can do is grin and bear it. Ultimately you stop grinning.

To make matters worse, I had Wolverton for company. Zard knows, I despised the man enough before I saw him and contact had only served to change my dislike to active loathing.

He sat across from me, draped bonelessly in the contoured comfort of a Varkhide chair fashioned for him by one of his Halsite retainers—a tall, angular man of indeterminate age, sandy-haired, lean-cheeked, beak-nosed, with piercing yellow eyes that flashed golden under tufted brows. His face was leathery and hatched with innumerable fine wrinkles, but his eyes and voice were young.

To give the devil his due, he had a wonderful voice—cajoling, persuasive, domineering and demanding. He could use it with all the skill and passionate conviction of a Bearer of the Word. His tongue was a weapon—a club and a rapier—and I had been pounded and pierced with it for nearly two weeks. I hated it, but I had to listen for I was literally a captive audience.

"As I was saying last time," Wolverton continued, "rabbits have nothing on the human race. Given a halfway favorable opportunity and sufficient time, humanity can make a planet look like the Australian bush. Men don't understand it until it's too late—and then, stifled by their own swarm, they either degenerate or strike out to find a new world where a man can breathe. Always they go in pairs—male and female—and pretty soon another world becomes another rabbit warren."

"What's a rabbit?" I asked.

Wolverton looked at me and laughed. "It's obvious you've never been on the Inner Worlds, have you?"

I shook my head. "I am an Adept," I said. "I am satisfied here in Promised Land."

"Thought so. You wouldn't be asking about rabbits if you had. The early colonists took them along as food animals,—and it's touch and go whether men or rabbits are the dominant species on some planets."

He didn't explain any further, but I got the general idea.

"But that isn't the point," Wolverton went on, his voice mellow and persuasive. "Rabbits maintain a fairly balanced ecology because they're more subject to natural forces which we humans ignore or circumvent. We change environment to meet our needs—and in those rare instances where environment changes us, we adapt to it and change ourselves. Take Samar for example, normally a human being is monogamous either by nature or by law—but what happens when women outnumber men?"

I stiffened. I had heard of Samar from traders and from the Word itself. "Samar," I said, "is a disgrace—a sink of iniquity—a foul blot upon the face —"

"Oh stop it," he said wearily. "You can't blame environmental forces. Nor can you blame men for adapting to them. Sure, you can point with holy horror at Samarian social customs, but even so, they aren't as bad as your ancestors'. They don't murder excess girls."

"They should," I retorted brutally. "The old days were harsh, but they were necessary. One man must cleave to one mate. The Word demands it. Polygamy must be stamped out at the source if Faith is to survive."

"But it did no good population-wise," Wolverton said. "You're now exceeding safe growth limits for your territories. That's why you want mine."

"Lies," I muttered.

"Not at all. And you know it. Your people already want my land. Soon you will need it. And in a few centuries, you won't be able to exist without it!" His voice was flat with certainty.

"Lies," I said, but my voice wasn't as certain as his. I had seen the crowding in the towns and fields of Promised Land, and we did need Wolverton's

Holding to absorb good farmers who had no land to farm. Wolverton was right about that. We had lived up our naturally tillable acreage and reclamation projects were slow to provide needed soil. Deviants were already appearing who defied the Word by advocating birth control. Yet the Word said, "Be fruitful and replenish the land."

"Back in the Dark Ages on a planet known as Earth," Wolverton went on inexorably, "a man named Malthus predicted our birth rate would fight a losing battle with famine. So far we have managed to avoid it by laws, by finding new frontiers, and by improving food technology. But laws and technology can only retard the growth, and frontiers are getting even harder to find. Time is catching up with us."

"I don't see—", I said. Wolverton looked at me grimly. "I know you don't," he said. "I haven't made the slightest impression."

"You've made an impression, all right," I assured him with equal grimness.

He shrugged. "There are all kinds of impressions," he commented wryly, "and not all of them are good."

"Yours has not been," I said boldly. "I place my trust in Zard, not in the voice of Evil."

"That blank, sanctimonious stare!" he said acidly. "You Worders—gah! You're so filled with catechism and cant that you won't see a fact if it hits you in the face. Of all the possibilities on this benighted planet, the one with all the proper qualities turns out to be mentally defective." He glared at me. "I don't know why I waste my time. Ordinarily I'd condition you and let it go at that."

"But you won't," I said confidently.

He winced and I smiled. It wasn't often that I won an advantage over him, and the taste of it was sweet in my mouth.

"The power of Faith," I said sententiously, "is the greatest force in the universe. It even restrains you."

He looked at me with the pitying contempt an adult has for a not-too-bright child. "What you need is an education," he said slowly. "You've never had a chance."

I groaned inwardly. Always he tried to shake my faith—but he had failed before and would fail again for my course was unalterably clear. "Avoid the smooth tongue of Evil lest ye lose your immortal soul. For the Evil will come to judgment—and the tortures of Hell are everlasting." So said Zard in the days of his Teaching—and so we all believed. The Word of Zard was more than a symbol. It was a way of life, and Promised Land had bloomed and flowered under it.

Admittedly I was ignorant of the heathenish jargon Wolverton advanced. I knew nothing of nucleonics, spaceways, genetic factors, chromosome patterns, economies or sociology. Nor did I care. Our people had known it once but they had passed it by as childish—as men put aside the games of children. For us there was the Word. For did not Zard write in letters of fire upon the riven rock, "Be steadfast in thy faith. Fix thine eyes upon the joys of heaven and abjure Evil. For the Faithful Man is a bright beam in the Almighty's eye and naught shall harm him who walks the fourfold path of Righteousness." Zard's words were comfort. Wolverton's were pain. I was thrice thankful I had learned the Word. It was so much a part of me that not even Wolverton could shake my belief. I was strong—in faith and in will. For I was an Adept—next only to a Bearer of the Word.

Wolverton with his machines could contain my powers—but that was all. He could not capture my soul. And that was what he wanted. My body was useless to him. He had many bodies of flesh and metal to serve him, but none had my powers to seek into the hearts of men, to know their inmost thoughts, to bring things to me by the power Zard had given. To kill, if need be.

It was because of my powers that I was here, nursing a broken leg, helpless in the house of the Father of Evil, a prisoner of a primitive idol worshipper who exalted his machines above the Word.

Wolverton eyed me speculatively. "If you would get the idea through your thick head that you are eventually going to join me—that you are not going to leave here until you do—that you are going to see things as they really are and not as you wish they were—we'd both have an easier time and I wouldn't be forced to keep a Halsite watching you, or waste power blanketing this place with ultra frequencies. But if I have to take ten years to pick the scales off your eyes one by one, I'll still do it and count it time well spent. You see, you are unique. There's no one quite like you anywhere in the known Universe—and what's more, you are necessary."

I laughed at him and rejoiced in the black anger which came to his face. Then the lines smoothed and the hard glitter vanished from his golden eyes—and again I was afraid. Not for myself, but for my soul.

"Well, let's try again," Wolverton said with forced cheerfulness.

I tried to find his true meaning—but he was blank—a smooth, cold-hard surface which I could not penetrate. Not like the others. They were soft and fuzzy. Their pictures were not clear—distorted—wavering—unreal, but that was due to Wolverton's machines. I could not communicate with them, but I couldn't even reach Wolverton. And as usual, my failure increased my determination. He was inhuman, a soulless monster, blacker than the Pit of Night. The Bearers were right. Promised Land would never be safe until we were finally rid of him. Wolverton must die.

But Wolverton was not dead. He survived and prospered. His Halsite mercenaries guarded his island Holding—and the broad reaches of his lands, innocent of the plow, were as lush and untamed as they had been in the days of the first-comers.

The followers of the Word could gain no foothold on his lands—for behind Wolverton was the might of his machines, which men could neither influence nor withstand. Wolverton's ancestor had found this world, and therefore the Holding was his—half a million square miles of island kingdom that cried in darkness for the Word. The fierce Halsites Wolverton employed and the hidden telltales scattered through his lands inevitably found trespassers and most of these were promptly and urgently returned to Promised Land. But not all. Adepts who tried to kill him never returned.

It was infuriating. It was a disgrace to our world. It was intolerable. And so it was that I had volunteered to kill Wolverton with an ancient weapon of horrid power, and in the bright cleansing flame of the explosion purge our world forever of the face of Evil.

But Evil, it seemed, was not defenseless. High as I was—I was seen from below and a flaming lance of power reached up from the forest to touch me,—and I fell. In shameful cowardice I dropped the Weapon without setting the detonator.

Hurling down to certain death, I berated myself and swore a mighty oath on Zard's bones never again to give way to weakness of the flesh if I were permitted to survive. For it was borne upon me as I fell toward the rocky

ground below that I had never really expected to die despite my proud boasts of sacrifice.

And Zard heard my prayer and was merciful—yet tempered his mercy with a stern reminder of his power. For although I recovered enough control to break the force of my descent, I did not escape completely. I did not die on the cruel rocks, but as punishment for my sins of pride and cowardice, my right leg was snapped between ankle and knee—a reminder that while Zard was merciful, he was also just and meted out punishment when it was deserved.

A Halsite found me an hour later—faint and weak with pain and shock. I could not reach him as he advanced upon me warily. But his fierce crest flattened back upon his head when he saw my helplessness and his yellow fangs bared in a travesty of a human grin as he came forward with gliding steps, lifted me in his huge arms, and ran with catlike leaps down the mountainside. My weight was nothing to him, nor was the pain of my broken leg. At the third dizzy leap and jarring landing, I fainted and knew no more until I opened my eyes and saw Wolverton.

I was lying on a couch in a small inner courtyard. Around me towered his fabulous stronghold—a mighty pile of metal and stone anchored to the top of a hill, bristling with structures of metal and weird spiderwork fabrications that rotated endlessly on gimbals. My head was filled with buzzings and dizzy pinwheels of color as he bent over me and examined my torn and dirty sacramental robe. "Hmm—an Adept," he said—"Wonder what you're adept at?" He chuckled. "You're lucky that my boy obeyed orders and brought you in. You had no business over my land. And judging from that bomb you were towing, you were loaded for bear."

I looked at him curiously. "What's a bear?" I asked.

"It's a—" he stopped abruptly and scowled. "You're pulling my leg," he accused.

"I am not!" I said firmly. "I haven't touched your leg, although you have broken mine."

He winced. "I asked for that," he said. "I mean, you were carrying an Atomic."

I nodded. "I was," I said calmly, "and if it hadn't been for that Halsite—"

"You wouldn't have done anything except destroy yourself," he interrupted. "This place is shielded like a Base Fortress. But I didn't want you dead," he chuckled. "You're more useful alive."

I choked back a gasp of pain.

He noticed it. "Well," he said, "let's have a look at you." He gestured at the Halsite. The humanoid produced a long knife, and slit through my tight underdrawers, exposing my leg from ankle to thigh. The shame of it was almost more than I could bear. Wolverton looked, whistled through his teeth, and turned to the Halsite.

"Fetch doctor," he said.

The humanoid grinned, flapped his ears in acknowledgment, and disappeared into the dark interior of the pile with a catlike bound.

And presently he came back with the doctor. She was an apostate, the barred, tattooed circle of the Faith still visible on her right wrist—a natural blonde—big-boned and graceful—carrying a small medikit. She set it down, opened it, took out a fluoroprobe and examined my leg, ignoring my ritual gesture of abomination.

Her diagnosis was swift and impersonal. "Transverse fracture of the tibia and fibula," she said. "No complications. Probably it will be difficult to set since the leg muscles are so well developed, but it should heal within two weeks under stimuray."

I was embarrassed. To be examined by a female, and an apostate at that, was bad enough, but to hear the diagnosis spoken so plainly was unbearable.

I retched violently—and it wasn't entirely a ritual spasm.

Wolverton chuckled as he turned to the doctor. "This one's a real hardshell," he said. "Better check for psi potential when you get back to the infirmary—we don't want to get caught with our pants down like we did last time." He laughed—a high-pitched cackle that grated on my nerves and turned to face me. "Don't worry," he went on. "You will get used to doc. You'll have to. She's the only medic we have."

The doctor looked at me with complete distaste.

"Do your worst," I said bitterly. "After your unclean hands have touched me, I can stand anything."

"I'll do my best—even for you!" the doctor said. She looked into my eyes until her own slid aside from the force of my superior will. "You probably can stand anything—and possibly even more," she admitted grudgingly. She gestured to the Halsite who picked me up as though I were a child and carried me into the building down corridors, past courtyards and fountains to a small white room where he laid me on a table and held me while the doctor set my leg—ignoring my flinching revulsion to her touch.

So that was how I came to be seated in a wheelchair with a Halsite at my back, listening to Wolverton's voice—the Voice of Evil. The Halsite who attended me scratched idly at an insect bite on one massive arm and eyed me speculatively. But I had seen quite a few Halsites these past two weeks and so I didn't feel particularly disturbed. My itching leg occupied most of my attention.

Wolverton looked at me, sighed and shrugged his lean shoulders. "I wonder if you're worth it," he speculated audibly. "Possibly it'd be better to wait until you've married and try again with your children." He rose to his feet. "But I can't take the chance," he said. "Already it's getting too late—in another generation there might be no opportunity to salvage the race. Can't work with material like your society. There has to be some balance—and the old civilizations are going downhill. There just doesn't seem to be anything now but nut cults and decadence. There's no middle ground except for a few places—and those are damn near Maximum Survival Density." He capitalized the last three words verbally.

I don't think he was really conscious of my presence at the moment, which was oddly annoying. For an instant he was miles away in a world of his own—a world which I did not understand. And for an equally brief instant I wished I could.

He walked out—leaving me alone with the Halsite.

"Take me outside," I said.

"Boss say no."

"Boss didn't say no—he just told you to watch me. You can watch me just as well outside as in here."

"Boss say keep you in house," the Halsite repeated, grinning cheerfully as he talked, exposing his long, yellow canines.

"Are you afraid of me?" I asked with mild incredulity.

"E'Komo afraid of no man," the Halsite said. "Men weak—poor hunters—poor fighters—but Boss say inside." His mouth closed like a trap and he looked sullen.

"You are afraid," I said, putting as much contempt into the words as I dared. "Afraid."

"E'Komo not afraid of any human."

"Of the Boss?" I asked insinuatingly.

"Even Boss—but he my chief. I put my hands in his and gave promise to be his man. Halsite no break word."

"Oh, well," I said, "you'll never convince me with all your talk that you're not afraid of Wolverton." I looked up at his broad, brutal face. He wasn't smart—and he was proud. For the past two weeks I had been feeling him out while my leg was rapidly mending under the doctor's expert care. I despised her, but she knew far more of medicine than did our best. At home, it would be a month away before I would be able to walk, but here I was almost well again. But it would do me no good as long as I was inside the house. Outside, the electronic field that blanked my strength might be weaker—and maybe if I could get far enough away I could escape. If I could once get away from Wolverton's influence he'd never catch me. I could return and tell the Bearers—

Just what could I tell them? The thought jerked my plans for escape to a dead halt.

What had I learned about our enemy? What were his weaknesses? How could he be attacked and destroyed? Sure, I knew his strength—but other ones than I had learned of that. And here I was in the very heart of Evil's power and I had learned exactly nothing that would help the Word prevail.

I could have kicked myself for being so stupid—for not leading Wolverton on. Surely Zard must think me a weak reed—a coward—or at best a fool. One cannot fight Evil by ignoring it. The Word came to me, "Smite Evil hip

and thigh. Fight fire with fire—oppose craft to craft—strike down the evil doer with his own spear that the Word may triumph. For in my Kingdom honor waits for those who spread the Word—that the light of the spirit may be passed to other minds and the heathen rescued from the Pit." What a fool I was to apply the "Canticles of the Young" to Wolverton. It should have been the "Missionary Creed." Against Wolverton, passive resistance could not win. It would take a sharp mind and resolute spirit to combat him. And it was time I displayed both.

Immersed in my thoughts I did not at first realize where the Halsite was taking me until a brilliant blaze of light struck my eyes. We were outside and the big fellow was pushing me rapidly down a smooth walk between rows of flowering shrubs.

"See—not afraid," he said as he came to a branch in the walk. "I take you outside. Now we go back."

I felt for him and he was all there—and with calculated force I struck! He crumpled, eyes rolling in their sockets, powerless to harm me as I stepped from the chair, limping a little from the weight of the brace on my leg. I looked down at the helpless Halsite for a long second, assimilating what I learned from him, and then I went over the fence and into the darkness of the forest beyond the grounds.

As the trees closed behind me I had a panicky feeling to fly and keep on flying until I was back home with my fellow Adepts in the cloister behind the great cathedral in Hosanna. I longed for the quiet and the comforting touches of my friends. Here I was alone in a savage land with the Father of Evil. The thought unnerved me. I was not used to Evil, and my cloistered days of study and practice as I mastered an Adept's powers were poor experience to pit against such a one as Wolverton. And then I remembered my vow to Zard, and the Missionary Creed, and I knew I must go back and fight him on his own ground. I must appear weak and inept until I could find an opening through which to strike. Yet I must not appear too easy. Wolverton must be allowed to recapture me, but I must make an obvious effort to escape. A pure cleansing wave flowed through me and my spirit was eased and my soul comforted. Zard was with me, and I felt no fear. He was pointing out my course—the only one I could possibly take. Slowly I turned and moved deeper into the forest, using my Adept's powers to confuse the trail.

Wolverton found me as I knew he would. I was aware of him even before he saw me. It surprised me that he had located me so quickly—but that was the only unusual thing about it. His air-boat came slanting down toward my hiding place, but I did not move. He stepped out and came toward me, but I did not fly though every muscle in my body screamed for flight. When he was close enough I reached for him, but my grip slipped harmlessly away. Still, this did not surprise me for I had not been able to touch him before—and was he not the Father of Evil? But when the glinting metal flashed violet in his hand and the stunning shock locked my muscles in rigid paralysis—I was afraid—but then it was too late—

I was again lying upon the narrow white table while the doctor massaged my stiff body. Slowly a feeling that was agony came back to my numbed body and I stirred weakly. "Fool," the doctor said. "Did you think to escape from him?" There was bitter acid in her voice, mixed with an odd note of admiration. "You had courage to try but you should have known you wouldn't succeed."

"I nearly did," I said, "and I would have if he had been slower to pursue. In the dark I could have avoided him."

"He would have found you though it had been as dark as the bottom of the Pit."

"I would have been gone."

She laughed. "You do not know him."

"I know he is the Father of Evil," I said.

"You are wrong—he is not that—he is merely different—older—wiser—but not evil."

It was my turn to laugh, and I did although it hurt my throat and made my chest ache. "It is you who are the fool," I said.

She shrugged. "It may be," she agreed, "but you will learn that Wolverton is master here, and what he wants he keeps. Nor will you escape again."

"Why not?"

"Try," she said, "He has turned the field off."

I tried—and panic flooded me! I did not move—nor could I feel the slightest trace of the doctor although I tried to reach her with all my strength. Then I screamed! And my screams were echoed by her laughter.

The spasm died quickly enough—for I am not a coward. It is the unknown which is frightening—the feeling of helplessness in the face of powers greater than one's own. But then I realized I had chosen this course—that it was not forced upon me, and that Zard was guiding my faltering steps.

"You are lying," I said with forced calmness. "The field is still on."

She looked at me with pitying contempt, rose quietly into the air and floated over my head! "So it's on, is it?" she asked.

My mouth dropped open in a gape of unmannerly surprise. "You're an Adept!" I gasped.

"I was. Now I'm a doctor."

"But why?—why haven't you reported back to Hosanna? You are free. What keeps you here?"

"I do not wish to leave," the doctor said calmly.

"You're conditioned!"

"You could call it that," she agreed. "I prefer to think I have learned some sense, that I have forgotten the silly superstitions of my childhood when I came here to kill. Ten years ago I was like you, but now—"

"Now," I said bitterly, "you are a minion of Evil."

The doctor's laugh was merry and unforced. "Every year they get worse!" she chuckled. "I see what Wolverton means when he says there's no hope for this world." She floated quietly back to the floor.

I felt crushed and angry at the same time. Who was she to laugh at the Word? Once again I tried to rise. With all my strength I tried, but again I didn't move. There was something warm encircling my neck. I raised a hand to it and touched smooth metal—a close fitting ring about my throat.

"Yes," the doctor said, answering my unspoken question. "That is what restrains you. And it will stay on until he removes it. Nothing can cut that ring." She smiled ruefully. "I wore one once—for nearly five years—"

She kept on talking, something about taking time for the electronics section to develop a wave form that would cancel my powers—which was why I had lived under the field—and why I had a chance to try to escape, but I didn't really hear her. I hadn't figured on this development. It shocked me into utter numbness.

It was two days later before I could rise. The braces were gone from my leg and I was whole again. Whole, but helpless.

Unmolested, I walked through Wolverton's stronghold. I passed the Halsite whom I had struck down. He looked at me and grinned. There was no malice in him.

"You fool me," he said cheerfully. "I not very smart—but next time you try I run you down—bring you back. You no do that thing twice."

"If you can catch me," I answered.

"I catch, all right. You wear ring now. You no get away."

I sighed. He was right.

Later that day I saw Leslie—the Adept who tried to reach Wolverton last year. I waved to him, but he did not notice me. He was reading a book, and the glass wall that separated us prevented me from speaking to him. A silver ring gleamed around his neck—he too was a prisoner, and from the looks of it he, too, was learning forbidden things. I wondered at the unholy spell of Wolverton. What was the devilish power he had over the minds of men that made even an Adept ignore Zard's teachings? There was a tense earnestness to Leslie's bent figure, a driving air of concentration he had never shown when learning the writings of Zard. He was absorbed—fascinated—and looking at him I again felt the icy hand of terror grip my mind.

I shrugged it off. So far there had been no invasion of my thoughts. My beliefs were still mine, and although my body was trapped, my spirit was free. And if I could not reach him with my mind, there was always a weapon to rely upon—something that would fit my hand—something blunt to smash—something sharp to drive through skin and flesh into his blackened heart.

But despite my freedom I was watched by seen and unseen eyes. No weapon I could find remained long in my hand. It was the ultimate frustration. And finally I gave it up. I would have to mark the location of weapons and bide

my time until Wolverton was close enough to one which I could seize and slay him before his minions could prevent me. Slowly I learned cunning—to dissemble—to hide my intent—to wait.

And while I waited Wolverton talked to me, and I listened, fascinated by the evil of the man. For not only did he mock the Word, he despised It, calling It a superstition-tainted mass of primitive Mumbo Jumbo—whatever that might be. But except for this flouting of the Word, Wolverton was not so evil as I thought. There was a gentleness about him that was strange. My own people had little of this. After all, Promised Land was not an easy world to tame, and our rise to greatness had been the product of unending struggle against an unfriendly if not inimical environment. But in the end, the Word and those who believed in It, were triumphant. Did we not tame and rule three-quarters of this world? Were we not the Chosen? Often I had to go back to basics after a talk with Wolverton. He disarmed me with his friendly voice and with his logic. It was getting harder to resist him—and I understood now how the others had fallen. Wolverton, if he tried, could charm the birds from the trees, make black look white, evil virtuous, and righteousness unrighteous. He was truly a terrible man and I looked forward to his daily visits with mingled dread and anticipation. There was something toward which he was leading me and I dreaded the revelation even while I enjoyed the trip.

We—or rather Wolverton—talked of philosophy—of science—of history—of distant worlds which he had visited with such disarming charm that I learned despite my obstinacy. Soon I began to know them—Earth—green Earth, the home-world of the race with her impossible blue skies and seas, gray clouds, white snows, fierce arid deserts, tall mountains and greenly verdant valleys. From her vast forests to her broad plains and great cities, Earth was a thing of loveliness. I could feel Wolverton's passion when he spoke of it—nor was I surprised when he at last confessed that he was born there.

And I learned of Mars—rust red and rugged—harsh and cold—where men lived under domes and husbanded the scanty air and water with miser's care.

And Proxima—first star colony of Earth—a gentle world of soft pastels and grays—a barren world which men reclaimed and made beautiful, drawing from their skill and science to mold the primitive life forms into things of beauty and utility.

And golden Fanar—ripe and lovely with its humanoids and developing civilization that blossomed to full flower when men came and lent their skills and science to their cousins.

And Kungtze—delicate fairyland of violet skies and soft rounded hills like virgin bosoms waiting to be kissed.

And Samar—not the Samar I knew, but a land of seas and islands, tall ships and gracious living.

And Halsey—harsh—forested and forbidding—a world that distrusted and did not welcome man—a world peopled by savage humanoids who united only in the face of danger.

And more—many more.

I learned of them all in the days of their youth—together with the struggles and pain that went into their taming. Wolverton's words were wings that sent my spirit soaring. His tales—filled with courage and adventure, of blood and treachery, of honor and fair dealing, made me proud of my race. We were not perfect, we men—but there was within us the seed of greatness that would perhaps flower into the true bloom. It made me proud to learn the past glories of our race. Almost I could feel that Wolverton was a brother in the great brotherhood of man.

And then he killed the dream—brought it crashing to the ground in a brutal series of horridly frank solidograph projections. These were real people that bled and died and performed unspeakable brutalities upon each other and upon the worlds where they lived.

"On the average," Wolverton said bitterly, "it takes five to six thousand years, but we have been in space longer than that, and some societies last longer than others, but the end is always inevitable."

He showed me all—a solid month of it.

Earth: A world of legalized cannibalism where men were bred for food—a world of wrecked glory swiftly returning to jungle and desert.

Mars: Redying in slow bitter agony as technology failed under the pressure of excessive population, with legal infanticide, eugenics laws, and tyranny.

Proxima: Bloody and torn—waging suicidal war whose ultimate end would be virtual annihilation of all life.

Fanar: Dead and radioactive.

Kungtze: A huge, monolithic state that owned and controlled everything down to the last living unit, where the population swarmed and jostled in huge collectives that were neither cities nor farms, but something of both—where everything was used even down to the dead bodies of those too old to work, slain by the state to make room for others.

Samar: A matriarchate ruled by the few—filled by the many, where women outnumbered men twenty to one, and the men ruled by the sly and subtle tyranny of sex, and where—despite the disparity of sexes—people swarmed and teemed, and struggled for possession of a place to live and the partial possession of a man.

Halsey: Harsh, forested, and forbidding—a world that distrusted and did not welcome man—a world peopled by savage humanoids who united only in the face of danger. They were united now—armed and ready to resist invasion.

And there were more.

I was sick—sick at the folly of man, who threw away so much for so little. "Whose fault?" I asked. "Why did these things happen?"

"It was no one's fault," Wolverton said, sadly. "It was everyone's. In opening new worlds, people are needed, so they have large families. The tradition becomes established and when at last the world is comfortably filled—instead of stopping—holding the line and consolidating what they have won—people go right on the same old way, producing more and more of their kind until finally the world grows too small. Then they quarrel, fight, and die until they are so reduced that they can start the vicious cycle over again—and in the process civilization becomes barbarism and culture becomes chaos. If the world is lucky, it survives to rise again as Earth will do. If it is unlucky it ends like Fanar.

"And that is where you come in. You and the others like you, but you in particular. For you possess in a tremendous degree the ability to convince. I could feel it in you despite my shields. It influenced E'Komo despite his loyalty. It made Doctor Sara waver despite her dedication. I have watched

and waited for you for generations—for over two thousand years. For here in this enclave I knew you must some day arrive. Your origin, frankly spiritual and mystic—your development so ruthlessly selective starting with ritual sacrifice of excess—and less desirable—maidens at puberty—your insistence upon developing the spiritual rather than the mechanistic side of culture—all these were bound to develop psi factors. And they have! It is here, I think, where man's salvation lies. Here is the brake on rising population—a person who can convince—who can inculcate into the very soul of men that three children are enough—or that two are enough—or whatever number is needed to stabilize the population of a planet."

I didn't really hear him. My mind had recoiled from what he had told me. Two thousand years, he had said. Two thousand years! And he was not old! Truly he was the Father of Evil, for only Evil and the soul are immortal! "You said two thousand years, didn't you?"

Wolverton chuckled. "I should have added objective," he said.

I didn't understand.

"It's a trick with time," he explained. "Actually I suppose I'm about forty or forty-five. It's not strange. Anyone with a lightspeed ship can do it as long as one stays in normal space time. Take a two-week trip subjective at Lume One and ten objective years go by just like that. It's an old trick. The Timejumpers knew about it before hyperdrive was developed, but it's been forgotten for centuries. Most of the time I'm not here. The Halsites take care of the Holding for me. I heard about you three years ago so I waited until you made your try for me. It was inevitable that you would. Your Bearers are always trying to get me inspired partly by religious and partly by economic reasons—and they pick the best of each year's crop to try. As a result I get about three new recruits a year. The old ones pick them up and indoctrinate them. But we keep up the fiction of Wolverton being here. It's good business." Wolverton looked at the dumbfounded expression on my face and laughed.

"So you don't understand," he said. "Well, you have plenty of time to learn after we treat about five rim worlds. We'll be practical about it and let you learn about lightspeed and time stasis the normal way—in a spaceship!"

"No," I said.

"But you can't turn me down," he protested. "I thought you understood. People need you—need you badly. Our others can modify a little but they

can't convince. It takes a hundred of them to even begin to cover a world—and there aren't very many hopeful worlds left. We have to hold the line or humanity will breed itself into extinction."

"I am still your prisoner," I said, luxuriating in the first real weakness I had found in him. "You might as well know that I still oppose you. I don't believe you. You are Evil and Evil has a smooth tongue—Zard said it long ago, and it is still the truth."

Wolverton groaned.

"Nor will I help you!"

Anger flowed from him. "You stupid fool!" he blazed. "Do you think I'd ask you to do anything for me? His rage struck me like a blow. I'm telling you—not asking. You will do something for your race—something you can do, or so help me God, I'll condition everything out of you except your superstitious prejudices and maroon you on Samar!"

He meant what he said. His anger was a true anger—and he had spoken the Name we all knew yet did not speak aloud. And he was not struck down. I was confused and upset. I shivered with a fear that was as icy as the River of the Dead. There was something wrong here—something I could not understand. Then I saw the light.

"I will bargain with you," I said. Zard's plan was becoming clear. "I will join you in good faith."

"With what reservations?"

"None—I will swear this by Zard's bones."

He looked at me speculatively. "What is the nature of this bargain?"

"I will join you willingly if you leave this world."

He smiled. "Sorry, it's no go. It's too good a psi trap. And your race has a virtual monopoly on the supply. You presume too much on my claims about your value. You're not that valuable."

I sighed. This was not the way. Zard would have opened it if it were. I had weakened—but he had not retreated. I had shown a softness in my armor and had given him hope of conquering—and with that little opening what

could he not do? He needed but one break in my defenses—and I would be lost. Already I was dangerously weakened. Rapidly I repeated the catechism of Zard as he talked, and presently his voice faded and was gone as the ecstasy of spiritual union with the Word gripped me in firm protecting hands....

"Come with me," Wolverton said a week later. "I have something to show you."

Obediently I rose and followed him. A Halsite followed as we walked out into the sun. We had come a different way than before—a way I had never taken. Before me was a broad concrete plain studded with oddly curved walls. In the center of the area a tall, pinch-waisted, needle-nosed spaceship stood on its landing pads—pointing straight up to the sky. I looked at it with awe. It was bigger even than a trader and it looked oddly menacing yet beautiful.

"Yours?" I asked.

He nodded. "Mine. She's Earth-built—one of the last battle cruisers ever built in an Earth yard. Ships like this aren't made any more—even though she's four thousand objective years old. Come, let's look at her."

As we approached, I could see the ship was enormous. It rose over our heads like some great campanile tower, yet despite its size there was an air of subtle refinement about the mass, an impression almost of delicacy—as though it had been tenderly and carefully constructed by men who loved their work. Each part was beautifully finished and perfectly machined, and the diamond-hard non-corrosive metal gleamed in the golden sunlight. And despite its huge size and absurdly tiny jets, it looked fast!

"It's big enough to move an entire city!" I gasped.

"She has a crew of five—and capacity for fifty marines," Wolverton replied.

"All that size—but—"

"Most of it is taken up with weapons systems," he said. "I could utterly destroy a planet of this size with her weapons. She'll travel at Lume One as long as you care to drive her—or she'll go clear up to ultra band in hyperspace. She's the fastest, deadliest thing in this sector—beautiful— isn't she?" He talked as though the ship was a woman—a woman he loved.

"I wanted you to see her," he pointed at the ship, "so that you will know exactly what I mean when I offer you freedom such as you have never known. With this ship we can do anything—go anywhere. Time means nothing—hours in hyperspace—years in normal spacetime. I'm offering you the Universe if you join with me to work and save—to keep men from following the old paths to racial destruction." His voice, eyes, and entire body were tense. Conviction flowed from him in smothering waves. I had never really felt the power of the man and I was shaken. Shaken and unsure. For the Word seemed oddly weak in the presence of this titanic ship and the equally titanic man who owned it. I could not explain the feelings that surged inside me—missionary to the human race—freedom from worldly bounds—greed for life and knowledge—weariness and surrender to Wolverton's endless urging—all were there, but there was more than that. I kept looking up at the ship, my head whirling from the dizzying sweep of her—her beauty and power filling my eyes. My heart soared with her soaring lines. I felt quite enthralled—uplifted—caught in a force greater than my will. Now—suddenly I knew why Wolverton spoke of the ship with such passion in his voice. It must have shown in my eyes for a great gladness lighted his. "I will join you," I said in a small voice—and inside me something died as soon as I had spoken. I had the hollow feeling I had lost my soul.

"I will not ask you to swear," he said with odd gentleness. "I have pushed you far enough. Let us go to the laboratory and remove that ring and restore your powers."

A voice inside me spoke sluggishly. "Fight fire with fire—craft with craft," it said. "Strike down the Evil doer with his own spear," but the voice was weak. I followed Wolverton and as I walked the voice became stronger. "And the Father of Evil took Zard to the top of Mount Karat, and from this high place he offered the world and eternal life if Zard would fall down and worship him. And Zard refused." I shook my head. I had promised—but what was a promise when it involved the Father of Evil. To slay him, one could promise anything, and yet receive absolution.

The ring was removed from my neck, and with its removal awareness flowed into me. I was whole again! I could see as only an Adept knew how to see. I turned to Wolverton with pleasure in my eyes, and as I looked at him I stiffened with shock!

His barriers were down!!

I could penetrate his mind as though it were thinnest air, and in my brain the voice rang out loud, clear, quick, eager, triumphant!

Now—NOW!!—KILL!!!

I took his mind in mine, encompassing it. I held his life. One surge of power, one squeeze and he was dead. The Father of Evil—helpless in the grasp of righteousness.

I paused, savoring my triumph searching for the evil I knew lay concealed beneath the surface web of flashing thoughts. I probed beneath them, brushing aside his feeble defenses—and stopped—appalled!

For there was no evil, no guile, no treachery—only a deep limpid pool of abiding faith and selfless love for mankind that transcended anything I had ever dreamed. There was anger, too, a clean bright anger at the stupidities and follies of mankind, impassioned yet impersonal, and oddly lacking in bitterness. He knew that I could snuff him out as easily as an acolyte snuffs a candle upon the Altar of Zard. Yet he neither shrank nor feared. And I realized with numbing shock that he had placed himself in my hands, knowing what I was, and what I would do. Frantically I tried to withdraw, but I was immersed in love, drowned in it, absorbed in a warm golden glow that rushed along the power that connected us.

I shuddered. Father of Evil? If he was evil, then every responding fiber of my heart and mind was evil too, and I was damned beyond redemption. With a groan I wrenched myself free. I could not kill him. Nor could I longer stand the shattering concepts of his mind. And with stark realization I faced the elemental truth that it was I, not he, who was wrong!

He looked down at me as I stood shrunken and defeated before him, and his eyes were kind. "It was a chance I had to take," he said softly. "And I was right. You were not conditioned beyond redemption." He sighed and placed his hand on my shoulder. It was warm and gentle, and I did not shrink from his touch. "There are many worlds," he murmured, "and it is getting late, and you are unique. Another like you might not appear again. The plan would be useless without you, yet without your complete cooperation it would fail. So I opened my mind, dropped the screen which shielded me." He smiled wryly. "Desperate measures of a desperate man," he said with a trace of the old masking cynicism.

But I knew him now and could see behind the mask. A strange wonder filled me. I had tried to apply the Missionary Creed, but it was he who was the missionary and I the convert. Slowly I knelt and placed my hands in his as I would to a Bearer of the Word. "Show me the way, Master, and I will follow," I said.

He raised me to my feet. "No, Saul," he said. "Not that way. In the struggle to come, you will be the leader. Like your namesake."

THE END



TINY WINDOWS

TINY WINDOWS

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