

## *Gesture of Farewell*

Across this stretch of the planet Risim ran the big groove. It was ten miles wide and over a quarter of a mile deep. A cluster of mobile buildings dotted the road, which ran straight along the middle of the groove. Today, the buildings seemed to crouch closer to the ground, for above them raged the worst storm Risim had experienced in over a thousand years.

Lester Nixon's half-track swerved off the road and headed down a dirt trail for home, St. Elmo's fire dancing along its roof. The violent winds carried rain – not, by ordinary standards, very much rain, but by Risim standards a deluge. Lester smiled with pleasure over it as he ploughed through puddles. He enjoyed the feel of a live planet about him.

Swerving up a steep incline, he came within sight of his house.

As befitted the home of Risim's Resident Governor, the building stood apart from all the other of Sector One, and was on high enough ground to possess a view right across the artificial valley. Its exposed position accounted for the fact that the garage was now flat; the gale had blown it over. The unexpected sight of it strewn over the ground was not dismaying enough to wipe the smile off Lester's broad face. Life on Risim was nothing but hard work; rebuilding a garage was a drop in the ocean; Lester was rebuilding a planet.

Lester's smile faded only when he climbed out of the half-track and noticed his wife, Ruthmary, standing in the long, low window of their house. Leaving the vehicle in the open, he limped across to the door and let himself in, pushing through the airlock which was no longer needed.

'What's for supper?' he asked heartily, when she appeared in the hall.

You could not deflect Ruthmary as simply as that.

'Lester! I thought you were *never* coming home!' she exclaimed, pressing the palms of her hands together. 'Oh, I've been so *scared*! You've no idea how awful it's been up here. I thought we'd all be blown away. Why are you so late?'

‘Communications wanted help,’ Lester said, taking her hand. ‘They had a line down, and it’ll be needed when Sector Six comes through tonight.’

‘A line down!’ she said, staring into his face. ‘They had a line down, so you stayed to help them – never mind that we had a whole *garage* down!’

‘Try and keep your sense of proportion, Rue,’ he said quietly, stripping off his oilskins and going over to the coal fire. ‘The garage can be re-erected at any time.’ She fluttered before him like a bird. She was a good-looking forty, although just now her face was blotchy with strain.

‘I’m keeping my sense of proportion,’ she said. ‘You’re losing yours, Lester. You’re letting this planet become your life. While you were putting that line up, I don’t suppose you once thought of me, did you?’

She interpreted his silence correctly.

‘No ...’ she said, in a wounded tone. ‘It’s getting to be Risim first and last with you. You love the place. You think of it as yours! You keep forgetting what kind of people the Risimians were. You keep forgetting they must have left a booby trap for us ... This isn’t a planet to love; it’s a planet to hate.’

He heard, but for a long while did not reply; he was looking out of the window. Most of the land along the ten-mile-wide groove was now under cultivation, semi-outdoor cultivation. Some of the old airtight domes were still being used for more experimental crops. Trees and wheatfields and acres of root vegetables met Lester’s eye; he could see some Shorthorns on Darbie’s farm being driven in to milk. The uplands beyond the groove were thatched here and there with green. It was all good to look upon. The vista Lester’s inward eye saw was something different. It had no green anywhere about it. When Lester had arrived on Risim, as a junior member of the Reclamation Force advance party, all this landscape had been white with CO<sub>2</sub> rime. Bare earth, bare rock, stretched everywhere. Nothing grew. Planetary atmosphere was about a foot deep.

That was fifteen years ago. The RF had made the rock flower.

‘It is a planet to love,’ Lester Nixon said, turning back to his wife as a fresh cascade of rain swept the windows.

Ruthmary was staring out too. He did not need telling what she saw. She saw only the arbitrary miles-wide furrow chopped out by the giant excavators, the humble quarters of Sector One, the jagged background of

unreclaimed land, pitted still by a thousand years of falling meteorites. Certainly Risim was as yet not a woman's world; Ruthmary's expression told Lester she might have been looking over the wastes of Hell.

'Love!' she said, making it sound like a dirty word. 'Risim's a desert, and a few blades of grass won't conceal the fact. It killed little Alec; it has swallowed up our youth. And if you can say you love it, you must be mad.'

'I asked you never to mention Alec, Rue,' he said, mildly enough. Talk of his dead son reminded him of his daughter. 'Where's Jackie?'

'Upstairs,' she said shortly.

As Lester started to go, Ruthmary caught his arm.

'You know the real reason why I hate Risim, Lester,' she half-whispered.

'Yes. You're afraid it may blow up at any minute,' he said steadily, refusing to look into her eyes.

'Not at *any* minute,' she said. 'At every minute. I'm always afraid – not just for myself: for Jackie, for you, even for the convicts. Angagulalatun blew up. So did Cobatt II. So did Vicinzo. The Reclamation Forces on all of them were destroyed.'

'We may be luckier,' he said curtly, for this was something he had no wish to discuss. 'Don't think of it.'

Her nails were biting into his sleeve. She was shouting now, to make herself heard above the wind.

'I can't stop thinking of it!' she said. 'Can't you see, Lester, I'm asking you to let me go back to Earth. I just can't bear it here any longer. I've got to go!'

'Alone?' he asked.

'Why not? You – ' she cried, then stopped, reading the look on his face, realising what she had just said.

'Oh, Lester ...' she began, suddenly cold. She could see how deeply she had hurt him by her indifference. It came back to her that she knew Lester very well; always living with someone makes us forget they are not strangers. He was an odd man, with a sensitive side to his nature which could never find expression in words. Now he staggered as if she had sunk a pickaxe into him.

'Lester, my dear, I didn't mean – ' she started. But he went out, slamming the door in her face, not waiting for her explanation. And what was there to explain? They had abruptly stopped loving each other; it was inexplicable.

Ruthmary leaned against the door; she listened to its slamming over and over again in her mind, dreading its implications. Lester did not slam doors. He was the kind who always left them open.

The daylight grew weirder now. Lester, as he ran up the stairs to Jackie, glanced out at the purple glare; Risim had never looked like this before. All around the sun floated pale sun-dogs, phantoms of the real thing, and behind them wavered the aurora – the new aurora. The garish effect, when it could be glimpsed through cloud, was of polka dots imposed on shot silk.

Before he opened her door, Lester could hear Jackie sobbing. He went in and found her lying across the bed, her toes stubbing the floor, rucking up the bedside rug. She did not look up when he spoke her name. Sitting beside her, Lester rested his hands on her thin shoulders. He thought: perhaps our worst troubles come when we are thirteen years old, when we've lost the resilience of childhood and have yet to gain the strength of an adult.

'You're a big girl to be scared by a little storm,' he said aloud.

She looked up then, her face tear-stained.

'Mummy says the planet may blow up at any minute,' she said.

That, of course, would be it. The anger came up like choking fumes in Lester's throat. He coughed it down and said, 'Now listen, Jackie girl, what's going on outside has nothing to do with anywhere blowing up. That's just one of your mother's silly stories, and I'm going to tell you a far nicer one.'

'What's yours about?' she asked suspiciously, flinching as the room was deluged in lightning.

'My story's about why the air is behaving so funnily outside,' he said. 'I want to tell you why it's a good thing and not a bad thing. You see, when you were born, lying in your cradle in this selfsame room, you could look out of the window and see space coming right down and touching the bare land. Well, maybe by then there was air in the groove, but there was not much to spread about elsewhere. You could see the stars come right down and touch those distant mountains, even by day.'

'But every month, the view changed just a little. As you grew up, so did Risim. As you put on weight, it put on air. You two have grown up together.'

‘Now it seems as if Risim is coming of age. Why, the air’s breathable almost half a mile up – it will soon be settled enough for us to be able to use planes and helicopters. You’ve seen how in every sector the land’s coming back to life again; now the air’s doing the same. It’s not just so many thousand cubic yards of released oxygen and carbon dioxide any more; it’s a planetary atmosphere. An ionosphere is in the process of establishing itself. That’s what all the noise and colour is about.’

‘I don’t think I want to live on a planet with an “onosphere”,’ Jackie said, making bubbly noises into a handkerchief.

‘It should soon settle down,’ Lester replied. ‘Then we won’t notice it any more. In fact, it’ll be a great help to us for radio and suchlike. At present, the ultra-violet from the sun is charging all the gas particles in the sky; and, although it may sound and look rather alarming, it’s really a sign that all our work here is being blessed.’

Jackie cocked her head on one side to peer into his solemn face.

‘Mummy says you’ve got a creator complex,’ she announced. ‘What is a creator complex, Daddy?’

It was not a time when Lester Nixon wanted personal troubles. His schedules for the next few days were even busier than usual. On the morrow he had to drive over to Sector Three, Tod Clitheroe’s sector, and officiate at the ocean seeding. Sector Six, as Lester had reminded Ruthmary, was advancing to its new territories in the night; he would have to visit them within the next two or three days to see that the basic planning jobs were carried out efficiently.

Tired, Lester went early to bed. Usually, he allowed himself twenty minutes of constructive thought before sliding smoothly into sleep. Tonight, the thoughts were not constructive, nor would they let him rest. He worried about Jackie, he worried about Ruthmary. The unfortunate thing was that he could see his wife’s point of view; she cared for the refinements of life, which were scarce on Risim. Even her beloved music tapes were few and well worn. And although she could, in her fashion, appreciate the mighty transformation of Risim, she discounted it with the thought that it might all blow to Kingdom Come at any day.

So she blamed all her troubles on Lester, who had brought her here as a bride. She believed he thought himself a god, bringing light where there

was only darkness, and she had begun to hate him for it.

‘Now she’s trying to win Jackie over to her ideas,’ Lester muttered aloud. Brushing his hair back from his forehead, he sat up in bed. Ruthmary’s breathing came steadily from the other side of the room. Beyond the shutters, the aurora still fluttered.

Lester got out of bed, dressed, went downstairs. It was nearly midnight. He had never felt less like sleep.

After some indecision, he put on thick clothes and boots, slung an oxygen mask over his shoulder in case it should be needed, and let himself into the night air.

The cold knocked his cheekbones. Twenty degrees of frost, he estimated. It would be sharper than that before morning, under the thin air-blanket. Lester could remember when evening brought dips of two hundred degrees below freezing. He was getting old; he could remember too much.

Without bothering to drag out the half-track, he walked down into the center of the groove. It was a fine night. The rain, the thin cloud, had gone; only the aurora remained, flapping overhead like a gigantic mauve bat. In the distance, the combined wheels of Sector Six could be heard, moving up the highway. You couldn’t hear a thing on Risim in the old days.

For this special occasion, Sector One’s only filling station was open and ablaze with light. Lester limped over to it, greeting its owner and standing with him by the pumps as the leading vehicles of the big convoy appeared down the road.

These RF vehicles were leviathans. They towered like ships as they lumbered by. Bulldozers,eledozers, rock-snorkers, grabs, drills, furnaces, and pounders; some tracked, some on balloon tyres as high as a house, some on trailers, they began to growl majestically past the garage. Machines had ruined Risim over a thousand years ago; now machines – these machines – were patching her up again.

Behind the RF vehicles came the smaller traffic, mainly mobile living quarters. It would be twelve hours before they had all passed.

A landrover swerved into the garage, and a squat man swaddled in furs jumped out.

‘I thought that was you, Governor!’ he exclaimed. ‘How’re you doing?’

Lester shook hands warmly with him. This was Brandy Mireball, Commander of Sector Six, and an old friend of Lester's.

They talked eagerly together for some minutes, swinging their arms to keep warm, until Lester said, 'Your convoy looks as if it could forge on without you to wet-nurse it for an hour or two. Come on up to the house for a warm-up and a gossip.'

At once a look of reserve passed over Brandy's big, square face.

'Er – well, no. I'd better be moving, Governor,' he said. 'Besides, you don't want to trouble your wife at this time of night.'

Or at any other time, Lester thought grimly. He had forgotten that Brandy was, officially, a convict; now he recalled the frosty reception Ruthmary had given him, the last and only time they had met. Brandy had too much pride in him to welcome a repetition of that meeting.

Ruthmary, unlike Lester, had never failed once in the last fifteen years to remember that ninety-nine per cent of the men under her husband were the offerings of other planets' jails. He preferred to think of himself as the creator of a world, rather than the governor of a penal settlement. But of course only criminals could be expected to operate on a planet that might disintegrate at any time.

'There's a room ahind my office you like to borrar,' the owner of the garage volunteered.

'Thanks,' Lester said.

The room was comfortable and had a good coal fire burning; coal was the cheapest fuel in Sector One, wood the dearest. Lester meditated briefly on what a fine thing it was that he had to bring a friend here to entertain him. Even a governor was inescapably governed.

Brandy was full of information about the new territory Sector Six was taking over. It was nothing but shop, and Lester listened with interest. The territory would not be easy to lick into shape; preliminary surveys had indicated that it was mainly high ground, broken and fissured by a thousand years of extremes of heat and cold.

'And it contains the ruins of the chief city of Risim,' said Brandy, looking hard at Lester.

Lester shrugged.

'It'll all have to go,' he said. 'Those are always RF orders: obliterate every trace of the enemy civilisation.'

‘I know that. I’m not worried about that,’ Brandy said. ‘I think you know, too, what I’m driving at, Governor. If there’s a booby trap anywhere on Risim, waiting to blow us to bits, chances are it’ll be in the capital city.’

‘It wasn’t in the capital on Cobatt II.’

‘It was on Angagulalatun. And on Vicinzo.’

Silence drifted like ice between the two men.

‘I’ve got some drink here, Governor,’ Brandy said, sheepishly bringing a flask out of his pocket. ‘Have a swig.’

Lester accepted gratefully. He had not had a drink since the last time he and Brandy had met. The stuff was supposed to be prohibited, but the more settled the planet became, the more drink there was about. Some of the men seemed to have stills working as soon as they pitched camp.

‘Just how seriously do you take this booby trap business, Brandy?’ Lester asked.

‘I don’t let it rule my life,’ Brandy said cautiously.

‘But do you seriously believe the Risimians would stoop to such a thing? They were an old and cultured race.’

Brandy laughed harshly. ‘What a question!’ he said. ‘Men’ll stoop to anything. Besides, look at it from the Risimians’ point of view. They were our enemies. Right? That galactic bust-up, the Hub Wars, was about the toughest thing that’s ever happened. And the Gobblers that won the war for us were about the nastiest weapons ever invented. Right? They could make a planet uninhabitable within an hour – as they did here. Now: if you think your planet’s going to be made uninhabitable, what do you say to yourself? You say: Right, then it stays uninhabitable; if we can’t live on it, no other ———’s going to, either.

‘And it’s a simple enough matter, if you’re as advanced as Cobatt or Vicinzo – or Risim – was, to plant a little device that will be triggered off when the enemy finally gets to it.’

They argued the point back and forward, as every man on Risim had done ever since the RF landed, fifteen years ago. The trouble was, that the vital issue – whether or not the Risimians had planned a revenge – would always remain open: until Risim blew up or a booby trap was discovered.

A second bottle was produced and drunk between them before Brandy got up to go.



‘Give my regards to Clitheroe when you see him,’ he said, adding, as Lester attempted to rise, ‘Don’t bother to come outside.’

‘Right,’ Lester replied, rather thickly. ‘I’ll be over to see how you’re getting on in two or three days, Brandy. Keep your fingers crossed.’

When the other had gone, he did try to rise from his chair, but he was heavy with the unaccustomed drink. Leaning back before the fire, he fell fast asleep.

Cold fury boiled in him when he woke and found it was nearly eight o’clock in the morning. His days began at six. The owner of the filling station would have seen him; Lester could almost hear the whisper spreading around the community: ‘The Governor was in a drunken stupor!’ This would never have happened if he had felt free to take Brandy home.

He went out into the bitter morning, peevishly buttoning his coat. The wind was as spiteful as ever, the aurora still up to its silly tricks. The convoy of Sector Six still poured by; Lester could see sleepy men at the steering wheels. A girl smiled at him through a trailer window.

He arrived home to find his wife and Jackie starting breakfast. Frosty looks greeted his explanations and apologies; he felt his neck grow red.

‘I’m not feeling humble this morning, Rue,’ he said, ‘so don’t make too much capital out of the incident.’

‘You never feel humble these days,’ she said indistinctly.

A thousand years of silence seemed to lumber in from outside and engulf them. Lester helped himself unhappily to breakfast. Ruthmary was probably right; he had the sort of occupation to make men overbearing – which did not make the truth *any* more palatable. It would do Ruthmary no harm to be humbled, either.

‘I’m going to drive over to see Clitheroe in Sector Three in half an hour,’ he said, addressing himself to Jackie. ‘How about your taking a day off and coming with me, eh?’

‘She’s got to go to school,’ Ruthmary said before Jackie could answer.

‘A visit to the sea would be equally instructive,’ Lester said, looking only at his daughter.

‘It’s her music day,’ Ruthmary said. ‘And you know she has an exam coming soon.’

Yes, Lester knew. And in another year, when Jackie was fourteen, she was going back to Earth, to Milan, to learn music properly. And then he

would have lost touch irrevocably with her, for Lester expressed himself even more haltingly in letters than he did in speech. So he had to win her to his side before she went; he was shrewd enough to see that from now on there were going to be sides, and only sides.

‘Well, Jackie, would you like to come?’ he asked temptingly. ‘It’ll be an historic occasion for Risim, you know; more important than when we released the micro-organisms into the soil here.’

It was painful to see her looking from one to the other of her parents, like a trapped animal. Young as she was, she sensed that a lot hung on her decision. Her cheeks colored with resentment.

‘I suppose I ought to go to school, oughtn’t I?’ she asked them, pleading for a helpful answer.

‘They wouldn’t miss you for one day,’ Lester said.

‘You must make up your own mind,’ Ruthmary said.

The little girl stared at them desperately. All of a sudden, she burst into tears and ran from the room.

‘That was entirely your fault,’ Ruthmary said.

Perhaps it was the way she said it that made Lester do what he ever afterwards regretted. When he drove off to Sector Three in the half-track, Jackie rode delightedly beside him, her tears forgotten. He had crept upstairs and brought her down without her mother knowing; even at the time it was not a trick he felt particularly proud of.

To Lester’s mind, it was a good day for a drive. The morning’s snow, as the temperature rose rapidly, fell for only ten minutes. The sun shone blindingly among the drapes of the aurora. St. Elmo’s fire flickered on every protuberance of their vehicle.

They turned out of the groove onto a minor road which cut away from the highway at right angles. This portion of the huge RF checker-board had yet to be leap-frogged over by one of the Reclamation sectors; consequently, it was still in much the same state that the Gobblers had left, ten centuries ago. Once, dark under the eerie sky, a furnace swung into view and dropped behind them, its funnel-like chimneys continuously pouring hot oxygen into the atmosphere.

Establishing these mighty furnaces regularly over the face of Risim had been the RF’s first task. The furnaces were automatic. Tunnelling further

and further below them into the rock were the mechanical miners. In a screaming inferno of heat and dust, tireless drills ferreted coal, ores, and oxides out of the ground, shuttled them into lifts, and rocketed them up to the furnaces, where they were pulverized and baked. As the great detritus hills grew to mountains outside the plants, so more vital gas was liberated.

Already, as Lester happily pointed out to Jackie, nature was helping the artificial processes in her own way. For a considerable distance around the black bulk of the furnace, green showed. Near the walls were bushes, even a few stunted conifers, which gave place further out to grass or lichen.

‘It’s wonderful what a little air and continuous heat will do,’ Lester remarked. ‘All that foliage is self-sown, from spores and seed, in the ground which has endured a thousand years of space conditions. It just goes to show that nature’s on our side.’

‘And which side are the Risimians on?’ Jackie asked.

‘You are developing a bad habit of asking irrelevant questions, young lady!’ he exclaimed. ‘Don’t forget *we’re* the Risimians now.’

After three hours of fast driving, without once seeing another vehicle, they dipped down into another groove, ten miles across, a quarter-mile deep – standard RF measurements. The air was noticeably better to breathe in the depression.

This was Sector Three.

Lester asked their way to Tod Clitheroe’s building, and soon the lanky commander was shaking their hands. They all ate a good meal while Clitheroe told them his plans for the afternoon’s ceremony.

Sector Three was generally regarded as one of the softest stations on Risim; a rather sour wine set on the table confirmed that opinion. No other sector could afford to grow vines. Lester had a momentary sense of unease at this cool infringement of planetary law, but banished it. It was one of those human problems which has to be tackled when the time is ripe.

‘Are you sure you want me to make a speech to them?’ Lester asked, when Clitheroe broached the idea.

‘Sure,’ Clitheroe said. ‘We’ve got to have a real ceremony.’

‘I’m not the kind who makes a very good speech,’ Lester protested. ‘And our boys aren’t the kind who make very good listeners.’

‘They’ll listen. They’ve got to realise they aren’t just working gangs and wives any more; they’re citizens of an up-and-coming planet.’

That also made Lester uncomfortable. He was not happy with personal problems. He was a Reclamation man, an engineer. The trouble was, he had no precedents to guide him; the other reclaimed planets, Vicinzo and the rest, had blown up before this stage. But obviously – just as the time had come when their air was no longer simply measurable quantities of gas, but an atmosphere – the day was dawning when he had, not a number of task forces, but a population on his hands. It sounded frightening to Lester.

Nevertheless, he made a good speech.

He spoke in a barrack-like warehouse – the only warehouse – by the water’s edge. Outside, the wind screamed. Inside, some three hundred men, women, and children had drifted from their work to hear him talk. Jackie stood at the front of the crowd, admiring her father.

‘From today on,’ he began, without preliminaries, ‘a new trade is open on Risim: fisherman, though, to begin with, the fishers will put fish in the sea instead of pulling them out. This town of Clitheroeville is on the way up. After the fishermen’ll come the sailors, then the shipbuilders, then the dockers, then the customs men – but we hope we’ll never need them! – then the millionaires.’ They laughed at that.

‘You people have now got a sea on your hands. It’s only a little one, but it’ll grow. It’s like all the processes we’ve started in this barren land: once you start it, it goes on of its own accord. Before you know it, there’ll be an ocean where you had a puddle. But it’s not just going to be wet water. It’s going to live; before we’re done it’s going to be full to the brim with crabs and shrimps and fish and mighty big blowing whales. It’s going to be a howling success, like everything else we’ve done here.

‘That’s why Commander Clitheroe and I are going down with the Biology Corps now, to stock the waters with plankton, so that in several years’ time you can all have caviar in your lunch packs!’

Their cheering buoyed him all the way down to the jetty. Braving wind and fresh rain, most of the crowd followed the official party as far as the cliffs.

‘The cliffs’ were the sides of an enormous M-bomb crater which had been blasted into existence perhaps only a few days before the Gobblers did their

deadly work on Risim. They fell steeply for two hundred tawny feet; the party spanned this distance in an open lift, which swayed furiously in the gusty up-draughts playing along the cliffs.

Below, protruding from a ledge of rock, was the jetty, a temporary affair since the water level was expected to be rising for the next century. Against the jetty a cumbrous amphibian, Risim's only boat, slumped and lifted on the waves. On its bow was painted its name: 'Old Greedy Guts'. Against boat and jetty smacked the full force of the new sea.

Roughly rectangular, the sea was at present only one mile wide by five long. Old ocean beds to the south, whose waters had evaporated when the atmosphere went, would take its continued expansion. Started six years ago by a spring, one of many rising unsummoned from the reviving ground, the sea was now fed by several small streams.

For such a baby stretch of water, the sea looked menacing enough. It was dark and it was rough. Every wave seemed blacker than the one before, breaking without foam against the tall cliffs.

'Are you going to like this, Jackie?' Lester asked, with some misgivings.

'I'm going to make a movie of it!' she replied, waving her cinecamera eagerly.

Witling hands helped them aboard. Lester caught Jackie looking almost skittishly at the young biologist who pulled her up. He thought: perhaps Rue's right; we don't want the girl messing about with a lot of criminals – it's best for her to go to Earth now that she is growing up. And then he rebuked himself bitterly for the thought. He was getting old; the strain was telling on him.

Dismissing all but the present from his mind, Lester followed Clitheroe over to the biologists. 'Old Greedy Guts' cast off, her engines throbbing, and began to wallow out toward mid-ocean. The few spectators in the jetty turned their backs to the cutting wind and hurried for shelter.

The seeding ceremony was outwardly unimpressive. Four great tanks full of water containing laboratory-reared plankton stood along the decks of the amphibian; pipes led from them over the side of the vessel; when they reached mid-ocean, the cocks would be opened and the microscopic life released into the open waters.

‘I think it’s too rough to reach what for want of a better term we must call mid-ocean,’ the chief biologist told Clitheroe and Lester. ‘If it’s all the same to you, we’ll release our load and turn back at once.’

Looking pretty sick, he stared anxiously into other green faces, in search of agreement.

‘I’m all for it,’ Clitheroe said. ‘We’re not meant to be sailors. As the Governor says, they’ll come later.’

The cocks were opened. Everyone peered over the side; Jackie leaned dangerously out, filming the dark waters. Yet there was nothing to see. The tanks emptied under the surface, and the additional billions to Risim’s inhabitants, being invisible, gave no sign of their presence. At an impatient sign from the chief biologist, the skipper leaned against the wheel, swinging ‘Old Greedy Guts’ about.

The deck lurched, a fresh gust of wind buffeted them. Dropping her cinecamera, Jackie, caught off balance, snatched at the low side and missed it. She screamed briefly as she hit the vinegar-dark sea.

Lester was actually the third to dive in after her. Two young members of the biology team beat him to it.

Every molecule of water ached with cold. The bite of it was like cruel jaws, penetrating down to the marrow. Before Lester surfaced, he could feel it beginning to kill him; he came up gasping for help and splashing toward the ship’s side.

As Clitheroe and others dragged him out, he saw, half-fainting, that crimson stained the threshing water by the propellers. Sun-dogs seemed to leap at his throat as he lost consciousness.

‘So you’ve come at last, Brandy,’ Lester said, trying to conceal the irritation he felt.

‘I only came here because I had to,’ Brandy Mireball said. He spoke uneasily, looking around the Governor’s room as if he expected Ruthmary to burst in, and seldom glancing at Lester.

‘It was two days ago that I phoned you,’ Lester said, twitching at the rug wrapped about his knees.

‘We were busy,’ Brandy said. ‘I was sorry about your daughter, Governor. Hope your wife didn’t take it too hard?’

Perhaps even as he spoke, Brandy guessed that Ruthmary had taken it hard. He might have read it in the atmosphere of Lester's house, or on Lester's face. No doubt he could hear, through the intervening doors, the stormy music issuing from the study. Lester could picture his wife standing entranced before the tape machine, palms pressed together, eyes shut, trying – what was she trying to do? It baffled Lester. She drew something from music he could never find. Now she was playing 'The Atomics' from Dinkuhl's *Managerial Suite*; it was one of her favourites. She seemed to find in it the something Lester had found when listening to the wind cutting across the new sea before – before little Jackie was churned into the propellers.

Ruthmary had taken the news as a personal insult. When Lester returned, dosed against pneumonia, to tell her of the accident, she had wailed like a Greek tragedy. First Alec, crushed long ago in a collapsing dome, now Jackie! Risim was against them all; Risim would kill them all! She turned her misery into a triumph.

Wearily, Lester tried to direct his thoughts away from his wife. She was, of course, right; it was all his fault. Now he must make her what amends he could. ~~There's~~ 'There's something I had to tell you, Brandy,' he said, looking up from under his heavy eyebrows. 'Come next month, you are Resident Governor of Risim, in my place.'

The great purgatorial chords ascended in the stillness; she was playing that thing too damn loud.

'What do you mean, Lester?' Brandy asked. 'What's happening to you?'

'I'm going ...' He choked on the words.

'Going home?'

'This is home, Brandy. I'm going back to Earth.'

There was time to listen to the frantic cellos again before Brandy said, 'You run Risim, boss! You can't clear out on us now, not before the Twenty Year Plan is finished. I can't believe it! Nobody'll believe it!'

Lester made a testy gesture.

'It's true,' he said shortly. 'You'll have to get used to it. The people will follow you – you're their kind.'

'Yes ... a convict. I know.' Brandy put his hands to his head, then lowered them again. 'Why are you quitting on us like this, Governor?' he asked softly. 'It's not just because of the little girl, is it?'

Lester shook his head.

‘I promised my wife ...’ he said.

He sat there inarticulately. He wanted to explain that a man’s duty before all else is to his wife, that she must be considered before even life-long companions – certainly before a planet that might at any time unlock violently into its individual atoms. He wanted to explain all the complex loops of reasoning he had staggered through alone. But he just sat there enduring the other’s scorn. He could tell it was scorn; Brandy had no patience with the whims of women.

‘Thanks for the promotion, anyhow,’ Brandy said at last. ‘It looks as if you’re getting out of Risim just in time.’

‘What do you mean?’ Lester asked.

‘I was not coming over here to hear what you had to say, but to tell you my news. Care to hear it now?’

Lester looked up questioningly.

‘We’ve found Risim’s booby trap, we think,’ Brandy said. ‘I’d come to fetch you to have a look at it.’

He watched Lester’s face with interest as the Governor stood up, the tug flopping about his feet.

‘You can sit down again,’ Brandy said. ‘We’ll manage this ourselves.’

In those cold words, Lester saw the kind of reputation he was in danger of leaving behind him on the planet he had made. When they spoke of him at all, they would speak of him as a coward. They were not subtle people here; they were as harsh as the world around them and would – could – only soften as it softened. Under their code of behaviour, a thing was either black or white: if Governor Lester Nixon did not go to see the booby trap, it was because Governor Lester Nixon was scared. Nobody realised that more clearly than Lester himself.

‘I’m coming with you, Mireball,’ he said. ‘Next month’s a month away.’

‘Lester!’

Both men turned at the cry. Ruthmary had come unnoticed into the room. From the expression on her face, they realised she had heard Brandy’s news. Her countenance was the colour of dirty snow.

‘My husband is on the verge of a breakdown, Mr. Mireball,’ she said stiffly.



‘So’s Risim,’ Brandy replied, buttoning up his coat with brisk fingers.

Without a word, Lester went over and kissed Ruthmary on the forehead. Pulling his outdoor clothes from a peg, he followed Brandy into the hall. Ruthmary stood where she was, transfixed, long after the outer door had slammed.

Brandy had a two-tonner with self-hauling grabs standing ready before the house, a driver lounging at its wheel. It was a typical, ugly, self-sufficient RF machine, and it did Lester’s heart good to see it as he climbed into the back beside Brandy.

‘Sure you’re well enough for this?’ Brandy asked.

‘Start her up,’ Lester said tensely.

It was a long haul into the territory Sector Six had just taken over. When they left the settled limits of Sector One, the change in landscape was very noticeable. Though the road continued, the ten-mile-wide groove ended; geonivorous machines were chewing out an extension of it now, working in a hell of pulverized rock particles. Beyond the geonivores, it was more peaceful, but bleaker. The two-tonner climbed snarling into low mountains which, on their shattered and sad flanks, bore witness to their exposure to space. Even here, the vital air-furnaces had been built, crouching among their hills of ash. As the vehicle climbed, the air grew thinner, the heavens darker. The wind died to tooth-comb fineness. Yet even here, Lester noticed, life was limping back to sheltered ridges, showing green among the slate-grays.

They echoed their way through a pass and began to descend. Before them, in a valley, lay the remnants of the capital city of old Risim. It lay split open, like a beached whale, with the massed impedimenta of Sector Six all around it in a wide circle. There was something wrong with the picture.

‘You’ve got an unusual grouping down there,’ Lester commented to Brandy, as they looked out of the observation blister.

‘It’s not from choice,’ Brandy said. ‘Our stuff is spread around in such a wide circle just because they can’t get in any farther. There’s something in the middle of the city stopping them: a power-damper field, extending half a mile in all directions. It must come from the booby trap the Risimians left.’

‘Must?’

Brandy turned to face his superior squarely.

‘What else would it be?’ he asked. ‘I’ve never really understood your attitude to this business, Governor. Angagulalatun, Vicinzo and Cobatt II were booby-trapped; Risim, in its heyday, was as much Earth’s enemy as they were – don’t you think it would have laid the same sort of trap for us as our other enemies?’

‘Perhaps I’ve never really faced up to the problem in all the years we’ve been here,’ Lester said. ‘I enjoyed RF work; I’ve never thought of Risim as an enemy planet.’

‘You’ll have to face it now.’

‘Risim may be different from the other worlds.’

‘Why should it be?’ Brandy asked bluntly.

‘Because every world is different,’ Lester said, ‘and every race is different, just as every man is different. The traps on Angagulalatun and Cobatt and Vicinzo were themselves all different. Cobatt blew almost as soon as the RF set foot on it. On Angagulalatun, nothing happened until an air pressure of five pounds had been established at sea level. And the trap on Vicinzo must have had some kind of encephalic trigger; the place blew after the RF had been there thirteen years and the population numbered twenty thousand.’

‘All right, we die a different way,’ Brandy said gloomily. ‘It’ll feel the same ...’

‘But we’ve got some kind of a chance here, don’t you see,’ Lester said. ‘On the other RF planets, they never knew what hit them. Here we have something we can tackle.’

While they were talking, the two-tonner had rolled down to the outskirts of the town. Traffic police directed them amid a chaos of camping; among silent vehicles, tents had been pitched, and silent women stood about in groups. They bumped over rock and rubble to a parking space.

‘Another hundred yards forward and the engine would have conked,’ Brandy said, offering Lester a hand down. ‘Nothing functions in the anti-power field.’

The stillness was eerie. The ionosphere having established itself, the days-long storm had died and the aurora faded into the sky. Now

temperatures were falling toward night.

‘We’ll tackle the booby trap in the morning,’ Brandy said. ‘Right now, let’s get a drink.’

‘I’d like to see it now,’ Lester said.

Brandy shrugged.

‘As you like,’ he said.

They walked forward together. Beyond the stalled vehicles, the power-damper field began. It manifested itself faintly on their body electricity, making their skins itch. Lester’s head swam and his lame leg dragged, but he knew that only his own physical condition was to blame for that.

The city closed around them. Of its might, little was left but stone and rubble; great pyramids of crumbling debris told of the millennium in which space, that great sea, had had its high tide over the land. And already on the pyramids, like scraggy hens pecking out a living, weeds grew and a toad crawled. Picking their way through the destruction. Brandy and Lester came to the booby trap.

Clusters of men stood beside it, eyeing it without speaking. Their faces were stiff with tension; their expressions seemed to have been written indelibly across their skulls.

Once, before the defeat of Risim, the booby trap had stood in an open square; now rubble covered half of it. It was a featureless dome, rising at its highest point to less than eight feet. It looked no more impressive than an eskimo’s igloo.

The grim-faced men were turning to go.

‘We’d better be going, too,’ Brandy said. ‘There’s nothing else to see. We’ll tackle the problem tomorrow.’

They followed the silent groups back through the dusk. Everyone was hurrying now; even torches would not burn in the power-damper field. Tomorrow, men would come with spades and uncover the rest of the dome, seeking an entrance. And then ... and then it was anybody’s guess what happened, Lester thought.

Despite all his other worries, he found himself thinking of the way he had left Ruthmary, with matters unresolved between them. He did not want to be blown to hell with their affairs in that state. At the time, Lester’s leaving home with Brandy had seemed fine: he was going to show them all he was

no coward; now, in among the ruins, he knew he would have been braver to have stayed with Ruthmary and let everyone else think what he would.

He climbed early into the bunk Brandy provided in his four-room trailer, hoping for sleep to cover his weakness. Sleep did not come. Instead, his mind floated back to the last days of the Risimians, and he pictured the terrible weapon with which Earth had crushed them. The Gobblers: that was the universal name for what were officially called aerdetergands; half a dozen of them could wipe an atmosphere clean off a planet in half an hour.

The Gobblers were big. At the height of the Hub Wars, Earth owned no more than six of them; but six were all that were needed. They hurtled in upon their victims on low, intra-atmospheric orbits. They leeched air through their great bodies, dis-bonding it as it went, and spraying it far out into space, whence it could never return. This implacable and terrifying ingestion of atmosphere produced the typical Gobbler noise, a sustained belch, audible all around the globe. When the belch rose to a howl and the howl to a scream and the scream to an echo of a shriek, the Gobblers had finished their ugly meal – and a planet lay dead beneath them.

The Gobblers were the most evil weapon ever produced. They won the Hub Wars for Earth; but the harvest of hatred they sowed had still to be fully reaped. No wonder most of the vanquished enemy races had seen to it that any world the Gobblers stripped remained forever uninhabitable.

After the Wars, Earth herself had been so weakened that a thousand years had lapsed before she could stretch forth her hand and touch the fruits of her victory – only to find them fruits of death.

In the blind dark, hopelessness gripped Lester. For fifteen years, he had been putting this vision away from him. So busy had he been recreating a world, he had not realised on what it was he built. Others, less absorbed, had known all along – and feared.

Ruthmary had feared.

He had been so obtuse. He remembered how clumsily he had tried to console her for Jackie's death. He had said: 'From the sea comes life. Now Jackie is there, as imperishable as the plankton, starting a whole new chain of life.'

At that, Ruthmary had wept more bitterly, and Lester had not understood why.

He was glad when the frozen dawn came and he climbed out of bed to escape from the past.

The ambiguous dome lay exposed to the sky. About it, shuffling uneasily on the rubble they had cleared, stood a crowd of RF men; a hopeless instinct for flight competed in them with curiosity.

The dome was featureless. Built of a strange, semi-translucent metal, it was untouched by time or heat or cold. Lester limped around it twice and then returned to Brandy. They stood silent. Silence lay like a malediction over everything.

Brandy licked his numb lips.

‘Looks as if it won’t hurt us if we don’t hurt it,’ he said, speaking in a low voice. ‘How about evacuating this sector for good? We’ve got the rest of the planet to work on.’

‘As long as this remains,’ Lester said, ‘we’ve got nothing. It would always mock our safety.’

‘Right, Governor, tell us what we do about it then,’ Brandy said. ‘Don’t forget, as long as it transmits this power-damper, we can’t bring up anything more ferocious than a spade against it.’

‘The damper field must be there for something more than just to draw our attention to the dome,’ Lester said thoughtfully. He fell silent, trying to work it out. This thing, he knew, was something different from that which the other RF worlds had yielded; this was no efficient but crude time bomb, such as had shattered the ill-fated Angagulalatun and Vicinzo. The Risimians had been more subtle in their gesture of farewell.

Obviously, they had intended that no power should be used to break open the dome. What, then, was the key required to open what a thousand years of silence had kept locked?

There could be only one answer ...

Lester turned to the anxious phalanxes of men. He had no need to attract their attention; every eye was on him. Stiffly, he raised his right hand above his head.

‘When I drop my hand,’ he said in a clear voice, ‘I want you all to shout ‘Hey’ as loudly as possible. Right?’

He dropped his hand.

The response, from two hundred choked throats, was negligible.

‘Louder!’ Lester called. ‘We’ve got to waken the dead!’

He raised his hand and dropped it again.

The answering shout was frighteningly loud.

A section of the dome slid open.

A great sigh rose from the crowd. Brandy gripped Lester’s arm as if he would break it.

‘You see,’ Lester said, ‘the Risimians had this place ready for emergencies. The bellowing of the Gobblers closing in overhead would activate the power-damper field and lock the dome in readiness. Outside, silence would fall forever – or until another atmosphere was established. Then another sound was needed to unlock the door.’

Brandy nodded blankly, almost as if he had not heard. He was shaking like a leaf.

‘N – now what?’ he managed to ask.

‘Now we go in,’ Lester said.

He looked around. The onlookers had vanished. Silently, ashamedly, they had scrambled away. The inherited impulses of fear had been too much for them. Only the Commander of Sector Six and the Resident Governor stood under the iron sky; but a woman was approaching them. It had, of course, been an easy matter for her to follow Lester; a Resident Governor’s wife can appropriate any vehicle in an emergency.

‘Aren’t you afraid, Rue?’ Lester asked huskily.

‘The doctor says you ought to be at home in bed!’ she exclaimed, as she came up to him.

At Lester’s side, Brandy Mireball began to laugh, fitfully and without humor. In a crisis, anything that is not the crisis releases laughter. But Lester thought he understood: Rue was concentrating on him, as he had previously concentrated on the reclamation, to exclude the chilling threat of reality. Taking her hand, he led her into the dome.

Immediately, the movable section of wall swung back into place, imprisoning them. The two of them were alone – as they had always been.

A soft yellow light illuminated the interior of the dome. The room seemed tiny, and was as featureless as the exterior, apart from a small grille five feet from the floor; and below the grille, projecting from the wall, was an open cube large enough for a man to poke his head into.

Husband and wife had barely had time to look around before a voice spoke to them through the grille. Though it was clear, it had the quality of a recording. It spoke slowly, in Prime Galactic.

‘You are the new possessors of Risim,’ it said. ‘You walk on our world. It was our world, and we loved it. But all that we loved – so it must be if you hear our voice – is now gone, obliterated. Our enemies have terrible powers; our enemies are evil. But to every race falls a time of evil and a time of good, a time of weakness and a time of strength, a time for destruction and a time for construction.

‘We are prepared to leave what remains of our loved planet even to our enemies if, by the time they hear our voice, they have turned from their old ways. Accordingly, we have devised this test, to see if they are fit to possess Risim. For know that it was fair and can be made fair again.

‘But we would rather that our world were dissolved into its component molecules than that it became a stronghold of evil. So we have arranged that, far below this dome, mighty engines of retribution lie ever ready to split our once fair world into the atoms from which it was created.

‘The closing of the door behind you activated those engines. Even now, miles below your feet, critical conditions are slowly building up.

‘This is the simple test we have devised. Five seconds – five seconds only – after our voice has stopped, the engines of retribution will be geared so that nothing whatsoever can keep them from destroying Risim. But the fusion will not take place until twenty-eight days from today. We make that humane delay so that everybody now on Risim will have time to escape – but Risim will not escape. Its end is foredoomed five seconds after our voice ceases *unless someone present loves this World enough to lay down his life for it immediately.*

‘We must have a sacrifice for the wrong done us.

‘If a head is placed in the metal box below this grille within five seconds, it will be instantly pulverized; but Risim will be preserved to grow beautiful again, and the engines of destruction stopped forever.’

The voice ceased – and before it had done so, Ruthmary was clinging to Lester.

‘You can’t do it!’ she screamed. ‘No, Lester, no, you’re all I’ve got left now! I love you, Lester! For God’s sake, Lester – Lester, no, let’s all leave this damned – ’

His clothes ripped as he pulled himself away from her. Something about not deserting Jackie, something about a man's lifework ...

Instantly after the flash which neatly sliced his neck, the grille announced, coolly, 'Risim is yours now. Tend it lovingly. Farewell!'

The section of wall slid open again. Choking with tears, Ruthmary hardly saw Brandy on his knees outside, or, far behind him, the ravaged slopes with their touch of green.