

ANC

SEPT.
25¢

STARTLING STORIES

EARLE
BERGEY

FEATURING
**THE CYBERNETIC
BRAINS**
*A Novel of
Men and Machines*
By **RAYMOND F. JONES**

**THE HARPERS OF
TITAN**
A Captain Future Novelet
By **EDMOND
HAMILTON**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

THE HARPERS OF TITAN

by Edmond Hamilton

Simon Wright watched, a small square shape of metal, hovering on silent beams



Again Simon Wright, the “Brain”, lives in a human body, and in that guise contends with the most hideous peril he has ever faced – a menace driving a planet to madness!

CHAPTER I

Shadowed Moon

His name was Simon Wright, and once he had been a man like other men. Now he was a man no longer, but a living brain, housed in a metal case, nourished by serum instead of blood, provided with artificial senses and means of motion.

The body of Simon Wright, that had known the pleasures and the ills of physical existence, had long ago mingled with the dust. But the mind of Simon Wright lived on, brilliant and unimpaired.

THE ridge lifted, gaunt and rocky, along the rim of the lichen forest, the giant growths crowding to the very crest and down the farther slope into the valley.

Here and there was a clearing around what might once have been a temple, now long fallen into ruin. The

vast ragged shapes of the lichens loomed above it, wrinkled and wind-torn and sad. Now and again a little breeze came and set them to rustling with a sound like muted weeping, shaking down a rotten, powdery dust.

Simon Wright was weary of the ridge and the dun-gray forest, weary of waiting. Three of Titan's nights had passed since he and Grag and Otho and Curt Newton, whom the System knew better as Captain Furore, had hidden their ship down in the lichen-forest and had waited here on the ridge for a man who did not come.

This was the fourth night of waiting, under the incredible glory of Titan's sky. But even the pageant of Saturn, girdled with the blazing Rings and attended by the brilliant swarm of moons, failed to lift Simon's mental spirits. Somehow the beauty above only accentuated the dreariness below.

Curt Newton said sharply, "If Keogh doesn't come tonight, I'm going down there and look for him."

He looked outward through a rift in the lichens, to the valley where Moneb lay – a city indistinct with night and distance, picked out here and there with the light of torches.

Simon spoke, his voice coming precise and metallic through the artificial resonator.

"Keogh's message warned us on no account to go into the city. Be patient, Curtis. He will come."

Otho nodded. Otho, the lean, lithe android who was so exactly human that only a disturbing strangeness in his pointed face and green, bright eyes betrayed him.

"Apparently," Otho said, "there's a devil of a mess going on in Moneb, and we're liable to make it worse if we go tramping in before we know what it's all about."

THE manlike metal form of Grag moved impatiently in the shadows with a dull clanking sound. His booming voice crashed loud against the stillness.

"I'm like Curt," he said. "I'm tired of waiting."

"We are all tired," said Simon. "But we must wait. From Keogh's message, I judge that he is neither a coward nor a fool. He knows the situation. We do not. We must not endanger him by impatience."

Curt sighed. "I know it." He settled back on the block of stone where he was sitting. "I only hope he makes it soon. These infernal lichens are getting on my nerves."



THE BRAIN

Poised, effortlessly upon the unseen magnetic beams that were his limbs, Simon watched and brooded. Only in a detached way could he appreciate the picture he presented to others – a small square metal case, with a strange face of artificial lens-eyes and resonator-mouth, hovering in the darkness.

To himself, Simon seemed almost a bodiless ego. He could not see his own strange body. He was conscious only of the steady, rhythmic throbbing of the serum-pump that served as his heart, and of the visual and auditory sensations that his artificial sense-organs gathered for him.

His lenslike eyes were capable of better vision under all conditions than the human eye, but even so he could not penetrate the shifting, tumultuous shadows of the valley. It remained a mystery of shaking moonlight,

mist and darkness.

It looked peaceful. And yet the message of this stranger, Keogh, had cried for help against an evil too great for him to fight alone.

Simon was acutely conscious of the dreary rustling of the lichens. His microphonic auditory system could hear and distinguish each separate tiny note too faint for normal ears, so that the rustling became a weaving, shifting pattern of sound, as of ghostly voices whispering – a sort of symphony of despair.

Pure fancy, and Simon Wright was not given to fancies. Yet in these nights of waiting he had developed a definite sense of foreboding. He reasoned now that this sad whispering of the forest was responsible, his brain reacting to the repeated stimulus of a sound-pattern.

Like Curt, he hoped that Keogh would come soon.

Time passed. The Rings filled the sky with supernal fire, and the moons went splendidly on 'their eternal way, bathed in the milky glow of Saturn. The lichens would not cease from their dusty weeping. Now and again Curt Newton rose and went restlessly back and forth across the clearing. Otho watched him, sitting still, his slim body bent like a steel bow. Grag remained where he was, a dark immobile giant in the shadows, dwarfing even Newton's height.

Then, abruptly, there was a sound different from all other sounds. Simon heard, and listened, and after a moment he said:

"There are two men, climbing the slope from the valley, coming this way."

Otho sprang up. Curt voiced a short, sharp "Ah!" and said, "Better take cover, until we're sure."

The four melted into the darkness.

Simon was so close to the strangers that he might have reached out one of his force-beams and touched them. They came into the clearing, breathing heavily from the long climb, looking eagerly about. One was a tall man, very tall, with a gaunt width of shoulder and a fine head. The other was shorter, broader, moving with a bearlike gait. Both were Earthmen, with the unmistakable stamp of the frontiers on them, and the hardness of physical labor. Both men were armed.

They stopped. The hope went out of them, and the tall man said despairingly, "They failed us. They didn't come. Dan, they didn't come!"

Almost, the tall man wept.

"I guess your message didn't get through," the other man said. His voice, too, was leaden. "I don't know, Keogh. I don't know what we'll do now. I guess we might as well go back."

Curt Newton spoke out of the darkness. "Hold on a minute. It's all right."

CURT moved out into the open space, his lean face and red hair clear in the moonlight. "It's he," said the stocky man. "It's Captain Fu-

ture." His voice was shaken with relief.

Keogh smiled, a smile without much humor in it. "You thought I might be dead, and someone else might keep the appointment. Not a far-fetched assumption. I've been so closely watched that I dared not try to get away before. I only just managed it tonight."

He broke off, staring, as Grag came striding up, shaking the ground with his tread. Otho moved in from beyond him, light as a leaf. Simon joined them, gliding silently from among the shadows.

Keogh laughed, a little shakily. "I'm glad to see you. If you only knew how glad I am to see you all!"

"And me!" said the stocky man. He added, "I'm Harker."

"My friend," Keogh told the Futuremen. "For many years, my friend." Then he hesitated, looking earnestly at Curt. "You will help me? I've held back down there in Moneb so far. I've kept the people quiet. I've tried to give them courage when they need it, but I'm only one man. That's a frail peg on which to hang the fate of a city."

Curt nodded gravely. "We'll do all we can. Otho – Grag! Keep watch, just in case."

Grag and Otho disappeared again. Curt looked expectantly at Keogh and Harker. The breeze had steadied to a wind, and Simon was conscious that it was rising, bringing a deeper plaint from the lichens.

Keogh sat down on a block of stone and began to talk. Hovering near him, Simon listened, watching Keogh's face. It was a good face. A wise man, Simon thought, and a strong one, exhausted now by effort and long fear.

"I was the first Earthman to come into the valley, years ago," Keogh said. "I liked the men of Moneb and they liked me. When the miners began to come in, I saw to it that there was no trouble between them and the natives. I married a girl of Moneb, daughter of one of the chief men. She's dead now, but I have a son here. And I'm one of their councilors, the only man of foreign blood ever allowed in the Inner City.

"So you see, I've swung a lot of weight and have used it to keep peace here between native and outlander. But *now!*"

He shook his head. "There have always been men in Moneb who hated to see Earthmen and Earth civilization come in and lessen their own influence. They've hated the Earthmen who live in New Town and work the mines. They'd have tried long ago to force them out, and would have embroiled Moneb in a hopeless struggle, if they'd dared defy tradition and use their one possible weapon. Now, they're bolder and are planning to use that weapon."

Curt Newton looked at him keenly. "What is this weapon, Keogh?"

Keogh's answer was a question. "You Futuremen know these worlds well – I suppose you've heard of the

Harpers?"

Simon Wright felt a shock of surprise. He saw incredulous amazement on Curt Newton's face.

"You don't mean that your malcontents plan to use the *Harpers* as a weapon?"

Keogh nodded somberly. "They do."

Memories of old days on Titan were flashing through Simon's mind; the strange, strange form of life that dwelt deep in the great forests, the unforgettable beauty wedded to dreadful danger.

"The Harpers could be a weapon, yes," he said, after a moment. "But the weapon-would slay those who wielded it, unless they were protected from it."

"Long ago," Keogh answered, "the men of Moneb had such a protection. They used the Harpers, then. But use of them was so disastrous that it was forbidden, put under a tabu.

"Now, those who wish to force out the Earthmen here plan to break that tabu. They want to bring in the Harpers, and use them."

Harker added, "Things were all right until the old king died. He was a man. His son is a weakling. The fanatics against outland civilization have got to him, and he's afraid of his own shadow. Keogh has been holding him on his feet, against them."

SIMON saw the almost worshipful trust in Harker's eyes as he glanced at his friend. "They've tried to kill Keogh, of course," Harker said. "With him gone, there'd be no leader against them." – Keogh's voice rose, to be heard over the booming and thrumming of the lichens.

"A full council has been called for two days from now. That will be the time of decision – whether we, or the breakers of tabu, will rule in Moneb. And I know, as I know truth, that some land of a trap has been set for me.

"That is where I will need you Futuremen's help, most desperately. But you must not be seen in the town. Any strangers now would excite suspicion, and you are too well known and –" he glanced at Simon and added apologetically, "distinctive."

He paused. In that pause, the boom and thunder of the lichen was like the slatting of great sails in the wind, and Simon could not hear the little furtive sound from behind him until it was too late – a second too late.

A man leaped into the clearing. Simon had a fleeting glimpse of copper-gold limbs and a killer's face, and a curious weapon raised. Simon spoke, but the bright small dart was already fled.

In the same breath, Curt turned and drew and fired.

The man dropped. Out in the shadows another gun flashed, and they heard Otho's fierce cry.

There was a timeless instant when no one moved, and then Otho came back into the clearing. "There were

only two of them, I think."

"They followed us!" Harker exclaimed. "They followed us up here to –"

He had been turning, as he spoke. He suddenly stopped speaking, and then cried out Keogh's name.

Keogh lay face down in the powdery dust. From out his temple stood a slim bronzed shaft little larger than a needle, and where it pierced the flesh was one dark drop of blood.

Simon hovered low over the Earthman. His sensitive beams touched the throat, the breast, lifted one lax eyelid.

Simon said, without hope, "He still lives."

CHAPTER II

Unearthly Stratagem

GRAG carried Keogh through the forest and, tall man that Keogh was, he seemed like a child in the robot's mighty arms. The wind howled, and the lichens shook and thundered, and it was growing darker.

"Hurry!" said Harker. "Hurry – there may still be a chance!"

His face had the white, staring look that comes with shock. Simon was still possessed of emotion – sharper, clearer emotions than before, he thought, divorced as they were from the chemical confusions of the flesh. Now he knew a great pity for Harker.

"The *Comet* is just ahead," Curt told him.

Presently they saw the ship, a shadowed bulk of metal lost among the giant growths. Swiftly they took Keogh in, and Grag laid him carefully on the table in the tiny laboratory. He was still breathing, but Simon knew that it would not be for long.

The laboratory of the *Comet*, for all its cramped size, was fitted with medical equipment comparable to most hospitals – most of it designed for its particular purpose by Simon himself, and by Curt Newton. It had been used many times before for the saving of lives. Now the two of them, Simon and Curt together, worked feverishly to save Keogh.

Curt wheeled a marvellously compact adaptation of the Fraser unit into place. Within seconds the tubes were clamped into Keogh's arteries and the pumps were working, keeping the blood flowing normally, feeding in a stimulant solution directly to the heart. The oxygen unit was functioning. Presently Curt nodded.

"Pulse and respiration normal. Now let's have a look at the brain."

He swung the ultrafluoroscope into position and switched it on. Simon looked into the screen, hovering close to Curt's shoulder.

"The frontal lobe is torn beyond repair," he said.

"See the tiny barbs on that dart? Deterioration of the cells has already set in."

Harker spoke from the doorway. "Can't you do something? Can't you save him?" He stared into Curt's face for a moment, and then his head dropped forward and he said dully, "No, of course you can't. I knew it when he was hit."

All the strength seemed to run out of him. He leaned against the door, a man tired and beaten and sad beyond endurance.

"It's bad enough to lose a friend. But now everything he fought for is lost, too. The fanatics will win, and they'll turn loose something that will destroy not only the Earthmen here, but the entire populace of Moneb too, in the long run."

Tears began to run slowly from Harker's eyes. He did not seem to notice them. He said, to no one, to the universe, "Why couldn't I have seen him in time? Why couldn't I have killed him – in time?"

For a long, long moment, Simon looked at Harker. Then he glanced again into the screen, and then aside at Curt, who nodded and slowly switched it off. Curt began to remove the tubes of the Fraser unit from Keogh's wrists.

Simon said, "Wait, Curtis. Leave them as they are."

Curt straightened, a certain startled wonder in his eyes. Simon glided to where Harker stood, whiter and more stricken than the dead man on the table.

Simon spoke his name three times, before he roused himself to answer.

"Yes?"

"How much courage have you, Harker? As much as Keogh? Am much as I?"

Harker shook his head.

"There are times when courage doesn't help a bit."

"Listen to me, Harker! Have you courage to walk be-beside Keogh into Moneb, knowing that he is dead?"

The eyes of the stocky man widened. And Curt Newton came to Simon and said in a strange voice, "What are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking of a brave man who died in the act of seeking help from us. I am thinking, of many innocent men and women who will die, unless ... Harker, it is true, is it not, that the success of your fight depended on Keogh?"

HARKER'S gaze dwelt upon the body stretched on the table – a body that breathed and pulsed with the semblance of life borrowed from the sighing pumps.

"That is true," he said. "That's why they killed him. He was the leader. With him gone –" Harker's broad hands made a gesture of utter loss.

"Then it must not be known that Keogh died."

Curt said harshly, "No! Simon, you can't do it!"

"Why not, Curtis? You are perfectly capable of completing the operation."

"They've killed the man once. They'll be ready to do it again. Simon, you can't risk yourself! Even if I could do the operation – no!"

Something queerly pleading came into Curt's gray eyes. "This is my kind of a job, Simon. Mine and Grag's and Otho's. Let us do it."

"And how will you do it?" Simon asked. "By force? By reasoning? You are not omnipotent, Curtis. Nor are Grag and Otho. You, all three of you, would be going into certain death, and even more certain defeat. And I know you. You *would* go."

Simon paused. It seemed to him suddenly that he had gone mad, that he must be mad to contemplate what he was about to do. And yet, it was the only way – the only possible chance of preventing an irretrievable disaster.

Simon knew what the Harpers could do, in the wrong hands. He knew what would happen to the Earthmen in New Town. And he knew too what retribution for that would overtake the many guiltless people of Moneb, as well as the few guilty ones.

He glanced beyond Harker and saw Grag standing there, and Otho beside him, his green eyes very bright, and Simon thought, I made them both, I and Roger Newton. I gave them hearts and minds and courage. Some day they will perish, but it will not be because I failed them.

And there was Curt, stubborn, reckless, driven by the demon of his own loneliness, a bitter searcher after knowledge, a stranger to his own kind.

Simon thought. We made him so, Otho and Grag and I. And we wrought too well. There is too much iron in him. He will break, but never bend – and I will not have him broken because of me!

Harker said, very slowly, "I don't understand."

Simon explained. "Keogh's body is whole. Only the brain was destroyed. If the body were supplied with another brain – mine – Keogh would seem to live again, to finish his task in Moneb."

Harker stood for a long moment without speaking. Then he whispered, "Is that possible?"

"Quite possible. Not easy, not even safe – but possible."

Harker's hands clenched into fists. Something, a light that might have been hope, crept back into his eyes.

"Only we five," said Simon, "know that Keogh died. There would be no difficulty there. And I know the language of Titan, as I know most of the System tongues."

"But I would still need help – a guide, who knew' Keogh's life and could enable me to live it for the short time that is necessary. You, Harker. And I warn you, it will not be easy."

Harker's voice was low, but steady. "If you can do

the one thing, I can do the other."

Curt Newton said angrily, "No one is going to do anything of the sort. Simon, I won't have any part of it!"

The stormy look that Simon knew so well had come into Curt's face. If Simon had been able to, he would have smiled. Instead, he spoke exactly as he had spoken so many times before, long ago when Curt Newton was a small red-headed boy playing in the lonely corridors of the laboratory hidden under Tycho, with no companions but the robot, the android, and Simon, himself.

"You will do as I say, Curtis!" He turned to the others. "Grag, take Mr. Harker into the main cabin. See that he sleeps, for he will need his strength. Otho, Curtis will want your help."

Otho came in and shut the door. He glanced from Simon to Curt and back again, his eyes brilliant with a certain acid amusement. Curt stood where he was, his jaw set, unmoving.

SIMON glided over to the cabinets built solidly against one wall. Using the wonderfully adaptable force-beams more skilfully than a man uses his hands, he took from them the needful things – the trephine saw, the clamps and sutures, the many-shaped delicate knives. And the other things, that had set modern surgery so far ahead of the crude Twentieth Century techniques. The compounds that prevented bleeding, the organic chemicals that promoted cell regeneration so rapidly and fully that a wound would heal within hours and leave no scar, the Stimulants and anaesthetics that prevented shock, the neurone compounds.

The UV tube was pulsing overhead, sterilizing everything in the laboratory. Simon, whose vision was better and touch more sure than that of any surgeon dependent on human form, made the preliminary incision in Keogh's skull.

Curt Newton had still not moved. His face was as set and stubborn as before, but there was a pallor about it now, something of desperation.

Simon said sharply, "Curtis!"

Curt moved then. He came to the table and put his hands on it beside the dead man's head, and Simon saw that they trembled.

"I can't," he whispered. "Simon, I can't do it. I'm afraid."

Simon looked steadily into his eyes. "There is no need to be. You will not let me die."

He held out a glittering instrument. Slowly, like a man in a dream, Curt took it.

Otho's bright gaze softened. He nodded to Simon, across Curt's shoulder, and smiled. There was admiration in that smile, for both of them.

Simon busied himself with other things.

"Pay particular attention, Curtis, to the trigeminal, glossopharyngeal, facial –"

"I know all about that," said Curt, with a peculiar ir-

ritation.

"– pneumogastric, spinal accessory, and hypoglossal nerves," Simon finished. Vials and syringes were laid in a neat row. "Here is the anaesthetic to be introduced into my serum-stream. And immediately after the operation, this is to be injected beneath the dura and pia mater."

Curt nodded. His hands had stopped shaking, working now with swift, sure skill. His mouth had thinned to a grim line.

Simon thought, He'll do. He'll always do.

There was a moment, then, of waiting. Simon looked down at the man John Keogh and of a sudden fear took hold of him, a deep terror of what he was about to do.

He was content as he was. Once, many years before, he had made his choice between extinction and his present existence. The genius of Curt's own father had saved him then, given him new life, and Simon had made peace with that life, strange as it was, and turned it to good use. He had discovered the advantages of his new form – the increased skills, the ability to think clearly with a mind unfettered by useless and uncontrollable impulses of the flesh. He had learned to be grateful for them.

And now, after all these years ...

He thought, I cannot do it, after all! I, too, am afraid – not of dying, but of life.

And yet, beneath that fear was longing, a hunger that Simon had thought mercifully dead these many years.

The longing to be once again a man, a human being clothed in flesh.

The cold, clear mind of Simon Wright, the precise, logical unwavering mind, reeled under the impact of these mingled dreads and hungers. They leaped up full stature from their graves in his subconscious. He was shocked that he could still be prey to emotion, and the voice of his mind cried out, I cannot do it! No, I cannot!

Curt said quietly, "All ready, Simon."

Slowly, very slowly, Simon moved and came to rest beside John Keogh. He saw Otho watching him, with a look of pain and understanding, and – yes, envy. Being unhuman himself, Otho would know, where others could only guess.

Curt's face was cut from stone. The serum-pump broke its steady rhythm, and then went on.

Simon Wright passed quietly into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

Once Born of Flesh

HEARING came first. A distant confusion of sounds, seeming very dull and blurred. Simon's first thought was that something had gone wrong with his auditory mechanism. Then a chill wing of memory brushed him, and in its wake came a pang of fear, and a sense of *wrongness*.

It was dark. Why should it be so dark in the *Comet*? From far off, someone called his name. "Simon! Simon, open your eyes!"

Eyes?

Again that dull inchoate terror. His mind was heavy. It refused to function, and the throb of the serum-pump was gone.

The serum-pump, Simon thought. It has stopped, arid I am dying!

He must call for help. That had happened once before, and Curt had saved him. He cried out, "Curtis, the serum-pump has stopped!"

The voice was not his own, and it was formed so strangely.

"I'm here, Simon. Open your eyes." A long unused series of motor relays clicked over in Simon's brain at that repeated command. Without conscious volition he raised his eyelids. Someone's eyelids, surely not his own! He had not had eyelids for many years!

He saw.

Vision like the hearing, dim and blurred. The familiar laboratory seemed to swim in a wavering haze. Curt's face, and Otho's, and above them the looming form of Grag, and a strange man ... No, not strange; he had a name and Simon knew it – Harker.

That name started the chain, and Simon remembered. Memory pounced upon him, worried him, tore him, and now he could *feel the fear* – the physical anguish of it, the sweating, the pounding of the heart, the painful contraction of the great bodily ganglia.

"Raise your hand, Simon. Raise your right hand." There was a strained undertone in Curt's voice. Simon understood. Curt was afraid he might not have done things properly.

Uncertainly, like a child who has not yet learned co-ordination, Simon raised his right hand. Then his left. He looked at them for an endless moment and let them fall. Drops of saline moisture stung his eyes, and he remembered them. He remembered tears.

"You're all right," Curt said shakily. He helped Simon raise his head and held a glass to his lips. "Can you drink this? It will clear away the fog, give you strength."

Simon drank, and the act of drinking had wonder in it.

The potion counteracted the remaining effects of the

anaesthetic. Sight and hearing cleared, and he had his mind under control again. He lay still for some time, trying to adjust himself to the all but forgotten sensations of the flesh.

The little things. The crispness of a sheet against the skin, the warmth, the pleasure of relaxed lips. The memory of sleep.

He sighed, and in that, too, there was wonder. "Give me your hand, Curtis. I will stand."

Curt was on one side, Otho on the other, steadying him. And Simon Wright, in the body of John Keogh, rose from the table where he had lain and stood upright, a man and whole.

By the doorway, Harker fell forward in a dead faint.

Simon looked at him, the strong stocky man crumpled on the floor, his face gray and sick. He said, with a queer touch of pity for all humanity, "I told him it would not be easy."

But even Simon had not realized just how hard it would be.

There were so many things to be learned all over again. Long used to a weightless, effortless ease of movement, this tall rangy body he now inhabited seemed heavy and awkward, painfully slow. He had great difficulty in managing it. At first his attempts to walk were a series of ungainly staggerings wherein he must cling to something to keep from falling.

His sense of balance had to undergo a complete readjustment. And the dullness of his sight and hearing bothered him. That was only comparative, he knew – Keogh's sight and hearing had been excellent, by all human standards. But they lacked the precision, the selectivity, the clarity to which Simon had become accustomed. He felt as though his senses were somehow muffled, as by a veil.

And it was a strange thing, when he stumbled or made an incautious movement, to feel pain again.

BUT as he began to gain control over this complicated bulk of bone and muscle and nerve, Simon found himself taking joy in it. The endless variety of sensory and tactile impressions, the feeling of life, of warm blood flowing, the knowing of heat and cold and hunger were fascinating.

Once born of flesh, he thought, and clenched his hands together. What have I done? What madness have I done?

He must not think of that, nor of himself. He must think of nothing but the task to be done, in the name of John Keogh who was dead.

Harker recovered from his faint. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "It was just that I saw him – you – rise up and stand, it –" He did not finish. "I'm all right, now. You don't have to worry."

Simon noticed that he kept his eyes averted as much as possible. But there was a dogged look about him that

said he told the truth.

"We ought to get back as soon as you can make it," Harker said. "We – Keogh and I, have been gone too long as it is."

He added, "There's just one thing. What about Dion?"

"Dion?"

"Keogh's son."

Simon said slowly, "No need to tell the boy. He could not understand, and it will only torture him."

Mercifully, he thought, the time would be short. But he wished that Keogh had not had a son.

Curt interrupted. "Simon, I've been talking to Harker. The council is tonight, only a few hours away. And you will have to go alone into the Inner City, for there Harker is not allowed to enter."

"But Otho and I are going to try to get around Moneb and into the council hall, secretly. Harker tells me that was Keogh's idea, and it's a good one – if it works. Grag will stay with the ship, on call if necessary."

He handed Simon two objects, a small mono-wave audio disc and a heavy metal box only four inches square.

"We'll keep in touch with the audios," he said. "The other is a hasty adaptation of the *Comet's* own repellor field, but tuned for sonic vibrations. I had to rob two of the coil units. What do you think of it?"

Simon examined the tiny box, the compact, cunning interior arrangement of oscillators, the capsule power unit, the four complicated grids.

"The design might have been further simplified, Curtis – but, under the circumstances, a creditable job. It will serve very well, in case of necessity."

"Let's hope," said Curt feelingly, "that there won't be any such case." He looked at Simon and smiled. His eyes held a deep pride and admiration.

"Good luck," he said.

Simon held out his hand. It was long and long since he had done that. He was amazed to find his voice unsteady.

"Take care," he said. "All of you."

He turned and went out, going still a bit uncertainly, and behind him he heard Curt speaking low and savagely to Harker.

"If you let anything happen to him, I'll lull you with my own hands!"

Simon smiled.

Harker joined him, and they went together through the lichen forest, ghostly under the dim, far Sun. The tall growths were silent now that the wind had died. And as they went, Harker talked of Moneb and the men and women who dwelt there. Simon listened, knowing that his life depended on remembering what he heard.

But even that necessity could not occupy more than one small part of his mind. The rest of it was busy with the other things – the bitter smell of dust, the chill bite

of the air in the shaded places, the warmth of the sun in the clearings, the intricate play of muscles necessary to the taking of a step, the rasp of lichen fronds over unprotected skin, the miracle of breathing, of sweating, of grasping an object with five fingers of flesh.

The little things one took for granted. The small, miraculous incredible things that one never noticed until they were gone.

He had seen the forest before as a dun-gray monochrome, heard it as a pattern of rustling sound. It had been without temperature, scent or feel. Now it had all of these things. Simon was overwhelmed with a flood of impressions, poignant almost beyond enduring.

HE gathered strength and sureness as he went. By the time he breasted the slope of the ridge, he could find pleasure in the difficulty of climbing, scrambling up over treacherous slides of dust, choking, coughing as the acrid powder invaded his lungs.

Harker swore, shambling bearlike up the steep way among the lichens. And suddenly Simon laughed. He could not have said what made him do so. But it was good to laugh again.

They avoided the clearing by common consent. Harker led the way, lower down across the ridge. They came out onto open ground, and Simon was touched beyond measure to find that he had a shadow.

They paused to get their breath, and Harker glanced sidelong at Simon, his eyes full of a strange curiosity.

"How does it feel?" he asked. "How does it feel to be a man again?"

Simon did not answer. He could not. There were no words. He looked away from Harker, out over the valley that lay so quiet under the shadowy Sun. He was filled with a strange excitement, so that he felt himself tremble. As though suddenly frightened by what he had said, and all the things that were implicit in that question, Harker turned suddenly and plunged down the slope, almost running, and Simon followed. Once he slipped and caught himself, gashing his hand against a rock. He stood motionless, watching with wondering eyes the slow red drops that ran from the cut, until Harker had called him three times by Keogh's name, and once by his own.

They avoided the New Town. "No use asking for trouble," Harker said, and led the way past it down a ravine. But they could see it in the distance, a settlement of metalloy houses on a shoulder of the ridge, below the black mouth of the mines. Simon thought the town was strangely quiet.

"See the shutters on the windows?" Harker asked. "See the barricades in the streets? They're waiting, waiting for tonight."

He did not speak again. At the foot of the ridge they came to an open plain, dotted with clumps of grayish

scrub. They began to cross it, toward the outskirts of the city.

But as they approached Moneb a group of men came running to meet them. At their head Simon saw a tall, dark-haired boy.

Harker said, "That is your son."

His skin a lighter gold, his face a mixture of Keogh's and something of a softer beauty, his eyes very direct and proud, Dion was what Simon would have expected.

He felt a sense of guilt as he greeted the boy by name. Yet mingled with it was a strange feeling of pride. He thought suddenly, I wish that I had had a son like this, in the old days before I changed.

And then, desperately, "I must not think these things! The lure of the flesh is pulling me back."

Dion was breathless with haste, his face showing the marks of sleeplessness and worry.

"Father, we've scoured the valley for you! Where have you been?"

Simon started the explanation that he had concerted with Harker, but the boy cut him short, racing from one thing to another in an urgent flood of words.

"You didn't come, and we were afraid something had happened to you. And while you were gone, they advanced the time of the council! They hoped you wouldn't come back at all, but if you did, they were going to make sure it was too late."

Dion's strong young hand gripped Simon's arm. "They're already gathering in the council hall! Come on. There may still be time, but we must hurry!"

Harker looked grimly over the boy's head at Simon. "It's come already."

With Keogh's impatient son, and the men with him, they hurried on into the city.

Houses of mud brick, generations old, and towering above them the wall of the Inner City, and above that still the roofs and squat, massive towers of the palaces and temples, washed with a kind of lime and painted with ocher and crimson.

THE air was full of smells – of food and the smoke of Cooking fires, acrid-sweet, of dust, of human bodies oiled and fragrant and musky, of old brick crumbling in the sun, of beasts in pens, of unknown spices. Simon breathed them deeply, and listened to the echo of his footsteps ring hollow from the walls. He felt the rising breeze cold on his face that was damp with sweat. And again the excitement shook him, and with it came a sort of awe at the magnificence of human sensation.

I had forgotten so much, he thought. And how was it possible ever to forget?

He walked down the streets of Moneb, striding as a tall man strides, his head erect, a proud fire in his eyes. The dark-haired folk with skins of golden copper watched him from the doorways and sent the name of

Keogh whispering up the lanes and the twisting alleys.

It came to Simon that there was yet another thing in the air of Moneb – a thing called fear.

They came to the gates in the inner wall. Here Harker dropped helplessly back with the other men, and Simon and the son of Keogh went on alone.

Temple and palace rose above him, impressive and strong, bearing in heroic frescoes the history of the kings of Moneb. Simon hardly saw them. There was a tightness in him now, a gathering of nerves.

This was the test – now, before he was ready for it. This was the time when he must not falter, or the thing he had done would be for nothing, and the Harpers would be brought into the valley of Moneb.

Two round towers of brick, a low and massive doorway. Dimness, lighted by torches, red light flaring on coppery flesh, on the ceremonial robes of the councillors, here and there on a helmet of barbaric design. Voices, clamoring over and through each other. A feeling of tension so great that the nerves screamed with it.

Dion pressed his arm and said something that Simon did not catch, but the smile, the look of love and pride, were unmistakable. Then the boy was gone, to the shadowy benches beyond.

Simon stood alone.

At one end of the low, oblong hall, beside the high, gilded seat of the king, he saw a group of helmeted men looking toward him with hatred they did not even try to conceal, and with it, a contempt that could only come from triumph.

And suddenly from out of the uneasy milling of the throng before him an old man stepped and put his hands on Simon's shoulders, and peered at him with anguished eyes.

"It is too late, John Keogh," the old man said hoarsely. "It is all for nothing. They have brought the Harpers in!"

CHAPTER IV

The Harpers

SIMON felt a cold shock of recoil. He had not looked for this. He had not expected that now, this soon, he might be called upon to meet the Harpers.

He had met them once before, years ago. He knew the subtle and terrible danger of them. It had shaken him badly then, when he was a brain divorced from flesh. What would it do to him, now that he dwelt again in a vulnerable, unpredictable human body?

His hand closed tightly on the tiny metal box in his pocket. He must gamble that it would protect him from the Harpers' power. But, remembering that experience of years ago, he dreaded the test.

He asked the old councillor, "Do you know this to be true, about the Harpers?"

"Taras and two others were seen at dawn, coming back from the forest, each bearing a hidden thing. And – they wore the Helmets of Silence."

The old man gestured toward the group of men by the king's throne who looked with such triumphant hatred at he whom they thought to be John Keogh.

"See, they wear them still!"

Swiftly, Simon studied the helmets. At first glance they had seemed no more than the ordinary bronze battle-gear of a barbaric warrior. Now he saw that they were of curious design, covering the ears and the entire cranial area, and overlaid as though padded with many layers of some insulating material.

The Helmets of Silence. He knew, now, that Keogh had spoken truly when he told of an ancient means of protection used long ago by the men of Moneb against the Harpers. Those helmets would protect, yes.

The king of Moneb rose from his throne. And the nervous uproar in the hall stilled to a frozen tension.

A young man, the king. Very young, very frightened, weakness and stubbornness mingled in his face. His head was bare.

"We of Moneb have too long tolerated strangers in our valley – have even suffered one of them to sit in this council and influence our decisions," he began.

Here there was a sharp uneasy turning of heads toward "Keogh."

"The strangers' ways more and more color the lives of our people. They must go – all of them! And since they will not go willingly, they must be forced!"

He had learned the speech by rote. Simon knew that from the way in which he stumbled over it, the way in which his eyes slid to the tallest of the cloaked and helmeted men beside him, for prompting and strength. The dark, tall man whom Simon recognized from Harker's description as Keogh's chief enemy, Taras.

"We cannot force the Earthmen out with our darts and spears. Their weapons are too strong. But we too have a weapon, one they cannot fight! It was forbidden to us, by foolish kings who were afraid it might be used against them. But now we must use it.

"Therefore I demand that the old tabu be lifted! I demand that we invoke the power of the Harpers to drive the Earthmen forth!"

There was a taut, unhappy silence in the hall. Simon saw men looking at him, the eager confidence in young Dion's eyes. He knew that they placed in him their desperate last hope of preventing this thing.

They were right, for whatever was done he must do alone. Curt Newton and Otho could not possibly have yet made their way secretly by back ways to this council hall.

Simon strode forward. He looked around him. Because of what he was, a kind of fierce exaltation took

him, to be once more a man among men. It made his voice ring loud, thundering from the low vault.

"Is it not true that the king fears, not the Earthmen, but Taras – and that Taras is bent not on freeing Moneb from a mythical yoke, but in placing one of his own upon our necks?"

There was a moment of utter silence in which they all, king and councilors alike, stared at him aghast. And in the silence, Simon said grimly:

"I speak for the council! There will be no lifting of tabu – and he that brings the Harpers into Moneb does so under pain of death!"

For one short moment the councilors recovered their courage and voiced it. The hall shook with the cheering. Under cover of the noise Taras bent and spoke into the king's ear, and Simon saw the face of the king become pallid.

FROM behind the high seat Taras lifted a helmet bossed in gold and placed it on the king's head. A Helmet of Silence.

The cheering faded, and was not.

The king said hoarsely, "Then for the good of Moneb, I must disband the council,"

Taras stepped forward. He looked directly at Simon, and his eyes smiled. "We had foreseen your traitorous counsels, John Keogh. And so we came prepared."

He flung back his cloak. Beneath it, in the curve of his left arm, was something wrapped in silk.

Simon instinctively stepped back.

Taras ripped the silk away. And in his hands was a living creature no larger than a dove, a thing of silver and rose-pearl and delicate frills of shining membrane, and large, soft, gentle eyes.

A dweller in the deep forests, a shy sweet bearer of destruction, an angel of madness and death.

A Harper!

A low moan rose among the councilors, and there was a shifting and a swaying of bodies poised for flight. Taras said, "Be still. There is time enough for running, when I give you leave."

The councilors were still. The king was still, white-faced upon his throne. But on the shadowy benches, Simon saw Keogh's son bent forward, yearning toward the man he thought to be his father, his face alight with a child's faith.

Taras stroked the creature in his hands, his head bent low over it.

The membranous frills began to lift arid stir. The rose-pearl body pulsed, and there broke forth a ripple of music like the sound of a muted harp, infinitely sweet and distant.

The eyes of the Harper glowed. It was happy, pleased to be released from the binding silk that had kept its membranes useless for the making of music. Taras continued to stroke it gently, and it responded

with a quivering freshet of song, the liquid notes running and trilling upon the silent air.

And two more of the helmeted men brought forth silvery, soft-eyed captives from under their cloaks, and they began to join their music together, timidly at first, and then more and more without hesitation, until the council hall was full of the strange wild harping and men stood still because they were too entranced now to move.

Even Simon was not proof against that infinitely poignant tide of thrilling sound. He felt his body respond, every nerve quivering with a pleasure akin to pain.

He had forgotten the effect of music on the human consciousness. For many years he had forgotten music. Now, suddenly, all those long-closed gates between mind and body were flung open by the soaring song of the Harpers. Clear, lovely, thoughtless, the very voice of life unfettered, the music filled Simon with an aching hunger for he knew not what. His mind wandered down vague pathways thronged with shadows, and his heart throbbed with a solemn joy that was close to tears.

Caught in the sweet wild web of that harping, he stood motionless, dreaming, forgetful of fear and danger, of everything except that somewhere in that music was the whole secret of creation, and that he was poised on the very edge of understanding the subtle secret of that song.

Song of a newborn universe joyously shouting its birth-cry, of young suns calling to each other in exultant strength, the thunderous chorus of star-voices and the humming bass of the racing, spinning worlds!

Song of life, growing, burgeoning, bursting, on every world, complicated counterpoint of a million million species voicing the ecstasy of being in triumphant chorus!

Something deep in Simon Wright's tranced mind warned him that he was being trapped by that hypnotic web of sound, that he was falling deeper, deeper, into the Harpers' grip. But he could not break the spell of that singing.

Soaring singing of the leaf drinking the sun, of the bird on the wing, of the beast warm in its burrow, of the young, bright miracle of love, of birth, of living!

And then the song changed. The beauty and joy faded from it, and into the sounds came a note of terror, growing, growing ...

IT came to Simon then that Taras was speaking to the thing he held, and that the soft eyes of the Harper were afraid.

The creature's simple mind was sensitive to telepathic impulses, and Taras was filling its mild emptiness with thoughts of danger and of pain, so that its membranes shrilled now to a different note.

The other Harpers picked it up. Shivering, vibrating together and across each other's rhythms, the three small rose-pearl beings flooded the air with a shuddering sound that was the essence of all fear.

Fear of a blind universe that lent its creatures life only to snatch it from them, of the agony and death that always and forever must rend the bright fabric of living! Fear of the somber depths of darkness and pain into which all life must finally descend, of the shadows that closed down so fast, so fast!

That awful threnody of primal terror that shuddered from the Harpers struck icy fingers of dread across the heart. Simon recoiled from it, he could not bear it, he knew that if he heard it long he must go mad.

Only dimly was he aware of the terror among the other councilors, the writhing of their faces, the movements of their hands. He tried to cry out but his voice was lost in the screaming of the Harpers, going ever higher and higher until it was torture to the body.

And still Taras bent over the Harper, cruel-eyed, driving it to frenzy with the power of his mind. And still the Harpers screamed, and now the sound had risen and part of it had slipped over the threshold of hearing, and the super-sonic notes stabbed the brain like knives.

A man bolted past Simon. Another followed, and another, and then more and more, clawing, trampling, falling, floundering in the madness of panic. And he himself must flee!

He would *not* flee! Something held him from the flight his body craved – some inner core of thought hardened and strengthened by his long divorce from the flesh. It steadied him, made him fight back with iron resolution, to reality.

His shaking hand drew out the little metal box. The switch clicked. Slowly, as the power of the thing built up, it threw out a high, shrill keening sound.

"The one weapon against the Harpers!" Curt had said. "The only thing that can break sound is – sound!"

The little repeller reached out its keening sonic vibrations and caught at the Harpers' terrible singing, like a claw.

It clawed and twisted and broke that singing. It broke it, by its subtle sonic interference, into shrieking dissonances.

Simon strode forward, toward the throne and toward Taras. And now into the eyes of Taras had come a deadly doubt.

The Harpers, wild and frightened now, strove against the keening sound that broke their song into hideous discord. The shuddering sonic struggle raged, much of it far above the level of hearing, and Simon felt his body plucked and shaken by terrible vibrations.

He staggered, but he went on. The faces of Taras and the others were contorted by pain. The king had fainted on his throne.

Storm of shattered harmonies, of splintered sound, .

shrieked like the very voice of madness around the throne. Simon, his mind darkening, knew that he could endure no more ...

And suddenly it was over. Beaten, exhausted, the Harpers stilled the wild vibration of their membranes. Utterly silent, they remained motionless in the hands of their captors, their soft eyes glazed with hopeless terror.

Simon laughed. He swayed a little on his feet and said to Taras,

"My weapon is stronger than yours!"

Taras dropped the Harper. It crawled away and hid itself beneath the throne. Taras whispered,

"Then we must have it from you, Earthman!"

He sprang toward Simon. On his heels came the others, mad with the bitter fury of defeat when they had been so sure of victory.

Simon snatched out the audio-disc and raised it to his lips, pressing its button and crying out the one word, "Hurry!"

He felt that it was too late. But not until now, not until this moment when fear conquered the force of tradition, could Curt and Otho have entered this forbidden place without provoking the very outbreak that must be prevented.

SIMON went down beneath his attackers' rush. As he went down, he saw that the councilors who had fled were running back to help him. He heard their voices shouting, and he saw the boy Dion among them.

Something struck cruelly against his head, and there was a crushing weight upon him. Someone screamed, and he caught the bright sharp flash of darts through the torchlight.

He tried to rise, but he could not. He was near unconsciousness, aware only of a confusion of movement and ugly sounds. He smelled blood, and he knew pain.

He must have moved, for he found himself on his hands and knees, looking down into the face of Dion. The shank of a copper dart stood out from the boy's breast, and there was a streak of red across the golden skin. His eyes met Simon's, in a dazed, wondering look. He whispered uncertainly:

"Father!"

He crept into Simon's arms. Simon held him, and Dion murmured once more and then sighed. Simon continued to hold him, though the boy had become very heavy and his eyes looked blankly now into nothingness.

It came to Simon that the hall had grown quiet. A voice spoke to him. He lifted his head and saw Curt standing over him, and Otho, both staring at him anxiously. He could not see them clearly. He said, "The boy thought I was his father. He clung to me and called me Father as he died."

Otho took Dion's body and laid it gently on the

stones.

Curt said, "It's all over, Simon. We got here in time, and it's all right."

Simon rose. Taras and his men were dead. Those who had tried to foster hatred were gone, and not ever again would Harpers be brought into Moneb. That was what the pale, shaken councilors around him were telling him.

He could not hear them clearly. Not so clearly, somehow, as the fading whisper of a dying boy.

He turned and walked out of the council hall, onto the steps. It was dark now. There were torches flaring, and the wind blew cold, and he was very tired.

Curt stood beside him. Simon said, "I will go back to the ship."

He saw the question in Curt's eyes, the question that he did not quite dare to ask.

Heartsick, Simon spoke the lines that a Chinese poet had written long ago.

" 'Now I know, that the ties of flesh and blood only bind us to a load of grief and sorrow.' "

He shook his head. "I will return to what I was. I

could not bear the agony of a second human life – no!"

Curt did not answer. He took Simon's arm and they walked together across the court.

Behind them Otho came, carrying gently three small creatures of silver and rose-pearl, who began now to sound ripples of muted music, faint but hopeful at first, then soaring swiftly to a gladness of prisoners newly freed.

They buried the body of John Keogh in the clearing where he had died, and the boy Dion lay beside him. Over them, Curt and Grag and Otho built a cairn of stones with Harker's help.

From the shadows, Simon Wright watched, a small square shape of metal hovering on silent beams, again a living brain severed forever from human form.

It was done, and they parted from Harker and went down through the great booming lichens toward the ship. Curt and the robot and android paused and looked back at the tall cairn towering lonely against the stars.

But Simon did not look back.