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REQUIEM FOR A SMALL PLANET

by RAY CUMMINGS

The voice of the Hittag city was always a restless, muttering murmur, floating here from far off over the distant hills. And you could see the blotch of its glow-lights. Sometimes the voice would rise as though in anger. Sometimes the blotch would spread, then die away and surge again. Restless; active with the struggle for accomplishment. To Jan, as he stretched sprawled on the blue sward, comfortable and lazy with the fullness of the food inside him, it seemed that the intruding presence of the distant Hittags was the only dissonance here in his little world. The shimmering blue pool at his feet was beautiful. Mara's music, as she played and sang to herself after the evening meal, was sweet and gentle like herself. The perfume of the flowers massed around the garden and Mara's dwelling here, the shining opalescence of the eternal twilight, seemed to make Jan's soul expand so that life was holding everything that one could want.

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But always—all Jan's young life—the jangle of the Hittag's was off there beyond the purple hills.

Now little Mara came through the dwelling entrance into the garden. Her stringed lute was in her hand. Her long pale hair, the pale draped robe, shimmered blue in the warm dimness. Her gentle beauty was like an aura around her.

"Jan?"

He stirred on the sward. "Yes, Mara? Here I am." He sat up, smiling, extended his hand as she came to him so that he drew her down, reclining beside him.

"Play more, Mara."

The stirring flying things cheeped to join her music, little vivid blobs of color as they flitted among the blue-gold leaves. The fountain of the pool was a soft background of harmony.

But the Hittag splotch in the blur of distance was muttering loud tonight. Jan could see that Mara's blue eyes were troubled.

He stopped her music. "What is it, Mara? There is something wrong?"

It seemed such a momentous question.

"Old Mama Megan," she said. "To the very aged must come a divination? Don't you think so?"

"What of her?"

"She tells me that now we should fear Hido."

That terrible word fear. Word so incongruous here in the little realm of the Marans that one might grow from childhood to maturity and scarcely hear it uttered. Fear Hido? How could they fear Hido who for so long had done the few simple tasks of gathering the food from the lush fields, serving it, and keeping their dwelling in order? Hido with his dwarfed, ugly little body; his imp-grin and comical gestures and jokes that always made you laugh—why should the dread word fear be invoked because of him?

"Mama Megan reminds me that once he was a Hittag," Mara was saying.

So long ago, when still Jan's mother and father were living and Jan was very small, Hido had come; beaten and scourged by the Hittags, he had come like a refugee to the Marans. No Hittag had bothered to chase him. No Hittag, busy, restless with his civilized struggle toward what he called achievement, would ever bother with anything concerning the little race of Marans off here in the secluded hills. To the great Hittags, the simple Marans were savages. Unimportant in the restless Hittag world.

Jan himself knew little of them, but it was enough. Their present ruler, him whom they called HittagH, surely was a

madman, lashing them on, mad with lust of power to lift himself and push down others who might oppose him. Life for the Hittags was a struggle always to create complexities. A life of fear. A life with violence and bloodshed, and they called it civilization's upward struggle! To Jan, it was the reality of savagery. Nature was benign here in this world peopled only by the Hittags and Marans. Surely, there was nothing to struggle against. Jan's father had once said a strange word, and tried to explain what it was. Sickness. A thing that ended lives before their lifespan of time. It was not here. Only age at last could kill. Or sudden accident or violence. For the simple Marans, accidents was rare. Violence, the Hittags created. But why? Why?

Jan, now that he and Mara had reached maturity so that soon children would be coming, knew that there was no answer to that. He could only be thankful that surely their children would be spared such struggle.

"Mama Megan wishes you to come to her," Mara was saying.

"Come now?"

"Yes, that would be best. Soon she will be sleeping."

Jan rose to his feet, stretching his long, slim body. He was much taller than Mara. Taller, really, than most of the Marans. A little different, too. His eyes were blue, like Mara's; his blond hair was cut shorter, but still it was like hers. Yet about him there was something very different. A different cast of feature, perhaps a sort of sternness, incongruous to his gentle nature. He could remember that his father had been the same, perhaps even his mother also.

There was a mystery about Jan. It used to trouble him a little, when he was a questioning child. Now suddenly it was troubling him again. Old Mama Megan would know. With her great age and wisdom, surely she would be able to tell him. He thought now that tonight he would ask her.

Pulling Mara by the hand, Jan strode into the dwelling room, where Hido was removing the evening food. The misshapen dwarf, with his ugly grinning face, pointed chin and bulbous nose, set down his tray and did a little mock dance, waving his thick arms and jiggling so that his stone bracelets tinkled.

"Laugh," he said. "Who but Hido shall always make you laugh? Go hasten to your love-couch, I wish you well."

"Hido, shush," Mara said.

"And life is merry and we are wise to keep it so." He was still jiggling as he vanished with his tray.

They found old Megan in her wood-chair, quiescent with the weight of great age. The opal sheen from outside lay spread on her thin wrinkled face, as though it were a sort of glory. Her hands were folded in her lap among the leaves of her robe. She was so old now that to Jan it seemed that only her glowing eyes were really alive.

She greeted them silently, with one hand stirring into a gesture so that they sat down on the leaf-strewn floor before her, hand in hand like little children who had been summoned.

Then she said, "I have not told you, but now I should. It will be soon now that I am gone from you."

"Mama Megan—" Mara gave a little cry; Jan just silently stared. It is the way of life, but you can never quite get use to it, the inevitable passing of the old whom you love. Mara's mother, and her mother and hers, were here, with no thought yet of dying. Now Megan, oldest of them all, had found her time drained out. Jan realized it; so many of the old had tried to explain it. Nature tells you, with little warning signals that you cannot miss.

And now old Megan knew, so that she had sent for them.

"Mama Megan—" Jan touched her hand with a caress, but she smiled gently.

"It is not for sorrow, the ways of wise nature," Megan said. "But there are things now, I must tell you. Things of the Maran Secret. I have been its Custodian, you know."

They knew it, of course. The Maran Secret. To all the young it was a mysterious thing, a thing you could not even begin to understand. A legend. A tradition. Yet everyone knew it was very real. From out of the dim past, down through the generations unnumbered, someone always was the Custodian. Near the end, warned by nature that time had run out, always the Custodian must pass it on to someone else, this knowledge of the Maran Secret.

"To us both, Mama Megan?" Jan and Mara spoke together.

"Yes, I have decided. You two, still so young yet being as one, with your coming children."

"Now?" They held their breath.

"Yes. Perhaps you will be surprised. There is nothing that I can tell you save where it is."

"The Secret?" Her words were puzzling. Always Jan had thought it was something which was to be explained. But now old Megan was telling them it was nothing of that. Merely it was something that was hidden here, with Megan's knowledge only that she knew where it was hidden.

"But what is it?" Jan murmured.

Her grey, palsied head shook with negation. "I do not know. Through the ages, always it has been here. They say it has a container, indestructible by time. It lies there, buried in the ground."

She was telling them the place. Not far from here, out in the nearest little valley between the twin hills. Now they were the Custodians and could find it if need be.

"Find it if need be?" Jan echoed. "If need be for what? And you don't know what it is? You talk riddles, Mama Megan."

She was still gently smiling. "The new Custodians must know what I know. I must tell you now something of the history of the Marans. You have not been taught it. Perhaps that is because we Marans feel it is a little shameful. There was once a time when the Marans here were struggling upward, building a great civilization."

"Like the Hittags," Mara breathed.

The smile on Megan's pallid lips was ironic. "Yes. Like the Hittags. The Hittags were primitive then—just little roving tribes far away. The Marans were the Great Race. They were learned in science. They built great cities—vast, complicated ways of living, working very hard with frantic urge to satisfy needs which they created for themselves."

Megan's thin, shaking arm gestured vaguely toward the window oval where it shone with the opalescent distance outside. "Their cities are out there now, buried in the ruins of time. And we, here, are all that is left."

"But what happened?" Jan demanded. "They got tired of working? Tired of working, for nothing at all?"

"Perhaps they reached the peak that man is allowed to go," Megan said. "I do not know. I am not wise enough to interpret the ways of God. I know only that their science at last tampered with nature too freely. Some engine of death which they had found with which to murder each other, at last turned against them. There was the Great Catastrophe. And then there was nothing left but a world in ruins, and little remnants of struggling beings left in the chaos."

"And that's—us?" Jan murmured.

"Out of them, our world as we have it here now, has come," Megan said. "The span of ten times my long life. But these Marans who were left—surely they had learned their lesson." Her thin, quavering old voice took on a sudden warmth, almost as though in talking of this, she were young again. "A lesson learned from the lash of an unthinkable horror. Those chastened Marans, suddenly saw what fools their forebears had been. And they lived for the things that all mankind really wants. So that now, as you see and feel, we are happy here."

"And now the Hittags are doing it all over again." Mara said.

"Yes. I suppose so."

"But Mama Megan," Jan said. "You forget to tell us about the Maran Secret."

It was something left from the great Maran civilization. Something the pitiful survivors found intact in the ruins. They had a temptation to preserve it, so that always to now, it had been kept hidden here.

"To be used if need be," Jan said. "What did you mean by that?"

Old Megan shook her head. "Words that the Custodian before me passed down. Perhaps, originally, one might have thought he could have a need to use the hidden thing, whatever it is. We cannot imagine that—not now—because it is a thing diabolic."

How different from what Jan and Mara always had pictured the Maran Secret to be! Just a shuddering, unknown thing, diabolic.

Old Megan's eyesight was dim, her hearing blurred. Jan and Mara had their backs to the door oval; they were intent, so that the little noise there behind them went unnoticed. Megan did not see the moving shadow as now it slid away.

Megan was saying, "There is no one in the world now—perhaps even among the Hittags save their madman ruler—who would want our Secret. But always I have remembered that Hido is a Hittag. I wanted to tell you that—though perhaps it means so little as a warning that I do great injustice to the clowning fellow. But they say now that HittagH is desperate. There is someone else there among them who lusts for the Leadership."

Jan had heard of it. In his mind there was a dim picture of the boastful madman, lurking in his tower—the Great Leader, yet fearing everybody and everything. His mind, warped, twisted, bringing mad fits of rage, so that alternately he would order murder done, and threaten suicide if ever his power were successfully assailed.

Suddenly Jan remembered what he had wanted to ask her. "Mama Megan," he said. "My father and my mother—how is it they were not very old, like you, yet they passed and were gone?"

Megan's face clouded. Her eyes looked away. "They died," she said. "One quite soon after the other. You were very small."

"Yes, I know. I can remember them a little. Was it an accident?"

"No."

"Violence?" A shudder was within Jan.

"Violence?" she echoed. "Oh no. They were here. Right here in this house. I was with them."

"Then—what?" he demanded.

"They called it a meaningless word," she said. "A sickness. Perhaps, like I feel now. Jan, child, question me no more. Your father told me little. Almost nothing. What little it was, I could not understand."

"I am not just like the Marans," Jan declared. "I know it. There is something different."

"Question me not. Your father left you a message. You have it written down."

"To be opened, only if ever great and terrible danger comes to me," Jan said bitterly. "Yes, I have it." He touched his chest. "I have it always on me, as you told me I must. Yet never can I open it, of course. For how can great and terrible danger come to a Maran?" A little while ago he could have said that sincerely. Yet now, somehow, it sounded empty, fatuous.

Old Megan was sagging in her chair, her little strength drained from the talk. Mara said, "Jan, we must go."

Then they left her. Presently on their couch Jan lay with Mara in his arms with the soft warm redolence of the opalescent air caressing them. The little shining pool outside their window splashed with music to lull them. Surely they felt older. Not children now. The new Custodians.

Jan was thinking of the mystery of it. A thing diabolic, so ironically to be treasured from generation to generation just because that was the tradition, the command of ancestors long gone. He was thinking too of the mystery of himself, the message from his father that he could not open. Never had he wondered about it more than now.

And he was thinking of his love for Mara and hers for him. And their coming child. Surely they were very singularly blessed...

He knew that he had been asleep. Mara, warm here in his arms, was asleep. But something had awakened him. Something horrible. Then he knew it was a scream he had heard, because now it was repeated—a scream, gurgling off horribly into a moan. It awakened Mara. She gasped in fear, with her arms around him.

"Jan!"

"That was Megan! Surely that was Megan!"

In that moment, as he and the trembling Mara flung on their leaf-ropes, it seemed that a bridge was crossed by Jan. A great gulf spanned. A transition, as though from one world to another. For a brief interval he stood dazed, trying to encompass it. All his life, here among the Marans, the thought of violence was a distant thing. Something apart. Something to be contemplated abstractly as happening somewhere to others, but never to oneself. Yet here now, embodied in that scream, was the presage of violence. Something—someone—forcing violence.

Perhaps Mara was feeling the same. She clung to him. She was gasping, "Megan—in danger—" Then as he turned and dashed through the dim and silent cubby rooms, Mara was running behind him.

Old Megan was not in her chair. She was not on her sleep-couch. She was lying on the flooring. Dead? As they bent over her, the blue-veined waxen eyelids fluttered up. She murmured,

"Hido came. He must have listened as I made you Custodians—yet he—did not think he had heard clearly enough."

That grinning, hideous dwarf, trying to force more information from Megan, finally had knocked her from her couch. Her slow gasping voice now was barely audible.

"Jan—other Hittags were here. I saw them here lurking in my corridor. If they—find now the Maran Secret—if the madman Leader gets it—our little world is gone, Jan."

"Megan! Megan!" Mara was bending down, sobbing. She tried to hold the old woman's head in her warm arms.

But Jan only stood mute, with the turmoil of his thoughts flooding him. Now Megan's faint voice was saying, "Remember your father's message—so that at least you and Mara may save yourselves. I—love you both—my children—good-bye —"

She lay so still. The waxen shell of her lay still, and the evanescent thing which was Megan had fled away.

Violence. Megan had died by violence. Unthinkable thing, yet here it was. As he faced it, groped with the reality of it, unprecedented fury rose in Jan. It blurred him, this coping with a wild rush of new emotions. Then he turned, shouted something at Mara. He hardly knew what it was.

"Mara—wait—don't come!"

The opalescent dimness outside, the eternal glowing, shimmering twilight of the little Maran realm, enveloped Jan as he ran. And now he knew that Mara was coming behind him, running with flashing pale limbs and her robe and pale tresses fluttering behind her.

The dim hills shone ahead of him as he ran for the little valley between them. Then suddenly a figure rose up from a leafy copse in front of him. Hido. The dwarf jumped. He flung a rock, but Jan ducked down and then was upon him.

It was a blur of horror, this weird new thing that Jan knew was the lust to kill. The gibbering dwarf was hard with

muscle. Jan could feel it as they rolled, pounding wildly at each other. Mara was standing with a hand against her mouth, her wide blue eyes staring at this incredible scene of violence.

Now the dwarf had him down, astride him, trying to grip his throat. But the simple work of the fields hardens one. Jan too, had the strength and the youth, so that now he had heaved the heavy dwarf away and leaped to his feet. And plunged again. Jan knew that this time his antagonist was under him; Hido was screaming from the blows in his ugly face.

He was finished, but Jan did not know it, nor care. How could he know anything, save that he was fighting something which had to be killed? He was on his feet again. Incredibly there was frenzied strength in him, enough to lift Hido up. A great jagged rock, Jan's height, was nearby; and now he was jamming Hido against it, pounding the dwarf's head against the pointed rock.

"Jan! Jan!"

He hardly heard Mara's cry of horror. The dead twisted thing was at his feet, but once more he picked it up, panting, sweating as again he heaved it headfirst to crash soddenly against the rock. Incredible, this lust. It was like a water-maelstrom bursting loose inside him, a thing once surging that was not to be checked.

"You—you—" His tongue had no epithet, though weirdly he wanted one.

He was hurling the limp body, and picking it up and heaving it again ... then pounding it with a rock held in his hand until at last his strength and breath gave out and he dropped back beside it on the ground, spent and trembling.

Violence. His first experience with violence. In that moment Jan knew he hated it, would always hate it, with a revulsion so terrible that it made his gorge rise. The dim opalescent scene swam dizzily around him. He felt Mara's shaking arms holding him.

Megan had said there were other Hittags here. Jan was Custodian. The thought made him leap to his feet and he drew Mara up with him. She understood, of course, because now again she was running behind him, trying to keep with him as he dashed into the glowing little valley.

He knew he was too late, because far up there ahead of him, shapes were fleeing. The Hittags. There was a group of them. In that moment they bounded away and were gone in the twilight glow, little dots vanishing in the distance beyond which the Hittag city was a blotch in the sky...

He paused to stare, and Mara caught up with him.

"Jan, that was the Hittags?"

"Yes, I think so. They may have gotten it."

Then at last he and Mara were gazing blankly at the hidden rock which already had been found and moved, revealing the hole down into which he and Mara climbed to find the hidden little place underground. Evidence of strange science was here. The forgotten science of so long ago—smooth and glistening polished walls here underground; a little metal casket here, of a strange smooth substance impervious to time. And the casket was open; its tiny mysterious contents was gone...

The new Custodians. Children, really, so short a time ago. Perhaps all the Marans—so simple and trusting and gentle a people now—were not much more than children. Even old Megan, mistrusting Hido, yet had made Jan and Mara Custodians in simple fashion. Only those who live by violence, trained to it, will think to guard in advance against a murderous enemy.

"Mara, what can we do?"

But Jan knew then that it was an irrevocable thing. She was standing staring at him. And because she was a girl, and more perhaps because she was a woman whose child was coming—and the horror of the first violence she had ever seen was flooding her—suddenly now the color of life faded from her face. She stood staring at Jan, puzzled, bewildered by the feelings within her. Perhaps she thought it was death now rushing at her. She gave a soft little cry; her hand went out

as though to clutch at him, and she wilted down, lay at his feet.

To Jan, she was dead. Fainting was something beyond his experience or knowledge. He crouched holding her in his arms, his grief blurring him. Mara and their child, both gone. There was nothing here with Jan but a great, drab void of emptiness, with everything which had been his life suddenly taken away.

Then he saw that she was breathing. It brought hope.

"Mara! Oh, my Mara—"

So much time passed. He could not guess how long he sat there in the cold and dank little vault with his dying one in his arms. But death held off. Now a little of the rose-color was coming into her cheeks and lips. She stirred.

Her eyes opened. She had come back to him. She and their child. The flooding thankfulness of it misted his vision, choked his voice so that he could only hold her with his cheek against hers and his fingers winding in her tossed, pale hair.

It may have been the full time that one would sleep while he sat there, holding Mara and both of them wondering when death would come. But she was strong with color now. Gradually it came to them that she would not die.

"The Hittags took the Maran Secret," she murmured. "Oh, Jan, what shall we do?"

There was nothing they could do. They left the vault open as they had found it. The little valley between the twin peaks glowed around them as they stood wondering what they could do. To Jan then came the presage that though the valley looked the same, certainly everything was different now with the Maran Secret gone. A new era, just beginning. An era of danger, of horror...

The valley here was no longer the same. Always it had been like everything here, shimmering with quiet peace and security. Now there were voices; Marans running here, shouting, babbling with the new emotion of terror.

"Doomed. Death—death is coming to us all!"

"The end of the world—"

"Where shall we go—what can we do?"

A little way down the valley, as Jan and Mara too were running, they came upon an old Maran sitting on a rock with his hands dangling and on his face the vacancy of bewilderment. Jan seized him. "Tell me—"

He stared. "My Meeta," he mumbled. "I cannot find her. I do not know where she is. I tried to find her—"

"They talk of doom and death," Jan gasped. "The end of the world!"

"Yes," the old Maran said. "The Secret was stolen—have you not heard that? Already news has come to us from the Hittag city. The Hittags themselves fleeing here—fools! What fools, those men who call themselves civilized."

Jan was shaking him. "Doom?"

"Their madman leader has the Secret. In his impregnable tower he stands laughing at his enemies because with the Secret he is bringing the end of the world, and he laughs and jibes because he is a madman."

Now Jan and Mara were running again, with the babbling chaos of terror around them. And others were telling them—the horrible, diabolic science with a madman using it...

Suddenly in a little blue-green glade with the tinkling splash of a brook at their feet, Jan remembered. He stopped the aimless panic of their flight.

"Jan, what is it?" Mara gasped.

"That message my father left me." He remembered it now against the flesh of his chest, under his leaf-robe. "He said, if there were ever terrible danger." Now Jan drew it out. He sat down by the brook, opening the small flat package with the wondering, awed Mara beside him.

"Jan, what is it? What does he say?"

There were very many words in his father's small, neat script. For a long time Jan sat reading, his face grim, his eyes puzzled.

"Jan, what does he say?"

"So much that I cannot understand."

A chance at least to save just him and Mara—and their child who was coming. That much seemed clear. Now Jan knew that his mother and father, and he himself who had not yet been born, had come here from some strange and distant place. Why of course! A strange and distant place so that they were not just like the Marans. Here was the chance for Jan and Mara to return there. A haven ... Jan felt it so. An escape...

He tried to explain it to Mara. "We must go ourselves and our unborn child."

His whole world was here by the brook, as he stood with his arms around Mara. Everything else was doomed by a madman.

"There is enough, just for us two—"

There was a flat little vial, and as he opened it, tiny pellets rolled out into the palm of his hand.

"Now, Mara—"

"Oh, Jan, whatever you say—" She was docile, trusting because he gently smiled at her, trying not to show his fear.

The pellets were sweet to the taste. They bubbled on the tongue and were gone. Now Jan and Mara sat by the brook, clutching at each other with a vast and terrible dizziness sweeping them so that they closed their eyes. But still the world swam and swayed with soundless clapping in their heads. Perhaps it was yet another form of dying?

But then Jan opened his eyes. The dizziness passed. With an incredible amazement, even though his father's message had warned and tried to explain, Jan and Mara stared at the strange scene around them. It seemed all in motion. Everything was dwindling. And drawing closer. The nearby blue-green trees were shrinking down and coming nearer. The little shining brook was narrowing and already it was lapping against them. Jan could feel the movement under him. But he knew, what the message had said, it was his own body which was moving. Growing larger. He and Mara, swiftly now and with steady acceleration, growing gigantic so that everything else seemed dwindling into littleness...

Already the giant bodies of the two of them were sprawled over the ribbon of brook...

Jan staggered to his feet. To him, Mara was the same, unchanging.

"Quick now!" He tried to smile at her again. "Don't be frightened. I will lead us."

The letter had warned him what to do. The trees here now were down at their knees. The walls of the shining valley were shrinking, rushing forward. For a moment the voices of the panic-stricken Marans and Hittags were little squeaks down among the tiny trees. The valley walls came with a soundless sliding rush. Then one of them was here at hand, hardly waist high so that Jan leaped up to what always before he had seen as a hilltop.

"I'll lift you, Mara. Quick."

Then he had drawn her up. There was a moment when the valley seemed just a little narrowing rift in the ground beside them. A moment more and it was a crack, so small that when they staggered to their feet again, hardly could they notice it.

Now a new vista of rocks and distant mountains was around them. Mountains that shrank with ever increasing speed, coming down, shifting forward. The scene closing together, until again, monstrous titans, they drew themselves upward.

There was no sense of time. Jan could tell nothing of that. It seemed a journey endless. Journey into largeness. He could envisage now that somewhere down among the tiny cracks and crevices at his feet lay the infinitesimal space which held the Maran and Hittag world...

Now the scene here, dwindling and closing together so swiftly, was shining with a new radiance. Long since, the shimmering opalescence of the little world down there, had gone. The boulders, crags, and closing, shrinking mountains, were glittering with cold nakedness. Rocks of many facets, prismatic with light.

Overhead the sky was changing. It was a blur now; but in the blur there seemed to be light which was yellow. A blur of it far off to one side.

Now a definite horizon seemed to have come around them. As Jan and Mara stood together, clutching at each other with the glittering ground shrinking under their feet, Jan could see that the tumbled landscape was all down lower than their heads. It spread out and stopped at an abyss. The brink made a distant circle around them. Beyond it, there was the blur of empty sky coming down. There were shadows in the sky now. High up, monstrous moving shapes with the blur of yellow light on them.

The shrinking circle of the abyss came closer. And suddenly Jan's viewpoint changed so that he saw himself and Mara standing here gigantic. Enlarging giants with a little circular spread of glittering rock under them—a circle shrinking until presently in a step he reached its edge.

"Jump, Mara! Wait, I'll go first."

He jumped, and it was less than the height of his head. Only waist high when he had lifted Mara down and they stood on a black undulating plain. Beside them now the white glitter of rock from which they had jumped was a little boulder. It shrank. A rock as big as one's head. Then smaller...

Mara gasped, shaking as she clutched Jan. And all the world now was a chaos because there were immense titans who seemed to be standing in the far distance, back beyond the edge of the black plain. Human shapes looming far up, with great spread of pink-white faces. They moved, and there was wind here.

Then a human hand came slowly down toward them. A hand far bigger than their bodies. A voice, roaring from high up overhead, said, "Careful, Hal. Not too fast."

A strange language. But Jan remembered. The message had reminded him of the queer language which his father and mother had taught him when he was still a child. They said it was the first language he had ever spoken. They had begged him never to forget it. When they had died, he had practiced it with Mara. Queer words. His father had called them *English*.

"Careful, Hal—"

Now the monstrous hand had grasped them so that they were cradled in it. With a rush of wind they were off the black plain and down on a wooden ground, with the towering legs of a giant stretching up over their heads. But the giants were dwindling...

Then at last the growth had stopped, and Jan and Mara with a group of grave-faced men in size like themselves around them, stood in a room. Lights were overhead. Windows were there, with strangeness that Jan remembered he should call daylight outside them. Strange things, strange sounds out there.

His father's message had told him what to expect. This would be a room in the Bureau of Standards, in a place called

Washington. His new world. Strange new world for him and Mara and their child...

He stood holding Mara. Someone said, "They seemed to understand us."

"Yes," Jan said. "My father taught me."

Now he saw that the black plain was a smooth square of marble, with a hooded light over it. And in its center, a tiny grain of crystal quartz which held the world into which his father and mother had gone, when his scientist father had discovered the strange drugs so many years ago. Explorer into smallness. His father and mother had remained there and guards night and day had watched the tiny fragment of quartz...

There was one scientist here they called Hal Matheson—a youngish, goggled fellow, thin-faced with somber eyes. "My father was here to see them go," he said. "Then you would be Blanchard's boy? Your mother said, if you were a boy you would be called Jan."

"I am Jan," he said. Then he explained about Mara. "We came," he said. "My father's message told me to come, if terrible danger threatened—"

It was as though his words were timed by fate. One of the men cried out. As Jan turned to gaze at the marble slab, there seemed a tiny aura of something around the grain of quartz. Premonitory aura, and in that same split-second, there was a tiny puff of light. The grain was gone.

The end of a world. It was as swift, as simple as that—And as unimportant. Certainly of no moment here in the vastness of this other, teeming world...

Save perhaps as a symbol ... A presage ... a warning...

Someone here in the room laughed grimly. "Dissolution—hah! That could happen to the best of us—"

"Shut up, Hal! Don't be ghoulish—"

As though with macabre prophecy he had spoken at just the right instant; the windows brightened with a glare. Jan and Mara felt themselves falling, or knocked down. A whiteness so blinding beat here at the windows that they flung their hands to their closed eyes, yet still could not shut it out. Then it was gone, but there was a great clatter and roaring and breaking glass and the room shuddering around them and outside, a terrible, distant, immense roaring of horror...

Through the shattered window it seemed that Jan could see a vast column of vapour surging upward...

The voices and the shouts and running footsteps were a bewildering chaos, so that Jan could only crouch and hold Mara with her questioning gaze on him like a frightened child...

The voices were shouting such strange things...

"An H-bomb fell in Virginia—"

"Missed us and fell in Virginia—"

"It's war! War!"

"So what?" That ironic, ghoulish laugh again. "You knew if we waited, we'd get the first one, didn't you?"

War ... War ... The cries of it were spreading everywhere...

And Jan crouched huddled, holding Mara...

Violence ... Violence ... He could think of nothing else. The horror of man wanting to create violence ... Then he was thinking of the blue-green sward outside Mara's dwelling, the tinkling splashing of the shimmering pool a background to Mara's music ... Surely things like that must be the essence of what man really wants ... If only he knew it...

Now Jan and Mara were questioning each other with gazes of mute bewilderment. It seemed that their last haven had gone.

THE END

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