



Homo Inferior

Wolf, Mari

Published: 1953

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/31692>

Also available on Feedbooks for Wolf:

- *The First Day of Spring* (1954)
- *Robots of the World! Arise!* (1952)
- *An Empty Bottle* (1952)
- *The Very Secret Agent* (1954)
- *The Statue* (1953)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks
<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from If Worlds of Science Fiction November 1953. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

The starship waited. Cylindrical walls enclosed it, and a transparent plastic dome held it back from the sky and the stars. It waited, while night changed to day and back again, while the seasons merged one into another, and the years, and the centuries. It towered as gleaming and as uncorroded as it had when it was first built, long ago, when men had bustled about it and in it, their shouting and their laughter and the sound of their tools ringing against the metallic plates.

Now few men ever came to it. And those who did come merely looked with quiet faces for a few minutes, and then went away again.

The generations kaleidoscoped by. The Starship waited.

Eric met the other children when he was four years old. They were out in the country, and he'd slipped away from his parents and started wading along the edge of a tiny stream, kicking at the water spiders.

His feet were soaked, and his knees were streaked with mud where he'd knelt down to play. His father wouldn't like it later, but right now it didn't matter. It was fun to be off by himself, splashing along the stream, feeling the sun hot on his back and the water icy against his feet.

A water spider scooted past him, heading for the tangled moss along the bank. He bent down, scooped his hand through the water to catch it. For a moment he had it, then it slipped over his fingers and darted away, out of his reach.

As he stood up, disappointed, he saw them: two boys and a girl, not much older than he. They were standing at the edge of the trees, watching him.

He'd seen children before, but he'd never met any of them. His parents kept him away from them—and from all strangers. He stood still, watching them, waiting for them to say something. He felt excited and uncomfortable at the same time.

They didn't say anything. They just watched him, very intently.

He felt even more uncomfortable.

The bigger boy laughed. He pointed at Eric and laughed again and looked over at his companions. They shook their heads.

Eric waded up out of the water. He didn't know whether to go over to them or run away, back to his mother. He didn't understand the way they were looking at him.

"Hello," he said.

The big boy laughed again. "See?" he said, pointing at Eric. "He can't."

"Can't what?" Eric said.

The three looked at him, not saying anything. Then they all burst out laughing. They pointed at him, jumped up and down and clapped their hands together.

"What's funny?" Eric said, backing away from them, wishing his mother would come, and yet afraid to turn around and run.

"You," the girl said. "You're funny. Funny, funny, funny! You're stupid."

The others took it up. "Stu-pid, stu-pid. You can't talk to us, you're too stu-pid... ."

They skipped down the bank toward him, laughing and calling. They jumped up and down and pointed at him, crowded closer and closer.

"Silly, silly. Can't talk. Silly, silly. Can't talk... ."

Eric backed away from them. He tried to run, but he couldn't. His knees shook too much. He could hardly move his legs at all. He began to cry.

They crowded still closer around him. "Stu-pid." Their laughter was terrible. He couldn't get away from them. He cried louder.

"Eric!" His mother's voice. He twisted around, saw her coming, running toward him along the bank.

"Mama!" He could move again. He stumbled toward her.

"He wants his mama," the big boy said. "Funny baby."

His mother was looking past him, at the other children. They stopped laughing abruptly. They looked back at her for a moment, scuffing their feet in the dirt and not saying anything. Suddenly the big boy turned and ran, up over the bank and out of sight. The other boy followed him.

The girl started to run, and then she looked at Eric's mother again and stopped. She looked back at Eric. "I'm sorry," she said sulkily, and then she turned and fled after the others.

Eric's mother picked him up. "It's all right," she said. "Mother's here. It's all right."

He clung to her, clutching her convulsively, his whole body shaking. "Why, Mama? Why?"

"You're all right, dear."

She was warm and her arms were tight around him. He was home again, and safe. He relaxed, slowly.

"Don't leave me, Mama."

"I won't, dear."

She crooned to him, softly, and he relaxed still more. His head drooped on her shoulder and after a while he fell asleep.

But it wasn't the same as it had been. It wouldn't ever be quite the same again. He knew he was different now.

That night Eric lay asleep. He was curled on his side, one chubby hand under his cheek, the other still holding his favorite animal, the woolly lamb his mother had given him for his birthday. He stirred in his sleep, thrashing restlessly, and whimpered.

His mother's face lifted mutely to her husband's.

"Myron, the things those children said. It must have been terrible for him. I'm glad at least that he couldn't perceive what they were thinking."

Myron sighed. He put his arm about her shoulders and drew her close against him. "Don't torture yourself, Gwin. You can't make it easier for him. There's no way."

"But we'll have to tell him something."

He stroked her hair. The four years of their shared sorrow lay heavily between them as he looked down over her head at his son.

"Poor devil. Let him keep his childhood while he can, Gwin. He'll know he's all alone soon enough."

She nodded, burying her face against his chest. "I know... ."

Eric whimpered again, and his hands clenched into fists and came up to protect his face.

Instinctively Gwin reached out to him, and then she drew back. She couldn't reach his emotions. There was no perception. There was no way she could enter his dreams and rearrange them and comfort him.

"Poor devil," his father said again. "He's got his whole life to be lonely in."

The summer passed, and another winter and another summer. Eric spent more and more time by himself. He liked to sit on the glassed-in sunporch, bouncing his ball up and down and talking to it, aloud, pretending that it answered him back. He liked to lie on his stomach close to the wall and look out at the garden with its riotous mass of flowers and the insects that flew among them. Some flew quickly, their wings moving so fast that they were just blurs. Others flew slowly, swooping on outspread bright-colored wings from petal to petal. He liked these slow-flying ones the best. He could wiggle his shoulder blades in time with their wings and pretend that he was flying too.

Sometimes other children came by on the outside of the wall. He could look out at them without worrying, because they couldn't see him. The wall wasn't transparent from the outside. He liked it when three or four

of them came by together, laughing and chasing each other through the garden. Usually, though, they didn't stay long. After they had played a few minutes his father or his mother went out and looked at them, and then they went away.

Eric was playing by himself when the old man came out to the sunporch doorway and stood there, saying nothing, making no effort to interrupt or to speak. He was so quiet that after a while Eric almost didn't mind his being there.

The old man turned back to Myron and Gwin.

"Of course the boy can learn. He's not stupid."

Eric bounced the ball, flung it against the transparent glass, caught it, bounced it again.

"But how, Walden?" Gwin shook her head. "You offer to teach him, but—"

Walden smiled. "Remember *these*?"

... Walden's study. The familiar curtains drawn aside, and the shelves behind them. The rows of bright-backed, box-like objects, most of them old and spotted, quite unhygienic ...

Gwin shook her head at the perception, but Myron nodded.

"Books. I didn't know there were any outside the museums."

Walden smiled again. "Only mine. Books are fascinating things. All the knowledge of a race, gathered together on a few shelves... ."

"Knowledge?" Myron shrugged. "Imagine storing knowledge in those—boxes. What are they? What's in them? Just words... ."

The books faded as Walden sighed. "You'd be surprised what the old race did, with just those—boxes."

He looked across at Eric, who was now bouncing his ball and counting, out loud, up to three, and then going back and starting again.

"The boy can learn what's in those books. Just as if he'd gone to school back in the old times."

Myron and Gwin looked doubtfully at each other, and then over at the corner where Eric played unheeding. Perhaps Walden could help. Perhaps... .

"Eric," Gwin said aloud.

"Yes, mother?"

"We've decided you're going to go to school, the way you want to. Mr. Walden here is going to be your teacher. Isn't that nice?"

Eric looked at her and then at the old man. Strangers didn't often come out on the sunporch. Strangers usually left him alone.

He bounced the ball again without answering.

"Say something, Eric," his mother commanded.

Eric looked back at Walden. "He can't teach me to be like other children, can he?"

"No," Walden said. "I can't."

"Then I don't want to go to school." Eric threw the ball across the room as hard as he could.

"But there once were other people like *you*," Walden said. "Lots of them. And you can learn about them, if you want to."

"Other people like me? Where?"

Myron and Gwin looked helplessly at each other and at the old man. Gwin began to cry and Myron cursed softly, on the perception level so that Eric wouldn't hear them.

But Walden's face was gentle and understanding as he answered, so understanding that Eric couldn't help wanting desperately to believe him.

"Everyone was like you once," Walden said. "A long time ago."

It was a new life for Eric. Every day he would go over to Walden's and the two of them would pull back the curtains in the study and Walden would lift down some of the books. It was as if Walden was giving him the past, all of it, as fast as he could grasp it.

"I'm really like the old race, Walden?"

"Yes, Eric. You'll see just how much like them... ."

Identity. Here in the past, in the books he was learning to read, in the pictures, the pages and pages of scenes and portraits. Strange scenes, far removed from the gardens and the quiet houses and the wordless smile of friend to friend.

Great buildings and small. The Parthenon in the moonlight, not too many pages beyond the cave, with its smoky fire and first crude wall drawings. Cities bright with a million neon lights, and still later, caves again—the underground stations of the Moon colonies. All unreal, and yet—

They were his people, these men in the pictures. Strange men, violent men: the barbarian trampling his enemy to death beneath his horse's hooves, the knight in armor marching to the Crusade, the spaceman. And the quieter men: the farmer, the artisan, the poet—they too were his people, and far easier to understand than the others.

The skill of reading mastered, and the long, sweeping vistas of the past. Their histories. Their wars. "Why did they fight, Walden?" And Walden's sigh. "I don't know, Eric, but they did."

So much to learn. So much to understand. Their art and music and literature and religion. Patterns of life that ebbed and flowed and ebbed again, but never in quite the same way. "Why did they change so much, Walden?" And the answer, "You probably know that better than I, Eric... ."

Perhaps he did. For he went on to the books that Walden ignored. Their mathematics, their science. The apple's fall, and the orbits of planets. The sudden spiral of analysis, theory, technology. The machines—steamships, airplanes, spaceships... .

And the searching loneliness that carried the old race from the caves of Earth to the stars. The searching, common to the violent man and the quiet man, to the doer and the dreaming poet.

Why do we hunger, who own the Moon and trample the shifting dust of Mars?

Why aren't we content with the worlds we've won? Why don't we rest, with the system ours?

We have cast off the planets like outgrown toys, and now we want the stars... .

"Have you ever been to the stars, Walden?"

Walden stared at him. Then he laughed. "Of course not, Eric. Nobody goes there now. None of our race has ever gone. Why should we?"

There was no explaining. Walden had never been lonely.

And then one day, while he was reading some fiction from the middle period of the race, Eric found the fantasy. Speculation about the future, about their future... . About the new race!

He read on, his heart pounding, until the same old pattern came clear. They had foreseen conflict, struggle between old race and new, suspicion and hatred and tragedy. The happy ending was superficial. Everyone was motivated as they had been motivated.

He shut the book and sat there, wanting to reach back across the years to the old race writers who had been so right and yet so terribly, blindly wrong. The writers who had seen in the new only a continuation of the old, of themselves, of their own fears and their own hungers.

"Why did they die, Walden?" He didn't expect an answer.

"Why does any race die, Eric?"

His own people, forever removed from him, linked to him only through the books, the pictures, and his own backward-reaching emotions.

"Walden, hasn't there *ever* been anyone else like me, since they died?"

Silence. Then, slowly, Walden nodded.

"I wondered how long it would be before you asked that. Yes, there have been others. Sometimes three or four in a generation."

"Then, perhaps... ."

"No," Walden said. "There aren't any others now. We'd know it if there were." He turned away from Eric, to the plastic wall that looked out across the garden and the children playing and the long, level, flower-carpeted plain.

"Sometimes, when there's more than one of them, they go out there away from us, out to the hills where it's wild. But they're found, of course. Found, and brought back." He sighed. "The last of them died when I was a boy."

Others like him. Within Walden's lifetime, others, cut off from their own race, lonely and rootless in the midst of the new. Others like him, but not now, in his lifetime. For him there were only the books.

The old race was gone, gone with all its conflicts, all its violence, its stupidity—and its flaming rockets in the void and its Parthenon in the moonlight.

Eric came into the study and stopped. The room was filled with strangers. There were half a dozen men besides Walden, most of them fairly old, white-haired and studious looking. They all turned to look at him, watched him gravely without speaking.

"Well, there he is." Walden looked from face to face. "Are you still worried? Do you still think that one small boy constitutes a threat to the race? What about you, Abbot?"

"I don't know. I still think he should have been institutionalized in the beginning."

"Why? So you could study the brain processes of the lower animals?" Walden's thoughts were as sarcastic as he could send them.

"No, of course not. But don't you see what you've done, by teaching him to read? You've started him thinking of the old race. Don't deny it."

"I don't."

The thin man, Drew, broke in angrily. "He's not full grown yet. Just fourteen, isn't he? How can you be sure what he'll be like later? He'll be a problem. They've always been problems."

They were afraid. That was what was the matter with them. Walden sighed. "Tell them what you've been studying, Eric," he said aloud.

For a minute Eric was too tongue-tied to answer. He stood motionless, waiting for them to laugh at him.

"Go on. Tell them."

"I've been reading about the old race," Eric said. "All about the stars. About the people who went off in the starships and explored our whole galaxy."

"What's a galaxy?" the thin man said. Walden could perceive that he really didn't know.

Eric's fear lessened. These men weren't laughing at him. They weren't being just polite, either. They were interested. He smiled at them, shyly, and told them about the books and the wonderful, strange tales of the past that the books told. The men listened, nodding from time to time. But he knew that they didn't understand. The world of the books was his alone... .

"Well?" Walden looked at the others. They looked back. Their emotions were a welter of doubt, of indecision.

"You've heard the boy," Walden said quietly, thrusting his own uneasiness down, out of his thoughts.

"Yes." Abbot hesitated. "He seems bright enough—quite different from what I'd expected. At least he's not like the ones who grew up wild in the hills. This boy isn't a savage."

Walden shrugged. "Maybe they weren't savages either," he suggested. "After all, it's been fifty years since the last of them died. And a lot of legends can spring up in fifty years."

"Perhaps we have been worrying unnecessarily." Abbot got up to go, but his eyes still held Walden's. "But," he added, "it's up to you to watch him. If he reverts, becomes dangerous in any way, he'll have to be locked up. That's final."

The others nodded.

"I'll watch him," Walden told them. "Just stop worrying."

He stood at the door and waited until they were out of sight. Then and only then did he allow himself to sigh and taste the fear he'd kept hidden. The old men, the men with authority, were the dangerous ones.

Walden snorted. Even with perception, men could be fools.

The summer that Eric was sixteen Walden took him to the museum. The aircar made the trip in just a few hours—but it was farther than Eric had ever traveled in his life, and farther than most people ever bothered traveling.

The museum lay on an open plain where there weren't many houses. At first glance it was far from impressive. Just a few big buildings, housing the artifacts, and a few old ruins of ancient constructions, leveled now and half buried in the sands.

"It's nothing." Eric looked down at it, disappointed. "Nothing at all."

"What did you expect?" Walden set the aircar down between the two largest buildings. "You knew it wouldn't be like the pictures in the books. You knew that none of the old race's cities are left."

"I know," Eric said. "But I expected more than this."

He got out of the car and followed Walden around to the door of the first building. Another man, almost as old as Walden, came toward them smiling. The two men shook hands and stood happily perceiving each other.

"This is Eric," Walden said aloud. "Eric, this is Prior, the caretaker here. He was one of my schoolmates."

"It's been years since we've perceived short range," Prior said. "Years. But I suppose the boy wants to look around inside?"

Eric nodded, although he didn't care too much. He was too disappointed to care. There was nothing here that he hadn't seen a hundred times before.

They went inside, past some scale models of the old cities. The same models, though a bit bigger, that Eric had seen in the three-dimensional view-books. Then they went into another room, lined with thousands of books, some very old, many the tiny microfilmed ones from the middle periods of the old race.

"How do you like it, Eric?" the caretaker said.

"It's fine," he said flatly, not really meaning it. He was angry at himself for feeling disappointment. Walden had told him what to expect. And yet he'd kept thinking that he'd walk into one of the old cities and be able to imagine that it was ten thousand years ago and others were around him. Others like him... .

Ruins. Ruins covered by dirt, and no one of the present race would even bother about uncovering them.

Prior and Walden looked at each other and smiled. "Did you tell him?" the caretaker telepathed.

"No. I thought we'd surprise him. I knew all the rest would disappoint him."

"Eric," the caretaker said aloud. "Come this way. There's another room I want to show you."

He followed them downstairs, down a long winding ramp that spiraled underground so far that he lost track of the distance they had descended. He didn't much care anyway. Ahead of him, the other two were communicating, leaving him alone.

"Through here," Prior said, stepping off the ramp.

They entered a room that was like the bottom of a well, with smooth stone sides and far, far above them a glass roof, with clouds apparently drifting across its surface. But it wasn't a well. It was a vault, forever preserving the thing that had been the old race's masterpiece.

It rested in the center of the room, its nose pointing up at the sky. It was like the pictures, and unlike them. It was big, far bigger than Eric had ever visualized it. It was tall and smooth and as new looking as if its builders had just stepped outside for a minute and would be back in another minute to blast off for the stars.

"A starship," Walden said. "One of the last types."

"There aren't many left," Prior said. "We're lucky to have this one in our museum."

Eric wasn't listening. He was looking at the ship. The old race's ship. His ship.

"The old race built strange things," Prior said. "This is one of the strangest." He shook his head. "Imagine the time they put in on it... . And for what?"

Eric didn't try to answer him. He couldn't explain why the old ones had built it. But he knew. He would have built it himself, if he'd lived then. *We have cast off the planets like outgrown toys, and now we want the stars... .*

His people. His ship. His dream.

The old caretaker showed him around the museum and then left him alone to explore by himself. He had all the time he wanted.

He studied. He worked hard all day long, scarcely ever leaving the museum grounds. He studied the subjects that now were the most fascinating to him of all the old race's knowledge—the subjects that related to the starships. Astronomy, physics, navigation, and the complex charts of distant stars, distant planets, worlds he'd never heard of before. Worlds that to the new race were only pin-pricks of light in the night sky.

All day long he studied. But in the evening he would go down the winding ramp to the ship. The well was lighted with a softer, more diffuse illumination than that of the houses. In the soft glow the walls and

the glass-domed roof seemed to disappear and the ship looked free, pointing up at the stars.

He didn't try to tell the caretaker what he thought. He just went back to his books and his studies. There was so much he had to learn. And now there was a reason for his learning. Someday, when he was fully grown and strong and had mastered all he needed from the books, he was going to fly the ship. He was going to look for his people, the ones who had left Earth before the new race came... .

He told no one. But Walden watched him, and sighed.

"They'll never let you do it, Eric. It's a mad dream."

"What are you talking about?"

"The ship. You want to go to the stars, don't you?"

Eric stared at him, more surprised than he'd been in years. He had said nothing. There was no way for Walden to know. Unless he'd perceived it—and Eric couldn't be perceived, any more than he could perceive other people... .

Walden shook his head. "It wasn't telepathy that told me. It was your eyes. The way you look at the ship. And besides, I've known you for years now. And I've wondered how long it would be before you thought of this answer."

"Well, why not?" Eric looked across at the ship, and his throat caught, choking him, the way it always did. "I'm lonely here. My people are gone. Why shouldn't I go?"

"You'd be lonelier inside that ship, by yourself, away from Earth, away from everything, and with no assurance you'd ever find anyone at all, old race or new or alien... ."

Eric didn't answer. He looked back at the ship, thinking of the books, trying to think of it as a prison, a weightless prison carrying him forever into the unknown, with no one to talk to, no one to see.

Walden was right. He would be too much alone in the ship. He'd have to postpone his dream.

He'd wait until he was old, and take the ship and die in it... .

Eric smiled at the thought. He was seventeen, old enough to know that his idea was adolescent and melodramatic. He knew, suddenly, that he'd never fly the ship.

The years passed. Eric spent most of his time at the museum. He had his own aircar now, and sometimes he flew it home and visited with his parents. They liked to have him come. They liked it much better than having to travel all the way to the museum to visit him.

Yet, though he wasn't dependent on other people any more, and could fly the aircar as he chose, he didn't do much exploring. He didn't have any desire to meet strangers. And there were always the books.

"You're sure you're all right?" his mother said. "You don't need anything?"

"No. I'm fine."

He smiled, looking out through the sunporch wall into the garden. It seemed years and years since he'd pressed his nose to the glass, watching the butterflies. It had been a long time.

"I've got to get going," he said. "I want to be back at the museum by dark."

"Well, if you're sure you won't stay... ."

They said goodbye and he went out and got into the aircar and started back. He flew slowly, close to the ground, because he really had plenty of time and he felt lazy. He skimmed along over a valley and heard laughter and dipped lower. A group of children was playing. Young ones—they even talked aloud sometimes as they played. Children... . There were so many children, always in groups, laughing... .

He flew on, quickly, until he was in a part of the country where he didn't see any houses. Just a stream and a grove of trees and bright flowers. He dropped lower, stopped, got out and walked down to the stream.

It was by another stream that he'd met the children who had laughed at him, years ago. He smiled, sadly.

He felt alone, but in a different sense from his usual isolation. He felt free, away from people, away even from the books and their unspoken insistence that their writers were dead and almost forgotten. He stood by the edge of the stream, watching water spiders scoot across the rippled surface.

This was the same. This stream had probably been here when the old race was here, maybe even before the old race had even come into existence.

Water spiders. Compared to man, their race was immortal... .

The sun was low when he turned away from the stream and walked back to where he had parked the aircar. He scarcely looked about him as he walked. He was sure he was alone, and he felt no caution, no need to watch and listen.

But as he turned toward the car he saw the people. Two. Young, about his own age. A boy and a girl, smiling at each other, holding hands.

They weren't a dozen feet in front of him. But they didn't notice him. They were conscious of no one but each other. As Eric watched, standing frozen, unwilling to draw attention to himself by even moving or backing up, the two leaned closer together. Their arms went around each other, tightly, and they kissed.

They said nothing. They kissed, and then stood apart and went on looking at each other. Even without being able to perceive, Eric could feel their emotion.

Then they turned, slowly, toward him. In a moment they would be aware of him. He didn't want them to think he was spying on them, so he went toward them, making no effort to be quiet, and as he moved they stepped still farther apart and looked at him, startled.

They looked at each other as he passed, even more startled, and the girl's hand went up to her mouth in surprise.

They know, Eric thought bitterly. They know I'm different.

He didn't want to go back to the museum. He flew blindly, not looking down at the neat domed houses and the gardens and the people, but ahead, to the eastern sky and the upthrust scarp of the hills. The hills, where people like him had fled, for a little while.

The occasional aircars disappeared. The gardens dropped away, and the ordered color, and there was grass and bare dirt and, ahead, the scraggly trees and out-thrust rocks of the foothills. No people. Only the birds circling, crying to each other, curious about the car. Only the scurrying animals of the underbrush below.

A little of the tension drained from him as he climbed. Perhaps in these very hills men like him had walked, not many generations ago. Perhaps they would walk there again, amid the disorder of tree and canyon and tumbled rock. Amid the wildness, the beauty that was neither that of the gardens nor that of the old race's cities, but older, more enduring than either.

Below him were other streams, but these were swift-flowing, violent, sparkling like prised sunlight as they cascaded over the rocks. Their wildness called to him, soothed him as the starship soothed him, as the gardens and the neat domed houses never could.

He knew why his kind had fled to the hills, for whatever little time they had. He knew too that he would come again.

Searching. Looking for his own kind.

That was what he was doing. That was what he had always intended to do, ever since he had heard of the others like himself, the men who

had come here before him. He realized his motive suddenly, and realized too the futility of it. But futile or not, he would come again.

For he was of the old race. He shared their hungering.

Walden was reading in his study when the council members arrived. They came without advance warning and filed in ceremoniously, responding rather coolly to his greeting.

"We're here about the boy," Abbot began abruptly. "He's at the museum now, isn't he?"

Walden nodded. "He's been spending most of his time there lately."

"Do you think it's wise, letting him wander around alone?"

Trouble. Always trouble. Just because there was one young boy, Eric, asking only to be let alone. And the old council members wouldn't rest until they had managed to find an excuse to put him in an institution somewhere, where his actions could be watched, where there wouldn't be any more uncertainty.

"Eric's all right."

"Is he? Prior tells me he leaves the museum every day. He doesn't come here. He doesn't visit his family."

The thin man, Drew, broke in. "He goes to the hills. Just like the others did. Did you know that, Walden?"

Walden's mouth tightened. It wouldn't do to let them read his hostility to their prying. It would be even worse to let them know that they worried him.

"Besides," Drew added, "he's old enough to be thinking about women now. There's always a chance he'll—"

"Are you crazy?" Walden shouted the words aloud. "Eric's not an animal."

"Isn't he?" Abbot answered quietly. "Weren't all the old race just animals?"

Walden turned away from them, closing his mind to their thoughts. He mustn't show anger. If he did, they'd probably decide he was too emotional, not to be trusted. They'd take Eric away, to some institution. Cage him... .

"What do you want to do with the boy?" Walden forced his thoughts to come quietly. "Do you want to put him in a zoo with the other animals?"

The sarcasm hurt them. They wanted to be fair. Abbot especially prided himself on his fairness.

"Of course not."

They hesitated. They weren't going to do anything. Not this time. They stood around and made a little polite conversation, about other things, and then Abbot turned toward the door.

"We just wanted to be sure you knew what was going on." Abbot paused. "You'll keep an eye on the boy, won't you?"

"Am I his keeper?" Walden asked softly.

They didn't answer him. Their thoughts were confused and a bit irritated as they went out to the aircar that had brought them. But he knew they'd be back. And they would keep track of Eric. Prior, the caretaker, would help them. Prior was old too, and worried... .

Walden walked back into his study, slowly. His legs were trembling. He hadn't realized how upset he had been. He smiled at the intensity of his emotions, realizing something he'd always kept hidden, even from himself.

He was as fond of Eric as if the boy had been his own son.

Eric pushed the books away, impatiently. He didn't feel like studying. The equations were meaningless. He was tired of books, and history, and all the facts about the old race.

He wanted to be outdoors, exploring, walking along the hillsides, looking for his own kind.

But he had already explored the hills. He had flown for miles, and walked for miles, and searched dozens of caves in dozens of gorges. He had found no one. He was sure that if there had been anyone he would have discovered some sign.

He opened the book again, but he couldn't concentrate on it.

Beyond those hills, across another valley, there were even higher mountains. He had often looked across at them, wondering what they held. They were probably as desolate as the ones he'd searched. Still, he would rather be out in them, looking, than sitting here, fretting, almost hating the old race because it had somehow bequeathed him a heritage of loneliness.

He got up abruptly and went outside to the aircar.

It was a long way to the second range of mountains. He flew there directly, skimming over the nearer hills, the ones he had spent weeks exploring. He dropped low over the intervening valley, passing over the houses and towns, looking down at the gardens. The new race filled all the valleys.

He came into the foothills and swung the car upward, climbing over the steep mountainsides. Within a mile from the valley's edge he was in

wild country. He'd thought the other hills were wild, but here the terrain was jagged and rock-strewn, with boulders flung about as if by some giant hand. There were a hundred narrow canyons, opening into each other, steep-sloped, overgrown with brambles and almost impenetrable, a maze with the hills rising around them and cutting off all view of the surrounding country.

Eric dropped down into one of the larger canyons. Immediately he realized how easy it would be to get lost in those hills. There were no landmarks that were not like a hundred jutting others. Without the aircar he would be lost in a few minutes. He wondered suddenly if anyone, old race or new, had ever been here before him.

He set the aircar down on the valley floor and got out and walked away from it, upstream, following the little creek that tumbled past him over the rocks. By the time he had gone a hundred paces the car was out of sight.

It was quiet. Far away birds called to each other, and insects buzzed around him, but other than these sounds there was nothing but his own footsteps and the creek rapids. He relaxed, walking more slowly, looking about him idly, no longer searching for anything.

He rounded another bend, climbed up over a rock that blocked his path and dropped down on the other side of it. Then he froze, staring.

Not ten feet ahead of him lay the ashes of a campfire, still smoldering, still sending a thin wisp of smoke up into the air.

He saw no one. Nothing moved. No tracks showed in the rocky ground. Except for the fire, the gorge looked as uninhabited as any of the others.

Slowly Eric walked toward the campfire and knelt down and held his hand over the embers. Heat rose about him. The fire hadn't been out for very long.

He turned quickly, glancing about him, but there was no sudden motion anywhere, no indication that anyone was hiding nearby. Perhaps there was nobody near. Perhaps whoever had built the fire had left it some time before, and was miles away by now... .

He didn't think so. He had a feeling that eyes were watching him. It was a strange feeling, almost as if he could perceive. Wishful thinking, he told himself. Unreal, untrue... .

But *someone* had been here. Someone had built the fire. And it was probably, almost certainly, someone without perception. Someone like himself.

His knees were shaking. His hands trembled, and sweat broke out on the palms. Yet his thoughts seemed calm, icily calm. It was just a nervous reaction, he knew that. A reaction to the sudden knowledge that people *were* here, out in these hills where he had searched for them but never, deep down, expected to find them. They were probably watching him right now, hidden up among the trees somewhere, afraid to move because then he would see them and start out to capture them.

If there were people here, they must think that he was one of the normal ones. That he could perceive. So they would keep quiet, because a person with perception couldn't possibly perceive a person who lacked it. They would remain motionless, hoping to stay hidden, waiting for him to leave so that they could flee deeper into the hills.

They couldn't know that he was one of them.

He felt helpless, suddenly. So near, so near—and yet he couldn't reach them. The people who lived here in the wild mountain gorges could elude him forever.

No motion. No sound. Only the embers, smoking... .

"Listen," he called aloud. "Can you hear me?"

The canyon walls caught his voice, sent it echoing back, fainter and fainter. "... can you hear me can you hear me can you... ."

No one answered.

"I'm your friend," he called. "I can't perceive. I'm one of you."

Over and over it echoed. "... one of you one of you one of you... ."

"Answer me. I've run away from them too. Answer me!"

"Answer me answer me answer me... ."

The echoes died away and it was quiet, too quiet. No sound. Even if they heard him, they wouldn't answer.

He couldn't track them. If they had homes that were easy to find they would have left them by now. He was helpless.

The heat from the fire rose about him, and he tasted smoke and coughed. Nothing moved. Finally he stood up, turned away from the fire and walked on past it, up the stream.

No one. No tracks. No sign. Only the feeling that other eyes watched him as he walked along, other ears listened for the sound of his passing.

He turned back, retraced his steps to the fire. The embers had blackened. The wisp of smoke that curled upward was very thin now. Otherwise everything was the same as it had been.

He couldn't give up and fly back to the museum. If he did he might never find them again. But even if he didn't, he might never find them.

"Listen!" He screamed the word, so loudly that they could have heard it miles away. "I'm one of you. I can't perceive. Believe me! You've got to believe me!"

"Believe me believe me believe me... ."

Nothing. The tension went out of him suddenly and he began to tremble again, and his throat choked up, wanting to cry. He stumbled away from the embers, back in the direction of the aircar.

"Believe me... ." This time the words were little more than a whisper, and there was no echo.

"I believe you," a voice said quietly.

He swung about, trying to place it, and saw the woman. She stood at the edge of the trees, above the campfire, half hidden in the undergrowth. She looked down at him warily, a rock clenched in her hand. She wasn't an attractive sight.

She looked old, with a leathery skin and gnarled arms and legs. Her grey-white hair was matted, pulled back into a snarled bun behind her head. She wore a shapeless dress of some roughwoven material that hung limply from her shoulders, torn, dirty, ancient. He'd never seen an animal as dirty as she.

"So you can't perceive," the woman cackled. "I believe it, boy. You don't have that look about you."

"I didn't know," Eric said softly. "I never knew until today that there were any others."

She laughed, a high-pitched laugh that broke off into a choking cough. "There aren't many of us, boy. Not many. Me and Nell—but she's an old, old woman. And Lisa, of course... ."

She cackled again, nodding. "I always told Lisa to wait," she said firmly. "I told her that there'd be another young one along."

"Who are you?" Eric said.

"Me? Call me Mag. Come on, boy. Come on. What are you waiting for?"

She turned and started off up the hill, walking so fast that she was almost out of sight among the trees before Eric recovered enough to follow her. He stumbled after her, clawing his way up the steep slope, slipping and grabbing the branches with his hands and hauling himself up the rocks.

"You're a slow one." The old woman paused and waited for him to catch up. "Where've you been all your life? You don't act like a mountain boy."

"I'm not," Eric said. "I'm from the valley... ."

He stopped talking. He realized, suddenly, the futility of trying to explain his life to her. If she had ever known the towns, it would have been years ago. She was too old, and tattered, and so dirty that her smell wasn't even a good clean animal smell.

"Hurry up, boy!"

He felt unreal, as if this were a dream, as if he would awaken suddenly and be back at the museum. He almost wished that he would. He couldn't believe that he had found another like himself and was now following her, scrambling up a mountain as if he were a goat.

A goat. Smells. The dirty old woman in front of him. He wrinkled his nose in disgust and then was furious with himself, with his reactions, with the sudden knowledge that he had glamorized his kind and had hoped to find them noble and brilliant.

This tattered old woman with her cackling laugh and leathery, toothless face and dirt encrusted clothing couldn't be like him. He couldn't accept it... .

Mag led him up the slope and then over some heaped boulders, and suddenly they were on level ground again. They had come out into a tiny canyon, a blind pocket recessed into the mountain, almost completely surrounded by walls that rose sharply upward. Back across the gorge, huddled against the face of the mountain, was a tiny hut.

It was primitive, like those in the prehistoric sections of the old history books. It was made of branches lashed together, with sides that leaned crookedly against each other and a matted roof that looked as if it would slide off at any minute. It was like a twig house that a child might make with sticks and grass.

"Our home," Mag said. Her voice was proud.

He didn't answer. He followed her across toward it, past the mounds of refuse, the fruit rinds and bones and skins that were flung carelessly beside the trail. He smelled the scent of decay and rotteness and turned his head away, feeling sick.

"Lisa! Lisa!" Mag shouted, the words echoing and re-echoing.

A figure moved just inside the hut doorway. "She's not here," a voice called. "She's out hunting."

"Well, come on out, Nell, and see what I've found."

The figure moved slowly out from the gloom of the hut, bending to get through the low door, half straightening up outside, and Eric saw that it was an old, old woman. She couldn't straighten very far. She was too old, bent and twisted and brittle, feebler looking than anyone Eric had ever seen before. She hobbled toward him slowly, teetering from side to side as she walked, her hands held out in front of her, her eyes on the ground.

"What is it, Mag?" Her voice was as twisted as her body.

"A boy. Valley boy. Just the age for our Lisa, too."

Eric felt his face redden and he opened his mouth to protest, to say something, anything, but Mag went right on talking, ignoring him.

"The boy came in an aircar. I thought he was one of the normals—but he's not. Hasn't their ways. Good looking boy, too."

"Is he?" Nell had reached them. She stopped and looked up, right into Eric's face, and for the first time he realized that she was blind. Her eyes were milky white, without pupils, without irises. Against the brown leather of her skin they looked moist and dead.

"Speak, boy," she croaked. "Let me hear your voice."

"Hello," Eric said, feeling utterly foolish and utterly confused. "I'm Eric."

"Eric... ." Nell reached out, touched his arm with her hand, ran her fingers up over his shoulders, over his chest.

"It's been a long time since I've heard a man's voice," she said. "Not since Mag here was a little girl."

"Have you been—here—all that time?" Eric asked, looking around him at the hut, and the meat hanging to dry, covered with flies, and the leather water bags, and the mounds of refuse, the huge, heaped mounds that he couldn't stop smelling.

"Yes," Nell said. "I've been here longer than I want to remember, boy. We came here from the other mountains when Mag was only a baby."

They walked toward the hut, and as they neared it he smelled a new smell, that of stale smoke and stale sweat overlying the general odor of decay.

"Let's talk out here," he said, not wanting to go inside.

They sat down on the hard earth and the two women turned their faces toward him, Mag watching him intently, Nell listening, her head cocked to one side like an old crippled bird's.

"I always thought I was the only one like me," Eric said. "The people don't know of any others. They don't know you exist. They wouldn't believe it."

"That's the way we want it," Mag said. "That's the only way it can be."

Nell nodded. "I was a girl in the other hills," she said, nodding toward the west, toward the museum. "There were several of us then. There had been families of us in my father's time, and in his father's time, and maybe before that even. But when I was a girl there was only my father and my mother and another wife of my father's, and a lot of children... ."

She paused, still looking toward the west, facing a horizon she could no longer see. "The normal ones came. We'd hidden from them before. But this time we had no chance to hide. I was hunting, with the boy who was my father's nephew.

"They surrounded the hut. They didn't make any sound. They don't have to. I was in the forest when I heard my mother scream."

"Did they kill her?" Eric cried out. "They wouldn't do that."

"No, they didn't kill any of them. They dragged them off to the aircars, all of them. My father, my mother and the other woman, the children. We watched from the trees and saw them dragged off, tied with ropes, like wild animals. The cars flew away. Our people never came back."

She stopped, sunken in revery. Mag took up the story. Her voice was matter-of-fact, completely casual about those long ago events.

"A bear killed my father. That was after we came back here. Nell was sick. I did the hunting. We almost starved, for a while, but there's lots of game in the hills. It's a good life here. But I've been sorry for Lisa. She's a woman now. She needs a man. I'm glad you came. I would have hated to send her out looking for a normal one."

"But—" Eric stopped, his head whirling. He didn't know what to say. Anything at all would sound wrong, cruel.

"It's dangerous," Mag went on, "taking up with the normals. They think it's wrong. They think we're animals. One of us has to pick a man who's stupid—a farmer, maybe—and even then it's like being a pet. A beast."

It took a moment for Eric to realize what she was saying, and when he did realize, the thought horrified him.

"Lisa's father was stupid," Mag said. "He took me in when I came down from the hills. He didn't send for the others. Not then. He kept me and fed me and treated me kindly, and I thought I was safe. I thought our kind and theirs could live together."

She laughed. Deep, bitter lines creased her mouth. "A week later the aircar came. They sneaked up to the garden where I was. He was with them. He was leading them."

She laughed again. "Their kindness means nothing. Their love means nothing. To them, we're animals."

The old woman, Nell, rocked back and forth, her face still in reverie. Flies crawled over her bare arms, unheeded.

"I got away," Mag said. "I saw them coming. They can't run fast, and I knew the hiding places. I never went back to the valleys. Nell would have starved without me. And there was Lisa to care for, later... ."

The flies settled on Eric's hands and he brushed them away, shivering.

Mag smiled. The bitterness left her face. "I'm glad I don't have to send Lisa down to the valley."

She got up before he could answer, before he could even think of anything to say or do. Crossing over to the pole where the dried meat hung, she pulled a piece of it loose and brought it back to where they sat. Some she gave to the old woman and some she kept for herself and the rest, most of it, she tossed to Eric.

"You must be hungry, boy."

It was filthy. Dirt clung to it—dust and pollen and grime—and the flies had flown off in clouds when she lifted it down.

The old woman raised her piece and put the edge of it in her mouth and started to chew, slowly, eating her way up the strip. Mag tore hers with her teeth, rending it and swallowing it quickly, watching Eric all the time.

"Eat."

It was unreal. He couldn't be here. These women couldn't exist.

He lifted the meat, feeling his stomach knot with disgust, wanting to fling it from him and run, blindly, down the hill to the aircar. But he didn't. He had searched too long to flee now. Shuddering, he closed his mind to the flies and the smell and the filth and bit into the meat and chewed it and swallowed it. And all the time, Mag watched him.

The sun passed overhead and began to dip toward the west. The shadows, which had shortened as they sat in front of the hut, lengthened again, until they themselves were half in the shadow of the trees lining the gorge. Still Lisa did not come. It was very quiet. The only sounds that broke the silence were their own voices and the buzzing of the flies.

They talked, but communication was difficult between them. Eric tried to accept their ideas, their way of life, but he couldn't. The things they said were strange to him. Their whole pattern of life was strange to him.

He could understand it at all only because he had studied the primitive peoples of the old race. But he couldn't imagine himself as one of them. He couldn't think of himself as having grown up among them, in the hills, living only to hunt and gather berries and store food for the winter-time. He couldn't think of himself hiding, creeping through the gorges like a hunted animal, flattening himself in the underbrush whenever an aircar passed by.

He sat and listened to them talk, and his amazement grew. Their beliefs were so different. He listened to their superstitious accounts of the old race, and the way it had been "in the beginning."

He listened to their legends of the old gods who flew through the air and were a mighty people, but who were destroyed by a new race of devils. He listened as they told him of their own ancestors, children of the gods, who had fled to the hills to await the gods' return. They had no conception at all of the thousands of years that had elapsed between the old race's passing and their own forefathers' flight into the hills. And when he tried to explain, they shook their heads and wouldn't believe him.

He didn't hear Lisa come. One minute the far end of the clearing was empty and still and the next minute the girl was walking across it toward them, a bow in one hand and a pair of rabbits dangling from the other.

She saw him and stopped, the rabbits dropping from her hand.

"Here's your young man, Lisa," Mag said. "Valley boy. His name's Eric."

He stared back at her, more in curiosity than in surprise. She wasn't nearly as unattractive as he had thought she would be. She wouldn't be bad looking at all, he thought, if she were clean. She was fairly tall and lean, too skinny really, with thin muscular arms instead of the softly rounded arms the valley girls had. She was too brown, but her skin hadn't turned leathery yet, and there was still a little life in the lank brown hair that fell matted about her shoulders.

"Hello, Lisa," he said.

"Hello." Her eyes never left him. She stared at him, her lips trembling, her whole body tensed. She looked as if she were going to turn and run at any moment, as if only his quietness kept her from fleeing.

With a sudden shock Eric realized that she too was afraid—afraid of him. His own hesitation fell away and he smiled at her.

Mag got up and went over to the girl and put her arm around Lisa's shoulders. "Don't be afraid of him, child," Mag said. "He's a nice boy. Not like one of *them*."

Lisa trembled.

Eric watched her, pitying her. She was as helpless as he before the calm assumption of the older women. More helpless, because she had probably never thought of defying them, of escaping the pattern of their lives.

"Don't worry, Lisa," he said. "I won't hurt you."

Slowly she walked toward him, poised, waiting for a hostile move. She came within a few feet of him and then sank to her haunches, still watching him, still poised.

She was as savage as the others. A graceful, dirty savage.

"You're really one of us?" she said. "You can't perceive?"

"No," he said. "I can't perceive."

"He's not like them," Mag said flatly. "If you'd ever been among them, you'd know their ways."

"I've never seen a man before, up close," Lisa said.

Her eyes pleaded with him, and suddenly he knew why he pitied her. It was because she felt helpless before him, and begged him not to harm her, and thought of him as something above her, more powerful than she, and dangerous. He looked across at her and felt protective, and it was a new feeling to him, absolutely new. Because always before, around the normals, even around his own parents and Walden, he had been the helpless one.

He liked this new feeling, and wished it could last. But it couldn't. He couldn't do as the old women expected him to, leave the valley and his parents, leave the books and the museum and the ship, just to hide in the hills like a beast with them.

He had come to find his people, but these three were not they.

"You two go on off and talk," Mag said. "We're old. We don't matter now. You've got things to settle between you."

She cackled again and got up and went into the hut and old Nell got up also and followed her.

The girl shivered. She drew back a little, away from him. Her eyes never left his face.

"Don't be afraid, Lisa," he said gently. "I won't hurt you. I won't even touch you. But I would like to talk to you."

"All right," she said.

They got up and walked to the end of the gorge, the girl keeping always a few feet from him. At the boulders she stopped and faced him, her back against a rock, her thin body still trembling.

"Lisa," he said. "I want to be your friend."

Her eyes widened. "How can you?" she said. "Men are friends. Women are friends. But you're a man and I'm a woman and it's different."

He shook his head helplessly, trying to think of a way to explain things to her. He couldn't say that he found her dirty and unattractive and almost another species. He couldn't say that he'd searched the hills, often thinking of the relationship between man and woman, but that she wasn't the woman, that she never could be the woman for him. He couldn't tell her that he pitied her in perhaps the same way that the normals pitied him.

Still, he wanted to talk to her. He wanted to be her friend. Because he was sure now that he could search the mountains forever, and perhaps find other people, even if those he found were like her, and Mag and Nell.

"Listen, Lisa," he said. "I can't live up here. I live in the valley. I came in an aircar, and it's down in the canyon below here. I have to go back—soon. Before it gets completely dark."

"Why?"

"If I don't the normals will come looking for me. They'll find the aircar and then they'll find us. And you and your family will be taken away. Don't you understand?"

"You're going?" Lisa said.

"In a little while. I must."

She looked at him, strangely. She looked at his clothes, at his face, at his body. Then she looked at her own hands and touched her own coarse dress, and she nodded.

"You won't come back," she said. "You don't like me. I'm not what you were searching for."

He couldn't answer. Her words hurt him. The very fact that she could recognize their difference from each other hurt him. He pitied her still more.

"I'll come back," he said, "Of course I will. As often as I can. You're the only other people I've ever known who didn't perceive."

She looked up into his face again. Her eyes were very large. They were the only beautiful thing about her.

"Even if you do come back, you won't want me."

There wasn't any answer at all.

It was dusk when Eric got back to the museum. He landed the aircar and climbed out and walked across to the building, still feeling unreal, still not believing that the events of this day had actually happened.

He nodded to Prior and the old caretaker nodded back and then stood staring at him, troubled and curious. Eric didn't notice the other's expression, nor the fact that Prior followed him to the top of the spiral ramp and remained there for a while, watching.

Eric stood at the bottom of the well where he had so often stood before, staring across at the ship, then looking up, up, up its sleek length to where its nose pointed yearningly toward the night sky. But tonight he found no comfort in the sight, no sense of kinship with its builders. Tonight the ship was a dead and empty thing.

"*You won't want me—*" Her voice, her eyes, came between him and the stars.

He had thought of finding his people and sharing with them their common heritage from the past, the knowledge of the old race and its thoughts and its science and its philosophy. He had thought of sharing with them the old desire for the stars, the old hunger, the old loneliness that the new race could never understand. He had been wrong.

His people... . He pushed the thought away.

He looked up at the stars that were merely pin-pricks of light at the top of the well and wondered if anyone, old race or new or something different from either, lived among them now. And he felt small, and even the ship was small, and his own problems and his own search were unimportant. He sat down and leaned back against the smooth wall and closed his eyes, blotting out the ship and the stars, and finally, even Lisa's face before him.

The old caretaker found him sleeping there, and sighed, and went away again, still frowning. Eric slept on, unheeding. When he awoke it was late morning and the stars were gone and clouds drifted across the mouth of the well.

There was no answer here. The starship would never fly.

And Eric went back to the mountains.

It was two weeks later that the councilmen stood facing Walden across the great museum table. They had come together, Abbot and Drew and the others, and they faced him together, frowning. Their thoughts were hidden. Walden could catch only glimpses of what lay beneath their worry.

"Every day." Abbot's eyes were hard, unyielding. "Why, Walden? Why does he go there every day?"

"Does it matter?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. We can't tell—yet."

The ring of faces, of buried perceptions, of fear, anxiety, and a worry that could no longer be shrugged off. And Eric away, as he was every day now, somewhere in the distant hills.

"The boy's all right." Walden checked his own rush of worry.

"Is he?"

The worry in the open now, the fear uncontained, and no more vacillation. Their thoughts hidden from Walden, their plans hidden, and nothing he could do, no way to warn Eric, yet.

Abbot smiled, humorlessly. "The boy had better be all right... ."

Eric landed in the canyon and made sure that the aircar was hidden under a ledge, with branches drawn about it so that no one could spot it from above. Then he turned and started for the slope, and as he reached it Lisa ran down to meet him.

"You're late," she called.

"Am I? Have you really been waiting for me?"

"Of course." She came over to meet him, laughing, openly glad that he had come.

He smiled back at her and walked along beside her, having to take long strides to match her skipping ones, and he too was glad that he'd come. Lately he felt like this every day. It was a feeling he couldn't analyze. Nothing had changed. The girl was still too thin and too brown and too dirty, although now she had begun to wash her dress and her body in the mountain stream and to comb the snarls from her hair. But it didn't make her attractive to him. It only made her less unattractive.

"Will you always have to go away every night?" she asked guilelessly.

"I suppose so."

He looked down at her and smiled, wondering why he came. There was still an air of unreality about the whole situation. He felt numb. He had felt that way ever since the first day, and the feeling had grown, until now he moved and spoke and smiled and ate and it was as if he were someone else and the person he had been was gone completely. He liked coming here. But there was no triumph in being with these people, no sense of having found his own kind, no purpose, nothing but a vague contentment and an unwillingness to search any farther.

"You're very quiet," Lisa said.

"I know. I was thinking."

She reached out and touched his arm, her fingers strong and muscular. He smiled at her but made no move toward her, and after a moment she sighed and took her hand away.

"Why are you so different, Eric?"

"Perhaps because I was raised by the others, the normal ones. Perhaps just because I've read so many books about the old race... ."

They came up to the boulders that blocked the entrance of the little gorge where the hut was. Lisa started toward them, then stopped abruptly.

"Let's go on up the hill. I want to talk to you, without them."

"All right."

He followed her without speaking, concentrating all his effort on scrambling over the rougher spots in the trail. She didn't say anything more until they had come out on a high ledge that overlooked the whole canyon and she had sat down and motioned for him to sit down too.

"Whew," he panted. "You're a mountain goat, Lisa."

She didn't smile. "I've liked your coming to see us," she said. "I like to listen to you talk. I like the tales you tell of the old ones. But Mag and Nell are upset."

He knew what was coming. His eyes met hers, and then he looked away and reddened and felt sorry for her and what he would have to tell her. This was a subject they had managed to avoid ever since that first day, although the older women brought it up whenever he saw them.

"Mag says I must have a man," Lisa said. Her voice was tight. He couldn't tell if she was crying because he couldn't bear to look at her. He could only stare out over the canyon and listen and wait.

"She says if it isn't you I'll have to find someone else, later on, but she says it ought to be you. Because *they're* dangerous, and besides, if it's you our children will be sure to be like us."

"What?" He swung around, startled. "Do you mean that if one parent were normal the child might be too?"

"Yes," she said. "It might. They say that's happened. Sometimes. No one knows why we're born. No one knows why some are one way and some another."

"Lisa... ." He stopped.

"I know. You don't want me. I've known that all the time."

"It isn't just that."

He tried to find the words to express what he felt, but anything he might say would be cold and cruel and not quite true. He felt the

contentment drain out of him, and he felt annoyed, because he didn't want to have to think about her problem, or about anything.

"Why do they want you to have a child?" he said roughly. "Why do they want our kind to go on, living here like animals, or taken to the valleys and separated from each other and put into institutions until we die? Why don't they admit that we've lost, that the normals own the Earth? Why don't they stop breeding and let us die?"

"Your parents were normal, Eric. If all of us died, others would be born, someday."

He nodded and then he closed his eyes and fought against the despair that rose suddenly within him and blotted out the last of the contentment and the unreality. He fought against it and lost. And suddenly Lisa was very real, more real even than the books had ever been. And the dirty old women were suddenly people—individuals, not savages. He tried to pity them, to retreat into his pity and his loneliness, but he couldn't even do that.

The people he had looked for were imaginary. He would never find them, because Mag and Nell and Lisa were his people. They were like him, and the only difference between him and them was one of luck. They were dirty and ignorant. They had been born in the mountains and hunted like beasts. He was more fortunate; he had been born in the valley.

He was a snob. He had looked down on them, when all the time he was one of them. If he had been born among them, he would have been as they were. And, if Lisa had lived in another age, she too would have sought the stars.

Eric sat very still and fought until a little of the turmoil quieted inside of him. Then he opened his eyes again and stared across the canyon, at the rock slides and the trees growing out from the slopes at twisting, precarious angles, and he saw everything in a new light. He saw the old race as it had been far earlier than the age of space-travel, and he knew that it had conquered many environments on Earth before it had gained a chance to try for those of space. He felt humble, suddenly, and proud at the same time.

Lisa sat beside him, not speaking, drawing away from him and letting him be by himself, as if she knew the conflicts within him and knew enough not to interrupt. He was grateful both for her presence there beside him and for her silence.

Much later, when afternoon shadows had crept well out from the rocks, she turned to him. "Will you take me to the valley someday, Eric?"

"Maybe. But no one must know about you. You know what would happen if any of them found out you even existed."

"Yes," she said. "We'd have to be careful, all right. But you could take me for a ride in the aircar sometime and show me things."

Before, he would have shrugged off her words and forgotten them. Now he couldn't. Decision crystalized quickly in his mind.

"Come on, Lisa," he said, getting to his feet and reaching down to help her up also. "I'll take you to the valley right now."

She looked up at him, unable to speak, her eyes shining, and then she was running ahead of him, down the slope toward the aircar.

The car climbed swiftly away from the valley floor, up between the canyon walls and above them, over the crest of the hills. He circled it for a moment, banking it over on its side so that she could look down at the gorge and the rocks and the cascading stream.

"How do you like it, Lisa?"

"I don't know." She smiled, rather weakly, her body braced against the seat. "It feels so strange."

He smiled back and straightened the car, turning away from the mountains until the great, gardened valley stretched out before them, all the way to the foot of the western hills.

"I'll show you the museum," he said. "I only wish I could take you inside."

She moved away from him, nearer to the window, and looked down at the scattered houses that lay below them, at the people moving in the gardens, at the children.

"I never dreamed it was like this," she said. "I never could picture it before."

There was a longing in her face he'd never noticed before. He stared at her, and she was different suddenly, and her thin muscular body was different too.

Pioneer—that was the word he wanted.

The girls of the new race could never be pioneers.

"Look, Eric. Over there. Aircars."

The words broke in on his thoughts and he looked away from her, following her gaze incuriously, not much interested. And then his fingers stiffened on the controls and the peacefulness fell away from him as if it had never been.

"Lots of them," she said.

Aircars. Eight or ten of them, more than he had ever seen at one time, spread out in a line and flying eastward, straight toward him.

They mustn't see Lisa. They mustn't get close enough to realize who he was.

He swung away from them, perpendicular to their course, angling so that he would be out of perception range, and then he circled, close to the ground, as they swept by, undeviating, purposeful, toward the mountains.

Toward the mountains.

Fear. Sudden, numbing fear and the realization of his own carelessness.

"What's the matter, Eric?"

He had swung about and now followed them, far behind them and off to one side, much too far away for them to try to perceive him. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps they don't know. But all the time he remembered his own trips to the canyon, taken so openly.

"Oh, Eric, they're not—"

He swung up over the last ridge and looked down, and her words choked off in her throat. Below them lay the canyon, and in it, the long line of aircars, landed now, cutting off the gorge, the light reflecting off them, bronze in the sunset. And the tiny figures of men were even now spreading out from the cars.

"What'll we do, Eric?"

Panic. In her voice and in her eyes and in her fingers that bit into his arm, hurting him, steadying him against his own fear and the twisting realization of his betraying lack of caution.

"Run. What else can we do?"

Down back over the ridge, out of sight of the aircars and into the foothills, and all the while knowing that there was nowhere to run to now.

"No, Eric! We've got to go back. We've got to find Mag and Nell—" Her voice rose in anguish, then broke, and she was crying.

"We can't help them by going back," he said harshly. "Maybe they got away. Maybe they didn't. But the others would catch us for sure if they got near us."

Run. It was all they could do, now. Run to other hills and leave the air-car and hide, and live as Lisa had lived, as others of their kind had lived.

"We've got to think of ourselves, Lisa. It's all we can do, now."

Down through the foothills, toward the open valley, and the future, the long blind race to other mountains, and no choice left, no alternative, and the books lost and the starship left behind, forever... .

Lisa cried, and her fingers bit into his arm. Ahead of him, too close to flee or deceive, was another line of aircars, flying in from the valley, their formation breaking as they veered toward him.

"Land, Eric. Land and run!"

"We can't, Lisa. There's not enough time."

Everything was lost now—even the hills.

Unless ... one chance. The only chance, and it was nearly hopeless.

"Get in the back, Lisa," he said. "Climb over the seat and hide in that storage compartment. And stay there."

The two nearest cars had swung about now and paralleled his course, flanking him, drifting in nearer and nearer.

"Why?" Lisa clung to him. "What are you going to do?"

"They don't know you're with me. They probably don't even know I went back to the canyon. They think I'll land at the museum, not suspecting anything's wrong. So I'll do just what they expect me to. Go back, and pretend I don't know a thing."

"You're mad."

"It's our only chance, Lisa. If only they don't lock me up tonight... ."

She clung to him for still another minute and then she climbed over the seat and he heard the luggage compartment panel slide open and, a moment later, shut.

The nearest aircar drifted still closer to him, escorting him west-ward, toward the museum. Behind him, other cars closed in.

Walden and Prior were waiting for him at the entrance of the main building, just as they had waited so often before. He greeted them casually, trying to act exactly as he usually did, but their greetings to him were far from casual. They stared at him oddly, Prior even drawing back a little as he approached. Walden looked at him for a long moment, very seriously, as if trying to tell him something, but what it was Eric didn't know. Both men were worried, their anxiety showing in their manner, and Eric wondered if he himself showed the fear that gripped him.

They must know what had happened. By now probably every normal person within a hundred miles of the museum must know.

At the entrance he glanced back idly and saw that one of the aircars that had followed him had landed and that the others were angling off again, leaving. It was too dark to see how many men got out of the car, but Walden and Prior were facing in that direction, communicating, and Eric knew that they knew. Everything.

It was like a trap around him, with each of their minds a strand of the net, and he was unable to see which strands were about to entangle him, unable to see if there were any holes through which he might escape. All he could do was pretend that he didn't even know the net existed, and wait.

Half a dozen men came up to Prior and Walden. One of them was Abbot. His face was very stern, and when he glanced over at where Eric stood in the building entrance his face grew even sterner.

Eric watched them for a moment; then he went inside, the way he usually did when there were lots of people around. He wished he knew what they were saying. He wished he knew what was going to happen.

He went on into the library and pulled out a book at random and sat down and started turning the pages. He couldn't read. He kept waiting for them to come in, for one of them to lay a hand on his shoulder and tell him to come along, that they knew he had found other people like himself and that he was a danger to their race and that they were going to lock him up somewhere.

What would happen to Lisa? They'd find her, of course. She could never escape alone, on foot, to the hills.

What had happened to Mag and Nell?

No one came. He knew that their perceptions lay all around him, but he could sense no emotions, no thoughts but his own.

He sat and waited, his eyes focused on the book but not seeing it. It seemed hours before anyone came. Then Prior and Abbot and Walden were in the archway, looking across at him. Prior's face was still worried, Abbot's stern, Walden's reassuring... .

Eric forced himself to smile at them and then turn another page and pretend to go on reading. After a moment he heard their footsteps retreating, and when he looked up again they were gone.

He sat a while longer and then he got up and walked down the ramp and stood for a few minutes looking at the ship, because that too would be expected of him. He felt nothing. The ship was a world away now, mocking him, for his future no longer lay in the past, with the old race, but out in the hills. If he had a future at all... .

He went up the ramp again, toward his own room. No one else was in sight. They had all gone to bed, perhaps. They wouldn't expect him to try to run away now.

He began to walk, as aimlessly as he could, in the direction of the air-car. He saw no one. Perhaps it wasn't even guarded. He circled around

it, still seeing no one; then, feeling more secure suddenly, he went directly toward it and reached up to open the panel and climb in.

"Is that you, Eric?"

Walden's voice. Quiet as always. And it came from inside the car.

Eric stood frozen, looking up at the ship, trying to see Walden's face and unable to find it in the darkness. He didn't answer—couldn't answer. He listened, and heard nothing except Walden, there above him, moving on the seat.

Where was Lisa?

"I thought you'd come back here," Walden said. He climbed down out of the aircar and stood facing Eric, his body a dim shadow.

"Why are you here?" Eric whispered.

"I wanted to see you. Without the others knowing it. I was sure you'd come here tonight."

Walden. Always Walden. First his teacher and then his friend, and now the one man who stood between him and freedom. For a second Eric felt his muscles tense and he stiffened, ready to leap upon the older man and knock him down and take the ship and run. Then he relaxed. It was a senseless impulse, primitive and useless.

"The others don't know you have any idea what's happened, Eric. But I could tell. It was written all over you."

"What did they find, Walden?"

The old man sighed, and when he spoke his voice was very tired. "They found two women. They tried to capture them, but the women ran out on a ledge. The older one slipped and fell and the other tried to catch her and she fell too. They were dead when the men reached them."

Eric listened, and slowly his tension relaxed, replaced by a dull ache of mourning. But he knew that he was glad to hear that they were dead and not captured, not dragged away from the hills to be bathed and well fed and imprisoned forever under the eyes of the new race.

"The old one was blind," Walden said. "It may have been her blindness that caused her to fall."

"It wasn't."

"No, Eric, it probably wasn't."

They were silent for a moment, and there was no sound at all except for their own breathing. Eric wondered if Lisa still hid in the aircar, if she was listening to them, afraid and hopeless and crying over the death of her people.

"Why did you come out here, Walden?"

"To see you. I came today, when I realized how suspicious the council had grown. I was going to warn you, to tell you to keep away from the hills, that they wanted an excuse to lock you up. I was too late."

"I was careless, Walden." He felt guilt twist inside of him.

"No. You didn't know the danger. I should have warned you sooner. But I never dreamed you would find anyone in the hills, Eric. I never dreamed there were any more without perception, this generation."

Eric moved nearer the car and leaned against it, the cold plastic next to his body cooling him a little, steadying him against the feverish trembling that shook his legs and sent sweat down over him and made him too weak, suddenly, to want to struggle further.

"Let me go, Walden. Let me take the car and go."

Walden didn't move. He stood quietly, a tall thin shape in the darkness.

"There are other people the searchers didn't find, aren't there? And you're going to them."

Eric didn't answer. He looked past Walden, at the car, wishing he could somehow call to Lisa, wishing they could perceive so that he could reassure her and promise her that somehow he'd still take her to freedom. But it would be an empty promise... .

"I've warned you too late. You've found your people, but it won't do you any good. They'll hunt you through the hills, and I won't be able to help you any more."

Eric looked back at him, hearing the sadness in his voice. It was real sadness, real emotion. He thought of the years he had spent with Walden, learning, absorbing the old race knowledge, and he remembered that all through those years Walden had never once made him feel uncomfortable because of the difference between them.

He looked at the old man for a long time, wishing that it was day so he could read the other's expression, wondering how he had managed to take this man for granted for so long.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why are you helping me? Why aren't you like the others?"

"I never had a son, Eric. Perhaps that's the reason."

Eric thought of Myron and shook his head. "No, it isn't that. My father doesn't feel the way you do. He can't forget that I'm not normal. With him, I'm always aware of the difference."

"And you're not with me?"

"No," Eric said. "I'm not. Why?" And he wondered why he had never asked that question before.

"The final question," Walden said softly. "I wondered how long it would be before you asked it. I wondered if you'd ever ask it.

"Haven't you ever thought about why I never married, Eric? Haven't you ever asked yourself why I alone learned to read, and collected books, and studied the old race?"

"No," Eric admitted. "I just accepted you."

"Even though I can perceive and you can't." Walden paused and Eric waited, not knowing what was coming and yet sure that nothing could surprise him now.

"My father was normal," Walden said slowly. "But I never saw him. My mother was like you. So was my brother. We lived in the hills and I was the only one who could perceive. I learned what it was to be different."

Eric stared. He couldn't stop staring. And yet he should have realized, long ago, that Walden was different too, in his own way.

Walden smiled back, his face, shadowed in moonlight, as quiet and as understanding as ever. For a moment neither spoke, and there was only the faraway sound of crickets chirping and the rustling of the wind in the gardens.

And then, from within the aircar, there was a different rustling, that of a person moving.

"Lisa!"

Eric pushed the compartment panel back. The soft light came on automatically, framing her where she curled against the far wall.

"You heard us?"

She nodded. Tears had dried on her cheeks. Her eyes were huge in her thin face.

"We'd better go, Lisa."

He reached in to help her out.

They didn't see the aircar dropping in for a landing until it was almost upon them, until its lights arced down over the museum walls.

"Hide, Eric. In here—" Lisa pulled him forward.

Behind them, Walden's voice, suddenly tired in the darkness. "It's too late. They know I'm here. And they're wondering why."

The three of them stood frozen, watching each other, while the dark shape of the car settled to the ground some thirty yards away.

"It's Abbot," Walden said. He paused, intent for a moment, and added, "He doesn't know about you. Get out of sight somewhere, both of you, away from here—"

"Come on, Lisa—" Eric swung away from the car, toward the shelter of the building and whatever hiding place there might be. "Hurry!"

They ran, and the museum rose in front of them, and the door was open. They were through it and into the dim corridor, and there was no one around; Walden's figure was lost in the night outside. Beyond the libraries the great ramp spiraled downward.

"This way, Lisa!"

They came out into the bottom of the well and there in front of them the starship rested. Still reaching upward. Still waiting, as it had waited for so many uncounted years.

Their ship—if only it could be their ship... .

"Oh, Eric!"

Side by side they stood staring at it, and Eric wished that they could get into it and go, right now, while they were still free and there was no one to stop them. But they couldn't. There was no food in the ship, no plant tanks, none of the many provisions the books listed.

Besides, if they took off now they would destroy the museum and all the people in it, and probably kill themselves as well.

"Eric! We know you're down there!" It wasn't Walden's voice.

Lisa moved closer. Eric put his arm around her and held her while footsteps hurried toward them down the ramp. The council. Abbot and Drew and the others. Prior, shaking his head. Walden.

"Let us go," Eric cried. "Why won't you let us go?"

Walden turned to the others. His eyes pleaded with them. His lips moved and his hands were expressive, gesturing. But the others stood without moving, without expression.

Then Abbot pushed Walden aside and started forward, his face hard and determined and unchangeable.

"You won't let us go," Eric said.

"No. You're fools, both of you."

There was one answer, only one answer, and with it, a hot violence in his blood as the old race pattern came into focus, as the fear and the futility fell away.

It was only a few steps to the ship. Eric caught Lisa's arm and pulled her after him and ran toward it, reaching up to the door. In one motion he flung it open and lifted her through it, then he swung about to face the others.

"Let us go!" he shouted. "Promise to let us go, or we'll take off anyway and if we die at least you'll die too!"

Abbot stopped. He looked back at Walden, his face scornful. "You see?" he said aloud. "They're mad. And you let this happen."

He turned away, dismissing Walden, and came toward the ship. The others followed him.

Eric waited. He stood with his back to the door, waiting, as Abbot strode toward him, ahead of the other councilmen, alone and unprotected.

"You're the fool!" Eric said. He laughed as he leaped forward.

Abbot's eyes went wide suddenly; he tried to dodge, gave a little grunt, and went limp in Eric's grasp.

Eric laughed again, swung Abbot into the ship and leaped in himself. The old race and its violence had never been nearer.

He slammed the door shut, bolted it, and turned back to where the councilman was struggling to his feet.

"Now will you let us go?" Eric said softly. "Or must we take off now, with you—for the stars?"

For a long moment Abbot looked at him, and then his lips trembled and his whole body went slack in defeat.

"The ship is yours," he whispered. "Just let me go."

Outside the ship, Walden chuckled wryly.

The Vacuum Suit was strange against Eric's body, as strange as the straps that bound him to the couch. He looked over at Lisa and she too was unrecognizable, a great bloated slug tied down beside him. Only her face, frightened behind the helmet, looked human.

He reached for the controls, then paused, glancing down through the view screens at the ground, at the people two hundred feet below, tiny ants scurrying away from the ship, running to shelter but still looking up at him. He couldn't see his parents or Walden.

His fingers closed about the control lever but still he stared down. Everything that had been familiar all his life stood out sharply now, because he was leaving and it would never be there again for him. And he had to remember what it was like... .

Then he looked up. The sky was blue and cloudless above him, and there were no stars at all. But he knew that beyond the sky the stars were shining.

And perhaps, somewhere amid the stars, the old race waited.

He turned to Lisa. "This may be goodbye, darling."

"It may be. But it doesn't matter, really."

They had each other. It was enough. Even though they could never be as close to each other as the new race was close. They were separate, with a gulf always between their inmost thoughts, but they could bridge that gulf, sometimes.

He turned back to the controls and his fingers tightened. The last line of the poem shouted in his mind, and he laughed, for he knew finally what the poet had meant, what the old race had lived for. *We have cast off the planets like outgrown toys, and now we want the stars...*

He pulled the lever back and the ship sprang free. A terrible weight pressed against him, crushing him, stifling him. But still he laughed, because he was one of the old race, and he was happy.

And the meaning of his life lay in the search itself.

They stood staring up at the ship until it was only a tiny speck in the sky, and then they looked away from it, at each other. A wave of perception swept among them, drawing them closer to each other in the face of something they couldn't understand.

"Why did they go?" Abbot asked, in his mind.

"Why did any of the old race go?" Walden answered.

The sunlight flashed off the ship, and then it was gone.

"It's not surprising that the old race died," Abbot said. "They were brilliant, in their way, and yet they did such strange things. Their lives seemed so completely meaningless... ."

Walden didn't answer for a moment. His eyes searched the sky for a last glimpse of the ship, but there was nothing at all. He sighed, and he looked at Abbot, and then past him, at all the others.

"I wonder," he said, "how long it will be before some other race says the same thing about us."

No one answered. He turned and walked away from them, across the trampled flowers, toward the museum and the great empty vault where the starship had waited for so long.

THE END

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

Murray F. Yaco

Membership Drive

Want to join our secret organization? Well, first you have to pass the tests.

Charles E. Fritch

Skin Game

Working on the theory that you can skin a sucker in space as well as on Earth, the con team of Harding and Sheckly operated furtively but profitably among natives of the outer planets. That is—until there was a question of turnabout being fair play in a world where natives took their skinning literally !

M.C. Pease

Generals Help Themselves

With no one to help him, it seemed the General was lost. But the enemy was soon to discover that— Generals Help Themselves.

Irving Cox

The Instant of Now

Revolution is not necessarily a noble thing. Unless shrewdly directed, its best elements may fall victim to its basest impulses.

Irving Cox

Impact

They were languorous, anarchic, shameless in their pleasures ... were they lower than man ... or higher?

Irving Cox

The Cartels Jungle

In most ideally conceived Utopias the world as it exists is depicted as a mushrooming horror of maladjustment, cruelty and crime. In this startlingly original short novel that basic premise is granted, but only to pave the way for an approach to Utopia over a highway of the mind so daringly unusual we predict you'll forget completely that you're embarking on a fictional excursion into the future by one of the most gifted writers in the field. And that forgetfulness will be accompanied by the startling realization that Irving E. Cox has a great deal more than a storyteller's magic to impart.

Evelyn E. Smith

Once a Greech

The mildest of men, Iversen was capable of murder ... to disprove Harkaway's hypothesis that in the midst of life, we are in life!

Mari Wolf

Robots of the World! Arise!

What would you do if your best robots—children of your own brain—walked up and said "We want union scale"?

Mari Wolf

An Empty Bottle

They wanted to go home—back to the planet they'd known. But even the stars had changed. Did the fate of all creation hinge upon an— AN EMPTY BOTTLE

Mari Wolf

The Very Secret Agent

Poor Riuku!... Not being a member of the human race, how was he supposed to understand what goes on in a woman's mind when the male of the same species didn't even know?



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind