So you have the knowledge of Life and Death.
And what can you do with it? How can you use it . . .

I

As the solid-wheeled, almost spring-less coach progressed through the rutted streets, Tansman, coming near to his destination, felt more tense than at any moment since he'd been set down on Zebulon. There was little traffic and little noise, and he looked through the coach window to see many of the adobe houses they passed shut and shuttered. He was the only passenger in the coach. He wasn't particularly afraid of sickness, so the warning he'd had against the megrim when he bought his seat for North Hill had passed over his head. Tansman was thinking of the last thing that Nancy Poate had said before he left the Ship.

It was standard advice, and he had had it before: Zebulon? Whatever you do, don't let them know where you come from. They finger-across-the-neck Ship people. (Accompanied with appropriate sound effect.) Nancy had simply reminded him that taking care and coming back were two things she expected of him. It was nice of her to say that, and—hang the irony—remember the Sons of Prometheus. ("They" being the ones who had gotten it in the neck).

Zebulon was not really the place for a chromoplastician with a positive distaste for do-gooding and an unadventurous temperament. This one, however, had a determined and formidable older cousin named Nancy Poate which was an off-setting factor beyond calculation.

"Phil," she had said, "did you, or did you not, tell me last week that you were finished with that silly set of experiments that you have been working on?"

"Yes."

"Then you need a vacation. This will be a vacation."

"Nancy, I'll grant that after Earth was destroyed in the Population Wars we owed the Colonies more than we gave them, but this sneaking around doing paternal good works to people, who just want to be left alone, doesn't appeal to me. You don't dare come out in the open because you're afraid they'll wring your neck and you aren't willing to leave them alone. So what do you do? You prod and you poke, you try to establish trade routes and you hand out propaganda and how-to-do-it books, and that makes you feel good. Well, I don't want it."

Nancy, bluff and unstoppable—and Tansman was convinced she didn't have herself remodeled because her appearance helped her to overwhelm people and get her own way—just nodded and said, "I knew I was right to pick on you, Phil. You won't be tempted to meddle. All you'll have to do is be there for a month, keeping an eye on things."

"No," he had said.

“Phil," she had said, "don't be uffy." The way she'd said it had made him laugh.

So here Tansman was on Zebulon, no less stuffy for being here; reluctant fire-bringer, muttering to himself about a man he had yet to meet named Hans Rilke who was a do-gooder with an undurable liver. Wishing Nancy Poate a better occupation than coordinating the activities of do-gooders—including the replacement of their innards—he laughed at himself for being fond enough of his cousin to allow her to jolly him into doing what he didn't particularly want to do. For all that they called themselves "The Group," Nancy Poate's people were still lower-key Sons of Prometheus and Tansman had no wish to tempt either Zeus or the Ship-hating population of Zebulon. He thought again how appropriate it was that Rilke should have a liver complaint—that had been Prometheus' problem, too.

In his lifetime, Tansman had traveled a good many thousand light-years, but this was only the third time he'd been away from his home. That home was a ship built to ferry a comparative few from an over-populated Earth about to destroy itself, to make fresh starts in a variety of new places where, it was

hoped, the same mistakes would not be repeated. Those carried—many of them with no belief in the altogether unlikely future they were assured was coming—took nothing but their own reasons for leaving Earth, and were then flatly abandoned with little more to keep them alive. Within fifteen years of the founding of the first colony Earth was destroyed. Earth's heirs were one hundred twelve colonies—the best of them barely at the subsistence level, and seven great ships whose crews were left in very comfortable circumstances. The inequity was felt by all the Colonies and by some of those aboard the Ships, but the only obvious reparation would have been on the order of giving each of long-dead India's billions a chip of a brick from the Taj Mahal. So Tansman was a chromoplastician in a world ignorant of chromoplasts, an incognito prince amongst sharp-toothed paupers, an uneasy rider in a coach that was now, at last, coming to a stop in a dusty street and under a lowering sky.

He descended from the coach, bag in hand, a tall young man wearing the slouch hat, jacket, breeches and leggings that were seasonable and stylish here. Tansman felt like a great fool. He'd never worn a hat before in his life and he kept reaching up to adjust the clumsy uncomfortable thing. He was a thin man with a thin face and a nose somewhat overlarge that he had never had altered because he had never been one to do what everybody did; also a girl he had once had a *tendre* for had told him that it made him look engaging, which, in fact, it did.

Close at hand was a flat-bed wagon with a gnarled little old man standing in the street beside it. He was wearing a leather costume that might well be seasonable, but which Tansman was sure could never have been considered stylish, and was holding a rag to his face. Tansman could sense a good reason for this: there was in the air the most unpleasant odor he had ever smelled in his life, a very penetrating smell of singed animal. The coach had stopped at the entrance to a square, the obvious center of this little town.

Perhaps fifty yards distant across the square was built a great bonfire. By the fire were four men and a cart drawn by a horse made visibly nervous by the heat and smell, so nervous that one of the men was hard put to keep the horse still. Two of the men, working as a team grabbing arms and feet and heaving, were adding the human bodies piled on the cart to those already roasting on the fire. The bodies were naked and even at this distance Tansman could see that they were disfigured with purple blotches that greatly resembled bruises, or port wine scars. These three men were wearing gloves and white cloth masks. The speed and determination with which the pair worked showed only too clearly their anxiety to be done and away. They treated the bodies like so many logs to be added to the fire. Besides the impersonality there was a distinct note of fear and distaste. Tansman didn't share the fear since he had been quite adequately protected against the spectrum of Zebulonite diseases, including this hemorrhagic fever, before he left the Ship, but he could quite understand the distaste. He would have found it perhaps more than he could do to stand beside a great open fire and stoke it with human cadavers. The fourth man by the fire, however, seemed calm and unbothered. He was a white-robed, white-cowled, black-belted friar standing so close to the fire that the hand of one young woman, who was heaved too hastily, slapped the dirt at his feet. Apparently unmindful of heat, stench, infection or esthetics, he continued speaking, trying to add one single note of dignity to the unpleasant deaths and necessarily hasty disposal of these heirs of Earth.

Tansman was barely out of the coach before the driver had made a sharp whistle and the horses had lurched forward. He might have to make a change of horses and this might be his ordinary stop, but apparently he had no interest in following conventional practice. Perhaps, for all the talk of plague, he hadn't bargained on a funeral pyre in the main square. Raising dust, the coach rattled to the right and around the corner, and was gone between the mud-walled buildings. The wind under the gray sky was chill and carried the dust raised by the coach.

The old man in leather was the only person on the street, the only person in view besides those by the fire. He had a gold-spot earring set in his right ear, and a wicked-looking knife at his belt. He had curly muttonchop whiskers and they, like the rest of his dirty brown hair, were shot with gray. The rest of his face looked as though it had been shaved last about four days earlier. Altogether, he had something of a bright-eyed monkey look about him.

"Mr. Tansman?" he said, taking the rag away. He had a nervous, strained look about him.

Tansman said, "Yes."

"I'm from your uncle. Hop in, boy, and let's be off."

Tansman swung his bag over the side and into the bed of the wagon, stepped on the wheel hub and up to the seat. The little man, with quick movements, freed the hitched horses, tossed the grease-covered rag he'd been holding into the back of the wagon, hopped up to the seat, and in not more than thirty seconds from the disappearance of the coach the wagon was in motion, too, headed away from the square down the rutted street.

The little man shouted to the horses and took to the street at the highest speed he could manage, clearly wishing, as much as the coach driver, to be away from this silent town of grimly-shuttered windows and unstaveable death. The wagon rumbled and shook as the wheels bounced from rut to rut. The quick old man didn't slow the pace until the last flat-topped roof had been left behind, and then he brought the team down to a walk. "You're lucky I waited for you, boy. I wouldn't have stayed another ten minutes."

"The fever?"

"Aye, the megrim. I haven't lived these many years to end my days being sizzled in the town square and I don't fancy walking around with half my mind leached should I survive the megrim, neither." He looked at the blank sky. "I should have known. The megrim is no more than you should expect when five moons are full and the shippeens are about."

Tansman said, "Do you work for my uncle?"

"Yes. Old Garth, they call me." "How do you do?"

"Well enough, thankee, lad,"

Garth said, almost absently. He gave one last look back to the town, as though he expected to see something monstrous sneaking up on tiptoe to catch them unawares. He lifted the reins in hands twisted and brown like roots. "Let's do our chatting later. The soonest away, the better."

The countryside to the left was small hills rising away; to the right it was reasonably level as far as the eye could see. The road followed a hill slope down from the town to meet the flatland. The soil was the color and texture of the adobe buildings in town, cracked tan mud. There were no trees on either hills or flats, just sparse gray scrub. They reached the flatland in less than ten minutes, and here the road continued, almost straight and almost level, parallel to the line of hills. In another mile they came to a crossroads.

There was a sign that read Del-era and pointed toward a break in the hills. The road followed the pointing finger of the sign. The sign knew enough to stand and point; the road, following the sign's advice, was lost in the hills. Old Garth, without slackening the wagon's speed, brought the horses left and they turned toward the hills.

Just beyond the crossroads, however, there was a white-robed figure carrying a traveling bag and trudging toward the hills. The impression that the figure gave to Tansman was of unyielding determination, that no matter how long it took, its steady, even, foot-after-foot pace would be maintained until it arrived at its destination.

Garth brought the wagon alongside. Perhaps Tansman's impression came in part from the fact that it was only then, for all their noise and the dust they raised, that the friar noticed their presence.

"Good afternoon, Brother," Garth said: "Do you care to ride?" The friar turned his head and looked at them. "I'm going to the monastery at Delera." He was a pleasant-looking man of middle age, stubby and stout.

Garth, said, "That is where we are bound."

"Well, bless you."

The wagon lurched forward again with the friar sitting in back, brushing dust from his robes. Sitting on his own bag and using Tansman's larger bag for a backrest, he managed to have a seat that was reasonably stable and reasonably comfortable. He introduced himself as Brother Boris. He had a red face and just a fringe of hair, and a thoroughly plebeian look, but he also had that air of determination and detachment that was somehow more impressive than his looks. Tans-man's curiosity was piqued.

Tansman half-turned on his seat to speak to the friar, who was sitting just behind Garth, and asked, "How do you happen to be traveling with the fever abroad?"

Brother Boris smiled, "The business of the Confraternity doesn't wait on the megrim—in fact, just the opposite. The megrim is a sign that the Men of the Ships are about and then the Confraternity must be particularly watchful. Heresy, evil and disease travel together—and the effects are a certain sign of the cause."

Garth spoke without turning his head. "It's as I told you," he said, "when all the moons are full, the shippeens are abroad."

"No, my son," Brother Boris said. "You must not believe that. What you have said is rank superstition. The Confraternity has kept careful records—as I may say, I having spent a year assigned to the task when first I aspired to the Questryand the phases of the moons have nothing to do with the Men of the Ships. During the year I labored at the records, a nest of Shipmen, openly proclaiming themselves and calling themselves The Sons of Prometho, were eliminated by the Confraternity and at that time Aleph and Veth were full, Gimel was in the last quarter, and Daleth and Beth were new. Only once in fifteen Aleph months are all the moons full together, and heresy, evil and disease and the men that spread them are to be found in any month."

"But still," Garth said, "the moons are full now."

"Yes," Brother Boris said. Then he said to Tansman, "And why are you traveling when the moons are full?"

Tansman said, "When I set out, I didn't know there was danger of the megrim, and by the time I learned, it was easier to go on than to go back. I'm going to run my uncle's store. Garth here works for my uncle."

It had been agreed upon that Rilke would be known as Tansman's uncle. This had struck Tansman as odd because he knew that Rilke and he were within a few years of the same age—he was forty-six and Rilke a little older—and he would have thought that making them brothers, or cousins, might have been more appropriate. The choice had been Nancy Poate's, however, and Tansman hadn't been interested enough to argue any points with her. The friar asked, "And what is with your uncle?"

"He journeys to see his parents. I doubt news of the megrim will stop him. They're very old now, and ill, and not expected to live more than a short time at best."

"A dutiful son."

It was well after dark when they reached Delera. The road calve down a steep grade to the town. Halfway down it, they stopped to let Brother Boris get off. The monastery was set in the hillside above the road and it made a dark looming shape against the clouds. There was a lane leading up from the road. "Thank you very much for the ride," Brother Boris said. "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Tansman, and you, Garth. Perhaps I'll stop at your store one of these days and say hello."

As they drove away, Garth said, "He's a canny one, isn't he?"

"He's not usual. Will he come to the store?"

"Aye, and you'd best be on your mark, too," Garth said, laughing. "When a Questryman is about, that's the time to mind the tight and tender."

Rilke's store was a low adobe structure, one story in the front, two stories in the middle, one story with a patio on top in the rear. Behind it, along the back of the lot, was a warehouse-cum-stable, also of adobe. Both store and warehouse were closely hemmed by similar buildings like piled blocks. The street was quiet except for a dog who barked and played tag with the horses' hoofs. They swung *in* beside the store and the dog, apparently self-satisfied, fell away. There were lights upstairs and down in the center of the building. Garth pulled in by a door that opened on the alley.

"Hop on down," Garth said. "I'll see to the horses."

Tansman grabbed his bag and stepped down. There was a figure in the doorway, holding a lamp. Garth and the wagon rattled on and Tans-man looked up. The man in the doorway was no more than his height, even with the advantage of being a step higher. He had a nar row-chinned face and long wispy hair, and an unhealthy look in the lamp's glow.

"Rilke?" Tansman said, starting forward, his wagon-befuddled bones somewhat unsteady. "Tansman."

They shook hands and Rilke said, "Come on inside. I imagine you're hungry."

A curtain separated the living quarters from the store in front. Tansman got a glimpse of silhouetted things hanging from the ceiling as he passed. While he was putting his bag in the spare, dimly-lit room upstairs, he could hear Rilke busying himself in the kitchen. He came down the stairs, passed through the sitting room and into the kitchen. Then he sat at the table and observed Rilke as he stirred a hanging kettle over the open fire.

Rilke said, "I don't suppose you know how to cook. Garth will come in and do for you while Pm gone." His tone was short, and he didn't look at Tansman.

Tansman saw now why Rilke was supposed to be his uncle, rather than a relative of the same generation. He looked both tired and sick. His hair was sparse and seemed to have only a tenuous connection with his head. His color was bad and his skin papery. His fourteen years here seemed to have taken a considerable price from him. No one, either from the Ship or from Zebulon, would have thought Rilke and Tansman to be of the same age.

Tansman said, "What is a Questryman?"

Rilke swung around, serving spoon in hand. "What's this?"

"Apparently we gave one a ride most of the way here. I gather they are something other than common friars."

"Yes," Rilke said, turning back. "They're the bright ones, who keep the rest of them in order and the people orthodox. You shouldn't have to worry. All of our books have been checked by them and given an overmark and the rest of

I the stock is completely innocuous. Any questions you have about the *store,* Garth will answer." "If things are so innocent and ' Garth can handle everything, why am I here?"

"I'll show you the things that aren't innocent. They're locked away upstairs. Your real business is just to see that they stay locked and hidden. That's all. Here." He handed Tansman a plate of unappetizing stew and poured two cups of hot dark beverage.

Tansman lifted his fork and gingerly tested his stew. Then carefully he took the smallest bit onto his fork. Just as carefully, he took the bite and found it not as bad as he feared, though not so good as he might have wished.

He swallowed and said, "They were burning bodies in the town square in North Hill."

"The megrim, I suppose?"

"Yes."

Rilke thoughtfully sipped his drink. Tansman tried his and found it bitter and undrinkable. He hastily put it down and took another bite of stew.

"I hadn't counted on that. Well, if they're burning bodies in North Hill, you can expect they'll be burning them here within two weeks. You needn't worry. You're safe. All you have to do is sit it out until I get back."

Rilke fell silent again. After five minutes, Tansman, nearly done with his stew, said, "You know, I'm not one of your Group."

"I know," Rilke said, the constant slightly hostile note in his voice evident.

"All I'm doing is sitting in your chair for a month. I have no stake in what you do. It seems to me, though, that it might be a little more to the point if you made an effort to cure or prevent the megrim instead of sitting safe through epidemics with whatever it is that you do."

"I'll bet you don't know anything about art, but you know what you like," Rilke said.

"What?"

"Never mind. If we tried curing the megrim, we'd have the Questrymen down on us in no time. We have to be careful. Garth has worked for me for thirteen years, but if he thought I was from a Ship for even a moment, he'd be off to the monastery as fast as he could run, scared to death and looking for help."

"So you just sit," Tansman said.

"It's a choice between doing nothing and doing what we can. We do what we can."

"You mean you have faith that your paternal good works actually do more good than harm?"

Rilke visibly controlled himself. Finally he said, "Something like that."

Tansman finished his plate and as much of the drink that passed for coffee as he could choke down. "Is Old Garth the only person who works for you?"

Rilke turned on him sharply. "You want to know why I'm here? I'll tell you. The fact of the matter is that 'Old Garth' is five years younger than I am. He's had a life five times as hard as I have and he'll be dead a good sight sooner. There's no good reason for it, either, except that I was luckier than he was. Anything that I can do to even things out, I'll do."

"You must be joking," Tansman said. "He couldn't be five years younger than you."

Rilke picked up his plate. "You'd better go to bed. You've had a hard trip. Tomorrow morning I'll show you everything, and then I can leave."

As Tansman passed through the sitting room to the stairs, the outer door opened and Garth came in dusting his hands, his old monkey face savoring the smell of food.

"Well, lad," he said. "All squared away?"

Tansman stopped with a foot on the stairs and looked at him. "Yes, thank you," he said after a moment and started up.

II

Tansman helped Garth wrestle barrels off the porch and inside the store, impelled by Garth's assurance that rain was not more than a half hour away. As he worked, Tansman thought about the essence of being away from home. It was, he decided, discomfort.

You could set the discomforts in a list: unregulated weather, mostly cold and wet; mud; filth; odor; insects; noise; bad food, and certainly an unhealthy diet; an uncomfortable bed to sleep on. Subtler things: no one to talk frankly to with Rilke gone now for a full week. No one to talk to at all, really, on any subject of interest to him. Nothing to read, either, except encyclopedia distillates couched in mystical terms or books like "The Secret of the Ships" that purported to tell all and in reality told nothing, but simply hoped to temper prejudice slightly by substituting gray lies for black ones. Nothing to read by except an eye-straining oil lamp.

There is a comfort in being in your own place, knowing that life has a pattern to it. Knowing what is expected and what to expect. Let the primitive nature of Zebulon go, there is a basic discomfort in being in a strange place. Strangeness in itself is a discomfort. Tans-man didn't mark the passage of days on a calendar, but he well knew how many had passed and how many more he had to wait.

As they worked, Brother Boris came down the boardwalk toward them. Tansman looked up from fitting a lid on a pickle barrel to find him at his elbow looking more florid and less certain than Tansman remembered.

"As I promised, Mr. Tansman," he said, "I've come to look at your store."

"My uncle's store. Is this a friendly call, or in your official capacity?"

"I trust I am always friendly," Brother Boris said sharply, and shook his head as though trying to clear it. There was sweat on his forehead.

"Are you feeling well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"Well, if you will wait inside for a minute," Tansman said, "I'll be with you as soon as I'm done here." He banged the lid home.

Garth came out of the store as Tansman began rolling the pickle barrel on its lower rim toward the door. Tansman stopped and looked back at the half-cleared porch.

"Finish up here, will you?" he said. "I'm going to serve the brother."

"He don't seem quite the same man today," Garth said. "He wasn't above half civil."

"I don't believe he's feeling well." "Oh."

Tansman wheeled the barrel across the store floor and slammed it into place beside its fellows. There were shelves on both sides of the store and against the back wall, with counters in front. The main floor of the store was crowded with racks and tables and strings of hanging goods. It looked at first to be a hodgepodge, but Tansman had gradually learned that first there was a system in the store and then learned the system itself.

Brother Boris was standing at the small rack of books that was one of the store's principal reasons for being, for all that the books were few in number and not conspicuously displayed. He was holding one of the books and looking through it. There was no one else in the store. With the storm clouds outside gathering and the season of the year determining an early dusk—an involved matter that Tansman, never having had to live with the problem, had never completely understood—the interior of the store was dim. The hanging lamps would have to be lit soon.

Brother Boris looked across the store and said, "I will not be stayed. I will not be stayed." His tone was almost preoccupied.

"Brother?"

"I will go into the town today. I will not be stayed. There is evil here and it must be searched out. Would you keep me from my purposes? Look to yourself, Brother—the effect bespeaks the cause. You jeopardize yourself."

The brother's words were disconcerting to Tansman, not because they applied to him, but because he was sure they didn't. Brother Boris was talking to himself or to someone who wasn't there and his tone was becoming agitated.

Tansman crossed the store as quickly as he could, threading his way. He knocked a basket off a table and it bounced on the floor, but he didn't stop to pick it up.

"Brother, are you all right?"

Brother Boris turned toward him, his eyes focusing. There were even more beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Are you a communicant of the Confraternity?"

That was a rhetorical question. Tansman lied and said, "Yes."

Brother Boris held up the book in his hand. Tansman saw that it was one of the three copies the store had of "The Secret of the Ships." Brother Boris pawed at the table with his other hand for support.

The brother said, his voice slightly out of control: "If you love the Confraternity, why do you peddle this filth? Evil is corrupting. Is profit all that is important to you?"

"That book has the personal over-mark of Bishop Rafael."

"He doesn't know."

The bell suspended over the front door tinged as Garth rolled a barrel in. Brother Boris' voice trailed off as he raised a shaky hand to his forehead. The book in his left hand dropped to the floor.

"I *see* the evil and I know it," Brother Boris said. "But my head—why does it not . . . stop . . . moving?"

Tansman stepped forward, calling to Garth, as the friar's knees unlocked and he began to slump to the floor. Tansman caught the brother and began to wrestle his limp body, much as he had wrestled the barrel. Brother Boris' sleeve slid up his arm to show a purple patch of hemorrhaged blood vessels. Tansman heaved him behind the counter and onto the stool there. Garth had come forward when Tansman had called to him and he had seen the friar falling, but he stayed on the other side of the counter.

"Is it the megrim?" he asked. Tansman nodded. "I think it is. Go hitch the wagon and we'll carry him up to the monastery."

Old Garth left immediately, through the curtain to the house behind and out through the side door. It was some minutes before he came back, and he was cautious in approaching.

"Come on," Tansman said. "Help me get him out to the wagon."

Garth said, "Please. I'd rather not."

"I can't move him by myself." "No, sir. But I'm scared. I'm old, I know, but I don't want to die, and I especial don't want to die of the megrim. Look at him."

Garth pointed at Brother Boris. He was writhing in obvious pain, his jaw clenched, his face bright red and sweating, veins standing out. Tansman had to hold him down.

Tansman said, "But the megrim is here in Delera and you can't avoid it. You're just going to have to take your chances. Just help me get him to the wagon. You drive and I'll hold him down. That is all I'll ask of you."

All the usual quick bounce and vigor was gone from Garth. It was apparent, however, that Brother Boris could not stay where he was. Reluctantly and apprehensively, Garth helped Tansman move him out to the wagon. Perhaps he had hoped that the megrim would pass them by here in Delera. Perhaps he had such scanty notions of the disease as to think the appearance of the megrim a purely accidental thing, determined by the moons or the comparative uprightness of a town. Or perhaps he had not thought at all. For obvious reasons —their relative positions, and the possibility of an accidently betrayed ignorance—Tansman hadn't discussed the situation with him, but it was clearly evident that Garth was unprepared for the megrim to strike and that he was scared to death of catching it himself.

In any case, it wasn't: "Now, lad." It was "Yes, Mr. Tansman." It was unwonted quietness and reserve. It was an uncharacteristic respect for the young dandy neph ew with such apparent lack of fear in dealing with the sweating, raving, purple-blotched pile of meat that was Brother Boris.

Brother Boris was loaded, Tans-man handling the arms, Garth the feet, into the wagon standing in the alley by the side door. Garth mounted to the seat and whistled the horses into motion.

They charged into the street and up the hill. The monastery, set into the hill, dominated the town below, seeming a dark fortress with the wind rising and the heavy clouds riding overhead. It took five minutes to reach the lane that wound up from the main road to the monastery. When they reached the main gate there was a friar there to open in response to Garth's shouts.

The court of the monastery was unmortared brick and they clattered in. A brother came out to meet them.

"What is it that you wish?" he asked as the wagon swung in beside him.

"It's Brother Boris."

"Brother Boris?"

"Yes. He's ill. My name is Tansman. He collapsed in my uncle's store."

"He was determined to go to town today, but I thought he had been . . . restrained. He wasn't at all well this morning."

"It's the megrim," Tansman said. "Yes, I know. Brother Boris is the third in the monastery. I'm told by the good doctor that there has been a case in town. I believe the abbot may close the gates."

The brother had waved two younger brothers to the wagon as he talked, and they carried Brother Boris inside.

On the way down the hill again, Tansman said to Garth, "I think we'd best close the store temporarily."

Standing on the patio in the evening air near the stair that went down to the alley, Tansman could not see the fire that had been built in the afternoon, but he could smell it. He was more of an outsider than anyone in the town dreamed, but he'd been asked his advice and he had voted for burning. It was, as he knew, far more of a preventive measure than mass burial, though no real solution, of course, to the basic problems of sanitation that lay behind the regular appearance of the megrim.

The buildings all around him were silent and dark, shuttered against the great unknown. The smell of the fire had been penetrating, reaching him even within his closed room, but it was much stronger here in the open air. Tansman couldn't help but wonder if he would grow used to it. The night held no noise but one, and that briefly—the neighborhood problem dog who went skittering and yelping through the alley below and then was gone, pursuing a great unknown of his own.

A diffident rapping noise recalled his attention and he turned to see Garth standing in his doorway. "I called up, lad, but you didn't answer."

"Did you want to see me about something?"

"Yes, sir."

Tansman nodded and came inside, closing the door behind him. Little old Garth, head reaching only to Tansman's shoulder, a bit nervous, stood waiting.

"Mr. Tansman, you won't be wanting me tomorrow, will you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Will you be needing the wagon?"

"No."

Garth's manner was distinctly nervous and uncertain, but he seemed to have a distinct end in mind. Tansman waited for him to come to it.

"They need someone to haul for the fire. I said I'd do. I know it was presuming, but I thought Mr. Rilke would say it was all right."

"It's all right," Tansman said, "but are you sure you want to do it?"

Garth held out his hand. It was rough-backed and corded, and it was trembling.

"I'm scared," he said. "I don't deny it. But it's what you said the other day. Somebody has got to do it, and when they asked me I said I would. I don't want to die, but I thought better me who's had my life than somebody young, a boy like you who hasn't had any life to speak of yet."

Tansman didn't comment. He just said in a harsh voice, "Go ahead if you want." And then he turned away.

III

The front of the store was dark, the night was close and secret. There was a single oil lamp lit in the sitting room and Tansman tried desultorily to read. He found it hard to concentrate. The book was dull and ludicrous and his mind was unsettled. He hadn't heard from Garth since the morning he'd left with the wagon. He didn't know where Garth was sleeping or eating. He was, in all truth, worried.

At this particular moment Tansman had no great taste for life. Under no circumstances could he have wished to be a Zebulonite, ignorant, superstitious, wretched and short-lived. That would have been like cutting out two-thirds of his mind. But the only other choice meant automatic guilt. He'd led a quiet life and never, as far as he knew, done any damage to anybody. He had, in fact, added some small bits of knowledge to the human store, possibly added some years to the human lifetime. But simply to know what things were like here and that elsewhere there was an easier, simpler life, and to live that life was to be guilty.

He didn't know how Rilke looked at what he did, but to his mind there was no less guilt in doing to people for their own good what you thought best, particularly since that "best" was severely tempered. The book he was reading, "All-Purpose Household Hints and Medica," had an entry for megrim. A lie. Under treatment, it said, "Supportive care." That, honestly translated, meant, "Put a blanket over him. Feed him as much as he will eat. He'll either die or he won't."

Knowing better, you could prevent or cure, and that was a decision for which you were responsible. But knowing better, if you did nothing, that was a decision, too, for which you were no less responsible. Tansman could not help envying Garth whose decisions were simple. The consequences of Garth's actions could clearly be foreseen. Hell was not knowing whether what you did was right or wrong, but still having to make a decision and live with it. He wished he were anywhere but here.

He was roused from his book late in the evening by a noise in the alley, the noise of the wagon stopping. He snatched up the lamp and hurried to the door. The air was cool outside. The horses, well-trained, were standing quietly in their traces. The wagon was hauled up by the door. Garth was sitting on the seat, the lines in his hand, his eyes shut. There was vomit on the front of the wagon, yellow streaks. Garth weaved noticeably on the stock-still wagon box.

He turned to Tansman and said with care, "I'm . . . sick." Then he fell forward on his face.

Tansman took him inside and cleaned him up. Garth's own quarters were a sleeping mat and little

more in a small room off the warehouse and stables. There was no question of taking him there, so Tansman carried him upstairs and put him in his own bed, throwing his clothes in the corner.

Then Tansman went outdoors to tend to the wagon and horses. As he was rubbing the horses down, his motions were automatic, his mind on other things. He had a decision to make, just as before, because, after all, the consequences of Garth's actions had been foreseeable. His mind told him there was a decision to make, but for all the mulling ahead he did know now what he was going to do.

Garth's little gnarled body thrashed uneasily under the blankets Tansman had covered him with and brought Tansman awake in his chair. The lamp was low as he had left it, and he turned it up and carried it close to the bed.

Garth was mumbling and moaning to himself. Tansman reached over to touch his forehead. It was feverish, as before, but possibly a bit cooler. Tansman fetched broth that he had had simmering over the fire and spooned it down Garth's throat. Garth swallowed, but his eyes did not open.

Now it was afternoon and there was sun outside, but Tansman kept the windows covered and the light was just a glow on the walls of the room. It was time to give Garth another injection. As Tansman bent over, Garth's eyes did come open to look blankly at Tansman. Tans-man didn't stop. He slid Garth's sleeve up, placed the blunt tip against Garth's arm, held the faintly-blotched arm steady, and pressed the button. Then he turned away and replaced the injector in his little medical kit. When he looked again at Garth, his eyes were closed. On the third day, as Tansman fed him broth, Garth's eyes were open again and focused. It was evening again. The spoon clinked against his teeth as he tried to speak.

Finally he said, "You're a shippeen, aren't you?" There was no real question in his voice.

Tansman said, "Yes," and lifted the spoon again.

Garth didn't say anything more, but simply continued to eat until the bowl was empty. Tansman took it downstairs and filled another for himself. He sagged a little as he sat at the table and ate. He'd had little sleep for days, and the sleep that he had had was in a chair, and he was tired. The soup was poor—he had made it himself with the advice of one of Rilke's books, and either the advice was bad or, more likely, the gods had not intended him to be a soup maker—but nonetheless there was a certain satisfaction in it. It was hot and stomach-filling.

The lamp was out when he went upstairs and there was a chill in the air. He lit the lamp and turned to find the bed empty, and Garth and his clothes gone. Suddenly he felt frightened. He hadn't really expected this and he hadn't expected Garth to have the strength to move. He was struck that a man could fear him so, and frightened of what Garth might do.

He looked around the room. Not the stairs—he'd been facing them in the kitchen and he'd have seen. He felt the cooler air he had sensed when he entered the room and looked toward the door to the patio. There was the stair from the patio to the alley. He took a deep breath and followed a shadow.

The air on the patio was damp. There was a film of wetness under Tansman's feet. The smell of the eternal fire hung heavily over all, a smell that only the sun would bake out long after this time of death and suffering. Tansman shivered in the cool of the late evening. He went down the uncertain stairs to the alley, hand on the railing, and reaching the bottom wiped the hand dry on his pants and looked both ways. There was no one in sight and the fading light gleamed faintly on the wet cobbles. The back of the alley was blocked by the warehouse and the buildings that abutted on the adjacent street, so Tans-man took a chance and went in the other direction, toward the front of the store and the main street.

Halfway there, running, he stopped and turned back, caught by the half-open door in the adobe building that formed the other side of the alley. He hesitated and then he entered. The door entered on stairs up and stairs down. Tansman wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the mumble of voices from above, so he went up the stairs wondering that he might be going only farther and farther afield.

But he knew he wasn't when he got to the top of the stairs. Through the door he could clearly distinguish Garth's voice. He lifted the latch and opened the door. The room was dark, but he got the impression of a family circle, one lying down and two sitting, with Garth standing in front and addressing them.

Garth turned to see him as he entered the room, fear evident in his face. Garth said nothing, but almost desperately summoned strength and lifted the wooden chair that stood between them, then brought it down over the shoulders of an unprepared Tansman. Tans-man had seen two hundred years of dramatic entertainment at home in the Ship in which chairs and people were brought violently together. In every single one of them, the chair broke and the person didn't. This chair didn't break. This chair was made of heavy, solid wood, hand-pegged, designed to be sat upon by generation after generation without breaking. Tansman was knocked solidly to the floor. Garth dropped the chair and ran in terror past him out the door.

The breath was knocked out of Tansman's lungs. He had tensed just as the chair struck him, exactly the wrong thing to do, and his back and neck were severely wrenched. His head ached. Coughing, he pushed himself up to elbows and knees as Garth went down the stairs.

Through all this the other three in the room had not moved. Wonderingly, Tansman looked at them through the gloom. The man in the chair nearest him grinned hollowly back at him, and then Tansman saw that all three were dead and that the stink of rotting, rather than burning, death permeated the room. Dead for who knew how many days and no one had yet discovered it and added their bodies to the death wagons. Garth's mind was evidently so befuddled that he hadn't even realized it.

Tansman dragged himself to his feet and lurched down the stairs. Halfway down, he stopped and coughed again, trying to get his breath. Garth was at the corner when he reached the alley, turning left, and he tried to run, but slipped on the wet cobbles and went skidding headlong. He picked himself up and followed Garth, limping on a banged knee and coughing.

When he reached the road he looked left to see Garth at the base of the hill where the cobblestones turned to dirt and the road began to climb toward the monastery. The last light, except for three risen moons, had gone, but he could just make out Garth who was moving as rockily as he. The monastery showed in what direction Garth's mind lay. Tansman followed.

The road reached to the right as it rose, and the lane to the monastery switched back to the last three-quarters of the way up. Garth left the road at the base of the hill and moved nearly straight up the hillside. When Tansman got there he saw that there was a footpath.

He stumbled and scrambled, concentrating on climbing. The main ought was catching Garth before he reached the monastery, but the thought was lost in the darkness, the wet earth of the path, the slope, the stones that moved under his feet, the struggle to climb and climb as fast as he could. All of a sudden there was a level place where the path moved around a shoulder of the hill before climbing again. Tansman took a long shuddering breath of cold black air and then stopped and listened, but heard nothing. He didn't hesitate, but moved on, following the path.

Then he was struck again, this time not by a chair but by a body waiting on the hill just above the path. Garth landed on his shoulders and toppled him over, and he went off the edge of the path. He felt a jabbing pain in his ribs and knew that he had been stabbed. Tansman tried for balance as he was knocked forward, but his foot twisted in the soft earth and he fell backwards, landing on his side half on the path edge. Garth, who was holding on to him for purchase and whose knife was occupied, landed heavily.

Garth's grip relaxed and Tansman rolled away. They both rose slowly, facing each other.

"Damned shippeen," Garth gasped as Tansman launched himself forward.

Tansman grasped for Garth's left hand, his knife hand, and hit him full body at the same time. The knife sliced his arm, but Garth's knees buckled and he fell with Tansman on top. Tansman held on to Garth's left arm through his own pain; his superior weight and strength gave him the advantage. The arm was pinned down to the ground where Garth could not use it. Tansman brought his left knee up to slam into Garth's ribs. Garth lost his breath with an abrupt and audible *whoof*. Tansman then bore down on

Garth's knife arm with one hand and brought the other over to wrench the knife away.

Garth tried to struggle loose, heaving his body, but Tansman kept his weight solidly on top. He took the knife awkwardly in his left hand and jammed it into Garth's side. Garth made a little cry and then went limp.

Tansman rolled away and then came to his feet. Struggling for breath, with banged knee, twisted ankle, aching back and head, and two knife wounds, he limped down the path and then fell to the ground again. He drew a heavy breath, choked on it, and then just lay there, breathing.

When he was in control of himself again, he found he was still holding the knife in his hand. He wiped it in the dirt of the path, not knowing why he did it, and then threw it as far away as he could. Finally he came to his feet and moved back to the place that he had left Garth's body.

The body wasn't there. Tansman felt the fear rise again.

He shook his head and then started along the path. After a little distance he could see the snail marks Garth had left in dragging himself.

He came on Garth's crooked body moving along the path as he limped after. He laid hands on it to stop it, but when he let go the body moved ahead again. He struck it, but still it moved. At last, Tansman picked a muddy rock out of the hillside. It was just hand-sized.

He struck Garth in the side of the head with it until he lay still and the rock was bloody. Then he threw the rock away and rolled the body over.

Garth's head was bloody and his cheek broken. His left eye was no longer contained in the socket, but hung loose. Tansman gently touched the broken face and cried. Garth lay limp and silent. This was not what Tansman had ever wanted.

Finally Tansman knew what he had to do. He put the body on his shoulders and started down toward the town again. He found it hard going and moved slowly. Twice he set the body down in the mud while he caught his breath and rested his aching shoulders.

He walked straight down the main street, but the street was empty. There were no lights on the main street, just the glow of the fire down at the far end. Shutters were closed. Then the problem dog came shooting out from between two houses to sniff and snap at the ankles and yap. Finally the dog fell away.

After that, Tansman stopped and put the body down again while he rested. The pain in his side was intense and his right arm was caked with blood. He made a perfect creature of the night, covered with both his own and Garth's blood. His mind was cloudy and then he was caught by a noise of pain.

He turned to see Garth moving, his mouth making a noise of pain so intense that it could be only half-uttered, his hand reaching up as Tansman's had done to touch his broken face.

Tansman made an inarticulate cry. Then, tears of pain and pity in his eyes, he killed Garth for the third time. He put his hands around Garth's neck, and knowing what he did and acting deliberately, he broke the neck. It took an effort, and he felt it give at last under his hands.

After another while he loaded Garth back onto his shoulders and staggered on down the street. The fire was low and unattended, but the remains of its fuel could still be seen. Tansman ignored the smell. He added wood from the pile that stood at hand until the fire blazed up again, and then he added Garth's belated body. Tansman stood watching it burn and cried for both of them.

IV

Tansman made his way down the hill from the monastery. The air was cool but the sun was bright. From the path you could see the whole town, wagons, horses, people moving, shadows from an occasional cloud sweeping across like a sea wave. Tansman had taken

Brother Boris some fruit. The brother had been pleased both by the fruit and by the visit, and he had summoned enough of the little wit remaining to him to gurgle, smile and wave. That had been some satisfaction to Tansman.

He returned to the closed store to find Rilke there, patiently waiting for him.

"Are you back now?"

Rilke said, "Yes." And he said that he was feeling much better now. He was looking better now, too, more like an older brother than an uncle. His color was stronger, his hair less wispy.

They talked for some minutes on inconsequential subjects, and then Rilke, looking around, asked where Garth was.

Slowly Tansman said, "You remember the megrim? He died of the megrim."

Tansman remained one last night and then returned to the Ship. He stayed there for three months, trying to re-busy himself with his former life. Finally, he went to see Nancy Poate one day and came back at last to Zebulon.

He wasn't happy and he had no certainty of the rightness of what he was to do. But he was willing to live with the consequences, whatever they turned out to be. That's all he could ask.