



SHORT STORIES

FREDERIK POHL

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BY
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DOUBLE-CROSS

Writing as James MacCreigh. Originally published in *Planet Stories* Winter 1944.

The Officer of the Deck was pleased as he returned to the main lock. There was no reason why everything shouldn't have been functioning perfectly, of course, but he was pleased to have it confirmed, all the same. The Executive Officer was moodily smoking a cigarette in the open lock, staring out over the dank Venusian terrain at the native town. He turned.

"Everything shipshape, I take it!" he commented.

The OD nodded. "I'll have a blank log if this keeps up," he said. "Every man accounted for except the delegation, cargo stowed, drivers ready to lift as soon as they come back."

The Exec tossed away his cigarette. "If they come back."

"Is there any question?"

The Exec shrugged. "I don't know, Lowry," he said. "This is a funny place. I don't trust the natives."

Lowry lifted his eyebrows. "Oh? But after all, they're human beings, just like us—"

"Not any more. Four or five generations ago they were. Lord, they don't even look human any more. Those white, flabby skins—I don't like them."

"Acclimation," Lowry said scientifically. "They had to acclimate themselves to Venus's climate. They're friendly enough."

The Exec shrugged again. He stared at the wooden shacks that were the outskirts of the native city, dimly visible through the ever-present Venusian mist. The native guard of honor, posted a hundred yards from the Earth-ship, stood stolidly at attention with their old-fashioned proton-rifles slung over their backs. A few natives were gazing wonderingly at the great ship, but made no move to pass the line of guards.

"Of course," Lowry said suddenly, "there's a minority who are afraid of us. I was in town yesterday, and I talked with some of the natives. They think there will be hordes of immigrants from Earth, now that we know Venus is habitable. And there's some sort of a paltry underground group that is spreading the word that the immigrants will drive the native Venusians—the descendants of the first expedition, that is—right down into the mud. Well—" he laughed—"maybe they will. After all, the fittest survive. That's a basic law of—"

The annunciator over the open lock clanged vigorously, and a metallic voice rasped: "Officer of the Deck! Post Number One! Instruments reports a spy ray focused on the main lock!"

Lowry, interrupted in the middle of a word, jerked his head back and stared unbelievably at the tell-tale next to the annunciator. Sure enough, it was glowing red—might have been glowing for minutes. He snatched at the hand-phone dangling from the wall, shouted into it. "Set up a screen! Notify the delegation! Alert a landing party!" But even while he was giving orders, the warning light flickered suddenly and went out. Stricken, Lowry turned to the Exec.

The Executive Officer nodded gloomily. He said, "You see!"

"You see?"

Svan clicked off the listening-machine and turned around. The five others in the room looked apprehensive. "You see?" Svan repeated. "From their own mouths you have heard it. The Council was right."

The younger of the two women sighed. She might have been beautiful, in spite of her dead-white skin, if there had been a scrap of hair on her head. "Svan, I'm afraid," she said. "Who are we to decide if this is a good thing? Our parents came from Earth. Perhaps there will be trouble at first, if colonists come, but we are of the same blood."

Svan laughed harshly. "*They* don't think so. You heard them. We are not human any more. The officer said it."

The other woman spoke unexpectedly. "The Council was right," she agreed. "Svan, what must we do?"

Svan raised his hand, thoughtfully. "One moment. Ingra, do you still object?"

The younger woman shrank back before the glare in his eyes. She looked around at the others, found them reluctant and uneasy, but visibly convinced by Svan.

"No," she said slowly. "I do not object."

"And the rest of us? Does any of us object?"

Svan eyed them, each in turn. There was a slow but unanimous gesture of assent.

"Good," said Svan. "Then we must act. The Council has told us that we alone will decide our course of action. We have agreed that, if the Earth-ship returns, it means disaster for Venus. Therefore, it must not return."

An old man shifted restlessly. "But they are strong, Svan," he complained. "They have weapons. We cannot force them to stay."

Svan nodded. "No. They will leave. But they will never get back to Earth."

"Never get back to Earth?" the old man gasped. "Has the Council authorized—murder?"

Svan shrugged. "The Council did not know what we would face. The Councilmen could not come to the city and see what strength the Earth-ship has." He paused dangerously. "Toller," he said, "do you object?"

Like the girl, the old man retreated before his eyes. His voice was dull. "What is your plan?" he asked.

Svan smiled, and it was like a dark flame. He reached to a box at his feet, held up a shiny metal globe. "One of us will plant this in the ship. It will be set by means of this

dial—" he touched a spot on the surface of the globe with a pallid finger—"to do nothing for forty hours. Then—it will explode. Atomite."

He grinned triumphantly, looking from face to face. The grin faded uncertainly as he saw what was in their eyes—uncertainty, irresolution. Abruptly he set the bomb down, savagely ripped six leaves off a writing tablet on the table next him. He took a pencil and made a mark on one of them, held it up.

"We will let chance decide who is to do the work," he said angrily. "Is there anyone here who is afraid? There will be danger, I think...."

No answer. Svan jerked his head. "Good," he said. "Ingra, bring me that bowl."

Silently the girl picked up an opaque glass bowl from the broad arm of her chair. It had held Venus-tobacco cigarettes; there were a few left. She shook them out and handed the bowl to Svan, who was rapidly creasing the six fatal slips. He dropped them in the bowl, stirred it with his hand, offered it to the girl. "You first, Ingra," he said.

She reached in mechanically, her eyes intent on his, took out a slip and held it without opening it. The bowl went the rounds, till Svan himself took the last. All eyes were on him. No one had looked at their slips.

Svan, too, had left his unopened. He sat at the table, facing them. "This is the plan," he said. "We will go, all six of us, in my ground car, to look at the Earth-ship. No one will suspect—the whole city has been to see it already. One will get out, at the best point we can find. It is almost dusk now. He can hide, surely, in the vegetation. The other five will start back. Something will go wrong with the car—perhaps it will run off the road, start to sink in the swamp. The guards will be called. There will be commotion—that is easy enough, after all; a hysterical woman, a few screams, that's all there is to it. And the sixth person will have his chance to steal to the side of the ship. The bomb is magnetic. It will not be noticed in the dark—they will take off before sunrise, because they must travel away from the sun to return—in forty hours the danger is removed."

There was comprehension in their eyes, Svan saw ... but still that uncertainty. Impatiently, he crackled: "Look at the slips!"

Though he had willed his eyes away from it, his fingers had rebelled. Instinctively they had opened the slip, turned it over and over, striving to detect if it was the fatal one. They had felt nothing....

And his eyes saw nothing. The slip was blank. He gave it but a second's glance, then looked up to see who had won the lethal game of chance. Almost he was disappointed.

Each of the others had looked in that same second. And each was looking up now, around at his neighbors. Svan waited impatiently for the chosen one to announce it—a second, ten seconds....

Then gray understanding came to him. *A traitor!* his subconscious whispered. *A coward!* He stared at them in a new light, saw their indecision magnified, became opposition.

Svan thought faster than ever before in his life. If there was a coward, it would do no good to unmask him. All were wavering, any might be the one who had drawn the fatal slip. He could insist on inspecting every one, but—suppose the coward,

cornered, fought back? In fractions of a second, Svan had considered the evidence and reached his decision. Masked by the table, his hand, still holding the pencil, moved swiftly beneath the table, marked his own slip.

In the palm of his hand, Svan held up the slip he had just marked in secret. His voice was very tired as he said, "I will plant the bomb."

The six conspirators in Svan's old ground car moved slowly along the main street of the native town. Two Earth-ship sailors, unarmed except for deceptively flimsy-looking pistols at their hips, stood before the entrance to the town's Hall of Justice.

"Good," said Svan, observing them. "The delegation is still here. We have ample time."

He half turned in the broad front seat next to the driver, searching the faces of the others in the car. Which was the coward? he wondered. Ingra? Her aunt? One of the men?

The right answer leaped up at him. *They all are*, he thought. *Not one of them understands what this means. They're afraid.*

He clamped his lips. "Go faster, Ingra," he ordered the girl who was driving. "Let's get this done with."

She looked at him, and he was surprised to find compassion in her eyes. Silently she nodded, advanced the fuel-handle so that the clumsy car jolted a trace more rapidly over the corduroy road. It was quite dark now. The car's driving light flared yellowishly in front of them, illuminating the narrow road and the pale, distorted vegetation of the jungle that surrounded them. Svan noticed it was raining a little. The present shower would deepen and intensify until midnight, then fall off again, to halt before morning. But before then they would be done.

A proton-bolt lanced across the road in front of them. In the silence that followed its thunderous crash, a man's voice bellowed: "Halt!"

The girl, Ingra, gasped something indistinguishable, slammed on the brakes. A Venusian in the trappings of the State Guard advanced on them from the side of the road, proton-rifle held ready to fire again.

"Where are you going?" he growled.

Svan spoke up. "We want to look at the Earth-ship," he said. He opened the door beside him and stepped out, careless of the drizzle. "We heard it was leaving tonight," he continued, "and we have not seen it. Is that not permitted?"

The guard shook his head sourly. "No one is allowed near the ship. The order was just issued. It is thought there is danger."

Svan stepped closer, his teeth bared in what passed for a smile. "It is urgent," he purred. His right hand flashed across his chest in a complicated gesture. "Do you understand?"

Confusion furrowed the guard's hairless brows, then was replaced by a sudden flare of understanding—and fear. "The Council!" he roared. "By heaven, yes, I understand! You are the swine that caused this—" He strove instinctively to bring the clumsy rifle up, but Svan was faster. His gamble had failed; there was only one course remaining. He hurled his gross white bulk at the guard, bowled him over against the splintery

logs of the road. The proton-rifle went flying, and Svan savagely tore at the throat of the guard. Knees, elbows and claw-like nails—Svan battered at the astonished man with every ounce of strength in his body. The guard was as big as Svan, but Svan had the initial advantage ... and it was only a matter of seconds before the guard lay unconscious, his skull a mass of gore at the back where Svan had ruthlessly pounded it against the road.

Svan rose, panting, stared around. No one else was in sight, save the petrified five and the ground car. Svan glared at them contemptuously, then reached down and heaved on the senseless body of the guard. Over the shoulder of the road the body went, onto the damp swampland of the jungle. Even while Svan watched the body began to sink. There would be no trace.

Svan strode back to the car. "Hurry up," he gasped to the girl. "Now there is danger for all of us, if they discover he is missing. And keep a watch for other guards."

Venus has no moon, and no star can shine through its vast cloud layer. Ensign Lowry, staring anxiously out through the astro-dome in the bow of the Earth-ship, cursed the blackness.

"Can't see a thing," he complained to the Exec, steadily writing away at the computer's table. "Look—are those lights over there?"

The Exec looked up wearily. He shrugged. "Probably the guards. Of course, you can't tell. Might be a raiding party."

Lowry, stung, looked to see if the Exec was smiling, but found no answer in his stolid face. "Don't joke about it," he said. "Suppose something happens to the delegation?"

"Then we're in the soup," the Exec said philosophically. "I told you the natives were dangerous. Spy-rays! They've been prohibited for the last three hundred years."

"It isn't all the natives," Lowry said. "Look how they've doubled the guard around us. The administration is co-operating every way they know how. You heard the delegation's report on the intercom. It's this secret group they call the Council."

"And how do you know the guards themselves don't belong to it?" the Exec retorted. "They're all the same to me.... Look, your light's gone out now. Must have been the guard. They're on the wrong side to be coming from the town, anyhow...."

Svan hesitated only a fraction of a second after the girl turned the lights out and stopped the car. Then he reached in the compartment under the seat. If he took a little longer than seemed necessary to get the atomite bomb out of the compartment, none of the others noticed. Certainly it did not occur to them that there had been *two* bombs in the compartment, though Svan's hand emerged with only one.

He got out of the car, holding the sphere. "This will do for me," he said. "They won't be expecting anyone to come from behind the ship—we were wise to circle around. Now, you know what you must do?"

Ingra nodded, while the others remained mute. "We must circle back again," she parroted. "We are to wait five minutes, then drive the car into the swamp. We will create a commotion, attract the guards."

Svan, listening, thought: *It's not much of a plan. The guards would not be drawn away. I am glad I can't trust these five any more. If they must be destroyed, it is good that their destruction will serve a purpose.*

Aloud, he said, "You understand. If I get through, I will return to the city on foot. No one will suspect anything if I am not caught, because the bomb will not explode until the ship is far out in space. Remember, you are in no danger from the guards."

From the guards, his mind echoed. He smiled. At least, they would feel no pain, never know what happened. With the amount of atomite in that bomb in the compartment, they would merely be obliterated in a ground-shaking crash.

Abruptly he swallowed, reminded of the bomb that was silently counting off the seconds. "Go ahead," he ordered. "I will wait here."

"Svan." The girl, Ingra, leaned over to him. Impulsively she reached for him, kissed him. "Good luck to you, Svan," she said.

"Good luck," repeated the others. Then silently the electric motor of the car took hold. Skilfully the girl backed it up, turned it around, sent it lumbering back down the road. Only after she had traveled a few hundred feet by the feel of the road did she turn the lights on again.

Svan looked after them. The kiss had surprised him. What did it mean? Was it an error that the girl should die with the others?

There was an instant of doubt in his steel-shackled mind, then it was driven away. Perhaps she was loyal, yet certainly she was weak. And since he could not know which was the one who had received the marked slip, and feared to admit it, it was better they all should die.

He advanced along the midnight road to where the ground rose and the jungle plants thinned out. Ahead, on an elevation, were the rain-dimmed lights of the Earth-ship, set down in the center of a clearing made by its own fierce rockets. Svan's mist-trained eyes spotted the circling figures of sentries, and knew that these would be the ship's own. They would not be as easily overcome as the natives, not with those slim-shafted blasters they carried. Only deceit could get him to the side of the ship.

Svan settled himself at the side of the road, waiting for his chance. He had perhaps three minutes to wait; he reckoned. His fingers went absently to the pouch in his wide belt, closed on the slip of paper. He turned it over without looking at it, wondering who had drawn the first cross, and been a coward. Ingra? One of the men?

He became abruptly conscious of a commotion behind him. A ground car was racing along the road. He spun around and was caught in the glare of its blinding driving-light, as it bumped to a slithering stop.

Paralyzed, he heard the girl's voice. "Svan! They're coming! They found the guard's rifle, and they're looking for us! Thirty Earthmen, Svan, with those frightful guns. They fired at us, but we got away and came for you. We must flee!"

He stared unseeingly at the light. "Go away!" he croaked unbelievably. Then his muscles jerked into action. The time was almost up—the bomb in the car—

"Go away!" he shrieked, and turned to run. His fists clenched and swinging at his side, he made a dozen floundering steps before something immense pounded at him

from behind. He felt himself lifted from the road, sailing, swooping, dropping with annihilating force onto the hard, charred earth of the clearing. Only then did he hear the sound of the explosion, and as the immense echoes died away he began to feel the pain seeping into him from his hideously racked body....

The Flight Surgeon rose from beside him. "He's still alive," he said callously to Lowry, who had just come up. "It won't last long, though. What've you got there?"

Lowry, a bewildered expression on his beardless face, held out the two halves of a metallic sphere. Dangling ends of wires showed where a connection had been broken. "He had a bomb," he said. "A magnetic-type, delayed-action atomite bomb. There must have been another in the car, and it went off. They—they were planning to bomb us."

"Amazing," the surgeon said dryly. "Well, they won't do any bombing now."

Lowry was staring at the huddled, mutilated form of Svan. He shuddered. The surgeon, seeing the shudder, grasped his shoulder.

"Better them than us," he said. "It's poetic justice if I ever saw it. They had it coming...." He paused thoughtfully, staring at a piece of paper between his fingers. "This is the only part I don't get," he said.

"What's that?" Lowry craned his neck. "A piece of paper with a cross on it? What about it?"

The surgeon shrugged. "He had it clenched in his hand," he said. "Had the devil of a time getting it loose from him." He turned it over slowly, displayed the other side. "Now what in the world would he be doing carrying a scrap of paper with a cross marked on both sides?"

THE TUNNEL UNDER THE WORLD

Originally published in Galaxy Science Fiction January 1955

On the morning of June 15th, Guy Burckhardt woke up screaming out of a dream.

It was more real than any dream he had ever had in his life. He could still hear and feel the sharp, ripping-metal explosion, the violent heave that had tossed him furiously out of bed, the searing wave of heat.

He sat up convulsively and stared, not believing what he saw, at the quiet room and the bright sunlight coming in the window.

He croaked, "Mary?"

His wife was not in the bed next to him. The covers were tumbled and awry, as though she had just left it, and the memory of the dream was so strong that instinctively he found himself searching the floor to see if the dream explosion had thrown her down.

But she wasn't there. Of course she wasn't, he told himself, looking at the familiar vanity and slipper chair, the uncracked window, the unbuckled wall. It had only been a dream.

"Guy?" His wife was calling him querulously from the foot of the stairs. "Guy, dear, are you all right?"

He called weakly, "Sure."

There was a pause. Then Mary said doubtfully, "Breakfast is ready. Are you sure you're all right? I thought I heard you yelling—"

Burckhardt said more confidently, "I had a bad dream, honey. Be right down."

In the shower, punching the lukewarm-and-cologne he favored, he told himself that it had been a beaut of a dream. Still, bad dreams weren't unusual, especially bad dreams about explosions. In the past thirty years of H-bomb jitters, who had not dreamed of explosions?

Even Mary had dreamed of them, it turned out, for he started to tell her about the dream, but she cut him off. "You *did*?" Her voice was astonished. "Why, dear, I dreamed the same thing! Well, almost the same thing. I didn't actually *hear* anything. I dreamed that something woke me up, and then there was a sort of quick bang, and then something hit me on the head. And that was all. Was yours like that?"

Burckhardt coughed. "Well, no," he said. Mary was not one of these strong-as-a-man, brave-as-a-tiger women. It was not necessary, he thought, to tell her all the little details of the dream that made it seem so real. No need to mention the splintered ribs, and the salt bubble in his throat, and the agonized knowledge that this was death. He said, "Maybe there really was some kind of explosion downtown. Maybe we heard it and it started us dreaming."

Mary reached over and patted his hand absently. "Maybe," she agreed. "It's almost half-past eight, dear. Shouldn't you hurry? You don't want to be late to the office."

He gulped his food, kissed her and rushed out—not so much to be on time as to see if his guess had been right.

But downtown Tylerton looked as it always had. Coming in on the bus, Burckhardt watched critically out the window, seeking evidence of an explosion. There wasn't any. If anything, Tylerton looked better than it ever had before: It was a beautiful crisp day, the sky was cloudless, the buildings were clean and inviting. They had, he observed, steam-blasted the Power & Light Building, the town's only skyscraper—that was the penalty of having Contro Chemical's main plant on the outskirts of town; the fumes from the cascade stills left their mark on stone buildings.

None of the usual crowd were on the bus, so there wasn't anyone Burckhardt could ask about the explosion. And by the time he got out at the corner of Fifth and Lehigh and the bus rolled away with a muted diesel moan, he had pretty well convinced himself that it was all imagination.

He stopped at the cigar stand in the lobby of his office building, but Ralph wasn't behind the counter. The man who sold him his pack of cigarettes was a stranger.

"Where's Mr. Stebbins?" Burckhardt asked.

The man said politely, "Sick, sir. He'll be in tomorrow. A pack of Marlins today?"

"Chesterfields," Burckhardt corrected.

"Certainly, sir," the man said. But what he took from the rack and slid across the counter was an unfamiliar green-and-yellow pack.

"Do try these, sir," he suggested. "They contain an anti-cough factor. Ever notice how ordinary cigarettes make you choke every once in a while?"

Burckhardt said suspiciously, "I never heard of this brand."

"Of course not. They're something new." Burckhardt hesitated, and the man said persuasively, "Look, try them out at my risk. If you don't like them, bring back the empty pack and I'll refund your money. Fair enough?"

Burckhardt shrugged. "How can I lose? But give me a pack of Chesterfields, too, will you?"

He opened the pack and lit one while he waited for the elevator. They weren't bad, he decided, though he was suspicious of cigarettes that had the tobacco chemically treated in any way. But he didn't think much of Ralph's stand-in; it would raise hell with the trade at the cigar stand if the man tried to give every customer the same high-pressure sales talk.

The elevator door opened with a low-pitched sound of music. Burckhardt and two or three others got in and he nodded to them as the door closed. The thread of music switched off and the speaker in the ceiling of the cab began its usual commercials.

No, not the *usual* commercials, Burckhardt realized. He had been exposed to the captive-audience commercials so long that they hardly registered on the outer ear any more, but what was coming from the recorded program in the basement of the building caught his attention. It wasn't merely that the brands were mostly unfamiliar; it was a difference in pattern.

There were jingles with an insistent, bouncy rhythm, about soft drinks he had never tasted. There was a rapid patter dialogue between what sounded like two ten-year-old boys about a candy bar, followed by an authoritative bass rumble: "Go right out and get a DELICIOUS Choco-Bite and eat your TANGY Choco-Bite *all up*. That's *Choco-Bite!*" There was a sobbing female whine: "I *wish* I had a Feckle Freezer! I'd do *anything* for a Feckle Freezer!" Burckhardt reached his floor and left the elevator in the middle of the last one. It left him a little uneasy. The commercials were not for familiar brands; there was no feeling of use and custom to them.

But the office was happily normal—except that Mr. Barth wasn't in. Miss Mitkin, yawning at the reception desk, didn't know exactly why. "His home phoned, that's all. He'll be in tomorrow."

"Maybe he went to the plant. It's right near his house."

She looked indifferent. "Yeah."

A thought struck Burckhardt. "But today is June 15th! It's quarterly tax return day—he has to sign the return!"

Miss Mitkin shrugged to indicate that that was Burckhardt's problem, not hers. She returned to her nails.

Thoroughly exasperated, Burckhardt went to his desk. It wasn't that he couldn't sign the tax returns as well as Barth, he thought resentfully. It simply wasn't his job, that was all; it was a responsibility that Barth, as office manager for Contro Chemicals' downtown office, should have taken.

He thought briefly of calling Barth at his home or trying to reach him at the factory, but he gave up the idea quickly enough. He didn't really care much for the people at the factory and the less contact he had with them, the better. He had been to the factory once, with Barth; it had been a confusing and, in a way, a frightening experience. Barring a handful of executives and engineers, there wasn't a soul in the factory—that is, Burckhardt corrected himself, remembering what Barth had told him, not a *living* soul—just the machines.

According to Barth, each machine was controlled by a sort of computer which reproduced, in its electronic snarl, the actual memory and mind of a human being. It was an unpleasant thought. Barth, laughing, had assured him that there was no Frankenstein business of robbing graveyards and implanting brains in machines. It was only a matter, he said, of transferring a man's habit patterns from brain cells to vacuum-tube cells. It didn't hurt the man and it didn't make the machine into a monster.

But they made Burckhardt uncomfortable all the same.

He put Barth and the factory and all his other little irritations out of his mind and tackled the tax returns. It took him until noon to verify the figures—which Barth could have done out of his memory and his private ledger in ten minutes, Burckhardt resentfully reminded himself.

He sealed them in an envelope and walked out to Miss Mitkin. "Since Mr. Barth isn't here, we'd better go to lunch in shifts," he said. "You can go first."

"Thanks." Miss Mitkin languidly took her bag out of the desk drawer and began to apply makeup.

Burckhardt offered her the envelope. "Drop this in the mail for me, will you? Uh—wait a minute. I wonder if I ought to phone Mr. Barth to make sure. Did his wife say whether he was able to take phone calls?"

"Didn't say." Miss Mitkin blotted her lips carefully with a Kleenex. "Wasn't his wife, anyway. It was his daughter who called and left the message."

"The kid?" Burckhardt frowned. "I thought she was away at school."

"She called, that's all I know."

Burckhardt went back to his own office and stared distastefully at the unopened mail on his desk. He didn't like nightmares; they spoiled his whole day. He should have stayed in bed, like Barth.

A funny thing happened on his way home. There was a disturbance at the corner where he usually caught his bus—someone was screaming something about a new kind of deep-freeze—so he walked an extra block. He saw the bus coming and started to trot. But behind him, someone was calling his name. He looked over his shoulder; a small harried-looking man was hurrying toward him.

Burckhardt hesitated, and then recognized him. It was a casual acquaintance named Swanson. Burckhardt sourly observed that he had already missed the bus.

He said, "Hello."

Swanson's face was desperately eager. "Burckhardt?" he asked inquiringly, with an odd intensity. And then he just stood there silently, watching Burckhardt's face, with a burning eagerness that dwindled to a faint hope and died to a regret. He was searching for something, waiting for something, Burckhardt thought. But whatever it was he wanted, Burckhardt didn't know how to supply it.

Burckhardt coughed and said again, "Hello, Swanson."

Swanson didn't even acknowledge the greeting. He merely sighed a very deep sigh.

"Nothing doing," he mumbled, apparently to himself. He nodded abstractedly to Burckhardt and turned away.

Burckhardt watched the slumped shoulders disappear in the crowd. It was an *odd* sort of day, he thought, and one he didn't much like. Things weren't going right.

Riding home on the next bus, he brooded about it. It wasn't anything terrible or disastrous; it was something out of his experience entirely. You live your life, like any man, and you form a network of impressions and reactions. You *expect* things. When you open your medicine chest, your razor is expected to be on the second shelf; when you lock your front door, you expect to have to give it a slight extra tug to make it latch.

It isn't the things that are right and perfect in your life that make it familiar. It is the things that are just a little bit wrong—the sticking latch, the light switch at the head of the stairs that needs an extra push because the spring is old and weak, the rug that unfaillingly skids underfoot.

It wasn't just that things were wrong with the pattern of Burckhardt's life; it was that the *wrong* things were wrong. For instance, Barth hadn't come into the office, yet Barth *always* came in.

Burckhardt brooded about it through dinner. He brooded about it, despite his wife's attempt to interest him in a game of bridge with the neighbors, all through the evening. The neighbors were people he liked—Anne and Farley Dennerman. He had known them all their lives. But they were odd and brooding, too, this night and he barely listened to Dennerman's complaints about not being able to get good phone service or his wife's comments on the disgusting variety of television commercials they had these days.

Burckhardt was well on the way to setting an all-time record for continuous abstraction when, around midnight, with a suddenness that surprised him—he was strangely *aware* of it happening—he turned over in his bed and, quickly and completely, fell asleep.

On the morning of June 15th, Burckhardt woke up screaming.

It was more real than any dream he had ever had in his life. He could still hear the explosion, feel the blast that crushed him against a wall. It did not seem right that he should be sitting bolt upright in bed in an undisturbed room.

His wife came pattering up the stairs. "Darling!" she cried. "What's the matter?"

He mumbled, "Nothing. Bad dream."

She relaxed, hand on heart. In an angry tone, she started to say: "You gave me such a shock—"

But a noise from outside interrupted her. There was a wail of sirens and a clang of bells; it was loud and shocking.

The Burckhardts stared at each other for a heartbeat, then hurried fearfully to the window.

There were no rumbling fire engines in the street, only a small panel truck, cruising slowly along. Flaring loudspeaker horns crowned its top. From them issued the screaming sound of sirens, growing in intensity, mixed with the rumble of heavy-duty engines and the sound of bells. It was a perfect record of fire engines arriving at a four-alarm blaze.

Burckhardt said in amazement, "Mary, that's against the law! Do you know what they're doing? They're playing records of a fire. What are they up to?"

"Maybe it's a practical joke," his wife offered.

"Joke? Waking up the whole neighborhood at six o'clock in the morning?" He shook his head. "The police will be here in ten minutes," he predicted. "Wait and see."

But the police weren't—not in ten minutes, or at all. Whoever the pranksters in the car were, they apparently had a police permit for their games.

The car took a position in the middle of the block and stood silent for a few minutes. Then there was a crackle from the speaker, and a giant voice chanted:

"Feckle Freezers!

Feckle Freezers!

Gotta have a

Feckle Freezer!

**Feckle, Feckle, Feckle,
Feckle, Feckle, Feckle—"**

It went on and on. Every house on the block had faces staring out of windows by then. The voice was not merely loud; it was nearly deafening.

Burckhardt shouted to his wife, over the uproar, "What the hell is a Feckle Freezer?"

"Some kind of a freezer, I guess, dear," she shrieked back unhelpfully.

Abruptly the noise stopped and the truck stood silent. It was still misty morning; the Sun's rays came horizontally across the rooftops. It was impossible to believe that, a moment ago, the silent block had been bellowing the name of a freezer.

"A crazy advertising trick," Burckhardt said bitterly. He yawned and turned away from the window. "Might as well get dressed. I guess that's the end of—"

The bellow caught him from behind; it was almost like a hard slap on the ears. A harsh, sneering voice, louder than the arch-angel's trumpet, howled:

"Have you got a freezer? *It stinks!* If it isn't a Feckle Freezer, *it stinks!* If it's a last year's Feckle Freezer, *it stinks!* Only this year's Feckle Freezer is any good at all! You know who owns an Ajax Freezer? Fairies own Ajax Freezers! You know who owns a Triplecold Freezer? Commies own Triplecold Freezers! Every freezer but a brand-new Feckle Freezer *stinks!*"

The voice screamed inarticulately with rage. "I'm warning you! Get out and buy a Feckle Freezer right away! Hurry up! Hurry for Feckle! Hurry for Feckle! Hurry, hurry, hurry, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle...."

It stopped eventually. Burckhardt licked his lips. He started to say to his wife, "Maybe we ought to call the police about—" when the speakers erupted again. It caught him off guard; it was intended to catch him off guard. It screamed:

"Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle. Cheap freezers ruin your food. You'll get sick and throw up. You'll get sick and die. Buy a Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle! Ever take a piece of meat out of the freezer you've got and see how rotten and moldy it is? Buy a Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle. Do you want to eat rotten, stinking food? Or do you want to wise up and buy a Feckle, Feckle, Feckle—"

That did it. With fingers that kept stabbing the wrong holes, Burckhardt finally managed to dial the local police station. He got a busy signal—it was apparent that he was not the only one with the same idea—and while he was shakingly dialing again, the noise outside stopped.

He looked out the window. The truck was gone.

Burckhardt loosened his tie and ordered another Frosty-Flip from the waiter. If only they wouldn't keep the Crystal Cafe so *hot!* The new paint job—searing reds and blinding yellows—was bad enough, but someone seemed to have the delusion that this was January instead of June; the place was a good ten degrees warmer than outside.

He swallowed the Frosty-Flip in two gulps. It had a kind of peculiar flavor, he thought, but not bad. It certainly cooled you off, just as the waiter had promised. He reminded himself to pick up a carton of them on the way home; Mary might like them. She was always interested in something new.

He stood up awkwardly as the girl came across the restaurant toward him. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in Tylerton. Chin-height, honey-blond hair and a figure that—well, it was all hers. There was no doubt in the world that the dress that clung to her was the only thing she wore. He felt as if he were blushing as she greeted him.

"Mr. Burckhardt." The voice was like distant tomtoms. "It's wonderful of you to let me see you, after this morning."

He cleared his throat. "Not at all. Won't you sit down, Miss—"

"April Horn," she murmured, sitting down—beside him, not where he had pointed on the other side of the table. "Call me April, won't you?"

She was wearing some kind of perfume, Burckhardt noted with what little of his mind was functioning at all. It didn't seem fair that she should be using perfume as well as everything else. He came to with a start and realized that the waiter was leaving with an order for *filets mignon* for two.

"Hey!" he objected.

"Please, Mr. Burckhardt." Her shoulder was against his, her face was turned to him, her breath was warm, her expression was tender and solicitous. "This is all on the Feckle Corporation. Please let them—it's the *least* they can do."

He felt her hand burrowing into his pocket.

"I put the price of the meal into your pocket," she whispered conspiratorially. "Please do that for me, won't you? I mean I'd appreciate it if you'd pay the waiter—I'm old-fashioned about things like that."

She smiled meltingly, then became mock-businesslike. "But you must take the money," she insisted. "Why, you're letting Feckle off lightly if you do! You could sue them for every nickel they've got, disturbing your sleep like that."

With a dizzy feeling, as though he had just seen someone make a rabbit disappear into a top hat, he said, "Why, it really wasn't so bad, uh, April. A little noisy, maybe, but—"

"Oh, Mr. Burckhardt!" The blue eyes were wide and admiring. "I knew you'd understand. It's just that—well, it's such a *wonderful* freezer that some of the outside men get carried away, so to speak. As soon as the main office found out about what happened, they sent representatives around to every house on the block to apologize. Your wife told us where we could phone you—and I'm so very pleased that you were willing to let me have lunch with you, so that I could apologize, too. Because truly, Mr. Burckhardt, it is a *fine* freezer.

"I shouldn't tell you this, but—" the blue eyes were shyly lowered—"I'd do almost anything for Feckle Freezers. It's more than a job to me." She looked up. She was enchanting. "I bet you think I'm silly, don't you?"

Burckhardt coughed. "Well, I—"

"Oh, you don't want to be unkind!" She shook her head. "No, don't pretend. You think it's silly. But really, Mr. Burckhardt, you wouldn't think so if you knew more about the Feckle. Let me show you this little booklet—"

Burckhardt got back from lunch a full hour late. It wasn't only the girl who delayed him. There had been a curious interview with a little man named Swanson, whom he barely knew, who had stopped him with desperate urgency on the street—and then left him cold.

But it didn't matter much. Mr. Barth, for the first time since Burckhardt had worked there, was out for the day—leaving Burckhardt stuck with the quarterly tax returns.

What did matter, though, was that somehow he had signed a purchase order for a twelve-cubic-foot Feckle Freezer, upright model, self-defrosting, list price \$625, with a ten per cent "courtesy" discount—"Because of that *horrid* affair this morning, Mr. Burckhardt," she had said.

And he wasn't sure how he could explain it to his wife.

He needn't have worried. As he walked in the front door, his wife said almost immediately, "I wonder if we can't afford a new freezer, dear. There was a man here to apologize about that noise and—well, we got to talking and—"

She had signed a purchase order, too.

It had been the damndest day, Burckhardt thought later, on his way up to bed. But the day wasn't done with him yet. At the head of the stairs, the weakened spring in the electric light switch refused to click at all. He snapped it back and forth angrily and, of course, succeeded in jarring the tumbler out of its pins. The wires shorted and every light in the house went out.

"Damn!" said Guy Burckhardt.

"Fuse?" His wife shrugged sleepily. "Let it go till the morning, dear."

Burckhardt shook his head. "You go back to bed. I'll be right along."

It wasn't so much that he cared about fixing the fuse, but he was too restless for sleep. He disconnected the bad switch with a screwdriver, stumbled down into the black kitchen, found the flashlight and climbed gingerly down the cellar stairs. He located a spare fuse, pushed an empty trunk over to the fuse box to stand on and twisted out the old fuse.

When the new one was in, he heard the starting click and steady drone of the refrigerator in the kitchen overhead.

He headed back to the steps, and stopped.

Where the old trunk had been, the cellar floor gleamed oddly bright. He inspected it in the flashlight beam. It was metal!

"Son of a gun," said Guy Burckhardt. He shook his head unbelievably. He peered closer, rubbed the edges of the metallic patch with his thumb and acquired an annoying cut—the edges were *sharp*.

The stained cement floor of the cellar was a thin shell. He found a hammer and cracked it off in a dozen spots—everywhere was metal.

The whole cellar was a copper box. Even the cement-brick walls were false fronts over a metal sheath!

Baffled, he attacked one of the foundation beams. That, at least, was real wood. The glass in the cellar windows was real glass.

He sucked his bleeding thumb and tried the base of the cellar stairs. Real wood. He chipped at the bricks under the oil burner. Real bricks. The retaining walls, the floor—they were faked.

It was as though someone had shored up the house with a frame of metal and then laboriously concealed the evidence.

The biggest surprise was the upside-down boat hull that blocked the rear half of the cellar, relic of a brief home workshop period that Burckhardt had gone through a couple of years before. From above, it looked perfectly normal. Inside, though, where there should have been thwarts and seats and lockers, there was a mere tangle of braces, rough and unfinished.

"But I *built* that!" Burckhardt exclaimed, forgetting his thumb. He leaned against the hull dizzily, trying to think this thing through. For reasons beyond his comprehension, someone had taken his boat and his cellar away, maybe his whole house, and replaced them with a clever mock-up of the real thing.

"That's crazy," he said to the empty cellar. He stared around in the light of the flash. He whispered, "What in the name of Heaven would anybody do that for?"

Reason refused an answer; there wasn't any reasonable answer. For long minutes, Burckhardt contemplated the uncertain picture of his own sanity.

He peered under the boat again, hoping to reassure himself that it was a mistake, just his imagination. But the sloppy, unfinished bracing was unchanged. He crawled under for a better look, feeling the rough wood incredulously. Utterly impossible!

He switched off the flashlight and started to wriggle out. But he didn't make it. In the moment between the command to his legs to move and the crawling out, he felt a sudden draining weariness flooding through him.

Consciousness went—not easily, but as though it were being taken away, and Guy Burckhardt was asleep.

On the morning of June 16th, Guy Burckhardt woke up in a cramped position huddled under the hull of the boat in his basement—and raced upstairs to find it was June 15th.

The first thing he had done was to make a frantic, hasty inspection of the boat hull, the faked cellar floor, the imitation stone. They were all as he had remembered them—all completely unbelievable.

The kitchen was its placid, unexciting self. The electric clock was purring soberly around the dial. Almost six o'clock, it said. His wife would be waking at any moment.

Burckhardt flung open the front door and stared out into the quiet street. The morning paper was tossed carelessly against the steps—and as he retrieved it, he noticed that this was the 15th day of June.

But that was impossible. *Yesterday* was the 15th of June. It was not a date one would forget—it was quarterly tax-return day.

He went back into the hall and picked up the telephone; he dialed for Weather Information, and got a well-modulated chant: "—and cooler, some showers. Barometric pressure thirty point zero four, rising ... United States Weather Bureau forecast for June 15th. Warm and sunny, with high around—"

He hung the phone up. June 15th.

"Holy heaven!" Burckhardt said prayerfully. Things were very odd indeed. He heard the ring of his wife's alarm and bounded up the stairs.

Mary Burckhardt was sitting upright in bed with the terrified, uncomprehending stare of someone just waking out of a nightmare.

"Oh!" she gasped, as her husband came in the room. "Darling, I just had the most *terrible* dream! It was like an explosion and—"

"Again?" Burckhardt asked, not very sympathetically. "Mary, something's funny! I *knew* there was something wrong all day yesterday and—"

He went on to tell her about the copper box that was the cellar, and the odd mock-up someone had made of his boat. Mary looked astonished, then alarmed, then placatory and uneasy.

She said, "Dear, are you *sure*? Because I was cleaning that old trunk out just last week and I didn't notice anything."

"Positive!" said Guy Burckhardt. "I dragged it over to the wall to step on it to put a new fuse in after we blew the lights out and—"

"After we what?" Mary was looking more than merely alarmed.

"After we blew the lights out. You know, when the switch at the head of the stairs stuck. I went down to the cellar and—"

Mary sat up in bed. "Guy, the switch didn't stick. I turned out the lights myself last night."

Burckhardt glared at his wife. "Now I *know* you didn't! Come here and take a look!"

He stalked out to the landing and dramatically pointed to the bad switch, the one that he had unscrewed and left hanging the night before....

Only it wasn't. It was as it had always been. Unbelieving, Burckhardt pressed it and the lights sprang up in both halls.

Mary, looking pale and worried, left him to go down to the kitchen and start breakfast. Burckhardt stood staring at the switch for a long time. His mental processes were gone beyond the point of disbelief and shock; they simply were not functioning.

He shaved and dressed and ate his breakfast in a state of numb introspection. Mary didn't disturb him; she was apprehensive and soothing. She kissed him good-bye as he hurried out to the bus without another word.

Miss Mitkin, at the reception desk, greeted him with a yawn. "Morning," she said drowsily. "Mr. Barth won't be in today."

Burckhardt started to say something, but checked himself. She would not know that Barth hadn't been in yesterday, either, because she was tearing a June 14th pad off her calendar to make way for the "new" June 15th sheet.

He staggered to his own desk and stared unseeingly at the morning's mail. It had not even been opened yet, but he knew that the Factory Distributors envelope contained an order for twenty thousand feet of the new acoustic tile, and the one from Finebeck & Sons was a complaint.

After a long while, he forced himself to open them. They were.

By lunchtime, driven by a desperate sense of urgency, Burckhardt made Miss Mitkin take her lunch hour first—the June-fifteenth-that-was-yesterday, *he* had gone first. She went, looking vaguely worried about his strained insistence, but it made no difference to Burckhardt's mood.

The phone rang and Burckhardt picked it up abstractedly. "Contro Chemicals Downtown, Burckhardt speaking."

The voice said, "This is Swanson," and stopped.

Burckhardt waited expectantly, but that was all. He said, "Hello?"

Again the pause. Then Swanson asked in sad resignation, "Still nothing, eh?"

"Nothing what? Swanson, is there something you want? You came up to me yesterday and went through this routine. You—"

The voice crackled: "Burckhardt! Oh, my good heavens, *you remember!* Stay right there—I'll be down in half an hour!"

"What's this all about?"

"Never mind," the little man said exultantly. "Tell you about it when I see you. Don't say any more over the phone—somebody may be listening. Just wait there. Say, hold on a minute. Will you be alone in the office?"

"Well, no. Miss Mitkin will probably—"

"Hell. Look, Burckhardt, where do you eat lunch? Is it good and noisy?"

"Why, I suppose so. The Crystal Cafe. It's just about a block—"

"I know where it is. Meet you in half an hour!" And the receiver clicked.

The Crystal Cafe was no longer painted red, but the temperature was still up. And they had added piped-in music interspersed with commercials. The advertisements were for Frosty-Flip, Marlin Cigarettes—"They're sanitized," the announcer purred—and something called Choco-Bite candy bars that Burckhardt couldn't remember ever having heard of before. But he heard more about them quickly enough.

While he was waiting for Swanson to show up, a girl in the cellophane skirt of a nightclub cigarette vendor came through the restaurant with a tray of tiny scarlet-wrapped candies.

"Choco-Bites are *tangy*," she was murmuring as she came close to his table. "Choco-Bites are *tangier* than tangy!"

Burckhardt, intent on watching for the strange little man who had phoned him, paid little attention. But as she scattered a handful of the confections over the table next to his, smiling at the occupants, he caught a glimpse of her and turned to stare.

"Why, Miss Horn!" he said.

The girl dropped her tray of candies.

Burckhardt rose, concerned over the girl. "Is something wrong?"

But she fled.

The manager of the restaurant was staring suspiciously at Burckhardt, who sank back in his seat and tried to look inconspicuous. He hadn't insulted the girl! Maybe she was just a very strictly reared young lady, he thought—in spite of the long bare legs under the cellophane skirt—and when he addressed her, she thought he was a masher.

Ridiculous idea. Burckhardt scowled uneasily and picked up his menu.

"Burckhardt!" It was a shrill whisper.

Burckhardt looked up over the top of his menu, startled. In the seat across from him, the little man named Swanson was sitting, tensely poised.

"Burckhardt!" the little man whispered again. "Let's get out of here! They're on to you now. If you want to stay alive, come on!"

There was no arguing with the man. Burckhardt gave the hovering manager a sick, apologetic smile and followed Swanson out. The little man seemed to know where he was going. In the street, he clutched Burckhardt by the elbow and hurried him off down the block.

"Did you see her?" he demanded. "That Horn woman, in the phone booth? She'll have them here in five minutes, believe me, so hurry it up!"

Although the street was full of people and cars, nobody was paying any attention to Burckhardt and Swanson. The air had a nip in it—more like October than June, Burckhardt thought, in spite of the weather bureau. And he felt like a fool, following this mad little man down the street, running away from some "them" toward—toward what? The little man might be crazy, but he was afraid. And the fear was infectious.

"In here!" panted the little man.

It was another restaurant—more of a bar, really, and a sort of second-rate place that Burckhardt had never patronized.

"Right straight through," Swanson whispered; and Burckhardt, like a biddable boy, side-stepped through the mass of tables to the far end of the restaurant.

It was "L"-shaped, with a front on two streets at right angles to each other. They came out on the side street, Swanson staring coldly back at the question-looking cashier, and crossed to the opposite sidewalk.

They were under the marquee of a movie theater. Swanson's expression began to relax.

"Lost them!" he crowed softly. "We're almost there."

He stepped up to the window and bought two tickets. Burckhardt trailed him in to the theater. It was a weekday matinee and the place was almost empty. From the screen came sounds of gunfire and horse's hoofs. A solitary usher, leaning against a bright brass rail, looked briefly at them and went back to staring boredly at the picture as Swanson led Burckhardt down a flight of carpeted marble steps.

They were in the lounge and it was empty. There was a door for men and one for ladies; and there was a third door, marked "MANAGER" in gold letters. Swanson listened at the door, and gently opened it and peered inside.

"Okay," he said, gesturing.

Burckhardt followed him through an empty office, to another door—a closet, probably, because it was unmarked.

But it was no closet. Swanson opened it warily, looked inside, then motioned Burckhardt to follow.

It was a tunnel, metal-walled, brightly lit. Empty, it stretched vacantly away in both directions from them.

Burckhardt looked wondering around. One thing he knew and knew full well:

No such tunnel belonged under Tylerton.

There was a room off the tunnel with chairs and a desk and what looked like television screens. Swanson slumped in a chair, panting.

"We're all right for a while here," he wheezed. "They don't come here much any more. If they do, we'll hear them and we can hide."

"Who?" demanded Burckhardt.

The little man said, "Martians!" His voice cracked on the word and the life seemed to go out of him. In morose tones, he went on: "Well, I think they're Martians. Although you could be right, you know; I've had plenty of time to think it over these last few weeks, after they got you, and it's possible they're Russians after all. Still—"

"Start from the beginning. Who got me when?"

Swanson sighed. "So we have to go through the whole thing again. All right. It was about two months ago that you banged on my door, late at night. You were all beat up—scared silly. You begged me to help you—"

"I did?"

"Naturally you don't remember any of this. Listen and you'll understand. You were talking a blue streak about being captured and threatened, and your wife being dead and coming back to life, and all kinds of mixed-up nonsense. I thought you were crazy. But—well, I've always had a lot of respect for you. And you begged me to hide you and I have this darkroom, you know. It locks from the inside only. I put the lock on myself. So we went in there—just to humor you—and along about midnight, which was only fifteen or twenty minutes after, we passed out."

"Passed out?"

Swanson nodded. "Both of us. It was like being hit with a sandbag. Look, didn't that happen to you again last night?"

"I guess it did," Burckhardt shook his head uncertainly.

"Sure. And then all of a sudden we were awake again, and you said you were going to show me something funny, and we went out and bought a paper. And the date on it was June 15th."

"June 15th? But that's today! I mean—"

"You got it, friend. It's *always* today!"

It took time to penetrate.

Burckhardt said wonderingly, "You've hidden out in that darkroom for how many weeks?"

"How can I tell? Four or five, maybe. I lost count. And every day the same—always the 15th of June, always my landlady, Mrs. Keefer, is sweeping the front steps, always the same headline in the papers at the corner. It gets monotonous, friend."

It was Burckhardt's idea and Swanson despised it, but he went along. He was the type who always went along.

"It's dangerous," he grumbled worriedly. "Suppose somebody comes by? They'll spot us and—"

"What have we got to lose?"

Swanson shrugged. "It's dangerous," he said again. But he went along.

Burckhardt's idea was very simple. He was sure of only one thing—the tunnel went somewhere. Martians or Russians, fantastic plot or crazy hallucination, whatever was wrong with Tylerton had an explanation, and the place to look for it was at the end of the tunnel.

They jogged along. It was more than a mile before they began to see an end. They were in luck—at least no one came through the tunnel to spot them. But Swanson had said that it was only at certain hours that the tunnel seemed to be in use.

Always the fifteenth of June. Why? Burckhardt asked himself. Never mind the how. *Why?*

And falling asleep, completely involuntarily—everyone at the same time, it seemed. And not remembering, never remembering anything—Swanson had said how eagerly he saw Burckhardt again, the morning after Burckhardt had incautiously waited five minutes too many before retreating into the darkroom. When Swanson had come to, Burckhardt was gone. Swanson had seen him in the street that afternoon, but Burckhardt had remembered nothing.

And Swanson had lived his mouse's existence for weeks, hiding in the woodwork at night, stealing out by day to search for Burckhardt in pitiful hope, scurrying around the fringe of life, trying to keep from the deadly eyes of *them*.

Them. One of "them" was the girl named April Horn. It was by seeing her walk carelessly into a telephone booth and never come out that Swanson had found the tunnel. Another was the man at the cigar stand in Burckhardt's office building. There were more, at least a dozen that Swanson knew of or suspected.

They were easy enough to spot, once you knew where to look—for they, alone in Tylerton, changed their roles from day to day. Burckhardt was on that 8:51 bus, every

morning of every day—that-was-June-15th, never different by a hair or a moment. But April Horn was sometimes gaudy in the cellophane skirt, giving away candy or cigarettes; sometimes plainly dressed; sometimes not seen by Swanson at all.

Russians? Martians? Whatever they were, what could they be hoping to gain from this mad masquerade?

Burckhardt didn't know the answer—but perhaps it lay beyond the door at the end of the tunnel. They listened carefully and heard distant sounds that could not quite be made out, but nothing that seemed dangerous. They slipped through.

And, through a wide chamber and up a flight of steps, they found they were in what Burckhardt recognized as the Contro Chemicals plant.

Nobody was in sight. By itself, that was not so very odd—the automatized factory had never had very many persons in it. But Burckhardt remembered, from his single visit, the endless, ceaseless busyness of the plant, the valves that opened and closed, the vats that emptied themselves and filled themselves and stirred and cooked and chemically tasted the bubbling liquids they held inside themselves. The plant was never populated, but it was never still.

Only—now it *was* still. Except for the distant sounds, there was no breath of life in it. The captive electronic minds were sending out no commands; the coils and relays were at rest.

Burckhardt said, "Come on." Swanson reluctantly followed him through the tangled aisles of stainless steel columns and tanks.

They walked as though they were in the presence of the dead. In a way, they were, for what were the automatons that once had run the factory, if not corpses? The machines were controlled by computers that were really not computers at all, but the electronic analogues of living brains. And if they were turned off, were they not dead? For each had once been a human mind.

Take a master petroleum chemist, infinitely skilled in the separation of crude oil into its fractions. Strap him down, probe into his brain with searching electronic needles. The machine scans the patterns of the mind, translates what it sees into charts and sine waves. Impress these same waves on a robot computer and you have your chemist. Or a thousand copies of your chemist, if you wish, with all of his knowledge and skill, and no human limitations at all.

Put a dozen copies of him into a plant and they will run it all, twenty-four hours a day, seven days of every week, never tiring, never overlooking anything, never forgetting....

Swanson stepped up closer to Burckhardt. "I'm scared," he said.

They were across the room now and the sounds were louder. They were not machine sounds, but voices; Burckhardt moved cautiously up to a door and dared to peer around it.

It was a smaller room, lined with television screens, each one—a dozen or more, at least—with a man or woman sitting before it, staring into the screen and dictating notes into a recorder. The viewers dialed from scene to scene; no two screens ever showed the same picture.

The pictures seemed to have little in common. One was a store, where a girl dressed like April Horn was demonstrating home freezers. One was a series of shots of kitchens. Burckhardt caught a glimpse of what looked like the cigar stand in his office building.

It was baffling and Burckhardt would have loved to stand there and puzzle it out, but it was too busy a place. There was the chance that someone would look their way or walk out and find them.

They found another room. This one was empty. It was an office, large and sumptuous. It had a desk, littered with papers. Burckhardt stared at them, briefly at first—then, as the words on one of them caught his attention, with incredulous fascination.

He snatched up the topmost sheet, scanned it, and another, while Swanson was frenziedly searching through the drawers.

Burckhardt swore unbelievably and dropped the papers to the desk.

Swanson, hardly noticing, yelped with delight: "Look!" He dragged a gun from the desk. "And it's loaded, too!"

Burckhardt stared at him blankly, trying to assimilate what he had read. Then, as he realized what Swanson had said, Burckhardt's eyes sparked. "Good man!" he cried. "We'll take it. We're getting out of here with that gun, Swanson. And we're going to the police! Not the cops in Tylerton, but the F.B.I., maybe. Take a look at this!"

The sheaf he handed Swanson was headed: "Test Area Progress Report. Subject: Marlin Cigarettes Campaign." It was mostly tabulated figures that made little sense to Burckhardt and Swanson, but at the end was a summary that said:

Although Test 47-K3 pulled nearly double the number of new users of any of the other tests conducted, it probably cannot be used in the field because of local sound-truck control ordinances.

The tests in the 47-K12 group were second best and our recommendation is that retests be conducted in this appeal, testing each of the three best campaigns with and without the addition of sampling techniques.

An alternative suggestion might be to proceed directly with the top appeal in the K12 series, if the client is unwilling to go to the expense of additional tests.

All of these forecast expectations have an 80% probability of being within one-half of one per cent of results forecast, and more than 99% probability of coming within 5%.

Swanson looked up from the paper into Burckhardt's eyes. "I don't get it," he complained.

Burckhardt said, "I don't blame you. It's crazy, but it fits the facts, Swanson, *it fits the facts*. They aren't Russians and they aren't Martians. These people are advertising men! Somehow—heaven knows how they did it—they've taken Tylerton over. They've got us, all of us, you and me and twenty or thirty thousand other people, right under their thumbs.

"Maybe they hypnotize us and maybe it's something else; but however they do it, what happens is that they let us live a day at a time. They pour advertising into us the

whole damned day long. And at the end of the day, they see what happened—and then they wash the day out of our minds and start again the next day with different advertising."

Swanson's jaw was hanging. He managed to close it and swallow. "Nuts!" he said flatly.

Burckhardt shook his head. "Sure, it sounds crazy—but this whole thing is crazy. How else would you explain it? You can't deny that most of Tylerton lives the same day over and over again. You've *seen* it! And that's the crazy part and we have to admit that that's true—unless we are the crazy ones. And once you admit that somebody, somehow, knows how to accomplish that, the rest of it makes all kinds of sense.

"Think of it, Swanson! They test every last detail before they spend a nickel on advertising! Do you have any idea what that means? Lord knows how much money is involved, but I know for a fact that some companies spend twenty or thirty million dollars a year on advertising. Multiply it, say, by a hundred companies. Say that every one of them learns how to cut its advertising cost by only ten per cent. And that's peanuts, believe me!

"If they know in advance what's going to work, they can cut their costs in half—maybe to less than half, I don't know. But that's saving two or three hundred million dollars a year—and if they pay only ten or twenty per cent of that for the use of Tylerton, it's still dirt cheap for them and a fortune for whoever took over Tylerton."

Swanson licked his lips. "You mean," he offered hesitantly, "that we're a—well, a kind of captive audience?"

Burckhardt frowned. "Not exactly." He thought for a minute. "You know how a doctor tests something like penicillin? He sets up a series of little colonies of germs on gelatine disks and he tries the stuff on one after another, changing it a little each time. Well, that's us—we're the germs, Swanson. Only it's even more efficient than that. They don't have to test more than one colony, because they can use it over and over again."

It was too hard for Swanson to take in. He only said: "What do we do about it?"

"We go to the police. They can't use human beings for guinea pigs!"

"How do we get to the police?"

Burckhardt hesitated. "I think—" he began slowly. "Sure. This place is the office of somebody important. We've got a gun. We'll stay right here until he comes along. And he'll get us out of here."

Simple and direct. Swanson subsided and found a place to sit, against the wall, out of sight of the door. Burckhardt took up a position behind the door itself—

And waited.

The wait was not as long as it might have been. Half an hour, perhaps. Then Burckhardt heard approaching voices and had time for a swift whisper to Swanson before he flattened himself against the wall.

It was a man's voice, and a girl's. The man was saying, "—reason why you couldn't report on the phone? You're ruining your whole day's test! What the devil's the matter with you, Janet?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dorchin," she said in a sweet, clear tone. "I thought it was important."

The man grumbled, "Important! One lousy unit out of twenty-one thousand."

"But it's the Burckhardt one, Mr. Dorchin. Again. And the way he got out of sight, he must have had some help."

"All right, all right. It doesn't matter, Janet; the Choco-Bite program is ahead of schedule anyhow. As long as you're this far, come on in the office and make out your worksheet. And don't worry about the Burckhardt business. He's probably just wandering around. We'll pick him up tonight and—"

They were inside the door. Burckhardt kicked it shut and pointed the gun.

"That's what you think," he said triumphantly.

It was worth the terrified hours, the bewildered sense of insanity, the confusion and fear. It was the most satisfying sensation Burckhardt had ever had in his life. The expression on the man's face was one he had read about but never actually seen: Dorchin's mouth fell open and his eyes went wide, and though he managed to make a sound that might have been a question, it was not in words.

The girl was almost as surprised. And Burckhardt, looking at her, knew why her voice had been so familiar. The girl was the one who had introduced herself to him as April Horn.

Dorchin recovered himself quickly. "Is this the one?" he asked sharply.

The girl said, "Yes."

Dorchin nodded. "I take it back. You were right. Uh, you—Burckhardt. What do you want?"

Swanson piped up, "Watch him! He might have another gun."

"Search him then," Burckhardt said. "I'll tell you what we want, Dorchin. We want you to come along with us to the FBI and explain to them how you can get away with kidnapping twenty thousand people."

"Kidnapping?" Dorchin snorted. "That's ridiculous, man! Put that gun away—you can't get away with this!"

Burckhardt hefted the gun grimly. "I think I can."

Dorchin looked furious and sick—but, oddly, not afraid. "Damn it—" he started to bellow, then closed his mouth and swallowed. "Listen," he said persuasively, "you're making a big mistake. I haven't kidnapped anybody, believe me!"

"I don't believe you," said Burckhardt bluntly. "Why should I?"

"But it's true! Take my word for it!"

Burckhardt shook his head. "The FBI can take your word if they like. We'll find out. Now how do we get out of here?"

Dorchin opened his mouth to argue.

Burckhardt blazed: "Don't get in my way! I'm willing to kill you if I have to. Don't you understand that? I've gone through two days of hell and every second of it I blame on you. Kill you? It would be a pleasure and I don't have a thing in the world to lose! Get us out of here!"

Dorchin's face went suddenly opaque. He seemed about to move; but the blonde girl he had called Janet slipped between him and the gun.

"Please!" she begged Burckhardt. "You don't understand. You mustn't shoot!"

"Get out of my way!"

"But, Mr. Burckhardt—"

She never finished. Dorchin, his face unreadable, headed for the door. Burckhardt had been pushed one degree too far. He swung the gun, bellowing. The girl called out sharply. He pulled the trigger. Closing on him with pity and pleading in her eyes, she came again between the gun and the man.

Burckhardt aimed low instinctively, to cripple, not to kill. But his aim was not good.

The pistol bullet caught her in the pit of the stomach.

Dorchin was out and away, the door slamming behind him, his footsteps racing into the distance.

Burckhardt hurled the gun across the room and jumped to the girl.

Swanson was moaning. "That finishes us, Burckhardt. Oh, why did you do it? We could have got away. We could have gone to the police. We were practically out of here! We—"

Burckhardt wasn't listening. He was kneeling beside the girl. She lay flat on her back, arms helter-skelter. There was no blood, hardly any sign of the wound; but the position in which she lay was one that no living human being could have held.

Yet she wasn't dead.

She wasn't dead—and Burckhardt, frozen beside her, thought: *She isn't alive, either.*

There was no pulse, but there was a rhythmic ticking of the outstretched fingers of one hand.

There was no sound of breathing, but there was a hissing, sizzling noise.

The eyes were open and they were looking at Burckhardt. There was neither fear nor pain in them, only a pity deeper than the Pit.

She said, through lips that writhed erratically, "Don't—worry, Mr. Burckhardt. I'm—all right."

Burckhardt rocked back on his haunches, staring. Where there should have been blood, there was a clean break of a substance that was not flesh; and a curl of thin golden-copper wire.

Burckhardt moistened his lips.

"You're a robot," he said.

The girl tried to nod. The twitching lips said, "I am. And so are you."

Swanson, after a single inarticulate sound, walked over to the desk and sat staring at the wall. Burckhardt rocked back and forth beside the shattered puppet on the floor. He had no words.

The girl managed to say, "I'm—sorry all this happened." The lovely lips twisted into a rictus sneer, frightening on that smooth young face, until she got them under control. "Sorry," she said again. "The—nerve center was right about where the bullet hit. Makes it difficult to—control this body."

Burckhardt nodded automatically, accepting the apology. Robots. It was obvious, now that he knew it. In hindsight, it was inevitable. He thought of his mystic notions of hypnosis or Martians or something stranger still—idiotic, for the simple fact of created robots fitted the facts better and more economically.

All the evidence had been before him. The automatized factory, with its transplanted minds—why not transplant a mind into a humanoid robot, give it its original owner's features and form?

Could it know that it was a robot?

"All of us," Burckhardt said, hardly aware that he spoke out loud. "My wife and my secretary and you and the neighbors. All of us the same."

"No." The voice was stronger. "Not exactly the same, all of us. I chose it, you see. I—" this time the convulsed lips were not a random contortion of the nerves—"I was an ugly woman, Mr. Burckhardt, and nearly sixty years old. Life had passed me. And when Mr. Dorchin offered me the chance to live again as a beautiful girl, I jumped at the opportunity. Believe me, I *jumped*, in spite of its disadvantages. My flesh body is still alive—it is sleeping, while I am here. I could go back to it. But I never do."

"And the rest of us?"

"Different, Mr. Burckhardt. I work here. I'm carrying out Mr. Dorchin's orders, mapping the results of the advertising tests, watching you and the others live as he makes you live. I do it by choice, but you have no choice. Because, you see, you are dead."

"Dead?" cried Burckhardt; it was almost a scream.

The blue eyes looked at him unwinkingly and he knew that it was no lie. He swallowed, marveling at the intricate mechanisms that let him swallow, and sweat, and eat.

He said: "Oh. The explosion in my dream."

"It was no dream. You are right—the explosion. That was real and this plant was the cause of it. The storage tanks let go and what the blast didn't get, the fumes killed a little later. But almost everyone died in the blast, twenty-one thousand persons. You died with them and that was Dorchin's chance."

"The damned ghoul!" said Burckhardt.

The twisted shoulders shrugged with an odd grace. "Why? You were gone. And you and all the others were what Dorchin wanted—a whole town, a perfect slice of America. It's as easy to transfer a pattern from a dead brain as a living one. Easier—the dead can't say no. Oh, it took work and money—the town was a wreck—but it was

possible to rebuild it entirely, especially because it wasn't necessary to have all the details exact.

"There were the homes where even the brains had been utterly destroyed, and those are empty inside, and the cellars that needn't be too perfect, and the streets that hardly matter. And anyway, it only has to last for one day. The same day—June 15th—over and over again; and if someone finds something a little wrong, somehow, the discovery won't have time to snowball, wreck the validity of the tests, because all errors are canceled out at midnight."

The face tried to smile. "That's the dream, Mr. Burckhardt, that day of June 15th, because you never really lived it. It's a present from Mr. Dorchin, a dream that he gives you and then takes back at the end of the day, when he has all his figures on how many of you responded to what variation of which appeal, and the maintenance crews go down the tunnel to go through the whole city, washing out the new dream with their little electronic drains, and then the dream starts all over again. On June 15th.

"Always June 15th, because June 14th is the last day any of you can remember alive. Sometimes the crews miss someone—as they missed you, because you were under your boat. But it doesn't matter. The ones who are missed give themselves away if they show it—and if they don't, it doesn't affect the test. But they don't drain us, the ones of us who work for Dorchin. We sleep when the power is turned off, just as you do. When we wake up, though, we remember." The face contorted wildly. "If I could only forget!"

Burckhardt said unbelievably, "All this to sell merchandise! It must have cost millions!"

The robot called April Horn said, "It did. But it has made millions for Dorchin, too. And that's not the end of it. Once he finds the master words that make people act, do you suppose he will stop with that? Do you suppose—"

The door opened, interrupting her. Burckhardt whirled. Belatedly remembering Dorchin's flight, he raised the gun.

"Don't shoot," ordered the voice calmly. It was not Dorchin; it was another robot, this one not disguised with the clever plastics and cosmetics, but shining plain. It said metallically: "Forget it, Burckhardt. You're not accomplishing anything. Give me that gun before you do any more damage. Give it to me *now*."

Burckhardt bellowed angrily. The gleam on this robot torso was steel; Burckhardt was not at all sure that his bullets would pierce it, or do much harm if they did. He would have put it to the test—

But from behind him came a whimpering, scurrying whirlwind; its name was Swanson, hysterical with fear. He catapulted into Burckhardt and sent him sprawling, the gun flying free.

"Please!" begged Swanson incoherently, prostrate before the steel robot. "He would have shot you—please don't hurt me! Let me work for you, like that girl. I'll do anything, anything you tell me—"

The robot voice said. "We don't need your help." It took two precise steps and stood over the gun—and spurned it, left it lying on the floor.

The wrecked blonde robot said, without emotion, "I doubt that I can hold out much longer, Mr. Dorchin."

"Disconnect if you have to," replied the steel robot.

Burckhardt blinked. "But you're not Dorchin!"

The steel robot turned deep eyes on him. "I am," it said. "Not in the flesh—but this is the body I am using at the moment. I doubt that you can damage this one with the gun. The other robot body was more vulnerable. Now will you stop this nonsense? I don't want to have to damage you; you're too expensive for that. Will you just sit down and let the maintenance crews adjust you?"

Swanson groveled. "You—you won't punish us?"

The steel robot had no expression, but its voice was almost surprised. "Punish you?" it repeated on a rising note. "How?"

Swanson quivered as though the word had been a whip; but Burckhardt flared: "Adjust *him*, if he'll let you—but not me! You're going to have to do me a lot of damage, Dorchin. I don't care what I cost or how much trouble it's going to be to put me back together again. But I'm going out of that door! If you want to stop me, you'll have to kill me. You won't stop me any other way!"

The steel robot took a half-step toward him, and Burckhardt involuntarily checked his stride. He stood poised and shaking, ready for death, ready for attack, ready for anything that might happen.

Ready for anything except what did happen. For Dorchin's steel body merely stepped aside, between Burckhardt and the gun, but leaving the door free.

"Go ahead," invited the steel robot. "Nobody's stopping you."

Outside the door, Burckhardt brought up sharp. It was insane of Dorchin to let him go! Robot or flesh, victim or beneficiary, there was nothing to stop him from going to the FBI or whatever law he could find away from Dorchin's synthetic empire, and telling his story. Surely the corporations who paid Dorchin for test results had no notion of the ghoul's technique he used; Dorchin would have to keep it from them, for the breath of publicity would put a stop to it. Walking out meant death, perhaps—but at that moment in his pseudo-life, death was no terror for Burckhardt.

There was no one in the corridor. He found a window and stared out of it. There was Tylerton—an ersatz city, but looking so real and familiar that Burckhardt almost imagined the whole episode a dream. It was no dream, though. He was certain of that in his heart and equally certain that nothing in Tylerton could help him now.

It had to be the other direction.

It took him a quarter of an hour to find a way, but he found it—skulking through the corridors, dodging the suspicion of footsteps, knowing for certain that his hiding was in vain, for Dorchin was undoubtedly aware of every move he made. But no one stopped him, and he found another door.

It was a simple enough door from the inside. But when he opened it and stepped out, it was like nothing he had ever seen.

First there was light—brilliant, incredible, blinding light. Burckhardt blinked upward, unbelieving and afraid.

He was standing on a ledge of smooth, finished metal. Not a dozen yards from his feet, the ledge dropped sharply away; he hardly dared approach the brink, but even from where he stood he could see no bottom to the chasm before him. And the gulf extended out of sight into the glare on either side of him.

No wonder Dorchin could so easily give him his freedom! From the factory, there was nowhere to go—but how incredible this fantastic gulf, how impossible the hundred white and blinding suns that hung above!

A voice by his side said inquiringly, "Burckhardt?" And thunder rolled the name, mutteringly soft, back and forth in the abyss before him.

Burckhardt wet his lips. "Y-yes?" he croaked.

"This is Dorchin. Not a robot this time, but Dorchin in the flesh, talking to you on a hand mike. Now you have seen, Burckhardt. Now will you be reasonable and let the maintenance crews take over?"

Burckhardt stood paralyzed. One of the moving mountains in the blinding glare came toward him.

It towered hundreds of feet over his head; he stared up at its top, squinting helplessly into the light.

It looked like—

Impossible!

The voice in the loudspeaker at the door said, "Burckhardt?" But he was unable to answer.

A heavy rumbling sigh. "I see," said the voice. "You finally understand. There's no place to go. You know it now. I could have told you, but you might not have believed me, so it was better for you to see it yourself. And after all, Burckhardt, why would I reconstruct a city just the way it was before? I'm a businessman; I count costs. If a thing has to be full-scale, I build it that way. But there wasn't any need to in this case."

From the mountain before him, Burckhardt helplessly saw a lesser cliff descend carefully toward him. It was long and dark, and at the end of it was whiteness, five-fingered whiteness....

"Poor little Burckhardt," crooned the loudspeaker, while the echoes rumbled through the enormous chasm that was only a workshop. "It must have been quite a shock for you to find out you were living in a town built on a table top."

It was the morning of June 15th, and Guy Burckhardt woke up screaming out of a dream.

It had been a monstrous and incomprehensible dream, of explosions and shadowy figures that were not men and terror beyond words.

He shuddered and opened his eyes.

Outside his bedroom window, a hugely amplified voice was howling.

Burckhardt stumbled over to the window and stared outside. There was an out-of-season chill to the air, more like October than June; but the scent was normal enough—except for the sound-truck that squatted at curbside halfway down the block. Its speaker horns blared:

"Are you a coward? Are you a fool? Are you going to let crooked politicians steal the country from you? NO! Are you going to put up with four more years of graft and crime? NO! Are you going to vote straight Federal Party all up and down the ballot? YES! *You just bet you are!*"

Sometimes he screams, sometimes he wheedles, threatens, begs, cajoles ... but his voice goes on and on through one June 15th after another.

WOLFBANE

By Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. Originally published in Galaxy Science Fiction October and November 1957

Appallingly, the Earth and the Moon had been kidnapped from the Solar System—but who were the kidnappers and what ransom did they want?

I

Roget Germyn, banker, of Wheeling, West Virginia, a Citizen, woke gently from a Citizen's dreamless sleep. It was the third-hour-rising time, the time proper to a day of exceptional opportunity to appreciate.

Citizen Germyn dressed himself in the clothes proper for the appreciation of great works—such as viewing the Empire State ruins against storm clouds from a small boat, or walking in silent single file across the remaining course of the Golden Gate Bridge. Or as today—one hoped—witnessing the Re-creation of the Sun.

Germyn with difficulty retained a Citizen's necessary calm. One was tempted to meditate on improper things: Would the Sun be re-created? What if it were not?

He put his mind to his dress. First of all, he put on an old and storied bracelet, a veritable identity bracelet of heavy silver links and a plate which was inscribed:

PFC JOE HARTMANN

Korea

1953

His fellow jewelry-appreciators would have envied him that bracelet—if they had been capable of such an emotion as envy. No other ID bracelet as much as two hundred and fifty years old was known to exist in Wheeling.

His finest shirt and pair of light pants went next to his skin, and over them he wore a loose parka whose seams had been carefully weakened. When the Sun was re-created, every five years or so, it was the custom to remove the parka gravely and rend it with the prescribed graceful gestures ... but not so drastically that it could not be stitched together again. Hence the weakened seams.

This was, he counted, the forty-first day on which he and all of Wheeling had donned the appropriate Sun Re-creation clothing. It was the forty-first day on which the Sun—no longer white, no longer blazing yellow, no longer even bright red—had risen and displayed a color that was darker maroon and always darker.

It had, thought Citizen Germyn, never grown so dark and so cold in all of his life. Perhaps it was an occasion for special viewing. For surely it would never come again, this opportunity to see the old Sun so near to death....

One hoped.

Gravely, Citizen Germyn completed his dressing, thinking only of the act of dressing itself. It was by no means his specialty, but he considered, when it was done, that he had done it well, in the traditional flowing gestures, with no flailing, at all times balanced lightly on the ball of the foot. It was all the more perfectly consummated because no one saw it but himself.

He woke his wife gently, by placing the palm of his hand on her forehead as she lay neatly, in the prescribed fashion, on the Woman's Third of the bed.

The warmth of his hand gradually penetrated the layers of sleep. Her eyes demurely opened.

"Citizeness Germyn," he greeted her, making the assurance-of-identity sign with his left hand.

"Citizen Germyn," she said, with the assurance-of-identity inclination of the head which was prescribed when the hands are covered.

He retired to his tiny study.

It was the time appropriate to meditation on the properties of Connectivity. Citizen Germyn was skilled in meditation, even for a banker; it was a grace in which he had schooled himself since earliest childhood.

Citizen Germyn, his young face composed, his slim body erect as he sat but in no way tense or straining, successfully blanked out, one after another, all of the external sounds and sights and feelings that interfered with proper meditation. His mind was very nearly vacant except of one central problem: Connectivity.

Over his head and behind, out of sight, the cold air of the room seemed to thicken and form a—call it a blob; a blob of air.

There was a name for those blobs of air. They had been seen before. They were a known fact of existence in Wheeling and in all the world. They came. They hovered. And they went away—sometimes not alone. If someone had been in the room with Citizen Germyn to look at it, he would have seen a distortion, a twisting of what was behind the blob, like flawed glass, a lens, like an eye. And they were called Eye.

Germyn meditated.

The blob of air grew and slowly moved. A vagrant current that spun out from it caught a fragment of paper and whirled it to the floor. Germyn stirred. The blob retreated.

Germyn, all unaware, disciplined his thoughts to disregard the interruption, to return to the central problem of Connectivity. The blob hovered....

From the other room, his wife's small, thrice-repeated throat-clearing signaled to him that she was dressed. Germyn got up to go to her, his mind returning to the world; and the overhead Eye spun relentlessly, and disappeared.

Some miles east of Wheeling, Glenn Tropile—of a class which found it wisest to give itself no special name, and which had devoted much time and thought to shaking the unwelcome name it had been given—awoke on the couch of his apartment.

He sat up, shivering. It was cold. The damned Sun was still bloody dark outside the window and the apartment was soggy and chilled.

He had kicked off the blankets in his sleep. *Why couldn't* he learn to sleep quietly, like anybody else? Lacking a robe, he clutched the blankets around him, got up and walked to the unglassed window.

It was not unusual for Glenn Tropile to wake up on his couch. This happened because Gala Tropile had a temper, was inclined to exile him from her bed after a quarrel, and—the operative factor—he knew he always had the advantage over her for the whole day following the night's exile. Therefore the quarrel was worth it. An advantage was, by definition, worth anything you paid for it or else it was no advantage.

He could hear her moving about in one of the other rooms and cocked an ear, satisfied. She hadn't waked him. Therefore she was about to make amends. A little itch in his spine or his brain—it was not a physical itch, so he couldn't locate it; he could only be sure that it was there—stopped troubling him momentarily; he was winning a contest. It was Glenn Tropile's nature to win contests ... and his nature to create them.

Gala Tropile, young, dark, attractive, with a haunted look, came in tentatively carrying coffee from some secret hoard of hers.

Glenn Tropile affected not to notice. He stared coldly out at the cold landscape. The sea, white with thin ice, was nearly out of sight, so far had it retreated as the little sun waned.

"Glenn—"

Ah, good! *Glenn*. Where was the proper mode of first-greeting-one's-husband? Where was the prescribed throat-clearing upon entering a room?

Assiduously, he had untaught her the meticulous ritual of manners that they had all of them been brought up to know; and it was the greatest of his many victories over her that sometimes, now, *she* was the aggressor, *she* would be the first to depart from the formal behavior prescribed for Citizens.

Depravity! Perversion!

Sometimes they would touch each other at times which were not the appropriate coming-together times, Gala sitting on her husband's lap in the late evening, perhaps, or Tropile kissing her awake in the morning. Sometimes he would force her to let him watch her dress—no, not now, for the cold of the waning sun made that sort of frolic unattractive, but she had permitted it before; and such was his mastery over her that he knew she would permit it again, when the Sun was re-created....

If, a thought came to him, *if* the Sun was re-created.

He turned away from the cold outside and looked at his wife. "Good morning, darling." She was contrite.

He demanded jarringly: "Is it?" Deliberately he stretched, deliberately he yawned, deliberately he scratched his chest. Every movement was ugly. Gala Tropile quivered, but said nothing.

Tropile flung himself on the better of the two chairs, one hairy leg protruding from under the wrapped blankets. His wife was on her best behavior—in his unique terms; she didn't avert her eyes.

"What've you got there?" he asked. "Coffee?"

"Yes, dear. I thought—"

"Where'd you get it?"

The haunted eyes looked away. Still better, thought Glenn Tropile, more satisfied even than usual; she's been ransacking an old warehouse again. It was a trick he had taught her, and like all of the illicit tricks she had learned from him, a handy weapon when he chose to use it.

It was not prescribed that a Citizen should rummage through Old Places. A Citizen did his work, whatever that work might be—banker, baker or furniture repairman. He received what rewards were his due for the work he did. A Citizen *never* took anything that was not his due—not even if it lay abandoned and rotting.

It was one of the differences between Glenn Tropile and the people he moved among.

I've got it made, he exulted; it was what I needed to clinch my victory over her.

He spoke: "I need you more than I need coffee, Gala."

She looked up, troubled.

"What would I do," he demanded, "if a beam fell on you one day while you were scrambling through the fancy groceries? How can you take such chances? Don't you *know* what you mean to me?"

She sniffed a couple of times. She said brokenly: "Darling, about last night—I'm sorry—" and miserably held out the cup. He took it and set it down. He took her hand, looked up at her, and kissed it lingeringly. He felt her tremble. Then she gave him a wild, adoring look and flung herself into his arms.

A new dominance cycle was begun at the moment he returned her frantic kisses.

Glenn knew, and Gala knew, that he had over her an edge, an advantage—the weather gauge, initiative of fire, percentage, the can't-lose lack of tension. Call it anything, but it was life itself to such as Glenn Tropile. He knew, and she knew, that having the advantage he would press it and she would yield—on and on, in a rising spiral.

He did it because it was his life, the attaining of an advantage over anyone he might encounter; because he was (unwelcomely but justly) called a Son of the Wolf.

A world away, a Pyramid squatted sullenly on the planed-off top of the highest peak of the Himalayas.

It had not been built there. It had not been carried there by Man or Man's machines. It had—come, in its own time; for its own reasons.

Did it wake on that day, the thing atop Mount Everest, or did it ever sleep? Nobody knew. It stood, or sat, there, approximately a tetrahedron. Its appearance was known: constructed on a base line of some thirty-five yards, slaggy, midnight-blue in color. Almost nothing else about it was known—at least, to mankind.

It was the only one of its kind on Earth, though men thought (without much sure knowledge) that there were more, perhaps many thousands more, like it on the unfamiliar planet that was Earth's binary, swinging around the miniature Sun that hung at their common center of gravity like an unbalanced dumbbell. But men knew

very little about that planet itself, only that it had come out of space and was now there.

Time was when men had tried to label that binary, more than two centuries before, when it had first appeared. "Runaway Planet." "The Invader." "Rejoice in Messiah, the Day Is at Hand." The labels were sense-free; they were Xs in an equation, signifying only that there was *something* there which was unknown.

"The Runaway Planet" stopped running when it closed on Earth.

"The Invader" didn't invade; it merely sent down one slaggy, midnight-blue tetrahedron to Everest.

And "Rejoice in Messiah" stole Earth from its sun—with Earth's old moon, which it converted into a miniature sun of its own.

That was the time when men were plentiful and strong—or thought they were—with many huge cities and countless powerful machines. It didn't matter. The new binary planet showed no interest in the cities or the machines.

There was a plague of things like Eyes—dust-devils without dust, motionless air that suddenly tensed and quivered into lenticular shapes. They came with the planet and the Pyramid, so that there probably was some connection. But there was nothing to do about the Eyes. Striking at them was like striking at air—was the same thing, in fact.

While the men and machines tried uselessly to do something about it, the new binary system—the stranger planet and Earth—began to move, accelerating very slowly.

But accelerating.

In a week, astronomers knew something was happening. In a month, the Moon sprang into flame and became a new sun—beginning to be needed, for already the parent Sol was visibly more distant, and in a few years it was only one other star among many.

When the little sun was burned to a clinker, they—whoever "they" were, for men saw only the one Pyramid—would hang a new one in the sky. It happened every five clock-years, more or less. It was the same old moon-turned-sun, but it burned out, and the fires needed to be rekindled.

The first of these suns had looked down on an Earthly population of ten billion. As the sequence of suns waxed and waned, there were changes, climatic fluctuation, all but immeasurable differences in the quantity and kind of radiation from the new source.

The changes were such that the forty-fifth such sun looked down on a shrinking human race that could not muster up a hundred million.

A frustrated man drives inward; it is the same with a race. The hundred million that clung to existence were not the same as the bold, vital ten billion.

The thing on Everest had, in its time, received many labels, too: The Devil, The Friend, The Beast, A Pseudo-living Entity of Quite Unknown Electrochemical Properties.

All these labels were also Xs.

If it did wake that morning, it did not open its eyes, for it had no eyes—apart from the quivers of air that might or might not belong to it. Eyes might have been gouged; therefore it had none. So an illogical person might have argued—and yet it was tempting to apply the "purpose, not function" fallacy to it. Limbs could be crushed; it had no limbs. Ears could be deafened; it had none. Through a mouth, it might be poisoned; it had no mouth. Intentions and actions could be frustrated; apparently it had neither.

It was there. That was all.

It and others like it had stolen the Earth and the Earth did not know why. It was there. And the one thing on Earth you could not do was hurt it, influence it, or coerce it in any way whatever.

It was there—and it, or the masters it represented, owned the Earth by right of theft. Utterly. Beyond human hope of challenge or redress.

II

Citizen and Citizeness Roget Germyn walked down Pine Street in the chill and dusk of—one hoped—a Sun Re-creation Morning.

It was the convention to pretend that this was a morning like any other morning. It was not proper either to cast frequent hopeful glances at the sky, nor yet to seem disturbed or afraid because this was, after all, the forty-first such morning since those whose specialty was Sky Viewing had come to believe the Re-creation of the Sun was near.

The Citizen and his Citizeness exchanged the assurance-of-identity sign with a few old friends and stopped to converse. This also was a convention of skill divorced from purpose. The conversation was without relevance to anything that any one of the participants might know, or think, or wish to ask.

Germyn said for his friends a twenty-word poem he had made in honor of the occasion and heard their responses. They did line-capping for a while—until somebody indicated unhappiness and a wish to change by frowning the Two Grooves between his brows. The game was deftly ended with an improvised rhymed exchange.

Casually, Citizen Germyn glanced aloft. The sky-change had not begun yet; the dying old Sun hung just over the horizon, east and south, much more south than east. It was an ugly thought, but suppose, thought Germyn, just *suppose* that the Sun were not re-created today? Or tomorrow. Or—

Or ever.

The Citizen got a grip on himself and told his wife: "We shall dine at the oatmeal stall."

The Citizeness did not immediately reply. When Germyn glanced at her with well-masked surprise, he found her almost staring down the dim street at a Citizen who moved almost in a stride, almost swinging his arms. Scarcely graceful.

"That might be more Wolf than man," she said doubtfully.

Germyn knew the fellow. Tropile was his name. One of those curious few who made their homes outside of Wheeling, though they were not farmers. Germyn had had banking dealings with him—or would have had, if it had been up to Tropile.

"That is a careless man," he decided, "and an ill-bred one."

They moved toward the oatmeal stall with the gait of Citizens, arms limp, feet scarcely lifted, slumped forward a little. It was the ancient gait of fifteen hundred calories per day, not one of which could be squandered.

There was a need for more calories. So many for walking, so many for gathering food. So many for the economical pleasures of the Citizens, so many more—oh, many more, these days!—to keep out the cold. Yet there were no more calories; the diet the whole world lived on was a bare subsistence diet.

It was impossible to farm well when half the world's land was part of the time drowned in the rising sea, part of the time smothered in falling snow.

Citizens knew this and, knowing, did not struggle—it was ungraceful to struggle, particularly when one could not win. Only—well, Wolves struggled, wasting calories, lacking grace.

Citizen Germyn turned his mind to more pleasant things.

He allowed himself his First Foretaste of the oatmeal. It would be warm in the bowl, hot in the throat, a comfort in the belly. There was a great deal of pleasure there, in weather like this, when the cold plucked through the loosened seams and the wind came up the sides of the hills. Not that there wasn't pleasure in the cold itself, for that matter. It was proper that one should be cold now, just before the re-creation of the Sun, when the old Sun was smoky-red and the new one not yet kindled.

"—still looks like Wolf to me," his wife was muttering.

"Cadence," Germyn reproved his Citizeness, but took the sting out of it with a Quirked Smile.

The man with the ugly manners was standing at the very bar of the oatmeal stall where they were heading. In the gloom of mid-morning, he was all angles and strained lines. His head was turned awkwardly on his shoulder, peering toward the back of the stall where the vendor was rhythmically measuring grain into a pot. His hands were resting helter-skelter on the counter, not hanging by his sides.

Citizen Germyn felt a faint shudder from his wife. But he did not reprove her again, for who could blame her? The exhibition was revolting.

She said faintly: "Citizen, might we dine on bread this morning?"

He hesitated and glanced again at the ugly man. He said indulgently, knowing that he was indulgent: "On Sun Re-creation Morning, the Citizeness may dine on bread." Bearing in mind the occasion, it was only a small favor and therefore a very proper one.

The bread was good, very good. They shared out the half-kilo between them and ate it in silence, as it deserved. Germyn finished his first portion and, in the prescribed pause before beginning his second, elected to refresh his eyes upward.

He nodded to his wife and stepped outside.

Overhead, the Old Sun parceled out its last barrel-scrapings of heat. It was larger than the stars around it, but many of them were nearly as bright.

A high-pitched male voice said: "Citizen Germyn, good morning."

Germyn was caught off balance. He took his eyes off the sky, half turned, glanced at the face of the person who had spoken to him, raised his hand in the assurance-of-identity sign. It was all very quick and fluid—almost too quick, for he had had his fingers bent nearly into the sign for female friends and this was a man. Citizen Boyne. Germyn knew him well; they had shared the Ice Viewing at Niagara a year before.

Germyn recovered quickly enough, but it had been disconcerting.

He improvised swiftly: "There are stars, but are stars still there if there is no Sun?" It was a hurried effort, he grieved, but no doubt Boyne would pick it up and carry it along. Boyne had always been very good, very graceful.

Boyne did no such thing. "Good morning," he said again, faintly. He glanced at the stars overhead, as though trying to unravel what Germyn was talking about. He said accusingly, his voice cracking sharply: "There isn't any Sun, Germyn. What do you think of that?"

Germyn swallowed. "Citizen, perhaps you—"

"No Sun, you hear me!" the man sobbed. "It's cold, Germyn. The Pyramids aren't going to give us another Sun, do you know that? They're going to starve us, freeze us; they're through with us. We're done, all of us!" He was nearly screaming.

All up and down Pine Street, people were trying not to look at him and some of them were failing.

Boyne clutched at Germyn helplessly. Revolted, Germyn drew back—*bodily contact!*

It seemed to bring the man to his senses. Reason returned to his eyes. He said: "I—" He stopped, stared about him. "I think I'll have bread for breakfast," he said foolishly, and plunged into the stall.

Boyne left behind him a shaken Citizen, caught halfway into the wrist-flip of parting, staring after him with jaw slack and eyes wide, as though Germyn had no manners, either.

All this on Sun Re-creation Day!

What could it mean? Germyn wondered fretfully, worriedly.

Was Boyne on the point of—

Could Boyne be about to—

Germyn drew back from the thought. There was one thing that might explain Boyne's behavior. But it was not a proper speculation for one Citizen to make about another.

All the same—Germyn dared the thought—all the same, it *did* seem almost as though Citizen Boyne were on the point of—well, running amok.

At the oatmeal stall, Glenn Tropile thumped on the counter. The laggard oatmeal vendor finally brought the ritual bowl of salt and the pitcher of thin milk. Tropile

took his paper twist of salt from the top of the neatly arranged pile in the bowl. He glanced at the vendor. His fingers hesitated. Then, quickly, he ripped the twist of paper into his oatmeal and covered it to the permitted level with the milk.

He ate quickly and efficiently, watching the street outside.

They were wandering and mooning about, as always—maybe today more than most days, since they hoped it would be the day the Sun blossomed flame once more.

Tropile always thought of the wandering, mooning Citizens as *they*. There was a *we* somewhere for Tropile, no doubt, but Tropile had not as yet located it, not even in the bonds of the marriage contract.

He was in no hurry. At the age of fourteen, Glenn Tropile had reluctantly come to realize certain things about himself—that he disliked being bested, that he had to have a certain advantage in all his dealings, or an intolerable itch of the mind drove him to discomfort. The things added up to a terrifying fear, gradually becoming knowledge, that the only *we* that could properly include him was one that it was not very wise to join.

He had realized, in fact, that he was a Wolf.

For some years, Tropile had struggled against it, for Wolf was an obscene word; the children he played with were punished severely for saying it, and for almost nothing else.

It was not *proper* for one Citizen to advantage himself at the expense of another; Wolves did that.

It was *proper* for a Citizen to accept what he had, not to strive for more, to find beauty in small things, to accommodate himself, with the minimum of strain and awkwardness, to whatever his life happened to be.

Wolves were not like that. Wolves never meditated, Wolves never Appreciated, Wolves *never* were Translated—that supreme fulfillment, granted only to those who succeeded in a perfect meditation, that surrender of the world and the flesh by taking leave of both, which could never be achieved by a Wolf.

Accordingly, Glenn Tropile had tried very hard to do all the things that Wolves could not do.

He had nearly succeeded. His specialty, Water Watching, had been most rewarding. He had achieved many partly successful meditations on Connectivity.

And yet he was still a Wolf, for he still felt that burning, itching urge to triumph and to hold an advantage. For that reason, it was almost impossible for him to make friends among the Citizens; and gradually he had almost stopped trying.

Tropile had arrived in Wheeling nearly a year before, making him one of the early settlers in point of time. And yet there was not a Citizen in the street who was prepared to exchange recognition gestures with him.

He knew *them*, nearly every one. He knew their names and their wives' names. He knew what northern states they had moved down from with the spreading of the ice, as the sun grew dim. He knew very nearly to the quarter of a gram what stores of sugar and salt and coffee each one of them had put away—for their guests, of course, not for themselves; the well-bred Citizen hoarded only for the entertainment of others.

Tropile knew these things because there was an advantage in knowing them. But there was no advantage in having anyone know him.

A few did—that banker, Germyn; Tropile had approached him only a few months before about a prospective loan. But it had been a chancy, nervous encounter. The idea was so luminously simple to Tropile—organize an expedition to the coal mines that once had flourished nearby, find the coal, bring it to Wheeling, heat the houses. And yet it had seemed blasphemous to Germyn. Tropile had counted himself lucky merely to have been refused the loan, instead of being cried out upon as Wolf.

The oatmeal vendor was fussing worriedly around his neat stack of paper twists in the salt bowl.

Tropile avoided the man's eyes. Tropile was not interested in the little wry smile of self-deprecation which the vendor would make to him, given half a chance. Tropile knew well enough what was disturbing the vendor. Let it disturb him. It was Tropile's custom to take extra twists of salt. They were in his pockets now; they would stay there. Let the vendor wonder why he was short.

Tropile licked the bowl of his spoon and stepped into the street. He was comfortably aware under a double-thick parka that the wind was blowing very cold.

A Citizen passed him, walking alone: odd, thought Tropile. He was walking rapidly and there was a look of taut despair on his face. Still more odd. Odd enough to be worth another look, because that sort of haste, that sort of abstraction, suggested something to Tropile. They were in no way normal to the gentle sheep of the class *They*, except in one particular circumstance.

Glenn Tropile crossed the street to follow the abstracted Citizen, whose name, he knew, was Boyne. The man blundered into Citizen Germyn outside the baker's stall, and Tropile stood back out of easy sight, watching and listening.

Boyne was on the ragged edge of breakdown. What Tropile heard and saw confirmed his diagnosis. The one particular circumstance was close to happening—Citizen Boyne was on the verge of running amok.

Tropile looked at the man with amusement and contempt. Amok! The gentle sheep *could* be pushed too far. He had seen Citizens run amok, the signs were obvious.

There was pretty sure to be an advantage in it for Glenn Tropile. There was an advantage in almost anything, if you looked for it.

He watched and waited. He picked his spot with care, so that he could see Citizen Boyne inside the baker's stall, making a dismal botch of slashing his quarter-kilo of bread from the Morning Loaf.

He waited for Boyne to come racing out....

Boyne did.

A yell—loud, piercing. It was Citizen Germyn, shrilling: "Amok, amok!" A scream. An enraged wordless cry from Boyne, and the baker's knife glinting in the faint light as Boyne swung it. And then Citizens were scattering in every direction—all of the Citizens but one.

One Citizen was under the knife—his own knife, as it happened; it was the baker himself. Boyne chopped and chopped again. And then Boyne came out, roaring, the broad knife whistling about his head. The gentle Citizens fled panicked before him. He struck at their retreating forms and screamed and struck again. Amok.

It was the one particular circumstance when they forgot to be gracious—one of the two, Tropile corrected himself as he strolled across to the baker's stall. His brow furrowed, because there was another circumstance when they lacked grace, and one which affected him nearly.

He watched the maddened creature, Boyne, already far down the road, chasing a knot of Citizens around a corner. Tropile sighed and stepped into the baker's stall to see what he might gain from this.

Boyne would wear himself out—the surging rage would leave him as quickly as it came; he would be a sheep again and the other sheep would close in and capture him. That was what happened when a Citizen ran amok. It was a measure of what pressures were on the Citizens that, at any moment, there might be one gram of pressure too much and one of them would crack. It had happened here in Wheeling twice within the past two months. Glenn Tropile had seen it happen in Pittsburgh, Altoona and Bronxville.

There is a limit to the pressure that can be endured.

Tropile walked into the baker's stall and looked down without emotion at the slaughtered baker. The corpse was a gory mess, but Tropile had seen corpses before.

He looked around the stall, calculating. As a starter, he bent to pick up the quarter-kilo of bread Boyne had dropped, dusted it off and slipped it into his pocket. Food was always useful. Given enough food, perhaps Boyne would not have run amok.

Was it simple hunger they cracked under? Or the knowledge of the thing on Mount Everest, or the hovering Eyes, or the sought-after-dreaded prospect of Translation, or merely the strain of keeping up their laboriously figured lives?

Did it matter? *They* cracked and ran amok, and Tropile never would, and that was what mattered.

He leaned across the counter, reaching for what was left of the Morning Loaf—

And found himself staring into the terrified large eyes of Citizeness Germyn.

She screamed: "Wolf! Citizens, help me! Wolf!"

Tropile faltered. He hadn't even *seen* the damned woman, but there she was, rising up from behind the counter, screaming her head off: "Wolf! Wolf!"

He said sharply: "Citizeness, I beg you—" But that was no good. The evidence was on him and her screams would fetch others.

Tropile panicked. He started toward her to silence her, but that was no good, either. He whirled. She was screaming, screaming, and there were people to hear. Tropile darted into the street, but they were popping out of every doorway now, appearing from each rat's hole in which they had hid to escape Boyne.

"Please!" he cried, sobbing. "Wait a minute!"

But they weren't waiting. They had heard the woman and maybe some of them had seen him with the bread. They were all around him—no, they were all over him; they were clutching at him, tearing at his soft, warm furs.

They pulled at his pockets and the stolen twists of salt spilled accusingly out. They yanked at his sleeves and even the stout, unweakened seams ripped open. He was fairly captured.

"Wolf!" they were shouting. "Wolf!" It drowned out the distant noise from where Boyne had finally been run to earth, a block and more away. It drowned out everything.

It was the other circumstance when *they* forgot to be gracious: when they had trapped a Son of the Wolf.

III

Engineering had long ago come to an end.

Engineering is possible under one condition of the equation: Total available Calories divided by Population equals Artistic-Technological Style. When the ratio Calories-to-Population is large—say, five thousand or more, five thousand daily calories for every living person—then the Artistic-Technological Style is *big*. People carve Mount Rushmore; they build great foundries; they manufacture enormous automobiles to carry one housewife half a mile for the purchase of one lipstick.

Life is coarse and rich where C:P is large. At the other extreme, where C:P is too small, life does not exist at all. It has starved out.

Experimentally, add little increments to C:P and it will be some time before the right-hand side of the equation becomes significant. But at last, in the 1,000 to 1,500 calorie range, Artistic-Technological Style firmly appears in self-perpetuating form. C:P in that range produces the small arts, the appreciations, the peaceful arrangements of necessities into subtle relationships of traditionally agreed-upon virtue.

Think of Japan, locked into its Shogunate prison, with a hungry population scrabbling food out of mountainsides and beauty out of arrangements of lichens. The small, inexpensive sub-sub-arts are characteristic of the 1,000 to 1,500 calorie range.

And this was the range of Earth, the world of ten billion men, when the planet was stolen by its new binary.

Some few persons inexpensively studied the study of science with pencil and renewable paper, but the last research accelerator had long since been shut down. The juice from its hydro-power dam was needed to supply meager light to a million homes and to cook the pablum for two million brand-new babies.

In those days, one dedicated Byzantine wrote the definitive encyclopedia of engineering (though he was no engineer). Its four hundred and twenty tiny volumes examined exhaustively the engineering feats of ancient Greece and Egypt, the Wall of Shih-Hwang Ti, the Gothic builders, Brunel who changed the face of England, the Roeblings of Brooklyn, Groves of the Pentagon, Duggan of the Shelter System (before C:P dropped to the point where war became vanishingly implausible), Leveron of Operation Up. But the encyclopedist could not use a slide rule without thinking, faltering, jotting down his decimals.

And then ... the magnitudes grew less.

Under the tectonic and climatic battering of the great abduction of Earth from its primary, under the sine-wave advances to and retreats from the equator of the ice sheath, as the small successor Suns waxed, waned, died and were replaced, the ratio C:P remained stable. C had diminished enormously; so had P. As the calories to support life grew scarce, so the consuming mouths of mankind grew less in number.

The forty-fifth small Sun shone on no engineers.

Not even on the binary, perhaps. The Pyramids, the things on the binary, the thing on Mount Everest—they were not engineers. They employed a crude metaphysic based on dissection and shoving.

They had no elegant field theories. All they knew was that everything came apart, and that if you pushed a thing, it would move.

If your biggest push would not move a thing, you took it apart and pushed the parts, and then it would move. Sometimes, for nuclear effects, they had to take things apart into 3×10^9 pieces and shove each piece very carefully.

By taking apart and shoving, then, they landed their one spaceship on the burned-out sunlet. Four human beings were on that ship. They meditated briefly on Connectivity and died screaming.

A point of new flame appeared on the sunlet's surface and the spaceship scrambled for the binary. The point of flame went from cherry through orange into the blue-white and began to spread.

At the moment of the Re-creation of the Sun, there was rejoicing on the Earth.

Not quite everywhere, though. In Wheeling's House of the Five Regulations, Glenn Tropile waited unquietly for death. Citizen Boyne, who had run amok and slaughtered the baker, shared Tropile's room and his doom, but not his rage. Boyne, with demure pleasure, was composing his death poem.

"Talk to me!" snapped Tropile. "Why are we here? What did you do and why did you do it? What have I done? Why don't I pick up a bench and kill you with it? You would've killed me two hours ago if I'd caught your eye!"

There was no satisfaction in Citizen Boyne; the passions were burned out of him. He politely tendered Tropile a famous aphorism: "Citizen, the art of living is the substitution of unimportant, answerable questions for important, unanswerable ones. Come, let us appreciate the new-born Sun."

He turned to the window, where the spark of blue-white flame in what had once been the crater of Tycho was beginning to spread across the charred moon.

Tropile was child enough of his culture to turn with him, almost involuntarily. He was silent. That blue-white infinitesimal up there growing slowly—the oneness, the calm rapture of Being in a universe that you shaded into without harsh discontinua, the being one with the great blue-white gem-flower blossoming now in the heavens that were no different stuff than you yourself—

He closed his eyes, calm, and meditated on Connectivity.

He was being Good.

By the time the fusion reaction had covered the whole small disk of the sunlet, a quarter-hour at the most, his meditation began to wear off.

Tropile shrugged out of his torn parka, not bothering to rip it further. It was already growing warm in the room. Citizen Boyne, of course, was carefully opening every seam with graceful rending motions, miming great and smooth effort of the biceps and trapezius.

But the meditation was over, and as Tropile watched his cellmate, he screamed a silent *Why?* Since his adolescence, that wailing syllable had seldom been far from his mind. It could be silenced by appreciation and meditation.

Tropile's specialty was Water Watching and he was so good at it that several beginners had asked him for instruction in the subtle art, in spite of his notorious oddities of life and manner. He *enjoyed* Water Watching. He almost pitied anybody so single-mindedly devoted to, say, Clouds and Odors—great game though it was—that he had never even tried Water Watching. And after a session of Watching, when one was lucky enough to observe the Nine Boiling Stages in classic perfection, one might slip into meditation and be harmonious, feel Good.

But what did one do when the meditations failed, as they had failed him? What did one do when they came farther and farther apart, became less and less intense, could be inspired, finally, only by a huge event like the renewal of the Sun?

One went amok, he had always thought.

But he had not. Boyne had. He had been declared a Son of the Wolf, on no evidence that he could understand. Yet he had not run amok.

Still, the penalties were the same, he thought, uncomfortably aware of an unfamiliar itch—not the inward intolerable itch of needing the advantage, but a localized sensation at the base of his spine. The penalties for all gross crimes—Wolfhood or running amok—were the same, and simply this:

They would perform the Lumbar Puncture. He would make the Donation of Spinal Fluid.

He would be dead.

The Keeper of the House of Five Regulations, an old man, Citizen Harmane, looked in on his charges—approvingly at Boyne, with a beclouded expression at Glenn Tropile.

It was thought that even Wolves were entitled to the common human decencies in the brief interval between exposure and the Donation of Fluid. The Keeper would not have dreamed of scowling at the detected Wolf or of interfering with whatever wretched imitation of meditation-before-dying the creature might practice. But he could not, all the same, bring himself to offer even an assurance-of-identity gesture.

Tropile had no such qualms.

He scowled at Keeper Harmane with such ferocity that the old man almost hurried away. He turned an almost equally ugly scowl upon Citizen Boyne. How dared that knife-murderer be so calm, so relaxed!

Tropile said brutally: "They'll kill us! You know that? They'll stick a needle in our spines and drain us dry. It *hurts*. Do you understand me? They're going to drain us, and then they're going to drink our spinal fluid, and it's going to *hurt*."

He was gently corrected. "We shall make the Donation," Citizen Boyne said calmly. "Is not the difference intelligible to a Son of the Wolf?"

True culture demanded that that remark be accepted as a friendly joke, probably based on a truth—how else could an unpalatable truth be put in words? Otherwise the unthinkable might happen. They might quarrel. They might even come to blows!

The appropriate mild smile formed on Tropile's lips, but harshly he wiped it off. They were going to *kill* him. He would *not* smile for them! And the effort was enormous.

"I'm *not* a Son of the Wolf!" he howled, desperate, knowing he was protesting to the man of all men in Wheeling who didn't care, and who could do least about it if he did. "What's this crazy talk about Wolves? I don't know what a Son of the Wolf is and I don't think you or anybody does. All I know is that I was acting *sensibly*. And everybody began howling! You're supposed to know a Son of the Wolf by his unculture, his ignorance, his violence. But you chopped down three people and I only picked up a piece of bread! And *I'm* supposed to be the dangerous one!"

"Wolves never know they're Wolves," sighed Citizen Boyne. "Fish probably think they're birds and you evidently think you're a Citizen. Would a Citizen speak as you are speaking?"

"But they're going to kill us!"

"Then why aren't you composing your death poem?"

Glenn Tropile took a deep breath. Something was biting him. It was bad enough that he was about to die, bad enough that he had done nothing worth dying for. But what was gnawing at him now had nothing to do with dying.

The percentages were going the wrong way. This pale Citizen was getting an edge on him.

An engorged gland in Tropile's adrenals—it was only a pinhead in Citizen Boyne's—gushed raw hormones into his bloodstream. He could die, yes—that was a skill everyone had to acquire, sooner or later. But while he was alive, he could not stand to be bested in an encounter, an argument, a relationship—not and stay alive. Wolf? Call him Wolf. Call him Operator, or Percentage Player; call him Sharp Article; call him Gamesman.

If there was an advantage to be derived, he would derive it. It was the way he was put together.

He said, for time: "You're right. Stupid of me. I must have lost my head!"

He thought. Some men think by poking problems apart; some think by laying facts side by side to compare. Tropile's thinking was neither of these, but a species of judo. He conceded to his opponent such things as Strength, Armor, Resource. He didn't need these things for himself; to every contest, the opponent brought enough of them to supply two. It was Tropile's habit (and Wolfish, he had to admit) to use the opponent's strength against him, to break the opponent against his own steel walls.

He thought.

The first thing was to make up his mind: He was Wolf. Then let him *be* Wolf. He wouldn't stay around for the spinal tap; he would go from there. But how?

The second thing was to plan. There were obstacles. Citizen Boyne was one. The Keeper of the House of the Five Regulations was another.

Where was the pole which would permit him to vault over these hurdles? There was always his wife, Gala. He owned her; she would do what he wished—provided he made her *want* to do it.

Yes, Gala. He walked to the door and shouted to Citizen Harmane: "Keeper! I must see my wife! Have her brought to me!"

It was impossible for the Keeper to refuse. He called gently, "I will invite the Citizeness," and toddled away.

The third thing was time.

Tropile turned to Citizen Boyne. "Citizen," he said persuasively, "since your death poem is ready and mine is not, will you be gracious enough to go first when they—when they come?"

Citizen Boyne looked temperately at his cellmate and made the Quirked Smile.

"You see?" he said. "Wolf."

And that was true. But what was also true was that Boyne couldn't and didn't refuse.

IV

Half a world away, the midnight-blue Pyramid sat on its planed-off peak as it had sat since the days when Earth had a real sun of its own.

It was of no importance to the Pyramid that Glenn Tropile was about to receive a slim catheter into his spine, to drain his saps and his life. It didn't matter to the Pyramid that the pretext for the execution was an act which human history had long stopped considering a capital crime. Ritual sacrifice in any guise made no difference to the Pyramid.

The Pyramid saw them come and the Pyramid saw them go—if the Pyramid could be said to "see." One human being more or less, what matter? Who bothers to take a census of the cells in a hangnail?

And yet the Pyramid did have a kind of interest in Glenn Tropile. Or, at least, in the human race of which he was a part.

Nobody knew much about the Pyramids, but everybody knew *that* much. They wanted something—else why would they have bothered to steal the Earth?

The date of the theft was 2027. A great year—the year of the first landings on the Runaway Planet that had come blundering into the Solar System. Maybe those landings were a mistake—although they were a very great triumph, too; but maybe if it hadn't been for the landings, the Runaway Planet might have run right through the ecliptic and away.

However, the triumphal mistake was made and that was the first time a human eye saw a Pyramid.

Shortly after—though not before a radio message was sent—that human eye winked out forever; but by then the damage was done. What passed in a Pyramid for "attention" had been attracted. The next thing that happened set the wireless channels between Palomar and Pernambuco, between Greenwich and the Cape of Good Hope, buzzing and worrying, as astronomers all over the Earth reported and confirmed and reconfirmed the astonishing fact that our planet was on the move. Rejoice in Messiah had come to take us away.

A world of ten billion people, some of them brilliant, many of them brave, built and flung the giant rockets of Operation Up at the invader: Nothing.

The first, and only, Interplanetary Expeditionary Force was boosted up to no-gravity and dropped onto the new planet to strike back: Nothing.

Earth moved spirally outward.

If a battle could not be won, then perhaps a migration. New ships were built in haste. But they lay there rusting as the sun grew small and the ice grew thick, because where was there to go? Not Mars. Not the Moon, which was trailing alone. Not choking Venus or crushing Jupiter.

The migration was defeated as surely as the war, there being no place to migrate to.

One Pyramid came to Earth, only one. It shaved the crest off the highest mountain there was and squatted on it. An observer? A warden? Whatever it was, it stayed.

The sun grew too distant to be of use, and out of the old Moon, the Pyramid aliens built a new small sun in the sky—a five-year sun that burned out and was replaced, again and again and endlessly again.

It had been a fierce struggle against unbeatable odds on the part of the ten billion; and when the uselessness of struggle was demonstrated at last, many of the ten billion froze to death, and many of them starved, and nearly all of the rest had something frozen or starved out of them; and what was left, two centuries and more later, was more or less like Citizen Boyne, except for a few—a very few—like Glenn Tropile.

Gala Tropile stared miserably at her husband. "I want to get out of here," he was saying urgently. "They mean to kill me. Gala, you know you can't make yourself suffer by letting them kill me!"

She wailed: "I *can't*!"

Tropile looked over his shoulder. Citizen Boyne was fingering the textured contrasts of a golden watch-case which had been his father's—and soon would be his son's. Boyne's eyes were closed and he wasn't listening.

Tropile leaned forward and deliberately put his hand on his wife's arm. She started and flushed, of course.

"You *can*," he said, "and what's more, you will. You can help me get out of here. I insist on it, Gala, because I must save you that pain."

He took his hand off her arm, content.

He said harshly: "Darling, don't you think I know how much we've always meant to each other?"

She looked at him wretchedly. Fretfully she tore at the billowing filmy sleeve of her summer blouse. The seams hadn't been loosened; there had not been time. She had just been getting into the appropriate Sun Re-creation Day costume, to be worn under the parka, when the messenger had come with the news about her husband.

She avoided his eyes. "If you're really Wolf...."

Tropile's sub-adrenals pulsed and filled him with confident strength. "You know what I am—you better than anyone else." It was a sly reminder of their curious furtive behavior together; like the hand on her arm, it had its effect. "After all, why do we quarrel the way we did last night?"

He hurried on; the job of the rowel was to spur her to action, not to inflame a wound. "Because we're *important* to each other. I know that you would count on me to help if you were in trouble. And I know that you'd be hurt—*deeply*, Gala!—if I didn't count on you."

She sniffled and scuffed the bright strap over her open-toed sandal.

Then she met his eyes.

It was the after-effect of the argument, of course. Glenn Tropile knew just how heavily he could rely on the after-spiral of a quarrel. She was submitting.

She glanced furtively at Citizen Boyne and lowered her voice.

"What do I have to do?" she whispered.

In five minutes, she was gone, but that was more than enough time. Tropile had at least thirty minutes left. They would take Boyne first; he had seen to that. And once Boyne was gone—

Tropile wrenched a leg off his three-legged stool and sat precariously balanced on the other two. He tossed the loose leg clattering into a corner.

The Keeper of the House of Five Regulations ambled slack-bodied by and glanced into the room. "Wolf, what happened to your stool?"

Tropile made a left-handed sign of no-importance. "It doesn't matter. Except it is hard to meditate, sitting on this thing, with every muscle tensing and fighting against every other to keep my balance...."

The Keeper made an overruling sign of please-let-me-help. "It's your last half-hour, Wolf," he reminded Tropile. "I'll fix the stool for you."

He entered and slammed and banged it together, and left with an expression of mild concern. Even a Son of the Wolf was entitled to the fullest appreciation of that unique opportunity for meditation, the last half-hour before a Donation.

In five minutes, the Keeper was back, looking solemn and yet glad, like a bearer of serious but welcome tidings.

"It is the time for the first Donation," he announced. "Which of you—"

"Him," said Tropile quickly, pointing.

Boyne opened his eyes calmly and nodded. He got to his feet, made a formal leavetaking bow to Tropile, and followed the Keeper toward his Donation and his

death. As they were going out, Tropile coughed a would-you-please-grant-me-a-favor cough.

The Keeper paused. "What is it, Wolf?"

Tropile showed him the empty water pitcher—empty, all right; he had emptied it out the window.

"My apologies," the Keeper said, flustered, and hurried Boyne along. He came back almost at once to fill the pitcher, even though he should be there to watch Boyne's ceremonial Donation.

Tropile stood looking at the Keeper, his sub-adrenals beginning to pound like the rolling boil of Well-aged Water. The Keeper was at a disadvantage. He had been neglectful of his charge—a broken stool, no water in the pitcher. And a Citizen, brought up in a Citizen's maze of consideration and tact, could not help but be humiliated, seeking to make amends.

Tropile pressed his advantage home. "Wait," he said to the Keeper. "I'd like to talk to you."

The Keeper hesitated, torn. "The Donation—"

"Damn the Donation," Tropile said calmly. "After all, what is it but sticking a pipe into a man's backbone and sucking out the juice that keeps him alive? It's killing, that's all."

The Keeper turned literally white. Tropile was speaking blasphemy and he wasn't stopping.

"I want to tell you about my wife," Tropile went on, assuming a confidential air. "Now there's a real *woman*. Not one of these frozen-up Citizenesses, you know? Why, she and I used to—" He hesitated. "You're a man of the world, aren't you?" he demanded. "I mean you've seen life."

"I—suppose so," the Keeper said faintly.

"Then you won't be shocked," Tropile lied. "Well, let me tell you, there's a lot to women that these stuffed-shirt Citizens don't know about. Boy! Ever see a woman's knee?" He sniggered. "Ever kiss a woman with—" he winked—"with the *light on*? Ever sit in a big armchair, say, with a woman in your *lap*—all soft and heavy, and kind of warm, and slumped up against your chest, you know, and—"

He stopped and swallowed. He was almost making himself retch, it was so hard to say these things. But he forced himself to go on: "Well, that's what she and I used to do. Plenty. All the time. That's what I call a real *woman*."

He stopped, warned by the Keeper's sudden change of expression, glazed eyes, strangling breath. He had gone too far. He had only wanted to paralyze the man, revolt him, put him out of commission, but he was overdoing it. He jumped forward and caught the Keeper as he fell, fainting.

Tropile callously emptied the water pitcher over the man. The Keeper sneezed and sat up groggily. He focused his eyes on Tropile and agonizedly blushed.

Tropile said harshly: "I wish to see the new sun from the street."

The request was incredible. Even after the unbelievable obscenities he had heard, the Keeper was not prepared for this; he was staggered. Tropile was in detention regarding the Fifth Regulation. That was all there was to it. Such persons were not to be released from their quarters. The Keeper knew it, the world knew it, Tropile knew it.

It was an obscenity even greater than the lurid tales of perverted lust, for Tropile had asked something which was impossible! No one *ever* asked anything that was impossible to grant, for no one could ever refuse anything. That was utterly graceless, unthinkable.

One could only attempt to compromise. The Keeper stammeringly said: "May I—may I let you see the new sun from the corridor?" And even that was wretchedly wrong, but he had to offer something. One always offered something. The Keeper had never since babyhood given a flat no to anybody about anything. No Citizen had. A flat no led to anger, strong words—perhaps even hurt feelings. The only flat no conceivable was the enormous terminal no of an amok. Short of that—

One offered. One split the difference. One was invariably filled with tepid pleasure when, invariably, the offer was accepted, the difference was split, both parties were satisfied.

"That will do for a start," Tropile snarled. "Open, man, open! Don't make me wait."

The Keeper reeled and unlatched the door to the corridor.

"Now the street!"

"I can't!" burst in an anguished cry from the Keeper. He buried his face in his hands and began to sob, hopelessly incapacitated.

"The street!" Tropile said remorselessly. He himself felt wrenchingly ill; he was going against custom that had ruled his own life as surely as the Keeper's.

But he was Wolf. "I *will* be Wolf," he growled, and advanced upon the Keeper. "My wife," he said, "I didn't finish telling you. Sometimes she used to put her arm around me and just snuggle up and—I remember one time she kissed my ear. Broad daylight. It felt funny and warm—I can't describe it."

Whimpering, the Keeper flung the keys at Tropile and tottered brokenly away.

He was out of the action. Tropile himself was nearly as badly off; the difference was that he continued to function. The words coming from him had seared like acid in his throat.

"They call me Wolf," he said aloud, reeling against the wall. "I will be one."

He unlocked the outer door and his wife was waiting, holding in her arms the things he had asked her to bring.

Tropile said strangely to her: "I am steel and fire. I am Wolf, full of the old moxie."

She wailed: "Glenn, are you sure I'm doing the right thing?"

He laughed unsteadily and led her by the arm through the deserted streets.

Citizen Germyn, as was his right by position and status as a connoisseur, helped prepare Citizen Boyne for his Donation. There was nothing much to it—which made it an elaborate and lengthy task, according to the ethic of the Citizens; it had to be protracted, each step being surrounded by fullest dress of ritual.

It was done in the broad daylight of the new Sun, and as many of the three hundred citizens of Wheeling as could manage it were in the courtyard of the old Federal Building to watch.

The nature of the ceremony was this: A man who revealed himself Wolf, or who finally crumbled under the demands of life and ran amok, could not be allowed to live. He was hauled before an audience of his equals and permitted—with the help of regretful force, if that should be necessary, but preferably not—to make the Donation of Spinal Fluid.

Execution was murder and murder was not permitted under the gentle code of Citizens; this was not execution. The draining of a man's spinal fluid did not kill him. It only insured that, after a time and with much suffering, his internal chemistry would so arrange itself that it would continue to function, only not in a way that would sustain life.

Once the Donation was made, the problem was completely altered, of course. Suffering was bad in itself. To save the Donor from the suffering that lay ahead, it was the custom to have the oldest and gentlest Citizen on hand stand by with a sharp-edged knife. When the Donation was complete, the Donor's head was removed—purely to avert suffering. That was not execution, either, but only the hastening of an inevitable end.

The dozen or so Citizens whose rank permitted them to assist then dissolved the spinal fluids in water and ceremoniously sipped them, at which time it was proper to offer a small poem in commentary. All in all, it was a perfectly splendid opportunity for the purest form of meditation for everyone concerned.

Citizen Germyn, whose role was Catheter Bearer, took his place behind the Introducer Bearer, the Annunciators and the Questioner of Purpose. As he passed Citizen Boyne, Germyn assisted him to assume the proper crouched-over position. Boyne looked up gratefully and Germyn found the occasion correct for a commendatory half-smile.

The Questioner of Purpose said solemnly to Boyne: "It is your privilege to make a Donation here today. Do you wish to do so?"

"I do," said Boyne raptly. The anxiety had passed; clearly he was confident of making a good Donation. Germyn approved with all his heart.

The Annunciators, in alternate stanzas, announced the right pause for meditation to the meager crowd, and all fell silent. Citizen Germyn began the process of blanking out his mind, to ready himself for the great opportunity to Appreciate that lay ahead. A sound distracted him; he glanced up irritably. It seemed to come from the House of the Five Regulations, a man's voice, carrying. But no one else appeared to notice it. All of the watchers, all of those on the stone steps, were in somber meditation.

Germyn tried to return his thoughts to where they belonged.

But something was troubling him. He had caught a glimpse of the Donor and there had been something—something—

He angrily permitted himself to look up once more to see just what it had been about Citizen Boyne that had attracted his attention.

Yes, there *was* something. Over the form of Citizen Boyne, silent, barely visible, a flicker of life and motion. Nothing tangible. It was as if the air itself were in motion.

It was, Germyn thought with a bursting heart—it was an Eye!

The veritable miracle of Translation and it was about to take place here and now, upon the person of Citizen Boyne! And no one knew it but Germyn himself!

In this last surmise, Citizen Germyn was wrong. Or was he? True, no other human eyes saw the flawed-glass thing that twisted the air over Boyne's prostrate body, but there was, in a sense, another witness ... some thousands of miles away.

The Pyramid on Mount Everest "stirred."

It did not move, but something about it moved, or changed, or radiated. The Pyramid surveyed its—cabbage patch? Wristwatch mine? As much sense, it may be, to say wristwatch patch or cabbage mine. At any rate, it surveyed what to it was a place where intricate mechanisms grew, ripened and were dug up at the moment of usefulness, whereupon they were quick-frozen and wired into circuits.

Through signals perceptible to it, the Pyramids had become "aware" that one of its mechanisms was now ready to be plucked—harvested.

The Pyramid's blood was dielectric fluid. Its limbs were electrostatic charges. Its philosophy was: Unscrew It and Push. Its motive was survival.

Survival today was not what survival once had been, for a Pyramid.

Once survival had merely been gliding along on a cushion of repellent charges, streaming electrons behind for the push, sending h-f pulses out often enough to get a picture of their bounced return to integrate deep inside.

If the picture showed something metabolizable, one metabolized it. One broke it down into molecules by lashing it with the surplus protons left over from the dispersed electrons; one adsorbed the molecules. Sometimes the metabolizable object was an Immobile and sometimes a Mobile—a vague, theoretical, frivolous classification to a philosophy whose basis was that *everything* unscrewed. If it was a Mobile, one sometimes had to move after it.

That was the difference.

The essential was survival, not making idle distinctions. And one small part of survival today was the Everest Pyramid's job.

It sat and waited. It sent out its h-f pulses bouncing and scattering, and it bounced and scattered them additionally on their return. Deep inside, the more-than-anamorphically distorted picture was reintegrated. Deeper inside, it was interpreted and evaluated for its part in survival.

There was a need for certain mechanisms which grew on this planet. At irregular times, the Pyramid evaluated the picture to the effect that a mechanism—a wristwatch, so to speak—was ripe for plucking; and by electrostatic charges, it did so.

The electrostatic charges, in forming, produced what humans called an Eye. But the Pyramid had no use for names.

It merely plucked, when a mechanism was ripe. It had found that a mechanism was ripe now.

A world away, before the steps of Wheeling's Federal Building, electrostatic charges gathered above a component whose name was Citizen Boyne. There was a small sound like the clapping of two hands which made the three hundred citizens of Wheeling jerk upright out of their meditations.

The sound was air filling the gap that had once been occupied by Citizen Boyne, who had instantly vanished—who had, in a word, been ripe and therefore been plucked.

VI

Glenn Tropile and his sobbing wife passed the night in the stubble of a cornfield. Neither of them slept much.

Tropile, numbed by contact with the iron chill of the field—it would be months before the new Sun warmed the Earth enough for it to begin radiating in turn—tossed restlessly, dreaming. He was Wolf. Let it be so, he told himself again and again. *I will* be Wolf. I will strike back at the Citizens. I will—

Always the thought trailed off. He would exactly *What?* What could he do?

Migration was an answer—go to another city. With Gala, he guessed. Start a new life, where he was not known as Wolf.

And then what? Try to live a sheep's life, as he had tried all his years? And there was the question of whether, in fact, he could manage to find a city where he was not known. The human race was migratory, in these years of subjection to the never quite understood rule of the Pyramids.

It was a matter of insulation. When the new Sun was young, it was hot, and there was plenty of warmth; it was possible to spread north and south, away from final line of permafrost which, in North America, came just above the old Mason-Dixon line. When the Sun was dying, the cold spread down. The race followed the seasons. Soon all of Wheeling would be spreading north again, and how was he to be sure that none of Wheeling's Citizens might not turn up wherever he might go?

He could be sure—that was the answer to that.

All right, scratch migration. What remained? He could—with Gala, he guessed—live a solitary life on the fringes of cultivated land. They both had some skill at rummaging the old storehouses of the ancients, and there was still food and other commodities to be found.

But even a Wolf is gregarious by nature and there were bleak hours in that night when Tropile found himself close to sobbing with his wife.

At the first break of dawn, he was up. Gala had fallen into a light and restless sleep; he called her awake.

"We have to move," he said harshly. "Maybe they'll get up enough guts to follow us. I don't want them to find us."

Silently she got up. They rolled and tied the blankets she had bought; they ate quickly from the food she had brought; they made packs and put them on their shoulders and started to walk. One thing in their favor: they were moving fast, faster than any Citizen was likely to follow. All the same, Tropile kept looking nervously behind him.

They hurried north and east, and that was a mistake, because by noon they found themselves blocked by water. Once it had been a river; the melting of the polar ice caps that had submerged the coasts of the old continents had drowned it out and now it was salt water. But whatever it was, it was impassable. They would have to skirt it westward until they found a bridge or a boat.

"We can stop and eat," Tropile said grudgingly, trying not to despair.

They slumped to the ground. It was warmer now. Tropile found himself getting drowsier, drowsier—

He jerked erect and stared around belligerently. Beside him, his wife was lying motionless, though her eyes were open, gazing at the sky. Tropile sighed and stretched out. A moment's rest, he promised himself, and then a quick bite to eat, and then onward....

He was sound asleep when they spotted him.

There was a flutter of iron bird's wings from overhead. Tropile jumped up out of his sleep, awakening to panic. It was outside the possibility of belief, but there it was:

In the sky over him, etched black against a cloud, a helicopter. And men staring out of it, staring down at him.

A helicopter!

But there were no helicopters, or none that flew—if there had been fuel to fly them with—if any man had had the skill to make them fly. It was impossible! And yet there it was, and the men were looking at him, and the impossible great whirling thing was coming down, nearer.

He began to run in the downward wash of air from the vanes. But it was no use. There were three men and they were fresh and he wasn't. He stopped, dropping into the fighter's crouch that is pre-set into the human body, ready to do battle.

The men didn't want to fight. They laughed and one of them said amiably: "*Long* past your bedtime, boy. Get in. We'll take you home."

Tropile stood poised, hands half-clenched. "Take—"

"Take you home. Yeah. Where you belong, Tropile. Not back to Wheeling, if that's what is worrying you."

"Where I—"

"Where you belong."

Then Tropile understood.

He got into the helicopter wonderingly. Home. So there *was* a home for such as he. He wasn't alone. He needn't keep his solitary self apart. He could be with his own kind.

He remembered Gala Tropile and paused. One of the men said with quick understanding: "Your wife? I think we saw her about half a mile from here. Heading back to Wheeling as fast as she could go."

Tropile nodded. That was better, after all. Gala was no Wolf, though he had tried his best to make her one.

One of the men closed the door; another did something with levers and wheels; the vanes whooshed around overhead; the helicopter bounced on its stiff-sprung landing legs and then rocked up and away.

For the first time in his life, Glenn Tropile looked *down* on the land.

They didn't fly high—but Glenn Tropile had never flown at all, and the two or three hundred feet of air beneath made him faint and queasy. They danced through the passes in the West Virginia hills, crossed icy streams and rivers, swung past old empty towns which no longer even had names of their own. They saw no one.

It was something over four hundred miles to where they were going, one of the men told him. They made it easily before dark.

As Tropile walked through the town in the evening light, electricity flared white and violet in the buildings around him. Imagine! Electricity was calories, and calories were to be hoarded.

There were other walkers in the street. Their gait was not the economical shuffle with pendant arms. They burned energy visibly. They swung. They *strode*. It had been chiseled on his brain in earliest childhood that such walking was wrong, reprehensible, debilitating. It wasted calories. These people did not look debilitated and they didn't seem to mind wasting calories.

It was an ordinary sort of town, apparently named Princeton. It did not have the transient look to it of, say, Wheeling, or Altoona, or Gary, in Tropile's experience. It looked like—well, it looked permanent.

Tropile had heard of a town called Princeton, but it happened that he had never passed through it southwarding or northbound. There was no reason why he or anybody should or should not have. Still, there was a possibility, once he thought of it, that things were somehow so arranged that they should not; maybe it was all on purpose. Like every town, it was underpopulated, but not so much so as most. Perhaps one living space in five was used. A high ratio.

The man beside him was named Haendl, one of the men from the helicopter. They hadn't talked much on the flight and they didn't talk much now. "Eat first," Haendl said, and took Tropile to a bright and busy sort of food stall. Only it wasn't a stall. It was a restaurant.

This Haendl—what to make of him? He should have been disgusting, nasty, an abomination. He had no manners whatever. He didn't know, or at least didn't use, the Seventeen Conventional Gestures. He wouldn't let Tropile walk behind him and to his left, though he was easily five years Tropile's senior. When he ate, he *ate*. The Sip of Appreciation, the Pause of First Surfeit, the Thrice Proffered Share meant nothing to him. He laughed when Tropile tried to give him the Elder's Portion.

Cheerfully patronizing, this man Haendl said to Tropile: "That stuffs all right when you don't have anything better to do with your time. Those poor mutts don't. They'd

die of boredom without their inky-pinky cults and they don't have the resources to do anything bigger. Yes, I do know the Gestures. Seventeen delicate ways of communicating emotions too refined for words. The hell with them, Tropile. I've got words. You'll learn them, too."

Tropile ate silently, trying to think.

A man arrived, threw himself in a chair, glanced curiously at Tropile and said: "Haendl, the Somerville Road. The creek backed up when it froze. Flooded bad. Ruined everything."

Tropile ventured: "The flood ruined the road?"

"The road? No. Say, you must be the fellow Haendl went after. Tropile, that the name?" He leaned across the table, pumped Tropile's hand. "We had the road nicely blocked," he explained. "The flood washed it clean. Now we have to block it again."

Haendl said: "Take the tractor if you need it."

The man nodded and left.

Haendl said: "Eat up. We're wasting time. About that road—we keep all entrances blocked up, see? Why let a lot of sheep in and out?"

"Sheep?"

"The opposite," said Haendl, "of Wolves."

Take ten billion people and say that, out of every million of them, one—just one—is different. He has a talent for survival; call him Wolf. Ten thousand of him in a world of ten billion.

Squeeze them, freeze them, cut them down. Let old Rejoice in Messias loom in the terrifying sky and so abduct the Earth that the human race is decimated, fractionated, reduced to what is in comparison a bare handful of chilled, stunned survivors. There aren't ten billion people in the world any more. No, not by a factor of a thousand. Maybe there are as many as ten million, more or less, rattling around in the space their enormous Elder Generations made for them.

And of these ten million, how many are Wolf?

Ten thousand.

"You understand, Tropile?" said Haendl. "We survive. I don't care what you call us. The sheep call us Wolves. Me, I kind of call us Supermen. We have a talent for survival."

Tropile nodded, beginning to understand. "The way I survived the House of the Five Regulations."

Haendl gave him a pitying look. "The way you survived thirty years of Sheephoo before that. Come on."

It was a tour of inspection. They went into a building, big, looking like any other big and useful building of the ancients, gray stone walls, windows with ragged spears of glass. Inside, though, it wasn't like the others. Two sub-basements down, Tropile winced and turned away from the flood of violet light that poured out of a quartz bull's-eye on top of a squat steel cone.

"Perfectly harmless, Tropile—you don't have to worry," Haendl boomed. "Know what you're looking at? There's a fusion reactor down there. Heat. Power. All the power we need. Do you know what that means?"

He stared soberly down at the flaring violet light of the inspection port.

"Come on," he said abruptly to Tropile.

Another building, also big, also gray stone. A cracked inscription over the entrance read: ORIAL HALL OF HUMANITIES. The sense-shock this time was not light; it was sound. Hammering, screeching, rattling, rumbling. Men were doing noisy things with metal and machines.

"Repair shop!" Haendl yelled. "See those machines? They belong to our man Innison. We've salvaged them from every big factory ruin we could find. Give Innison a piece of metal—any alloy, any shape—and one of those machines will change it into any other shape and damned near any other alloy. Drill it, cut it, plane it, weld it, smelt it, zone-melt it, bond it—you tell him what to do and he'll do it.

"We got the parts to make six tractors and forty-one cars out of this shop. And we've got other shops—aircraft in Farmingdale and Wichita, armaments in Wilmington. Not that we can't make some armaments here. Innison could build you a tank if he had to, complete with 105-millimeter gun."

"What's a tank?" Tropile asked.

Haendl only looked at him and said: "Come on!"

Glenn Tropile's head spun dizzily and all the spectacles merged and danced in his mind. They were incredible. All of them.

Fusion pile, machine shop, vehicular garage, aircraft hangar. There was a storeroom under the seats of a football stadium, and Tropile's head spun on his shoulders again as he tried to count the cases of coffee and canned soups and whiskey and beans. There was another storeroom, only this one was called an armory. It was filled with ... guns. Guns that could be loaded with cartridges, of which they had very many; guns which, when you loaded them and pulled the trigger, would fire.

Tropile said, remembering: "I saw a gun once that still had its firing pin. But it was rusted solid."

"These work, Tropile," said Haendl. "You can kill a man with them. Some of us have."

"Kill—"

"Get that sheep look out of your eyes, Tropile! What's the difference how you execute a criminal? And what's a criminal but someone who represents a danger to your world? We prefer a gun instead of the Donation of the Spinal Tap, because it's quicker, because it's less messy—and because we don't like to drink spinal fluid, no matter what imaginary therapeutic or symbolic value it has. You'll learn."

But he didn't add "come on." They had arrived where they were going.

It was a small room in the building that housed the armory and it held, among other things, a rack of guns.

"Sit down," said Haendl, taking one of the guns out of the rack thoughtfully and handling it as the doomed Boyne had caressed his watch-case. It was the latest pre-

Pyramid-model rifle, anti-personnel, short-range. It would not scatter a cluster of shots in a coffee can at more than two and a half miles.

"All right," said Haendl, stroking the stock. "You've seen the works, Tropile. You've lived thirty years with sheep. You've seen what they have and what we have. I don't have to ask you to make a choice. I know what you choose. The only thing left is to tell you what *we* want from *you*."

A faint pulsing began inside Glenn Tropile. "I expected we'd be getting to that."

"Why not? We're not sheep. We don't act that way. Quid pro quo. Remember that—it saves time. You've seen the quid. Now we come to the quo." He leaned forward.

"Tropile, what do you know about the Pyramids?"

"Nothing."

Haendl nodded. "Right. They're all around us and our lives are beggared because of them. And we don't even know why. We don't have the least idea of what they are. Did you know that one of the sheep was Translated in Wheeling when you left?"

"Translated?"

Tropile listened with his mouth open while Haendl told him about what had happened to Citizen Boyne.

"So he didn't make the Donation after all," Tropile said.

"Might have been better if he had," said Haendl. "Still, it gave you a chance to get away. We had heard—never mind how just yet—that Wheeling'd caught itself a Wolf, so we came looking for you. But you were already gone."

Tropile said, faintly annoyed: "You were damn near too late."

"Oh, no, Tropile," Haendl assured him. "We're never too late. If you don't have enough guts and ingenuity to get away from sheep, you're no wolf—simple as that. But there's this Translation. We know it happens, but we don't even know what it is. All we know, people disappear. There's a new sun in the sky every five years or so. Who makes it? The Pyramids. How? We don't know that. Sometimes something floats around in the air and we call it an Eye. It has something to do with Translation, something to do with the Pyramids. What? We don't know that."

"We don't know much of anything," interrupted Tropile, trying to hurry him along.

"Not about the Pyramids, no." Haendl shook his head. "Hardly anyone has ever seen one, for that matter."

"Hardly—You mean you have?"

"Oh, yes. There's a Pyramid on Mount Everest, you know. That's not just a story. It's true. I've been there, and it's there. At least, it was there five years ago, right after the last Sun Re-creation. I guess it hasn't moved. It just sits there."

Tropile listened, marveling. To have seen a real Pyramid! Almost he had thought of them as legends, contrived to account for such established physical facts as the Eyes and Translation, as children with a Santa Claus. But this incredible man had seen it!

"Somebody dropped an H-bomb on it, way back," Haendl continued, "and the only thing that happened is that now the North Col is a crater. You can't move the

Pyramid. You can't hurt it. But it's alive. It has been there, alive, for a couple of hundred years; and that's about all we know about the Pyramids. Right?"

"Right."

Haendl stood up. "Tropile, that's what all of this is all about!" He gestured around him. "Guns, tanks, airplanes—we want to know more! We're going to find out more and then we're going to fight."

There was a jarring note and Tropile caught at it, sniffing the air. Somehow—perhaps it was his sub-adrenals that told him—this very positive, very self-willed man was just the slightest bit unsure of himself. But Haendl swept on and Tropile, for a moment, forgot to be alert.

"We had a party up Mount Everest five years ago," Haendl was saying. "We didn't find out a thing. Five years before that, and five years before *that*—every time there's a sun, while it is still warm enough to give a party a chance to climb up the sides—we send a team up there. It's a rough job. We give it to the new boys, Tropile. Like you."

There it was. He was being invited to attack a Pyramid.

Tropile hesitated, delicately balanced, trying to get the *feel* of this negotiation. This was Wolf against Wolf; it was hard. There had to be an advantage—

"There is an advantage," Haendl said aloud.

Tropile jumped, but then he remembered: Wolf against Wolf.

Haendl went on: "What you get out of it is your life, in the first place. You understand you can't get out now. We don't want sheep meddling around. And in the second place, there's a considerable hope of gain." He stared at Tropile with a dreamer's eyes. "We don't send parties up there for nothing, you know. We want to get something out of it. What we want is the Earth."

"The Earth?" It reeked of madness. But this man wasn't mad.

"Some day, Tropile, it's going to be us against them. Never mind the sheep—they don't count. It's going to be Pyramids and Wolves, and the Pyramids won't win. And then—"

It was enough to curdle the blood. This man was proposing to *fight*, and against the invulnerable, the godlike Pyramids.

But he was glowing and the fever was contagious. Tropile felt his own blood begin to pound. Haendl hadn't finished his "and then—" but he didn't have to. The "and then" was obvious: And then the world takes up again from the day the wandering planet first came into view. And then we go back to our own solar system and an end to the five-year cycle of frost and hunger.

And then the Wolves can rule a world worth ruling.

It was a meretricious appeal, perhaps, but it could not be refused. Tropile was lost.

He said: "You can put away the gun, Haendl. You've signed me up."

VII

The way to Mount Everest, Tropile glumly found, lay through supervising the colony's nursery school. It wasn't what he had expected, but it had the advantages that while his charges were learning, he was learning, too.

One jump ahead of the three-year-olds, he found that the "wolves," far from being predators on the "sheep," existed with them in a far more complicated ecological relationship. There were Wolves all through sheepdom; they leavened the dough of society.

In barbarously simple prose, a primer said: "The Sons of the Wolf are good at numbers and money. You and your friends play money games almost as soon as you can talk, and you can think in percentages and compound interest when you want to. Most people are not able to do this."

True, thought Tropile subvocally, reading aloud to the tots. That was how it had been with him.

"Sheep are afraid of the Sons of the Wolf. Those of us who live among them are in constant danger of detection and death—although ordinarily a Wolf can take care of himself against any number of sheep." True, too.

"It is one of the most dangerous assignments a Wolf can be given to live among the sheep. Yet it is essential. Without us, they would die—of stagnation, of rot, eventually of hunger."

It didn't have to be spelled out any further. Sheep can't mend their own fences.

The prose was horrifyingly bald and the children were horrifyingly—he choked on the word, but managed to form it in his mind—*competitive*. The verbal taboos lingered, he found, after he had broken through the barriers of behavior.

But it was distressing, in a way. At an age when future Citizens would have been learning their Little Pitcher Ways, these children were learning to fight. The perennial argument about who would get to be Big Bill Zeckendorf when they played a strange game called "Zeckendorf and Hilton" sometimes ended in bloody noses.

And nobody—nobody at all—meditated on Connectivity.

Tropile was warned not to do it himself. Haendl said grimly: "We don't understand it and we don't like what we don't understand. We're suspicious animals, Tropile. As the children grow older, we give them just enough practice so they can go into one meditation and get the feel of it—or pretend to, at any rate. If they have to pass as Citizens, they'll need that much. But more than that we do not allow."

"Allow?" Somehow the word grated; somehow his sub-adrenals began to pulse.

"*Allow!* We have our suspicions and we know for a fact that sometimes people disappear when they meditate. We don't want to disappear. We think it's not a good thing to disappear. Don't meditate, Tropile. You hear?"

But later, Tropile had to argue the point. He picked a time when Haendl was free, or as nearly free as that man ever was. The whole adult colony had been out on what they used as a parade ground—it had once been a football field, Haendl said. They had done their regular twice-a-week infantry drill, that being one of the prices one paid for living among the free, progressive Wolves instead of the dull and tepid sheep.

Tropile was mightily winded, but he cast himself on the ground near Haendl, caught his breath and said: "Haendl—about meditation."

"What about it?"

"Well, perhaps you don't really grasp it."

Tropile searched for words. He knew what he wanted to say. How could anything that felt as good as Oneness be bad? And wasn't Translation, after all, so rare as hardly to matter? But he wasn't sure he could get through to Haendl in those terms.

He tried: "When you meditate successfully, Haendl, you're one with the Universe. Do you know what I mean? There's no feeling like it. It's indescribable peace, beauty, harmony, repose."

"It's the world's cheapest narcotic," Haendl snorted.

"Oh, now, really—"

"*And* the world's cheapest religion. The stone-broke mutts can't afford gilded idols, so they use their own navels. That's all it is. They can't afford alcohol; they can't even afford the muscular exertion of deep breathing that would throw them into a state of hyperventilated oxygen drunkenness. Then what's left? Self-hypnosis. Nothing else. It's all they can do, so they learn it, they define it as pleasant and good, and they're all fixed up."

Tropile sighed. The man was so stubborn! Then a thought occurred to him and he pushed himself up on his elbows. "Aren't you leaving something out? What about Translation?"

Haendl glowered at him. "That's the part we don't understand."

"But surely self-hypnosis doesn't account for—"

"Surely it doesn't!" Haendl mimicked savagely. "All right. We don't understand it and we're afraid of it. Kindly do not tell me Translation is the supreme act of Un-willing, Total Disavowal of Duality, Unison with the Brahm-Ground or any such slop. You don't know what it is and neither do we." He started to get up. "All we know is, people vanish. And we want no part of it, so we don't meditate. None of us—including you!"

It was foolishness, this close-order drill. Could you defeat the unreachable Himalayan Pyramid with a squads-right flanking maneuver?

And yet it wasn't all foolishness. Close-order drill and 2500-calorie-a-day diet began to put fat and flesh and muscle on Tropile's body, and something other than that on his mind. He had not lost the edge of his acquisitiveness, his drive—his whatever it was that made the difference between Wolf and sheep.

But he had gained something. Happiness? Well, if "happiness" is a sense of purpose, and a hope that the purpose can be accomplished, then happiness. It was a feeling that had never existed in his life before. Always it had been the glandular compulsion to gain an advantage, and that was gone, or anyway almost gone, because it was permitted in the society in which he now lived.

Glenn Tropile sang as he putt-putted in his tractor, plowing the thawing Jersey fields. Still, a faint doubt remained. Squads right against the Pyramids?

Stiffly, Tropile stopped the tractor, slowed the diesel to a steady *thrum* and got off. It was hot—being midsummer of the five-year calendar the Pyramids had imposed. It was time for rest and maybe something to eat.

He sat in the shade of a tree, as farmers always have done, and opened his sandwiches. He was only a mile or so from Princeton, but he might as well have been in Limbo; there was no sign of any living human but himself. The northering sheep didn't come near Princeton—it "happened" that way, on purpose.

He caught a glimpse of something moving, but when he stood up for a better look into the woods on the other side of the field, it was gone. Wolf? *Real* Wolf, that is? It could have been a bear, for that matter—there was talk of wolves and bears around Princeton; and although Tropile knew that much of the talk was assiduously encouraged by men like Haendl, he also knew that some of it was true.

As long as he was up, he gathered straw from the litter of last "year's" head-high grass, gathered sticks under the trees, built a small fire and put water on to boil for coffee. Then he sat back and ate his sandwiches, thinking.

Maybe it was a promotion, going from the nursery school to labor in the fields. Or maybe it wasn't. Haendl had promised him a place in the expedition that would—maybe—discover something new and great and helpful about the Pyramids. And that might still come to pass, because the expedition was far from ready to leave.

Tropile munched his sandwiches thoughtfully. Now *why* was the expedition so far from ready to leave? It was absolutely essential to get there in the warmest weather possible—otherwise Mt. Everest was unclimbable. Generations of alpinists had proved that. That warmest weather was rapidly going by.

And *why* were Haendl and the Wolf colony so insistent on building tanks, arming themselves with rifles, organizing in companies and squads? The H-bomb hadn't flustered the Pyramid. What lesser weapon could?

Uneasily, Tropile put a few more sticks on the fire, staring thoughtfully into the canteen cup of water. It was a satisfyingly hot fire, he noticed abstractedly. The water was very nearly ready to boil.

Half across the world, the Pyramid in the Himalays felt, or heard, or tasted—a difference.

Possibly the h-f pulses that had gone endlessly wheep, wheep, wheep were now going wheep-*beep*, wheep-*beep*. Possibly the electromagnetic "taste" of lower-than-red was now spiced with a tang of beyond-violet. Whatever the sign was, the Pyramid recognized it.

A part of the crop it tended was ready to harvest.

The ripening bud had a name, of course, but names didn't matter to the Pyramid. The man named Tropile didn't know he was ripening, either. All that Tropile knew was that, for the first time in nearly a year, he had succeeded in catching each stage of the nine perfect states of water-coming-to-a-boil in its purest form.

It was like ... like ... well, it was like nothing that anyone but a Water Watcher could understand. He observed. He appreciated. He encompassed and absorbed the myriad subtle perfections of time, of shifting transparency, of sound, of distribution of ebullieny, of the faint, faint odor of steam.

Complete, Glenn Tropile relaxed all his limbs and let his chin rest on his breast-bone.

It was, he thought with placid, crystalline perception, a rare and perfect opportunity for meditation. He thought of Connectivity. (Overhead, a shifting glassy flaw appeared in the thin, still air.) There wasn't any thought of Eyes in the erased palimpsest that was Glenn Tropile's mind. There wasn't any thought of Pyramids or of Wolves. The plowed field before him didn't exist. Even the water, merrily bubbling itself dry, was gone from his perception.

He was beginning to meditate.

Time passed—or stood still—for Tropile; there was no difference. There was no time. He found himself almost on the brink of Understanding.

Something snapped. An intruding blue-bottle drone, maybe, or a twitching muscle. Partly, Tropile came back to reality. Almost, he glanced upward. Almost, he saw the Eye....

It didn't matter. The thing that really mattered, the only thing in the world, was all within his mind; and he was ready, he knew, to find it.

Once more! Try harder!

He let the mind-clearing unanswerable question drift into his mind:

If the sound of two hands together is a clapping, what is the sound of one hand?

Gently he pawed at the question, the symbol of the futility of mind—and therefore the gateway to meditation. Unawareness of self was stealing deliciously over him.

He was Glenn Tropile. He was more than that. He was the water boiling ... and the boiling water was he. He was the gentle warmth of the fire, which was—which was, yes, itself the arc of the sky. As each thing was each other thing; water was fire, and fire air; Tropile was the first simmering bubble and the full roll of Well-aged Water was Self, was—more than Self—was—

The answer to the unanswerable question was coming clearer and softer to him. And then, all at once, but not suddenly, for there was no time, it was not close—it *was*.

The answer was his, was him. The arc of sky was the answer, and the answer belonged to sky—to warmth, to all warmths that there are, and to all waters, and—and the answer was—was—

Tropile vanished. The mild thunderclap that followed made the flames dance and the column of steam fray; and then the fire was steady again, and so was the rising steam. But Tropile was gone.

VIII

Haendl plodded angrily through the high grass toward the dull throb of the diesel.

Maybe it had been a mistake to take this Glenn Tropile into the colony. He was more Citizen than Wolf—no, cancel that, Haendl thought; he was more Wolf than Citizen. But the Wolf in him was tainted with sheep's blood. He *competed* like a Wolf, but in spite of everything, he refused to give up some of his sheep's ways. Meditation. He had been cautioned against that. But had he given it up?

He had not.

If it had been entirely up to Haendl, Glenn Tropile would have found himself back among the sheep or dead. Fortunately for Tropile, it was not entirely up to Haendl. The community of Wolves was by no means a democracy, but the leader had a certain responsibility to his constituents, and the responsibility was this: He couldn't afford to be wrong. Like the Old Gray Wolf who protected Mowgli, he had to defend his actions against attack; if he failed to defend, the pack would pull him down.

And Innison thought they needed Tropile—not in spite of the taint of the Citizen that he bore, but because of it.

Haendl bawled: "Tropile! Tropile, where are you?" There was only the wind and the *thrum* of the diesel. It was enormously irritating. Haendl had other things to do than to chase after Glenn Tropile. And where was he? There was the diesel, idling wastefully; there the end of the patterned furrows Tropile had plowed. There a small fire, burning—

And there was Tropile.

Haendl stopped, frozen, his mouth opened, about to yell Tropile's name.

It was Tropile, all right, staring with concentrated, oyster-eyed gaze at the fire and the little pot of water it boiled. Staring. Meditating. And over his head, like flawed glass in a pane, was the thing Haendl feared most of all things on Earth. It was an Eye.

Tropile was on the very verge of being Translated ... whatever that was.

Time, maybe, to find out *what* that was! Haendl ducked back into the shelter of the high grass, knelt, plucked his radio communicator from his pocket, urgently called.

"Innison! Innison, will somebody, for God's sake, put Innison on!"

Seconds passed. Voices answered. Then there was Innison.

"Innison, listen! You wanted to catch Tropile in the act of Meditation? All right, you've got him. The old wheat field, south end, under the elms around the creek. Get here fast, Innison—there's an Eye forming above him!"

Luck! Lucky that they were ready for this, and only by luck, because it was the helicopter that Innison had patiently assembled for the attack on Everest that was ready now, loaded with instruments, planned to weigh and measure the aura around the Pyramid—now at hand when they needed it.

That was luck, but there was driving hurry involved, too; it was only a matter of minutes before Haendl heard the wobbling drone of the copter, saw the vanes fluttering low over the hedges, dropping to earth behind the elms.

Haendl raised himself cautiously and peered. Yes, Tropile was still there, and the Eye still above him! But the noise of the helicopter had frayed the spell. Tropile stirred. The Eye wavered and shook—

But did not vanish.

Thanking what passed for his God, Haendl scuttled circuitously around the elms and joined Innison at the copter. Innison was furiously closing switches and pointing lenses.

They saw Tropile sitting there, the Eye growing larger and closer over his head. They had time—plenty of time; oh, nearly a minute of time. They brought to bear on the silent and unknowing form of Glenn Tropile every instrument that the copter carried. They were waiting for Tropile to disappear—

He did.

Innison and Haendl hunched at the thunderclap as air rushed in to replace him.

"We've got what you wanted," Haendl said harshly. "Let's read some instruments."

Throughout the Translation, high-tensile magnetic tape on a madly spinning drum had been hurtling under twenty-four recording heads at a hundred feet a second. Output to the recording heads had been from every kind of measuring device they had been able to conceive and build, all loaded on the helicopter for use on Mount Everest—all now pointed directly at Glenn Tropile.

They had, for the instant of Translation, readings from one microsecond to the next on the varying electric, gravitational, magnetic, radiant and molecular-state conditions in his vicinity.

They got back to Innison's workshop, and the laboratory inside it, in less than a minute; but it took hours of playing back the magnetic pulses into machines that turned them into scribed curves on coordinate paper before Innison had anything resembling an answer.

He said: "No mystery. I mean no mystery except the speed. Want to know what happened to Tropile?"

"I do," said Haendl.

"A pencil of electrostatic force maintained by a pinch effect bounced down the approximate azimuth of Everest—God knows how they handled the elevation—and charged him and the area positive. A *big* charge, clear off the scale. They parted company. He was bounced straight up. A meter off the ground, a correcting vector was applied. When last seen, he was headed fast in the direction of the Pyramids' binary—fast! So fast that I would guess he'll get there alive. It takes an appreciable time, a good part of a second, for his protein to coagulate enough to make him sick and then kill him. If the Pyramids strip the charges off him immediately on arrival, as I should think they will, he'll live."

"Friction—"

"Be damned to friction," Innison said calmly. "He carried a packet of air with him and there *was* no friction. How? I don't know. How are they going to keep him alive in space, without the charges that hold air? I don't know. If they don't maintain the charges, can they beat the speed of light? I don't know. I can tell you *what* happened. I can't tell you *how*."

Haendl stood up thoughtfully. "It's something," he said grudgingly.

"It's more than we've ever had—a complete reading at the instant of Translation!"

"We'll get more," Haendl promised. "Innison, now that you know what to look for, go on looking for it. Keep every possible detection device monitored twenty-four hours a day. Turn on everything you've got that'll find a sign of imposed modulation. At any sign—or at anybody's hunch that there *might* be a sign—I'm to be called. If I'm

eating. If I'm sleeping. If I'm enjoying with a woman. Call me, you hear? Maybe you were right about Tropile; maybe he did have some use. He might give the Pyramids a bellyache."

Innison, flipping the magnetic tape drum to rewind, said thoughtfully: "It's too bad they've got him. We could have used some more readings."

"Too bad?" Haendl laughed sharply. "This time they've got themselves a Wolf."

The Pyramids did have a Wolf—a fact which did not matter in the least to them.

It is not possible to know what "mattered" to a Pyramid except by inference. But it is possible to know that they had no way of telling Wolf from Citizen.

The planet which was their home—Earth's old Moon—was small, dark, atmosphereless and waterless. It was completely built over, much of it with its propulsion devices.

In the old days, when technology had followed war, luxury, government and leisure, the Pyramids' sun had run out of steam; and at about the same time, they had run out of the Components they imported from a neighboring planet. They used the last of their Components to implement their stolid metaphysic of hauling and pushing. They pushed their planet.

They knew where to push it.

Each Pyramid as it stood was a radio-astronomy observatory, powerful and accurate beyond the wildest dreams of Earthly radio-astronomers. From this start, they built instruments to aid their naked senses. They went into a kind of hibernation, reducing their activity to a bare trickle except for a small "crew" and headed for Earth. They had every reason to believe they would find more Components there, and they did.

Tropile was one of them. The only thing which set him apart from the others was that he was the most recent to be stockpiled.

The religion, or vice, or philosophy he practiced made it possible for him to be a Component. Meditation derived from Zen Buddhism was a windfall for the Pyramids, though, of course, they had no idea at all of what lay behind it and did not "care." They knew only that, at certain times, certain potential Components became Components which were no longer merely potential—which were, in fact, ripe for harvesting.

It was useful to them that the minds they cropped were utterly blank. It saved the trouble of blanking them.

Tropile had been harvested at the moment his inhibiting conscious mind had been cleared, for the Pyramids were not interested in him as an entity capable of will and conception. They used only the raw capacity of the human brain and its perceptors.

They used Rashevsky's Number, the gigantic, far more than astronomical expression that denoted the number of switching operations performable within the human brain. They used "subception," the phenomenon by which the reasoning mind, uninhibited by consciousness, reacts directly to stimuli—shortcutting the cerebral censor, avoiding the weighing of shall-I-or-shan't-I that precedes every conscious act.

The harvested minds were—Components.

It is not desirable that your bedroom wall switch have a mind of its own; if you turn the lights on, you want them *on*. So it was with the Pyramids.

A Component was needed in the industrial complex which transformed catabolism products into anabolism products.

With long experience gained since their planetfall, Pyramids received the *tabula rasa* that was Glenn Tropile. He arrived in one piece, wearing a blanket of air. Quick-frozen mentally at the moment of inert blankness his Meditation had granted him—the psychic drunkard's coma—he was cushioned on repellent charges as he plummeted down, and instantly stripped of surplus electrostatic charge.

At this point, he was still human; only asleep.

He remained "asleep." Annular fields they used for lifting and lowering seized him and moved him into a snug tank of nutrient fluid. There were many such tanks, ready and waiting.

The tanks themselves could be moved, and the one containing Glenn Tropile did move, to a metabolism complex where there were many other tanks, all occupied. This was a warm room—the Pyramids had wasted no energy on such foppish comforts in the first "room." In this room, Glenn Tropile gradually resumed the appearance of life. His heart once again began to beat. Faint stirrings were visible in his chest as his habit-numbed lungs attempted to breathe. Gradually the stirrings slowed and stopped. There was no need for that foppish comfort, either; the nutrient fluid supplied all.

Tropile was "wired into circuit."

The only literal wiring, at first, was a temporary one—a fine electrode aseptically introduced into the great nerve that leads to the rhinencephalon—the "small brain," the area of the brain which contains the pleasure centers that motivate human behavior.

More than a thousand Components had been spoiled and discarded before the Pyramids had located the pleasure centers so exactly.

While the Component, Tropile, was being "programmed," the wire rewarded him with minute pulses that made his body glow with animal satisfaction when he functioned correctly. That was all there was to it. After a time, the wire was withdrawn, but by then Tropile had "learned" his entire task. Conditioned reflexes had been established. They could be counted on for the long and useful life of the Component.

That life might be very long indeed; in the nutrient tank beside Tropile's, as it happened, lay a Component with eight legs and a chitinous fringe around its eyes. It had lain in such a tank for more than a hundred and twenty-five thousand Terrestrial years.

The Component was placed in operation. It opened its eyes and saw things. The sensory nerves of its limbs felt things. The muscles of its hands and toes operated things.

Where was Glenn Tropile?

He was there, all of him, but a zombie-Tropile. Bereft of will, emptied of memories. He was a machine and part of a huger machine. His sex was the sex of a photoelectric cell; his politics were those of a transistor; his ambition that of a mercury switch. He didn't know anything about sex, or fear, or hope. He only knew two things: Input and Output.

Input to him was a display of small lights on a board before his vacant face; and also the modulation of a loudspeaker's liquid-borne hum in each ear.

Output from him was the dancing manipulation of certain buttons and keys, prompted by changes in Input and by nothing else.

Between Input and Output, he lay in the tank, a human Black Box which was capable of Rashevsky's Number of switchings, and of nothing else.

He had been programmed to accomplish a specific task—to shepherd a chemical called 3, 7, 12-trihydroxycholelithic acid, present in the catabolic product of the Pyramids, through a succession of more than five hundred separate operations until it emerged as the chemical, which the Pyramids were able to metabolize, called Protoporphin IX.

He was not the only Component operating in this task; there were several, each with its own program.

The acid accumulated in great tanks a mile from him. He knew its concentration, heat and pressure; he knew of all the impurities which would affect subsequent reactions. His fingers tapped, giving binary-coded signals to sluice gates to open for so many seconds and then to close; for such an amount of solvent at such a temperature to flow in; for the agitators to agitate for just so long at just such a force. And if a trouble signal disturbed any one of the 517 major and minor operations, he—it?—was set to decide among alternatives:

- scrap the batch in view of flow conditions along the line?
- isolate and bypass the batch through a standby loop?
- immediate action to correct the malfunction?

Without inhibiting intelligence, without the trammels of humanity on him, the intricate display board and the complex modulations of the two sound signals could be instantly taken in, evaluated and given their share in the decision.

Was it—he?—still alive?

The question has no meaning. It was working. It was an excellent machine, in fact, and the Pyramids cared for it well. Its only consciousness, apart from the reflexive responses that were its program, was—well, call it "the sound of one hand alone." Which is to say zero, mindlessness, Samadhi, stupor.

It continued to function for some time—until the required supply of Protoporphin IX had been exceeded by a sufficient factor of safety to make further processing unnecessary—that is, for some minutes or months. During that time, it was Happy. (It had been programmed to be Happy when there were no uncorrected malfunctions of the process.) At the end of that time, it shut itself off, sent out a signal that the task was completed, then it was laid aside in the analogue of a deep-freeze, to be reprogrammed when another Component was needed.

It was totally immaterial to the Pyramids that this particular Component had not been stamped from Citizen but from Wolf.

IX

Roget Germyn, of Wheeling a Citizen, contemplated his wife with growing concern. Possibly the events of the past few days had unhinged her reason, but he was nearly sure that she had eaten a portion of the evening meal secretly, in the serving room, before calling him to the table.

He felt positive that it was only a temporary aberration; she was, after all, a Citizeness, with all that that implied. A—a creature—like that Gala Tropile, for example—someone like that might steal extra portions with craft and guile. You couldn't live with a Wolf for years and not have some of it rub off on you. But not Citizeness Germyn.

There was a light, thrice-repeated tap on the door.

Speak of the devil, thought Roget Germyn most appropriately; for it was that same Gala Tropile. She entered, her head downcast, looking worn and—well, pretty.

He began formally: "I give you greeting, Citi—"

"They're here!" she interrupted in desperate haste. Germyn blinked. "Please," she begged, "can't you do something? They're *Wolves*!"

Citizeness Germyn emitted a muted shriek.

"You may leave, Citizeness," Germyn told her shortly, already forming in his mind the words of gentle reproof he would later use. "Now what is all this talk of Wolves?"

Gala Tropile distractedly sat in the chair her hostess had vacated. "We were running away," she babbled. "Glenn—he was Wolf, you see, and he made me leave with him, after the House of the Five Regulations. We were a day's long march from Wheeling and we stopped to rest. And there was an aircraft, Citizen!"

"An aircraft!" Citizen Germyn allowed himself a frown. "Citizeness, it is not well to invent things which are not so."

"I saw it, Citizen! There were men in it. One of them is here again! He came looking for me with another man and I barely escaped him. I'm afraid!"

"There is no cause for fear, only an opportunity to appreciate," Citizen Germyn said mechanically—it was what one told one's children.

But within himself, he was finding it very hard to remain calm. That word Wolf—it was a destroyer of calm, an incitement to panic and hatred! He remembered Tropile well, and there was Wolf, to be sure. The mere fact that Citizen Germyn had doubted his Wolfishness at first was powerful cause to be doubly convinced of it now; he had postponed the day of reckoning for an enemy of all the world, and there was enough secret guilt in his recollection to set his own heart thumping.

"Tell me exactly what happened," said Citizen Germyn, in words that the stress of emotion had already made far less than graceful.

Obediently, Gala Tropile said: "I was returning to my home after the evening meal and Citizeness Puffin—she took me in after Citizen Tropile—after my husband was—"

"I understand. You made your home with her."

"Yes. She told me that two men had come to see me. They spoke badly, she said, and I was alarmed. I peered through a window of my home and they were there. One had been in the aircraft I saw! And they flew away with my husband."

"It is a matter of seriousness," Citizen Germyn admitted doubtfully. "So then you came here to me?"

"Yes, but they saw me, Citizen! And I think they followed. You must protect me—I have no one else!"

"If they be Wolf," Germyn said calmly, "we will raise hue and cry against them. Now will the Citizeness remain here? I go forth to see these men."

There was a graceless hammering on the door.

"Too late!" cried Gala Tropile in panic. "They are here!"

Citizen Germyn went through the ritual of greeting, of deprecating the ugliness and poverty of his home, of offering everything he owned to his visitors; it was the way to greet a stranger.

The two men lacked both courtesy and wit, but they did make an attempt to comply with the minimal formal customs of introduction. He had to give them credit for that; and yet it was almost more alarming than if they had blustered and yelled.

For he knew one of these men.

He dredged the name out of his memory. It was Haendl. The same man had appeared in Wheeling the day Glenn Tropile had been scheduled to make the Donation of the Spinal Tap—and had broken free and escaped. He had inquired about Tropile of a good many people, Citizen Germyn included, and even at that time, in the excitement of an Amok, a Wolf-finding and a Translation in a single day, Germyn had wondered at Haendl's lack of breeding and airs.

Now he wondered no longer.

But the man made no overt act and Citizen Germyn postponed the raising of the hue and cry. It was not a thing to be done lightly.

"Gala Tropile is in this house," the man with Haendl said bluntly.

Citizen Germyn managed a Quirked Smile.

"We want to see her, Germyn. It's about her husband. He—uh—he was with us for a while and something happened."

"Ah, yes. The Wolf."

The man flushed and looked at Haendl. Haendl said loudly: "The Wolf. Sure he's a Wolf. But he's gone now, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Gone?"

"Not just him, but four or five of us. There was a man named Innison and he's gone, too. We need help, Germyn. Something about Tropile—God knows how it is, but he started something. We want to talk to his wife and find out what we can about him. So will you get her out of the back room where she's hiding and bring her here, please?"

Citizen Germyn quivered. He bent over the ID bracelet that once had belonged to the one PFC Joe Hartman, fingering it to hide his thoughts.

He said at last: "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps the Citizeness is with my wife. If this be so, would it not be possible that she is fearful of those who once were with her husband?"

Haendl laughed sourly. "She isn't any more fearful than we are, Germyn. I told you about this man Innison who disappeared. He was a Son of the Wolf, you understand me? For that matter—" He glanced at his companion, licked his lips and changed his mind about what he had been going to say next. "He was a Wolf. Do you ever remember hearing of a Wolf being Translated before?"

"Translated?" Germyn dropped the ID bracelet. "But that's impossible!" he cried, forgetting his manners completely. "Oh, no! Translation comes only to those who attain the moment of supreme detachment, you can be sure of that. I *know*! I've seen it with my own eyes. No Wolf could *possibly*—"

"At least five Wolves did," Haendl said grimly. "Now you see what the trouble is? Tropile was Translated—I saw that with *my* own eyes. The next day, Innison. Within a week, two or three others. So we came down here, Germyn, not because we like you people, not because we enjoy it, but because we're *scared*."

"What we want is to talk to Tropile's wife—you, too, I guess; we want to talk to anybody who ever knew him. We want to find out everything there is to find out about Tropile and see if we can make any sense of the answers. Because maybe Translation is the supreme objective of life to you people, Germyn, but to us it's just one more way of dying. And we don't want to die."

Citizen Germyn bent to pick up his cherished identification bracelet and dropped it absently on a table. There was very much on his mind.

He said at last: "That is strange. Shall I tell you another strange thing?"

Haendl, looking angry and baffled, nodded.

Germyn said: "There has been no Translation here since the day the Wolf, Tropile, escaped. But there have been Eyes. I have seen them myself. It—" He hesitated, shrugged. "It has been disturbing. Some of our finest Citizens have ceased to Meditate; they have been worrying. So many Eyes and nobody taken! It is outside of all of our experience, and our customs have suffered. Politeness is dwindling among us. Even in my own household—"

He coughed and went on: "No matter. But these Eyes have come into every home; they have peered about, peered about, and no one has been taken. Why? Is it something to do with the Translation of Wolves?" He stared hopelessly at his visitors. "All I know is that it is very strange and therefore I am worried."

"Then take us to Gala Tropile," said Haendl. "Let's see what we can find out!"

Citizen Germyn bowed. He cleared his throat and raised his voice just sufficiently to carry from one room to another. "Citizeness!" he called.

There was a pause and then his wife appeared in the doorway, looking ruffled and ill at ease with her guest.

"Will you ask if Citizeness Tropile will join us here?" he requested.

His wife nodded. "She is resting. I will call her."

They called her and questioned her for some time.

She told them nothing.

She had nothing to tell.

X

On Earth's binary, Glenn Tropile had been reprogrammed for a new task.

The problem was navigation. Earth had been a disappointment to the Pyramids; it was necessary to move rapidly to a more rewarding planet.

The Pyramids had taken Earth out past Pluto's orbit with a simple shove, slow and massive. It had been enough merely to approximate the direction in which they would want to go. There would be plenty of time for refinements of course later.

But now the time for refinements had come, earlier than they might have expected. They had now time to travel, they knew where to—a star cluster reasonably sure to be rich in Componentiferous planets. It was inherent in the nature of Component mines that eventually they always played out.

There were always more mines, though. If that had not been so, it would have been necessary, perhaps, to stock-breed Components against future needs. But it was easier to work the vein out and move on.

Now the course had to be computed. There were such variables to be considered as: motion of the star cluster; acceleration of the binary-planet system; *gravitational influence of every astronomical object in the island universe, without exception.*

Precise computation on this basis was obviously not practical. That was not an answer to the problem, since the time required would approach eternity as one of its parameters.

It was possible to simplify the problem. Only the astronomical bodies which were relatively nearby need be treated as individuals. Farther away, the Pyramids began to group them in small bunches, still farther in large bunches, on to the point where the farthest—and the most numerous—bodies were lumped together as a vague gravitational "noise" whose average intensity alone it was required to know and to enter as a datum.

And still no single Component could handle even its own share of the problem, were the "computer" they formed to be kept within the range of permissible size.

It was for this that the Component which had once been Tropile was taken out of storage.

This was all old stuff to the Pyramids; they knew how to handle it. They broke the problem down to its essentials, separated even those into many parts. There was, for example, the subsection of one certain aspect of the logistical problem which involved locating and procuring additional Components to handle the load.

Even that tiny specialization was too much for a single Component, but fortunately the Pyramids had resources to bring to bear. The procedure in such cases was to hitch several Components together.

This was done.

When the Pyramids finished their neuro-surgery, there floated in an oversized nutrient tank a thing like a great sea-anemone. It was composed of eight Components—all human, as it happened—arranged in a circle, facing inward, joined temple to temple, brain to brain.

At their feet, where sixteen eyes could see it, was the display board to feed them their Input. Sixteen hands each grasped a molded switch to handle their binary-coded Output. There would be no storage of the Output outside of the eight-Component complex itself; it went as control signals to the electrostatic generators, funneled through the single Pyramid on Mount Everest, which handled the task of Component-procurement.

That is, of Translation.

The programming was slow and thorough. Perhaps the Pyramid which finally activated the octuple unit and went away was pleased with itself, not knowing that one of its Components was Glenn Tropile.

Nirvana. (It pervaded all; there was nothing outside of it.)

Nirvana. (Glenn Tropile floated in it as in the amniotic fluid around him.)

Nirvana. (The sound of one hand.... Floating oneness.)

There was an intrusion.

Perfection is completed; by adding to it, it is destroyed. *Duality struck like a thunderbolt. Oneness shattered.*

For Glenn Tropile, it seemed as though his wife were screaming at him to wake up. He tried to.

It was curiously difficult and painful. Timeless poignant sadness, five years of sorrow over a lost love compressed into a microsecond. It was always so, Tropile thought drowsily, awakening. It never lasts. What's the use of worrying over what always happens....

Sudden shock and horror rocked him.

This was no ordinary awakening—no ordinary thing at all—*nothing* was as it ever had been before!

Tropile opened his mouth and screamed—or thought he did. But there was only a hoarse, faint flutter in his eardrums.

It was a moment when sanity might have gone. But there was one curious, mundane fact that saved him. He was holding something in his hands. He found that he could look at it, and it was a switch. A molded switch, mounted on a board, and he was holding one in each hand.

It was little to cling to, but it at least was real. If his hands could be holding something, then there must be some reality somewhere.

Tropile closed his eyes and managed to open them again. Yes, there was reality, too. He closed his eyes and light stopped. He opened them and light returned.

Then perhaps he was not dead, as he had thought.

Carefully, stumbling—his mind his only usable tool—he tried to make an estimate of his surroundings.

He could hardly believe what he found.

Item: he could scarcely move. Somehow he was bound by his feet and his head. How? He couldn't tell.

Item: he was bent over and he couldn't straighten. Why? Again he couldn't tell, but it was a fact. The great erecting muscles of his back answered his command, but his body would not move.

Item: his eyes saw, but only in a small area.

He couldn't move his head, either. Still, he could see a few things. The switch in his hand, his feet, a sort of display of lights on a strangely circular board.

The lights flickered and changed their pattern.

Without thinking, he moved a switch. Why? Because it was *right* to move that switch. When a certain light flared green, a certain switch had to be thrown. Why? Well, when a certain light flared green, a certain switch—

He abandoned that problem. Never mind why; what the devil was going *on*?

Glenn Tropile squinted about him like a mollusc peering out of its shell. There was another fact, the oddness of the seeing. What makes it look so queer, he asked himself.

He found an answer, but it required some time to take it in. He was seeing in a strange perspective. One looks out of two eyes. Close one eye and the world is flat. Open it again and there is a stereoscopic double; the salencies of the picture leap forward, the background retreats.

So with the lights on the board—no, not exactly; but something *like* that, he thought. It was as though—he squinted and strained—well, as though he had never really *seen* before. As though for all his life he had had only one eye, and now he had strangely been given two.

His visual perception of the board was *total*. He could see all of it at once. It had no "front" or "back." It was in the round. The natural thinking of it was without orientation. He engulfed and comprehended it as a unit. It had no secrets of shadow or silhouette.

I think, Tropile mouthed slowly to himself, that I'm going crazy.

But that was no explanation, either. Mere insanity didn't account for what he saw.

Then, he asked himself, was he in a state that was *beyond* Nirvana? He remembered, with an odd flash of guilt, that he had been Meditating, watching the stages of boiling water. All right, perhaps he had been Translated. But what was this, then? Were the Meditators wrong in teaching that Nirvana was the end—and yet righter than the Wolves, who dismissed Meditation as a phenomenon wholly inside the skull and refused to discuss Translation at all?

That was a question for which he could find nothing approaching an answer. He turned away from it and looked at his hands.

He could see them, too, in the round, he noted. He could see every wrinkle and pore in all sixteen of them....

Sixteen hands!

That was the other moment when sanity might have gone. He closed his eyes. (Sixteen eyes! No wonder the total perception!) And, after a while, he opened them again.

The hands were there. All sixteen of them.

Cautiously, Tropile selected a finger that seemed familiar in his memory. After a moment's thought, he flexed it. It bent. He selected another. Another—on a different hand this time.

He could use any or all of the sixteen hands. They were all his, all sixteen of them.

I appear, thought Tropile crazily, to be a sort of eight-branched snowflake. Each of my branches is a human body.

He stirred, and added another datum: I appear also to be in a tank of fluid and yet I do not drown.

There were certain deductions to be made from that. Either someone—the Pyramids?—had done something to his lungs, or else the fluid was as good an oxygenating medium as air. Or both.

Suddenly a burst of data-lights twinkled on the board below him. Instantly and involuntarily, his sixteen hands began working the switches, transmitting complex directions in a lightninglike stream of on-off clicks.

Tropile relaxed and let it happen. He had no choice; the power that made it *right* to respond to the board made it impossible for his brain to concentrate while the response was going on. Perhaps, he thought drowsily, he would never have awakened at all if it had not been for the long period with no lights....

But he was awake. And his consciousness began to explore as the task ended.

He had had an opportunity to understand something of what was happening. He understood that he was now a part of something larger than himself, beyond doubt something which served and belonged to the Pyramids. His single brain not being large enough for the job, seven others had been hooked in with it.

But where were their personalities?

Gone, he supposed; presumably they had been Citizens. Sons of the Wolf did not Meditate and therefore were not Translated—except for himself, he corrected wryly, remembering the Meditation on Rainclouds that had led him to—

No, wait!

Not Rainclouds but Water!

Tropile caught hold of himself and forced his mind to retrace that thought. He *remembered* the Raincloud Meditation. It had been prompted by a particularly noble cumulus of the Ancient Ship type.

And this was odd. Tropile had never been deeply interested in Rainclouds, had never known even the secondary classifications of Raincloud types. And he *knew* that the Ancient Ship was of the fourth order of categories.

It was a false memory.

It was not his.

Therefore, logically, it was someone else's memory; and being available to his own mind, as the fourteen other hands and eyes were available, it must belong to—another branch of the snowflake.

He turned his eyes down and tried to see which of the branches was his old body. He found it quickly, with growing excitement. There was the left great toe of his body. He had injured it in boyhood and there was no mistaking the way it was bent. Good! It was reassuring.

He tried to feel the one particular body that led to that familiar toe.

He succeeded, though not easily. After a time, he became more aware of *that* body—somewhat as a neurotic may become "stomach conscious" or "heart conscious." But this was no neurosis; it was an intentional exploration.

Since that worked, with some uneasiness he transferred his attention to another pair of feet and "thought" his way up from them.

It was embarrassing.

For the first time in his life, he knew what it felt like to have breasts. For the first time in his life, he knew what it was like to have one's internal organs quite differently shaped and arranged, buttressed and stressed by different muscles. The very faint background feel of man's internal arrangements, never questioned unless something goes wrong with them and they start to hurt, was not at all like the faint background feel that a woman has inside her.

And when he concentrated on that feel, it was no faint background to him. It was surprising and upsetting.

He withdrew his attention—hoping that he would be able to. Gratefully, he became conscious of his own body again. He was still *himself* if he chose to be.

Were the other seven still themselves?

He reached into his mind—all of it, all eight separate intelligences that were combined within him.

"Is anybody there?" he demanded.

No answer—or nothing he could recognize as an answer. He drove harder and there still was none. It was annoying. He resented it as bitterly, he remembered, as in the old days when he had first been learning the subtleties of Ruin Appreciation. There had been a Ruin Master, his name forgotten, who had been sometimes less than courteous, had driven hard—

Another false memory!

He withdrew and weighed it. Perhaps, he thought, that was a part of the answer. These people, these other seven, would not be driven. The attempt to call them back to consciousness would have to be delicate. When he drove hard, it was painful—he

remembered the instant violent agony of his own awakening—and they reacted with anguish.

More gently, alert for vagrant "memories," he combed the depths of the eightfold mind within him, reaching into the sleeping portions, touching, handling, sifting and associating, sorting. This memory of an old knife wound from an Amok—that was not the Raincloud woman; it was a man, very aged. This faint recollection of a childhood fear of drowning—was that she? It was; it fitted with this other recollection, the long detour on the road south toward the sun, around a river.

The Raincloud woman was the first to round out in his mind, and the first he communicated with. He was not surprised to find that, early in her life, she had feared that she might be Wolf.

He reached out for her. It was almost magic—knowing the "secret name" of a person, so that then he was yours to command. But the "secret name" was more than that. It was the gestalt of the person. It was the sum of all data and experience, never available to another person—until now.

With her memories arranged at last in his own mind, he thought persuasively: "Citizeness Alla Narova, will you awaken and speak with me?"

No answer—only a vague, troubled stirring.

Gently he persisted: "I know you well, Alla Narova. You sometimes thought you might be a Daughter of the Wolf, but never really believed it because you knew you loved your husband—and thought Wolves did not love. You loved Rainclouds, too. It was when you stood at Beachy Head and saw a great cumulus that you went into Meditation—"

And on and on, many times, coaxingly. Even so, it was not easy; but at last he began to reach her. Slowly she began to surface. Thoughts faintly sounded in his mind, like echoes at first, his own thoughts bouncing back at him, a sort of mental nod of agreement: "Yes, that is so." Then—terror. With a shaking fear, a hysterical rush, Citizeness Alla Narova came violently up to full consciousness and to panic.

She was soundlessly screaming. The whole eight-branched figure quivered and twisted in its nutrient bath.

The terrible storm raged in Tropile's own mind as fully as in hers—but he had the advantage of knowing what it was. He helped her. He fought it for the two of them ... soothing, explaining, calming.

At last her branch of the snowflake-body retreated, sobbing for a spell. The storm was over.

He talked to her in his mind and she "listened." She was incredulous, but there was no choice for her; she *had* to believe.

Exhausted and passive, she asked finally: "What can we do? I wish I were dead!"

He told her: "You were never a coward before. Remember, Alla Narova, I *know* you as nobody has ever known another human being before. That's the way you will know me. As for what we can do—we must begin by waking the others, if we can."

"If not?"

"If not," Tropile replied grimly, "then we will think of something else."

She was of tough stuff, he thought admiringly. When she had rested and absorbed things, her spirit was almost that of a Wolf; she had very nearly been right about herself.

Together they explored their twinned members. They found through them exactly what task was theirs to do. They found how the electrostatic harvesting scythe of the Pyramids was controlled, by and through them. They found what limitations there were and what freedoms they owned. They reached into the other petals of the snowflake, reached past the linked Components into the whole complex of electrostatic field generators and propulsion machinery, reached even past that into—

Into the great single function of the Pyramids that lay beyond.

XI

Haendl was on the ragged edge of breakdown, which was something new in his life.

It was full hot summer and the hidden colony of Wolves in Princeton should have been full of energy and life. The crops were growing on all the fields nearby; the drained storehouses were being replenished.

The aircraft that had been so painfully rebuilt and fitted for the assault on Mount Everest were standing by, ready to be manned and to take off.

And nothing, absolutely nothing, was going right.

It looked as though there would *be* no expedition to Everest. Four times now, Haendl had gathered his forces and been all ready. Four times, a key man of the expedition had—vanished.

Wolves didn't vanish!

And yet more than a score of them had. First Tropile—then Innison—then two dozen more, by ones and twos. No one was immune. Take Innison, for example. There was a man who was Wolf through and through. He was a doer, not a thinker; his skills were the skills of an artisan, a tinkerer, a jackleg mechanic. How could a man like that succumb to the pallid lure of Meditation?

But undeniably he had.

It had reached a point where Haendl himself was red-eyed and jumpy. He had set curious alarms for himself—had enlisted the help of others of the colony to avert the danger of Translation from himself.

When he went to bed at night, a lieutenant sat next to his bed, watchfully alert lest Haendl, in that moment of reverie before sleep, fell into Meditation and himself be Translated. There was no hour of the day when Haendl permitted himself to be alone; and his companions, or guards, were ordered to shake him awake, as violently as need be, at the first hint of an abstracted look in the eyes or a reflective cast of the features.

As time went on, Haendl's self-imposed regime of constant alertness began to cost him heavily in lost rest and sleep. And the consequences of that were—more and more occasions when the bodyguards shook him awake; less and less rest.

He was very close to breakdown indeed.

On a hot, wet morning a few days after his useless expedition to see Citizen Germyn in Wheeling, Haendl ate a tasteless breakfast and, reeling with fatigue, set out on a tour of inspection of Princeton. Warm rain dripped from low clouds, but that was merely one more annoyance to Haendl. He hardly noticed it.

There were upward of a thousand Wolves in the Community and there were signs of worry on the face of every one of them. Haendl was not the only man in Princeton who had begun laying traps for himself as a result of the unprecedented disappearances; he was not the only one who was short of sleep. When one member in forty disappears, the morale of the whole community receives a shattering blow.

To Haendl, it was clear, looking into the faces of his compatriots, that not only was it going to be nearly impossible to mount the planned assault on the Pyramid on Everest this year, it was going to be unbearably difficult merely to keep the community going.

The whole Wolf pack was on the verge of panic.

There was a confused shouting behind Haendl. Groggily he turned and looked; half a dozen Wolves were yelling and pointing at something in the wet, muggy air.

It was an Eye, hanging silent and featureless over the center of the street.

Haendl took a deep breath and mustered command of himself. "Frampton!" he ordered one of his lieutenants. "Get the helicopter with the instruments here. We'll take some more readings."

Frampton opened his mouth, then looked more closely at Haendl and, instead, began to talk on his pocket radio. Haendl knew what was in the man's mind—it was in his own, too.

What was the use of more readings? From the time of Tropile's Translation on, they had had a superfluity of instrument readings on the forces and auras that surrounded the Eyes—yes, and on Translations themselves, too. Before Tropile, there had never been an Eye seen in Princeton, much less an actual Translation. But things were different now. Everything was different. Eyes roamed restlessly around day and night.

Some of the men nearest the Eye were picking up rocks and throwing them at the bobbing vortex in the air. Haendl started to yell at them to stop, then changed his mind. The Eye didn't seem to be affected—as he watched, one of the men scored a direct hit with a cobblestone. The stone went right through the Eye, without sound or effect; why not let them work off some of their fears in direct action?

There was a fluttering of vanes and the copter with the instruments mounted on it came down in the middle of the street, between Haendl and the Eye.

It was all very rapid from then on.

The Eye swooped toward Haendl. He couldn't help it; he ducked. That was useless, but it was also unnecessary, for he saw in a second that it was only partly the motion of the Eye toward him that made it loom larger; it was also that the Eye itself was growing.

An Eye was perhaps the size of a football, as near as anyone could judge. This one got bigger, bigger. It was the size of a roc's egg, the size of a whale's blunt head. It

stopped and hovered over the helicopter, while the man inside frantically pointed lenses and meters—

Thundercrash.

Not a man this time—Translation had gone beyond men. The whole helicopter vanished, man, instruments, spinning vanes and all.

Haendl picked himself up, sweating, shocked beyond sleepiness.

The young man named Frampton said fearfully: "Haendl, what do we do now?"

"Do?" Haendl stared at him absently. "Why, kill ourselves, I guess."

He nodded soberly, as though he had at last attained the solution of a difficult problem. Then he sighed.

"Well, one thing before that," he said. "I'm going to Wheeling. We Wolves are licked; maybe the Citizens can help us now."

Roget Germyn, of Wheeling, a Citizen, received the message in the chambers that served him as a place of business. He had a visitor waiting for him at home.

Germyn was still Citizen and he could not quickly break off the pleasant and interminable discussion he was having with a prospective client over a potential business arrangement. He apologized for the interruption caused by the message the conventional five times, listened while his guest explained once more the plan he had come to propose in full, then turned his cupped hands toward himself in the gesture of Denial of Adequacy. It was the closest he could come to saying no.

On the other side of the desk, the Citizen who had come to propose an investment scheme immediately changed the subject by inviting Germyn and his Citizeness to a Sirius Viewing, the invitation in the form of rhymed couplets. He had wanted to transact his business very much, but he couldn't *insist*.

Germyn got out of the invitation by a Conditional Acceptance in proper form, and the man left, delayed only slightly by the Four Urgings to Stay. Almost immediately, Germyn dismissed his clerk and closed his office for the day by tying a triple knot in a length of red cord across the open door.

When he got to his home, he found, as he had suspected, that the visitor was Haendl.

There was much doubt in Citizen Germyn's mind about Haendl. The man had nearly admitted to being Wolf, and how could a citizen overlook that? But in the excitement of Gala Tropile's Translation, there had been no hue and cry. Germyn had permitted the man to leave. And now?

He reserved judgment. He found Haendl distastefully sipping tea in the living room and attempting to keep up a formal conversation with Citizeness Germyn. He rescued him, took him aside, closed a door—and waited.

He was astonished at the change in the man. Before, Haendl had been bouncy, aggressive, quick-moving—the very qualities least desired in a Citizen, the mark of the Son of the Wolf. Now he was none of these things, but he looked no more like a Citizen for all that; he was haggard, tense.

He said, with an absolute minimum of protocol: "Germyn, the last time I saw you, there was a Translation. Gala Tropile, remember?"

"I remember," Citizen Germyn said. Remember! It had hardly left his thoughts.

"And you told me there had been others. Are they still going on?"

Germyn said: "There have been others." He was trying to speak directly, to match this man Haendl's speed and forcefulness. It was hardly good manners, but it had occurred to Citizen Germyn that there were times when manners, after all, were not the most important thing in the world. "There were two in the past few days. One was a woman—Citizeness Baird; her husband's a teacher. She was Viewing Through Glass with four or five other women at the time. She just—disappeared. She was looking through a green prism at the time, if that helps."

"I don't know if it helps or not. Who was the other one?"

Germyn shrugged. "A man named Harmane. No one saw it. But they heard the thunderclap, or something like a thunderclap, and he was missing." He thought for a moment. "It is a little unusual, I suppose. Two in a week—"

Haendl said roughly: "Listen, Germyn. It isn't just two. In the past thirty days, within the area around here and in *one other place*, there have been at least fifty. In *two* places, do you understand? Here and in Princeton. The rest of the world—nothing much; a few Translations here and there. But just in these two communities, fifty. Does that make sense?"

Citizen Germyn thought. "—No."

"No. And I'll tell you something else. Three of the—well, victims have been children under the age of five. One was too young to walk. And the most recent Translation wasn't a person at all. It was a helicopter. Now figure that out, Germyn. What's the explanation for Translations?"

Germyn was gaping. "Why—you Meditate, you know. On Connectivity. The idea is that once you've grasped the Essential Connectivity of All Things, you become One with the Cosmic Whole. But I don't see how a baby or a machine—"

"No, of course you don't. Remember Glenn Tropile?"

"Naturally."

"He's the link," Haendl said grimly. "When he got Translated, we thought it was a big help, because he had the consideration to do it right under our eyes. We got enough readings to give us a clue as to what, physically speaking, Translation is all about. That was the first real clue and we thought he'd done us a favor. Now I'm not so sure."

He leaned forward. "Every person I know of who was Translated was someone Tropile knew. The three kids were in his class at the nursery school—we put him there for a while to keep him busy, when he first came to us. Two of the men he bunked with are gone; the mess boy who served him is gone; his wife is gone. Meditation? No, Germyn. I know most of those people. Not a damned one of them would have spent a moment Meditating on Connectivity to save his life. And what do you make of that?"

Swallowing hard, Germyn said: "I just remembered. That man Harmane—"

"What about him?"

"The one who was Translated last week. He also knew Tropile. He was the Keeper of the House of the Five Regulations when Tropile was there."

"You see? And I'll bet the woman knew Tropile, too." Haendl got up fretfully, pacing around. "Here's the thing, Germyn. I'm licked. You know what I am, don't you?"

Germyn said levelly: "I believe you to be Wolf."

"You believe right. That doesn't matter any more. You don't like Wolves. Well, I don't like you. But this thing is too big for me to care about that any more. Tropile has started something happening, and what the end of it is going to be, I can't tell. But I know this: We're not safe, either of us. Maybe you still think Translation is a fulfillment. I don't; it scares me. *But it's going to happen to me*—and to you. It's going to happen to everybody who ever had anything to do with Glenn Tropile, unless we can somehow stop it—and I don't know how. Will you help me?"

Germyn, trying not to tremble when all his buried fears screamed *Wolf!*, said honestly: "I'll have to sleep on it."

Haendl looked at him for a moment. Then he shrugged. Almost to himself, he said: "Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe we can't do anything about it anyhow. All right. I'll come back in the morning, and if you've made up your mind to help, we'll start trying to make plans. And if you've made up your mind the other way—well, I guess I'll have to fight off a few Citizens. Not that I mind that."

Germyn stood up and bowed. He began the ritual Four Urgings.

"Spare me that," Haendl growled. "Meanwhile, Germyn, if I were you, I wouldn't make any long-range plans. You may not be here to carry them out."

Germyn asked thoughtfully: "And if you were *you*?"

"I'm not making any," Haendl said grimly.

Citizen Germyn, feeling utterly tainted with the scent of the Wolf in his home, tossed in his bed, sleepless. His eyes were wide open, staring at the dark ceiling. He could hear his wife's decorous breathing from the foot of the bed—soft and regular, it should have been lulling him to sleep.

It was not. Sleep was very far away.

Germyn was a brave enough man, as courage is measured among Citizens. That is to say, he had never been afraid, though it was true that there had been very little occasion. But he was afraid now. He didn't want to be Translated.

The Wolf, Haendl, had put his finger on it: *Perhaps you still think Translation is a fulfillment*. Translation—the reward of Meditation, the gift bestowed on only a handful of gloriously transfigured persons. That was one thing. But the sort of Translation that was now involved was nothing like that—not if it happened to children; not if it happened to Gala Tropile; not if it happened to a machine.

And Glenn Tropile was involved in it.

Germyn turned restlessly.

If people who knew Glenn Tropile were likely to be Translated, and people who Meditated on Connectivity were likely to be Translated, then people who knew Glenn Tropile and didn't want to be Translated had better not Meditate on Connectivity.

It was very difficult to *not* think of Connectivity.

Endlessly he calculated sums in arithmetic in his mind, recited the Five Regulations, composed Greeting Poems and Verses on Viewing. And endlessly he kept coming back to Tropile, to Translation, to Connectivity. He didn't *want* to be Translated. But still the thought had a certain lure. What was it like? Did it hurt?

Well, probably not, he speculated. It was very fast, according to Haendl's report—if you could believe what an admitted Son of the Wolf reported. But Germyn had to.

Well, if it was fast—at that kind of speed, he thought, perhaps you would die instantly. Maybe Tropile was dead. Was that possible? No, it didn't seem so; after all, there was the fact of the connection between Tropile and so many of the recently Translated. What was the connection there? Or, generalizing, what connections were involved in—

He rescued himself from the dread word and summoned up the first image that came to mind. It happened to be Tropile's wife—Gala Tropile, who had disappeared herself, in this very room.

Gala Tropile. He stuck close to the thought of her, a little pleased with himself. That was the trick of *not* thinking of Connectivity—to think so hard and fully of something else as to leave no room in the mind for the unwanted thought. He pictured every line of her face, every wave of her stringy hair....

It was very easy that way. He was pleased.

XII

On Mount Everest, the sullen stream of off-and-on responses that was "mind" to the Pyramid had taken note of a new input signal.

It was not a critical mind. Its only curiosity was a restless urge to shove-and-haul, and there was no shove-and-haul about what to it was perhaps the analogue of a man's hunger pang. The input signal said: *Do thus*. It obeyed.

Call it craving for a new flavor. Where once it had patiently waited for the state that Citizens knew as Meditation on Connectivity, and the Pyramid itself perhaps knew as a stage of ripeness in the fruits of its wristwatch mine, now it wanted a different taste. Unripe? Overripe? At any rate, different.

Accordingly, the high-frequency wheep, wheep changed in tempo and in key, and the bouncing echoes changed and ... there was a ripe one to be plucked. (Its name was Innison.) And there another. (Gala Tropile.) And another, another—oh, many others—a babe from Tropile's nursery school and the Wheeling jailer and a woman Tropile once had coveted on the street.

Once the ruddy starch-to-sugar mark of ripeness had been what human beings called Meditation on Connectivity and the Pyramids knew as a convenient blankness. Now the sign was a sort of empathy with the Component named Tropile. It didn't matter to the Pyramid on Mount Everest. It swung its electrostatic scythe and the—call them Tropiletropes—were harvested.

It did not occur to the Pyramid on Mount Everest that a Component might be directing its actions. How could it?

Perhaps the Pyramid on Mount Everest wondered, if it knew how to wonder, when it noticed that different criteria were involved in selecting components these days. If it knew how to "notice." Surely even a Pyramid might wonder when, without warning or explanation, its orders were changed—not merely to harvest a different sort of Component, but to drag along with the flesh-and-blood needful parts a clanking assortment of machinery and metal, as began to happen. Machines? Why would the Pyramids need to Translate machines?

But why, on the other hand, would a Pyramid bother to question a directive, even if it were able to?

In any case, it didn't. It swung its scythe and gathered in what it was caused to gather in.

Men sometimes eat green fruit and come to regret it. Was it the same with Pyramids?

And Citizen Germyn fell into the unsuspected trap. Avoiding Connectivity, he thought of Glenn Tropile—and the unfelt h-f pulses found him out.

He didn't see the Eye that formed above him. He didn't feel the gathering of forces that formed his trap. He didn't know that he was seized, charged, catapulted through space, caught, halted and drained. It happened too fast.

One moment he was in his bed; the next moment he was—elsewhere. There wasn't anything in between.

It had happened to hundreds of thousands of Components before him, but, for Citizen Germyn, what happened was in some ways different. He was not embalmed in nutrient fluid, formed and programmed to take his part in the Pyramid-structure, for he had not been selected by the Pyramid but by that single wild Component, Tropile. He arrived conscious, awake and able to move.

He stood up in a red-lit chamber. Vast thundering crashes of metal buffeted his ears. Heat sprang little founts of perspiration on his skin.

It was too much, too much to take in at once. Oily-skinned madmen, naked, were capering and shouting at him. It took him a moment to realize that they were not devils; this was not Hell; he was not dead.

"This way!" they were bawling at him. "Come on, hurry it up!"

He reeled, following their directions, across an unpleasantly warm floor, staggering and falling—the binary planet was a quarter denser than Earth—until he got his balance.

The capering madmen led him through a door—or sphincter or trap; it was not like anything he had ever seen. But it was a portal of a sort, and on the other side of it was something closer to sanity. It was another room, and though the light was still red, it was a paler, calmer red and the thundering ironmongery was a wall away. The madmen were naked, yes, but they were not mad. The oil on their skins was only the sheen of sweat.

"Where—where am I?" he gasped.

Two voices, perhaps three or four, were all talking at once. He could make no sense of it. Citizen Germyn looked about him. He was in a sort of chamber that formed a

part of a machine that existed for the unknown purposes of the Pyramids on the binary planet. And he was alive—and not even alone.

He had crossed more than a million miles of space without feeling a thing. But when what the naked men were saying began to penetrate, the walls lurched around him.

It was true; he had been Translated.

He looked dazedly down at his own bare body, and around at the room, and then he realized they were still talking: "—when you get your bearings. Feel all right now? Come on, Citizen, snap out of it!"

Germyn blinked.

Another voice said peevishly: "Tropile's got to find some other place to bring them in. That foundry isn't meant for human beings. Look at the shape this one is in! Some time somebody's going to come in and we won't spot him in time and—pfut!"

The first voice said: "Can't be helped. Hey! Are you all right?"

Citizen Germyn looked at the naked man in front of him and took a deep breath of hot, sour air. "Of course I'm all right," he said.

The naked man was Haendl.

The Tropile-petal "said" to the Alla Narova-petal: "Got another one! It's Citizen Germyn!" The petal fluttered feebly in soundless laughter.

The Alla Narova-petal "said": "Glenn, come back! The whole propulsion-pneuma just went out of circuit!"

Tropile pulled his attention away from his human acquisitions in the chamber off the foundry and allowed himself to fuse with the woman-personality. Together they reached out and explored along the pathways they had laboriously traced. The propulsion-pneuma was the complex of navigation-computers, drive generators, course-vectoring units that their own unit had been originally part of—until Glenn Tropile, by waking its Components, had managed to divert it for purposes of his own. The two of them reached out into it—

Dead end.

It was out of circuit, as Alla Narova had said. One whole limb of their body—their new, jointly tenanted body, that spanned a whole planet and reached across space to Earth—had been lopped off. Quick, quick, they separated, traced separate paths. They came together again: Still dead end.

The dyad that was Tropile and the woman reached out to touch the others in the snowflake and communicated—not in words, not in anything as slow and as opaque as words: *The Pyramids have lopped off another circuit.* The compound personality of the snowflake considered its course of action, reached its decision, acted. Quick, quick, three of the other members of the snowflake darted out of the collective unit and went about isolating and tracing the exact area that had been affected.

Tropile: "We expected this. They couldn't help noticing sooner or later that something was going wrong."

Alla Narova: "But, Glenn, suppose they cut *us* out of circuit? We're stuck here. We can't move. We can't get out of the tanks. If they know that we are the source of their trouble—"

Tropile: "Let them know! That's what we've got the others here for!" He was cocky now, self-assured, fighting. For the first time in his life, he was free to fight—to let his Wolf blood strive to the utmost—and he knew what he was fighting for. This wasn't a matter of Haendl's pitiful tanks and carbines against the invulnerable Pyramids; this was the invulnerability of the whole Pyramid system turned against the Pyramids!

It was a warning, the fact that the Pyramids had become alert to danger, had begun cutting sections of their planetary communications system out of the main circuit. But as a warning, it didn't frighten Tropile; it only spurred him to action.

Quick, quick, he and the woman-personality dissolved, sped away. Figuratively they sought out the most restive Components they could find, shook them by the shoulder, tried to wake them. Actually—well, what is "actually?" The physical fact was surely that they didn't move at all, for they were bound to their tank and to the surgical joinings, each to each, at their temples. No crawling child in a playpen was more helplessly confined than Tropile and Alla Narova and the others.

And yet no human being had ever been more free.

Regard that imbecile servant of Everyman, the thermostat.

He runs the furnace in Everyman's house, he measures the doneness of Everyman's breakfast toast, he valves the cooling fluid through the radiator of Everyman's car. If Everyman's house stays too hot or too cold, the man swears at the lackwit switch and maybe buys a new one to plug in. But he never, never thinks that his thermostat might be plotting against him.

Thermostat : Man = Man : Pyramid. Only that and nothing more. It was not in the nature of a Pyramid to think that its Components, once installed, could reprogram themselves. No Component ever had. (But before Glenn Tropile, no Component had been Wolf.)

When Tropile found himself, he found others. They were men and women, real persons with gonads and dreams. They had been caught at the moment of blankness—yes; and frozen into that shape, true. But they were palimpsest personalities on which the Pyramids had programmed their duties. Underneath the Pyramids' cabalistic scrawl, the men and women still remained. They had only to be reached.

Tropile and Alla Narova reached them—one at a time, then by scores. The Pyramids made that possible. The network of communication that they had created for their own purposes encompassed every cell of the race and all its works. Tropile reached out from his floating snowflake and went where he wished—anywhere within the binary planet; to the brooding Pyramid on Earth; through the Eyes, wherever he chose on Earth's surface.

Physically, he was scarcely able to move a muscle. But, oh, the soaring range of his mind and vision!

Citizen Germyn was past shock, but just the same it was uncomfortable to be in a room with several dozen other persons, all of them naked. Uncomfortable. Once it would have been brain-shattering. For a Citizen to see his own Citizeness unclothed was gross lechery. To be part of a mixed and bare-skinned group was unthinkable. Or had been. Now it only made him uneasy.

He said numbly to Haendl: "Citizen, I pray you tell me what sort of place this is."

"Later," said Haendl gruffly, and led him out of the way. "Stay put," he advised. "We're busy."

And that was true. Something was going on, but Citizen Germyn couldn't make out exactly what it was. The naked people were worrying out a distribution of some sort of supplies. There were tools and there were also what looked to Citizen Germyn's unsophisticated eyes very much like guns. Guns? It was foolishness to think they were guns, Citizen Germyn told himself strongly. *Nobody* had guns. He touched the floor with an exploratory hand. It was warm and it shook with a nameless distant vibration. He shuddered.

Haendl came back; yes, they were guns. Haendl was carrying one.

"Ours!" he crowed. "That Tropile must've looted our armory at Princeton. By the looks of what's here, I doubt if he left a single round of ammunition. What the hell, they're more use here!"

"But what are we going to do with *guns*?"

Haendl looked at him with savage amusement. "Shoot."

Citizen Germyn said: "Please, Citizen. Tell me what this is all about."

Haendl sat down next to him on the warm, quivering floor and began fitting cartridges into a clip.

"We're fighting," he explained gleefully. "Tropile did it all. You've been shanghaied and so have all the rest of us. Tropile's alive! He's part of the Pyramid communications network—don't ask me how. But he's there and he has been hauling men and weapons and God knows what all up from Earth—you're on the binary planet now, you know—and we're going to bust things up so the Pyramids will *never* be able to put them back together again. Understand? Well, it doesn't matter if you don't. All you have to understand is that when I tell you to shoot this gun, you shoot."

Numbly, Citizen Germyn took the unfamiliar stock and barrel into his hands. Muscles he had forgotten he owned straightened the limp curve of his back, squared his shoulders and thrust out his chest.

It had been many generations since any of Citizen Germyn's people had known the feeling of being an Armed Man.

A naked woman with wild hair and a full, soft figure came toward them, jiggling in a way that agonized Citizen Germyn. He dropped his eyes to his gun and kept them there.

She cried: "Orders from Tropile! We've got to form a party and blow something up."

Haendl demanded: "Such as what?"

"I don't know what. I only know where. We've got a guide. And Tropile particularly asked for you, Haendl. He said you'd enjoy it."

And enjoy it Haendl did—anticipation was all over his face.

They formed a party of a dozen. They armed themselves with the guns Tropile had levitated from the bulging warehouse at Princeton. They supplied themselves with gray metal cans of something that Haendl said were explosives, and with fuses and detonators to match, and they set off—with their guide.

A guide! It was a shambling, fearsome monster!

When Citizen Germyn saw it, he had to fight an almost irresistible temptation to be ill. Even the bare skins about him no longer mattered; this new horror canceled them out.

"What—What—" he strangled, pointing.

Haendl laughed raucously. "That's Joey."

"What's Joey?"

"He works for us," said Haendl, grinning.

Joey was neither human nor beast; it was not Pyramid; it was nothing Citizen Germyn had ever seen or imagined before. It crouched on many-jointed limbs, and even so was twice the height of a man. Its ropy arms and legs were covered with fine chitinous spines, laid on as close as hairs in a pelt, and sharp as thorns. There was a layer of chitin around its reddish eyes. What was more horrible than all, it spoke.

It said squeakily: "You all ready? Come on, snap it up! The Pyramids have got something big building up and we've got to squash it."

Citizen Germyn whispered feverishly to Haendl: "That voice! It sounds odd, yes—but isn't it Tropile's voice?"

"Sure it is! That's what old Joey is good for," said Haendl. "Tropile says he's telepathic, whatever that is. Makes it handy for us."

And it did. Telepathy was the alien's very special use to Glenn Tropile, for what Joey was in fact was another Component, from a previous wristwatch mine. Joey's planet had once circled a star never visible from Earth; his home air was thin and his home sunlight was weak, and in consequence his race had developed a species of telepathy for communicating at long range. This was handy for the Pyramids, because it simplified the wiring. And it was equally handy for Glenn Tropile, once he managed to wake the creature—with its permission, he could use its body as a sort of walkie-talkie in directing the tactics of his shanghaied army.

That permission was very readily given. Joey remembered what the Pyramids had done to its own planet.

"Come on!" ordered Joey in Tropile's filtered voice, and they hastened through a straight and aching cramped tunnel in single file, toward what Tropile had said was their target.

They had nearly reached it when, abruptly, there was a thundering of explosions ahead.

The party stopped, looked at each other, and got ready to move on more slowly.

At last it had started. The Pyramids were beginning to fight back.

XIII

Citizeness Roget Germyn, widow, woke from sleep like a well-mannered cat on the narrow lower third of the bed that her training had taught her to occupy, though it had been some days since her husband's Translation had emptied the Citizen's two-thirds permanently.

Someone had tapped gently on her door.

"I am awake," she called, in a voice just sufficient to carry.

A quiet voice said: "Citizeness, there is exceptional opportunity to Appreciate this morning. Come see, if you will. And I ask forgiveness for waking you."

She recognized the voice; it was the wife of one of her neighbors. The Citizeness made the appropriate reply, combining forgiveness and gratitude.

She dressed rapidly, but with appropriate pauses for reflection and calm, and stepped out into the street.

It was not yet daylight. Overhead, great sheets of soundless lightnings flared.

Inside Citizeness Germyn long-unfelt emotions stirred. There was something that was very like terror, and something that was akin to love. This was a generation that had never seen the aurora, for the ricocheting electron beams that cause it could not span the increasing distance between the orphaned Earth and its primary, Old Sol, and the small rekindled suns the Pyramids made were far too puny.

Under the sleeting aurora, small knots of Citizens stood about the streets, their faces turned up to the sky and illuminated by the distant light. It was truly an exceptional opportunity to Appreciate and they were all making the most of it.

Conscientiously, Citizeness Germyn sought out another viewer with whom to exchange comments on the spectacle above. "It is more bright than meteors," she said judiciously, "and lovelier than the freshly kindled Sun."

"Sure," said the woman. Citizeness Germyn, jolted, looked more closely. It was the Tropile woman—Gala? Was that her name? And what sort of name was *that*? But it fitted her well; she was the one who had been wife to Wolf and, more likely than not, part Wolf herself.

Still, the case was not proved. Citizeness Germyn said honestly: "I have never seen a sight to compare with this in all my life."

Gala Tropile said indifferently: "Yeah. Funny things are happening all the time these days, have you noticed? Ever since Glenn turned out to be—" She stopped.

Citizeness Germyn rapidly diagnosed her embarrassment and acted to cover it up. "That is so. I have seen Eyes a hundred times and yet has there been a Translation with the Eyes? No. But there have been Translations. It is queer."

"I suppose so," Gala Tropile said, looking upward at the display. She sighed.

Over their heads, a formed Eye was drifting slowly about, but neither of the women noticed it. The shifting lights in the sky obscured it.

"I wonder what causes that stuff," Gala Tropile said idly.

Citizeness Germyn made no attempt to answer. It was not the sort of question that would normally have occurred to her and therefore not a sort to which she could reply.

Moreover, it was not the question closest to Gala Tropile's heart at that moment—nor, for that matter, the question closest to Citizeness Germyn's. The question that underlay the thoughts of both was: *I wonder what happened to my husband.*

It was strange, but true, that the answers to all their questions were very nearly the same.

The Alla-Narova mind said sharply: "Glenn, come back!"

Tropile withdrew from scanning the distant dark street. He laughed soundlessly. "I was watching my wife. God, we're giving them fits down there! The Pyramids must be churning things up, too—the sky is full of auroral displays. Looks like there's plenty of h-f bouncing around the atmosphere."

"Pay attention!" the Alla-Narova mind commanded.

"All right." Obediently, Tropile returned to the war he was waging.

It was a strange conflict, strangely fought. Tropile's mind searched the abysses and tunnels of the Pyramid planet, and what he sensed or saw was immediately communicated to all of the awakened Components who were his allies.

It was a godlike position. Was he sane? There was no knowing. Sanity no longer meant anything to Tropile. He was beyond such human affairs as lunacy or its reverse. An insane man is one who is out of joint with his environment. Tropile was himself his environment. His mind encompassed two planets and the space between. He saw with a thousand eyes. He worked with a thousand hands.

And he struck mighty blows.

The weakness of a network that reaches everywhere is that it is everywhere vulnerable. If a teletype repeater in Omaha garbles a single digit, printing units in Atlanta and Bangor will type out errors. Tropile, by striking at the Pyramids' net at a thousand points, garbled their communications and made them nearly useless. More, he took the Pyramid network for his own. The Tropile-pulse sped through the neurone guides of the Pyramid net, and what it encountered it mastered, and what it mastered it changed.

The Pyramids discovered that they had been attacked.

Frantically (if they felt frenzy), the Pyramids replaced Components; the Tropile-pulse woke the new ones. Unbelievably (did they know how to "believe"?), the Pyramids isolated contaminated circuits; the Tropile-pulse bypassed them.

Desperately (or joyously or uffishly—one term fits exactly as well as another), the Pyramids returned to shove-and-haul, and there was much destruction, and some Components died.

But by then, the Components had reprogrammed themselves.

The first job had been the matter of finding hands for the Tropile-brain to work with. Bring hands in, then! Tropile commanded the Pyramids' network and obediently it

was done. The Translation mechanism, the electrostatic scythe that had harvested so many crops from the wristwatch mines, suffered a change and went to work not for the pickers but for the fruit.

The essential change in the operation of that particular pneuma had been simple; first, to "harvest" or "Translate" the men and women Tropile wanted as fighters instead of the meditative Citizen kind. Second, to divert the new arrivals to where they would not go straight to deep-freeze. It happened that the only alternate space Tropile could find was a sort of foundry that was nearly Hell, but that was only a detail. The important thing was that new helpers were arriving, with minds of their own and the capacity to move and act.

Then Tropile needed to communicate with them. He found the alien, ropy-limbed Component whose name vaguely approached "Joey." Joey's limited sense of telepathy was needed and so, with enormous difficulty, Tropile and Alla Narova, combined, managed to reach and wake it.

And so he had an army, captured humans for troops, an awakened Joey for liaison.

Tropile was lord of two worlds. Not only the Pyramids were under his thumb, but his own fellow humans whom he had drafted into his service. They ate when a captured circuit he controlled fed synthetic mush into troughs for them. They breathed because a captured circuit he directed created air. They would return to Earth when—and only when—a captured circuit he operated sent them home.

Sane?

By what standards?

And what difference did it make?

XIV

With a series of grinding shocks, like an enormous earthquake-fault relieving a strain, the Pyramids began to fight back.

"Tropile!" the Alla-Narova mind called urgently.

Tropile flashed to the trouble spot. Through eyes that were not his own, Tropile scanned the honeycombed world of the Pyramids. There was an area where huge and ancient vehicles lay covered with the slow dust of centuries, and the vehicles were beginning to move.

Caterpillar-treaded hauling machines were loading themselves with what Tropile judged were quickly synthesized explosives. Almost forgotten wheeled vehicles were creeping mindlessly out of nearly abandoned storage sections and lumbering painfully along the tunnels of the planet.

"Coming toward us," Tropile diagnosed dispassionately.

Alla Narova queried: "They mean to fight?"

"Of course. You see if you can penetrate the circuit that controls them. I—" already he was flashing away—"I'll get to the boys through Joey."

It was queer, looking through the eyes of the alien they called Joey; colors were all wrong, perspective was flat. But he could see, though cloudily. He saw Haendl

joyously fitting a bayonet—*a bayonet!*—to a rifle; he saw Citizen Germyn, naked but square-shouldered, puffing valiantly along in the rear.

Tropile said through the strange vocal cords that belonged to the alien: "You'll have to hurry." (Strange to speak in words again!) "The Pyramids are heading toward the chambers where the Components are kept. I think they mean to kill us."

He flashed away, located the area, flashed back. "You'll have to go without me—I mean without Joey-me. The only way I see to get there is through a narrow little ventilation tunnel—I guess ventilation is what it was for."

Quickly (but against the familiar race of thought, it seemed agonizingly slow) he laid out the route for them and left; it was up to them. Watching from a dozen viewpoints at once, he saw the slow creep of the Pyramids' machines and the slower intersecting march of his little army. He studied the alternate cross routes and contrived to block some of them by interfering with the control-circuits of the emergency doors and portals.

But there were some circuits he could not control. The Pyramids had withdrawn whole sections of their net and areas of the planet were now hidden from him entirely. Sections of the vast maintenance-propulsion-manufacturing complex were no longer subject to his interference or control.

It would be, Tropile thought dispassionately, a rather close thing. The chances were perhaps six out of ten that his hastily assembled task force would be able to intercept the convoy of automatic machines before it could reach the racks of nutrient tanks.

And if they were not in time?

Tropile almost laughed out loud, if that had been possible. Why, then, his body would be destroyed! How trivial a thing to worry about! He began to forget he owned a body; surely it was someone else's bone and tissue that lay floating in the eight-branched snowflake. He knew that this was not so. He knew that if his body were killed, he would die. And yet there was no sense of fear, no personal involvement. It was an interesting problem in scheduling and nothing more.

Would the human fighters get there in time?

Perhaps the automatic machines had senses, for as the first of the humans burst into the tunnel they were using, a few hundred yards ahead of the lead load-carrier, the machines shuddered to a stop. Pause for a second; then, laboriously, they began to back toward the nearest of the side passages that Tropile had been unable to block. He scanned it hurriedly. Good, good! The circuits surrounding the passage proper were out of his reach, but it led to another passage, an abandoned pipeline of sorts, it seemed to be. And *that* he could reach....

Patiently (how slowly the machines crept along!) he waited until one of the Pyramids' machines bearing explosives passed through an enormous valve in the line—and then the valve was thrown.

The explosion triggered every vehicle in the line. The damage was complete.

Scratch one threat from the Pyramids—

And almost at once, there was another urgent call from Alia Narova: "Tropile, quickly!"

The Pyramids were the mightiest race of warriors the Universe had ever known. They were invulnerable and unconquerable, except from within. Like Alexander the Great, they had met every enemy and whipped them all. And, like dying Alexander, they writhed and raged against the tiny, unseen bacillus within themselves.

Blindly, almost suicidally, the Pyramids returned to their ancient principle of shove-and-haul.

The geography of the binary planet was like a hive of bees, nearly featureless on the surface, but internally a congeries of tunnels, chambers, warrens, rooms, tubes and amphitheaters. Machinery and metal Components were everywhere thick under the planet's crust. The more delicate and more useful Components of flesh and blood were, to a degree, concentrated in a few areas....

And one of those areas had disappeared.

Tropile, battering futilely with his mind at the periphery of the vanished area, cried sharply to Alla Narova and the others: "It looks as though they've broken a piece right out of the planet! Everything stops here—there's a physical gap which I can't cross. Hurry, one of you—what was this section for?"

"Propulsion."

"I see." Tropile hesitated, confused for the first time since his awakening. "Wait."

He retreated to the snowflake and communed with the other eight-branched members, now become something that resembled his general staff. He told them—most of them already knew, but the telling took so little time that it was simpler to go through it from beginning to end:

"The Pyramids attempted to cut the propulsion-pneuma out of circuit some seconds or days ago and were unsuccessful; we awakened additional Components and were able to maintain contact with it. They have now apparently cut it loose from the planet itself. I do not think it is far, but there is a physical space between."

"The importance of the propulsion-pneuma is this: It controls the master generators of electrostatic force, which are used both to move this planet and ours, and to perform the act of Translation. If the Pyramids control it, they may be able to take us out of circuit, perhaps back to Earth, perhaps throwing us into space, where we will die. The question for decision: How can we counteract this move?"

A rush of voices all spoke at once; it was no trick for Tropile and the others to sort them out and follow the arguments of each, but it cannot be reproduced.

At last, one said: "There is a way. I will do it."

It was Alla Narova.

"What is the way?" Tropile demanded, curiously alarmed.

"I shall go with them, trace the areas the Pyramids are attempting to isolate, place my entire self—" by this she meant her "concentration," her "psyche," that part of all of them which flashed along the neurone guides unhampered by flesh or distance—"in

the most likely point they will next cut loose. And then I shall cause the propulsion units on the severed sections to force them back into circuit."

Tropile objected: "But you don't know what will happen! We have never been cut off from our physical bodies, Alla Narova. It may be death. It may not be possible at all. You don't know!"

Alla Narova thought a smile and a farewell. She said: "No, I do not." And then, "Good-bye, Tropile."

She had gone.

Furiously, Tropile hurled himself after her, but she was quick as he, too quick to catch; she was gone. *Foolishness, foolishness!* he shouted silently. How could she do an insane, chancy thing like this?

And yet what else was there to do? They were all ignorant babes, temporarily successful because there had been no defense against them, for who expects babes to rise up in rebellion? They didn't *know*. For all they could guess or imagine, the Pyramids had an effective counter for any move they might make. Temporary success meant nothing. It was the final decision that counted, when either the Pyramids were vanquished or the men, and what steps were needed to make that decision favor the men were anyone's guess—Alla Narova's was as good as his.

Tropile could only watch and wait.

Through a great many viewpoints and observers, he was able to see roughly what happened.

There was a section of the planet next the severed chunk where the mind and senses of Alla Narova lay coiled for a moment—and were gone. For what it had accomplished, her purpose succeeded. She had been taken. She was out of circuit.

The overwhelming consciousness of loss that flooded through Glenn Tropile was something outside of all his experience.

Next to him in the snowflake, the body which he had learned to think of as the body of Alla Narova twisted sharply as though waking from a dream—and lay flaccid, floating in the fluid.

"Alla Narova! *Alla Narova!*"

There was no answer.

A voice came piercingly: "Tropile! Here now, quickly!"

Good-bye, Alla Narova! He flashed away to see what the other voice had found. Great mindless boulders were chipping away from the crust of the binary planet and whirling like midges in the void around it.

"What is it?" cried one of the others.

Tropile had no answer. It was the Pyramids, clearly. Were they attempting to demolish their own planet? Were they digging away at the crust to uncover the maggot's-nest of awakened Components beneath?

"The air!" cried Tropile sharply, and knew it was true. What the Pyramids were up to was a simple delousing operation. If you could destroy their own machinery for maintaining air and pressure and temperature, they would destroy all living things

within—including Haendl and Citizen Germyn and thus, in the final analysis, including the bodies of Tropile and his awakened fellows. For without the mobile troops to defend their helpless cocoons against the machines of the Pyramids, the limp bodies could be destroyed as easily as a larva under a farmer's heel.

So Alla Narova had failed.

Alone against the Pyramids, she had been unable to bring the recaptured sections back into the circuit that Tropile's Components now dominated. It was the end of hope; but it was not the fear of defeat and damnation for the Earth that paralyzed Tropile. It was Alla Narova, gone from him forever.

The Pyramids were too strong.

And yet, he thought, quickening, they had been too strong before and still a weak spot had been found!

"Think," he ordered himself desperately.

And then again: "Think!" Components stirred restlessly around him, questioning. "Think!" he cried mightily. "All of you, think! Think of your lives and hopes!

"Think!

"Hope!

"Worry!

"Dream!"

The Components were reaching toward him now, wonderingly. He commanded them violently: "Do it—concentrate, wish, think! Let your minds run free and think of Earth, pleasant grass and warm sun! Think of loving and sweat and heartbreak! Think of death and birth! *Think*, for the love of heaven, *think*!"

And the answer was not in sound, but it was deafening.

In the cut-off sections, Alla Narova's soaring mind lay trapped. It had not been enough; she could not force her will against the dull inflexibility of the Pyramids....

Until that inflexible will began to waver.

There was a leakage of thought.

It maddened and baffled the Pyramids. The whole neuronc network was resounding to a babble of thoughts and emotions that, to a Pyramid, were utterly demented! The rousing Component minds throbbed with urge and emotion that were new to Pyramid experience. What could a Pyramid make of a human's sex drive? Or of the ropy-armed aliens' passionate deification of the Egg? What of hunger and thirst and the blazing Wolf-need for odds and advantage that streamed out of such as Tropile?

They wavered, unsure. Their reactions were slow and very confused.

For Alla Narova succeeded in her purpose. She was able to reach out across the space and barrier to Tropile and the propulsion-pneuma was back in circuit. The section that controlled the master generators of the electronic scythe lay under his hands.

"Now!" he cried, and all of the Components reached out to grasp and move.

"Now!" And the central control was theirs; the full flood of power from the generators was at their command.

"Now! Now! Now!" And they reached out, with a fat pencil of electrostatic force and caught the sluggish, brooding Pyramid on Mount Everest.

It had squatted there without motion for more than two centuries. Now it quivered and seemed to draw back, but the probing pencil caught it, and whirled it, and hurled it up and out of Earth, into the tiny artificial sun.

It struck with a flare of blue-white light.

"One gone!" gloated Tropile. "Alla Narova, are you there?"

"Still here," she called from a great distance. "Again?"

"Again!"

They reached for the Pyramids and found them, wherever they were. Some lay close to the surface of the binary planet, and some were hundreds of miles within, and a few, more desperate than the others or merely assigned to the task, they discovered at the very portal of the single spaceship of the Pyramids.

But wherever they were and whatever they chose to do, each one of them was found and seized. They came wriggling and shaking, like trout on an angler's line. They came bursting through layer on layer of impenetrable metal that, nevertheless, they penetrated. They came by the dozens and scores, and at last by the thousands; but they came.

There were more and more flares of blue-white light on the tiny sun—so many that Tropile found himself scouring the planet in a desperate search for one surviving Pyramid—not to destroy as an enemy, but to keep for a specimen.

But he searched in vain.

The Pyramids were destroyed, gone. There was not one left. The Earth lay open and free under its tiny sun for the first time in centuries.

It had been a strange war, but a short one.

And it was over.

XIV

Tropile swam up out of hammering blackness into daylight and pain.

It *hurt*. He was being born again—coming back to life—and it had all the agonies of parturition, except that they were visited upon the creature being born, himself. There were crushing blows at his temples that pounded and pained like no other ache he had ever felt. He moaned raspingly.

Someone moved blurrily over his shut eyes. He felt something sting sharply at the base of his brain. Then it tingled, warming his scalp, comforting it, numbing it. Pain went slowly away.

He opened his eyes.

Four masked torturers were leaning over him. He stared, not understanding; but the eyes were not torturers' eyes, and in a moment the masks came off. Surgical masks—and the faces beneath the masks were human faces.

Surgeons and nurses.

He blinked at them and said groggily: "Where am we?" And then he remembered.

He was back on Earth; he was merely human again.

Someone came bustling into the room and he knew without looking that it was Haendl.

"We beat them, Tropile!" Haendl cried. "No, cancel that. *You* beat them. We've destroyed every Pyramid there was, and a nice hot fire they're making up there on the sun, eh? Beautiful work, Tropile. Beautiful! You're a credit to the name of Wolf!"

The surgeons stirred uneasily, but apparently, Tropile thought, there had been changes, for they did no more than that.

Tropile touched his temples fretfully and his fingers rested on gauze bandages. It was true: he was out of circuit. The long reach of his awareness was cut short at his skull; there was no more of the infinite sweep and grasp he had known as part of the snowflake in the nutrient fluid.

"Too bad," he whispered hopelessly.

"What?" Haendl frowned. The nurse next to him whispered something and he nodded. "Oh, I see. You're still a little groggy, right? Well, that's not hard to understand—they tell me it was a tricky job of surgery, separating you from that gunk the Pyramids had wired into your head."

"Yes," said Tropile, and closed his ears, though Haendl went on talking. After a while, Tropile pushed himself up and swung his legs over the side of the operating table. He was naked. Once that would have bothered him enormously, but now it didn't seem to matter.

"Find me some clothes, will you?" he asked. "I'm back. I might as well start getting used to it."

Glenn Tropile found that he was a returning hero, attracting a curious sort of hero-worship wherever he went. It was not, he thought after careful analysis, *exactly* what he might have expected. For instance, a man who went out and killed a dragon in the old days was received with great gratitude and rejoicing, and if there was a prince's daughter around, he married her. Fair enough, after all. And Tropile had slain a foe more potent than any number of dragons.

But he tested the attention he received and found no gratitude in it. It was odd.

What it was like most of all, he thought, was the sort of attention a reigning baseball champion might get—in a country where cricket was the national game. He had done something which, everybody agreed, was an astonishing feat, but about which nobody seemed to care. Indeed, there was an area of accusation in some of the attention he got.

Item: nearly ninety thousand erstwhile Components had now been brought back to ambient life, most of them with their families long dead, all of them a certain drain on the limited resources of the planet. And what was Glenn Tropile going to do about it?

Item: the old distinctions between Citizen and Wolf no longer made much sense now that so many Componentized Citizens had fought shoulder to shoulder with

Componentized Sons of the Wolf. But didn't Glenn Tropile think he had gone a little too far *there*?

And item—looking pretty far ahead, of course, but still—well, just what *was* Glenn Tropile going to do about providing a new sun for Earth, when the old one wore out and there would be no Pyramids to tend the fire?

He sought refuge with someone who would understand him. That, he was pleased to realize, was easy. He had come to know several persons extremely well. Loneliness, the tortured loneliness of his youth, was permanently behind him, *definitely*.

For example, he could seek out Haendl, who would understand everything very well.

Haendl said: "It is a bit of a letdown, I suppose. Well, hell with it; that's life." He laughed grimly. "Now that we've got rid of the Pyramids, there's plenty of other work to be done. Man, we can breathe now! We can plan ahead! This planet has maundered along in its stupid, rutted, bogged-down course too many years already, eh? It's time we took over! And we'll be doing it, I promise you. You know, Tropile—" he sniggered—"I only regret one thing."

"What's that?" Tropile asked cautiously.

"All those weapons, out of reach! Oh, I'm not *blaming* you. But you can see what a lot of trouble it's going to be now, stocking up all over again—and there isn't much we can do about bringing order to this tired old world, is there, until we've got the guns to do it with again?"

Tropile left him much sooner than he had planned.

Citizen Germyn, then? The man had fought well, if nothing else. Tropile went to find him and, for a moment at least, it was very good. Germyn said: "I've been doing a lot of thinking, Tropile. I'm glad you're here." He sent his wife for refreshments, and decorously she brought them in, waited for exactly one minute, and then absented herself.

Tropile burst into speech as soon as she left. "I'm beginning to realize what has happened to the human race, Germyn. I don't mean just now, when we licked the Pyramids and so on. No, I mean hundreds of years ago, what happened when the Pyramids arrived, and what has been happening since. Did you ever hear of Indians, Germyn?"

Germyn frowned minutely and shrugged.

"They were, oh, hundreds *and* hundreds of years ago. They were a different color and not very civilized—of course, nobody was then. But the Indians were nomads, herdsmen, hunters—like that. And the white people came from Europe and wanted this country for themselves. So they took it. And do you know something? I don't think the Indians ever knew what hit them."

"*They* didn't know about land grants and claiming territory for the crown and church missions and expanding populations. They didn't have those things. It's true that they learned pretty well, by and by—at least they learned things like guns and horses and firewater; they didn't have those things, either, but they could see some sense to them, you know. But I really don't think the Indians ever knew exactly what the Europeans were up to, until it was too late to matter.

"And it was the same with us and the Pyramids, only more so. What the devil *did* they want? I mean, yes, we found out what they did with the Translated people. But what were they *up* to? What did they *think*? *Did* they think? You know, I've got a kind of a crazy idea—maybe it's not crazy, maybe it's the truth. Anyway, I've been thinking. Suppose even the *Pyramids* weren't the Pyramids? We never talked to one of them. We never gave it a Rorschach or tested its knee jerks. We licked them, but we don't know anything about them. We don't even know if they were the guys that started the whole bloody thing, or if they were just sort of super-sized Components themselves. Do we?

"And meanwhile, here's the human race, up against something that it not only can't understand, same as the Indians couldn't the whites, but that it can't begin to make a *guess* about. At least the Indians had a clue now and then, you know—I mean they'd see the sailors off the great white devil ship making a beeline for the Indian women and so on, and they'd begin to understand there was *something* in common. But we didn't have that much.

"So what did we do? Why, we did like the reservation Indians. We turned inward. We got loaded on firewater—Meditation—and we closed our minds to the possibility of ever expanding again. And there we were, all tied up in our own knots. Most of the race rebelled against action, because it had proven useless—Citizens. A few of the race rebelled against *that*, because it was not only useless but *deliberately* useless—Wolves. But they're the same kind of people. You've seen that for yourself, right? And—"

Tropile stopped, suddenly aware that Citizen Germyn was looking tepidly pained.

"What's the matter?" Tropile demanded harshly.

Citizen Germyn gave him the faint deprecatory Quirked Smile. "I know you thought you were a Wolf, but—I told you I've been thinking a lot, and that's what I was thinking about. *Truly*, Citizen, you do yourself no good by pretending that you really thought you were Wolf. Clearly you were not; the rest of us might have been fooled, but certainly you couldn't fool yourself.

"Now here's what I think you ought to do. When I found you were coming, I asked several rather well-known Citizens to come here later this evening. There won't be any embarrassment. I only want you to talk to them and set the record straight, so that this terrible blemish will no longer be held against you. Times change and perhaps a certain latitude is advisable now, but certainly you don't want—"

Tropile also left Citizen Germyn sooner than he had expected to.

There remained Alla Narova, but, queerly, she was not to be found.

Instantly it became clear to Tropile that it was she above all whom he needed to talk to. He remembered the shared beauty of their plunging drive through the neurone-guides of the Pyramids, the linked and inextricable flow of their thoughts and of their most hidden feelings.

She could not be very far, he thought numbly, cursing the blindness of his human eyes, the narrowness of his human senses. Time was when two worlds could not have hidden her from him; but that time was gone. He walked from place to place with the angry resentful tread of one used to riding—no, to flying, or faster than flying. He asked after her. He searched.

And at last he found—not her. A note. At one of the stations where the re-awakened Components were funneled back into human affairs, there was a letter waiting for him:

I'm sure you will look for me. Please don't. You thought that there were no secrets between us, but there was one.

When I was Translated, I was sixty-one years old. Two years before that, I was caught in a collapsing building; my legs are useless, and I had grown quite fat. I do not want you to see me fat and old.

Alla Narova.

And that was that, and at last Glenn Tropile turned to the last person of all those on his list who had known him well. Her name was Gala Tropile.

She had got thinner, he observed. They sat together quietly and there was considerable awkwardness, but then he noticed that she was weeping. Comforting her ended the awkwardness and he found that he was talking:

"It was like being a god, Gala! I swear, there's no feeling like it. I mean it's like—well, maybe if you'd just had a baby, and invented fire, and moved a mountain, and transmuted lead into gold—maybe if you'd done all of those things, then you might have some idea. But I was everywhere at once, Gala, and I could do anything! I fought a whole world of Pyramids, do you realize that? Me! And now I come back to—"

He stopped her in time; it seemed she was about to weep again.

He went on: "No, Gala, don't misunderstand, I don't hold anything against you. You were right to leave me in the field. What did I have to offer you? Or myself, for that matter? And I don't know that I have anything now, but—"

He slammed his fist against the table. "They talk about putting the Earth back in its orbit! Why? And how? My God, Gala, we don't know *where* we are. Maybe we could tinker up the gadgets the Pyramids used and turn our course backward—but do you know what Old Sol looks like? I don't. I never saw it.

"And neither did you or anyone else alive.

"It was like being a god—

"And they talk about going back to things as they were—

"I'm sick of that kind of thinking! Wolves or Citizens, they're dead on their feet and don't know it. I suppose they'll snap out of it in time, but I can't wait. I won't live that long.

"Unless—"

He paused and looked at her, confused.

Gala Tropile met her husband's eyes.

"Unless what, Glenn?"

He shrugged and turned away.

"Unless you go back, you mean." He stared at her; she nodded. "You want to go back," she said, without stress. "You don't want to stay here with me, do you? You

want to go back into that tub of soup again and float like a baby. You don't want to *have* babies—you want to *be* one."

"Gala, you don't understand. We can own the Universe. I mean mankind can. And I can do it. Why not? There's nothing for me—"

"That's right, Glenn. There's nothing for you here. Not any more."

He opened his mouth to speak, looked at her, spread his hands helplessly. He didn't look back as he walked out the door, but he knew that his back was turned not only on the woman who happened to be his wife, but on mankind and all of the flesh.

It was night outside, and warm. Tropile stood in the old street surrounded by the low, battered houses—and he could make them new and grand! He looked up at the stars that swung in constellations too new and changeable to have names. *There* was the Universe.

Words were no good; there was no explaining things in words. Naturally he couldn't make Gala or anyone else understand, for flesh couldn't grasp the realities of mind and spirit that were liberated from flesh. Babies! A home! And the whole grubby animal business of eating and drinking and sleeping! How could anyone ask to stay in the mire when the stars challenged overhead?

He walked slowly down the street, alone in the night, an apprentice godling renouncing mortality. There was nothing here for him, so why this sense of loss?

Duty said (or was it Pride?): "Someone must give up the flesh to control Earth's orbit and weather—why not you?"

Flesh said (or was it his soul—whatever that was?): "But you will be *alone*."

He stopped, and for a moment he was poised between destiny and the dust....

Until he became aware of footsteps behind him, running, and Gala's voice: "Wait! Wait, Glenn! I want to go with you!"

And he turned and waited, but only until she caught up, and then he went on.

But not—forever and always again—not alone.

SEARCH THE SKY

By Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. Originally published in 1954

..... 1

DECAY.

Ross stood on the traders' ramp, overlooking the Yards, and the word kept bobbing to the top of his mind.

Decay.

About all of Halsey's Planet there was the imperceptible reek of decay. The clean, big, bustling, efficient spaceport only made the sensation stronger. From where he stood on the height of the Ramp, he could see the Yards, the spires of Halsey City ten kilometers away—and the tumble-down gray acres of Ghost Town between.

Ross wrinkled his nose. He wasn't a man given to brooding, but the scent of decay had saturated his nostrils that morning. He had tossed and turned all the night, wrestling with a decision. And he had got up early, so early that the only thing that made sense was to walk to work.

And that meant walking through Ghost Town. He hadn't done that in a long time, not since childhood. Ghost Town was a wonderful place to play. "Tag," "Follow My Fuehrer," "Senators and President"—all the ancient games took on new life when you could dodge and turn among crumbling ruins, dart down unmarked lanes, gallop through sagging shacks where you might stir out a screeching, unexpected recluse.

But it was clear that—in the fifteen years between childhood games and a troubled man's walk to work—Ghost Town had grown.

Everybody knew that! Ask the right specialists, and they'd tell you how much and how fast. An acre a year, a street a month, a block a week, the specialists would twinkle at you, convinced that the acre, street, block was under control, since they could measure it.

Ask the right specialists and they would tell you why it was happening. One answer per specialist, with an ironclad guarantee that there would be no overlapping of replies. "A purely psychological phenomenon, Mr. Ross. A vibration of the pendulum toward greater municipal compactness, a huddling, a mature recognition of the facts of interdependence, basically a step forward...."

"A purely biological phenomenon, Mr. Ross. Falling birth rate due to biochemical deficiency of trace elements processed out of our planetary diet. Fortunately the situation has been recognized in time and my bill before the Chamber will provide...."

"A purely technological problem, Mr. Ross. Maintenance of a sprawling city is inevitably less efficient than that of a compact unit. Inevitably there has been a drift back to the central areas and the convenience of air-conditioned walkways, winterized plazas...."

Yes. It was a purely psychological-biological-technological-educational-demographic problem, and it was basically a step forward.

Ross wondered how many Ghost Towns lay corpselike on the surface of Halsey's Planet. Decay, he thought. Decay.

But it had nothing to do with his problem, the problem that had kept him awake all the night, the problem that blighted the view before him now.

The trading bell clanged. The day's work began.

For Ross it might be his last day's work at the Yards.

He walked slowly from the ramp to the offices of the Oldham Trading Corporation. "Morning, Ross boy," his breezy young boss greeted him. Charles Oldham IV's father had always taken a paternal attitude toward his help, and Charles Oldham IV was not going to change anything that Daddy had done. He shook Ross's hand at the door of the suite and apologized because they hadn't been able to find a new secretary for him yet. They'd been looking for two weeks, but the three applicants they had been able to dredge up had all been hopeless. "It's the damn Chamber," said Charles Oldham IV, winsomely gesturing with his hands to show how helpless men of affairs were against the blundering interference of Government. "Damn labor shortage is nothing but a damn artificial scarcity crisis. Daddy saw it; he knew it was coming."

Ross almost told him he was quitting, but held back. Maybe it was because he didn't want to spoil Oldham's day with bad news, right on top of the opening bell. Or maybe it was because, in spite of a sleepless night, he still wasn't quite sure.

The morning's work helped him to become sure. It was the same monotonous grind.

Three freighters had arrived at dawn from Halsey's third moon, but none of them was any affair of his. There was an export shipment of jewelry and watches to be attended to, but the ship was not to take off for another week. It scarcely classified as urgent. Ross worked on the manifests for a couple of hours, stared through his window for an hour, and then it was time for lunch.

Little Marconi hailed him as he passed through the traders' lounge.

Of all the juniors on the Exchange, Marconi was the one Ross found easiest to take. He was lean and dark where Ross was solid and fair; worse, he stood four ranks above Ross in seniority. But, since Ross worked for Oldham, and Marconi worked for Haarland's, the difference could be waived in social intercourse.

Ross suspected that, to Marconi as to him, trading was only a job—a dull one, and not a crusade. And he knew that Marconi's reading was not confined to bills of lading. "Lunch?" asked Marconi. "Sure," Ross said. And he knew he'd probably spill his secret to the little man from Haarland's.

The skyroom was crowded—comparatively. All eight of the usual tables were taken; they pushed on into the roped-off area by the windows and found a table overlooking the Yards. Marconi blew dust off his chair. "Been a long time since this was used," he grumbled. "Drink?" He raised his eyebrows when Ross nodded. It made a break; Marconi was the one usually who had a drink with lunch, Ross never touched it.

When the drinks came, each of them said to the other in perfect synchronism: "I've got something to tell you."

They looked startled—then laughed. "Go ahead," said Ross.

The little man didn't even argue. Rapturously he drew a photo out of his pocket.

God, thought Ross wearily, Lurline again! He studied the picture with a show of interest. "New snap?" he asked brightly. "Lovely girl—" Then he noticed the inscription: *To my fiancé, with crates of love.* "Well!" he said, "Fiance, is it? Congratulations, Marconi!"

Marconi was almost drooling on the photo. "Next month," he said happily. "A big, big wedding. For keeps, Ross—for keeps. With children!"

Ross made an expression of polite surprise. "You don't say!" he said.

"It's all down in black and white! She agrees to have two children in the first five years—no permissive clause, a straight guarantee. Fifteen hundred annual allowance per child. And, Ross, do you know what? Her lawyer told her right in front of me that she ought to ask for three thousand, and she told him, 'No, Mr. Turek. I happen to be in love.' How do you like that, Ross?"

"A girl in a million," Ross said feebly. His private thoughts were that Marconi had been gaffed and netted like a sugar perch. Lurline was of the Old Landowners, who didn't own anything much but land these days, and Marconi was an undersized nobody who happened to make a very good living. Sure she happened to be in love. Smartest thing she could be. Of course, promising to have children sounded pretty special; but the papers were full of those things every day. Marconi could reliably be counted on to hang himself. He'd promise her breakfast in bed every third week end, or the maid that he couldn't possibly find on the labor market, and the courts would throw all the promises on both sides out of the contract as a matter of simple equity. But the marriage would stick, all right.

Marconi had himself a final moist, fatuous sigh and returned the photo to his pocket. "And now," he asked brightly, craning his neck for the waiter, "what's your news?"

Ross sipped his drink, staring out at the nuzzling freighters in their hemispherical slips. He said abruptly, "I might be on one of those next week. Fallon's got a purser's berth open."

Marconi forgot the waiter and gaped. "Quitting?"

"I've got to do something!" Ross exploded. His own voice scared him; there was a knife blade of hysteria in the sound of it. He gripped the edge of the table and forced himself to be calm and deliberate.

Marconi said tardily, "Easy, Ross."

"Easy! You've said it, Marconi: 'Easy.' Everything's so damned easy and so damned boring that I'm just about ready to blow! I've got to do something," he repeated. "I'm getting nowhere! I push papers around and then I push them back again. You know what happens next. You get soft and paunchy. You find yourself going by the book instead of by your head. You're covered, if you go by the book—no matter what happens. And you might just as well be dead!"

"Now, Ross—"

"Now, hell!" Ross flared. "Marconi, I swear I think there's something wrong with me! Look, take Ghost Town for instance. Ever wonder why nobody lives there, except a couple of crazy old hermits?"

"Why, it's Ghost Town," Marconi explained. "It's deserted."

"And why is it deserted? What happened to the people who used to live there?"

Marconi shook his head. "You need a vacation, son," he said sympathetically. "That was a long time ago. Hundreds of years, maybe."

"But where did the people go?" Ross persisted desperately. "All of the city was inhabited hundreds of years ago—the city was twice as big as it is now. How come?"

Marconi shrugged. "Dunno."

Ross collapsed. "Don't know. You don't know, I don't know, nobody knows. Only thing is, I care! I'm curious. Marconi, I get—well, moody. Depressed. I get to worrying about crazy things. Ghost Town, for one. And why can't they find a secretary for me? And am I really different from everybody else or do I just think so—and doesn't that mean that I'm insane?"

He laughed. Marconi said warmly, "Ross, you aren't the only one; don't ever think you are. I went through it myself. Found the answer, too. You wait, Ross."

He paused. Ross said suspiciously, "Yeah?"

Marconi tapped the breast pocket with the photo of Lurline. "She'll come along," he said.

Ross managed not to sneer in his face. "No," he said wearily. "Look, I don't advertise it, but I was married once. I was eighteen, it lasted for a year and I'm the one who walked out. Flat-fee settlement; it took me five years to pay off the loan, but I never regretted it."

Marconi began gravely, "Sexual incompatibility——"

Ross cut him off with an impatient gesture. "In that department," he said, "it so happens she was a genius. But——"

"But?"

Ross shrugged. "I must have been crazy," he said shortly. "I kept thinking that she was half-dead, dying on the vine like the rest of Halsey's Planet. And I must still be crazy, because I still think so."

The little man involuntarily felt his breast pocket. He said gently, "Maybe you've been working too hard."

"Too hard!" Ross laughed, a curious blend of true humor and self-disgust. "Well," he admitted, "I need a change, anyhow. I might as well be on a longliner. At least I'd have my spree to look back on."

"No!" Marconi said, so violently that Ross slopped the drink he was lifting to his mouth.

Ross looked hard at the little man—hard and speculatively. "No, then," he said. "It was just a figure of speech, of course. But tell me something, won't you, Marconi?"

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me why such a violent reaction to the word 'longliner.' I want to know."

"Hell, Ross," the little man grumbled, "you know what a longliner is. Gutter-scrapings for crews; nothing for a man like you."

"I want to know more," Ross insisted. "When I ask you what a longliner is, what the crew do with themselves for two or three centuries, you change the subject. You always change the subject! Maybe you know something I don't know. I want to know

what it is, and this time the subject doesn't get changed. You don't get off the hook until I find out." He took a sip of his drink and leaned back. "Tell me about longliners," he said. "I've never seen one coming in; it's been fifteen years or so since that bucket from Sirius IV, hasn't it? But you were on the job then."

Marconi was no longer a man in love or one of the few people whom Ross considered to be wholly alive—like him. He was a hard-eyed little stranger with a stubborn mouth and an ingratiating veneer. In short he was again a trader, and a good one.

"I'll tell you anything I know," Marconi declared positively, and insincerely. "Tend to that fellow first though, will you?" He pointed to a uniformed Yards messenger whose eye had just alighted on Ross. The man threaded his way, stumbling, through the tables and laid a sealed envelope down in the puddle left by Ross's drink.

"Sorry, sir," he said crisply, wiped off the envelope with his handkerchief and, for lagniappe, wiped the puddle off the table into Ross's lap.

Speechless, Ross signed for the envelope on a red-tabbed slip marked URGENT * PRIORITY * RUSH. The messenger saluted, almost putting his own eye out, and left, crashing into tables and chairs.

"Half-dead," Ross muttered, following him with his eyes. "How the devil do they stay alive at all?"

Marconi said, unsmiling, "You're taking this kick pretty seriously, Ross. I admit he's a little clumsy, but——"

"But nothing," said Ross. "Don't try to tell me you don't know something's wrong, Marconi! He's a bumbling incompetent, and half his generation is just like him." He looked bitterly at the envelope and dropped it on the table again. "More manifests," he said. "I swear I'll start throwing tableware if I have to check another bill of lading. Brighten my day, Marconi; tell me about the longliners. You're not off the hook yet, you know."

Marconi signaled for another drink. "All right," he said. "Marconi tells all about longliners. They're ships. They go from the planet of one star to the planet of another star. It takes a long time, because stars are many light-years apart and rocket ships cannot travel as fast as light. Einstein said so—whoever he was. Do we start with the Sirius IV ship? I was around when it came in, all right. Fifteen years ago, and Halsey's Planet is still enjoying the benefits of it. And so is Leverett and Sons Trading Corporation. They did fine on flowers from seeds that bucket brought, they did fine on sugar perch from eggs that bucket brought. I've never had it myself. Raw fish for dessert! But some people swear by it—at five shields a portion. They can have it."

"The hook, Marconi," Ross reminded grimly.

Trader Marconi laughed amiably. "Sorry. Well, what else? Pictures and music, but I'm not much on them. I do read, though, and as a reader I say, God bless that bucket from Sirius IV. We never had a novelist like Morris Halliday on this planet—or an essayist like Jay Waring. Let's see, there have been eight Halliday novels off the microfilms so far, and I think Leverett still has a couple in the vaults. Leverett must be——"

"Marconi. I don't want to hear about Leverett and Sons. Or Morris Halliday, or Waring. I want to hear about longliners."

"I'm trying to tell you," Marconi said sullenly, the mask down.

"No, you're not. You're telling me that the longline ships go from one stellar system to another with merchandise. I know that."

"Then what do you want?"

"Don't be difficult, Marconi. I want to know the facts. All about longliners. The big hush-hush. The candid explanations that explain nothing—except that a starship is a starship. I know that they're closed-system, multigeneration jobs; a group of people get in on Sirius IV and their great-great-great-great-grandchildren come giggling and stumbling out on Halsey's Planet. I know that every couple of generations your firm—and mine, for that matter—builds one with profits that would be taxed off anyway and slings it out, stocked with seeds and film and sound tape and patent designs and manufacturing specifications for every new gimmick on the market, in the hope that it'll be back long after we're dead with a similar cargo to enrich your firm's and my firm's then-current owners. Sounds silly—but, as I say, it's tax money anyhow. I know that your firm and mine staff the ships with half a dozen bums of each sex, who are loaded aboard with a dandy case of delirium tremens, contracted from spending their bounty money the only way they know how. And that's just about all I know. Take it from there, Marconi. And be specific."

The little man shrugged irritably. "That gag's beginning to wear thin, Ross," he complained. "What do you want me to tell you—the number of welds in Bulkhead 47 of 'Starship 74'? What's the difference? As you said, a starship is a starship is a longliner. Without them the inhabited solar systems would have no means of contact or commerce. What else is there to say?"

Ross looked suddenly lost. "I—don't know," he said. "Don't you know, Marconi?"

Marconi hesitated, and for a moment Ross was sure he did know—knew something, at any rate, something that might be an answer to the doubts and nagging inconsistencies that were bothering him. But then Marconi shrugged and looked at his watch and ordered another drink.

But there was something wrong. Ross felt himself in the position of a diagnostician whose patient willfully refuses to tell where it hurts. The planet was sick—but wouldn't admit it. Sick? Dying! Maybe he was on the wrong track entirely. Maybe the starships had nothing to do with it. Maybe there was nothing that Marconi knew that would fit a piece into the puzzle and make the answer come out all clear—but Ghost Town continued to grow acre by acre, year by year. And Oldham still hadn't found him a secretary capable of writing her own name.

"According to the historians, everything fits nicely into place," Ross said, dubiously. "They say we came here ourselves in longliners once, Marconi. Our ancestors under some man named Halsey colonized this place, fourteen hundred years ago. According to the longliners that come in from other stars, their ancestors colonized wherever they came from in starships from a place called Earth. Where is this Earth, Marconi?"

Marconi said succinctly, "Look in the star charts. It's there."

"Yes, but——"

"But, hell," Marconi said in annoyance. "What in the world has got into you, Ross? Earth is a planet like any other planet. The starship Halsey colonized in was a starship like any other starship—only bigger. I guess, that is—I wasn't there. After all, what are the longliners but colonists? They happen to be going to planets that are

already inhabited, that's all. So a starship is nothing new or even very interesting, and this is beginning to bore me, and you ought to read your urgent-priority-rush message."

Ross felt repentant—knowing that that was just how Trader Marconi wanted him to feel. He said slowly, "I'm sorry if I'm being a nuisance, Marconi. You know how it is when you feel stale and restless. I know all the stories—but it's so damned hard to believe them. The famous colonizing ships. They must have been absolutely gigantic to take any reasonable number of people on a closed-circuit, multigeneration ride. We can't build them that big now!"

"No reason to."

"But we couldn't if we had to. Imagine shooting those things all over the Galaxy. How many inhabited planets in the charts—five hundred? A thousand? Think of the technology, Marconi. What became of it?"

"We don't need that sort of technology any more," Marconi explained. "That job is done. Now we concentrate on more important things. Learning to live with each other. Developing our own planet. Increasing our understanding of social factors and demographic——"

Ross was laughing at last. "Well, Marconi," he said at last, "that takes care of that! We sure have figured out how to handle the social factors, all right. Every year there are fewer of them to handle. Pretty soon we'll all be dead, and then the problem can be marked 'solved.'"

Marconi laughed too—eagerly, as if he'd been waiting for the chance. He said, "Now that that's settled, are you going to open your message? Are you at least going to have some lunch?"

The Yards messenger stumbled up to their table again, this time with an envelope for Marconi. He looked sharply at Ross's unopened envelope and said nothing, pointedly. Ross guiltily picked it up and tore it open. You could act like a sulky child in front of a friend, but strangers didn't understand.

The message was from his office. RADAR REPORTS HIGH VELOCITY SPACECRAFT ON AUTOCONTROLS. FIRST APPROXIMATION TRAJECTORY INDICATES INTERSTELLAR ORIGIN. PROBABLE ETA YARDS 1500. NO RADIO MESSAGES RECEIVED. DON'T HAVE TO TELL YOU TO GET ON THIS IMMEDIATELY AND GIVE IT YOUR BEST. OLDHAM.

Ross looked at Marconi, whose expression was perturbed. "Bet I know what your message says," he offered with an uneasy quaver in his voice.

Marconi said: "I'll bet you do. Oldham's radar setup on Sunward always has been better than Haarland's. Better location. Man, you are in trouble! Let's get out there and hope nobody's missed you so far."

They grabbed sandwiches from the snack bar on the way out and munched them while the Yards jeep took them to the ready line. Skirting the freighters in their pits, slipping past the enormous overhaul sheds, they saw excited debates going on. Twice they were passed by Yards vehicles heading toward the landing area. Halfway to the line they heard the recall sirens warning everybody and everything out of the ten seared acres surrounded by homing and Ground-Controlled Approach radars. That was where the big ones were landed.

The ready line was jammed when they got there. Ships from one or another of the five moons that circled Halsey's planet were common; the moons were the mines. Even the weekly liner and freighters from the colony on Sunward, the planet next in from Halsey's, were routine to the Yards workers. But to anybody an interstellar ship was a sensation, a once-or-twice-in-a-lifetime thrill.

Protocols were uncertain. Traders argued about the first crack at the strangers and their goods. A dealer named Aalborg said the only fair system would be to give every trade there an equal opportunity to do business—in alphabetical order. Everybody agreed that under no circumstances should the man from Leverett and Sons be allowed to trade—everybody, except the man from Leverett and Sons. He pointed out that his firm was the logical choice because it had more and fresher experience in handling interstellar goods than any other....

They almost mobbed him.

It wasn't merely money that filled the atmosphere with electric tingles. The glamor of time-travel was on them. The crew aboard that ship were travelers of time as well as space. The crew that had launched the ship was dust. The crew that served it now had never seen a planet.

There was even some humility in the crowd. There were thoughtful ones among them who reflected that it was not, after all, a very great feat to hitch a rocket to a shell and lob it across a few million miles to a neighboring planet. It was eclipsed by the tremendous deed whose climax they were about to witness. The thoughtful ones shrugged and sighed as they thought that even the starship booming down toward Halsey's Planet—fitted with the cleverest air replenishers and the most miraculously efficient waste converters—was only a counter in the game whose great rule was the mass-energy formulation of the legendary Einstein: that there is no way to push a material object past the speed of light.

A report swept the field that left men reeling in its wake. Radar Track confirmed that the ship was of unfamiliar pattern. All hope that it might be a starship launched from this very spot on the last leg of a stupefying round trip was officially dead. The starship was foreign.

"Wonder what they have?" Marconi muttered.

"Trader!" Ross sneered ponderously. He was feeling better; the weight of depression had been lifted for the time being, either by his confession or the electric atmosphere. If every day were like this, he thought vaguely....

"Let's not kid each other," Marconi was saying exuberantly. "This is an event, man! Where are they from, what are they peddling? Do I get a good cut at their wares? It could be fifty thousand shields for me in commission alone. Lurline and I could build a tower house on Great Blue Lake with that kind of money, with a whole floor for her parents! Ross, you just don't know what it is to really be in love. Everything changes."

A jeep roared up and slammed to a stop; Ross blinked and yelled: "Here it comes!"

They watched the ground-controlled approach with the interest of semiprofessionals and concealed their rising excitement with shop talk.

"Whups! There goes the high-power job into action." Marconi pointed as a huge dish antenna swiveled ponderously on its mast. "Seems the medium-output dishes can't handle her."

"Maybe the high-power dish can't either. She might be just plain shot."

"Standard, sealed GCA doesn't get shot, my young friend. Not in a neon-atmosphere tank it doesn't."

"Maybe along about the fifth generation they forgot what it was and cut it open with an acetylene torch to see what was inside."

"Bad luck for us in that case, Ross." The ship steadied on a due-west course and flashed across the heavens and over the horizon.

"Somebody decided a braking ellipse or two was in order. What about line of sight?"

"No sweat. The GCA jockey—and I'd bet it's Delafield himself—pushes a button that hooks him into the high-power dish at every rocket field on Halsey's. It's been all thought out. There's a potential fortune aboard that longliner and Fields Administration wants its percentage for servicing and accommodating."

"Wonder what they have?"

"I already asked that one, Ross."

"So you did."

They lapsed into silence until the rocket boomed in again from the east, high and slow. The big dish swiveled abruptly and began tracking again.

"He'll try to bring her down this time. Yes! There go fore and stabilizing jets."

Flame jutted from the silvery speck high in the blue; its apparent speed slowed to a crawl. It vanished for a second as steering jets turned her slowly endwise. They caught sight of the stern jets when they blasted for the descent.

It was uneventful—just the landing of a very, very big rocket. When a landing is successful it is like every other successful landing ever made.

But the action that the field whirled into immediately following the landing was far from routine. The bullhorns roared that all traders, wipers, rubbernecks, and visitors were to get behind the ready lines and stay there. All Class-Three-and-higher Field personnel were to take stations for longliner clearance. The weapons and decontamination parties were to take their stations immediately. Captain Delafield would issue all future orders and don't let any of the traders talk you out of it, men. Captain Delafield would issue all future orders.

Ross watched in considerable surprise as Field men working with drilled precision broke out half a dozen sleek, needle-nosed guns from an innocent-looking bay of the warehouse and manhandled them into position. From another bay a large pressure tank was hauled and backed against the lock of the starship. Ross could see the station medic bustlingly supervise that, and the hosing of white gunk onto the juncture between tank and ship.

Delafield crossed the stretch from the GCA complex to the tank, vanished into it through a pressure-fitted door and that was that. The tank had no windows.

Ross said to Marconi, wonderingly: "What's all this about? There was Doc Gibbons handling the pressure tank, there was Chunk Blaney rolling out a God-damned cannon I never knew was there—how many more little secrets are there that I don't know about?"

Marconi grinned. "They have gun drill once a month, my young friend, and they never say a word about it. Let the right rabble-rouser get hold of the story and he might sail into office on a platform of 'Keep the bug-eyed monsters off of Halsey's Planet.' You have to have reasonable precautions, military and medical, though—and this is the straight goods—there's never been any trouble of either variety."

The conversation died and there was a long, boring hour of nothing. At last Delafield appeared again. One of the decontamination party ran up in a jeep with a microphone.

"What'll it be?" Ross demanded. "Alphabetic order? Or just a rush?"

The announcement floored him. "Representative of the Haarland Trading Corporation please report to the decontamination tank."

The representative of the Haarland Trading Corporation was Marconi.

"Hell," Ross said bitterly. "Good luck with them, whoever they are."

Marconi brooded for a moment and then said gruffly, "Come on along."

"You mean it?"

"Sure. Uh—naturally, Ross, you'll give me your word not to make any commercial offers or inquiries without my permission."

"Oh. Naturally." They started across the field and were checked through the ready line, Marconi cheerfully presenting his identification and vouching for Ross.

Captain Delafield, at the tank, snapped, "What are you doing here, Ross? You're Oldham's man. I distinctly said——"

"My responsibility, Captain. Will that do it?" Marconi asked.

Delafield snapped, "It'll be your fundament if Haarland hears about it. Actually it's the damndest situation—they *asked* for Haarland's."

Marconi looked frightened and his hand involuntarily went to his breast pocket. He swallowed and asked, "Where are they from?"

Delafield grimaced and said, "Home."

Marconi exploded, "Oh, no!"

"That's all I can get out of them. I suppose their trajectory can be analyzed, and there must be books. We haven't been in the ship yet. Nobody goes in until it gets sprayed, rayed, dusted, and busted down into its component parts. Too many places for nasty little mutant bacteria and viruses to lurk."

"Sure, Captain. 'Home,' eh? They're pretty simple?"

"Happy little morons. Fifteen of them, ranging in age from one month to what looks like a hundred and twenty. All they know is 'home' and 'we wish to see the representative of the Haarland Trading Corporation.' First the old woman said it. Then the next in line—he must be about a hundred—said it. Then a pair of identical twins, fifty-year-old women, said it in chorus. Then the rest of them on down to the month-old baby, and I swear to God he tried to say it. Well, you're the Haarland Trading Corporation. Go on in."

THEY were all naked. Why not? There's no weather in a space ship. All of them laughed when Ross and Marconi came in through the lock except the baby, who was nursing at the breast of a handsome woman. Their laughter was what attracted Ross immediately. Cheerful—no meanness in it. The happy yelping of puppies at play with a red rubber bone.

A stab went through him as the pleasure in their simple happiness turned to recollection and recognition. His wife of a decade ago.... Ross studied them with amazement, expecting to find her features in their features, her figure in theirs. And failed. Yet they reminded him inescapably of his miserable year with that half-a-woman, but they were physically no kin of hers. They were just cheerful laughers who he knew were less than human.

The cheerful laughers exposed unblemished teeth in all their mouths, including that of the hundred-and-twenty-year-old matriarch. Why not? If you put calcium and fluorides into a closed system, they stay there.

The old woman stopped laughing at them long enough to say to Marconi, "We wish to see the representative of the Haarland——"

"Yes, I know. I'm the representative of the Haarland Trading Corporation. Welcome to Halsey's Planet. May I ask what your name is, ma'am?"

"Ma," she said genially.

"Pleased to meet you, Ma. My name's Marconi."

Ma said, bewildered, "You just said you were the representative of the Haarland Trading——"

"Yes, Ma, but that's all right. Let's say that's my other name. Two names—understand?"

She laughed at the idea of two names, wonderingly.

Marconi pressed, "And what's the name of this gentleman?"

"He isn't Gentleman. He's Sonny."

Sonny was a hundred years old.

"Pleased to meet you, Sonny. And your name, sir?"

"Sonny," said a redheaded man of eighty or thereabouts.

The identical-twin women were named The Kids. The baby was named Him. The rest of the troop were named Girl, Ma, or Sonny. After introductions Ross noticed that Him had been passed to another Ma who was placidly suckling him. She had milk; it dribbled from the corner of the baby's mouth. "There isn't another baby left in the ship, is there?" Ross asked in alarm.

They laughed and the Ma suckling the baby said: "There was, but she died. Mostly they do when you put them into the box after they get born. Ma here was lucky. Her Him didn't die."

"Put them in the box? What box? Why?"

Marconi was nudging him fiercely in the ribs. He ignored it.

They laughed amiably at his ignorance and explained that the box was the box, and that you put your newborn babies into it because you put your newborn babies into it.

A beep tone sounded from the ship.

Ma said, "We have to go back now, The Representative of the Haarland Trading Corporation Marconi."

"What for?"

Ma said, "At regular intervals signaled by a tone of six hundred cycles and an intermittent downward shifting of the ship lights from standard illumination frequency to a signal frequency of 420 millimicrons, ship's operating personnel take up positions at the control boards for recalibration of ship-working meters and instruments against the battery of standard masters. We'll be right back."

They trooped through the hatch, leaving Ross and Marconi staring at each other in the decontamination tank.

"Well," Ross said slowly, "at last I know why the Longliner Departments have their little secrets. 'The box.' I say it's murder."

"Be reasonable," Marconi told him—but his own face was white under the glaring germicidal lamps. "You can't let them increase without limit or they'd all die. And before they died there'd be cannibalism. Which do you prefer?"

"Letting kids be born and then snuffing them out if a computer decides they're the wrong sex or over the quota is inhuman."

"I didn't say I like it, Ross. But it works."

"So do pills!"

"Pills are a private matter. A person might privately decide not to take hers. The box is a public matter and the group outnumbers and overrules a mother who decides not to use it. There's your question of effectiveness answered, but there's another point. Those people are sane, Ross. Preposterously naive, but sane! Saner than childless women or sour old bachelors we both know who never had to love anything small and helpless, and so come to love nobody but themselves. They're sane. Partly because the women get a periodic biochemical shakeup called pregnancy that their biochemical balance is designed to mesh with. Partly because the men find tenderness and protectiveness in themselves toward the pregnant women. Mostly, I think, because—it's something to do.

"Can you imagine the awful monotony of life in the ship? The work is sheer rote and repetition. They can't read or watch screentapes. They were born in the ship, and the books and screentapes are meaningless because they know nothing to compare them with. The only change they see is each other, aging toward death. Frequent pregnancies are a Godsend to them. They compare and discuss them; they wonder who the fathers are; they make bets of rations; the men brag and keep score. The girls look forward to their first and their last. The jokes they make up about them! The way they speculate about twins! The purgative fear, even, keeps them sane."

"And then," Ross said, "the box."

Staring straight ahead at the ship's port Marconi echoed: "Yes. 'The box.' If there were another way—but there isn't."

His breezy young boss, Charles Oldham IV, was not pleased with what Ross had to report.

“Asked for Haarland!” he repeated unbelievably. “Those dummies didn’t know where they were going or where they were from, but they knew enough to ask for Haarland.” He slammed a ruler on his desk and yelled: “God-damn it!”

“Mr. Oldham!” Ross protested, aghast. For a superior to lose his temper publicly was unthinkable; it covered you with embarrassment.

“Manners be God-damned too!” Oldham screamed, breaking up fast. “What do you know about the state of our books? What do you know about the overhead I inherited from my loving father? What the hell do you know about the downcurve in sales?”

“These fluctuations——” Ross began soothingly.

“Fluctuations be God-damned! I know a fluctuation when I see one, and I know a long-term downtrend when I see one. And that’s what we’re riding, right into bankruptcy, fellow. And now these God-damned dummies blow in from nowhere with a consignment exclusively for Haarland—I don’t know why I don’t get to hell out of this stupid business and go live in a shack on Great Blue Lake and let the planet go ahead and rot.”

Ross’s horror at the unseemly outburst was eclipsed by his interest at noting how similarly he and Oldham had been thinking. “Sir,” he ventured, “I’ve had something on my mind for a while——”

“It can wait,” Oldham growled, collecting himself with a visible effort. So there went his chance to resign. “What about customs? I know Haarland hasn’t got enough cash to lay out. Who has?”

Ross said glibly: “Usual arrangement, sir. They turn an estimated twenty-five per cent of the cargo over to the port authority for auction, the receipts to be in full discharge of their import tax. And I suppose they enter protective bids. They aren’t wasting any time—auction’s 2100 tonight.”

“You handle it,” Oldham muttered. “Don’t go over one hundred thousand shields. Diversify the purchases as much as possible. And try to sneak some advance information out of the dummies if you get a chance.”

“Yes, sir,” Ross said. As he left he saw Oldham taking a plastic bottle from a wall cabinet.

And that, thought Ross as he rode to the Free Port, was the first crack he had ever seen in the determined optimism of the trading firm’s top level. They were optimists and they were idealists, at least to hear them tell it. Interplanetary trading was a cause and a mission; the traders kept the flame of commerce alight. Perhaps, thought Ross, they had been able to indulge in the hypocrisy of idealism only so long as a population upcurve assured them of an expanding market. Perhaps now that births were flattening out—some said the dirty word “declining”—they all would drop their optimistic creed in favor of fang-and-claw competition for the favors of the dwindling pool of consumers.

And that, Ross thought gloomily, was the way he’d go himself if he stayed on: junior trader, to senior trader, to master trader, growing every year more paranoidly suspicious of his peers, less scrupulous in the chase of the shield....

But he was getting out, of course. The purser's berth awaited. And then, perhaps, the awful depressions he had been enduring would lift off him. He thought of the master traders he knew: his own man Oldham, none too happy in the hereditary business; Leverett, still smug and fat with his terrific windfall of the Sirius IV starship fifteen years ago; Marconi's boss Haarland—Haarland broke the sequence all to hell. It just wasn't possible to think of Haarland being driven by avarice and fear. He was the oldest of them all, but there was more zest and drive in his parchment body than in the rest of them combined.

In the auction hall Ross found a seat near the velvet ropes. One of the professional bidders lounging against a wall flicked him an almost imperceptible signal, and he answered with another. That was that; he had his man, and a good one. They had often worked together in the commodity pits, but not so often or so exclusively that the bidder would be instantly known as his.

Inside the enclosure Marconi, seated at a bare table, labored over a sheaf of papers with one of the "Sonnies" from the ship. Sonny was wriggling in coveralls, the first clothes he had ever worn. Ross saw they hadn't been able to get shoes onto him.

Who else did he know? Captain Delafield was sitting somberly within the enclosure; Win Fraley, the hottest auctioneer on the Port, was studying a list, his lips moving. Every trading firm was represented; the heads of the smaller firms were there in person, not daring to delegate the bidding job. Plenty of Port personnel, just there for the excitement of the first longliner in fifteen years, even though it was well after close of the business day.

The goods were in sealed cases against the back wall as usual. Ross could only tell that some of them were perforated and therefore ought to contain living animals. Only the one Sonny from the starship crew was there; presumably the rest were back on the ship. He wouldn't be able to follow Oldham's orders to snoop out the nature of the freight from them. Well, damn Oldham; damn even the auction, Ross thought to himself. His mood of gloom did not lift.

The auction was a kind of letdown. All that turmoil and bustle, concentrated in a tiny arc around the velvet ropes, contrasted unpleasantly with the long, vacant rows of dusty seats that stretched to the back of the hall. Maybe a couple of centuries ago Ross would have enjoyed the auction more. But now all it made him think of was the thing he had been brooding about for a night and a day, the slow emptying of the planet, the....

Decay.

But, as usual, no one else seemed to notice or to care.

Captain Delafield consulted his watch and stood up. He rapped the table. "In accordance with the rules of the Trade Commission and the appropriate governing statutes," he droned, "certain merchandise will now be placed on public auction. The Haarland Trading Corporation, consignee, agrees and consents to divest itself of merchandise from Consignment 97-W amounting by estimate of the customs authorities to twenty-five per cent of the total value of all merchandise in said consignment. All receipts of this auction are to be entered as excise duties paid by the consignee on said merchandise, said receipts to constitute payment in full on excise on Consignment 97-W. The clerk will record; if any person here present wishes to enter an objection let him do so thank you." He glanced at a slip of paper in his hand. "I am requested to inform you that the Haarland Trading Corporation has entered

with the clerk a protective bid of five thousand shields on each item.” There was a rustle in the hall. Five thousand shields was a lot of money. “Your auctioneer, Win Fraley,” said Captain Delafield, and sat down in the first row of seats.

The auctioneer took a long, slow swallow of water, his eyes gleaming above the glass at the audience. Theatrically he tossed the glass to an assistant, smacked his hands together and grinned. “Well,” he boomed genially, “I don’t have to tell you gentlemen that somebody’s going to get rich tonight. Who knows—maybe it’ll be you? But you can’t make money without spending money, so without any further ado, let’s get started. I have here,” he rapped out briskly, “Item Number One. Now you don’t know and I don’t know exactly what Item Number One contains, but I can tell you this, they wouldn’t have sent it two hundred and thirty-one lights if they didn’t think it was worth something. Let’s get this started with a rush, folks, and I mean with a big bid to get in the right mood. After all, the more you spend here the less you have to pay in taxes,” he laughed. “You ready? Here’s the dope. Item Number One——” His assistant slapped a carton at the extreme left of the line. “——weight two hundred and fifteen grams, net; fifteen cubic centimeters; one microfilm reel included. Reminds me,” he reminisced, “of an item just about that size on the Sirius IV shipment. Turned out to be Maryjane seeds, and I don’t suppose I have to tell anybody here how much Mr. Leverett made out of Maryjanes; I bet every one of us has been smoking them ever since. What do you say, Mr. Leverett? You did all right last time—want to say ten thousand as a first big bid on Item Number One? Nine thousand? Do I hear——?”

One of the smaller traders, not working through a professional bidder, not even decently delegating the work to a junior, bid seventy-five hundred shields. Like the spokesmen for the other big traders, Ross sat on his hands during the early stages. Let the small fry give themselves a thrill and drop out. The big firms knew to a fraction of a shield how much the small ones could afford to bid on a blind purchase, and the easiest way to handle them was to let them spend their budgets in a hurry. Of course the small traders knew all this, and their strategy, when they could manage it, was to hold back as long as possible. It was a matter of sensing emotion rather than counting costs; of recognizing the fraction of a second in which a little fellow made up his mind to acquire an item and bidding him up—of knowing when he’d gone his limit and letting him have it at a ruinous price. It was an art, and Ross, despising it, knew that he did it very, very well.

He yawned and pretended to read a magazine while the first six items went on the block; the little traders seemed desperate enough to force the price up without help. He bid on Item Seven partly to squeeze a runt trader and partly to test his liaison with his professional bidder. It was perfect; the pro caught his signal—a bored inspection of his fingernails—while seeming to peek clumsily at the man from Leverett’s.

Ross let the next two pass and then acquired three items in rapid succession. The fever had spread to most of the bidders by then; they were starting at ten thousand and up. One or two of the early birds had spent their budgets and were leaving, looking sandbagged—as indeed they had been. Ross signaled “take five” to his professional and strolled out for a cup of coffee.

On the way back he stopped for a moment outside the hall to look at the stars and breathe. There were the familiar constellations—The Plowman, the Rocket Fleet, Marilyn Monroe. He stood smoking a cigarette and yearning toward them until

somebody moved in the darkness near him. "Nice night, Ross," the man said gloomily.

It was Captain Delafield. "Oh, hello, sir," Ross said, the world descending around him again like a too-substantial curtain. "Taking a breather?"

"Had to," the captain growled. "Ten more minutes in that place and I would have thrown. Damned money-grabbing traders. No offense, Ross; just that I don't see how you stand the life. Seems to have got worse in my time. Much worse. You high-rollers goading the pee-wees into shooting their wads—it didn't use to be like that. Gallantry. Not stomping a downed man. I don't see how you stand it."

"I can't stand it," Ross said quietly. "Captain Delafield, you don't know—I'm so sick to death of the life I'm leading and the work I'm doing that I'd do anything to get away. Mr. Fallon offered me a purser's spot on his ship; I've been thinking about it very seriously."

"Purser? A dirty job. There's nothing to do except when you're in port, and then there's so much to do that you never get to see the planet. I don't recommend it, Ross."

Ross grunted, thinking. If even the purser's berth was no way out, what was left for him? Sixty more years of waiting for a starship and scheming how to make a profit from its contents? Sixty more years watching Ghost Town grow by nibbles on Halsey City, watching the traders wax in savagery as they battled for the ever-diminishing pool of consumers, watching obscene comedies like *Lurline of the Old Landowners* graciously consenting to wed Marconi of the New Nobodies? He said wearily: "Then what shall I do, Captain? Rot here with the rest of the planet?"

Delafield shrugged, suprisingly gentle. "You feel it too, Ross? I'm glad to hear it. I'm not sensitive, thank God, but I know they talk about me. They say I quit the space-going fleet as soon as I had a chance to grab off the port captaincy. They're right; I did. Because I was frightened."

"Frightened? You?" Delafield's ribbons for a dozen heroic rescues gleamed in the light that escaped from the hall.

"Sure, Ross." He flicked the ribbons. "Each one of these means I and my men pulled some people out of a jam they got into because of somebody's damned stupidity or slow reflexes or defective memory. No; I withdraw that. The 'Thetis' got stove in because of mechanical failure, but all the rest were human error. There got to be too many for me; I want to enjoy my old age.

"Ready to face that if you become a purser? I can tell you that if you don't like it here you won't be happy on Sunward and you won't like the moons. And you most especially and particularly won't like being a purser. It's the same job you're doing now, but it pays less, offers you a six-by-eight cubicle to work and live in, and gives you nothing resembling a future to aim at. Now if you'll excuse me I'd better get back inside. I've enjoyed our talk."

Ross followed the captain gloomily. Nothing had changed inside; Ross lounged in the doorway inconspicuously picking up the eye of his bidder. Marconi was gone from the enclosure. Ross looked around hopefully and found his friend in agitated conversation with an unrecognizable but also agitated man at the back of the hall. Ross drifted over. Heads were turning in the front rows. As Ross got within range he

heard a couple of phrases. “—in the ship. Mr. Haarland specially asked for you. Please, Mr. Marconi!”

“Oh, hell,” Marconi said disgustedly. “Go on. Tell him I’ll be there. But how he expects me to take care of things here and—” He trailed off as he caught sight of Ross.

“Trouble?” Ross asked.

“Not exactly. The hell with it.” Marconi stared indecisively at the auctioneer for a moment. He said obscurely, “Taking your life isn’t enough; he wants more. And I thought I’d be able to see Lurline tonight. Excuse me, Ross. I’ve got to get over to the ship.” He hurried out.

Ross looked wonderingly after him, caught the eye of his bidder, and went back to work. By the time the auction was over and dawn was breaking in the west, Oldham Trading had bought nine lots of merchandise: three breathing, five flowering, and one a roll of microfilm. Ross took his prizes to the office where Charles Oldham was waiting, much the better for a few drinks and a long nap.

“How much?” demanded Oldham. Evidently they were both supposed to ignore his hysteria of the night before.

“Fifty-seven thousand,” Ross said dully.

“For nine lots? Good man! With any kind of luck at all—” And Oldham babbled on and on. He wanted Ross to stay and view the microfilm projection, stand by for a report from a zoologist and a botanist on the living acquisitions. He pleaded weariness and Oldham became conciliatory to the wonderful young up-and-comer who had bid in the merchandise at a whopping bargain price.

Ross dragged himself from the building, into a cab, and home. Morosely undressing he lit a cigarette and brooded: well, that was it. What you’d been waiting for since you were a junior apprentice. The starship came, you had the alien prizes in your hands and you realized they were as tawdry as the cheap gimcracks you export every week to Sunward.

He stared out the window, over Ghost Town, to the Field. The sun was high over the surrounding mountains; he imagined he could pick out the reflected glimmer from the starship a dozen miles away. Marconi at least got to examine the ship. Marconi might be there now; he’d been headed that way when Ross saw him last. And evidently not enjoying it much. Ross wondered vaguely if anybody really enjoyed anything. He stubbed out his cigarette.

As he fell asleep he was remembering what Delafield had told him about the moons and the planet ports. His dreams were of the cities of other planets, and every one of them was populated by aloof Delafields and avaricious Oldhams.

.... 3

“WAKE up, Ross,” Marconi was saying, joggling him. “Come on, wake up.”

Ross thrust himself up on an elbow and opened his eyes. He said with a tongue the size of his forearm in a dust-lined mouth: “Wha’ time is it? Wha’ the hell are you doing here, for that matter?”

“It’s around noon. You’ve slept for three hours; you can get up.”

“Uh.” Ross automatically reached for a cigarette. The smoke got in his eyes and he rubbed them; it dehydrated and seared what little healthy tissue appeared to be left in his mouth. But it woke him up a little. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Marconi’s hand was involuntarily on his breast pocket again, the one in which he carried Lurline’s picture. He said harshly: “You want a job? Topside? Better than purser?” He wasn’t meeting Ross’s eye. His gaze roved around the apartment and lighted on a coffee maker. He filled it and snapped it on. “Get dressed, will you?” he demanded.

Ross sat up. “What’s this all about, Marconi? What do you want, anyway?”

Marconi, for his own reasons, became violently angry. “You’re the damnedest question-asker I ever did meet, Ross. I’m trying to do you a favor.”

“What favor?” Ross asked suspiciously.

“You’ll find out. You’ve been bellyaching to me long enough about how dull your poor little life is. Well, I’m offering you a chance to do something big and different. And what do you do? You crawfish. Are you interested or aren’t you? I told you: It’s a space job, and a big one. Bigger than being a purser for Fallon. Bigger than you can imagine.”

Ross began to struggle into his clothes, no more than half comprehending, but stimulated by the magic words. He asked, puzzling sleepily over what Marconi had said, “What are you sore about?” His guess was that Lurline had broken a date—but it seemed to be the wrong time of day for that.

“Nothing,” Marconi said grumpily. “Only I have my own life to live.” He poured two cups of coffee. He wouldn’t answer questions while they sipped the scalding stuff. But somehow Ross was not surprised when, downstairs, Marconi headed his car along the winding road through Ghost Town that led to the Yards.

Every muscle of Ross’s body was stiff and creaky; another six hours of sleep would have been a wonderful thing. But as they drove through the rutted streets of Ghost Town he began to feel alive again. He stared out the window at the flashing ruins, piecing together the things Marconi had said.

“Watch it!” he yelled, and Marconi swerved the car around a tumbled wall. Ross was shaking, but Marconi only drove faster. This was crazy! You didn’t race through Ghost Town as though you were on the pleasure parkways around the Great Blue Lake; it wasn’t safe. The buildings had to fall over from time to time—nobody, certainly, bothered to keep them in repair. And nobody bothered to pick up the pieces when they fell, either, until the infrequent road-mending teams made their rounds.

But at last they were out of Ghost Town, on the broad highway from Halsey City to the port. The administration building and car park was just ahead.

It was there that Marconi spoke again. “I’m assuming, Ross, that you weren’t snowing me when you said you wanted thrills, chills, and change galore.”

“That’s not the way I put it. But I wasn’t snowing you.”

“You’ll get them. Come on.”

He led Ross across the field to the longliner, past a gaggle of laughing, chattering Sonnies and Mas. He ignored them.

The longliner was a giant of a ship, a blunt torpedo a hundred meters tall. It had no ports—naturally enough; the designers of the ship certainly didn't find any reason for its idiot crew to look out into space, and landings and takeoffs would be remote-controlled. Two hundred years old it was; but its metal was as bright, its edges as sharp, as the newest of the moon freighters at the other end of the hardstand. Two hundred years—a long trip, but an almost unimaginably long distance that trip covered. For the star that spawned it was undoubtedly almost as far away as light would travel in two centuries' time. At 186,000 miles per second, sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour. Ross's imagination gave up the task. It was far.

He stared about him in fascination as they entered the ship. He gaped at sterile, gray-walled cubicles, each of which contained the same chair and cot—no screen or projector for longliners. Ross remembered his rash words of the day before about shipping out on a longliner, and shuddered.

"Here we are," said Marconi stopping before a closed door. He knocked and entered.

It was a cubicle like the others, but there were reels stacked on the floor and a projector. Sitting on the cot in a just-awakened attitude was old man Haarland himself. Beady-eyed, Ross thought. Watchful.

Haarland asked: "Ross?"

"Yes, sir," Marconi said. There was tension in his voice and attitude. "Do you want me to stay, sir?"

Haarland growled: "Good God, no. You can get out. Sit down, Ross."

Ross sat down. Marconi, carefully looking neither to right or left, went out and closed the door. Haarland stretched, scratched, and yawned. He said: "Ross, Marconi tells me you're quite a fellow. Sincere, competent, a good man to give a tough job to. Namely, his."

"Junior-Fourth Trader?" Ross asked, bewildered.

"A little more dramatic than that—but we'll come to the details in a minute. I'm told you were ready to quit Oldham for a purser's berth. That's ethical. Would you consider it unethical to quit Oldham for Haarland?"

"Yes—I think I would."

"Glad to hear it! What if the work had absolutely nothing to do with trading and never brings you into a competitive situation with Oldham?"

"Well——" Ross scratched his jaw. "Well, I think that would be all right. But a Junior Fourth's job, Mr. Haarland——" The floor bucked and surged under him. He gasped, "What was that?"

"Blastoff, I imagine," Haarland said calmly. "We're taking off. Better lie down."

Ross flopped to the floor. It was no time to argue, not with the first-stage pumps thundering and the preheaters roaring their threat of an imminent four-G thrust.

It came like thunder, slapping Ross against the floor plates as though he were glued to them. He felt every tiny wrinkle in every weld he lay on, and one arm had fallen across a film reel. He heaved, and succeeded in levering it off the reel. It thwacked to the floor as though sandbags were stacked meters-high atop it.

Blackout came very soon.

He awoke in free fall. He was orbiting aimlessly about the cubicle.

Haarland was strapped to the cot, absorbed in manipulating the portable projector, trying to thread a free-floating film. Ross bumped against the old man; Haarland abstractedly shoved him off.

He careened from a bulkhead and flailed for a grip.

"Oh," said Haarland, looking up. "Awake?"

"Yes, awake!" Ross said bitterly. "What is all this? Where are we?"

The old man said formally, "Please forgive my cavalier treatment of you. You must not blame your friend Marconi; he had no idea that I was planning an immediate blastoff with you. I had an assignment for him which he—he preferred not to accept. Not to mince words, Ross, he quit."

"Quit his job?"

The old man shook his head. "No, Ross. Quit much more than the job of working for me. He quit on an assignment which is—I am sorry if it sounds melodramatic—absolutely vital to the human race." He suddenly frowned. "I—I think," he added weakly. "Bear with me, Ross. I'll try to explain as I go along. But, you see, Marconi left me in the lurch. I needed him and he failed me. He felt that you would be glad to take it on, and he told me something about you." Haarland glowered at Ross and said, with a touch of bitterness, "A recommendation from Marconi, at this particular point, is hardly any recommendation at all. But I haven't much choice—and, besides, I took the liberty of calling that pompous young fool you work for."

"Mister Haarland!" Ross cried, outraged. "Oldham may not be any prize but really—"

"Oh, you know he's a fool. But he had a lot to say about you. Enough so that, if you want the assignment, it's yours. As to the nature of the assignment itself——"

Haarland hesitated, then said briskly, "The assignment itself has to do with a message my organization received via this longliner. Yes, a message. You'll see. It has also to do with certain facts I've found in its log which, if I can ever get this damned thing working——There we are."

He had succeeded in threading the film.

He snapped on the projector. On the screen appeared a densely packed block of numerals, rolling up and being replaced by new lines as fast as the eye could take them in. Haarland said, "Notice anything?"

Ross swallowed. "If that stuff is supposed to mean anything to me," he declared, "it doesn't."

Haarland frowned. "But Marconi said——Well, never mind." He snapped off the projector. "That was the ship's log, Ross. It doesn't matter if you can't read it; you wouldn't, I suppose, have had much call for that sort of thing working for Oldham. It is a mathematical description of the routing of this ship, from the time it was space-launched until it arrived here yesterday. It took a long time, Ross. The reason that it took a long time is partly that it came from far away. But, even more, there is another reason. We were not this ship's destination! Not the original destination. We weren't even the first alternate—or the second alternate. To be exact, Ross, we were the seventh choice for this ship."

Ross let go of his stanchion, floated a yard, and flailed back to it. "That's ridiculous, Mr. Haarland," he protested. "Besides, what has all this to do with—"

"Bear with an old man," said Haarland, with an amused gleam in his eye.

There was very little he could do but bear with him, Ross thought sourly. "Go on," he said.

Haarland said professorially, "It is conceivable, of course, that a planet might be asleep at the switch. We could believe it, I suppose, if it seemed that the first-choice planet somehow didn't pick the ship up when this longliner came into radar range. In that event, of course, it would orbit once or twice on automatics, and then select for its first alternate target—which it did. It might be a human failure in the GCA station—once." He nodded earnestly. "Once, Ross. Not six times. No planet passes up a trading ship."

"Mr. Haarland," Ross exploded, "it seems to me that you're contradicting yourself all over the place. Did six planets pass this ship up or didn't six planets pass this ship up? Which is it? And why would anybody pass a longliner up anyhow?"

Haarland asked, "Suppose the planets were vacant?"

"What?" Ross was shaken. "But that's silly! I mean, even I know that the star charts show which planets are inhabited and which aren't."

"And suppose the star charts are wrong. Suppose the planets have become vacant. The people have died off, perhaps; their culture decayed."

Decay. Death and decay.

Ross was silent for a long time. He took a deep breath. He said at last, "Sorry. I won't interrupt again."

Haarland's expression was a weft of triumph and relief. "Six planets passed this ship up. Remember Leverett's ship fifteen years ago? Three planets passed that one before it came to us. Nine different planets, all listed on the traditional star charts as inhabited, civilized, equipped with GCA radars, and everything else needed. Nine planets out of communication, Ross."

Decay, thought Ross. Aloud he said, "Tell me why."

Haarland shook his head. "No," he said strongly, "I want you to tell me. I'll tell you what I can. I'll tell you the message that this ship brought to me. I'll tell you all I know, all I've told Marconi that he isn't man enough to use, and the things that Marconi will never learn, as well. But why nine planets that used to be pretty much like our own planet are now out of communication, that you'll have to tell me."

Forward rockets boomed; the braking blasts hurled Ross against the forward bulkhead. Haarland rummaged under the cot for space suits. He flung one at Ross.

"Put it on," he ordered. "Come to the airlock. I'll show you what you can use to find out the answers." He slid into the pressure suit, dived weightless down the corridor, Ross zooming after.

They stood in the airlock, helmets sealed. Wordlessly Haarland opened the pet cocks, heaved on the lock door. He gestured with an arm.

Floating alongside them was a ship, a ship like none Ross had ever seen before.

..... 4

PICTURE Leif's longboat bobbing in the swells outside Ambrose Light, while the twentieth-century liners steam past; a tiny, ancient thing, related to the new giants only as the Eohippus resembles the horse.

The ship that Haarland revealed was fully as great a contrast. Ross knew spaceships as well as any grounder could, both the lumbering interplanet freighters and the titanic longliners. But the ship that swung around Halsey's Planet was a midget (fueled rocket ships must be huge); its jets were absurdly tiny, clearly incapable of blasting away from planetary gravity; its entire hull length was unbroken and sheer (did the pilot dare fly blind?).

The coupling connections were being rigged between the ships. "Come aboard," said Haarland, spryly wriggling through the passage. Ross, swallowing his astonishment, followed.

The ship was tiny indeed. When Ross and Haarland, clutching handholds, were drifting weightlessly in its central control cabin, they very nearly filled it. There was one other cabin, Ross saw; and the two compartments accounted for a good nine-tenths of the cubage of the ship. Where that left space for the combustion chambers and the fuel tanks, the crew quarters, and the cargo holds, Ross could not imagine. He said: "All right, Mr. Haarland. Talk."

Haarland grinned toothily, his expression eerie in the flickering violet light that issued from a gutter around the cabin's wall.

"This is a spaceship, Ross. It's a pretty old one—fourteen hundred years, give or take a little. It's not much to look at, compared with the up-to-date models you're used to, but it's got a few features that you won't find on the new ones. For one thing, Ross, it doesn't use rockets." He hesitated. "Ask me what it does use," he admitted, "and I can't tell you. I know the name, because I read it: nucleophoretic drive. What nucleophoresis is and how it works, I can't say. They call it the Wesley Effect, and the tech manual says something about squared miles of acceleration. Does that mean anything to you? No. How could it? But it works, Ross. It works well enough so that this little ship will get you where you're going very quickly. The stars, Ross—it will take you to the stars. Faster than light. What the top speed is I have no idea; but there is a ship's log here, too. And it has a three-month entry—three months, Ross!—in which this little ship explored the solar systems of fourteen stars."

Wide-eyed, Ross held motionless. Haarland paused. "Fourteen hundred years," he repeated. "Fourteen hundred years this ship has been floating out here. And for all that time, the longliners have been crawling from star to star, while little hidden ships like this one could have carried a thousand times as much goods a million times faster. Maybe the time has come to get the ships out of hiding. I don't know. I want to find out; I want you to find out for me. I'll be specific, Ross. I need a pilot. I'm too old, and Marconi turned it down. Someone has to go out there—" he gestured to the blind hull and the unseen stars beyond—"and find out why nine planets are out of communication. Will you do it?"

Ross opened his mouth to speak, and a thousand questions competed for utterance. But what he said, barely aloud, was only: "Yes."

The far-off stars—more than a thousand million of them in our galaxy alone. By far the greatest number of them drifted alone through space, or with only a stellar companion as utterly unlivable by reason of heat and crushing gravity as themselves.

Fewer than one in a million had a family of planets, and most even of those could never become a home for human life.

But out of a thousand million, any fraction may be a very large number, and the number of habitable planets was in the hundreds.

Ross had seen the master charts of the inhabited universe often enough to recognize the names as Haarland mentioned them: Tau Ceti II, Earth, the eight inhabitable worlds of Capella. But to realize that this ship—this ship!—had touched down on each of them, and on a hundred more, was beyond astonishment; it was a dream thing, impossible but unquestioned.

Through Haarland's burning, old eyes, Ross looked back through fourteen centuries, to the time when this ship was a scout vessel for a colonizing colossus. The lumbering giant drove slowly through space on its one-way trip from the planet that built it—was it semi-mythical Earth? The records were not clear—while the tiny scout probed each star and solar system as it drew within range. While the mother ship was covering a few hundred million miles, the scout might flash across parsecs to scan half a dozen worlds. And when the scout came back with word of a planet where humans could survive, they christened it with the name of the scout's pilot, and the chartroom labored, and the ship's officers gave orders, and the giant's nose swerved through a half a degree and began its long, slow deceleration.

"Why slow?" Ross demanded. "Why not use the faster-than-light drive for the big ships?"

Haarland grimaced. "I've got to answer that one for you sooner or later," he said, "but let me make it later. Anyway, that's what this ship was: a faster-than-light scout ship for a real longliner. What happened to the longliner the records don't show; my guess is the colonists cannibalized it to get a start in constructing homes for themselves. But the scout ship was exempted. The captain of the expedition had it put in an orbit out here, and left alone. It's been used a little bit, now and then—my great-grandfather's father went clear to 40 Eridani when my great-grandfather was a little boy, but by and large it has been left alone. It had to be, Ross. For one thing, it's dangerous to the man who pilots it. For another, it's dangerous to—the Galaxy."

Haarland's view was anthropomorphic; the danger was not to the immense and uncaring galaxy, but to the sparse fester of life that called itself humanity.

When the race abandoned Earth, it was a gesture of revulsion. Behind them they left a planet that had decimated itself in wars; ahead lay a cosmos that, in all their searches, had revealed no truly sentient life.

Earth was a crippled world, the victim of its playing with nuclear fission and fusion. But the techniques that gave them a faster-than-light drive gave them as well a weapon that threatened solar systems, not cities; that could detonate a sun as readily as uranium could destroy a building. The child with his forbidden matches was now sitting atop a munitions dump; the danger was no longer a seared hand or blinded eye, but annihilation.

And the decision had been made: secrecy. By what condign struggles the secrecy had been enforced, the secrecy itself concealed. But it had worked. Once the radiating colonizers had reached their goals, the nucleophoretic effect had been obliterated from their records and, except for a single man on each planet, from their minds.

Why the single man? Why not bury it entirely?

Haarland said slowly, "There was always the chance that something would go wrong, you see. And—it has."

Ross said hesitantly, "You mean the nine planets that have gone out of communication?"

Haarland nodded. He hesitated. "Do you understand it now?" he asked.

Ross shook his head dizzily. "I'm trying," he said. "This little ship—it travels faster than light. It has been circling out here—how long? Fourteen hundred years? And you kept it secret—you and your ancestors before you because you were afraid it might be used in war?" He was frowning.

"Not 'afraid' it would be used," Haarland corrected gently. "We knew it would be used."

Ross grimaced. "Well, why tell me about it now? Do you expect me to keep it secret all the rest of my life?"

"I think you would," Haarland said soberly.

"But suppose I didn't? Suppose I blabbed all over the Galaxy, and it was used in war?"

Haarland's face was suddenly, queerly gray. He said, almost to himself, "It seems that there are things worse than war." Abruptly he smiled. "Let's find Ma."

They returned through the coupling and searched the longliner for the old woman. A Sonny told them, "Ma usually hangs around the meter room. Likes to see them blinking." And there they found her.

"Hello, Haarland," she smiled, flashing her superb teeth. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Perfect, Ma. I want to talk to you under the seal."

She looked at Ross. "Him?" she asked.

"I vouch for him," Haarland said gravely. "Wesley."

She answered, "The limiting velocity is C."

"But C^2 is not a velocity," Haarland said. He turned to Ross. "Sorry to make a mystery," he apologized. "It's a recognition formula. It identifies one member of what we call the Wesley families, or its messenger, to another. And these people are messengers. They were dispatched a couple of centuries ago by a Wesley family whose ship, for some reason, no longer could be used. Why?—I don't know why. Try your luck, maybe you can figure it out. Ma, tell us the history again."

She knitted her brows and began to chant slowly:

"In great-grandfather's time the target was Clyde,
Rocketry firm and ores on the side.

If we hadn't of seen them direct we'd of missed 'em;

There wasn't a blip from the whole damn system.

That was the first.

Before great-grandfather's day was done

We cut the orbit of Cynrus One.

The contact there was Trader McCue,

But the sons o' bitches missed us too.

That was the second.

My grandpa lived to see the green

Of Target Three through the high-powered screen.

But where in hell was Builder Carruthers?

They let us go by like all the others.

That was the——"

"Ma," said Haarland. "Thanks very much, but would you skip to the last one?"

Ma grinned.

The Haarland Trading Corp. was last

With the fuel down low and going fast.

I'm glad it was me who saw the day

When they brought us down on GCA.

I told him the message; he called it a mystery,

But anyway this is the end of the history.

And it's about time!

"The message, please," Haarland said broodingly.

Ma took a deep breath and rattled off: "L-sub-T equals L-sub-zero e to the minus-T-over-two-N."

Ross gaped. "That's the message?"

"Used to be more to it," Ma said cheerfully "That's all there is now, though. The darn thing doesn't rhyme or anything. I guess that's the most important part. Anyway, it's the hardest."

"It's not as bad as it seems," Haarland told Ross. "I've asked around. It makes a very little sense."

"It does?"

"Well, up to a point," Haarland qualified. "It seems to be a formula in genetics. The notation is peculiar, but it's all explained, of course. It has something to do with gene loss. Now, maybe that means something and maybe it doesn't. But I know something that does mean something: some member of a Wesley Family a couple of hundred years ago thought it was important enough to want to get it across to other Wesley families. Something's happening. Let's find out what it is, Ross." The old man suddenly buried his face in his hands. In a cracked voice he mumbled, "Gene loss and war. Gene loss or war. God, I wish somebody would take this right out of my hands—or that I could drop with a heart attack this minute. You ever think of war, Ross?"

Shocked and embarrassed, Ross mumbled some kind of answer. One might think of war, good breeding taught, but one never talked about it.

"You should," the old man said hoarsely. "War is what this faster-than-light secrecy and identification rigmarole is all about. Right now war is impossible—between solar

systems, anyhow, and that's what counts. A planet might just barely manage to fit an invading multigeneration expedition at gigantic cost, but it never would. The fruits of victory—loot, political domination, maybe slaves—would never come back to the fitters of the expedition but to their remote descendants. A firm will take a flyer on a commercial deal like that, but no nation would accept a war on any such basis—because a conqueror is a man, and men die. With F-T-L—faster-than-light travel—they might invade Curnus or Azor or any of those other tempting dots on the master maps. Why not? Take the marginal population, hop them up with patriotic fervor and lust for booty, and ship them off to pillage and destroy. There's at least a fifty per cent chance of coming out ahead on the investment, isn't there? Much more attractive deal commercially speaking than our present longliners."

Ross had never seen a war. The last on Halsey's planet had been the Peninsular Rebellion about a century and a half ago. Some half a million constitutional psychopathic inferiors had started themselves an ideal society with theocratic trimmings in a remote and unfruitful corner of the planet. Starved and frustrated by an unrealistic moral creed they finally exploded to devastate their neighboring areas and were quickly quarantined by a radioactive zone. They disintegrated internally, massacred their priesthood, and were permitted to disperse. It was regarded as a shameful episode by every dweller on the planet. It wasn't a subject for popular filmreels; if you wanted to find out about the Peninsular Rebellion you went through many successive library doors and signed your name on lists, and were sternly questioned as to your age and scholarly qualifications and reasons for sniffing around such an unsavory mess.

Ross therefore had not the slightest comprehension of Haarland's anxiety. He told him so.

"I hope you're right," was all the old man would say. "I hope you don't learn worse."

The rest was work.

He had the Yard worker's familiarity with conventional rocketry, which saved him some study of the fine-maneuvering apparatus of the F-T-L craft—but not much. For a week under Haarland's merciless drilling he jetted the ship about its remote area of space, far from the commerce lanes, until the old man grudgingly pronounced himself satisfied.

There were skull-busting sessions with the Wesley drive, or rather with a first derivative of it, an insane-looking object which you could vaguely describe as a fan-shaped slide rule taller than a man. There were twenty-seven main tracks, analogues of the twenty-seven main geodesics of Wesley Space—whatever they were and whatever that was. Your cursor settings on the main tracks depended on a thirty-two step computation based on the apparent magnitudes of the twenty-seven nearest celestial bodies above a certain mass which varied according to yet another lengthy relationship. Then, having cleared the preliminaries out of the way, you began to solve for your actual setting on the F-T-L drive controls.

Somehow he mastered it, while Haarland, driving himself harder than he drove the youth who was to be his exploring eyes and ears, coached him and cursed him and—somehow!—kept his own complicated affairs going back on Halsey's Planet. When Ross had finally got the theory of the Wesley Drive in some kind of order in his mind, and had learned all there was to learn about the other worlds, and had cut his few

important ties with Halsey's Planet, he showed up in Haarland's planet-based office for a final, repetitive briefing.

Marconi was there.

He had trouble meeting Ross's eyes, but his handclasp was firm and his voice warmly friendly—and a little envious. "The very best, Ross," he said. "I—I wish——" He hesitated and stammered. He said, in a flood, "Damn it, I should be going! Do a good job, Ross—and I hope you don't hate me." And he left while Ross, disturbed, went in to see old man Haarland.

Haarland spared no time for sentiment. "You're cleared for space flight," he growled. "According to the visa, you're going to Sunward—in case anyone asks you between here and the port. Actually, let's hear where you *are* going."

Ross said promptly, "I am going on a mission of exploration and reconnaissance. My first proposed destination is Ragansworld; second Gemser, third Azor. If I cannot make contact with any of these three planets, I will select planets at random from the master charts until I find some Wesley Drive families somewhere. The contacts for the first three planets are: On Ragansworld, Foley Associates; on Gemser, the Franklin Foundation; on Azor, Cavallo Machine Tool Company. F-T-L contacts on other planets are listed in the appendix to the master charts. The co-ordinates for Ragansworld are——"

"Skip the co-ordinates," mumbled Haarland, rubbing his eyes. "What do you do when you get in contact with a Wesley Drive family?"

Ross hesitated and licked his lips. "I—well, it's a little hard——"

"Dammit," roared Haarland, "I've told you a *thousand* times——"

"Yessir, I know. All I meant was I don't exactly understand what I'm looking for."

"If I knew what you were to look for," Haarland rasped, "I wouldn't have to send you out looking! Can't you get it through your thick head? *Something* is wrong. I don't know what. Maybe I'm crazy for bothering about it—heaven knows, I've got troubles enough right here—but we Haarlands have a tradition of service, and maybe it's so old that we've kind of forgotten just what it's all about. But it's not so old that I've forgotten the family tradition. If I had a son, he'd be doing this. I counted on Marconi to be my son; now all I have left is you. And that's little enough, heaven knows," he finished bitterly.

Ross, wounded, said by rote: "On landing, I will attempt at once to make contact with the local Wesley Drive family, using the recognition codes given me. I will report to them on all the data at hand and suggest the need for action."

Haarland stood up. "All right," he said. "Sorry I snapped at you. Come on; I'll go up to the ship with you."

And that was the way it happened. Ross found himself in the longliner, then with Haarland in the tiny, ancient, faster-than-light ship which had once been tender to the ship that colonized Halsey's Planet. He found himself shaking hands with a red-eyed, suddenly-old Haarland, watching him crawl through the coupling to the longliner, watching the longliner blast away.

He found himself setting up the F-T-L course and throwing in the drive.

..... 5

ROSS was lucky. The second listed inhabited planet was still inhabited.

He had not quite stopped shuddering from the first when the approach radar caught him. The first planet was given in the master charts as "Ragansworld. Pop. 900,000,000; diam. 9400 m.; mean orbit 0.8 AU," and its co-ordinates went on to describe it as the fourth planet of a small G-type sun. There had been some changes made: the co-ordinates now intersected well inside a bright and turbulent gas cloud.

It appeared that suppressing the F-T-L drive had not quite annihilated war.

But the second planet, Gemser—there, he was sure, was a world where nothing was seriously awry.

He left the ship mumbling a name to himself: "Franklin Foundation." And he was greeted by a corporal's guard of dignified and ceremonially dressed men; they smiled at him, welcomed him, shook his hand, and invited him to what seemed to be the local equivalent of the administration building. He noticed disapprovingly that they didn't seem to go in for the elaborate decontamination procedures of Halsey's Planet, but perhaps, he thought, they had bred disease-resistance into their bloodlines. Certainly the four men in his guide party seemed hale and well-preserved, though the youngest of them was not less than sixty.

"I would like," he said, "to be put in touch with the Franklin Foundation, please."

"Come right in here," beamed one of the four, and another said:

"Don't worry about a thing." They held the door for him, and he walked into a small and sybaritically furnished room. The second man said, "Just a few questions. Where are you from?"

Ross said simply, "Halsey's Planet," and waited.

Nothing happened, except that all four men nodded comprehendingly, and the questioner made a mark on a sheet of paper. Ross amplified, "Fifty-three light years away. You know—another star."

"Certainly," the man said briskly. "Your name?"

Ross told him, but with a considerable feeling of deflation. He thought wryly of his own feelings about the longlines and the far stars; he remembered the stir and community excitement that a starship meant back home. Still, Ross told himself. Halsey's Planet might be just a back eddy in the main currents of civilization. Quite possibly on another world—this one, for instance—travelers from the stars were a commonplace. The field hadn't seemed overly busy, though; and there was nothing resembling a spaceship. Unless—he thought with a sudden sense of shock—those rusting hulks clumped together at the edge of the field had once been spaceships. But that was hardly likely, he reassured himself. You just don't let spaceships rust.

"Sex?" the man asked, and "Age?" "Education?" "Marital status?" The questions went on for more time than Ross quite understood; and they seemed far from relevant questions for the most part; and some of them were hard questions to answer. "Tau quotient?" for instance; Ross blinked and said, with an edge to his voice:

"I don't know what a tau quotient is."

"Put him down as zero," one of the men advised, and the interlocutor nodded happily.

"Working-with-others rating?" he asked, beaming.

Ross said with controlled irritation, "Look, I don't know anything about these ratings. Will you take me to somebody who can put me in touch with the Franklin Foundation?"

The man who was sitting next to him patted him gently on the shoulder. "Just answer the questions," he said comfortably. "Everything will be all right."

Ross flared, "The hell everything will——"

Something with electrified spikes in it hit him on the back of the neck.

Ross yelled and ducked away; the man next to him returned a little rod to his pocket. He smiled at Ross. "Don't feel bad," he said sympathetically. "Go ahead now, answer the questions."

Ross shook his head dazedly. The pain was already leaving his neck, but he felt nauseated by the suddenness and sharpness of it; he could not remember any pain quite like that in his life. He stood up waveringly and said, "Wait a minute, now——"

This time it was the man on the other side, and the pain was about twice as sharp. Ross found himself on the floor, looking up through a haze. The man on his right kept the rod in his hand, and the expression on his face, while in no way angry, was stern. "Bad boy," he said tenderly. "Why don't you want to answer the questions?"

Ross gasped, "God damn it, all I want is to see somebody! Keep your dirty hands off me, you old fools!" And that was a mistake, as he learned in the blessedly few minutes before he passed out completely under the little rods held by the gentle but determined men.

He answered all the questions—bound to a chair, with two of the men behind him, when he had regained consciousness. He answered every one. They only had to hit him twice.

When they untied him the next morning, Ross had caught on to the local folkways quite well. The fatherly fellow who released him said, "Follow me," and stood back, smiling but with one hand on one of the little rods. And Ross was careful to say:

"Yes, sir!"

They rode in a three-wheeled car, and entered a barracks-like building. Ross was left alone next to a bed in a dormitory with half a hundred beds. "Just wait here," the man said, smiling. "The rest of your group is out at their morning session now. When they come in for lunch you can join them. They'll show you what to do."

Ross didn't have too long to wait. He spent the time in conjecture as confused as it was fruitless; he had obviously done something wrong, but just what was it?

If he had had twice as long he would have got no farther toward an answer than he was: nowhere. But a noise outside ended his speculations. He glanced toward the curiously shaped door—all the doors on this planet seemed to be rectangular. A girl of about eighteen was peering inside.

She stared at Ross and said, "Oh!" Then she disappeared. There were footsteps and whispers, and more heads appeared and blinked at him and were jerked back.

Ross stood up in wretched apprehension. All of a sudden he was fourteen years old again, and entering a new school where the old hands were giggling and whispering about the new boy. He swore sullenly to himself.

A new face appeared, halted for an inspection of Ross, and walked confidently in. The man was a good forty years old, Ross thought; perhaps a kind of overseer in this institution—whatever kind of institution it was. He approached Ross at a sedate pace, and he was followed through the door in single file by a couple score men and women. They ranged in age, Ross thought wonderingly, from the leader's forty down to the late teens of the girl who had first peered in the door, and now was at the end of the procession.

The leader said, "How old are you?"

"Why, uh——" Ross figured confusedly: this planet's annual orbital period was roughly forty per cent longer than his own; fourteen into his age, multiplied by ten, making his age in their local calculations....

"Why, I'm nineteen of your years old, about. And a half."

"Yes. And what can you do?"

"Look here, sir. I've been through all this once. Why don't you go and ask those gentlemen who brought me here? And can anybody tell me where the Franklin Foundation is?"

The fortyish fellow, with a look of outrage, slapped Ross across the mouth. Ross knocked him down with a roundhouse right.

A girl yelled, "Good for you, Junior!" and jumped like a wildcat onto a slim, gray-haired lady, clawing, and slapping. The throng dissolved immediately into a wild melee. Ross, busily fighting off the fortyish fellow and a couple of his stocky buddies, noted only that the scrap was youth against age, whatever it meant.

"How *dare* you?" a voice thundered, and the rioters froze.

A decrepit wreck was standing in the doorway, surrounded by three or four gerontological textbook cases only a little less spavined than he. "Glory," a girl muttered despairingly. "It would be the minister."

"What is the meaning of this brawl?" rolled from the wreck's shriveled lips in a rich basso—no; rolled, Ross noted, from a flat perforated plate on his chest. There was a small, flesh-colored mike slung before his lips. "Who is responsible here?" asked the golden basso.

Ross's fortyish assailant said humbly: "I am, sir. This new fellow here——"

"Manners! Speak when you're spoken to."

Abjectly: "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Silly fools!" the senile wreck hectored them. "I'm going to take no official notice of this since I'm merely passing through. Luckily for you this is no formal inspection. But you've lost your lunch hour with your asinine pranks. Now get back to your work and never let me hear of a disgraceful incident like this again from Junior Unit Twenty-Three."

He swept out with his retinue. Ross noted that some of the younger girls were crying and that the older men and women were glaring at him murderously.

"We'll teach you manners, you pup," the foreman-type said. "You go on the dye vats this afternoon. Any more trouble and you'll miss a few meals."

Ross told him: "Just keep your hands off me, mister."

The foreman-type expanded into a beam of pleasure. "I thought you'd be sensible," he said. "Everybody to the plant, now!" He collared a pretty girl of about Ross's age. "Helena here is working out a bit of insolence on the dye vats herself. She'll show you." The girl stood with downcast eyes. Ross liked her face and wondered about her figure. Whatever it was like, it was covered from neck to knee by a loose shirt. But the older women wore fitted clothes.

The foreman-type led a grand procession through the door. Helena told Ross: "I guess you'd better get in front of me in line. I go here——" She slipped in deftly, and Ross understood a little more of what went on here. The procession was in order of age.

He had determined to drift for a day or two—not that he seemed to have much choice. The Franklin Foundation, supposedly having endured a good many years, would last another week while he explored the baffling mores of this place and found out how to circumvent them and find his way to the keepers of F-T-L on this world. Nobody would go anywhere with his own ship—not without first running up a setting for the Wesley Drive!

The line filed into a factory whose like Ross had never before seen. He had a fair knowledge of and eye for industrial processes; it was clear that the place was an electric-cable works. But why was the concrete floor dangerously cracked and sloppily patched? Why was the big enameling oven rumbling and stinking? Why were the rolling mills in a far corner unsupplied with guards and big, easy-to-hit emergency cutoffs? Why was the light bad and the air full of lint? Why did the pickling tank fume and make the workers around it cough hackingly? Most pointed of all, why did the dye vats to which Helena led him stink and slop over?

There were grimy signs everywhere, including the isolated bay where braiding cord was dyed the standard code colors. The signs said things like: AGE IS A PRIVILEGE AND NOT A RIGHT. AGE MUST BE EARNED BY WORK. GRATITUDE IS THE INDEX OF YOUR PROGRESS TO MATURITY.

Helena said girlishly as she took his arm and hooked him out of the moving line: "Here's Stinkville. Believe me, I'm not going to talk back again. After all, one's maturity is measured by one's acceptance of one's environment, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Ross. "Listen, Helena, have you ever heard of a place called the Franklin Foundation?"

"No," she said. "First you climb up here—golly! I don't even know your name."

"Ross."

"All right, Ross. First you climb up here and make sure the yarn's running over the rollers right; sometimes it gets twisted around and then it breaks. Then you take one of the thermometers from the wall and you check the vat temperature. It says right on the thermometers what it should be for the different colors. If it's off you turn that gas tap up or down, just a little. Then you check the wringer rolls where the yarn comes out. Watch your fingers when you do! The yarn comes in different thicknesses on the same thread so you have to adjust the wringer rolls so too much dye doesn't get squeezed out. You can tell by the color; it shouldn't be lighter after it goes through the rolls. But the yarn shouldn't come through sloppy and drip dye on the floor while it travels to the bobbin——"

There was some more, equally uncomplicated. He took the yellow and green vats; she took the red and blue. They had worked in the choking stench and heat for perhaps three hours before Ross finished one temperature check and descended to adjust a gas tap. He found Helena, spent and gasping, on the floor, hidden from the rest of the shop by the bulky tanks.

"Heat knock you out?" he asked briskly. "Don't try to talk. I'll tote you over by the wall away from the burners. Maybe we'll catch a little breeze from the windows there." She nodded weakly.

He picked her up without too much trouble, carried her three yards or so to the wall, still isolated from the rest of the shop. She was ripely curved under that loose shirt, he learned. He set her down easily, crouching himself, and did not take his hands away.

It's been a long time, he thought—and she was responding! Whether she knew it or not, there was a drowsy smile on her face and her body moved a little against his hands, pleurably. She was breathing harder.

Ross did the sensible thing and kissed her.

Wildcat!

Ross reeled back from her fright and anger, his face copiously scratched. "I'm dreadfully sorry," he sputtered. "Please accept my sincerest——"

The flare-up of rage ended; she was sobbing bitterly, leaning against the wall, wailing that nobody had ever treated her like that before, that she'd be set back three years if he told anybody, that she was a good, self-controlled girl and he had no *right* to treat her that way, and what kind of degenerate was he, not yet twenty and going around kissing girls when *everybody* knew you went crazy from it.

He soothed her—from a distance. Her sobbing dropped to a bilious croon as she climbed the ladder to the yellow vat, tears still on her face, and checked its temperature.

Ross, wondering if he were already crazy from too much kissing of girls, mechanically resumed his duties. But she had responded. And how long had they been working? And wasn't this shift ever going to end?

All the shifts ended in time. But there was a catch to it: There was always another shift. After the afternoon shift on the dye vats came dinner—porridge!—and then came the evening shift on the dye vats, and then sleep. The foreman was lenient, though; he let Ross off the vats after the end of the second day. Then it was kitchen orderly, and only two shifts a day. And besides, you got plenty to eat.

But it was a long, long way, Ross thought sardonically to himself, from the shining pictures he had painted to himself back on Halsey's Planet. Ross the explorer, Ross the hero, Ross the savior of humanity....

Ross, the semipermanent KP.

He had to admit it to himself: The expedition thus far had been a bust. Not only was it perfectly clear that there no longer was a Franklin Foundation on Gemser, but more had been lost than time and effort. For Ross himself, he silently admitted, was as close to lost as he ever wanted to be. He was, in effect, a prisoner, in a prison from which there was no easy escape as long as he was cursed with youthfulness....

Of course, the implications of that were that there was a perfectly easy escape in time. All he had to do was get old enough to matter, on this insane planet. Ninety, maybe. And then he would be perfectly free to totter out to the spaceport, dragoon a squad of juniors into lifting him into the ship, and take off....

Helena was some help. But only psychologically; she was pleasant company, but neither she nor anyone else in the roster of forty-eight to whom he was permitted to speak had ever heard of the Franklin Foundation, or F-T-L travel, or anything. Helena said, "Wait for Holiday. Maybe one of the grownups will tell you then?"

"Holiday?" Ross slid back and scratched his shoulder blades against the corner of his bed. Helena was sprawled on the floor, half watching a projected picture on the screen at the end of the dormitory.

"Yes. You're lucky, it's only eight days off. That's when Dobermann—" she pointed to the foreman—"graduates; he's the only one this year. And we all move up a step, and the new classes come in, and then we all get everything we want. Well, pretty near," she amended. "We can't do anything *bad*. But you'll see; it's nice."

Then the picture ended, and it was calisthenics time, and then lights out. Forty-eight men and women on their forty-eight bunks—the honor system appeared to work beautifully; there had been no signs of sex play that Ross had been able to see—slept the sleep of the innocent. While Ross, the forty-ninth, lay staring into the dark with rising hope.

In the kitchen the next morning he got more information from Helena. Holiday seemed to be a cross between saturnalia and Boy's Week; for one day of the year the elders slightly relaxed their grip on the reins. On that day alone one could Speak Before Being Spoken To, Interrupt One's Elders, even Leave the Room without Being Excused.

Whee, Ross thought sourly. But still....

The foreman, Dobermann, once you learned how to handle him, wasn't such a bad guy. Ross, studying his habits, learned the proper approach and used it. Dobermann's commonest complaint was of irresponsibility—irresponsibility when some thirty-year-old junior was caught sneaking into line ahead of his proper place, irresponsibility when Ross forgot to make his bed before stumbling out in the dark to his kitchen shift, one awful case of irresponsibility when Helena thoughtlessly poured cold water into the cooking vat while it was turned on. There was a sizzle, a crackle, and a puff of steam, and Helena was weeping over a broken heating element.

Dobermann came storming over, and Ross saw his chance. "That is very irresponsible of you, Helena," he said coldly, back to Dobermann but entirely conscious of his presence. "If Junior Unit Twenty-Three was all as irresponsible as you, it would reflect badly on Mr. Dobermann. You don't know how lucky you are that Mr. Dobermann is so kind to you."

Helena's weeping dried up instantly; she gave Ross one furious glance, and lowered her eyes before Dobermann. Dobermann nodded approvingly to Ross as he waded into Helena; it was a memorable tirade, but Ross heard only part of it. He was looking at the cooking vat; it was a simple-minded bit of construction, a spiral of resistance wire around a ceramic core. The core had cracked and one end of the wire was loose; if it could be reconnected, the cracked core shouldn't matter much—the wire was covered with insulation anyhow. He looked up and opened his mouth to say something, then remembered and merely stood looking brightly attentive.

“—looks like you want to go back to the vats,” the foreman was finishing. “Well, Helena, if that’s what you want we can make you happy. This time you’ll be by yourself, too; you won’t have Ross to help you out when the going’s rough. Will she, Ross?”

“No, sir,” Ross said immediately. “Sir?”

Dobermann looked back at him, frowning. “What?”

“I think I can fix this,” Ross said modestly.

Dobermann’s eyes bulged. “Fix it?”

“Yes, sir. It’s only a loose wire. Back where I come from, we all learned how to take care of things like that when we were still in school. It’s just a matter of—”

“Now, hold on, Ross”; the foreman howled. “Tampering with a machine is bad enough, but if you’re going to turn out to be a liar, too, you’re going just too far! School, indeed! You know perfectly well, Ross, that even I won’t be ready for school until after Holiday. Ross, I knew you were a troublemaker, knew it the first day I set eyes on you. School! Well, we’ll see how you like the school I’m going to send you to!”

The vats weren’t so bad the second time. Even though the porridge was cold for two days, until somebody got around to delivering a different though equally worn-out cooking vat.

Helena passed out from the heat three times. And when, on the third time, Ross, goaded beyond endurance, kissed her again, there were no hysterics.

..... 6

FROM birth to puberty you were an infant. From puberty to Dobermann’s age, a junior. For ten years after that you went to school, learning the things you had neither the need nor the right to know before.

And then you were Of Age.

Being Of Age meant much, much more than voting, Ross found out. For one thing, it meant freedom to marry—after the enforced sexlessness of the junior years and the directed breeding via artificial insemination of the Scholars. It meant a healthy head start on seniority, which carried with it all offices and all power.

It meant freedom.

As a bare beginning, it meant the freedom to command any number of juniors or scholars. On Ross’s last punitive day in the dye vats, a happy ancient commandeered the entire staff to help set shrubs in his front lawn—a good dozen acres of careful landscaping it was, and the prettiest sight Ross had seen on this ugly planet.

When they got back to the dye vats, the yellow and blue had boiled over, and broken strands of yarn had fouled all the bobbins. Dobermann raged—at the juniors.

But then Dobermann’s raging came to an end forever. It was the night before Holiday, and there was a pretty ceremony as he packed his kit and got ready to turn Junior Unit Twenty-three over to his successor. Everyone was scrubbed, and though a certain amount of license in regard to neatness was allowed between dinner and lights out, each bunk was made and carefully smoothed free of wrinkles. After half an

hour of fidgety waiting, Dobermann called—needlessly—for attention, and the minister came in with his ancient retinue.

The rich mechanical voice boomed out from his breastplate: “Junior Dobermann, today you are a man!”

Dobermann stood with his head bowed, silent and content. Junior Unit Twenty-Three chanted antiphonally: “Good-by, Junior Dobermann!”

The retinue took three steps forward, and the minister boomed, “Beauty comes with age. Age is beauty!”

And the chorus: “Old heads are wisest!” Ross, standing as straight as any of them, faked the words with his lips and tongue, and wondered how many repetitions had drilled those sentiments into Junior Unit Twenty-Three.

There were five more chants, and five responses, and then the minister and his court of four were standing next to Dobermann. Breathing heavily from his exertions, the minister reached behind him and took a book from the hands of the nearest of his retinue. He said, panting, “Scholar Dobermann, in the Book lies the words of the Fathers. Read them and learn.”

The chorus cried thrice, “The Word of the Fathers Is Law.” And then the minister touched Dobermann’s hand, and in solemn silence, left.

As soon as the elders had gone, the juniors flocked around Dobermann to wish him well. There was excited laughter in the congratulations, and a touch of apprehension too: Dobermann, with all his faults, was a known quantity, and the members of Junior Unit Twenty-Three were beginning to look a little fearfully at the short, redheaded youth who, from the next day on, would be Dobermann’s successor.

Ross promised himself: He can be good or bad, a blessing or a problem. But he won’t be *my* problem. I’m getting out of here tomorrow!

Holiday.

“Oh, it’s fun,” Helena told him enthusiastically. “First you get up early to get the voting out of the way—”

“Voting?”

“Sure. Don’t they vote where you come from? I thought everybody voted. That’s democracy, like we have it here.”

He sardonically quoted one of the omnipresent wall signs: “THE HAPPINESS OF THE MAJORITY MEANS THE HAPPINESS OF THE MINORITY.” He had often wondered what, if anything, it meant. But Helena solemnly nodded.

They were whispering from their adjoining cots by dim, false dawn filtering through the windows on Holiday morning. They were not the only whisperers. Things were relaxing already.

“Ross,” Helena said.

“Yes?”

“I thought maybe you might not know. On Holiday if you, ah, want to do that again you don’t have to wait until I faint. Ah, of course you don’t do it right out in the open.” Overcome by her own daring she buried her head under the coarse blanket.

Fine, thought Ross wearily. Once a year—or did Holiday come once a year?—the kids were allowed to play “Spin The Bottle.” No doubt their elders thought it was too cute for words: mere tots of thirty and thirty-five childishly and innocently experimenting with sex. Of course it would be discreetly supervised so that nobody would Get In Trouble.

He was quite sure Helena’s last two faints had been unconvincing phonies.

The wake-up whistle blew at last. The chattering members of Junior Unit Twenty-Three dawdled while they dressed, and the new foreman indulgently passed out shabby, smutted ribbons which the girls tied in their hair. They had sugar on their mush for breakfast, and Ross’s stomach came near turning as he heard burbles of gratitude at the feast.

With pushing and a certain amount of inept horseplay they formed a column of fours and hiked from the hall—from the whole factory complex, indeed, along a rubberized highway.

Once you got out of the factory area things became pleasanter by the mile. Hortatory roadside signs thinned out and vanished. Stinking middens of industrial waste were left behind. And then the landscape was rolling, sodded acres with the road pleasantly springy underfoot, the air clean and crisp.

They oohed and aahed at houses glimpsed occasionally in the distance—always rambling, one-story affairs that looked spanking-new.

Once a car overhauled them on the highway and slowed to a crawl. It was a huge thing, richly upholstered within. A pair of grimlooking youths were respectively chauffeur and footman; the passenger waved at the troop from Junior Twenty-Three and grinned out of a fantastic landscape of wrinkles. Ross gaped. Had he thought the visiting minister was old? This creature, male or female, was *old*.

After the car sped on, to the cheers of the marchers, there was happy twittering speculation. Junior Twenty-Three didn’t recognize the Citizen who had graciously waved to them, but they thought he—or she?—was wonderful. So dignified, so distinguished, so learned, so gracious, so democratic!

“Wasn’t it sweet of him?” Helena bubbled. “And I’m sure he must be somebody important connected with the voting, otherwise he’d just vote from home.”

Ross’s feet were beginning to hurt when they reached the suburban center. To the best of his recollection, they were no more than eight or ten kilos from the field and his starship. Backtrack on the road to the suburban center about three kilos, take the fork to the right, and that would be that.

Junior Twenty-Three reached a pitch of near-ecstasy marveling at the low, spacious buildings of the center. Through sweeping, transparent windows they saw acres of food and clothing in the shopping center; the Drive-In Theater was an architectural miracle. The Civic Center almost finished them off, with its statue of Equal Justice Under the Law (a dignified beldame whose chin and nose almost met, leaning on a gem-crusted crutch) and Civic Virtue (in a motorized wheelchair equipped with an emergency oxygen tent, Lindbergh-Carrel auxiliary blood pump and an artificial kidney).

Merry oldsters were everywhere in their cars and wheelchairs, gaily waving at the kids. Only one untoward incident marred their prevoting tour of inspection. A thick-headed young man mistakenly called out a cheerful: "Life and wisdom, ma'am!" to a beaming oldster.

"Ma'am, is it?" the oldster roared through his throat mike and amplifier in an unmistakable baritone. "I'll ma'am you, you wise punk!" He spun his wheelchair on a decishield, threw it into high and roared down on the offender, running him over. The boy covered himself as well as he could while the raging old man backed over him again and ran over him again. His ordeal ended when the oldster collapsed forward in the chair, hanging from his safety belt.

The boy got up with tire marks on him and groaned: "Oh, lord! I've hurt him." He appealed hysterically: "What'll I do? Is he dead?"

Another Senior Citizen buzzed up and snapped: "Cut in his L-C heart, you booby!"

The boy turned on the Lindbergh-Carrel pump, trembling. The white-faced juniors of Twenty-Three watched as the tubes to the oldster's left arm throbbed and pulsed. A massive sigh went up when the old man's eyes opened and he sat up groggily. "What happened?"

"You died again, Sherrington," said the other elder. "Third time this week—good thing there was a responsible person around. Now get over to the medical center this minute and have a complete checkup. Hear me?"

"Yes, Dad," Sherrington said weakly. He rolled off in low gear.

His father turned to the youngster who stood vacantly rubbing the tire marks on his face. "Since it's Holiday," he grated, "I'll let this pass. On any other day I would have seen to it that you were set back fifteen years for your disgraceful negligence."

Ross knew by then what that meant, and shuddered with the rest. It amounted to a death sentence, did fifteen additional years of the grinding toil and marginal diet of a junior.

Somewhat dampened they proceeded to the Hall of Democracy, a glittering place replete with slogans, statues, and heroic portraits of the heroic aged. Twenty-Three huddled together as it joined with a stream of juniors from the area's other factory units. Most of them were larger than the cable works; many of them, apparently, involved more wearing and hazardous occupations. Some groups coughed incessantly and were red-eyed from the irritation of some chemical. Others must have been heavy-manual-labor specialists. They were divided into the hale, whose muscles bulged amazingly, and the dying—men and women who obviously could not take the work but who were doing it anyway.

They seated themselves at long benches, with push buttons at each station. Helena, next to him, explained the system to Ross. Voting was universal and simultaneous, in all the Halls of Democracy around the planet and from all the homes of the Senior Citizens who did not choose to vote from a Hall. Simultaneously the votes were counted at a central station and the results were flashed to screens in the Centers and homes. She said a number of enthusiastic things about Democracy while Ross studied a sheet on which the candidates and propositions were listed.

The names meant nothing to him. He noted only that each of three candidates for Chief of State was one hundred thirty years old, that each of three candidates for First Assistant Chief was one hundred and twenty-seven years old, and so on.

Obviously the nominating conventions by agreement named candidates of the same age for each office to keep it a contest.

Proposition One read: "To dismantle seven pediatric centers and apply the salvage value to the construction of, and the funds no longer required for their maintenance to the maintenance of, a new wing of the Gerontological Center, said wing to be devoted to basic research in the extension of human life."

Proposition Two was worse. Ross didn't bother to read the rest of them. He whispered hoarsely to Helena, "What next?"

"Ssh!" She pointed to a screen at the front of the Hall. "It's starting."

A Senior Citizen of a very high rank (his face was entirely hidden by an oxygen mask) was speaking from the screen. There was what seemed to be a ritual speech of invocation, then he got down to business. "Citizens," he said through his throat mike, "behold Democracy in Action! I give you three candidates for Chief of State—look them over, and make up your minds. First, Citizen Raphael Flexner, age one century, three decades, seven months, ten days." Senior Citizen Flexner rolled on screen, spoke briefly through his throat mike and rolled off. The first speaker said again, "Behold Democracy in Action! See now Citizen Sheridan Farnsworth, age one century, three decades, ten months, forty-two days." Applause boomed louder; some of the younger juniors yelled hysterically and drummed their heels on the floor.

Helena was panting with excitement, eyes bright on the screen. "Isn't it *wonderful*?" she gasped ecstatically. "Oh, look at *him*!"

"Him" was the third candidate, and the first oldster Ross had seen whose gocar was a wheeled stretcher. Prone and almost invisible through the clusters of tubing and chromed equipment, Senior Citizen Immanuel Appleby acknowledged his introduction—"Age one century, three decades, eleven months and five days!" The crowd went mad; Helena broke from Ross's side and joined a long yelling snake dance through the corridors.

Ross yelled experimentally as protective coloration, then found himself yelling because everybody was yelling, because he couldn't help it. By the time the speaker on the screen began to call for order, Ross was standing on top of the voting bench and screaming his head off.

Helena, weeping with excitement, tugged at his leg. "Vote now, Ross," she begged, and all over the hall the cry was "Vote! Vote!"

Ross reached out for the voting buttons. "What do we do now?" he asked Helena.

"Push the button marked 'Appleby,' of course. Hurry!"

"But why Appleby?" Ross objected. "That fellow Flexner, for instance—"

"Hush, Ross! Somebody might be listening." There was sickening fright on Helena's face. "Didn't you hear? We *have* to vote for the best man. 'Oldest Is Bestest,' you know. That's what Democracy *means*, the freedom of choice. They read us the ages, and we choose which is oldest. Now please, Ross, hurry before somebody starts asking questions!"

The voting was over, and the best man had won in every case. It was a triumph for informed public opinion. The mob poured out of the hall in happy-go-lucky order, all precedences and formalities suspended for Holiday.

Helena grasped Ross firmly by the arm. The crowd was spreading over the quiet acres surrounding the Center, each little cluster heedlessly intent on a long-planned project of its own. Under the pressure of Helena's arm, Ross found himself swerving toward a clump of shrubbery.

He said violently, "No! That is, I mean I'm sorry, Helena, but I've got something to do."

She stared at him with shock in her eyes. "On Holiday?"

"On Holiday. Truly, Helena, I'm sorry. Look, what you said last night—from now till tomorrow morning, I can do what I want, right?"

Sullenly, "Yes. I *thought*, Ross, that I *knew* what——"

"Okay." He jerked his arm away, feeling like all of the hundred possible kinds of a skunk. "See you around," he said over his shoulder. He did not look back.

Three kilos back, he told himself firmly, then the right-hand fork in the road. And not more than a dozen kilos, at the most, to the spaceport. He could do it in a couple of hours.

One thing had been established for certain: If ever there had been a "Franklin Foundation" on this planet, it was gone for good now. Dismantled, no doubt, to provide building materials for an eartrumpet plant. No doubt the little F-T-L ship that the Franklin Foundation was supposed to cover for was still swinging in an orbit within easy range of the spaceport; but the chance that anybody would ever find it, or use it if found, was pretty close to zero. If they bothered to maintain a radar watch at all—any other watch than the fully automatic one set to respond only to highvelocity interstellar ships—and if anyone ever took time to look at the radar plot, no doubt the F-T-L ship was charted. As an asteroid, satellite, derelict or "body of unknown origin." Certainly no one of these smug oldsters would take the trouble to investigate.

The only problem to solve on this planet was how to get off it—fast.

On the road ahead of him was what appeared to be a combination sex orgy and free-for-all. It rolled in a yelling, milling mob of half a hundred excited juniors across the road toward him, then swerved into the fields as a cluster of screaming women broke free and ran, and the rest of the crowd roared after them.

Ross quickened his step. If he ever did get off this planet, it would have to be today; he was not fool enough to think that any ordinary day would give him the freedom to poke around the spaceport's defenses. And it would be just his luck, he thought bitterly, to get involved in a gang fight on the way to the port.

There was a squeal of tires behind him, and a little vehicle screeched to a halt. Ross threw up a defensive arm in automatic reflex.

But it was only Helena, awkwardly fumbling open the door of the car. "Get in," she said sourly. "You've spoiled *my* Holiday. Might as well do what *you* want to do."

"What's that?"

Helena looked where he was pointing, and shrugged. "Guard box," she guessed. "How would I know? Nobody's in it, anyhow."

Ross nodded. They had abandoned the car and were standing outside a long, seamless fence that surrounded the spaceport. The main gates were closed and

locked; a few hundred feet to the right was a smaller gate with a sort of pillbox, but that had every appearance of being locked too.

"All right," said Ross. "See that shed with the boxes outside it? Over we go."

The shed was right up against the fence; the metal boxes gave a sort of rough and just barely climbable foothold. Helena was easy enough to lift to the top of the shed; Ross, grunting, managed to clamber after her.

They looked down at the ground on the other side, a dozen feet away. "You don't have to come along," Ross told her.

"That's just *like* you!" she flared. "Cast me aside—trample on me!"

"All right, all right." Ross looked around, but neither junior nor elder was anywhere in sight. "Hang by your hands and then drop," he advised her. "Get moving before somebody shows up."

"On Holiday?" she asked bitterly. She squirmed over the narrow top of the fence, legs dangling, let herself down as far as she could, and let go. Ross watched anxiously, but she got up quickly enough and moved to one side.

Ross plopped down next to her, knocking the wind out of himself. He got up dizzily.

His ship, in lonesome quiet, was less than a quarter of a mile away. "Let's go," Ross panted, and clutched her hand. They skirted another shed and were in the clear, running as fast as they could.

Almost in the clear.

Ross heard the whine of the little scooter before he felt the blow, but it was too late. He sprawled on the ground, dragging Helena after him.

A Senior Citizen with a long-handled rod of the sort Ross remembered all too well was scowling down at them. "Children," he rumbled through his breast-speaker in a voice of awful disgust, "is this the way to act on Holiday?"

Helena, gibbering in terror, was beyond words. Ross croaked, "Sorry, sir. We—we were just—"

Crash! The rod came down again, and every muscle in Ross's body convulsed. He rolled helplessly away, the elder following him. Crash! "We give you Holiday," the elder boomed, "and—" crash "—you act like animals. Terrible! Don't you know that freedom of play on Holiday—" crash "—is the most sacred right of every junior—" crash "—and heaven help you—" crash "—if you abuse it!"

The wrenching punishment and the caressing voice stopped together. Ross lay blinking into the terrible silence that followed. He became conscious of Helena's weeping, and forced his head to turn to look at her.

She was standing behind the elder's scooter, a length of wire in her hand. The senior lay slumped against his safety strap. "Ross!" she moaned. "Ross, what have I done? *I turned him off!*"

He stood up, coughing and retching. No one else was in sight, only the two of them and the silent, slack form of the old man. He grabbed her arm. "Come on," he said fuzzily, and started toward the starship.

She hung back, mumbling to herself, her eyes saucers. She was in a state of grievous shock, it was clear.

Ross hesitated, rubbing his back. He knew that she might never pull out of it. Even if she did, she was certain to be a frightful handicap. But it was crystal-clear that she had declared herself on his side. Even if the elder could be revived, the punishment in store for Helena would be awful to contemplate....

Come what may, he was now responsible for Helena.

He towed her to the starship. She climbed in docilely enough, sat staring blankly as he sealed ship and sent it blasting off the face of the planet.

She didn't speak until they were well into deep space. Then the blank stare abruptly clouded and she exploded in a fit of tears. Ross said ineffectually, "There, there." It had no effect; until, in its own time, the storm ended.

Helena said hoarsely, "Wh-what do I do now?"

"Why, I guess you come right along with me," Ross said heartily, cursing his luck.

"Where's that?"

"Where? You mean, where?" Ross scratched his head. "Well, let's see. Frankly, Helena, your planet was quite a disappointment to me. I had hoped—Well, no matter. I suppose the best thing to do is to look up the next planet on the list."

"What list?"

Ross hesitated, then shrugged and plunged into the explanation. All about the longliners and the message and faster-than-light travel and the Wesley Families—and none of it, while he was talking, seemed convincing at all. But perhaps Helena was less critical; or perhaps Helena simply did not care. She listened attentively and made no comment. She only said, at the end, "What's the name of the next planet?"

He consulted the master charts. Haarland's listing showed a place called Azor, conveniently near at hand in the strange geodesics of the Wesley Effect, where the far galaxies might be near at hand in the warped space-lines, and the void just beyond the viewplates be infinitely distant. The F-T-L family of Azor was named Cavallo; when last heard from, they had been builders of machine tools.

Ross told Helena about it. She shrugged and watched curiously as he began to set up the F-T-L problem on the huge board.

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THEY were well within detection range of Azor's radar, if any, and yet there had been no beeping signal that the planet's GCA had taken over and would pilot them down. Another blank? He studied the surface of the world under his highest magnification and saw no signs that it had been devastated by war. There were cities—intact, as far as he could tell, but not very attractive. The design ran to huge, gloomy piles that mounted toward central towers.

Azor was a big world which showed not much water and a great deal of black rock. It was the fifth of its system and reportedly had colonized its four adjacent neighbors and their moons.

His own search radar pinged. The signal was followed at once by a guarded voice from his ship-to-ship communicator: "What ship are you? Do you receive me? The band is 798.44."

He hastily dialed the frequency on his transmitter and called, "I receive you. We are a vessel from outside your solar system, home planet Halsey. We want to contact a family named Cavallo of the planet Azor believed to be engaged in building machine tools. Can you help us?"

"You are a male?" the voice asked cautiously. "In command or simply the communicator?"

"I'm a male and I'm in command of this vessel."

The voice said: "Then sheer off this system and go elsewhere, my friend."

"What is this? Who are you?"

"My name does not matter. I happen to be on watch aboard the prison orbital station 'Minerva.' Get going, my friend, before the planetary GCA picks you up."

Prison orbital station? A very sensible idea. "Thanks for the advice," he parried. "Can you tell me anything about the Cavallo family?"

"I have heard of them. My friend, your time is running out. If you do not sheer off very soon they will land you. And I judge from the tone of your voice that it will not be long before you join the rest of us criminals aboard 'Minerva.' It is not pleasant here. Good-by."

"Wait, please!" Ross had no intention at all of committing any crimes that would land him aboard a prison hulk, and he had every intention of fulfilling his mission. "Tell me about the Cavallo family—and why you expect me to get in trouble on Azor."

"The time is running out, my friend, but—the Cavallo family of machine tool builders is located in Novj Grad. And the crime of which all of us aboard 'Minerva' were convicted is conspiracy to advocate equality of the sexes. Now go!"

The carrier-wave hum of the communicator died, but immediately there was another electronic noise to fill the cabin—the beep of a GCA radar taking over the sealed landing controls of the craft.

Helena had been listening with very little comprehension. "Who was your friend, Ross?" she asked. "Where are we?"

"I think," Ross said, "he *was* my friend. And I think we are—in trouble."

The ship began to jet tentative bursts of reaction mass, nosing toward the big, gloomy planet.

"That's all right," Helena said comfortably. "At least they won't know I disconnected a Senior Citizen." She thought a moment. "They won't, will they? I mean, the Senior Citizens here won't know about the Senior Citizens there, will they?"

He tried to break it to her gently as the ship picked up speed. "Helena, it's possible that the old people here won't be Senior Citizens—not in your planet's sense. They may just be old people, with no special authority over young people. I think, in fact, that we may find you outranking older people who happen to be males."

She took it as a joke. "You are funny, Ross. Old means Senior, doesn't it? And Senior means better, wiser, abler, and in charge, doesn't it?"

"We'll see," he said thoughtfully as the main reaction drive cut in. "We'll see very shortly."

The spaceport was bustling, busy, and efficient. Ross marveled at the speed and dexterity with which the anonymous ground operator whipped his ship into a braking orbit and set it down. And he stared enviously at the crawling clamshells on treads, bigger than houses, that cupped around his ship; the ship was completely and hermetically surrounded, and bathed in a mist of germicides and prophylactic rays.

A helmeted figure riding a little platform on the inside of one of the clamshells turned a series of knobs, climbed down, and rapped on the ship's entrance port.

Ross opened it diffidently, and almost strangled in the antiseptic fumes. Helena choked and wheezed behind him as the figure threw back its helmet and said, "Where's the captain?"

"I am he," said Ross meticulously. "I would like to be put in touch with the Cavallo Machine-Tool Company of Novj Grad."

The figure shook its long hair loose, which provided Ross with the necessary clue: it was a woman. Not a very attractive-looking woman, for she wore no makeup; but by the hair, by the brows and by the smoothness of her chin, a woman all the same. She said coldly, "If you're the captain, who's that?"

Helena said in a small voice, "I'm Helena, from Junior Unit Twenty-Three."

"Indeed." Suddenly the woman smiled. "Well, come ashore, dear," she said. "You must be tired from your trip. Both of you come ashore," she added graciously.

She led the way out of the clamshells to a waiting closed car. Azor's sun had an unpleasant bluish cast to it, not a type-G at all; Ross thought that the lighting made the woman look uglier than she really had to be. Even Helena looked pinched and bloodless, which he knew well was not the case at all.

All around them was activity. Whatever this planet's faults, it was not a stagnant home for graybeards. Ross, craning, saw nothing that was shoddy, nothing that would have looked out of place in the best-equipped port of Halsey's Planet. And the reception lounge, or whatever it was, that the woman took them to was a handsome and prettily furnished construction. "Some lunch?" the woman asked, directing her attention to Helena. "A cup of tribrew, maybe? Let me have the boy bring some." Helena looked to Ross for signals, and Ross, gritting his teeth, nodded to her to agree. Too young the last time, too male this time; was there ever going to be a planet where he mattered to anyone?

He said desperately, "Madam, forgive my interruption, but this lady and myself need urgently to get in touch with the Cavallo company. Is this Novj Grad?"

The woman's pale brows arched. She said, with an effort, "No, it is not."

"Then can you tell us where Novj Grad is?" Ross persisted. "If they have a spaceport, we can hop over there in our ship——"

The woman gasped something that sounded like, "Well!" She stood up and said pointedly to Helena, "If you'll excuse me, I have something to attend to." And swept out.

Helena stared wide-eyed at Ross. "She must've been a real Senior Citizen, huh?"

“Not exactly,” said Ross despairingly. “Look, Helena, things are different here. I need your help.”

“Help?”

“Yes, help!” he bellowed. “Get a grip on yourself, girl. Remember what I told you about the planet I came from? It was different from yours, remember? The old people were just like anybody else.” She giggled in embarrassment. “They were!” he yelled. “And they are here, too. Old people, young people, doesn’t matter. On my planet, the richest people were—well, never mind. On this planet, women are the bosses. Get it? Women are like elders. So you’ll have to take over, Helena.”

She was looking at him with a puzzled frown. She objected, “But if women are—”

“They are. Never mind about that part of it now; just remember that for the purposes of getting along here, you’re going to be my boss. You tell me what to do. You talk to everybody. And what you have to say to them is this: You must get to Novj Grad immediately, and talk to a high-ranking member of the Cavallo Machine-Tool Company. Clear? Once we get there, I’ll take over; everything will be under control then.” He added prayerfully, “I hope.”

Helena blinked at him. “I’m going to be your boss?” she asked.

“That’s right.”

“Like an elder bosses a junior? And it’s legal?”

Ross started to repeat, “That’s right,” impatiently again. But there was a peculiar look in Helena’s round eyes. “Helena!” he said warningly.

She was all concern. “Why, what is it, Ross?” she asked solicitously. “You look upset. Just leave everything to me, dear.”

They got started on the way to Novj Grad—not in their ship (the woman had said there was no spaceport in Novj Grad), and not alone, so that Ross could not confirm his unhappy opinion of Helena’s inner thoughts. But at least they were on their way to Novj Grad in the Azorian equivalent of a chartered aircraft, with Helena chatting happily with the female pilot, and Ross sitting uncomfortably on a narrow, upholstered strip behind.

Everything he saw in Azor confirmed his first impressions. The planet was busy and prosperous. Nobody seemed to be doing anything very productive, he thought, but somehow everything seemed to get done. Automatic machinery, he guessed; if women were to have any chance of gaining the upper hand on a planet, most of the hard physical work would have to be fairly well mechanized anyhow. And particularly on this planet. They had been flying for six hours, at a speed he guessed to be not much below that of sound, and fully half of the territory they passed over was bare, black rock.

The ship began losing altitude, and the pilot, who had been curled up in a relaxed position, totally ignoring the aircraft, glanced at her instrument panel. “Coming in for a landing,” she warned. “Don’t distract me right now, dear, I’ve got a thousand things to do.”

She didn’t seem to be doing any of them, Ross thought disapprovingly; all she did was watch varicolored lights blink on and off. But no doubt the ship landing, too, was as automatic as the piloting.

Helena turned and leaned back to Ross. "We're coming in for a landing," she relayed.

Ross said sourly, "I heard."

Helena gave him a look of reprimand and forgiveness. "I'm hungry," she mused.

The pilot turned from her controls. "You can get something at the airport," she offered eagerly. "I'll show you."

Helena looked at Ross. "Would you like something?"

But the pilot frowned. "I don't believe there's any place for men," she said disapprovingly. "Perhaps we can get something sent out for him if you like. Although, really, it's probably against the rules, you know."

Ross started to say with great dignity, "Thank you, but that won't be necessary." But he didn't quite get it out. The ship came in for its landing. There was an enormous jolt and a squawk of alarm bells and flashing lights. The ship careened crazily, and stopped.

"Oh, darn," complained the pilot mildly. "It's always doing that. Come on, dear, let's get something to eat. We'll come back for *him* later."

And Ross was left alone to stare apprehensively at the unceasingly flashing lights and to listen to the strident alarms for three-quarters of an hour.

His luck was in, though. The ship didn't explode. And eventually a pallid young man in a greasy apron appeared with a tray of sandwiches and a vacuum jug.

"Up here, boy," Ross called.

He gaped through the port. "You mean come in?"

"Sure. It's all right."

The young man put down the tray. Something in the way he looked at it prompted Ross to invite him: "Have some with me? More here than I can handle."

"Thanks; I believe I will. I, uh, was supposed to take my break after I brought you this stuff." He poured steaming brew into the cup that covered the jug, politely pushed it to Ross and swigged from the jug himself. "You're with the starship?" he asked, around a mouthful of sandwich.

"Yes. I—the captain, that is—wants to contact an outfit called Cavallo Machine-Tool. You know where they are?"

"Sure. Biggest firm on the south side. Fifteen Street; you can't miss them. The captain—is she the lady who was with Pilot Breuer?"

"Yes."

The youngster's eyes widened. "You mean you were in space—alone—with a lady?"

Ross nodded and chewed.

"And she didn't—uh—there wasn't—well—any problem?"

"No," said Ross. "You have much trouble with that kind of thing?"

The boy winced. "If I've asked once I've asked a hundred times for a transfer. Oh, those jet pilots! I used to work in a roadside truck stop. I know truckers are supposed to be rough and tough; maybe they are. But you can't tell me that deep down a

trucker isn't a lady. When you tell them no, that's that. But a pilot—it just eggs them on. Azor City today, Novj Grad tomorrow—what do they care?"

Ross was fascinated and baffled. It seemed to him that they should care and care plenty. Back where he came from, it was the woman who paid and he couldn't imagine any cultural setup which could alter that biological fact. He asked cautiously: "Have you ever been—in trouble?"

The boy stiffened and looked disapproving. Then he said with a sigh: "I might as well tell you. It's all over the station anyway; they call me 'Bernie the Pullover.' Yes. Twice. Pilots both times. I can't seem to say no——" He took another long pull from the jug and a savage bite from a second sandwich.

"I'm sure," Ross said numbly, "it wasn't your fault."

"Try telling that to the judge," Bernie the Pullover said bitterly. "The pilot speaks her piece, the medic puts the blood group tests in evidence, the doctor and crèche director depose that the child was born and is still living. Then the judge says, without even looking up, 'Paternity judgment to the plaintiff, defendant ordered to pay one thousand credits annual support, let this be a warning to you, young man, next case.' I shouldn't have joined you and eaten your sandwiches, but the fact is I was hungry. I had to sell my meal voucher yesterday to meet my payment. Miss three payments and——" He jerked his thumb heavenward.

Ross thought and realized that the thumb must indicate the orbiting prison hulk "Minerva." It *was* the man who paid here.

He demanded: "How did all this happen?"

Bernie, having admitted his hunger, had stopped stalling and seized a third sandwich. "All what?" he asked indistinctly.

Ross thought hard and long. He realized first that he could probably never explain what he meant to Bernie, and second that if he did they'd probably both wind up aboard "Minerva" for conspiracy to advocate equality. He shifted his ground. "Of course everybody agrees on the natural superiority of women," he said, "but people seem to differ from planet to planet as to the reasons. What do they say here on Azor?"

"Oh—nothing special or fancy. Just the common-sense, logical thing. They're smaller, for one thing, and haven't got the muscles of men, so they're natural supervisors. They accumulate money as a matter of course because men die younger and women are the beneficiaries. Then, women have a natural aptitude for all the interesting jobs. I saw a broadcast about that just the other night. The biggest specialist on the planet in vocational aptitude. I forget her name, but she proved it conclusively."

He looked at the empty platter before them. "I've got to go now. Thanks for everything."

"The pleasure was mine." Ross watched his undernourished figure head for the station. He swore a little, and then buckled down to some hard thinking. Helena was his key to this world. He'd have to have a long skull-session or two with her; he couldn't be constantly prompting her or there would be serious trouble. She would be the front and he would be the very inconspicuous brains of the outfit, trailing humbly behind. But was she capable of absorbing a brand-new, rather complicated concept? She seemed to be, he told himself uncomfortably, in love with him. That would help considerably....

Helena and Pilot Breuer showed up, walking with a languor that suggested a large and pleasant meal disposed of. Helena's first words disposed with shocking speed of Ross's doubts that she was able to acquire a brand-new sociological concept. They were: "Ah, there you are, my dear. Did the boy bring you something or other to eat?"

"Yes. Thanks. Very thoughtful of you," he said pointedly, with one eye on Breuer's reaction. There was none; he seemed to have struck the right note.

"Pilot Breuer," said Helena blandly, "thinks I'd enjoy an evening doing the town with her and a few friends."

"But the Cavallo people——"

"Ross," she said gently, "don't *nag*."

He shut up. And thought: wait until I get her out into space. *If* I get her out into space. She'd be a damned fool to leave this wacked-up culture...

Breuer was saying, with an altogether too-innocent air, "I'd better get you two settled in a hotel for the night; then I'll pick up Helena and a few friends and we'll show her what old Novj Grad has to offer in the way of night life. Can't have her batting around the universe saying Azor's sidewalks are rolled up at 2100, can we? And then she can do her trading or whatever it is with Cavallo bright and early tomorrow, eh?"

Ross realized that he was being jollied out of an attack of the sulks. He didn't like it.

The hotel was small and comfortable, with a bar crowded by roistering pilots and their dates. The glimpses Ross got of social life on Azor added up to a damnably unfair picture. It was the man who paid. Breuer roguishly tested the mattress in their room, nudging Helena, and then announced, "Get settled, kids, while I visit the bar."

When the door rolled shut behind her Ross said furiously: "Look, you! Protective mimicry's fine up to a point, but let's not forget what this mission is all about. We seem to be suckered into spending the night, but by hell tomorrow morning bright and early we find those Cavallo people——"

"There," Helena said soothingly. "Don't be angry, Ross. I promise I won't be out late, and she really did insist."

"I suppose so," he grumbled. "Just remember it's no pleasure trip."

"Not for you, perhaps," she smiled sweetly.

He let it drop there, afraid to push the matter.

Breuer returned in about ten minutes with a slight glow on. "It's all fixed," she told Helena. "Got a swell crowd lined up. Table at Virgin Willie's—oops!" She glanced at Ross. "No harm in it, of course," she said. "Anything you want, Ross, just dial service. It's on my account. I fixed it with the desk."

"Thanks."

They left, and Ross went grumpily to bed.

A secretive rustle in the room awoke him. "Helena?" he asked drowsily.

Pilot Breuer's voice giggled drunkenly, "Nope. Helena's passed out at Virgin Willie's, kind of the way I figured she would be on triple antigravs. Had my eye on you since Azor City, baby. You gonna be nice to me?"

"Get out of here!" Ross hissed furiously. "Out of here or I'll yell like hell."

"So yell," she giggled. "I got the house dick fixed. They know me here, baby——"

He fumbled for the bedside light and snapped it on. "I'll pitch you right through the door," he announced. "And if you give me any more lip I won't bother to open it before I do."

She hiccupped and said, "A spirited lad. That's the way I like 'em." With one hand she drew a nasty-looking little pistol. With the other she pulled a long zipper and stepped out of her pilot's coveralls.

Ross gulped. There were three ways to play this, the smart way, the stupid way, and the way that all of a sudden began to look attractive. He tried the stupid way.

He got the pistol barrel alongside his ear for his pains. "Don't jump me," Pilot Breuer giggled. "The boys that've tried to take this gun away from me are stretched end to end from here to Azor City. By me, baby."

Ross blinked through a red-spotted haze. He took a deep breath and got smart. "You're pretty tough," he said admiringly.

"Oh, sure." She kicked the coveralls across the room and moved in on him. "Baby," she said caressingly, "if I seem to sort of forget myself in the next couple of minutes, don't get any ideas. I *never* let go of my gun. Move over."

"Sure," Ross said hollowly. This, he told himself disgustedly, was the damndest, silliest, ridiculousest....

There was a furious hiccup from the door. "So!" Helena said venomously, pushing the door wide and almost falling to the floor. "So!"

Ross flailed out of the bed, kicking the pistol out of Pilot Breuer's hand in the process. He cried enthusiastically, "Helena, dear!"

"Don't you 'Helena-dear' me!" she said, moving in and kicking the door shut behind her. "I leave you alone for one little minute, and what happens? And *you*!"

"Sorry," Pilot Breuer muttered, climbing into her coveralls. "Wrong room. Must've had one anti-grav too many." She licked her lips apprehensively, zipping her coveralls and sidling toward the door. With one hand on the knob, she said diffidently, "If I could have my gun back——? No, you're right! I'll get it tomorrow." She got through the door just ahead of a lamp.

"Hussy!" spat Helena. "And you, Ross——"

It was the last straw. As Ross lurched toward her he regretted only one thing: that he didn't have a hairbrush.

Pilot Breuer had been right. Nobody paid any attention to the noise.

"Yes, Ross." Helena had hardly touched her breakfast; she sat with her eyes downcast.

“Yes, Ross,” he mimicked bitterly. “It better be ‘Yes, Ross.’ This place may look all right to you, but it’s trouble. You don’t want to find yourself stuck here all your life, do you? Then do what I tell you.”

“Yes, Ross.”

He pushed the remains of his food away. “Oh, the hell with it,” he said dispiritedly. “I wish I’d never started out on this fool’s errand. And I double damn well wish I’d left you in the dye vats.”

“Yes, Ro—I mean, I’m glad you didn’t, Ross,” she said in a small voice.

He stood up and patted her shoulder absently. “Come on,” he said, “we’ve got to get over to the Cavallo place. I wish you had let me talk to them on the phone.”

She said reasonably, “But you said—”

“I know what I said. When we get there, remember that I do the talking.”

They walked through green-lit streets, filled with proud-looking women and sad-eyed men. The Cavallo Machine-Tool Corporation was only a few intersections away, by the map the desk clerk had drawn for Helena; they found it without trouble. It was a smallish sort of building for a factory, Ross thought, but perhaps that was how factories went on Azor. Besides, it was well constructed and beautifully landscaped with the purplish lawns these people seemed to prefer.

Helena led him through the door, as was right and proper. She said to the busy little bald-headed man who seemed to be the receptionist, “We’re expected. Miss Cavallo, please.”

“Certainly, Ma’am,” he said with a gap-toothed smile, and worked a combination of rods and buttons on the desk beside him. In a moment, he said, “Go right in. Three up and four over; can’t miss it.”

They passed through a noisy territory of machines where metal was sliced, spun, hacked, and planed; no one seemed to be paying any attention to them. Ross wondered who had built the machines, and had a sudden flash of realization as to where those builders were now: On “Minerva,” staring at the unattainable free sky.

Miss Cavallo was a motherly type with a large black cigar. “Sit right down,” she said heartily. “You, too, young man. Tell me what we in Cavallo Company can do for you.”

Helena opened her mouth, but Ross stopped her with a gesture. “That’s enough,” he said quietly. “I’ll take over. Miss Cavallo,” he declaimed from memory, “what follows is under the seal.”

“Is it indeed! What do you know,” she said.

Ross said, “Wesley.”

Miss Cavallo slapped her thigh admiringly. “Son of a gun,” she said admiringly. “How this takes me back—those long-ago childhood days, learning these things at my mother’s knee. Let’s see. Uh—the limiting velocity is C.”

“But C² is not a velocity,” Ross finished triumphantly. And, from the heart, “Miss Cavallo, you don’t begin to know how happy this makes me.”

Miss Cavallo reached over and pumped his hand, then Helena’s. To the girl she said, “You’ve got a right to be a proud woman, believe me. The way he got through it,

without a single stumble! Never saw anything like it in my life. Well, just tell me what I can do for you, now that that's over."

Ross took a deep, deep breath. He said earnestly, "A great deal. I don't know where to begin. You see, it all goes back to Halsey's Planet, where I come from. This, uh, this ship came in, a longliner, and it got some of us a little worried because, well, it seemed that some of the planets were no longer in communication. We—uh, Miss Cavallo?" She was smiling pleasantly enough, but Ross had the crazy feeling that he just wasn't getting through to her.

"Go right ahead," she boomed. "God knows, I've got nothing against men in business; that's old-fashioned prejudice. Take your time. I won't bite you. Get on with your proposition, young man."

"It isn't exactly a proposition," Ross said weakly. All of a sudden the words seemed hard to find. What did you say to a potential partner in the salvation of the human race when she just nodded and blew cigar smoke at you?

He made an effort. "Halsey's Planet was the seventh alternate destination for this ship, and so we figured—That is, Miss Cavallo, it kind of looked like there was some sort of trouble. So Mr. Haarland—he's the one who has the F-T-L secret on Halsey, like you do here on Azor—he passed it on to me, of course—well, he asked me to, well, sort of take a look around." He stopped. The words by then were just barely audible anyhow; and Miss Cavallo had been looking furtively at her watch.

Miss Cavallo shrugged sympathetically to Helena. "They're all like that under the skin, aren't they?" she observed ambiguously. "Well, if men could take our jobs away from us, what would we do? Stay home and mind the kids?" She roared and poked a box of cigars at Helena.

"Now," she said briskly, "let's get down to cases. I really enjoyed hearing those lines from you, young man, and I want you to know that I'm prepared to help you in any possible way because of them. Open a line of credit, speed up deliveries, send along some of our technical people to help you get set up—anything. Now, what can I do for you? Turret lathes? Grinders? Screw machines?"

"Miss Cavallo," Ross said desperately, "don't you know anything about the faster-than-light secret?"

She said impatiently, "Of course I do, young man. Said the responses, didn't I? There's no call for that item, though."

"I don't want to *buy* one," Ross cried. "I have one. Don't you realize that the human race is in danger? Populations are dying out or going out of communication all over the galaxy. Don't you want to do something about it before we all go under?"

Miss Cavallo dropped all traces of a smile. Her face was like flint as she stood up and pointed to the window. "Young man," she said icily, "take a look out there. That's the Cavallo Machine-Tool Company. Does that look as if we're going under?"

"I know, but Clyde, Cyrnus One, Ragansworld—at least a dozen planets I can name—are *gone*. Didn't you ever think that you might be next?"

Miss Cavallo kept her voice level, but only with a visible effort.

She said flatly, "No. Never. Young man, I have plenty to do right here on Azor without bothering my head about those places you're talking about. Seventy-five years ago there was another fellow just like you; Flarney, some name like that; my

grandmother told me about him. He came bustling in here causing trouble, with that old silly jingle about Wesley and C-square and so on, with some cock-and-bull story about a planet that was starving to death, stirring up a lot of commotion. Well, he wound up on 'Minerva,' because he wouldn't take no for an answer. Watch out that you don't do the same."

She marched majestically to the door. "And now," she said, "if you've wasted quite enough of my time, kindly leave."

..... 8

"STUPID old bat," Ross muttered. They were walking aimlessly down Fifteen Street, the nicely-landscaped machine tool works behind them.

Helena said timidly: "You really shouldn't talk that way, Ross. She is older than you, after all. Old heads are——"

"——wisest," he wearily agreed. "Also the most conservative. Also the most rigidly inflexible; also the most firmly closed to the reception of new ideas. With one exception."

She reeled under the triple blasphemy and then faintly asked: "What's the exception?"

Ross became aware that they were not alone. Their very manner of walking, he a little ahead, obviously leading the way, was drawing unfavorable attention from passers-by. Nothing organized or even definite—just looks ranging from puzzled distaste to anger. He said, "Somebody named Haarland. Never mind," and in a lower voice: "Straighten up. Step out a little ahead of me. Scowl."

She managed it all except the scowl. The expression on her face got some stupefied looks from other pedestrians, but nothing worse.

Helena said loudly and plaintively: "I don't like it here after all, Ross. Can't we get away from all these women?"

Should the impulse seize you, placard ancient Brooklyn with twenty-four sheets proclaiming the Dodgers to be cellar-dwelling bums. Mount a detergent box and inform a crowd of Altairians that they are degenerate slith-fondlers if you must. Announce in a crowded Cephean bar room that Sadkia Revall is no better than she should be. From these situations you have some chance of emerging intact. But never, never pronounce the word "women" as Helena pronounced it on Fifteen Street, Novj Grad, Azor.

The mob took only seconds to form.

Ross and Helena found themselves with their backs to the glass doors of a food store. The handful of women who had actually heard the remark were all talking to them simultaneously, with fist-shaking. Behind them stood as many as a dozen women who knew only that something had happened and that there were comfortably outnumbered victims available. The noise was deafening, and Helena began to cry. Ross first wondered if he could bring himself to knock down a woman; then realized after studying the hulking virago in their foreground that he might bring himself to try but probably would not succeed.

She seemed to be accusing Helena of masquerading, of advocating equality, of uttering obscenely antisocial statements in the public road, to the affront of all decent-minded girls.

There was violence in the air. Ross was on the point of blocking a roundhouse right when the glass doors opened behind them. The small diversion distracted the imbecile collective brain of the mob.

"What's going on here?" a suety voice demanded. "Ladies, may I please get through?"

It was a man trying to emerge from the food shop with a double armful of cartons. He was a great fat slob, quite hairless, and smelling powerfully of kitchen. He wore the gravy-spotted whites of any cook anywhere.

The virago said to him, "Keep out of this, Willie. This fellow here's a masquerader. The thing I heard him say——!"

"I'm not," Helena wept. "I'm not!"

The cook stooped to look into her face and turned on the mob. "She isn't," he said definitely. "She's a lady from another system. She was slopping up triple antigravs at my place last night with a gang of jet pilots."

"That doesn't prove a thing!" the virago yelled.

"Madam," the cook said wearily, "after her third antigrav I had to trip her up and crown her. She was about to climb the bar and corner my barman."

Ross looked at her fixedly. She stopped crying and nervously cleared her throat.

"So if you'll just let us through," the cook bustled, seizing the psychological moment of doubt. His enormous belly bulldozed a lane for them. "Beg pardon. Excuse us. Madam, will you—thank you. Beg pardon——"

The lynchers were beginning to drift away, embarrassed. The party had collapsed. "Faster," the cook hissed at them. "Beg pardon——" And they were in the clear and well down the street.

"Thank you, Sir," Helena said humbly.

"Just 'Willie', *if* you please," the fat man said.

One hand descended on Ross's shoulder and another on Helena's. They both belonged to the virago. She spun them around, glaring. "*I'm* not satisfied with the brush-off," she snapped. "Exactly what did you mean by that remark you made?"

Helena wailed, "It's just that you and all these other women here seem so *young*."

The virago's granite face softened. She let go and tucked in a strand of steel-wool hair. "Did you really think so, dear?" she asked, beaming. "There, I'm sorry I got excited. A wee bit jealous, were you? Well, we're broad-minded here in Novj Grad." She patted Helena's arm and walked off, smiling and jaunty.

Virgin Willie led off and they followed him. Ross's knees were shaky. The virago had not known that to Helena "young" meant "stupid."

The cook absently acknowledged smiles and nods as they walked. He was, obviously, a character. Between salutes he delivered a low-voiced, rapid-fire reaming to Ross and Helena. "Silly stunt. Didn't you hear about the riots? Supposed to be arms caches somewhere here on the south side. Everybody's nerves absolutely ragged. Somebody

gets smashed up in traffic, they blame it on us. Don't care *where* you're from. Watch it next time."

"We will, Willie," Helena said contritely. "And I think you run an awfully nice restaurant."

"Yeah," said Ross, looking at her.

Willie muttered, "I guess you're clear. You still staying at that hot pilot's hangout? This is where we say good-by, then. You turn left."

He waddled on down the street. Helena said instantly, "I don't remember a thing, Ross."

"Okay," he said. "You don't remember a thing."

She looked relieved and said brightly, "So let's get back to the hotel."

"Okay," he said. Climbed the bar and tried to corner the.... Halfway to the hotel he slowed, then stopped, and said, "I just thought of something. Maybe we're not staying there any more. After last night why should Breuer carry us on her tab? I thought we'd have some money to carry us from the Cavallos by now——"

"The ship?" she asked in a small voice.

"Across the continent. Hell! Maybe Breuer forgave and forgot. Let's try, anyway."

They never got as far as the hotel. When they reached the square it stood on, there was a breathless rush and Bernie stood before them, panting and holding a hand over his chest. "In here," he gasped, and nodded at a shopfront that announced hot brew. Ross thoughtlessly started first through the door and caught Bernie's look of alarm. He opened the door for Helena, who went through smiling nervously.

They settled at a small table in an empty corner in stiff silence. "I've been walking around that square all morning," Bernie said, with a cowed look at Helena.

Ross told her: "This young man and I had a talk yesterday at the plane while you were eating. What is it, Bernie?"

He still couldn't believe that he was doing it, but Bernie said in a scared whisper: "Wanted to head you off and warn you. Breuer was down at the field cafe this morning, talking loud to the other hot-shots. She said you—both of you—talked equality. Said she got up with a hangover and you were gone. But she said there'd be six policewomen waiting in your room when you got back." He leaned forward on the table. Ross remembered that he had been forced to sell his ration card.

"Here comes the waiter," he said softly. "Order something for all of us. We have a little money. And thanks, Bernie."

Helena asked, "What do we *do*?"

"We eat," Ross said practically. "Then we think. Shut up; let Bernie order."

They ate; and then they thought. Nothing much seemed to come from all the thinking, though.

They were a long, long way from the spaceship. Ross commandeered all of Helena's leftover cash. It was almost, not quite, enough for one person to get halfway back to Azor City. He and Bernie turned out their pockets and added everything they had,

including pawnable valuables. That helped. It made the total almost enough for one person to get three-quarters of the way back.

It didn't help enough.

Ross said, "Bernie, what would happen if we, well, stole something?"

Bernie shrugged. "It's against the law, of course. They probably wouldn't prosecute, though."

"They wouldn't?"

"Not if they can prove egalitarianism on you. Stealing's against the law; preaching equality is against the *state*. You get the maximum penalty for that."

Helena choked on her drink, but Ross merely nodded. "So we might as well take a chance," he said. "Thanks, Bernie. We won't bother you any more. You'll forget you heard this, won't you?"

"The hell I will!" Bernie squawked. "If you're getting out of here, I want to go with you! You aren't leaving *me* behind!"

"But Bernie——" Ross started. He was interrupted by the manager, a battleship-class female with a mighty prow, who came scowling toward them.

"Pipe down," she ordered coarsely. "This place is for decent people; we don't want no disturbances here. If you can't act decent, get out."

"Awk," said Helena as Ross kicked her under the table. "I mean, yes ma'am. Sorry if we were talking too loud." They watched the manager walk away in silence.

As soon as she was fairly away, Ross hissed, "It's out of the question, Bernie. You might be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire."

Bernie asked, startled, "The what?"

"The—never mind, it's just an expression where I come from. It means you might get out of this place and find yourself somewhere worse. We don't know where we're going next; you might wish to God you were back here within the next three days."

"I'll take that chance," Bernie said earnestly. "Look, Ross, I played square with you. I didn't have to stick my neck out and warn you. How about giving me a break too?"

Helena interrupted, "He's right, Ross. After all, we owe him that much, don't we? I mean, if a person does that much for a person, a person ought to——"

"Oh, shut up." Ross glared at both of them. "You two seem to think this is a game," he said bitterly. "Let me set you straight, both of you. It isn't. More hangs on what happens to me than either of you realize. The fate of the human race, for instance."

Helena flashed a look at Bernie. "Of *course*, Ross," she said soothingly. "Both of us know that, don't we, Bernie?"

Bernie stammered, "Sure—sure we do, Ross." He rubbed his ankle. He went on, "Honest, Ross, I want to get the hell away from Azor once and for all. I don't care *where* you're going. Anything would be better than this place and the damned female bloodsuckers that——"

He stopped, petrified. His eyes, looking over Ross's shoulder, were enormous.

"Go on, sonny," said a rich female voice from behind Ross. "Don't let me and the lieutenant stop you just when you're going good."

"It must have been that damn manager," Bernie said for the fifteenth time.

Ross uncrossed his legs painfully and tried lying on the floor on his side. "What's the difference?" he asked. "They got us; we're in the jug. And face it: somebody would have caught us sooner or later, and we might have wound up in a worse jail than this one." He shifted uncomfortably. "If that's possible, I mean. Why don't they at least have beds in these places?"

"Oh," said Bernie immediately, "some do. The jails in Azor City and Nuevo Reykjavik have beds; Novj Grad, Eleanor, and Milo don't. I mean, that's what they tell me," he added virtuously.

"Sure," Ross growled. "Well, what do they tell you usually happens next?"

Bernie spread his hands. "Different things. First there's a hearing. That's all over by now. Then an indictment and trial. Maybe that's started already; sometimes they get it in on the same day as the hearing, sometimes not. Then—tomorrow sometime, most likely—comes the sentencing. We'll know about that, though, because we'll be there. The law's very strict on that—they always have you in the court for sentencing."

Ross cried, "You mean the trial might be going on right now without us?"

"Of course. What else? Think they'd take a chance on having the prisoners creating a disturbance during the trial?"

Ross groaned and turned his face to the wall. For this, he thought, he had come the better part of a hundred light years; for this he had left a comfortable job with a brilliant future. He spent a measurable period of time cursing the memory of old Haarland and his double-jointed, persuasive tongue.

Back in the days of Ross's early teens he had seen a good many situations like this in the tri-dis, and the hero had never failed to extricate himself by a simple exercise of superhuman strength, intellect, and ingenuity. That, Ross told himself, was just what he needed now. The trouble was, he didn't have them.

All he had was the secret of faster-than-light travel. And, here on Azor as on the planet of the graybeards, it had laid a king-sized egg. Women, Ross thought bitterly, women were basically inward-directed and self-seeking; trust them with the secret of F-T-L; make them, like the Cavallos, custodians of a universe-racking truth; and see the secret lost or embalmed in sterile custom. What, he silently demanded of himself, did the greatest of scientific discoveries mean to a biological baby-foundry? How could any female—no single member of which class had ever painted a great picture, written a great book, composed a great sonata, or discovered a great scientific truth—appreciate the ultimate importance of the F-T-L drive? It was like entrusting a first-folio Shakespeare to a broody hen; the shredded scraps would be made into a nest. For the egg came first. Motherhood was all.

That explained it, of course. That, Ross told himself moodily, explained everything except why the F-T-L secret had fallen into apparently equal or worse desuetude on such planets as Gemsel, Clyde, Cynrus One, Ragansworld, Tau Ceti II, Capella's family of eight, and perhaps a hundred others.

Ragansworld was gone entirely, drowned in a planetary nebula.

The planet of the graybeard had gone to seed; nothing new, nothing not hallowed by tradition had a chance in its decrepit social order.

His home, Halsey's Planet, was rapidly, calmly, inevitably depopulating itself.

And Azor had fallen into a rigid, self-centered matriarchal order that only an act of God could break.

Was there a pattern? Were there any similarities?

Ross searched desperately in his mind; but without result. The image of Helena kept intruding itself between him and his thoughts. Was he getting sentimental about that sweet little chucklehead? Who, he hastily added, had come near to criminally assaulting him, who had climbed the....

He turned to the little waiter and demanded: "Will she—Helena—be on the orbital station with us if we're all convicted?"

"Hmm—no, I should think not. As a responsible person, she gets the supreme penalty."

Ross numbly asked after a long pause, "How? Nothing—painful?" It was hard to think of Helena dangling grotesquely at a rope's end or jolting as she sat strapped in a large, ugly chair. But there were things he had heard of which were horribly worse.

Bernie had been watching him. "I'm sorry," the little man said soberly. "It's up to the judge. She's a foreigner, so they may consider that an extenuating circumstance and place some quick-acting poison aboard for her to take. Otherwise it's slow starvation."

A faint, irrational hope had begun to dawn in Ross's mind. "Aboard what? Exactly how does it work?"

"They'll put her aboard some hulk with the rockets disabled, fire it off into space—and that's that. I suppose they'll use the ship she came in—"

Ross was frantically searching his pockets. He had a stylus. "Got any paper?" he briskly demanded of Bernie.

"Yes, but—?" The waiter blankly passed over an order book. Ross sprawled on the floor and began to scribble: "Never mind how or why this works. Do it. You saw me work the big fan-shaped computer in the center room and you can do it too. Find the master star maps in the chart room. Look up the co-ordinates of Halsey's System. Set these co-ordinates on the twenty-seven dials marked Proximate Mass. Take the readings on the windows above the dials and set them on the cursors of the computer——" He scribbled furiously, from time to time forcing himself deliberately to slow down as the writing became an unreadable scrawl. He filled the ruled fronts of the order pages and then the backs—perhaps ten thousand closely-written words, and not one of them wasted. Haarland's precise instructions, mercilessly drilled into him, flowed out again.

He flung the stylus down at last and read through the book again, ignoring the gaping Bernie. It was all there, as far as he could tell. Grant her a lot of luck and more brains than he privately credited her with, and she had a fighting chance of winding up within radar range of Halsey's Planet. GCA could take her down from there; an annoying ship-like object hanging on the radarscopes would provoke a reconnaissance.

She knew absolutely nothing about F-T-L or the Wesley drive, but then—neither did he. That fact itself was no handicap.

He might rot on “Minerva,” but some word might get back to Haarland. And so would the ship. And Helena would not perish miserably in a drifting hulk.

Bernie saw the mysterious job was ended and dared to ask, “A letter?”

“No,” Ross said jubilantly. “By God, if things break right they won’t get her. It’s like this—”

He happily began to explain that his F-T-L ship’s rockets were only auxiliaries for fine maneuvering, but he counted on the court not knowing that. If he and Helena could persuade....

As he went on the look on Bernie’s face changed very slowly from hope to pity to politely-simulated interest. Correspondingly Ross’s accounting became labored and faulty. The pauses became longer and at last he broke off, filled with self-contempt at his folly. He said bitterly, “You don’t think it’ll work.”

“Oh, no!” Bernie protested with too much heartiness. “I could see she’s awfully mechanically-minded for a woman, even if it wouldn’t be polite to say so. Sure it’ll work, Ross. Sure!”

The hell it would.

At least he had disposed of a few hours. And—perhaps some bungling setting would explode the ship, or end a Wesley Jump in the heart of a white dwarf star—sudden annihilation, whiffing Helena out of existence before her body could realize that it had died, before the beginning of apprehension could darken happy absorption with a task she thought would bring her to safety.

For that reason alone he had to carry the scheme through.

The courtroom was a chintzy place bright with spring flowers. Ross and Helena looked numbly at one another from opposite corners while the previous order of business was cleared from the docket. A wedding.

The judge, unexpectedly sweet-faced and slender though gray, obviously took such parts of her work seriously. “Marylyn and Kent,” she was saying earnestly to the happy couple, “I suppose you know my reputation. I lecture people a bit before I tie the knot. Evidently it’s not such a bad idea because my marriages turn out well. Last week in Eleanor one of my girls was arrested and reprimanded for gross infidelity and a couple of years ago right here in Novj Grad one of my boys got five hundred lashes for nonsupport. Let’s hope it did them some good, but the cases were unusual. My people, I like to think, know their rights and responsibilities when they walk out of my court, and I think the record bears me out.

“Marylyn, you have chosen to share part of your life with this man. You intend to bear his children. This should not be because your animal appetites have overcome you and you can’t win his consent in any other way but because you know, down deep in your womanly heart, that you can make him happy. Never forget this. If you should thoughtlessly conceive by some other man, don’t tell him. He would only brood. Be thrifty, Marylyn. I have seen more marriages broken up by finances than any other reason. If your husband earns a hundred Eleanors a week, spend only that and no more. If he makes *fifty* Eleanors a week spend only that and no more.

Honorable poverty is preferable to debt. And, from a practical standpoint, if you spend more than your husband earns he will be jailed for debt sooner or later, with resulting loss to your own pocket.

“Kent, you have accepted the proposal of this woman. I see by your dossier that you got in just under the wire. In your income group the antibachelor laws would have caught up with you in one more week. I must say I don’t like the look of it, but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. I want to talk to you about the meaning of marriage. Not just the wage assignment, not just the insurance policy, not just the waiver of paternity and copulation ‘rights’, so-called. Those, as a good citizen, you will abide by automatically—Heaven help you if you don’t. But there is more to marriage than that. The honor you have been done by this woman who sees you as desirable and who wishes to make you happy over the years is not a sterile legalism. Marriage is like a rocket, I sometimes think. The brute, unreasoning strength of the main jets representing the husband’s share and the delicate precise steering and stabilizing jets the wife’s. We have all of us seen too many marriages crash to the ground like a rocket when these roles were reversed. It is not reasonable to expect the wife to provide the drive—that is, the income. It is not reasonable to expect the husband to provide the steering—that is, the direction of the personal and household expenditures. So much for the material side of things. On the spiritual side, I have little to say. The laws are most explicit; see that you obey them—and if you don’t, you had better pray that you wind up in some court other than mine. I have no patience with the obsolete doctrine that there is such a legal entity as seduction by female, despite the mouthings of certain so-called jurists who disgrace the bench of a certain nearby city.

“Having heard these things, Marylyn and Kent, step forward and join hands.”

They did. The ceremony was short and simple; the couple then walked from the courtroom under the beaming smile of the judge.

A burly guard next to Ross pointed at the groom. “Look,” she said sentimentally. “He’s crying. Cute!”

“I don’t blame the poor sucker,” Ross flared, and then, being a man of conscience, wondered suddenly if that was why, on Halsey’s Planet, women cried at weddings.

A clerk called: “Dear, let’s have those egalitarians front and center, please. Her honor’s terribly rushed.”

Helena was escorted forward from one side, while Ross and Bernie were jostled to the fore from the other. The judge turned from the happy couple. As she looked down at the three of them the smile that curved her lips turned into something quite different. Ross, quailing, suddenly realized that he had seen just that expression once before. It was when he was very, very young, when a friend of his mother’s had come bustling into the kitchen where he was playing, just after she had smelled, and just before she had seen, the long-dead rat he had fetched up from the abandoned cellar across the street.

While the clerk was reading the orders and indictment, the judge’s stare never wavered. And when the clerk had finished, the judge’s silent stare remained, for a long, terrible time.

In the quietest of voices, the judge said, “So.”

Ross caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye. He turned just in time to see Bernie, knees buckling, slip white-faced and unconscious to the floor. The guards rushed forward, but the judge raised a peremptory hand. "Leave him alone," she ordered soberly. "It is kinder. Defendants, you are charged with the gravest of crimes. Have you anything to say before sentence is passed on you?"

Ross tried to force words—any words, to protest, to plead, to vilify—through his clogged throat. All he managed was a croaking sound; and Helena, by his side, nudged him sharply to silence. He turned to her sharply, and realized that this was the best chance he'd be likely to get. He clutched at her, rolled up his eyes, slumped to the floor in as close an imitation of Bernie's swoon as he could manage.

The judge was visibly annoyed, and this time she didn't stop the attendants when they rushed in to kick him erect. But he had the consolation of seeing a flash of understanding cross Helena's face, and her hand dart to a pocket with the paper he had handed her. In the confusion no one saw.

The rest of the courtroom scene was kaleidoscopic in Ross's recollection. The only part he remembered clearly was the judge's voice as she said to him and Bernie, "—for the rest of your lives, as long as Almighty God shall, in Her infinite wisdom, permit you the breath of life, be banished from Azor and all of its allied worlds to the prison hulk in 'Orbit Minerva.'"

And they were hustled out as the judge, even more wrathful than before, turned to pronounce sentence on Helena.

..... 9

THE guard spat disgustedly. "Fine lot of wrecks we're getting," she complained. "Not like the old days. They used to send real men here." She glowered at Ross and Bernie, holding their commitment papers loosely in her hand. "And for treason, too!" she added. "Used to be it took guts to commit a crime against the state." She shook her head, then made a noise of distaste and scribbled initials on the commitment papers. She handed them back to the pilot who had brought them up from Azor, who grinned, waved, and got out of there. "All right," said the guard, "we have to take what we get. I'll have to put you two on construction; you'll never stand up under hard work. Keep your noses clean, that's all. Up at 0500; breakfast till 0510; work detail till 1950; dinner and recreation till 2005; then lights out. Miss a formation and you miss a meal. Miss two, and you get punishment detail. Nobody misses three."

Ross and Bernie found themselves sharing a communal cell. They had all of five minutes to look around and get oriented; then they were out on their first work detail.

It wasn't so bad as it sounded. Their shiftmates were a couple of dozen ragged-looking wrecks, half-heartedly assembling a sort of meccano-toy wall out of sheets of perforated steel and clip-spring bolts. All the parts seemed well worn; some of the bolts hardly closed. It took Ross the better part of his first detail, whispering when the guards were looking the other way, to find out why. Their half of the prisoners were Construction; the other half was Demolition. What Construction in the morning put up, Demolition in the evening tore down. Neither side was anxious to set any speed records, and the guards without exception were too bored to care.

With any kind of luck, Ross found, he could hope eventually to get a real job—manning the “Minerva’s” radar, signal, or generating facilities, working in the kitchens or service shops, perhaps even as an orderly in the guard quarters. (Although Ross quite by accident chanced to see a guard’s orderly as he passed through a corridor near the work area, a handkerchief held daintily to his nose. And though the orderly’s clothing was neat and his plump cheeks indicated good eating, the haunted expression in his eyes made Ross think twice.)

The one thing he could not do, according to the testimony of every man he spoke to, was escape.

The fifth time Ross got that answer, the guard had stepped out of the room. Ross took the opportunity to thrash the thing through. “Why?” he demanded. “Back where I come from we’ve got lots of prisons. I never heard of one nobody escaped from.”

The other prisoner laughed shortly. “Now you have,” he said. “Go ahead, try. Every one of us has tried, one time or another. There’s only one thing stopping you—there’s no place to go. You can get past the guards easy enough—they’re lazy, when they’re not either drunk or boy-chasing. You can roam around ‘Minerva’ all you like. You can even get to the spacelock, and if you want to you can walk right through it. But not in a spacesuit, because there aren’t any on board. And not into the tender that brings us up from Azor, because you aren’t built right.”

Ross looked puzzled. “Not built right?”

“That’s right. There’s telescreens and remote-control locks built into that tender. The pilot brings you up, but once she couples with ‘Minerva’ the controls lock. And the only way they get unlocked is when three women, in three different substations down on Azor, push the RC releases. And they don’t do that until they look in their screens, and see that everybody who has turned up in the tender has stripped down to nothing at all, and every one of them is by-God female. Any further questions?” He grinned wryly. “Don’t even think about plastic surgery, if that happens to cross your mind,” he said. “We have two men here who tried it. You don’t have much equipment here; you can’t do a neat enough job.”

Ross gulped. “Hadn’t given it a thought,” he assured the other man. “You can’t even hide away in a trunk or something?”

The prisoner shook his head. “Aren’t any trunks. Everything’s one way—Azor to ‘Minerva’—except pilots and guards. No men ever go back. When you die, you go out the lock—without a ship. Same with everything else that they want to get rid of.”

Ross thought hard. “What if they—well, what if you’re sent up here and all, and then some new evidence turns up and you’re found innocent? Don’t they send you back then?”

“Found innocent?” The man looked at Ross pityingly. “Man, you *are* new. Hey,” he called. “Hey, Chuck! This guy wants to know what happens if they find out back on Azor that he’s innocent!”

Chuck exploded into laughter. Wiping his eyes, he walked over to Ross. “Thanks,” he grinned. “Haven’t had a good laugh in fifteen years.”

“I don’t see that that’s so funny,” Ross said defensively. “After all, the judge can make a mistake, none of us is per—awk!”

"Shut up!" Chuck hissed, holding a hand over Ross's mouth. "Do you want to get us all in *real* trouble? Some of these guys would rat to the guards for an extra hunk of bread! The judges never make a mistake." And his lips formed the silent word: "Officially."

He let go of Ross and stood back, but didn't walk away. He scratched his head. "Say," he said, "you ask some stupid questions. Where are you from, anyhow?"

Ross said bitterly, "What's the use? You won't believe me. I happen to be from a place called Halsey's Planet, which is a good long distance from here. About as far as light will travel in two hundred years, if that gives you an idea. I came here in an F-T-L—that is, a faster-than-light ship. You don't know what that is, of course, but I did. It was a mistake, I admit it. But here I am."

Somewhat to Ross's surprise, Chuck didn't laugh again. He looked dubious, and he scratched his head some more, but he didn't laugh. To the other prisoner he said, "What do you think, Sam?"

Sam shrugged. "So maybe we were wrong," he observed.

Ross demanded, "Wrong about what?"

"Well," Chuck said hesitantly, "there's a guy here named Flarney. He's a pretty old son-of-a-gun by now, must be at least ninety, and he's been here a good long time. Dunno how long. But he talks crazy, just like you. No offense," he added, "it's just that we all thought he'd gone space-happy. But maybe we're wrong. Unless—" his eyes narrowed "unless the two of you are both space-happy, or trying to kid us, or something."

Ross said urgently, "I swear, Chuck, there's no such thing. It's true. Who's this Flarney? Where does he say he came from?"

"Who can make sense out of what he says? All I know is, he talked a lot about something faster than light. That's crazy; that's like saying slower than dark, or bigger than green, or something. But I don't know, maybe it means something."

"Believe me, Chuck, it does! Where is this man—can I see him?"

Chuck looked uncertain. "Well, sure. That is, you can see him all right. But it isn't going to do you a whole hell of a lot of good, because he's dead. Died yesterday; they're going to pitch him out into space sometime today."

Sam said, "This is when Whitker flips. One week without his old pal Flarney and he'll begin to look funny. Two weeks and he starts acting funny. Three and he's talking funny and the guards begin to crack down. I give him a month to get shot down and heaved through the locker."

Old pal? Ross demanded, "Who's this Whitker? Where can I get in touch with him?"

"Him and Flarney were both latrine orderlies. That's where they put the feeble old men, mopping and polishing. Number Two head, any hour of the day or night. Old buzzard has his racket—we're supposed to get a hank of cellosponge per man per day, but he's always 'fresh out'—unless you slip him your saccharine ration every once in a while."

Ross asked the way to Number Two head and the routine. But it was an hour before he could bring himself to ask the hulking guard for permission.

"Sure, sonny," she boomed. "I'll show you the way. Need any help?"

“No, thanks, ma’am,” he said hastily, and she roared with laughter. So did the members of the construction gang; it must have been an ancient gag. He hurried on his way thinking dark and bloody thoughts.

“Whitker?” he asked a tottering ancient who nodded and drowsed amid the facilities of the head.

The old man looked up blearily and squeaked: “Fresh out. Fresh out. You should’ve saved some from yesterday.”

“That’s all right. I’m a new man here. I want to ask you about your friend Flarney—”

Whitker bowed his head and began to cry noiselessly.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Whitker. I heard. But there’s something we can do about it—maybe. Flarney was a faster-than-light man. He must have told you that. So am I. Ross, from Halsey’s Planet.”

He hadn’t the faintest idea as to whether any of this was getting through to the ancient.

“It seems Flarney and I were both on the same mission, finding out how and why planets were dropping out of communication. You and he used to talk a lot, they tell me. Did he ever tell you anything about that?”

Whitker looked up and squeaked dimly. “Oh, yes. All the time. I humored him. He was an old man, you know. And now he’s dead.” The tears leaked from his rheumy eyes and traced the sad furrows beside his nose.

Was he getting through? “What did he *say*, Mr. Whitker? About faster-than-light?”

The old man said, “L-sub-T equals L-sub-zero e to the minus T-over-two-N.”

That damned formula again! “But what does it mean, Mr. Whitker? What did he say it meant?” Ross softly urged.

The old man looked surprised. “Genes?” he asked himself hazily. “Generations? I don’t remember. But you go to Earth, young man. Flarney said *they’d* know, and know what to do about it, too, which is more than he did. His very words, young man!”

Ross didn’t dare stay longer. Furthermore he suspected that the old man’s attention span had been exhausted. He started from the room with a muttered thanks, and was stopped at the door by Whitker’s hand on his shoulder.

“You’re a good boy,” Whitker squeaked. “Here.”

Ross found himself walking down the corridor with an enormous wad of cellosponge in his hand.

The bunks were hard, but that didn’t matter. Dormitories were the outermost layer of the hulk, pseudogravity varies inversely as the fourth power of the distance, and the field generator was conventionally located near “Minerva’s” center. When your relative weight is one-quarter normal you can sleep deliciously on a gravel driveway. This was the dormitory’s only attractive feature. Otherwise it was too many steel slabs, tiered and spotted too close, too many unwashed males, too much weary snoring. The only things in short supply were headroom and air.

Not everybody slept. Insomniacs turned and grunted; those who had given up the struggle talked from bunk to bunk in considerably low tones.

Bernie muttered from a third-tier bunk facing Ross's: "I wonder if she made it."

Ross knew what he meant. "Unlikeliest thing in the world," he said. "But I think she went fast and never knew what hit her." He thought of the formula and "They'd know on Earth—and know what to do about it too." Earth the enigma, from which all planetary peoples were supposed to be derived. Earth—the dot on the traditional master charts, Earth—from which and to which no longliners ever seemed to travel. Haarland had told him no F-T-L ship had in recent centuries ever reported again after setting out for Earth. Another world sunk in barbarism? But Flarney had said—no; that was not data. That was the confused recollections of a very old man, possibly based on the confused recollections of another very old man. Perhaps it had got mixed up with the semilegendary origin story.

Poor sweet Helena! He hoped it had happened fast, that she had been thinking of some pleasant prospect on Halsey's Planet. In her naïve way she'd think it just around the corner, a mere matter of following instructions....

So thought Ross, the pessimist.

In his gloom he had forgotten that this was exactly what it was. In his snobbishness he never realized that he was guilty of the most frightful arrogance in assuming that what he could do, she could not. In his ignorance he was not aware that since navigation began, every new instrument, every technique, has drawn the shuddery warnings of savants that uneducated skippers, working by rote, could not be expected to master these latest fruits of science—or that uneducated skippers since navigation began have cheerfully adopted new instruments and techniques at the drop of a hat and that never once have the shuddery warnings been justified by the facts.

Up the aisle somebody was saying in a low, argumentative tone, "I saw the drum myself. Naturally it was marked Dulsheen Creme, but the guards here never did give a damn whether their noses were dull or bright enough to flag down a freighter and I don't think they've suddenly changed. It was booze, I tell you. Fifty liters of it."

"Gawd! The hangovers tomorrow."

"We'll all have to watch our steps. I hope they don't do anything worse than getting quietly drunk in their quarters. Those foot-kissing orderlies'll get a workout, but who cares what happens to an orderly?"

"They haven't been on a real tear since I've been here."

"Lucky you. Let's hope they don't bust loose tonight. It's a break in the monotony, sure—but those girls play rough. Five prisoners died last time."

"They beat them up?"

"One of them."

"What about the others? Oh! Oh, Gawd—fifty liters, you said?"

Bernie began to whimper: "Not again! Not those plug-uglies! I swear I'll throw myself through the spacelock if they make a pass at me. Ross, isn't there anything we can do?"

"Seems not, Bernie. Maybe they won't come in. Or if they do, maybe they'll pass you by. There certainly isn't any place to hide."

A raucous female voice roared through the annunciator: "Bed check five minutes, boys. Anybody got any li'l thing to do down the hall, better do it now. See you lay-terr!" Hiccup and drunken giggle.

For the first time in his life Ross suddenly and spontaneously acted like a tri-di hero, with the exception that he felt like a silly ass through it all.

"Got an idea," he muttered. "Get out of your bunk." He pulled the wad of cellosponge, old Whitker's present, from his pocket and yanked it in half, one for him and one for Bernie.

The Pullover said faintly: "Thanks, but I don't have to——"

Ross didn't bother to answer. He was carefully fluffing the stuff out to its maximum dimensions. He unzipped his coveralls and began wadding them with cellosponge.

"I get it," Bernard said softly. He stepped out of his one-piece garment and followed suit. In less than a minute they had creditable dummies lying on their bunks.

The others watched their activity with emotions ranging between awe and envy. One giant of a man proclaimed grimly to whoever cared to listen: "These are a couple of smart guys. I wish them luck. And I want you guys to know that I will personally break the back of any sneaking rat who tips off a guard about this."

"Sure, Ox. Sure," came a muted chorus.

Arranged in a fetal sleeping position, face down, the dummies astonished even their creators. It would take a lucky look in a fair light to note that the heads were earless, fibrous globes.

"They'll do," Ross snapped. "Come on, Bernie."

They walked quietly from the dormitory in their singlet underwear toward the dormitory latrine—and past it. Into the corridor. Through a doorless opening into a storeroom piled with crates of rations. "This'll do," Ross said quietly. They ducked into a small cavern formed by sloppy issuing of stock and hunched down.

"The dummies will fool the bed check. It's only a sweep with a hundred-line TV system. If the guards do raid the dormitory tonight we'll have to count on them ignoring the dummies or thinking they're a joke or being too busy with other things to care. They'll be drunk, after all. Then in the morning things'll be plenty disorganized. We'll be able to sneak back into formation—and that'll be that for a matter of years. They can't often bribe the pilots with enough to guarantee a real ripsnorting drunk. Now try and get some sleep. There's nothing more we can do."

They actually did doze off for a couple of hours, and then were awakened by drunken war whoops.

"It's them!" Bernie wailed.

"Shut up. They're heading for the dormitory. We're safe."

"Safe!" Bernie echoed derisively. "Safe until when?"

Ross threatened him with the side of his hand and Bernie was quiet, though his lips were mumbling soundlessly. The guards lurched giggling past and Ross said:

"We'll sneak into the lockroom. There won't be anybody there tonight; at least we'll get a night's sleep."

"Big deal," grumbled Bernie, but he followed, complaining inarticulately to himself. Ross thought tiredly: All this work for a night's sleep! And saw, half-formed, the dreadful procession of days and nights and years ahead....

They reached the lockroom and stumbled in breathlessly.

"Dearie!" Two guards, playing a card game on the floor with a ring of empty bottles around them, looked up in drunken delight. "Dearie!" repeated the bigger of the two. "Angela, *look* what *we've* got!"

Ross said stupidly. "But you shouldn't be here——"

The guard made a clumsy pass at fluffing up her back hair and giggled. "Duty comes first, dearie. Angela, just lock that door, will you?" The other guard scrambled unevenly to her feet and weaved over to the door. It was locked before Ross or Bernie could move.

The big guard stood up too, leering at Bernie. "Wow!" she said. "New merchandise. Just be patient, dearie. We've got a little something to attend to in a couple of minutes, but we'll have *lots* of time after that."

Then things began to happen rapidly. There was Angela the guard, inarticulate, falling-down drunk; she waved bonelessly at a brightly flickering light on the far side of the lockroom. There was the other guard, reaching out for Bernie with one hand, pawing at a bottle with the other. There was Ross, a paralyzed spectator.

And there was Bernie.

Bernie's eyes bulged wide as the guard came toward him. He babbled hysterically, "No! Nonononono! I said I'd kill myself and I——"

He stiff-armed the big guard and leaped for the lock door. Ross suddenly came to life. "Bernie!" he bellowed. "Hold it! Don't jump!"

But it was too late. The one guard sprawling, the other staggering helplessly across the floor, Bernie was clear. He scrabbled at the lockwheels, spun them open. Ross tensed himself for the sudden, awful rush of expanding air; he leaped after Bernie just as Bernie flung the lock door open and jumped.

Ross jumped after.

There was no rush of air. They were not in space. Around them was no ripping, sucking void, no flaming backdrop of stars; around them were six walls and a Wesley board, and Helena peering at them wide-eyed and delighted.

"Well!" she said. "*That* was fast!"

Ross said, "But——"

Helena, hanging from the acceleration loops, smiled maternally. "Oh, it was nothing," she said. "Ross don't you think we're far enough away yet?"

Ross said hopelessly, "All right," and cut the drive. The starship hung in space in the limbo between stars. Azor, "Minerva," and the rest were light-years behind, far out of range of challenge.

Helena wriggled free from the loops and rubbed her arms where the retaining straps had gripped them. "After all," she said demurely, "you *told* me how to run the ship, and *really*, Ross, I'm not quite *stupid*."

Ross said, "But——"

"But what, Ross? It isn't as if I were some sort of brainless little thing that had never run a machine in her life. My goodness, Ross——" She wrinkled her nose.

"You should remember. All those days in the dye vats? Don't you think I had to learn a little something about machines *there*?"

Ross swore incredulously. To compare those clumsy constructs of wheels and rollers with the subtle subelectronic flows of the Wesley force—and to make it work! He said, unbelievably, "And the 'Minerva' helped you vector in? They gave you the co-ordinates and radared your course?"

"Certainly." Helena turned to Bernie, who was staring dazedly around him. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked.

Ross turned his back on them and faced the Wesley Christmas tree of controls. Don't question it, he told himself; take a miracle for what it is. God wanted you out of "Minerva"—and God moves in most mysterious ways His wonders to perform.

Anyway, they had to get going. When the court had exiled Helena in the starship they had gone through the customary rituals; not only was everything that looked like a weapon gone, along with all but a teacup of fuel for the auxiliary jets, but the food locker was stripped entirely. He put everything else out of his mind and began to calculate a setting.

Bernie said over his shoulder, "Home, huh? That place you call Halsey's Planet?"

Ross shook his head. "Not this time. I got this far and I'm still alive; maybe I can finish the job. Anyway, I'll try. The first solid suggestion I've had ever since I took off was what that half-witted old moron——" He ignored a little gasp from Helena. "——said back on 'Minerva.' If Flarney had lived, he would have gone there; we'll go there now." He finished manipulating the calculator and began to set it up on the board. He said, "The name of the place is—Earth."

.... 10

IT took Ross a while to learn a lesson, but when he learned it, it stuck. This time, he promised himself, *no spaceport*.

They sneaked into the solar system that held fabulous old Earth from far outside the ecliptic, where the chance of radar detection was least; they came to a relative dead halt millions of miles from the planet and cautiously scanned the surrounding volume of space with their own radar.

No ships seemed to be in space. Earth's solar system turned out to be a trivial affair, only five planets, scarcely a half-dozen moons among them. None of the planets except Earth itself was anything like inhabitable.

"Hold tight," said Ross grimly, "I'm not so good at this fine navigation." He cautiously applied power along a single vector; the starship leaped and bucked. He corrected with another; and the distant sun swelled in their view plates with frightening rapidity. The alarm beeps bleated furiously, and the automatic cutoff restored all controls to neutral.

Ross, sweating, picked himself up from the floor and staggered back to the panel. Helena said carefully, "You're doing *fine*, Ross, but if you'd like *me* to take over for a minute——"

Ross swallowed his pride and stood back. After one wide-eyed stare of shock—she wasn't even calculating!—he gripped the loops and closed his eyes and waited for death.

There was a punishing bump and his eyes flew open. Helena was looking at him apologetically. "You would have done it better," she lied, "but anyway we're down."

Ross lied, "Of course, but I'm glad you had the practice. Where—uh, where are we?"

Helena silently showed him the radar plot. Earth, it seemed, had a confusing multiplicity of continents; they were on one in the northern hemisphere, a large one as Earth's continents went, and smack in the middle of it. It was night on their side of Earth just then; and, by the plot, a largish city was only a dozen or so miles away.

"Okay," said Ross wearily, "landing party away. Helena, you stay here while Bernie and I——"

Helena said simply, "No."

Ross stared at her a minute, then shrugged. "All right. Then Bernie will stay while——"

"I will not!" said Bernie.

Clearly it was time for a showdown. Ross roared: "Who's the captain here, anyway?"

"You are," Helena said promptly. "As long as I don't have to stay here alone."

"Yeah," said Bernie.

Ross said, "Oh." He thought for a while and then said, "Well, let's all go." They thought it was a wonderful idea.

Earth wasn't a very unusual planet—lots of green sand and purple vegetation. Either the master star chart was wrong or the gravity meter was off; the former, strangely enough, gave Earth's gravity as 1.000000 and the latter as 0.8952, a whopping ten per cent discrepancy. Further, the principal inert gas in Earth's atmosphere was, according to the master chart's planetary supplement, nitrogen; and according to the ship's instruments was indubitably neon. A terrific aurora polaris display constantly flickering in the northern sky bore that out.

But the gap between the chart and the facts didn't particularly worry Ross as they swung along overland. So the chart was off, or perhaps things had changed. This was—according to Flarney via Whitker—the place where people knew about the formula, where his questions would be answered. After this, he thought happily, it's off to Halsey's Planet and an unspecified glorious future, revered as the savior of humanity instead of a lousy Yards clerk pushing invoices around. And Helena, he thought sentimentally....

He turned to smile at her and found she and Bernie were giggling.

"Listen, you two!" Captain Ross roared. "Haven't you learned anything yet? What's the good of us exploring if we stroll along with our silly heads in the clouds, not paying attention? Do you realize that this place may be as dangerous as Azor or worse?"

“Ross——” Helena said.

“Don’t interrupt! What this outfit needs is some discipline—tightening up. You two have got to accept your responsibilities. Keep alert! Be on the lookout! Any single thing out of the ordinary may be a deathtrap. Watch for——”

Helena was looking not at Ross but over his shoulder. Bernie was making strangled noises and pointing.

Ross turned. Behind him stood a mechanical monstrosity vaguely recognizable as a heavily-armed truck, its motor faintly humming. A man leaned darkly from the cab and transfixed them to the ground with a powerful spotlight. From the dazzling circle of light his voice came, hasty and furtive. “Thought it was two women and a man, but I guess you’re the ones. Ugh, those faces on you! Yes, you’re the ones. Get in. Fast.”

The light blinked out. When their eyes adjusted to the dimmer illumination of the stars and the aurora display they saw a side door in the body of the truck standing open. Too, one of the long, slim gun barrels with which the truck seemed copiously supplied swiveled to cover them.

Ross stupidly read aloud a sign on the truck: “Jones Floor-Cover Company. Finest Tile on Jones. Wall-to-Wall a Specialty. ‘Rugs Fit For a Jones’.”

“Yeah,” the man said. “Yeah, yeah. Just don’t try to buy any. Get in, for Jones’ sake! If I’d of known you were half-wits I wouldn’t of taken this job for a million Joneses, cash. Get in!” His voice was hysterical and the gun covering them moved ominously. “If this is a frame——” he began to shrill.

“Get in,” Ross said shakily to the others. They climbed in and the door slammed violently and automatically. Helena began to cry in a preoccupied sort of way and Bernie began a long, mumbling inventory of his own mental weaknesses for ever getting involved in this crackbrained, imbecilic, feeble-minded....

There were windows in the truck body and Ross turned from one to another. He saw the guns on the cab telescope into stubs, the stubs fold into the mounts, the mounts smoothly descend flush with the sheet metal. He saw the cursing driver manipulate a dozen levers as the car began to glide across the green sand, purple-dotted with vegetation. Finally, through the rear window, he saw three figures racing across the sand waving their arms, rapidly being left behind. All he could make out was that they seemed to be two women and a man.

Helena was wailing softly, “——and I am *not* ugly and just because we’re young and we’re strangers isn’t any reason to go around insulting people——”

From Bernie: “——fatheaded, goggly-eyed, no-browed, slobber-lipped, dim-witted——”

“Shut up,” Ross said softly. “Before I bang both your heads together.”

They stared.

“Thank you. We’ve got to think. What’s this spot we’re in? What can we do about it? I don’t have any F-T-L contact name for Earth and obviously this fellow picked us up by mistake. I saw two women and a man—remember what he said?—just now trying to catch up with us. He seems to be some kind of criminal. Otherwise why a disguised gun-carrier? Why floor coverings ‘but don’t try to buy any’? And Jones seems to be the name of the local political subdivision, the name of the local deity and the currency. That’s important. It points to a rigid one-man dictatorship—Jones, of

course, or possibly his dynasty. What course of action should we take? Kick it around. Helena, what do you think?"

"He shouldn't have said we were ugly," she pouted. "Isn't *that* important?"

"Women!" Ross said grimly. "If you'll kindly forget the trivial affront to your vanity perhaps we can figure something out."

Helena said stubbornly: "But he *shouldn't*. We're not. What if they just *think* we are because they all look alike and we don't look like them?"

Ross collapsed. After a long pause during which he tried and almost failed to control his temper he said slowly: "Thank you, Helena. You're wrong, of course, but it was a contribution. You see, you can't build up such a wild, far-fetched theory from the few facts available." His voice was beginning to choke with anger. "It isn't reasonable and it isn't really any help. In fact it's the God-damndest stupidest imitation of reasoning I have ever——"

"City," Bernard croaked, pointing. The jolting ride had become smoother, and gliding past the windows were green tiled buildings and street lights.

"Fine," Ross said bitterly. "We had a few clear minutes to think and now we find they were wasted by the crackpot dissertation of a female and my reasonable attempt to show her the elements of logical thinking." He put his head in his hands and tried to ignore them, tried to reason it out. But the truck made a couple of sharp turns and jolted to a stop.

The door opened and the voice of their driver said, again from behind a flashlight's dazzling circle: "Out. Walk ahead of me."

They did, into a fair-sized, well-lighted room with eight people in it whom they studied in amazement. Every one of the eight was exactly the same height—six feet. Every one had straight red hair of exactly the same shade, sprouting from an identical hairline. Every one had precisely the same build—gangling but broad-shouldered. Their sixteen eyes were the identical blue under sixteen identical eyebrows. Head to toe, they were duplicates. One of them spoke—in exactly the same voice as the truckdriver's.

"So you want to be Joneses, do you?" he said.

"Absolutely impossible."

"But we took their money."

"Give it back. Reasonable changes, yes, but look at them!"

"We can't give it back. Look what we spent already. Anyway, Sam,——" It sounded like "Sam" to Ross. "——anyway, Sam, look at some of the work you've done already. You can do it. I doubt if anybody else could, but you can."

Ross felt his eyes crossing, and gave up the effort of trying to tell which Jones was speaking to which. Even the clothing was nearly identical—purple pantaloons, scarlet jacket, black cummerbund sash, black shoes. Then he noticed that Third-from-the-left Jones—the one who seemed to be named Sam—wore a frilly shirt of white under the scarlet jacket. Only a lacy edge showed at the open collar; but where his was white, the others were all muted pastels of pink and green.

Sam said coldly, "I know nobody else can do it. Anybody else! Who else is there?"

A Jones with a frill of chartreuse pursed his lips. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "there's Northside Tim Jones—"

"Northside Tim Jones," Sam mimicked. "Eight of his jobs are in the stockade right now! Paraffin, for Jones's sake—he still uses paraffin to mold a face!"

"I know, Sam, but after all, these people need help. If you won't do it for them, what's left?"

Sam shrugged morosely. "Well——" he said. Then he shook his head, sighed, and came forward to look at the three travelers. With an expression of revulsion he said, "Strip."

Ross hesitated. "Hold it!" he said sharply to Helena, already half out of her coveralls. "Sir, there may have been some mistake. Would you mind explaining just what you propose to do?"

"The usual thing," Sam said irritably. "Fix your hair, build up your frames, level you off at standard Jones height. The works. Though I must say," he added bitterly, "I never saw such unpromising specimens in my life. How the Jones have you managed to stay out of trouble this long? Whose garrets have you been hiding in?"

Ross licked his lips. "You mean," he said, "you want to make us look more like you gentlemen, is that it?"

"I want!" Sam repeated in bafflement. Over his shoulder he roared, "Ben, what kind of creeps are you saddling me with?"

Ben, looking worried, said, "Holy Jones, Sam, I don't get it either. It was a perfectly normal deal. This guy came up to me in Jones's Joint and made a pitch. He knew the setup all right, and he had the money with him. Six hundred Joneses, cold cash; and it wasn't funny money, either." His face clouded. "I did think, though," he mentioned, "that he said two women and one man. But Paul Jones picked them up right at the rendezvous, so it must've been the right ones."

He glowered suspiciously at Ross and the others. "Come to think of it," he said, "maybe not. Tell you what, Sam, you just sit tight here for twenty minutes or so." And he hurried out of the room.

One of the other Joneses said curtly, "Sit down." Ross, Bernie, and Helena found chairs lined up against a wall; they sat. A different Jones rummaged in a stack of papers on a table; he handed something to each of them. "Relax," he advised. Obediently the three spacefarers opened the magazines he gave them. When they were settled, most of the Joneses, after a whispered conference, went out. The one that was left said, "No talking. If we made a mistake, we're sorry. Meanwhile, you do what you're told."

Ross found that his magazine was called *By Jones*; it seemed to be a periodical devoted to entertaining news and gossip of sports, fashion, and culture. He stared at an article headed "Be Glad the People's Police Are Watching YOU!", but the words made little sense. He tried to think; but somehow he couldn't find a point at which to grasp the flickering mass of impressions that were circling through his brain. Nothing seemed to make a great deal of sense any more; and Ross suddenly realized that he was very, very tired.

His mind an utter blank, he sat and waited.

It was twenty minutes and a bit more. Then the door flew open and half a dozen Joneses burst in. Even at first sight, Ross could tell that three of them were newcomers. For one thing, two were women; and the third, though red-haired, tall and gangling, had a nose a full centimeter shorter than any of the others, and his hair was crisply curled.

"All right, you Peepeece!" snarled the first Jones. "You found what you were looking for—now try to get out!"

Helena did the talking. It wasn't Ross's idea, but when her heel crunched down on his instep he was too startled to object, and from then on he didn't get a chance to get a word in edgewise.

He had to admit that her act was getting across with the audience. Long before she had finished reporting their meeting, their flight to Azor, the escape from "Minerva," and the flight here, most of the Joneses had put their guns away, and all were showing signs of stupefaction. "—And then," she finished, "we saw this truck, and that very good-looking man picked us up. And so we're here on Earth; and, honest to goodness, that's the exact truth."

There was silence while the Joneses looked at each other. Then the plastic-surgeon-type Jones, Sam with the white shirt front, stepped forward. "Hold still, my dear," he ordered. Helena bravely stood rigid while the surgeon raked searchingly through the roots of her hair, peered into her eyes, expertly traced the configuration of her ribs.

He stepped back, shaken. "One thing is for sure," he told the others, "they're not Peepeece. Not with those bones. They'd never get in."

Ben Jones beat his forehead and moaned. "How do I get into these things?" he demanded.

One of the female Joneses said shrilly, "We didn't expect anything like this. We're honest Jones-fearing Joneses and—"

"Shut up!" Ben Jones roared. "What about the other two, Sam? They all right too?"

"Oh, for Jones's sake, Ben," Sam said disgustedly, "just look at them, will you? Do you think the police would take in a five-inch height deviation like that one—" he pointed to Bernie—"or a half-bald scarecrow like that?" Ross, stung, opened his mouth to object; but swiftly closed it again. Nobody was paying much attention to him, anyhow, except as Exhibit A.

"So what do we do?" Ben demanded.

Sam shrugged. "The first thing we do," he said wearily, "is to take care of our, uh, clients here. We get them out of the way, and then we decide what to do next." He looked around at the other Joneses. "If you three will come this way," he said, "we'll finish up your job and get you back home. I needn't remind you, of course, that if you should happen to mention anything you've seen here tonight to the Peepeece it would—" His voice was cut off by the closing door before Ross could catch the nature of the threat.

Ben Jones stayed behind, scowling to himself. "You people got any Joneses?" he demanded abruptly.

"You mean money? Not any at all," Helena said honestly. Ross could have kicked her.

Ben Jones growled deep in his throat. "Always it happens to me!" he complained. "I suppose we're going to have to feed you, too."

“Well,” Helena said diffidently, “we haven’t eaten in a long time——”

Ben Jones swore to his god, whose name was Jones, but he stepped to the door and ordered food. When it came it was surprisingly good; each of the three, with their diverse backgrounds, found it delicious. While they were eating, Ben Jones sat watching them, refreshing himself from time to time with a greenish bubbling liquid out of a jug. He offered some to Ross; who clutched his throat as though he’d swallowed molten steel.

Ben Jones guffawed till his eyes ran. “First taste of Jones’s Juice, hey? Kind of gets right down inside, doesn’t it?” He wiped his eyes, then sobered. “I guess you people are all right,” he admitted. “What I’m going to do with you I don’t know. I can’t take you to Earth, and I can’t keep you here, and I can’t throw you out on the street—the Peepeece would have you in the stockade in ten minutes.”

Ross, startled, said, “Aren’t we on Earth?”

“Naw,” Ben Jones said disgustedly. “Didn’t you hear me? You’re on Jones, halfway between Jones’s Forks and Jonesgrad. But you came pretty close, at that. Earth’s about fifty miles out the Jones Pike past Jonesgrad, turn right at Jonesboro Minor.”

Ross said bewilderedly, “The planet Earth is fifty miles along the Pike?”

“Not a planet,” Ben Jones said. “It’s an old city, kind of. Nobody lives there any more; the Peepeece don’t permit it. I’ve never been there, but they say it’s kind of, you know, different. Some of the buildings——” he seemed actually to be blushing——“are as much as fifteen, twenty stories high; and the walls aren’t even all green. Excuse me,” he added, looking at Helena.

Sam Jones returned and said to Ben, “It’s all right. All finished. Trivial alterations. Maybe they could have gone along for the rest of their lives on wigs and pads—but we don’t tell them that, do we? And anyway now they won’t worry. Healy Jones, the older man, for instance. Very bright fellow, but it seems he was working as a snathe-handler’s apprentice. Afraid to take the master’s test, afraid to change his line of work—might be noticed and questioned.” He heaved a tremendous sigh and poured himself a tremendous slug of the green fluid. Ben Jones gave Ross a cynical wink and shrug.

“Look at my hand!” the surgeon exploded. It was shaking. He gulped the Jones Juice and poured himself another. “Nothing physical,” he said. “Neurosis. The subconscious coldly counting up my crimes and coldly imposing and executing sentence. I’m a surgeon, so my hand trembles.” He drank. “Jones is not mocked,” he said broodingly. “Jones is not mocked. Think those three are going to be happy? Think they’re going to be folded in Jones’s bosom just because they’re Joneses externally now? No. Watch them five years, ten years. Maybe they’ll sentence themselves to be hateful, vitriol-tempered lice and wonder why nobody loves them. Maybe they’ll sentence themselves to penal servitude and wonder why everybody pushes them around, why they haven’t the guts to hit back—Jones is not mocked,” he told the jug of green liquid, ignoring the others, and drank again.

Ben Jones said softly to them, “Come on,” and led them into an adjoining room furnished with sleeping pads. He said apologetically, “The doctor’s nerves are shot tonight. Trouble is, he’s too Jones-fearing. Me, I can take it or leave it alone.” His laugh had a little too much bravado in it. “There’s a little bit of nonJones in the best of us, I always say—but not to the doctor. And not when he’s hitting the Jones juice.”

He shrugged cynically and said, "What the hell? L-sub-T equals L-sub-zero e to the minus T-over-two-N."

Ross had him by his shirt frill. "Say that again!"

Ben Jones shoved him away. "What's the matter with you, boy?"

"I'm sorry. Would you please repeat that formula? What you said?" he hastily amended when the word "formula" obviously failed to register.

Ben Jones repeated the formula wonderingly.

"What does it mean?" Ross demanded. "I've been chasing the damned thing across the Galaxy." He hastily filled Ben Jones in on its previous appearances.

"Well," Ben Jones said, "it means what it says, of course. I mean, it's obvious, isn't it?" He studied their faces and added uncertainly, "Isn't it?"

"What does it mean to *you*, Ben?" Ross asked softly.

"Why, what it means to anybody, pal. Right's right, wrong's wrong, Jones is in his Heaven, conform or else—it means morality, man. What else could it mean?"

Ross then proceeded to make an unmannerly nuisance of himself. He grilled their involuntary host mercilessly, shrugging aside all attempted diversions of the talk into what they were going to do with the three visitors. He ignored protestations that Ben was no Jonesologist, Jones knew, and drilled in. By the time Ben Jones exploded, stamped out, and locked them in for the night, he had elicited the following:

Everybody knew the formula; they were taught it at their mother's knee. It was recited antiphonally before and after Jones Meetings. Ben knew it was right, of course, and some day he was going to get right with Jones and live up to it, but not just yet, because if he didn't make money in the prosthesis racket somebody else would. The formula was everywhere: on the lintels of public buildings, hanging in classrooms, and on the bedroom walls of the most Jones-fearing old ladies where they could see its comforting message last thing at night and first thing in the morning.

From a book? Well yes, he guessed so; sure it was in the Book of Joneses, but who could say whether that was where it started. Most people thought it was just Handed Down. Way back during the war—what war? The War of the Joneses, of course! Anyway, in the war the last of the holdouts against the formula had been destroyed. No, he didn't know anything about the war. No, not his grandfather's time or his grandfather's time. Long ago, that war was. Maybe there were records in the old museum in Earth. The city, of course, not some damn planet he never heard of!

After Ben Jones slammed out and the room darkened Helena and Bernie exchanged comforting words from adjoining sleeping pads, to Ross's intense displeasure. They fell asleep and at last he fell asleep still churning over the problem.

When he woke he found that evidently the doctor, Sam Jones, had stumbled in during the night and passed out on the pad next to him. The white frill was stiff and green with dried Jones Juice. Helena and Bernie still slept. He tried the door.

It was locked, but there was a tantalizing hum of voices beyond it. He put his ear to the cold steel. The fruits of his eavesdropping were scanty but alarming.

"—cut 'em down mumble found someplace mumble."

"—mumble never killed yet mumble prosthesis racket."

“—Jones’s sake, it’s their lives or mumble time to get scared mumble Peepeece are you?”

And then apparently the speakers moved out of range. Ross was cold with sweat, and there was an abnormal hollow in the pit of his stomach that breakfast would never fill.

He spun around as a Jones voice croaked painfully: “Hear anything good, stranger?”

The surgeon, looking very dilapidated, was sitting up and regarding him through bloodshot eyes. “They’re talking about killing us,” he said shortly.

“They are not really intelligent,” Sam Jones said wearily. “They were just bright enough to entangle me to the point where I had to work for them—and to keep me copiously supplied with that green stuff I haven’t the intelligence to use in moderation.”

Ross said, “How’d you like to break away from this?”

Sam Jones mutely extended his hand. It trembled like a leaf. He said, “For his own inscrutable reason, Jones grants me steadiness of hand during an operation designed to frustrate his grand design. He then overwhelms me with a titanic thirst for oblivion to my shame.”

“There’s no design,” Ross said. “Or if there is, luckily this planet is a trifling part of it. I have never heard of such arrogant pip-squeakery in my life. You flyspecks in your shabby corner of the Galaxy think your own fouled-up mess is the pattern of universal life. You’re wrong! I’ve seen life elsewhere and I know it isn’t.”

The doctor passed his trembling hand over his eyes. “Jones is not mocked,” he croaked. “ $L\text{-sub-T equals } L\text{-sub-zero } e \text{ to the minus } T\text{-over-two-N}$. You can’t fight *that*, stranger. You can’t fight that.”

Ross realized he was silently crying behind his covering hand.

He said, much more gently, “It’s nothing you have to fight. It’s something you have to understand.” He told Sam Jones of his two previous encounters with the formula. The doctor looked up, his eyes full of wonder. Ross said, “How would you like to be free, doctor? Free of your shaking hands, free of your guilt, free of these killers? How would you like to know the truth?”

The doctor said faintly, “If I dared—”

Ross pressed, “The museum in Earth city. Get me records, facts, anything about the War of the Joneses. If there’s any meaning to the formula it’ll have to lie in that. It seems there was a battle about its interpretation and we know who won. Let’s find out what the other side said. Get me in there.” He was thinking of the disgraceful war of fanaticism that had marred his own planet’s history. The doctor’s weak Jones jaw was firming up, though his eyes were still haunted. “Stall your killer friends, doctor,” Ross urged. “Tell them you can use us for experiments that’ll cut the cost of the operations. That ought to bring them around. And get me the facts!”

“To be free,” the doctor said wistfully. He said after a pause, “I’ll try. But—” And rapped a code series on the steel door.

THE doctor said with weak belligerence, "Who do you think I am? Jones? I *had* to leave your friends behind. I had enough trouble getting those hoods to let me take *you* along. After all, I'm not a miracle-worker."

Ross said sullenly, "Okay, okay." He glowered out of the car window and spat out a tendril of red hair that had come loose from the fringe surrounding his mouth. The trouble with a false beard was that it itched, worse than the real article, worse than any torment Ross had ever known. But at least Ross, externally and at extreme range, was enough of a Jones to pass a casual glance.

And what would Helena and Bernie be thinking now? He hadn't had a chance to whisper to them; they'd been just waking when the doctor dragged him out. Ross put that problem out of his mind; there were problems enough right on hand.

He cautiously felt his red wig to see if it was on straight. The doctor didn't seem to look away from his driving, but he said: "Leave it alone. That's the first thing the Peepeece look for, somebody who obviously isn't sure if his hair is still on or not. It won't come off."

"Umph," said Ross. The road was getting worse, it seemed; they had passed no houses for several miles now. They rounded a rutted turn, and ahead was a sign.

STOP!

restricted area ahead

Warning: This Road Is Mined

No Traffic Allowed! Detour

"Trespassers beyond this point will be shot

without further notice." Decree #404-5

People's Commissariat of

Culture and Solidarity.

The doctor spat contemptuously out the window and roared past. Ross said, "Hey!"

"Oh, relax," said the doctor. "That's just the Cultureniks. Nobody pays any attention to *them*."

Ross swallowed and sat as lightly as possible on the green leather cushion of the car. By the time they had gone a quarter of a mile, he began to feel a little reassured that the doctor knew what he was talking about. Then the doctor swerved sharply to miss a rusted hulk and almost skidded off the road. He swore and manhandled the wheel until they were back on the straightaway.

White lipped, Ross asked, "What was that?"

"Car," grunted the doctor. "Hit a mine. Silly fools!"

Ross squawked, "But you said——"

"Shut up," the doctor ordered tensely. "That was weeks ago; they haven't had a chance to lay new mines since then." Pause. "I hope."

The car roared on. Ross closed his eyes, limply abandoning himself to what was in store. But if it was bad to see what was going on, the roaring, swerving, jolting race was ten times worse with his eyes closed. He opened them again in time to see another sign flash past, gone before he could read it.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“What’s the difference?” the doctor grunted. “Want to go back?”

“Well, no——” Ross thought for a moment. “Do we have to go this fast, though?”

“If we want to get there. Crossed a Peepeece radar screen ten miles back; they’ll be chasing us by now.”

“Oh, I see,” Ross said weakly. “Look, Doc, tell me one thing—why do they make this place so hard to get to?”

“Tabu area,” the doctor said shortly. “Not allowed.”

“Why not allowed?”

“Because it’s not allowed. Don’t want people poking through the old records.”

“Why not just put the old records in a safe place—or burn the damn things up?”

“Because they didn’t, that’s why. Shut up! Expect me to tell you why the Peepeece do anything? They don’t know themselves. It isn’t Jonesly to destroy, I guess.”

Ross shut up. He leaned against the window, letting the air rush over his head. They were moving through forest, purplish squatty trees with long, rustling leaves. The sky overhead was crisp and cool looking; it was still early morning. Ross exhaled a long breath. Back on Halsey’s Planet he would be getting up about now, rising out of a soft, warm bed, taking his leisurely time about breakfast, climbing into a comfortable car to make his way to the spaceport where he was safe, respected, and at home.... Damn Haarland!

At least, Ross thought, some sort of a pattern was beginning to shape up. The planets were going out of communication each for its own reason; but wasn’t there a basic reason-for-the-reasons that was the same in each case? Wasn’t there some overall design—some explanation that covered all the facts, pointed to a way out?

He sat up straight as they approached a string of little signs. He scanned them worriedly as they rolled past.

“Workers, Peasants, Joneses all——”

“By these presents know ye——”

“If you don’t stop in spite of all——”

“THIS to hell will blow ye!”

“Duck!” the doctor yelled, crouching down in the seat and guiding the careening car with one hand. Ross, startled, followed his example, but not before he saw that “THIS” was an automatic, radar-actuated rapid-fire gun mounted a few yards past the last sign. There was a stuttering roar from the gun and a splatter of metal against the armored sides of the car. The doctor sat up again as soon as the burst had hit; evidently only one was to be feared. “Yah, yah,” he jeered at the absent builders of the gun. “Lousy fifty-millimeters can’t punch their way through a tin can!”

Ross, gasping, got up just in time to see the last sign in the series:

“By order of People’s Democratic Council
Of Arts & Sciences, Small Arms Division.”

He said wildly, "They can't even write a poem properly. Did you notice the first and third line rhyme-words?"

Surprisingly, the doctor glanced at him and laughed with a note of respect. He took a hand off the wheel to pat Ross on the shoulder. "You'll make a Jones yet, my boy," he promised. "Don't worry about these things; I told you this place was restricted. This stuff isn't worth bothering about."

Ross found that he was able to smile. There was a point, he realized with astonishment, where courage came easily; it was the only thing left. He sat up straighter and breathed the air more deeply. Then it happened.

They rounded another curve; the doctor slammed on the brakes. Suspended overhead across the road was a single big sign:

THAT'S ALL, JONES!

—People's Police

The car bucked, slewed around, and skidded. The wheels locked, but not in time to keep it from sliding into the pit, road wide and four feet deep, that was dug in front of them.

Ross heard the axles crack and the tires blow; but the springing of the car was equal to the challenge. He was jarred clear in the air and tumbled to the floor in a heap; but no bones were broken.

Painfully he pushed the door open and crawled out. The doctor limped after and the two of them stood on the edge of the pit, looking at the ruin of their car.

"That one," said the doctor, "was worth bothering about." He motioned Ross to silence and cocked an ear. Was there a distant roaring sound, like another car following on the road they had traveled? Ross wasn't sure; but the doctor's expression convinced him. "Peepeece," he said briefly. "From here on it's on foot. They won't follow beyond here; but let's get out of sight. They'll by-Jones *shoot* beyond here if they see us!"

Ross stared unbelievably. "This is Earth?" he asked.

The doctor fanned himself and blew. "That's it," he said, looking around curiously. "Heard a lot about it, but I've never been here before," he explained. "Funny-looking, isn't it?" He nudged Ross, indicating a shattered concrete structure beside them on the road. "Notice that toll booth?" he whispered slyly. "Eight sides!"

Ross said wearily, "Yes, mighty funny! Look, Doc, why don't you sort of wander around by yourself for a while? That big thing up ahead is the museum you were talking about, isn't it?"

The doctor squinted. His eyes were unnaturally bright, and his breathing was fast, but he was making an attempt to seem casual in the presence of these manifold obscenities of design. He licked his lips. "*Round pillars*," he marveled. "Why, yes, I think that's the museum. You go on up there, like you say. I'll, uh, sort of see what there is to see. Jones, yes!" He staggered off, staring from ribald curbing to scatological wall in an orgy of prurience.

Ross sighed and walked through the deserted, weed-grown streets to the stone building that bore on its cracked lintel the one surviving word, "Earth." This was all wrong, he was almost certain; Earth *had* to be a planet, not a city. But still....

The museum had to have the answers.

On its moldering double doors was a large lead seal. He read: "Surplus Information Repository. Access denied to unauthorized personnel." But the seal had been forced by somebody; one of the doors swung free, creaking.

Ross invoked the forcer of the door. If *he* could do it....

He went in and stumbled over a skeleton, presumably that of the last entrant. The skull had been crushed by a falling beam. There was some sort of mechanism involved—a trigger, a spring, a release hook. All had rusted badly, and the spring had lost its tension over the years. A century? Two? Five? Ross prayed that any similar mantraps had likewise rusted solid, and cautiously inched through the dismal hall of the place, ready for a backward leap at the first whisper of a concealed mechanism in action.

It was unnecessary. The place was—dead.

Exploring room after room, he realized slowly that he was stripping off history in successive layers. The first had been the booby-trapped road, lackadaisically planned to ensure that mere inquisitiveness would be discouraged. There had been no real denial of access, for there was almost no possibility that anybody would care to visit the place.

Next, the seal and the mantraps. An earlier period. Somebody had once said: "This episode is closed. This history is determined. We have all reached agreement. Only a dangerous or frivolous meddler would seek to rake over these dead ashes."

And then, prying into the museum, Ross found the era during which agreement had been reached, during which it still was necessary to insist and demonstrate and cajole.

The outer rooms and open shelves were testimonials to Jones. There were books of Jonesology—ingenious, persuasive books divided usually into three sections. Human Jonesology would be a painstaking effort to determine the exact physical and mental tolerances of a Jones. Anatomical atlases minutely gave femur lengths, cranial angles, eye color to an angstrom, hair thickness to a micron. Moral Jonesology treated of the dangers of deviating from these physical and more elastic mental specifications. (Here the formula appeared again, repeatedly invoked but never explained. Already it was a truism.) And Sacred Jonesology was a series of assertions concerning the nature of The Jones in whose image all other Joneses were created.

Subdivisions of the open shelves held works on Geographical Jonesology (the distribution across the planet of Joneses) and similar works.

Ross went looking for a lower layer of history and found it in a bale of crumbling pamphlets. "Comrades, We Must Now Proceed to Consolidate Our Victory"; "Ultra-Jonesism, An Infantile Political Disorder"; "On The Fallacy of 'Jonesism In One Country'." These Ross devoured. They added up to the tale of a savage political battle among the victors of a greater war. Clemency was advocated and condemned; extermination of the opposition was casually mentioned; the Cultural Faction and the Biological Faction had obviously been long locked in a death struggle. Across the face of each pamphlet stood a similar logotype: the formula. It was enigmatically mentioned in one pamphlet, which almost incomprehensibly advanced the claims of the Biological faction to supremacy among the Joneses United: "Let us never forget, comrades, that the initiation of the great struggle was not caused by our will or by the

will of our sincere and valiant opponents, the Culturists. The inexorable law of nature, $L_T = L_0 e^{-T/2N}$, was the begetter of that holocaust from which our planet has emerged purified——”

Was it now?

The entrance to a musty, airless wing had once been bricked up. The mortar was crumbling and a few bricks had fallen. Above the arched doorway a sign said Military Archives. On the floor was a fallen metal plaque whose inscription said simply Dead Storage. He kicked the loose bricks down and stepped through.

That was it. The place was lightless, except for the daylight filtering through the violated archway. Ross hauled maps and orders and period newspapers and military histories and handbooks into the corridor in armfuls and spread them on the floor. It took only minutes for him to realize that he had his answer. He ran into the street and shouted for the doctor.

Together they pored over the papers, occasionally reading aloud choice bits, wonderingly.

The simplest statement of the problem they found was in the paper-backed “Why We Fight” pamphlet issued for the enlisted men of the Provisional North Continent Government Army.

“What is a Jones?” the pamphlet asked rhetorically. “A Jones is just a human being, the same as you and I. Dismiss rumors that a Jones is supernatural or unkillable with a laugh when you hear them. They arose because of the extraordinary resemblance of one Jones to another. Putting a bullet through one Jones in a skirmish and seeing another one rise up and come at you with a bayonet is a chilling experience; in the confusion of battle it may seem that the dead Jones rose and attacked. But this is not the case. Never let the rumor pass unchallenged, and never fail to report habitual rumor-mongers.

“How did the Joneses get that way? Many of you were too young when this long war began to be aware of the facts. Since then, wartime disruption of education and normal communications facilities has left you in the dark. This is the authoritative statement in simple language that explains why we fight.

“This planet was colonized, presumably from the quasi-legendary planet Earth. (The famous Earth Archives Building, incidentally, is supposed to derive its puzzling name from this fact.) It is presumed that the number of colonists was originally small, probably in the hundreds. Though the number of human beings on the planet increased enormously as the generations passed, genetically the population remained small. The same ones (heredity units) were combined and reshuffled in varying combinations, but no new ones were added. Now, it is a law of genetics that in small populations, variations tend to smooth out and every member of the population tends to become like every other member. So-called unfixed genes are lost as the generations pass; the end product of this process would theoretically be a population in which every member had exactly the same genes as every other member. This is a practical impossibility, but the Joneses whom we fight are a tragic demonstration of the fact that the process need not be pushed to its ultimate extreme to dislocate the life of a planet and cause endless misery to its dwellers.

“From our very earliest records there have been Joneses. It is theorized that this gangling redheaded type was well represented aboard the original colonizing ship,

but some experts believe one Jones type and the workings of chance would be sufficient to produce the unhappy situation of type-dominance.

“Some twenty-five years ago Joneses were everywhere among us and not, as now, withdrawn to South Continent and organized into a ruthless aggressor nation. They made up about thirty per cent of the population and had become a closely knit organization devoted to mutual help. They held the balance of political power in every election from the municipal to the planetary level and virtually monopolized production and finance. There were fanatics and rabble-rousers among them who readily exploited a rising tide of discontent over a series of curbing laws, finally pushed through by a planetary majority, united at last in self-defense against the rapacity and ruthless self-interest of the Joneses.

“The Joneses withdrew en masse to South Continent. Some sincerely wished them well; others scoffed at the secession as a sulky and childish gesture. Only a handful of citizens guessed the terrible truth, and were laughed at for their pains. Five years after their withdrawal the Joneses returned across the Vandemeer Peninsula and the war had begun.

“A final word. There has been much loose talk among the troops about the slogan of the Joneses, which goes $L_T = L_0 e^{-T/2N}$. Some uninformed people actually believe it is an invocation which gives the Joneses supernatural power and invulnerability. It is not. It is merely an ancient and well-known formula in genetics which quantitatively describes the loss of unfixed genes from a population. By mouthing this formula, the Joneses are simply expressing in a compact way their ruthless determination that all genes except theirs shall disappear from the planet and the Joneses alone survive. In the formula L_T means the number of genes after the lapse of T years, L_0 means the original number of genes, e means the base of the natural system of logarithms and N means number of generations.”

The surgeon said slowly and with wonder: “So *that* was my God!” He stretched out his hands before him. The fingers were rock-steady.

Ross left him and paced the corridor uneasily. Fine. Now he knew. Lost genes in genetically small populations. On Halsey’s Planet, some fertility gene, no doubt. On Azor, a male-sex-linked gene that provides men with the backbone required to come out ahead in the incessant war of the genders? Bernie was a gutless character. Here, all too many genes determining somatotype. On the planets that had dropped out of communication, who knew? Scientific-thought genes? Sex-drive-determining genes?

One thing was clear: any gene-loss was bad for the survival of a planetary colony. Evolution had—on Earth—worked out in a billion trial-and-error years a working mechanism, man. Man exhibited a vast range of variation, which was why he survived almost any conceivable catastrophe.

Reduce man to a single type and he is certain to succumb, sooner or later, to the inevitable disaster that his one type cannot cope with.

The problem, now stated clearly, was bigger than he had dreamed. And now he knew only the problem—not the solution.

Go to Earth.

Well, he had tried. There had been no flaw in his calculations, no failure in setting up the Wesley panel. Yet—this was Jones, not Earth; the city was only a city, not the planet that the star charts logged. And the planet, beyond all other considerations,

was less like Earth than any conceivable chart error could account for. Gravitation, wrong; atmosphere, wrong; flora and fauna, wrong.

So. Eliminate the impossible, and what remains, however unlikely, is true. So there had been a flaw in his calculations. And the way to check that, once and for all, was to get back to the starship.

Ross wheeled and went back into the book room. "Doc," he called, "how do we get out of here?"

The answer was: on their bellies. They trudged through the forest for hours, skirting the road, hiding whenever a suspicious noise gave warning that someone might be in the vicinity. The Peepeece knew they were in the woods; there was no doubt of that. And as soon as they got past the tabu area, they had to crawl.

It was well past dark before Ross and the doctor, scratched and aching, got to the tiny hamlet of Jonesie-on-the-Pike. By the light from the one window in the village that gave any signs of life, the doctor took a single horrified look at Ross and shuddered. "You wait here," he ordered. "Hide under a bush or something—your beard rubbed off."

Ross watched the doctor rap on the door and be admitted. He couldn't hear the conversation that followed, but he saw the doctor's hand go to his pocket, then clasp the hand of the figure in the doorway. That was the language all the galaxy understood, Ross realized; he only hoped that the householder was an honest man—i. e., one who would stay bribed, instead of informing the Peepeece on them. It was beyond doubt that their descriptions had long since been broadcast; the road must have been lined with TV scanners on the way in.

The door opened again, and the doctor walked briskly out. He strode out into the street, walked half a dozen paces down the road, and waited for Ross to catch up with him. "Okay," the doctor whispered. "They'll pick us up in half an hour, down the road about a quarter of a mile. Let's go."

"What about the man you were talking to?" Ross asked. "Won't he turn us in?"

The doctor chuckled. "I gave him a drink of Jones's Juice out of my private stock," he said. "No, he won't turn anybody in, at least not until he wakes up."

Ross nodded invisibly in the dark. He had a thought, and suppressed it. But it wouldn't stay down. Cautiously he let it seep through his subconscious again, and looked it over from every angle.

No, there wasn't any doubt of it. Things were definitely looking up!

Ben Jones roared, "Just what the hell do you think you're doing, Doc?"

The doctor pushed Ross through the doorway and turned to face the other Jones. He asked mildly, "What?"

"You heard me!" Ben Jones blustered. "I let you out with this one, and maybe I made a mistake at that. But I by-Jones don't intend to let you get out of here with all three of them. What are you trying to get away with anyhow?"

The doctor didn't change his mild expression. He took a short, unhurried step forward. *Smack.*

Ben Jones reeled back from the slap, his mouth open, hand to his face. "Hey!" he squawked.

The doctor said levelly, "I'm telling you this just one time, Ben. *Don't cross me*. You've got the guns, but I've got these." He held up his spread hands. "You can shoot me, I won't deny that. But you can't make me do your dirty work for you. From now on things go my way—with these three people, with my own life, with the bootleg plastic surgery we do to keep you in armored cars. Or else there won't *be* any plastic surgery."

Ben Jones swallowed, and Ross could see the man fighting himself. He said after a moment, "No reason to act sore, Doc. Haven't we always got along? The only thing is, maybe you don't realize how dangerous these three——"

"Shut up," said the doctor. "Right, boys?"

The other two Joneses in the room shuffled and looked uncomfortable. One of them said, "Don't get mad, Ben, but it kind of looks as if he's right. We and the doc had a little talk before you got here. It figures, you have to admit it. He does the work; we ought to let him have something to say about it."

The look that Ben Jones gave him was pure poison, but the man stood up to it, and in a minute Ben Jones looked away. "Sure," he said distantly. "You go right ahead, Doc. We'll talk this over again later on, when we've all had a chance to cool off."

The doctor nodded coldly and followed Ross out. Helena and Bernie, suitably Jonesified for the occasion, were already in the car; Ross and the doctor jumped in with them, and they drove away. Now that the strain was relaxed a bit the doctor was panting, but there was a grin on his lips. "Son-of-a-Jones," he said happily, "I've been waiting five years for this day!"

Ross asked, "Is it all right? They won't chase after us?"

"No, not Ben Jones. He has his own way of handling things. Now if we were stupid enough to go back there, after he had a chance to talk to the others without me around, that would be something different. But we aren't going back."

Ross's eyes widened. "Not even you, Doc?"

"Especially not me." The doctor concentrated on his driving. Presently: "If I take you to the rendezvous, can you find your ship from there?" he asked.

"Sure," said Ross confidently. "And Doc—welcome to our party."

Space had never looked better.

They hung half a million miles off Jones, and Ross fumbled irritably with the Wesley panel while the other three stood around and made helpful suggestions. He set up the integrals for Earth just as he had set them up once before; the plot came out the same. He transferred the computations to the controls and checked it against the record in the log. The same. The ship should have gone straight as a five-dimensional geodesic arrow to the planet Earth.

Instead, he found by cross-checking the star atlas, it had gone in almost the other direction entirely, to the planet of Jones.

He threw his pencil across the room and swore. "I don't get it," he complained.

"It's probably broken, Ross," Helena told him seriously. "You know how machines are. They're *always* doing something funny just when you least expect it."

Ross bit down hard on his answer to that. Bernie contributed his morsel, and even Dr. Sam Jones, whose race had lost even the memory of spaceflight, had a suggestion. Ross swore at them all, then took time to swear at the board, at the starship, at Haarland, at Wesley, and most of all at himself.

Helena turned her back pointedly. She said to Bernie, "The way Ross acts sometimes you'd honestly think he was the *only* one who'd *ever* run this thing. Why, my goodness, I *know* you can't *rely* on that silly board! Didn't I have just exactly the same experience with it myself?"

Ross gritted his teeth and doggedly started all over again with the computations for Earth. Then he did a slow double-take.

"Helena," he whispered. "What experience did you have?"

"Why, just the same as now! Don't you *remember*, Ross? When you and Bernie were in jail and I had to come rescue you?"

"What happened?" Ross shouted.

"My goodness, Ross don't *yell* at me! There was that silly light flashing all the time. It was driving me out of my *mind*. Well, I knew *perfectly* well that I wasn't going to get anywhere if it was going to act like *that*, so I just—"

Ross, eyes glazed, robotlike, lifted the cover off the main Wesley unit. Down at the socket of the alarm signal, shorting out two delicately machined helices that were a basic part of the Wesley drive, wedged between an eccentric vernier screw and a curious crystalline lattice, was—the hairpin.

He picked it out and stared at it unbelievably. He marveled, "It says in the manual, 'On no account should any alterations be made in any part of the Wesley driving assembly by any technician under a C-Twelve rating.' She didn't like the alarm going off. So she fixed it. With a hairpin."

Helena giggled and appealed to Bernie. "Doesn't he *kill* you?" she asked.

Ross's eyes were glazed and his hands worked convulsively. "Kill," he muttered, advancing on Helena. "Kill, kill, kill—"

"Help!" she screamed.

The two men managed to subdue Ross with the aid of a needle from Dr. Jones's kit-pocket.

Helena was in tears and tried to explain to the others: "Just for no reason at *all*—"

She got only icy stares. After a while she sulkily began setting up the Wesley board for the Earth jump.

..... 12

ROSS awoke, clearheaded and alert. Helena and Bernie were looking at him apprehensively.

He understood and said grudgingly, "Sorry I flipped. I didn't mean to scare you. Everything seemed to go black—"

They smothered him with relieved protestations that they understood perfectly and Helena wouldn't stick hairpins into the Wesley Drive ever again. Even if the ship hadn't blown up. Even if she had rescued the men from "Minerva."

"Anyway," she said happily, "we're off Earth. At least, it's *supposed* to be Earth, according to the charts."

He unkinked himself and studied the planet through a vision screen at its highest magnification. The apparent distance was one mile; nothing was hidden from him.

"Golly," he said, impressed. "Science! Makes you realize what backward gropers we were."

Obviously they had it, down there on the pleasant, cloud-flecked, green and blue planet. Science! White, towering cities whose spires were laced by flying bridges—and inexplicably decorated with something that looked like cooling fins. Huge superstreamlined vehicles lazily coursing the roads and skies. Long, linked-pontoon cities slowly heaving on the breasts of the oceans. Science!

Ross said reverently, "We're here. Flarney was right. Helena, Bernie, Doc—maybe this is the parent planet of us all and maybe it isn't. But the people who built those cities *must* know all the answers. Helena, will you please land us?"

"Sure, Ross. Shall I look for a spaceport?"

Ross frowned. "Of course. Do you think *these* people are savages? We'll go in openly and take our problem to them. Besides, imagine the radar setup they must have! We'd never sneak through even if we wanted to."

Helena casually fingered the controls; there was the sickening swoop characteristic of her ship-handling, several times repeated. As she jerked them wildly across the planet's orbit she explained over her shoulder, "I had the darnedest time finding a really big spaceport on that little radar thing—oops!—but there's a nice-looking one near that coastal city. Wheel! That was close! There was one—sorry, Ross—on a big lake inland, but I didn't like—Now everybody be very quiet. This is the hard part and I have to concentrate."

Ross hung on.

Helena landed the ship with her usual timber-shivering crash. "Now," she said briskly, "we'd better allow a little time for it to cool down. This is nice, isn't it?"

Ross dragged himself, bruised, from the floor. He had to agree. It was nice. The landing field, rimmed by gracious, light buildings (with the cooling fins), was dotted with great, silvery ships. They didn't, Ross thought with a twinge of irritation, seem to be space vessels, though; leave it to Helena to get them down at some local airport! Still—the ships also, he noticed, were liberally studded with the fins. He peered at them with puzzlement and a rising sense of excitement. Certainly they had a function, and that function could only be some sort of energy receptor. Could it be—dared he imagine that it was the long-dreamed-of cosmic energy tap? What a bonus that would be to bring back with him! And what other marvels might this polished technology have to give them....

Bernie distracted him. He said, "Hey, Ross. Here comes somebody."

But even Bernie's tone was awed. A magnificent vehicle was crawling toward them across the field. It was long, low, bullet-shaped—and with cooling fins. Multiple plates of silvery metal contrasted with a glossy black finish. All about its periphery

was a lacy pattern of intricate crumples and crinkles of metal, as though its skirts had been crushed and rumped. Ross sighed and marveled: What a production problem these people had solved, stamping those forms out between dies.

Then he saw the faces of the passengers.

He drew in his breath sharply. Godlike. Two men whose brows were cliffs of alabaster, whose chins were strong with the firmness of steady, flamelike wisdom. Two women whose calm, lovely features made the heart within him melt and course.

The vehicle stopped ten yards from the open spacelock of the ship. From its tip gushed upward a ten-foot fountain of sparks that flashed the gamut of the rainbow. Simultaneously one of the godlike passengers touched the wheel, and there was a sweet, piercing, imperative summons like a hundred strings and brasses in unison.

Helena whispered, "They want us to come out. Ross—Ross—I can't face *them*!" She buried her face in her hands.

"Steady," he said gravely. "They're only human."

Ross gripped that belief tightly; he hardly dared permit himself to think, even for a second, that perhaps these people were no longer merely human. Hoarsely he said, "We need their help. Maybe we should send Doc Jones out first. He's the oldest of us, and he's the only one you could call a scientist; he can talk to them. Where is he?"

A raucous Jones voice bellowed through the domed control room: "Who wansh ol' doc, hargh? Who wansh goo' ol' doc?"

Good old doc staggered into the room, obviously loaded to the gills by a very enjoyable backslide. He began to sing:

"In A. J. seven thirty-two a Jones from Jones's Valley, He wandered into Jones's Town to hold a Jonesist Rally. He shocked the gents and ladies both; his talk was most disturbing; He spoke of seven-sided doors and purple-colored curbing—"

Jones's eyes focused on Helena. He flushed. "I'm deeply sorry," he mumbled. "Unforgivable vulgararrity. Mom'ntarily f'rgot ladies were present."

Again that sweet summons sounded.

"Pull yourself together, doctor," Ross begged. "This is Earth. The people seem—very advanced. Don't disgrace us. Please!"

Jones's face went pale and perspiration broke out. "Scuse me," he mumbled, and staggered out again.

Ross closed the door on him and said, "We'll leave him. He'll be all right; nothing's going to happen here." He took a deep breath. "We'll all go out," he said.

Unconsciously Ross and Helena drew closer together and joined hands. They walked together down the unfolding ramp and approached the vehicle.

One of the coolly lovely women scrutinized them and turned to the man beside her. She remarked melodiously, "Yuhsehtheybebems!", and laughed a silvery tinkle.

Panic gripped Ross for a long moment. A thing he had never considered, but a thing which he should have realized would be inevitable. Of course! These folk—older and incomparably more advanced than the rest of the peoples in the universe—would have evolved out of the common language into a speech of their own, deliberately or naturally rebuilt to handle the speed, subtlety, and power of their thoughts.

But perhaps the older speech was merely disused and not lost.

He said formally, quaking: "People of Earth, we are strangers from another star. We throw ourselves on your mercy and ask for your generosity. Our problem is summed up in the genetic law $L\text{-sub-T equals } L\text{-sub-zero } e \text{ to the minus } T\text{-over-two-N}$. Of course——"

One of the men was laughing. Ross broke off.

The man smiled: "Wha's that again?"

They understood! He repeated the formula, slowly, and would have explained further, but the man cut him off.

"Math," the man smiled. "We don' use that stuff no more. I got a lab assistant, maybe he uses it sometimes."

They were beyond mathematics! They had broken through into some mode of symbolic reasoning that must be as far beyond mathematics as math was beyond primitive languages!

"Sir," he said eagerly, "you must be a scientist. May I ask you to——"

"Get in," he smiled. Gigantic doors unfolded from the vehicle. Thought-reading? Had the problem been snatched from his brain even before he stated it? Mutely he gestured at Helena and Bernie. Jones would be all right where he was for several hours if Ross was any judge of blackouts. And you don't quibble with demigods.

The man, the scientist, did something to a glittering control panel that was, literally, more complex than the Wesley board back on the starship. Noise filled the vehicle—noise that Ross identified as music for a moment. It was a starkly simple music whose skeleton was three thumps and a crash, three thumps and a crash. Then followed an antiphonal chant—a clear tenor demanding in a monotone: "Is this your car?" and a tremendous chorally-shouted: "NO!"

Too deep for him, Ross thought forlornly as the car swerved around and sped off. His eyes wandered over the control board and fixed on the largest of its dials, where a needle crawled around from a large forty to a large fifty and a red sixty, proportional to the velocity of the vehicle. Unable to concentrate because of the puzzling music, unable to converse, he wondered what the units of time and space were that gave readings of fifty and sixty for their very low rate of speed—hardly more than a brisk walk, when you noticed the slow passage of objects outside. But there seemed to be a whistle of wind that suggested high speed—perhaps an effect peculiar to the cooling-fin power system, however it worked. He tried to shout a question at the driver, but it didn't get through. The driver smiled, patted his arm and returned to his driving.

They nosed past a building—cooling fins—and Ross almost screamed when he saw what was on the other side: a curve of highway jammed solid with vehicles that were traveling at blinding speed. And the driver wasn't stopping.

Ross closed his eyes and jammed his feet against the floorboards waiting for the crash which, somehow, didn't come. When he opened his eyes they were in the traffic and the needle on the speedometer quivered at 275. He blew a great breath and thought admiringly: reflexes to match their superb intellects, of course.

There *couldn't* have been a crash.

Just then, across the safety island in the opposing lane, there was a crash.

The very brief flash of vision Ross was allowed told him, incredibly, that a vehicle had attempted to enter the lane going the wrong way, with the consequences you'd expect. He watched, goggle-eyed, as the effects of the crash rippled down the line of oncoming traffic. The squeal of brakes and rending of metal was audible even above the thumping music: "Is this your car?" "NO!"

Thereafter, as they drove, the opposing lane was motionless, but not silent. The piercing blasts of strings and trumpets rose to the heavens from each vehicle, as did the brilliant pyrotechnic jets. A call for help, Ross theorized. The music was beginning to make his head ache. It had been going on for at least ten minutes. Suddenly, blessedly, it changed. There was a great fanfare of trombones in major thirds that seemed to go on forever, but didn't quite. At the end of forever, the same tenor chanted: "You got a Roadmeister?" and the chorus roared: "YES!"

Ross realized forlornly that the music must contain values and subtleties which his coarser senses and undeveloped esthetic background could not grasp. But he wished it would stop. It was making him miss all the scenery. After perhaps the fifteenth repetition of the Roadmeister motif, it ended; the driver, with a look of deep satisfaction, did something to the control board that turned off a subsequent voice before it could get out more than a syllable.

He turned to Ross and yelled above the suddenly-noticeable rush of air, "Talk-talk-talk," and gave a whimsical shrug.

During the moment his attention wandered from the road, his vehicle rammed the one ahead, decelerated sharply and was rammed by the one behind, accelerated and rammed the one ahead again and then fell back into place.

Ross suddenly realized that he knew what had caused those crumples and crinkles around the periphery of the car.

"Subtle," the driver yelled. "Indirection. Sneak it in."

"What?" Ross screamed.

"The commersh," the driver yelled.

It meant nothing to Ross, and he felt miserable because it meant nothing. He studied the roadside unhappily and almost beamed when he saw a sign coming up. Not advertising, of course, he thought. Perhaps some austere reminder of a whole man's duty to the race and himself, some noble phrase that summed up the wisdom of a great thinker....

But the sign—and it had cooling fins—declared:

BE SMUG! SMOKE SMOGS!

And the next one urged:

BEAT YOUR SISTER

CHEAT YOUR BROTHER

BUT SEND SOME SMOGS

TO DEAR OLD MOTHER.

It said it on four signs which, apparently alerted by radar, zinged in succession along a roadside track even with the vehicle.

There were more. And worse. They were coming to a city.

Turmoil and magnificence! White pylons, natty belts of green, lacy bridges, the roaring traffic, nimble-skipping pedestrians waving at the cars and calling—greetings? It sounded like “Suvvabih! Suvvabih! Bassa-bassa!” The shops were packed and radiant, dazzling. Ross wondered fleetingly how one parked here, and then found out. A car pulled from the curb and a hundred cars converged on the spot, shrilling their sweet message and spouting their gay sparkles. Theirs too! There were a pair of jolting crashes as it shouldered two other vehicles aside and parked, two wheels over the curb and on the sidewalk.

“Suvvabih-bassa!” shouted drivers, and the man beside Ross gaily repeated the cry. The vehicle’s doors opened and they climbed out into the quick tempo of the street.

It was loud with a melodious babble from speaker horns visible everywhere. The driver yelled cheerfully at Ross: “C’mon. Party.” He followed, dazed and baffled, assailed by sudden doubts and contradictions.

It was a party, all right—twenty floors up a shimmering building in a large, handsome room whose principal decorative motif seemed to be cooling fins.

Perhaps twenty couples were assembled; they turned and applauded as they made their appearance.

The vehicle driver, standing grandly at the head of a short flight of stairs leading to the room, proclaimed: “I got these rocket flyers like on the piece of paper you guys read me. Right off the field. Twenny points. How about that?”

A tall, graying man with a noble profile hurried up and beamed: “Good show, Joe. I knew we could count on you to try for the high-point combo. You was always a real sport. You got the fish?”

“Sure we got the fish.” Joe turned and said to one of the lovely ladies, “Elna, show him the fish.”

She unwrapped a ten-pound swordfish and proudly held it up while Ross, Bernie, and Helena stared wildly.

The profile took the fish and poked it. “Real enough, Joe. You done great. Now if the rocket flyers here are okay you’re okay. Then you got twenny points and the prize.

“You’re a rocket flyer, ain’t you, Buster?”

Ross realized he was being addressed. He croaked: “Men of Earth, we come from a far-distant star in search of——”

The profile said, “Just a minute, Buster. *Just* a minute. You ain’t from Earth?”

“We come from a far-distant star in search of——”

“Stick to the point, Buster. You ain’t a rocket flyer from Earth? None of you?”

“No,” Ross said. He furtively pinched himself. It hurt. Therefore he must be awake. Or crazy.

The profile was sorrowfully addressing a downcast Joe. “You should of asked them, Joe. You really should of. Now you don’t even get the three points for the swordfish, because you went an’ tried for the combo. It reely is a pity. Din’t you ask them at all?”

Joe blustered, “He did say sump’m, but I figured a rocket flyer was a rocket flyer, and they come out of a rocket.” His lower lip was trembling. Both of the ladies of his party

were crying openly. "We tried," Joe said, and began to blubber. Ross moved away from him in horrified disgust.

The profile shook its head, turned and announced: "Owing to a unfortunate mistake, the search group of Dr. Joseph Mulcahy, Sc.D., Ph.D., got disqualified for the combination. They on'y got three points. So that's all the groups in an' who got the highest?"

"I got fifteen! I got fifteen!" screamed a gorgeous brunette in a transport of joy. "A manhole cover from the museum an' a las' month *Lipreaders Digest* an' a steering wheel from a police car! I got fifteen!"

The others clustered about her, chattering. Ross said to the profile mechanically: "Man of Earth, we come from a far-distant star in search of——"

"Sure, Buster," said the profile. "Sure. Too bad. But you should of told Joe. You don't have to go. You an' your friends have a drink. Mix. Have fun. I gotta go give the prize now." He hurried off.

A passing blonde, stacked, said to Ross: "Hel-looo, baldy. Wanna see my operation?" He began to shake his head and felt Helena's fingers close like steel on his arm. The blonde sniffed and passed on.

"I'll operate her," Helena said, and then: "Ross, what's *wrong* with everybody? They act so young, even the old people!"

"Follow me," he said, and began to circulate through the party, trailing Bernie and a frankly terrified Helena, button-holing and confronting and demanding and cajoling. Nothing worked. He was greeted with amused tolerance and invited to have a drink and asked what he thought of the latest commersh with its tepid trumpets. Nobody gave a damn that he was from a far-distant star except Joe, who sullenly watched them wander and finally swaggered up to Ross.

"I figured something out," he said grimly. "You made me lose." He brought up a roundhouse right, and Ross saw the stars and heard the birdies.

Bernie and Helena brought him to on the street. He found he had been walking for some five minutes with a blanked-out mind. They told him he had been saying over and over again, "Men of Earth, I come from a far-distant star." It had got them ejected from the party.

Helena was crying with anger and frustration; she had also got a nasty scare when one of the vehicles had swerved up onto the sidewalk and almost crushed the three of them against the building wall.

"And," she wailed, "I'm hungry and we don't know where the ship is and I've got to sit down and—and go someplace."

"So do I," Bernie said weakly.

So did Ross. He said, "Let's just go into this restaurant. I know we have no money—don't nag me please, Helena. We'll order, eat, not pay, and get arrested." He held up his hand at the protests. "I said, get arrested. The smartest thing we could do. Obviously somebody's running this place—and it's not the stoops we've seen. The quickest way I know of to get to whoever's in charge is to get in trouble. And once they see us we can explain everything."

It made sense to them. Unfortunately the first restaurant they tried was coin-operated—from the front door on. So were the second to seventh. Ross tried to talk Bernie into slugging a pedestrian so they could all be juggled for disturbing the peace, but failed.

Helena noted at last that the women's wear shops had live attendants who, presumably, would object to trouble. They marched into one of the gaudy places, each took a dress from a rack and methodically tore them to pieces.

A saleslady approached them dithering and asked tremulously: "What for did you do that? Din't you like the dresses?"

"Well yes, very much," Helena began apologetically. "But you see, the fact is——"

"Shuddup!" Ross told her. He said to the saleslady: "No. We hated them. We hate every dress here. We're going to tear up every dress in the place. Why don't you call the police?"

"Oh," she said vaguely. "All right," and vanished into the rear of the store. She returned after a minute and said, "He wants to know your names."

"Just say 'three desperate strangers,'" Ross told her.

"Oh. Thank you." She vanished again.

The police arrived in five minutes or so. An excited elder man with many stripes on his arms strode up to them excitedly as they stood among the shredded ruins of the dresses. "Where'd they go?" he demanded. "Didja see what they looked like?"

"We're them. We three. We tore these dresses up. You'd better take them along for evidence."

"Oh," the cop said. "Okay. Go on into the wagon. And no funny business, hear me?"

They offered no funny business. In the wagon Ross expounded on his theme that there must be directing intelligences and that they must be at the top. Helena was horribly depressed because she had never been arrested before and Bernie was almost jaunty. Something about him suggested that he felt at home in a patrol wagon.

It stopped and the elderly stripe-wearer opened the door for them. Ross looked on the busy street for anything resembling a station house and found none.

The cop said, "Okay, you people. Get going. An' let's don't have no trouble or I'll run you in."

Ross yelled in outrage, "This is a frame-up! You have no right to turn us loose. We demand to be arrested and tried!"

"Wise guy," sneered the cop, climbed into the wagon and drove off.

They stood forlornly as the crowd eddied and swirled around them. "There was a plate of sandwiches at that party," Helena recalled wistfully. "And a ladies' room." She began to cry. "If only you hadn't acted so darn superior, Ross! I'll bet they would have let us have all the sandwiches we wanted."

Bernie said unexpectedly, "She's right. Watch me."

He buttonholed a pedestrian and said, "Duh."

"Yeah?" asked the pedestrian with kindly interest.

Bernie concentrated and said, "Duh. I yam losted. I yam broke. I losted all my money. Gimme some money, mister, please?"

The pedestrian beamed and said, "That is real tough luck, buddy. If I give you some money will you send it to me when you get some more? Here is my name wrote on a card."

Bernie said, "Sure, mister. I will send the money to you."

"Then," said the pedestrian, "I will give you some money because you will send it back to me. Good luck, buddy."

Bernie, with quiet pride, showed them a piece of paper that bore the interesting legend Twenty Dollars.

"Let's eat," Ross said, awed.

A machine on a restaurant door changed the bill for a surprising heap of coins and they swaggered in, making beelines for the modest twin doors at the rear of the place. Close up the doors were not very modest, but after the initial shock Ross realized that there must be many on this planet who could not read at all. The washroom attendant, for instance, who collected the "dimes" and unlocked the booths. "Dime" seemed to be his total vocabulary.

By comparison the machines in the restaurant proper were intelligent. The three of them ate and ate and ate. Only after coffee did they spare a thought for Dr. Sam Jones, who should about then be awakening with a murderous hangover aboard the starship.

Thinking about him did not mean they could think of anything to do.

"He's in trouble," Bernie said. "We're in trouble. First things first."

"What trouble?" asked Helena brightly. "You got twenty dollars by asking for it and I suppose you can get plenty more. And I think we wouldn't have got thrown out of that party if—ah—we hadn't gone swaggering around talking as if we knew everything. Maybe these people here aren't very bright—"

Ross snorted.

Helena went on doggedly, "—not *very* bright, but they certainly can tell when somebody's brighter than they are. And naturally they don't like it. Would you like it? It's like a really old person talking to a really young person about nothing but age. But here when you're bright you make everybody feel bad every time you open your mouth."

"So," Ross said impatiently, "we can go on begging and drifting. But that's not what we're here for. The answer is supposed to be on Earth. Obviously none of the people we've seen could possibly know anything about genetics. Obviously they can't keep this machine civilization going without guidance. There must be people of normal intelligence around. In the government, is my guess."

"No," said Helena, but she wouldn't say why. She just thought not.

The inconclusive debate ended with them on the street again. Bernie, who seemed to enjoy it, begged a hundred dollars. Ross, who didn't, got eleven dollars in singles and a few threats of violence for acting like a wise guy. Helena got no money and three indecent proposals before Ross indignantly took her out of circulation.

They found a completely automatic hotel at nightfall. Ross tried to inspect Helena's room for comfort and safety, but was turned back at the threshold by a staggering jolt of electricity. "Mechanical house dick," he muttered, picking himself up from the floor. "Well," he said to her sourly, "it's safe. Good night."

And later in the gents' room, to Bernie: "You'd think the damn-fool machine could be adjusted so that a person with perfectly innocent intentions could visit a lady——"

"Sure," said Bernie soothingly, "sure. Say, Ross, frankly, is this Earth exactly what you expected it to be?"

The attendant moved creakily across the floor and said hopefully, "Dime?"

..... 13

THEIR second day on the bum they accumulated a great deal of change and crowded into a telephone booth. The plan was to try to locate their starship and find out what, if anything, could be done for Sam Jones.

An automatic Central conferred with an automatic Information and decided that they wanted the Captain of the Port, Baltimore Rocket Field.

They got the Port Captain on the wire and Ross asked after the starship. The captain asked, "Who wan'sta know, huh?"

Ross realized he had overdone it and shoved Bernie at the phone. Bernie snorted and guggled and finally got out that he jus' wannit ta know. The captain warmed up immediately and said oh, sure, the funny-lookin' ship, it was still there all right.

"How about the fella that's in it?"

"You mean the funny-lookin' fella? He went someplace."

"He went someplace? What place?"

"Someplace. He went away, like. I din't see him go, mister. I got plenty to do without I should watch out for every dummy that comes along."

"T'anks," said Bernie hopelessly at Ross's signal.

They walked the street, deep in thought. Helena sobbed, "Let's *leave* him here, Ross. I don't like this place."

"No."

Bernie growled, "What's the difference, Ross? He can get a snootful just as easy here as anywhere else——"

"No! It isn't the Doc, don't you see? But this is the place we're looking for. All the answers we need are here; we've got to get them."

Bernie stepped around two tussling men on the ground, ineffectually thumping each other over a chocolate-covered confection. "Yeah," he said shortly.

Helena said: "Isn't that a silly way to put up a big sign like that?"

Ross looked up. "My God," he said. A gigantic metal sign with the legend, *Buy Smogs—You Can SMOKE Them*, was being hoisted across the street ahead. The street was nominally closed to traffic by cheerfully inattentive men with red flags; a

mobile boom hoist was doing the work, and quite obviously doing it wrong. The angle of the boom arm with the vertical was far too great for stability; the block-long sign was tipping the too-light body of the hoisting engine on its treads....

Ross made a flash calculation: when the sign fell, as fall it inevitably would, perhaps two hundred people who had wandered uncaringly past the warning flags would be under it.

There was a sudden aura of blue light around the engine body.

It tipped back to stability. The boom angle decreased, and the engine crawled forward to take up the horizontal difference.

The blue light went out.

Helena choked and coughed and babbled, "But Ross, it *couldn't* have because—"

Ross said: "It's them!"

"Who?"

Excitedly: "The people behind all this! The people who built the cities and put up the buildings and designed the machines. The people who have the answers! Come on, Bernie. I just seem to antagonize these people—I want you to ask the boom operator what happened."

The boom operator cheerfully explained that nah, it was just somep'n that happened. Nah, nobody did nothin' to make it happen. It was in case if anything went wrong, like. You know?

They retired and regrouped their forces.

"Foolproof machines," Ross said slowly. "And I mean really *fool* proof. Friends, I was wrong, I admit it; I thought that those buildings and cars were something super-special, and they turned out to be just silly gimcracks. But not this blue light thing. That boom *had* to fall."

Bernie shrugged rebelliously. "So what? So they've got some kinds of machines you don't have on Halsey's Planet?"

"A different order of machines, Bernie! Believe me, that blue light was something as far from any safety device I ever heard of as the starships are from oxcarts. When we find the people who designed them—"

"Suppose they're all dead?"

Ross winced. He said determinedly, "We'll find them." They returned to their begging and were recognized one day by the gray-haired profile of the party. He didn't remember just who they were or where they were from or where he had met them, but he enthusiastically invited them to yet another party. He told them he was Hennery Matson, owner of an airline.

Ross asked about accidents and blue lights. Matson jovially said some o' his pilots talked about them things but he din't bother his head none. Ya get these planes from the field, see, an' they got all kinds of gadgets on them. Come on to the party!

They went, because Hennery promised them another guest—Sanford Eisner, who was a wealthy aircraft manufacturer. But he din't bother his head none either; them rockets was hard to make, you had to feed the patterns, like, into the master jigs just

so, and, boy!, if you got 'em in backwards it was a *mess*. Wheredja get the patterns? Look, mister, we *always* had the patterns, an' don't spoil the party, will ya?

The party was a smasher. They all woke with headaches on Matson's deep living room rug.

"You did fine, Ross," Helena softly assured him. "Nobody would have guessed you were any smarter than anybody else here. There wasn't a bit of trouble."

Ross seemed to have a hiatus in his memory.

The importance of the hiatus faded as time passed. There was a general move toward the automatic dispensing bar. It seemed to be regulated by a time clock; no matter what you dialed first thing in the morning, it ruthlessly poured a double rye with Worcestershire and tabasco and plopped a fair imitation of a raw egg into the concoction. It helped!

Along about noon something clicked in the bar's innards. Guests long since surfeited with the prairie oysters joyously dialed martinis and manhattans and the day's serious drinking began.

Ross fuzzily tried to trace the bar's supply. There were nickel pipes that led Heaven knew where. Some vast depot of fermentation tanks and stills? Fed grain and cane by crawling harvest-monsters? Grain and cane planted from seed the harvest-monsters carefully culled from the crop for the plow-and-drag-and-drill-and-fertilize-and-cultivate monsters?

His head was beginning to ache again. A jovial martini-drinker who had something to do with a bank—a *bank!*—roared, "Hey, fellas! I got a idea what we can do! Less go on over to *my* place!"

So they all went, and that disposed of another day.

It blended into a dream of irresponsible childhood. When your clothes grew shabby you helped yourself to something that fit from your host of the moment's wardrobe. When you grew tired of one host you switched to another. They seldom remembered you from day to day, and they never asked questions.

Their sex was uninhibited and most of the women were more or less pregnant most of the time. They fought and sulked and made up and giggled and drank and ate and slept. All of the men had jobs, and all of them, once in a while, would remember and stagger over to a phone and make a call to an automatic receptionist to find out if everything was going all right with their jobs. It always was. They loved their children and tolerated anything from them, except shrewd inquisitiveness which drew a fast bust in the teeth from the most indulgent daddy or adoring mommy. They loved their friends and their guests, as long as they weren't wise guys, and tolerated anything from them—as long as they weren't wise guys.

Did it last a day, a week, a month?

Ross didn't know. The only things that were really bothering Ross were, first, nobody wouldn't tell him nothin' about the blue lights and, second, that Bernie, he was actin' like a wise guy.

There came a morning when it ended as it had begun: on somebody's living room rug with a headache pounding between his eyes. Helena was sobbing softly, and that wise guy, Bernie, was tugging at him.

"Lea' me alone," ordered Captain Ross without opening his eyes. Wouldn't let a man get his rest. What did he have to bring them along for, anyway? Should have left them where he found them, not brought them to this place Earth where they could act like a couple of wise guys and keep getting in his way every time he came close to the blue-light people, the intelligent people, the people with the answers to—to—to—

He lay there, trying to remember what the question was.

"—*have* to get him out of here," said Helena's voice with a touch of hysteria.

"—go back and get that fellow Haarland," said Bernie's voice, equally tense. Ross contemplated the fragments of conversation he had caught, ignoring what the two were saying to him. Haarland, he thought fuzzily, *that* wise guy....

Bernie had him on his feet. "Leggo," ordered Ross, but Bernie was tenacious. He stumbled along and found himself in the men's room of the apartment. The tired-looking attendant appeared from nowhere and Bernie said something to him. The attendant rummaged in his chest and found something that Bernie put into a fizzy drink.

Ross sniffed at it suspiciously. "Wassit?" he asked.

"Please, Ross, drink it. It'll sober you up. We've got to get out of here—we're going nuts, Helena and me. This has been going on for weeks!"

"Nope. Gotta find a blue light," Ross said obstinately, swaying.

"But you aren't finding it, Ross. You aren't doing anything except get drunk and pass out and wake up and get drunk. Come on, drink the drink." Ross impatiently dashed it to the floor. Bernie sighed. "All right, Ross," he said wearily. "Helena can run the ship; we're taking off."

"Go 'head."

"Good-by, Ross. We're going back to Halsey's Planet, where you came from. Maybe Haarland can tell us what to do."

"Go 'head. *That* wise guy!" Ross sneered.

The attendant was watching dubiously as Bernie slammed out and Ross peered at himself in a mirror. "Dime?" the attendant asked in his tired voice. Ross gave him one and went back to the party.

Somehow it was not much fun.

He shuffled back to the bar. The boilermaker didn't taste too good. He set it down and glowered around the room. The party was back in swing already; Helena and Bernie were nowhere in sight. Let them go, then....

He drank, but only when he reminded himself to. This party had become a costume ball; one of the men lurched out of the room and staggered back guffawing. "Looka him!" one of the women shrieked. "He got a woman's hat on! Horace, you get the craziest kinda ideas!"

Ross glowered. He suddenly realized that, while he wasn't exactly sober, he wasn't drunk either. Those soreheads, they had to go and spoil the party....

He began abruptly to get less drunk yet. Back to Halsey's Planet, they said? Ask Haarland what to do, they said? Leave him here—?

He was cold sober.

He found a telephone. The automatic Central checked the automatic Information and got him the Captain of the Port, Baltimore Rocket Field. The Captain was helpful and sympathetic; caught by the tense note in Ross's voice when he told him who wannit to know, the Captain said, "Gee, buddy, if I'd of known I woulda stopped them. Stoled your ship, is that what they done? They could get arrested for that. You could call the cops an' maybe they could do something—"

Ross didn't bother to explain. He hung up.

The party was no fun at all. He left it.

Ross walked along the street, hating himself. He couldn't hate Helena and Bernie; they had done the right thing. It had been his fault, all the way down the line. He'd been acting like a silly child; he'd had a job of work to do, and he let himself be sidetracked by a crazy round of drinking and parties.

Of course, he told himself, something had been accomplished. Somebody had built the machines—not the happy morons he had been playing with. Somebody had invented whatever it was that flared with blue light and repaired the idiot errors the morons made. Somebody, somewhere.

Where?

Well, he had some information. All negative. At the parties had been soldiers and politicians and industrialists and clergy and entertainers and, heaven save the mark, scientists. And none of them had had the wit to do more than push the Number Three Button when the Green Light A blinked, by rote. None of them could have given him the answer to the question that threatened to end human domination over the cosmos; none of them would have known what the words meant.

Maybe—Ross made himself face it—maybe there was no answer. Maybe even if he found the intellects that lurked beneath the surface on this ancient planet, they could not or would not tell him what he wanted to know. Maybe the intellects didn't exist.

Maybe he was all wrong in all of his assumptions; maybe he was wasting his time. But, he told himself wryly, he had fixed it for himself that time was all he had left. He might as well waste it. He might as well go right on looking....

A migrant party was staggering down the street toward him, a score of persons going from one host's home to another. He crossed to avoid them. They were singing drunkenly.

Ross looked at them with the distaste of the recently reformed. One of the voices raised in song caught his ear:

"—bobbed his nose and dyed it rose, and kissed his lady fair, And sat her down on a cushion brown in a seven-legged chair. 'By Jones,' he said, 'my shoes are red, and so's my overcoat, And with buttons nine in a zigzag line, I'll—"

"Doc!" Ross bellowed. "Doc Jones! For God's sake, come over here!"

They got rid of the rest of Doctor Sam Jones's party, and Ross sobered the doctor up in an all-night restaurant. It wasn't hard; the doctor had had plenty of practice.

Ross filled him in, carefully explaining why Bernie and Helena had left him. Doc Jones filled Ross in. He didn't have much to tell. He had come to in the ship, waited around until he got hungry, fallen into a conversation with a rocket pilot on the field—and that was how *his* round of parties had begun.

Like Ross, Doc, in his soberer moments, had come to the conclusion that Earth was run by person or persons unseen. He had learned little that Ross hadn't found out or deduced. The blue lights had bothered him, too; he'd asked the pilot about it, and found out about what Ross had—there appeared to be some sort of built-in safety device which kept the inevitable accidents from becoming unduly fatal. How they worked, he didn't know—

But he had an idea.

"It sounds a little ridiculous, I admit," he said, embarrassed. "But I think it might work. It's a radio program."

"A radio program?"

"I said it sounded ridiculous. They call it, 'What's Biting You,' and one of the fellows was telling me about it. It seems that you can appear before the panel on the program with any sort of problem, any sort at all, and they guarantee to solve it for you. There's some sort of bond posted—I don't know much about the details, but this man assured me that the bond was only a formality; they never failed. Of course," Doc finished, hearing his own proposal with a touch of doubt, "I don't know whether they ever had any problem like this before, but—"

"Yeah," said Ross. "What have we got to lose?"

They got into the program. It took the techniques of a doubler on an army chow line and a fair amount of brute strength, but they got to the head of the queue at the studio and wedged themselves inside. Doc came close to throttling the man who prowled through the studio audience, selecting the lucky few who would get on stage—but they got on.

The theme music swelled majestically around them, and a chorus crooned, "What's Biting You—Hunh?" It was repeated three times, with crashing cymbals under the "Hunh?"

Ross listened to the beginning of the program and cursed himself for being persuaded into such a harebrained tactic. But, he had to admit, the program offered the only possibility in sight. The central figure was a huge, jovially grinning figure of papier-mâché, smoking a Smog and billowing smoke rings at the audience. An announcer, for some obscure reason in blackface, interviewed the disturbed derelicts who came before Smiley Smog, the papier-mâché figure, and propounded their problems to Smiley in a sort of doggerel. And in doggerel the answers came back.

The first person to go up before Smiley was a woman, clearly in her last month of pregnancy. The announcer introduced her to the audience and begged for a real loud holler of hello for this poor mizzuble li'l girl. "Awright, honey," he said. "You just step right up here an' let ol' Uncle Smiley take care of your troubles for you. Less go, now. What's Bitin' You?"

"Uh," she sobbed, "it's like I'm gonna have a baby."

"Hoddya like that!" the announcer screamed. "She's gonna have a *baby*! Whaddya say to that, folks?" The audience shrieked hysterically. "Awright, honey," the announcer said. "So you're gonna have a baby, so what's bitin' you about that?"

"It's my husband," the woman sniffled. "He don't like kids. We got eight already," she explained. "Jack, he says if we have one more kid he's gonna take off an' marry somebody else."

"He's gonna marry somebody else!" the announcer howled. "Hoddya like that, folks?" There was a tempest of boos. "Awright, now," the announcer said, "you just sit there, honey, while I tell ol' Uncle Smiley about this. Ya ready? Listen:

"What's bitin' this lady is plain to see:

Her husband don't want no more family!"

The huge figure's head rotated on a concealed hinge to look down on the woman. From a squawk-box deep in Smiley's papier-mâché belly, a weary voice declaimed:

"If one more baby is your husband's dread,

Cross him up, lady. Have twins instead!"

The audience roared its approval. The announcer asked anxiously, "Ya get it? When ya get into the hospital, like, ya jus' tell the nurse ya want to take *two* kids home with you. See?"

The grateful woman staggered away. Ross gave Doc a poisonous look.

"What else is there to do?" the doctor hissed. "All right, perhaps this won't work out—but let's try!" He half rose, and staggered against the man next to him, who was already starting toward the announcer. "Go on, Ross," Doc hissed venomously, blocking off the other man.

Ross went. What else was there to do?

"What's biting me," he said belligerently before the announcer could put him through the preliminaries, "is simply this: L-sub-T equals L-sub-zero e to the minus-T-over-two-N."

Dead silence in the studio. The announcer quavered, "Wh-what was that again, buddy?"

"I said," Ross repeated firmly, "L-sub-T equals L-sub-zero e to the——"

"Now, wait a minute, buddy," the announcer ordered. "We never had no stuff like that on *this* program before. Whaddya, some kind of a wise guy?"

There might have been violence; the conditions were right for it. But Uncle Smiley Smog saved the day.

The papier-mâché figure puffed a blinding series of smoke rings at Ross. From its molded torso, the weary voice said:

"If you're looking for counsel sagacious and wise,

The price is ten cents. It's right under your eyes."

They left the studio in a storm of animosity.

"Maybe we could have collected the forfeit," Doc said hopefully.

"Maybe we could have collected some lumps," Ross growled. "Got any more ideas?"

The doctor sipped his coffee. "No," he admitted. "I wonder—No, I don't suppose that means anything."

"That jingle? Sure it means something, Doc. It means I should have had my head examined for letting you talk me into that performance."

The doctor said rebelliously, "Maybe I'm wrong, Ross, but I don't see that you've had any ideas than panned out much better."

Ross got up. "All right," he admitted. "I'm sorry if I gave you a hard time. It's all this coffee and all the liquor underneath it; I swear, if I ever get back to a civilized planet I'm going on a solid diet for a month."

They headed for the room marked "Gents," Ross sullenly quiet, Doc thoughtfully quiet.

Doc said reflectively, "'The price is ten cents.' Ross, could that mean a paper that we could buy on a newsstand, maybe?"

"Yeah," Ross said in irritation. "Look, Doc, don't give it another thought. There must be some way to straighten this thing out; I'll think of it. Let's just make believe that whole asinine radio program never happened." The attendant materialized and offered Ross a towel.

"Dime?" he said wearily.

Ross fished absently in his pocket. "The thing that bothers me, Doc," he said, "is that I know there are intelligent people somewhere around. I even know what they're doing, I bet. They're doing exactly what I tried to do: acted as stupid as anybody else, or stupider. I'd make a guess," he said, warming up, "that if we could just make a statistical analysis of the whole planet and find the absolute stupidest-seeming people of the lot, we'd——"

He ran out of breath all at once. His eyes bulged.

He looked at the men's-room attendant, and at the ten-cent piece in his own hand.

"You!" he breathed.

The attendant's face suddenly seemed to come to life. In a voice that was abruptly richer and deeper than before, the man said: "Yes. You had to find us yourself, you know."

..... 14

THERE was a home base, a gigantic island called Australia, to which they took Ross and Doc Jones in a little car that sprouted no wings and flashed no rockets, but flew.

They lived underground there, invisible to goggling passengers and crewmen aboard the "rockets." (They weren't rockets. They were turbo-jets. But it made the children happy to think that they had rockets, so iron filings were added to the hot jet stream, and they sparkled in magnificent display.)

There they were born, and there they spent strange childhoods, learning such things as psychodynamics and teleportation. By the time they were eight months or so old they thought it amusing to converse of Self and the Meaning of Meaning. By eighteen months a dozen infants would chat in *terza rima*. But by the age of two they had put such toys behind them with a sigh of pleasant regret. They would revert to them only for such purposes as love-making or choral funeral addresses.

They were then of an age to begin their work.

They were born there, and trained there for terrible tasks. And they died there, at whatever risk. For that they would not surrender: their right to die among their own.

But their lives between cradle and grave, those they gave away.

Nursemaids? What else can one call them?

They explained it patiently to Ross and the doctor.

“The pattern emerged clearly in the twentieth century. Swarming slums abrawl with children, children, children everywhere. Walk down a Chicago Southside street, and walk away with the dazed impression that all the world was pregnant. Walk through pretty, pleasant Evanston, and find the impression wrong. Those who lived in Evanston were reasonable people. They waited and thought. Being reasonable, they saved and planned. Being reasonable, they resorted to gadgets or chemicals or continence.

“A woman of the period had some three hundred and ninety opportunities to conceive a child. In the slums and the hills they took advantage of as many of them as they might. But around the universities, in the neighborhoods of the well-educated and the well-to-do, what was the score?

“First, education, until the age of twenty. This left two hundred and ninety-nine opportunities. Then, for perhaps five years, shared work; the car, the mortgage, the furniture, that two salaries would pay off earlier than one. Two hundred and thirty-four opportunities were left. Some of them were seized: a spate of childbearing perhaps would come next. But subtract a good ten years more at the end of the cycle, for the years when a child would be simply too, late—too late for fashion, too late for companionship with the first-born. We started with three hundred and ninety opportunities. We have, perhaps, one hundred and forty-four left.

“Is that the roster complete? No. There is the battle of the budget: No, not right now, not until the summer place is paid for. And more. The visits from the mothers-in-law, the quarterly tax payments, the country-club liaisons and the furtive knives behind the brownstone fronts and what becomes of fertility—they have all been charted. But these are superfluous. The ratio 390:144 points out the inevitable. As three hundred and ninety outweighs one hundred and forty-four, so the genes of the slovenly and heedless outweigh the thoughtful and slow to act.

“We tampered with the inevitable.

“The planet teemed and burst. The starships went forth. The strong, bright, quick ones went out in the ships. Two sorts were left: The strong ones who were not bright, the bright ones who were not strong.

“We are the prisoners of the planet. We cannot leave.

“The children—the witless ones outside—can leave. But who would have them?”

Ross peered into the shifting shadows. “But,” he said, “you are the masters of the planet—”

“*Masters?* We are slaves! Fully alive only here where we are born and die. Abstracted and as witless as they when we are among *them*—well we might be. For each of us, square miles to stand guard over. Our minds roving across the traps we dare not ignore, ready to leap out and straighten these children’s toppling walls of blocks, ready to warn the child that sharp things cut and hot things burn. The blue lights—did you think they were machines?” They were *us*!

“You’re torturing yourselves!” Ross exploded. “Let them die.”

“Let—ten—billion—children—die? We are not such monsters.”

Ross was humbled before their tragedy. Diffidently he spoke of Halsey's Planet, Ragansworld, Azor, Jones. He warmed to the task and was growing, he thought, eloquent when their smiles left him standing ashamed.

"I don't understand," he said, almost weeping.

The voice corrected him: "You do. But you do not—yet—know that you do. Consider the facts:

"Your planet. Sterile and slowly dying.

"The planets you have seen. One sterile because it is imprisoned by ancients, one sterile under an in-driven matriarchal custom, one sterile because all traces of divergence have been wiped out.

"Earth. Split into an incurable dichotomy—the sterility of brainless health, the sterility of sick intellect.

"Humanity, then, imprisoned in a thousand sterile tubes, cut off each from the other, dying. We feared war, and so we isolated the members with a wall of time. We have found something worse to fear. What if the walls are cracked?"

"Crack the walls? How? Is it too late?"

Somehow the image of Helena was before him.

"Is it too late?" they gently mocked. "Surely you know. How? Perhaps you will ask her."

The image of Helena was blushing.

Ross's heart leaped. "As simple as that?"

"For you, yes. For others there will be lives spent over the lathes and milling machines, eyes gone blind in calculating and refining trajectories, daring ones lost screaming in the hearts of stars, or gibbering with hunger and pain as the final madness closes down on them, stranded between galaxies. There will be martyrs to undergo the worst martyrdom of all—which is to say, they will never know of it. They will be unhappy traders and stock-chasers, grinding their lives to smooth dull blanks against the wearying routine so that the daring ones may go forth to the stars. But for you—you have seen the answer.

"Old blood runs thin. Thin blood runs cold. Cold blood dies. Let the walls crack."

There was a murmuring in the shadows that Ross could not hear. Then the voice again, saying a sort of good-by.

"We have had a great deal of experience with children, so we know that they must not be told too much. There is nothing more you need be told. You will go back now——"

Ross dared interrupt. "But our ship—the others have taken it away——"

Again the soundless laughter. "The ship has not been taken far. Did you think we would leave you stranded here?"

Ross peered hard into the shadows. But only the shadows were there, and then he and Jones were in the shadows no longer.

"Ross!" Helena was hysterical with joy. Even Bernie was stammering and shaking his head incredulously. "Ross, dearest! We thought—And the ship acted all *funny*,

and then it landed here and there just wasn't anybody around, and I couldn't make it go again——"

"It will go now," Ross promised. It did. They sealed ship; he took the controls; and they hung in space, looking back on a blue-green planet with a single moon.

There were questions; but Ross put an end to questions. He said, "We're going back to Halsey's Planet. Haarland wanted an answer. We've found it; we'll bring it to him. The F-T-L families have kept their secret too well. No wars between the planets—but stagnation worse than wars. And Haarland's answer is this: He will be the first of the F-T-L traders. He'll build F-T-L ships, and he'll carelessly let their secrets be stolen. We'll bridge the galaxy with F-T-L transports; and we'll pack the ships with a galaxy of crews! New genes for old; hybrid vigor for dreary decay!

"Do you see it?" His voice was ringing loud; Helena's eyes on him were adoring. "Mate Jones to Azor, Halsey's Planet to Earth. Smash the smooth, declining curve! Cross the strains, and then breed them back. Let mankind become genetically wild again instead of rabbits isolated in their sterile hutches!"

Exultantly he set up the combinations for Halsey's Planet on the Wesley board.

Helena was beside him, proud and close, as he threw in the drive.

ASTEROID OF THE DAMNED

Writing under Dirk Wylie's name. Originally published in Planet Stories Summer 1942

"Sorry, son," MacCauley said with the barrel-scrappings of his patience. "I said no and I meant it. I haven't got anything to give you. Now please stop wagging at me and go."

The excited glitter of the Palladian's luminiferous eyes died dispiritedly. MacCauley turned his back on the slight-bodied asterite and rapped his thumbnail against his drained glass. The bartender, a heavy and humorous man, expertly refilled Mac's glass with oily, musky, milk-white synthetic liquor and said: "This Kiddie bothering you? Scat, you, or I'll see that you never get into this place again."

Mac shrugged as he watched the stripling strain to catch the bartender's meaning by reading his lips, then mournfully disappear. "No more than they all do," he answered. "What's the matter with them, anyhow? They're positively nutty on the subject of money."

The bartender shook his head and snatched a quick drag on a smoldering cigar-stub. Replacing it on a ledge, he said: "Not money so much. You couldn't bribe a Kiddie with a certified check for a couple of billion dollars. They're not bright, exactly; they don't regard paper as worth anything. It's metal they want. If it happens to be precious, that's all right, but any kind of metal will do. What they're really crazy about, of course, is silver and copper. They'll do just about anything for it, including murder and treason."

Mac, listening too intently, gulped a bit more of his drink than even his spaceman's gullet could take. When the red-hot lava stopped strangling him and he could see once more through the streaming fountains that had been his eyes, he managed to choke out: "What do they want it for? Do they eat it?"

The bartender laughed. "Nah. They don't really eat anything. They drink some kind of stuff they find in the rocks—like they used to find petroleum, on Earth. Radioactive, this stuff is. That's all they need to live on. They don't breathe at all. You can see that; they don't even have a mouth or a real nose, just a sort of trunk that they drink through.... Wait a minute. Be back."

The bartender rolled away. A couple of new customers had come into his side of the bar and were demanding attention.

Mac sighed and glanced at his watch. But the bartender was back and ready for more talk before Mac had made up his mind to leave. The bartender wanted to talk because this was a dull night in the cafe attached to Pallas' largest gambling-room; for the same reason, MacCauley wanted to leave. He was here on business.

However, he might need to know something about the natives of Pallas for his business. And he really was shockingly uninformed about the creatures who

inhabited the free-port asteroid. Other than that they were called Kiddies, looked like seven-year-old Earthly children, and didn't breathe, he really knew nothing.

"Then what do they do with this metal if they don't eat it?" he asked.

The bartender shrugged. "They probably know, but they're too dopey to be able to tell you. I asked one of them once—he wrote out an answer, the way they always do when they want to tell you something. Seems they generate electricity in their bodies. A Palladian's idea of a real good time is to take a hunk of pure copper and hold it in his hands. The current runs from one hand to the other. They are like that. This one claimed that each metal gave them a different kind of thrill."

"All right if you like," MacCauley said absently. "Me, I'll take my jolts out of a bottle."

"Was that an order for another drink?" The bottle was already in the fat man's hands.

MacCauley nodded, and glanced again at the time. He swallowed the poisonous liquor as fast as he could manage; then took one last quick look around the bar to make sure.

Yep, he was wasting time here. The place was practically empty.

He paid his check in Earth-American dollars, and passed on to the main game room.

Like everything else in Pallas, it was completely underground, with a purely artificial atmosphere. Artificial, in fact, was the word for Pallas. Everything about it was synthetic; there wasn't a figment of reality to be found in it. All that Pallas had to offer visitors was freedom from most of the more pressing laws of the more civilized—and larger—worlds. That, and the Kiddies, the peculiar race that had been found on the small asteroid when the first space-explorers got there. Everything that Pallas had, it owed to the fact that, in essence, it had nothing. No minerals worth the cost of extraction; no agriculture; no science; no artifacts; no history. It was so totally useless that the major worlds of the system had declared, "Hands off!" And to that fact Pallas owed the liberality of laws that made it a refuge for fugitives from the Tri-Planet justice, as well as a planet-sized gambling den.

MacCauley curled the tip of his nose when he got a whiff of the atmosphere. It had been bad enough in the bar—thin, moist air, representing a compromise between the atmospheres of Earth, Mars and Venus; enjoyable to the members of none of the races from those planets, but just barely breathable to all. That atmosphere, even when pure, was obnoxious. And here, in the densely-packed main hall, it was really foul. There was something about Venusians, Mac decided, that he didn't like. It wasn't their fault, of course, that they had evolved in a wet climate, and had distinct auras of unearthly B.O. in consequence of their need to perspire. But it wasn't his fault, either, and he didn't see why he should suffer for it.

Mentally holding his nostrils, he waded into the reek and halted by a magneto-roulette table. A casual observer, MacCauley hoped, would think he was engrossed in watching the game. Actually he was carefully scrutinizing each of the score of players and spectators at the table. Somewhere in this motley mob made of the dwellers of a half-dozen planets there might be a cool, level-headed, thoroughly dangerous man, the brains of the syndicate that was flooding Earth and Venus with narcophene. That drug was the most formidable in the history of narcotics. You chewed it—if you were insane or ignorant!—and you felt nothing but a pleasant coolness on your tongue. There weren't any mad hallucinations of grandeur; you never lost consciousness of

what you were doing or who you were. Just, without your consciously realizing it, you felt better all around. Things that should have worried you sick seemed trivial; you could laugh at the specter of sickness or agony or anything, however fearsome that endangered or injured you. The drug had a certain medical value; it was used to prevent total insanity in persons suffering from utterly incurable and horribly painful diseases. For with them it didn't matter that the narcophene habit was permanent, once acquired; they didn't have to fear the mental and moral and eventually physical collapse that was bound to come. They were as good as dead anyhow.

But for others....

And the man who had reorganized the once-smashed industry of manufacturing and smuggling it was on Pallas now. That much the home office of Tri-Planet Law knew, and had told Mac. That was all their best operatives on the inner planets had been able to dig up, and from that point onward ... nothing. Those who could have told more were addicts, and those who had tried to tell more were dead. Murdered.

There was a TPL office on Pallas, of course, but it was a one-man outfit. And the one man seemed thoroughly incompetent, for this job, at least. His reports had shown him to be unable to even begin the job of tracking down the man. Hence, MacCauley.

For the sake of appearances, MacCauley threw a bill on number 28, lost it, and moved on. Nobody in the neighborhood of that table corresponded to the vague physical description he'd been able to glean from the scanty reports.

Nor, he found, did anyone in the house. That didn't prove anything, of course, except that the man Mac was after wasn't at this particular place at the time; or, naturally, that the description MacCauley'd been given was wrong from the ground up, but that wasn't a thing to think about.

He shrugged and moved toward the exit. The room was packed worse than ever; he had to shove his way through. He kept bumping into people, he noticed—then looked around. It wasn't so much that he was bumping into people, he found, as that people, represented by the Kiddie, were nudging him.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake!" he cried tiredly. "I tell you I won't give you anything. Now get away from me. And stay away, if you want to keep living."

The Kiddie shrank into himself and seemed to whimper voicelessly. The glow-glands set around his eyes shone a pinkish purple of fright. He started to say something—in the primitive sign-language that his race used to communicate with aliens—but halted the gesture and abruptly turned and slunk away. His slight frame, the size and appearance of a seven-year-old boy's, vanished almost immediately in the pack of hulking Venusians and attenuated, pallid stick-men from Mars.

MacCauley didn't pursue him; there was no reason, of course, for him to do so.

But that, "of course," like so many others, was wrong. There was a definite reason for Mac to follow the metals-mad asterite. Mac found the reason when he reached the cloakroom. He reached in his pocket to tip the pretty Terrestrial check-girl—and found not even a pocket. Just a slit that had been made not more than ten minutes before, through which the pocket itself and contents had been neatly extracted. Presumably by the Kiddie.

"Damn!" was the best Mac could do, but he said it with feeling. He was casting about in his mind for something he could say to the girl that might make her forget about tips when he saw the Kiddie himself, luminescing a vivid green, scuttling out the front door.

"Hey!" he yelled, and it wasn't only a desire to get away that kept the Kiddie from looking around; he couldn't hear any more than he could speak. Language failing, Mac took stronger measures. He left his sport-silk jacket on the arm of the bewildered girl and sprinted after the Kiddie. Intercepting him just previous to the door, he swung the Palladian around and gestured with frantic anger. The Kiddie, with a surprising show of strength in so frail a body, attempted no answer or denial of the charge of theft, but wrenched himself free and darted out the door.

Mac, following, met the inevitable. When the luck of the MacCauleys ran bad, it stayed bad—or worse. He collided with a fat and pugnacious drunk. Not only collided with him but knocked the wind out of him. If it hadn't been that the drunk had an equally drunk and volatile companion, that would have been all right. As it was, Mac found himself on the receiving end of a pale, knuckly Venusian fist.

He was flat on the floor before he realized he'd been hit. Then began the real trouble.

Somebody yelled, "Oh, boy! A fight!" and leaped joyously on Mac with a pair of magno-caulked spaceman's boots. What happened after that got worse and worse. Everybody in the gambling joint seemed to have mayhem in their hearts. Practically to a man, they poured out and joined in the free-for-all. Half the floating population of Pallas seemed to have come to rest on MacCauky's solar plexus by the time he heard the soft, popping noises from the weapons of the house's private army of bouncers and trouble-shooters. When MacCauley next found himself able to look around he was out in the half-hearted illumination of the street, sick and weak from the effect of the gas pellets which had quelled the riot.

And without a penny to his name.

It would have been foolhardy to have left his money in the "safe" at the hotel, though there was slight comfort in that thought. One place was as good as another on Pallas, where laws were made for the sheer pleasure of violating them; the native Palladians, shifty and unmoral as they were, were hopelessly outclassed in dishonesty by the civilized men of the inner planets. The one law all respected was the law of pure and applied force.

Mac fumbled a crumpled cigarette from his pocket and thought miserably of going to the police. Miserably, because the native police force was a joke and a mockery, maintained more to put the squeeze on innocent foreigners than for any other reason. Which shows how naive the asterites were; there was nothing innocent about most of the foreigners that came to the tiny planet.

Even the TPL post on the asteroid was powerless, shackled by diplomatic necessities to the pretence that the thick-witted Palladians were capable of running their own world. "Hands off!" was the watch-word.

His swollen eyes squinting at the fluoro-flame lamps set in the rocky ceiling of the tunneled street, MacCauley sighed heavily, feeling the full weight of his predicament.

All his money had been on him. All that was left of his money was a memory and a neat little slit just under the zip-seal flap of his hip pocket. And on Pallas, where it

was dog eat dog and the devil help the one who lacked a full set of teeth, money was the means of obtaining dental attention.

Yes, Mac was in a mess, for all his kit, including the last can of Terrestrial cigarettes, were in the hotel room; even his blasters, the slim, wicked pistols that projected a vibratory pencil-beam that destroyed flesh and neural fibers and left the brain watery pulp, were locked up in that dark little rat-hole up near the top of Pallas' single, buried city. Mac was weaponless, except for a tempered bronze knife in his shirt, on an outlaw world where a swift attack was the best insurance against sudden death.

His hotel bill was payable every twenty-four hours, and his period of grace had expired. Pallas being first and foremost a gambling planet, it wasn't at all uncommon for a man to check into the best suite a hotel could offer, his money-belt fat and heavy with a half-million in platinum credits; leave in the early afternoon for a little fling at the tables, and come back in the evening asking apologetically if he might borrow the price of a shave so he could look nice on the trip back home.

For that was the rule: no money, out you go and your baggage held by right of a lockout. Everything on Pallas was operated by the same ruling—cash strictly in advance. And to make sure that no floaters were left to the dubious charity of the planetoid, there was another standing rule. A law, this time; a duly enacted law of the Palladian legislature and the sole ordinance that was enforced by the foreign-sponsored native authorities.

Before a visitor was admitted to Pallas, he was first made to post a bond equal to his passage back home. And that could not be touched or refunded until he left.

MacCauley groaned aloud and looked about him. Walking blindly and without thinking, very easy in the light gravity of low-powered magna-gravs, he had entered a part of the sealed city new to him.

He was in the native quarter, at the planetoid's core, where the asterites were as thick as red dust on Mars—and for the first time Mac saw a Kiddie policeman. He was wearing no more clothing than the rest of his kind, just carried a staff of office, like the old Bow Street Runners.

An idea suddenly made contact in MacCauley's mind. He signaled the officer and dragged out a notebook and pencil, unnecessarily, as it happened. The Kiddie, in sinuous gestures, signified that he could understand English, partly by lip-reading, partly by picking up the sound in some weird fashion through rock-conduction and the sensitive soles of his splay feet.

Mac, enunciating carefully, spoke.

"One of your people has robbed me. I want him arrested. Where do I go?"

The Kiddie bobbed his head, and from the manner in which his luminiferous glands sparkled balefully, it was evident where he thought MacCauley should go.

Nevertheless, he snapped out *his* little pad and stylus, and scrawled: "Commi wih me tu Offic he wil arange arest."

MacCauley deciphered the scribble. He shrugged and said, "Okay. Hop to it, sonny." He walked beside the diminutive policeman for a few hundred feet, glancing incuriously at the small burrows which pierced the rock walls and kicking away

chunks of the queer, spongy rock on which the Kiddies subsisted, the equivalent of Earthly garbage.

He should have thought of the cops before, he realized. The Kiddies, as a race, were not numerous, and he could probably bully them into finding the thief and recovering his money. After all, why not?

He soon found out. The lolling half-breed Venusian interpreter who loafed around the ratty, worm-infested police station heard his complaint and deftly translated it for the benefit of a moth-eaten Kiddie who seemed to be as much in charge here as anyone else. MacCauley drew an easy breath, his first in two hours, and then—

The interpreter sing-songed, "Forty Earth-dollars, please. Filing fee."

MacCauley's eyes narrowed. The old squeeze play. "Don't be a sap," he said flatly, his thin lips tight against his teeth. "I haven't got forty cents. That little louse took everything that was in my pocket."

The Venusian smirked, and regarded his greenish, webbed hand with great interest. "That is very bad, my friend," he said, and flicked a flea from a fold in the skin of his wrinkled wrist. "Here on Pallas we have a law; the citizens must be protected. When a foreigner makes an accusation against a citizen, it is quite possible that he is wrong, and a great injustice will have been done. As you know, there is only one way to soothe a Palladian ... money."

MacCauley cursed bitterly, harsh, biting oaths. "All right," he said then, forcing his tone to evenness. "I'll sign a guarantee of the money. When you catch this pickpocket, you'll reclaim the money; then I'll put up the bond pending trial."

By great effort the interpreter managed to look shocked. "That is absurd. You must pay now; if the Palladian is innocent, he will not have the money. No, it is impossible."

"If he's innocent it'll be because you caught the wrong guy. Why, by all the Plutonian Ice Devils, should I have to pay for your mistake?"

The green-skinned man smirked again. "It is the law. The law is very strict. If you do not like it, you can go back to the planet you came from." And he turned away, busying himself with some important-looking papers, dusty and much-handled. MacCauley was not too preoccupied to note that the blubbery Venusian was holding them upside-down.

MacCauley socked his balled fist into his palm and wondered if pacing the littered floor would help. He was now, he assured himself, in the worst of all fixes. The time he'd been trapped between two hostile groups of Mercurians who were settling a private argument with quarter-mile lightning bolts was a pleasure compared to this. Then he'd had his guns, at least, and no restrictions about using them.

He had to have his kit. Which meant getting his money back. It was necessary, he decided, to play his trump card. He hadn't wanted to reveal himself as a free-lancing TPL man; word would be sure to leak out. But he certainly couldn't accomplish anything otherwise; the chance of recovering the credits, and eventually his *materiel*, was nil without some sort of aid. And that was what he could get only by showing these small-time constables that he was Mr. Law himself. It may be also that he was motivated by justifiable conceit in TPL itself.

"Okay," he snapped suddenly, startling the pudgy hybrid with the sharpness of his voice. "I guess there's no point in keeping under wraps any longer. Let me tell you who I am...."

Twenty minutes later, as he stumbled out of the warped stone building, he was wondering dazedly why his TPL affiliation had done him no good.

Tri-Planet Law was an organization that had considerable history, nor could all of it be written. It was the most potent single force in the history of any planet of the Solar System, figured any way you like. It was the only force whose rule was hardly ever challenged.

When you broke the law within the territories mandated by TPL, you did so with the very greatest caution. And you never tried to fight back if you were caught. It wasn't really a large organization, relative to the vast throngs of intelligent life that swarmed the System. It was only a tiny decimal of one per cent of the entire population of the thirty inhabited globes. But when you consider that the total census showed more than a hundred billion individuals of high enough brain-power to be rated sentient, you can understand that a fraction of a per cent does mean close to a hundred and thirty thousand persons united into the best-organized police and military force that a hundred trained social technicians could evolve.

That is why MacCauley couldn't understand the fact that the half-breed interpreter had practically laughed in his face.

True, TPL's hundred and thirty thousand of personnel were largely on the planets of Earth, Mars and Venus, plus their possessions and allied states. TPL had no standing here, officially, but the organization had a de facto reign over all of space by virtue of the fastest and best-armed space-ships made. And Pallas, dependent upon the transient trade, certainly shouldn't be able to afford to anger representative of the body that ruled the space-lanes.

Something, Mac decided, was thoroughly rotten in the local checking office of TPL. Something that might show why the operative on Pallas hadn't begun to be able to find the man or men behind the narcophene racket.

MacCauley hadn't shown himself there before because he didn't want himself identified with the Law group. Now that he'd uselessly exposed himself, that obstacle was nullified.

He'd found out where the place was just so he could avoid it. Pausing a second to puzzle out its probable direction, he started off.

It was close, of course; nothing was far from anything on Pallas. Within five minutes he was standing outside the building, rubbing his chin and deciding that he could stand a wash-up before going in.

Like most of the asteroid's structures, this one seemed to have been made by a blind moron for his elder brother's fifth birthday. Stepping gingerly to avoid bringing the ceiling down about his ears, he made for the washroom.

The Kiddie attendant was scrunched up in a corner, luminescing happily over a former airlock handle. "Hey!" Mac said uselessly. A wadded paper towel brought better results, and the Kiddie glanced up.

Of course, it had to be the Kiddie who lifted Mac's roll. The gods of chance saw to that. In a trice Mac had backed the frightened Kiddie into a corner, looking rather threatening what with his grim expression and the bronze knife suddenly sprouting from his fist. He was fumbling for the gesture that would convey, "Gimme!" to the asterite when the interruption came.

"Having fun?"

Mac dropped the Kiddie and spun around, automatically reaching for a blaster that wasn't there. "Who the devil are you?" he snarled.

The long Terrestrial newcomer leaned gingerly on a soot-covered washstand and frowned. "Me? I work near here. Who are you?" He stuck a cigarette in his taut lips, pinched the tip and inhaled sharply as it flared bluely.

Something clicked in MacCauley's memory. Remembrances of long rows of files, photographs.... The TPL agent for Pallas. He said, "You're Kittrell, right?"

The long man nodded. "I might be," he said, "if you're somebody that's got a right to know. So what?" He hadn't moved but his posture seemed subtly altered, caution in every line of his frame. From the position of his hands, Mac more than suspected he was armed.

Easing his hands behind his back, he twisted the stem of his wristwatch. Kittrell jumped. "Hey!" he exclaimed. Sparks were fairly snapping from the blazing dial of his own heavy, old-fashioned timepiece—the recognition signal of TPL operatives. "I guess I am Kittrell," the man acknowledged. "They told me they were sending someone from the Narcotics division to take over on that narcophene business. You him?"

"Yeah. Right now I'm having trouble of my own, though. This Kiddie rolled me last night. Every cent I had; I can't even get back to my hotel."

"Rolled you?" Kittrell's eyes widened. "I know this fella. He cleans up around the office. Wait a minute." His thin, pale hands flashed in intricate motions, meaningless to Mac. They were significant to the Kiddie, though, for he replied as rapidly. Kittrell nodded. "I wouldn't have thought it of him. Always thought he was too stupid to rob anybody over ten."

That was a pretty dubious remark, Mac thought, but he ignored it. "Do you suppose you can make him cough up?"

"Sure!" The other smiled cheerfully. "Like this!"

Mac was unprepared for the next move. Kittrell pulled his punch, of course, because he didn't want to kill the frail Palladian, but his heavy fist bounced the Kiddie off the floor and flung him to the base of the wall. He lay there, his glow-glands jetting crimson beams of fear and rage.

"Hey!" cried MacCauley. "Don't murder the poor son! That's no way to get my dough back!"

Kittrell stared. Then a shadow passed over his face and he seemed to lose interest. He shrugged. "Have it your way. What do you want me to do—adopt him?"

"Ask him what he did with the money. Tell him he can have the metal stuff; all I want back is the bills."

Kittrell, looking disgusted, semaphored the message. Kiddie faces don't react as a human's does, but MacCauley was pretty sure there was gratitude glowing on this one's knobby features. After a couple of seconds' gesticulation, Kittrell looked around. "He says he's sorry he took it. If you come with him he'll give you the money. He's got it stashed away in the sty he lives in, a little farther along this corridor."

"Will he do it?"

Kittrell shrugged again. "Guess so. Anyway, you're bigger than him—or don't you like rough stuff?"

That, MacCauley thought, was hardly a friendly remark. He resolved to take it up later; after all, it wasn't his fault that he was superseding Kittrell. There really was no cause for jealousy in the long man. "Coming?" Mac asked.

Kittrell shook his head. "Got to go back to the office for a minute. I'll drop around in about ten minutes, though."

"Okay," said Mac, satisfied, and went out behind the Kiddie.

The Kiddie's dwelling was ugly and cluttered, but moderately clean.

The little asterite, with somewhat the attitude of a man who expects a poke in the face, gestured to Mac to be seated on a hassock-like affair. MacCauley rumbled: "Sure I'll sit down. I'll stay right here until I get my dough back."

The Kiddie seemed to shrug resignedly; probably he just gave that impression from his general demeanor. He slipped away into another room. Mac just had time to think of the possibility that the Kiddie had made a getaway when he was back again, holding MacCauley's billfold.

Mac counted it swiftly. "Where's the rest of it?" he grunted. The bills were there, but there had been about two dollars in change—gone now.

The Kiddie looked scared but shook his head. "Won't tell me, huh?" Mac blustered. "How would you like to be put away for robbery? I swore out a complaint against you today; if I turn you over, it'll be a long time before you get out."

The Kiddie looked more frightened than ever; he was practically trembling. Mac was encouraged, but surprised by the reaction to his threat—it shouldn't have been so great. He lived to regret the fact that he didn't find out just why the Kiddie was so affected by the threat of imprisonment.

"All right," he went on. "Suppose I let you keep the metal. Suppose I pay you well, get you lots more. Gold and silver dollars. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

From the Palladian's sudden attitude of dog-like devotion, it was more than clear that he would.

"Okay," Mac said. "I'll pay you one hundred dollars in silver quarters, if—"

The Kiddie was ablaze with interest. Not taking his eyes off Mac, he scuttled crab-wise over to a tablette, snatched up a notebook and scrawled: "Il do anyhin wat do yu wan."

Mac grinned. "Fine. Listen carefully now. I'm looking for an Earthman. He's somewhere on this planet, but I wouldn't know him if I saw him. He is about two inches taller than me; weighs maybe two hundred pounds—a little fatter than I am. He's blind, practically, in one eye. That's all I can tell you, because those are the only things he can't disguise."

The Kiddie seemed suddenly reluctant, but was persuaded by a gesture of Mac's—a gesture that cost him dear, as it turned out.

"Here," he said, to seal the bargain. "Here's an advance for you." Dexterously he flipped his knife from some recess of his shirt and presented it to the Kiddie.

Ecstasy was clearly shown by that Kiddie. His glow-glands fairly spat large orange sparks of joy. The tempered bronze—it was made of that metal only to avoid magnetic spotters—wasn't much good for cutting, but it certainly was a conductor of electricity.

"Well?" MacCauley said, growing impatient. He tapped the engrossed Kiddie and repeated the question. The asterite bobbed his head and pressed a stud on his pad. The writing vanished, and he was scribbling again.

"Hello there!" boomed a new voice from the doorway. "What's going on?"

MacCauley whirled. Kittrell was standing there, beaming broadly. "Hi," Mac said. "We were wondering—Hey! What the hell!"

Kittrell's eyes had narrowed and a snarl flashed out on his face. With the fastest draw MacCauley had ever seen, he snapped out his gun and blasted—

Not MacCauley. There was a stomach-squeezing hiss of sizzling flesh behind Mac. He spun again, to see the Kiddie, his shoulder and half his neck gone, slumped to the floor.

Mac knelt swiftly beside him. Dead as a Ganymedan Secessionist. "Now what the hell did you do that for?" Mac demanded. "I was on the trail of something hot." He stared at the pad and stylus that had dropped from the dead asterite's limp hand.

"I kni the man yu wan he is th." That was all it said.

"*That's* a big help," said MacCauley, confronting the other man, who was strangely tense. He thrust the tablet at him. "Now what do I do?"

Kittrell scanned it briefly, and relaxed a bit. "It looked bad to me," he explained. "There was that damned Kiddie with a knife in his hand. He had it up to throw at you—or me. Can't take chances."

Mac sighed, resigning himself to continued hard luck. "We all make mistakes, I guess," he said. Then, hardening: "But you've made your last boner on this case. From now on stay the hell away from me. I don't like you and I don't like the way you do things." He moved toward the door. Kittrell, lounging across it, obstructed his path—just enough to stop him.

"Where're you going?" the bigger man asked.

"To report this," Mac snapped. "You'll get out of it all right."

"Don't report it."

"Why not?"

Kittrell grimaced distastefully. "Too much red tape. What the devil, who'll know we were here?"

Mac snorted and filled his lungs preparatory to telling Kittrell just what he thought of him. There was a sweetish, balsam-like taste to the air, like the smell of a fir forest.

Or like the smell of narcophene.

He had picked up the knife; still had it in his hands. While he was still figuring things out, his hand swept up with the knife still in it, pressed against Kittrell's abdomen. Kittrell's draw had been fast. Maybe he was naturally gun-slick—fast enough, maybe, for a lightning draw like that to be natural to him. Maybe he was, but maybe he was just burning up the years of his life twice as fast as normal under the influence of the drug.

"If you don't want your gut slit, Kittrell, keep your hands where they are!" Mac grated, his voice suddenly gone flat and hard.

Kittrell's hand had fluttered toward his shoulder holster; it stopped as Mac spoke.

"I don't know whether you're really Kittrell or not—probably you are," Mac muttered. "But if you're in TPL now, you'll be out pretty soon. As soon as I tell them you're a hophead."

Kittrell's face had gone white. Other than that there was no change as his bleak eyes bored steadily into MacCauley's. "What are you talking about?" he said evenly. "Take that thing out of my stomach."

"Oh, no!" Mac shook his head decisively. "You killed one of my witnesses; you'll take his place. You're going to tell me how to find the guy that sells you the narcophene."

"Sorry," said Kittrell, tautening still more, "but I can't." At the last possible second his eyes flicked behind and over Mac's shoulder.

The thing that hit MacCauley on the back of the neck first didn't quite knock him out. He was stunned, but in the half-second before the next blow jolted him into complete darkness, he heard Kittrell conclude, most casually: "You see, I *am* the guy who sells the narcophene."

A shiver rippled along Mac's spine, and another one. That was his first waking impression. He was cold, frozen stiff, he decided next, when his limbs failed to react to the stimuli of his neural commands. As the fog cleared away from his aching head he discovered that his hands were tightly bound behind him, hobbles on his feet to keep him from walking far or fast.

Not that he could have gone anywhere much. He was in a bare little metal room, lying on the grating that supplanted decks in most modern spacers. Not much point in getting up, he realized, and merely hitched himself into a more comfortable position in a corner, moving as well as he could under the unaccustomed drag of full Earth gravity.

He was in the lock-room, the chamber before an airlock. He felt vaguely unhappy. Whatever was coming, he was sure he wouldn't like it.

Behind him a heavy door eased open. Boots thumped hollowly on the grids and a familiar voice sounded, echoing from the bare metal walls. "Hello, MacCauley. How's the head?"

"Go to hell," Mac suggested. He craned his neck and stared full into Kittrell's face. There was a curious mixture of emotions there; faint sorrow, an unpleasant sort of crooked leer, and an air of boredom—each was visible. Kittrell shrugged.

"I guess you know what you're up against?"

"Sure." MacCauley tried to shrug, too, but succeeded only in tearing a patch of skin from his wrists where the wire bonds were tightest. "You're going to shove me out."

"I'm afraid so. Believe me, I'd rather not. I think you're a good chap; once I wanted to be like you—loyal to the service. They stuck me out here and made a desk clerk of me, when I would have given my arm to do some real work. I got a good salary; there was prestige enough whenever I could get back to Boston and show off. It was a good job, in a way. But there was nothing to do. Then I intercepted a load of narcophene. Like everybody else, I thought I could beat it. I didn't. I tried it and couldn't stop."

He stopped abruptly and scanned MacCauley's face through narrowed eyes. "You see how it is?" he questioned.

MacCauley tried to stall for time. Tensing his chest muscles against the bruises, he said, "Give me a cigarette, Kittrell? That's the usual privilege of the condemned man." The lunatic obligingly popped a brown-paper cylinder between his lips, squeezed the tip to light it. Mac suddenly heard more footsteps, lighter ones but many of them. "What's that?"

"Just my Kiddies," the dope peddler explained, as a dozen of them trotted into the room and ranged themselves, immobile, along the walls. "They've never seen an air-breather—that's you—in empty space, and they don't believe it will be fatal. You don't mind if they watch, do you?"

Mac could hold it in no longer. "Kittrell," he blurted, "you're crazy as a coot!"

Kittrell, wading through Kiddies whose faces shone an excited red, turned a surprised stare. "I've been afraid of that," he said worriedly over his shoulder. His long fingers pressed a stud by the 'lock, and the inner valve whined open. "You see, that's the trouble with narcophene. You know what's happening to you, but you just don't give a damn. God, it's cold in this 'lock!"

He stood there, one foot on the coaming of the 'lock, peering around the dark, icy chamber. The lawman braced his back to the wall, shoved up. "It's a hell of a death, Kittrell," he said, his voice strained.

Kittrell replied dreamily. "Is it? I don't know. It isn't bad. It's clean, at least, and the worms don't get you." Absently he fended off the crew of impatient, crowding Kiddies. He stared silently into nothingness, for a long minute.

MacCauley found he could reach his pocket, and his heart tried to impale itself on his palate. Eagerly he tore more flesh from his raw wrists, strained his fingers to plumb the depths of the pocket. A weapon—anything.

And his fingers found nothing. He remembered; that this was the pocket the dead asterite had picked; nothing there but a slit.

On the automatic return trip, his fingers, numbed by disheartenment, sent a message to his brain; a message of cold. He disregarded it for a split second.

Then, just as Kittrell was opening his mouth to speak, the correct interpretation of that coolness penetrated Mac's consciousness. Desperately he fumbled at the thing that was woven to his broad belt: wrenched at it with every atom of strength at his command. It came free; he twisted suddenly and something metallic jingled musically in the far corner of the 'lock, sending vibrations through the grid flooring

to be picked up by the Palladians. The jingle of metal—and the Kiddies loved metal insanely!

"Money!" roared MacCauley. And, "Money! In the 'lock! Copper—metal! Go get it!"

Kittrell vanished, washed into the airlock by an overflowing wave of Palladians. Hands fumbling desperately behind him for the control switch—where was it!—Mac cursed his stiff, ineffectual fingers and his inability to see behind his back. He touched a switch—no, not that one!—and another, jabbed at it. Motors hummed softly, the scrambling noise died away as the inner door swung shut—so slowly!—and then for a second the only sound in the chamber was the harsh sobbing of Mac's breath as he slumped weakly against the chill metal wall.

Until that semi-silence was broken by the descending siren-scream of the outer door's opening, abruptly terminating in a *whooosh* as the last molecules of air tore into the vacuum without, dragging with irresistible force at the chunks of matter, living and dead, that tried to obstruct its passage....

"And that's the story." MacCauley turned away from the recorder. "Here's the notebook I found among Kittrell's things." He flipped a thin, black pad at the major. "I think you'll be able to break the code easily enough, as there are enough names known for you to work on. It seems to include his whole organization."

Major Copeland glanced at the cabalistic signs incuriously, then ticketed the book and slipped it into a pneumatic tube.

"What bothers me," he complained, "is why Kittrell didn't claw his way out of the 'lock. Sounds to me as though he had plenty of time."

Mac gestured inquiringly at his superior, received a nod, and with a sigh unclipped his Sam Browne. "Kittrell? Probably stumbled and slammed his head against a rivet." He stood up suddenly, savagely snubbed out a freshly lit cigarette. "Oh, hell! I'll tell you what I really think, Major—I don't believe Kittrell tried to get out of there. I don't think he cared, and I haven't forgotten what he said about dying that way."

"Could be," Copeland agreed. "And what did you say that stuff was that saved your life?"

Mac smiled. "Money, of a sort. You know where I was stationed last year?"

"Some place on Earth, wasn't it?"

MacCauley nodded. "China. Got to know some of the people there. Got kind of chummy with one of them; she gave me a present when I left, as a keepsake. A string of what they call "cash." It's a kind of money they used to use; square pieces of copper with holes in the middle. Had 'em strung together and sewn onto a belt. Well, you know how Palladians feel about copper." His eyes crinkled again. "That was a pretty good keepsake—not worth much, but it bought my life."

Both men were silent for a while. Then, "What are your plans now, MacCauley? I've recommended you for promotion, to fill Kittrell's job on Pallas. You'll get a higher rating, more pay—and all the time in the world to yourself."

MacCauley shook his head. "Sorry, Major," he said, "But that's not what I want. My plans are extra-special. Say," he went on, sitting down and staring earnestly at

Copeland, "have you ever heard the story of how Manhattan Island—that's part of New York City—was bought from the ancient Indians? Twenty-four dollars' worth of junk beads—that's what they paid the Indians for it. Now the land is worth billions of dollars—a square foot of it brings the best part of a million."

"So?" The major was interested but lacked comprehension. "What's that got to do with your resignation?"

MacCauley smiled. "A lot," he answered. "Did it ever occur to you that intelligent salesmanship can do wonders? And did you ever think of the possibilities that you could realize on Pallas with—say—a couple of dozen thousand dollars' worth of copper and other metal junk?"

The major looked startled. "No—not till now," he added, understanding dawning. "And what you're going to do is—?"

"What I'm going to do," MacCauley beamed, "is convert reward money into junk. And then, Major, I'll begin to convert the junk—into a kingdom. I'm going to buy up a world—a wide-open world—with a boatload of scrap metal!"

SURVIVAL KIT

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I

Mooney looked out of his window, and the sky was white.

It was a sudden, bright, cold flare and it was gone again. It had no more features than a fog, at least not through the window that was showered with snow and patterned with spray from the windy sea.

Mooney blew on his hands and frowned at the window.

"Son of a gun," he said, and thought for a moment about phoning the Coast Guard station. Of course, that meant going a quarter of a mile in the storm to reach the only other house nearby that was occupied; the Hansons had a phone that worked, but a quarter of a mile was a long way in the face of a December gale. And it was all dark out there now. Less than twenty miles across the bay was New York, but this Jersey shore coast was harsh as the face of the Moon.

Mooney decided it was none of his business.

He shook the kettle, holding it with an old dish towel because it was sizzling hot. It was nearly empty, so he filled it again and put it back on the stove. He had all four top burners and the oven going, which made the kitchen tolerably warm—as long as he wore the scarf and the heavy quilted jacket and kept his hands in his pockets. And there was plenty of tea.

Uncle Lester had left that much behind him—plenty of tea, nearly a dozen boxes of assorted cookies and a few odds and ends of canned goods. And God's own quantity of sugar.

It wasn't exactly a balanced diet, but Mooney had lived on it for three weeks now—smoked turkey sausages for breakfast, and oatmeal cookies for lunch, and canned black olives for dinner. And always plenty of tea.

The wind screamed at him as he poured the dregs of his last cup of tea into the sink and spooned sugar into the cup for the next one. It was, he calculated, close to midnight. If the damn wind hadn't blown down the TV antenna, he could be watching the late movies now. It helped to pass the time; the last movie was off the air at two or three o'clock, and then he could go to bed and, with any luck, sleep till past noon.

And Uncle Lester had left a couple of decks of sticky, child-handled cards behind him, too, when the family went back to the city at the end of the summer. So what with four kinds of solitaire, and solo bridge, and television, and a few more naps, Mooney could get through to the next two or three A.M. again. If only the wind hadn't blown down the antenna!

But as it was, all he could get on the cheap little set his uncle had left behind was a faint gray herringbone pattern—

He straightened up with the kettle in his hand, listening.

It was almost as though somebody was knocking at the door.

"That's crazy," Mooney said out loud after a moment. He poured the water over the tea bag, tearing a little corner off the paper tag on the end of the string to mark the fact that this was the second cup he had made with the bag. He had found he could get three cups out of a single bag, but even loaded with sugar, the fourth cup was no longer very good. Still, he had carefully saved all the used, dried-out bags against the difficult future day when even the tea would be gone.

That was going to be one bad day for Howard Mooney.

Rap, tap. It really was someone at the door! Not knocking, exactly, but either kicking at it or striking it with a stick.

Mooney pulled his jacket tight around him and walked out into the frigid living room, not quite so frigid as his heart.

"Damn!" he said. "Damn, damn!"

What Mooney knew for sure was that nothing good could be coming in that door for him. It might be a policeman from Sea Bright, wondering about the light in the house; it might be a member of his uncle's family. It was even possible that one of the stockholders who had put up the money for that unfortunate venture into frozen-food club management had tracked him down as far as the Jersey shore. It could be almost anything or anybody, but it couldn't be good.

All the same, Mooney hadn't expected it to turn out to be a tall, lean man with angry pale eyes, wearing a silvery sort of leotard.

"I come in," said the angry man, and did.

Mooney slammed the door behind him. Too bad, but he couldn't keep it open, even if it was conceding a sort of moral right to enter to the stranger; he couldn't have all that cold air coming in to dilute his little bubble of warmth.

"What the devil do you want?" Mooney demanded.

The angry man looked about him with an expression of revulsion. He pointed to the kitchen. "It is warmer. In there?"

"I suppose so. What do—" But the stranger was already walking into the kitchen. Mooney scowled and started to follow, and stopped, and scowled even more. The stranger was leaving footprints behind him, or anyway some kind of marks that showed black on the faded summer rug. True, he was speckled with snow, but—that much snow? The man was drenched. It looked as though he had just come out of the ocean.

The stranger stood by the stove and glanced at Mooney warily. Mooney stood six feet, but this man was bigger. The silvery sort of thing he had on covered his legs as far as the feet, and he wore no shoes. It covered his body and his arms, and he had silvery gloves on his hands. It stopped at the neck, in a collar of what looked like pure silver, but could not have been because it gave with every breath the man took and every tensed muscle or tendon in his neck. His head was bare and his hair was black, cut very short.

He was carrying something flat and shiny by a molded handle. If it had been made of pigskin, it would have resembled a junior executive's briefcase.

The man said explosively: "You will help me."

Mooney cleared his throat. "Listen, I don't know what you want, but this is my house and—"

"You will help me," the man said positively. "I will pay you. Very well?"

He had a peculiar way of parting his sentences in the middle, but Mooney didn't care about that. He suddenly cared about one thing and that was the word "pay."

"What do you want me to do?"

The angry-eyed man ran his gloved hands across his head and sluiced drops of water onto the scuffed linoleum and the bedding of the cot Mooney had dragged into the kitchen. He said irritably: "I am a wayfarer who needs a. Guide? I will pay you for your assistance."

The question that rose to Mooney's lips was "How much?" but he fought it back. Instead, he asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"One moment." The stranger sat damply on the edge of Mooney's cot and, click-snap, the shiny sort of briefcase opened itself in his hands. He took out a flat round thing like a mirror and looked into it, squeezing it by the edges, and holding it this way and that.

Finally he said: "I must go to Wednesday, the twenty-sixth of December, at—" He tilted the little round thing again. "Brooklyn?" he finished triumphantly.

Mooney said, after a second: "That's a funny way to put it."

"Question?"

"I mean," said Mooney, "I know where Brooklyn is and I know *when* the twenty-sixth of December is—it's next week—but you have to admit that that's an odd way of putting it. I mean you don't *go* anywhere in time."

The wet man turned his pale eyes on Mooney. "Perhaps you are. Wrong?"

II

Mooney stared at his napping guest in a mood of wonder and fear and delight.

Time traveler! But it was hard to doubt the pale-eyed man. He had said he was from the future and he mentioned a date that made Mooney gasp. He had said: "When you speak to me, you must know that my. Name? Is Harse." And then he had curled up on the floor, surrounding his shiny briefcase like a mother cat around a kitten, and begun dozing alertly.

But not before he showed Mooney just what it was he proposed to pay him with.

Mooney sipped his cooling tea and forgot to shiver, though the drafts were fiercer and more biting than ever, now just before dawn. He was playing with what had looked at first like a string of steel ball-bearings, a child's necklace, half-inch spheres linked together in a strand a yard long.

Wampum! That was what Harse had called the spheres when he picked the string out of his little kit, and that was what they were.

Each ball-bearing was hollow. Open them up and out come the treasures of the crown. Pop, and one of the spheres splits neatly in half, and out spills a star sapphire, as big as the ball of your finger, glittering like the muted lights of hell. Pop, and another sphere drops a ball of yellow gold into your palm. Pop for a narwhal's tooth, pop for a cube of sugar; pop, pop, and there on the table before Harse sparkled diamonds and lumps of coal, a packet of heroin, a sphere of silver, pearls, beads of glass, machined pellets of tungsten, lumps of saffron and lumps of salt.

"It is," said Harse, "for your. Pay? No, *no!*" And he headed off Mooney's greedy fingers.

Click, click, click, and the little pellets of treasure and trash were back in the steel balls.

"No, *no!*" said Harse again, grinning, snapping the balls together like poppets in a string. "After you have guided me to Brooklyn and the December twenty-sixth. But I must say to you. This? That some of the balls contain plutonium and some radium. And I do not think that you can get them. Open? But if you did, you perhaps would die. Oh. Ho?" And, laughing, he began his taut nap.

Mooney swallowed the last of his icy tea. It was full daylight outside.

Very well, castaway, he said silently to the dozing pale-eyed man, I will guide you. Oh, there never was a guide like Mooney—not when a guide's fee can run so high. But when you are where you want to go, then we'll discuss the price....

A hacksaw, he schemed, and a Geiger counter. He had worn his fingers raw trying to find the little button or knob that Harse had used to open them. All right, he was licked there. But there were more ways than one to open a cat's eye.

A hacksaw. A Geiger counter. And, Mooney speculated drowsily, maybe a gun, if the pale-eyed man got tough.

Mooney fell asleep in joy and anticipation for the first time in more than a dozen years.

It was bright the next morning. Bright and very cold.

"Look alive!" Mooney said to the pale-eyed man, shivering. It had been a long walk from Uncle Lester's house to the bridge, in that ripping, shuddering wind that came in off the Atlantic.

Harse got up off his knees, from where he had been examining the asphalt pavement under the snow. He stood erect beside Mooney, while Mooney put on an egg-sucking smile and aimed his thumb down the road.

The station wagon he had spotted seemed to snarl and pick up speed as it whirled past them onto the bridge.

"I hope you skid into a ditch!" Mooney bawled into the icy air. He was in a fury. There was a bus line that went where they wanted to go. A warm, comfortable bus that would stop for them if they signaled, that would drop them just where they wanted to be, to convert one of Harse's ball-bearings into money. The gold one, Mooney planned. Not the diamond, not the pearl. Just a few dollars was all they

wanted, in this Jersey shore area where the towns were small and the gossip big. Just the price of fare into New York, where they could make their way to Tiffany's.

But the bus cost thirty-five cents apiece. Total, seventy cents. Which they didn't have.

"Here comes another. Car?"

Mooney dragged back the corners of his lips into another smile and held out his thumb.

It was a panel truck, light blue, with the sides lettered: *Chris's Delicatessen. Free Deliveries*. The driver slowed up, looked them over and stopped. He leaned toward the right-hand window.

He called: "I can take you far's Red Ba—"

He got a good look at Mooney's companion then and swallowed. Harse had put on an overcoat because Mooney insisted on it and he wore a hat because Mooney had told him flatly there would be trouble and questions if he didn't. But he hadn't taken off his own silvery leotard, which peeped through between neck and hat and where the coat flapped open.

"—ank," finished the driver thoughtfully.

Mooney didn't give him a chance to change his mind. "Red Bank is just where we want to go. Come on!" Already he had his hand on the door. He jumped in, made room for Harse, reached over him and slammed the door.

"Thank you very much," he said chattily to the driver. "Cold morning, isn't it? And that was some storm last night. Say, we really do appreciate this. Anywhere in Red Bank will be all right to drop us, anywhere at all."

He leaned forward slightly, just enough to keep the driver from being able to get a really good look at his other passenger.

It would have gone all right, it really would, except that just past Fair Haven, Harse suddenly announced: "It is the time for me to. Eat?"

He snip-snapped something around the edges of the gleaming sort of dispatch case, which opened. Mooney, peering over his shoulder, caught glimpses of shiny things and spinning things and things that seemed to glow. So did the driver.

"Hey," he said, interested, "what've you got there?"

"My business," said Harse, calmly and crushingly.

The driver blinked. He opened his mouth, and then he shut it again, and his neck became rather red.

Mooney said rapidly: "Say, isn't there—uh—isn't there a lot of snow?" He feigned fascination with the snow on the road, leaning forward until his face was nearly at the frosty windshield. "My gosh, I've never seen the road so snowy!"

Beside him, Harse was methodically taking things out of other things. A little cylinder popped open and began to steam; he put it to his lips and drank. A cube the size of a fist opened up at one end and little pellets dropped out into a cup. Harse picked a couple up and began to chew them. A flat, round object the shape of a cafeteria pie flipped open and something gray and doughy appeared—

"Holy heaven!"

Mooney's face slammed into the windshield as the driver tramped on his brakes. Not that Mooney could really blame him. The smell from that doughy mass could hardly be believed; and what made it retchingly worse was that Harse was eating it with a pearly small spoon.

The driver said complainingly: "Out! Out, you guys! I don't mind giving you a lift, but I've got hard rolls in the back of the truck and that smell's going to—Out! You heard me!"

"Oh," said Harse, tasting happily. "No."

"No?" roared the driver. "Now listen! I don't have to take any lip from hitchhikers! I don't have to—"

"One moment," said Harse. "Please." Without hurry and without delay, beaming absently at the driver, he reached into the silvery case again. Snip, snippety-snap; a jointed metal thing wriggled and snicked into place. And Harse, still beaming, pointed it at the driver.

Pale blue light and a faint whine.

It was a good thing the truck was halted, because the whining blue light reached diffidently out and embraced the driver; and then there was no driver. There was nothing. He was gone, beyond the reach of any further lip from hitchhikers.

III

So there was Mooney, driving a stolen panel truck, Mooney the bankrupt, Mooney the ne'er-do-well, and now Mooney the accomplice murderer. Or so he thought, though the pale-eyed man had laughed like a panther when he'd asked.

He rehearsed little speeches all the day down U.S. One, Mooney did, and they all began: "Your Honor, I didn't know—"

Well, he hadn't. How could a man like Mooney know that Harse was so bereft of human compassion as to snuff out a life for the sake of finishing his lunch in peace? And what could Mooney have done about it, without drawing the diffident blue glow to himself? No, Your Honor, really, Your Honor, he took me by surprise....

But by the time they ditched the stolen car, nearly dry of gas, at the Hoboken ferry, Mooney had begun to get his nerve back. In fact, he was beginning to perceive that in that glittering silvery dispatch case that Harse hugged to him were treasures that might do wonders for a smart man unjustly dogged by hard times. The wampum alone! But beyond the wampum, the other good things that might in time be worth more than any amount of mere money.

There was that weapon. Mooney cast a glance at Harse, blank-eyed and relaxed, very much disinterested in the crowds of commuters on the ferry.

Nobody in all that crowd would believe that Harse could pull out a little jointed metal thing and push a button and make any one of them cease to exist. Nobody would believe it—not even a jury. Corpus delicti, body of evidence—why, there would *be* no evidence! It was a simple, workable, foolproof way of getting any desired number of people out of the way without fuss, muss or bother—and couldn't a smart but

misfortunate man like Mooney do wonders by selectively removing those persons who stood as obstacles in his path?

And there would be more, much, much more. The thing to do, Mooney schemed, was to find out just what Harse had in that kit and how to work it; and then—who could know, perhaps Harse would himself find the diffident blue light reaching out for him before the intersection of Brooklyn and December twenty-sixth?

Mooney probed.

"Ah," laughed Harse. "Ho! I perceive what you want. You think perhaps there is something you can use in my survival kit."

"All right, Harse," Mooney said submissively, but he did have reservations.

First, it was important to find out just what was in the kit. After that—

Well, even a man from the future had to sleep.

Mooney was in a roaring rage. How dared the Government stick its bureaucratic nose into a simple transaction of citizens! But it turned out to be astonishingly hard to turn Harse's wampum into money. The first jeweler asked crudely threatening questions about an emerald the size of the ball of his thumb; the second quoted chapter and verse on the laws governing possession of gold. Finally they found a pawnbroker, who knowingly accepted a diamond that might have been worth a fortune; and when they took his first offer of a thousand dollars, the pawnbroker's suspicions were confirmed. Mooney dragged Harse away from there fast.

But they did have a thousand dollars.

As the cab took them across town, Mooney simmered down; and by the time they reached the other side, he was entirely content. What was a fortune more or less to a man who very nearly owned some of the secrets of the future?

He sat up, lit a cigarette, waved an arm and said expansively to Harse: "Our new home."

The pale-eyed man took a glowing little affair with eyepieces away from in front of his eyes.

"Ah," he said. "So."

It was quite an attractive hotel, Mooney thought judiciously. It did a lot to take away the sting of those sordidly avaricious jewelers. The lobby was an impressively close approximation of a cathedral and the bellboys looked smart and able.

Harse made an asthmatic sound. "What is. That?" He was pointing at a group of men standing in jovial amusement around the entrance to the hotel's grand ballroom, just off the lobby. They wore purple harem pants and floppy green hats, and every one of them carried a silver-paper imitation of a scimitar.

Mooney chuckled in a superior way. "You aren't up on our local customs, are you? That's a convention, Harse. They dress up that way because they belong to a lodge. A lodge is a kind of fraternal organization. A fraternal organization is—"

Harse said abruptly: "I want."

Mooney began to feel alarm. "What?"

"I want one for a. Specimen? Wait, I think I take the big one there."

"Harse! Wait a minute!" Mooney clutched at him. "Hold everything, man! You can't do that."

Harse stared at him. "Why?"

"Because it would upset everything, that's why! You want to get to your rendezvous, don't you? Well, if you do anything like that, we'll *never* get there!"

"Why not?"

"Please," Mooney said, "please take my word for it. You hear me? I'll explain later!"

Harse looked by no means convinced, but he stopped opening the silvery metal case. Mooney kept an eye on him while registering. Harse continued to watch the conventioners, but he went no further. Mooney began to breathe again.

"Thank *you*, sir," said the desk clerk—not every guest, even in this hotel, went for a corner suite with two baths. "Front!"

A smart-looking bellboy stepped forward, briskly took the key from the clerk, briskly nodded at Mooney and Harse. With the automatic reflex of any hotel bellhop, he reached for Harse's silvery case. Baggage was baggage, however funny it looked.

But Harse was not just any old guest. The bellboy got the bag away from him, all right, but his victory was purely transitory. He yelled, dropped the bag, grabbed his fist with the other hand.

"Hey! It shocked me! What kind of tricks are you trying to do with electric suitcases?"

Mooney moaned softly. The whole lobby was looking at them—even the conventioners at the entrance to the ballroom; even the men in mufti mingling with the conventioners, carrying cameras and flash guns; even the very doorman, the whole lobby away. That was bad. What was worse was that Harse was obviously getting angry.

"Wait, wait!" Mooney stepped between them in a hurry. "I can explain everything. My friend is, uh, an inventor. There's some very important material in that briefcase, believe me!"

He winked, patted the bellhop on the shoulder, took his hand with friendly concern and left in it a folded bill.

"Now," he said confidentially, "we don't want any disturbance. I'm sure you understand how it is, son. Don't you? My friend can't take any chances with his, uh, confidential material, you see? Right. Well, let's say no more about it. Now if you'll show us to our room—"

The bellhop, still stiff-backed, glanced down at the bill and the stiffness disappeared as fast as any truck-driver bathed in Harse's pale blue haze. He looked up again and grinned.

"Sorry, sir—" he began.

But he didn't finish. Mooney had let Harse get out of his sight a moment too long.

The first warning he had was when there was a sudden commotion among the lodge brothers. Mooney turned, much too late. There was Harse; he had wandered over

there, curious and interested and—Harse. He had stared them up and down, but he hadn't been content to stare. He had opened the little silvery dispatch-case and taken out of it the thing that looked like a film viewer; and maybe it was a camera, too, because he was looking through it at the conventioners. He was covering them as Dixie is covered by the dew, up and down, back and forth, heels to head.

And it was causing a certain amount of attention. Even one of the photographers thought maybe this funny-looking guy with the funny-looking opera glasses was curious enough to be worth a shot. After all, that was what the photographer was there for. He aimed and popped a flash gun.

There was an abrupt thin squeal from the box. Black fog sprayed out of it in a greasy jet. It billowed toward Harse. It collected around him, swirled high. Now all the flashguns were popping....

It was a clear waste of a twenty-dollar bill, Mooney told himself aggrievedly out on the sidewalk. There had been no point in buttering up the bellhop as long as Harse was going to get them thrown out anyway.

On the other side of the East River, in a hotel that fell considerably below Mooney's recent, brief standards of excellence, Mooney cautiously tipped a bellboy, ushered him out, locked the door behind him and, utterly exhausted, flopped on one of the twin beds.

Harse glanced at him briefly, then wandered over to the window and stared incuriously at the soiled snow outside.

"You were fine, Harse," said Mooney without spirit. "You didn't do anything wrong at all."

"Ah," said Harse without turning. "So?"

Mooney sat up, reached for the phone, demanded setups and a bottle from room service and hung up.

"Oh, well," he said, beginning to revive, "at least we're in Brooklyn now. Maybe it's just as well."

"As well. What?"

"I mean this is where you wanted to be. Now we just have to wait four days, until the twenty-sixth. We'll have to raise some more money, of course," he added experimentally.

Harse turned and looked at him with the pale eyes. "One thousand dollars you have. Is not enough?"

"Oh, no, Harse," Mooney assured him. "Why, that won't be nearly enough. The room rent in this hotel alone is likely to use that up. Besides all the extras, of course."

"Ah." Harse, looking bored, sat down in the chair near Mooney, opened his kit, took out the thing that looked like a film viewer and put it to his eyes.

"We'll have to sell some more of those things. After all—" Mooney winked and dug at the pale-eyed man's ribs with his elbow—"we'll be needing some, well, entertainment."

Harse took the viewer away from his eyes. He glanced thoughtfully at the elbow and then at Mooney. "So," he said.

Mooney coughed and changed the subject. "One thing, though," he begged. "Don't get me in any more trouble like you did in that hotel lobby—or with that guy in the truck. Please? I mean, after all, you're making it hard for me to carry out my job."

Harse was thoughtfully silent.

"Promise?" Mooney urged.

Harse said, after some more consideration: "It is not altogether me. That is to say, it is a matter of defense. My picture should not be. Photographed? So the survival kit insures that it is not. You understand?"

Mooney leaned back. "You mean—" The bellboy with the drinks interrupted him; he took the bottle, signed the chit, tipped the boy and mixed himself a reasonably stiff but not quite stupefying highball, thinking hard.

"Did you say 'survival kit'?" he asked at last.

Harse was deep in the viewer again, but he looked away from it irritably. "Naturally, survival kit. So that I can. Survive?" He went back to the viewer.

Mooney took a long, thoughtful slug of the drink.

Survival kit. Why, that made sense. When the Air Force boys went out and raided the islands in the Pacific during the war, sometimes they got shot down—and it was enemy territory, or what passed for it. Those islands were mostly held by Japanese, though their populations hardly knew it. All the aboriginals knew was that strange birds crossed the sky and sometimes men came from them. The politics of the situation didn't interest the headhunters. What really interested them was heads.

But for a palatable second choice, they would settle for trade goods—cloth, mirrors, beads. And so the bomber pilots were equipped with survival kits—maps, trade goods, rations, weapons, instructions for proceeding to a point where, God willing, a friendly submarine might put ashore a rubber dinghy to take them off.

Mooney said persuasively: "Harse. I'm sorry to bother you, but we have to talk." The man with the pale eyes took them away from the viewer again and stared at Mooney. "Harse, were you shot down like an airplane pilot?"

Harse frowned—not in anger, or at least not at Mooney. It was the effort to make himself understood. He said at last: "Yes. Call it that."

"And—and this place you want to go to—is that where you will be rescued?"

"Yes."

Aha, thought Mooney, and the glimmerings of a new idea began to kick and stretch its fetal limbs inside him. He put it aside, to bear and coddle in private. He said: "Tell me more. Is there any particular part of Brooklyn you have to go to?"

"Ah. The Nexus Point?" Harse put down the viewer and, snap-snap, opened the gleaming kit. He took out the little round thing he had consulted in the house by the cold Jersey sea. He tilted it this way and that, frowned, consulted a small square sparkly thing that came from another part of the case, tilted the round gadget again.

"Correcting for local time," he said, "the Nexus Point is one hour and one minute after midnight at what is called. The Vale of Cashmere?"

Mooney scratched his ear. "The Vale of Cashmere? Where the devil is that—somewhere in Pakistan?"

"Brooklyn," said Harse with an imp's grimace. "You are the guide and you do not know where you are guiding me to?"

Mooney said hastily: "All right, Harse, all right. I'll find it. But tell me one thing, will you? Just suppose—suppose, I said—that for some reason or other, we don't make it to the what-you-call, Nexus Point. Then what happens?"

Harse for once neither laughed nor scowled. The pale eyes opened wide and glanced around the room, at the machine-made candlewick spreads on the beds, at the dusty red curtains that made a "suite" out of a long room, at the dog-eared Bible that lay on the night table.

"Suh," he stammered, "suh—suh—seventeen years until there is another Nexus Point!"

IV

Mooney dreamed miraculous dreams and not entirely because of the empty bottle that had been full that afternoon. There never was a time, never will be a time, like the future Mooney dreamed of—Mooney-owned, houri-inhabited, a fair domain for a live-wire Emperor of the Eons....

He woke up with a splitting head.

Even a man from the future had to sleep, so Mooney had thought, and it had been in his mind that, even this first night, it might pay to stay awake a little longer than Harse, just in case it might then seem like a good idea to—well, to bash him over the head and grab the bag. But the whiskey had played him dirty and he had passed out—drunk, blind drunk, or at least he hoped so. He hoped that he hadn't seen what he thought he had seen *sober*.

He woke up and wondered what was wrong. Little tinkling ice spiders were moving around him. He could hear their tiny crystal sounds and feel their chill legs, so lightly, on him. It was still a dream—wasn't it?

Or was he awake? The thing was, he couldn't tell. If he was awake, it was the middle of the night, because there was no light whatever; and besides, he didn't seem to be able to move.

Thought Mooney with anger and desperation: I'm dead. And: What a time to die!

But second thoughts changed his mind; there was no heaven and no hell, in all the theologies he had investigated, that included being walked over by tiny spiders of ice. He *felt* them. There was no doubt about it.

It was Harse, of course—had to be. Whatever he was up to, Mooney couldn't say, but as he lay there sweating cold sweat and feeling the crawling little feet, he knew that it was something Harse had made happen.

Little by little, he began to be able to see—not much, but enough to see that there really was something crawling. Whatever the things were, they had a faint, tenuous glow, like the face of a watch just before dawn. He couldn't make out shapes, but he

could tell the size—not much bigger than a man's hand—and he could tell the number, and there were dozens of them.

He couldn't turn his head, but on the walls, on his chest, on his face, even on the ceiling, he could see faint moving patches of fox-fire light.

He took a deep breath. "Harse!" he started to call; wake him up, make him stop this! But he couldn't. He got no further than the first huff of the aspirate when the scurrying cold feet were on his lips. Something cold and damp lay across them and it stuck. Like spider silk, but stronger—he couldn't speak, couldn't move his lips, though he almost tore the flesh.

Oh, he could make a noise, all right. He started to do so, to snort and hum through his nose. But Mooney was not slow of thought and he had a sudden clear picture of that same cold ribbon crossing his nostrils, and what would be the use of all of time's treasures then, when it was no longer possible to breathe at all?

It was quite apparent that he was not to make a noise.

He had patience—the kind of patience that grows with a diet of thrice-used tea bags and soggy crackers. He waited.

It wasn't the middle of the night after all, he perceived, though it was still utterly dark except for the moving blobs. He could hear sounds in the hotel corridor outside—faintly, though: the sound of a vacuum cleaner, and it might have been a city block away; the tiniest whisper of someone laughing.

He remembered one of his drunken fantasies of the night before—little robot mice, or so they seemed, spinning a curtain across the window; and he shuddered, because that had been no fantasy. The window was curtained. And it was mid-morning, at the earliest, because the chambermaids were cleaning the halls.

Why couldn't he move? He flexed the muscles of his arms and legs, but nothing happened. He could feel the muscles straining, he could feel his toes and fingers twitch, but he was restrained by what seemed a web of Gulliver's cords....

There was a tap at the door. A pause, the scratching of a key, and the room was flooded with light from the hall.

Out of the straining corner of his eye, Mooney saw a woman in a gray cotton uniform, carrying fresh sheets, standing in the doorway, and her mouth was hanging slack. No wonder, for in the light from the hall, Mooney could see the room festooned with silver, with darting silvery shapes moving about. Mooney himself wore a cocoon of silver, and on the bed next to him, where Harse slept, there was a fantastic silver hood, like the basketwork of a baby's bassinet, surrounding his head.

It was a fairyland scene and it lasted only a second. For Harse cried out and leaped to his feet. Quick as an adder, he scooped up something from the table beside his bed and gestured with it at the door. It was, Mooney half perceived, the silvery, jointed thing he had used in the truck; and he used it again.

Pale blue light streamed out.

It faded and the chambermaid, popping eyes and all, was gone.

It didn't hurt as much the second time.

Mooney finally attracted Harse's attention, and Harse, with a Masonic pass over one of the little silvery things, set it to loosening and removing the silver bonds. The things were like toy tanks with jointed legs; as they spun the silver webs, they could also suck them in. In moments, the webs that held Mooney down were gone.

He got up, aching in his tired muscles and his head, but this time the panic that had filled him in the truck was gone. Well, one victim more or less—what did it matter? And besides, he clung to the fact that Harse had not exactly said the victims were dead.

So it didn't hurt as much the second time.

Mooney planned. He shut the door and sat on the edge of the bed. "Shut up—you put us in a lousy fix and I have to think a way out of it," he rasped at Harse when Harse started to speak; and the man from the future looked at him with opaque pale eyes, and silently opened one of the flat canisters and began to eat.

"All right," said Mooney at last. "Harse, get rid of all this stuff."

"This. Stuff?"

"The stuff on the walls. What your little spiders have been spinning, understand? Can't you get it off the walls?"

Harse leaned forward and touched the kit. The little spider-things that had been aimlessly roving now began to digest what they had created, as the ones that had held Mooney had already done. It was quick—Mooney hoped it would be quick enough. There were over a dozen of the things, more than Mooney would have believed the little kit could hold; and he had seen no sign of them before.

The silvery silk on the walls, in aimless tracing, disappeared. The thick silvery coat over the window disappeared. Harse's bassinet-hood disappeared. A construction that haloed the door disappeared—and as it dwindled, the noises from the corridor grew louder; some sort of sound-absorbing contrivance, Mooney thought, wondering.

There was an elaborate silvery erector-set affair on the floor between the beds; it whirled and spun silently and the little machines took it apart again and swallowed it. Mooney had no notion of its purpose. When it was gone, he could see no change, but Harse shuddered and shifted his position uncomfortably.

"All right," said Mooney when everything was back in the kit. "Now you just keep your mouth shut. I won't ask you to lie—they'll have enough trouble understanding you if you tell the truth. Hear me?"

Harse merely stared, but that was good enough. Mooney put his hand on the phone. He took a deep breath and held it until his head began to tingle and his face turned red. Then he picked up the phone and, when he spoke, there was authentic rage and distress in his voice.

"Operator," he snarled, "give me the manager. And hurry up—I want to report a thief!"

When the manager had gone—along with the assistant manager, the house detective and the ancient shrew-faced head housekeeper—Mooney extracted a promise from

Harse and left him. He carefully hung a "Do Not Disturb" card from the doorknob, crossed his fingers and took the elevator downstairs.

The fact seemed to be that Harse didn't care about *aboriginals*. Mooney had arranged a system of taps on the door which, he thought, Harse would abide by, so that Mooney could get back in. Just the same, Mooney vowed to be extremely careful about how he opened that door. Whatever the pale blue light was, Mooney wanted no part of it directed at him.

The elevator operator greeted him respectfully—a part of the management's policy of making amends, no doubt. Mooney returned the greeting with a barely civil nod. Sure, it had worked; he'd told the manager that he'd caught the chambermaid trying to steal something valuable that belonged to that celebrated proprietor of valuable secrets, Mr. Harse; the chambermaid had fled; how dared they employ a person like that?

And he had made very sure that the manager and the house dick and all the rest had plenty of opportunity to snoop apologetically in every closet and under the beds, just so there would be no suspicion in their minds that a dismembered chambermaid-torso was littering some dark corner of the room. What could they do but accept the story? The chambermaid wasn't there to defend herself, and though they might wonder how she had got out of the hotel without being noticed, it was their problem to figure it out, not Mooney's to explain it.

They had even been grateful when Mooney offered handsomely to refrain from notifying the police.

"Lobby, sir," sang out the elevator operator, and Mooney stepped out, nodded to the manager, stared down the house detective and walked out into the street.

So far, so good.

Now that the animal necessities of clothes and food and a place to live were taken care of, Mooney had a chance to operate. It was a field in which he had always had a good deal of talent—the making of deals, the locating of contacts, the arranging of transactions that were better conducted in private.

And he had a good deal of business to transact. Harse had accepted without question his statement that they would have to raise more money.

"Try heroin or Platinum?" he had suggested, and gone back to his viewer.

"I will," Mooney assured him, and he did; he tried them both, and more besides.

Not only was it good that he had such valuable commodities to vend, but it was a useful item in his total of knowledge concerning Harse that the man from the future seemed to have no idea of the value of money in the 20th Century, *chez* U.S.A.

Mooney found a buyer for the drugs; and there was a few thousand dollars there, which helped, for although the quantity was not large, the drugs were chemically pure. He found a fence to handle the jewels and precious metals; and he unloaded all the ones of moderate value—not the other diamond, not the rubies, not the star sapphire.

He arranged to keep those without mentioning it to Harse. No point in selling them now, not when they had several thousand dollars above any conceivable expenses,

not when some future date would do as well, just in case Harse should get away with the balance of the kit.

Having concluded his business, Mooney undertook a brief but expensive shopping tour of his own and found a reasonably satisfactory place to eat. After a pleasantly stimulating cocktail and the best meal he had had in some years—doubly good, for there was no reek from Harse's nauseating concoctions to spoil it—he called for coffee, for brandy, for the day's papers.

The disappearance of the truck driver made hardly a ripple. There were a couple of stories, but small and far in the back—amnesia, said one; an underworld kidnaping, suggested another; but the story had nothing to feed on and it would die.

Good enough, thought Mooney, waving for another glass of that enjoyable brandy; and then he turned back to the front page and saw his own face.

There was the hotel lobby of the previous day, and a pillar of churning black smoke that Mooney knew was Harse, and there in the background, mouth agape, expression worried, was Howard Mooney himself.

He read it all very, very carefully.

Well, he thought, at least they didn't get our names. The story was all about the Loyal and Beneficent Order of Exalted Eagles, and the only reference to the picture was a brief line about a disturbance outside the meeting hall. Nonetheless, the second glass of brandy tasted nowhere near as good as the first.

Time passed. Mooney found a man who explained what was meant by the Vale of Cashmere. In Brooklyn, there is a very large park—the name is Prospect Park—and in it is a little planted valley, with a brook and a pool; and the name of it on the maps of Prospect Park is the Vale of Cashmere. Mooney sent out for a map, memorized it; and that was that.

However, Mooney didn't really want to go to the Vale of Cashmere with Harse. What he wanted was that survival kit. Wonders kept popping out of it, and each day's supply made Mooney covet the huger store that was still inside. There had been, he guessed, something like a hundred separate items that had somehow come out of that tiny box. There simply was no room for them all; but that was not a matter that Mooney concerned himself with. They were there, possible or not, because he had seen them.

Mooney laid traps.

The trouble was that Harse did not care for conversation. He spent endless hours with his film viewer, and when he said anything at all to Mooney, it was to complain. All he wanted was to exist for four days—nothing else.

Mooney laid conversational traps, tried to draw him out, and there was no luck. Harse would turn his blank, pale stare on him, and refuse to be drawn.

At night, however hard Mooney tried, Harse was always awake past him; and in his sleep, always and always, the little metal guardians strapped Mooney tight. Survival kit? But how did the little metal things know that Mooney was a threat?

It was maddening and time was passing. There were four days, then only three, then only two. Mooney made arrangements of his own.

He found two girls—lovely girls, the best that money could buy, and he brought them to the suite with a wink and a snigger. "A little relaxation, eh, Harse? The red-haired one is named Ginger and she's partial to men with light-colored eyes."

Ginger smiled a rehearsed and lovely smile. "I certainly *am*, Mr. Harse. Say, want to dance?"

But it came to nothing, though the house detective knocked deferentially on the door to ask if they could be a little more quiet, please. It wasn't the sound of celebration that the neighbors were objecting to. It was the shrill, violent noise of Harse's laughter. First he had seemed not to understand, and then he looked as astonished as Mooney had ever seen him. And then the laughter.

Girls didn't work. Mooney got rid of the girls.

All right, Mooney was a man of infinite resource and sagacity—hadn't he proved that many a time? He excused himself to Harse, made sure his fat new pigskin wallet was in his pocket, and took a cab to a place on Brooklyn's waterfront where cabs seldom go. The bartender had arms like beer kegs and a blue chin.

"Beer," said Mooney, and made sure he paid for it with a twenty-dollar bill—thumbing through a thick wad of fifties and hundreds to find the smallest. He retired to a booth and nursed his beer.

After about ten minutes, a man stood beside him, blue-chinned and muscular enough to be the bartender's brother—which, Mooney found, he was.

"Well," said Mooney, "it took you long enough. Sit down. You don't have to roll me; you can earn this."

Girls didn't work? Okay, if not girls, then try boys ... well, not boys exactly. Hoodlums. Try hoodlums and see what Harse might do against the toughest inhabitants of the area around the Gowanus Canal.

Harse, sloshing heedlessly through melted snow, spattering Mooney, grumbled: "I do not see why we. Must? Wander endlessly across the face of this wretched slum."

Mooney said soothingly: "We have to make *sure*, Harse. We have to be sure it's the right place."

"Huff," said Harse, but he went along. They were in Prospect Park and it was nearly dark.

"Hey, look," said Mooney desperately, "look at those kids on sleds!"

Harse glanced angrily at the kids on sleds and even more angrily at Mooney. Still, he wasn't refusing to come and that was something. It had been possible that Harse would sit tight in the hotel room and it had taken all of the persuasive powers Mooney prided himself on to get him out. But Mooney was able to paint a horrible picture of getting to the wrong place, missing the Nexus Point, seventeen long years of waiting for the next one.

They crossed the Sheep Meadow, crossed the walk, crossed an old covered bridge; and they were at the head of a flight of shallow steps.

"The Vale of Cashmere!" cried Mooney, as though he were announcing a miracle.

Harse said nothing.

Mooney licked his lips, glancing at the kit Harse carried under an arm, glancing around. No one was in sight.

Mooney coughed. "Uh. You're sure this is the place you mean?"

"If it is the Vale of Cashmere." Harse looked once more down the steps, then turned.

"No, wait!" said Mooney frantically. "I mean—well, *where* in the Vale of Cashmere is the Nexus Point? This is a big place!"

Harse's pale eyes stared at him for a moment. "No. Not big."

"Oh, *fairly* big. After all—"

Harse said positively: "Come."

Mooney swore under his breath and vowed never to trust anyone again, especially a bartender's brother; but just then it happened. Out of the snowy bushes stepped a man in a red bandanna, holding a gun. "This is a stickup! Gimme that bag!"

Mooney exulted.

There was no chance for Harse now. The man was leaping toward him; there would be no time for him to open the bag, take out the weapon....

But he didn't have to. There was a thin, singing, whining sound from the bag. It leaped out of Harse's hand, leaped free as though it had invisible wings, and flew at the man in the red bandanna. The man stumbled and jumped aside, the eyes incredulous over the mask. The silvery flat metal kit spun round him, whining. It circled him once, spiraled up. Behind it, like a smoke trail from a destroyer, a pale blue mist streamed backward. It surrounded the man and hid him.

The bag flew back into Harse's hand.

The violet mist thinned and disappeared.

And the man was gone, as utterly and as finally as any chambermaid or driver of a truck.

There was a moment of silence. Mooney stared without belief at the snow sifting down from the bushes that the man had hid in.

Harse looked opaquely at Mooney. "It seems," he said, "that in these slums are many. Dangers?"

Mooney was very quiet on the way back to the hotel. Harse, for once, was not gazing into his viewer. He sat erect and silent beside Mooney, glancing at him from time to time. Mooney did not relish the attention.

The situation had deteriorated.

It deteriorated even more when they entered the lobby of the hotel. The desk clerk called to Mooney.

Mooney hesitated, then said to Harse: "You go ahead. I'll be up in a minute. And listen—don't forget about my knock."

Harse inclined his head and strode into the elevator. Mooney sighed.

"There's a gentleman to see you, Mr. Mooney," the desk clerk said civilly.

Mooney swallowed. "A—a gentleman? To see me?"

The clerk nodded toward the writing room. "In there, sir. A gentleman who says he knows you."

Mooney pursed his lips.

In the writing room? Well, that was an advantage. The writing room was off the main lobby; it would give Mooney a chance to peek in before whoever it was could see him. He approached the entrance cautiously....

"Howard!" cried an accusing familiar voice behind him.

Mooney turned. A small man with curly red hair was coming out of a door, marked "Men."

"Why—why, Uncle Lester!" said Mooney. "What a p-pleasant surprise!"

Lester, all of five feet tall, wispy red hair surrounding his red plump face, looked up at him belligerently.

"No doubt!" he snapped. "I've been waiting all day, Howard. Took the afternoon off from work to come here. And I wouldn't have been here at all if I hadn't seen *this*."

He was holding a copy of the paper with Mooney's picture, behind the pillar of black fog. "Your aunt wrapped my lunch in it, Howard. Otherwise I might have missed it. Went right to the hotel. You weren't there. The doorman helped, though. Found a cab driver. Told me where he'd taken you. Here I am."

"That's nice," lied Mooney.

"No, it isn't. Howard, what in the world are you up to? Do you know the Monmouth County police are looking for you? Said there was somebody missing. Want to talk to you." The little man shook his head angrily. "Knew I shouldn't let you stay at my place. Your aunt warned me, too. Why do you make trouble for me?"

"Police?" Mooney asked faintly.

"At my age! Police coming to the house. Who was that fella who's missing, Howard? Where did he go? Why doesn't he go home? His wife's half crazy. He shouldn't worry her like that."

Mooney clutched his uncle's shoulder. "Do the police know where I am? You didn't tell them?"

"Tell them? How could I tell them? Only I saw your picture while I was eating my sandwich, so I went to the hotel and—"

"Uncle Lester, listen. What did they come to see you for?"

"Because I was stupid enough to let you stay in my house, that's what for," Lester said bitterly. "Two days ago. Knocking on my door, hardly eight o'clock in the morning. They said there's a man missing, driving a truck, found the truck empty. Man from the Coast Guard station knows him, saw him picking up a couple of hitchhikers at a bridge someplace, recognized one of the hitchhikers. Said the hitchhiker'd been staying at my house. That's you, Howard. Don't lie; he described you. Pudgy, kind of a squinty look in the eyes, dressed like a bum—oh, it was you, all right."

"Wait a minute. Nobody knows you've come here, right? Not even Auntie?"

"No, course not. She didn't see the picture, so how would she know? Would've said something if she had. Now come on, Howard, we've got to go to the police and—"

"Uncle Lester!"

The little man paused and looked at him suspiciously. But that was all right; Mooney began to feel confidence flow back into him. It wasn't all over yet, not by a long shot.

"Uncle Lester," he said, his voice low-pitched and persuasive, "I have to ask you a very important question. Think before you answer, please. This is the question: Have you ever belonged to any Communist organization?"

The old man blinked. After a moment, he exploded. "Now what are you up to, Howard? *You* know I never—"

"Think, Uncle Lester! Please. Way back when you were a boy—anything like that?"

"Of course not!"

"You're sure? Because I'm warning you, Uncle Lester, you're going to have to take the strictest security check anybody ever took. You've stumbled onto something important. You'll have to prove you can be trusted or—well, I can't answer for the consequences. You see, this involves—" he looked around him furtively—

"Schenectady Project."

"Schenec—"

"Schenectady Project." Mooney nodded. "You've heard of the atom bomb? Uncle Lester, this is bigger!"

"Bigger than the at—"

"Bigger. It's the *molecule* bomb. There aren't seventy-five men in the country that know what that so-called driver in the truck was up to, and now you're one of them."

Mooney nodded soberly, feeling his power. The old man was hooked, tied and delivered. He could tell by the look in the eyes, by the quivering of the lips. Now was the time to slip the contract in his hand; or, in the present instance, to—

"I'll tell you what to do," whispered Mooney. "Here's my key. You go up to my room. Don't knock—we don't want to attract attention. Walk right in. You'll see a man there and he'll explain everything. Understand?"

"Why—why, sure, Howard. But why don't you come with me?"

Mooney raised a hand warningly. "You might be followed. I'll have to keep a lookout."

Five minutes later, when Mooney tapped on the door of the room—three taps, pause, three taps—and cautiously pushed it open, the pale blue mist was just disappearing. Harse was standing angrily in the center of the room with the jointed metal thing thrust out ominously before him.

And of Uncle Lester, there was no trace at all.

V

Time passed; and then time was all gone, and it was midnight, nearly the Nexus Point.

In front of the hotel, a drowsy cab-driver gave them an argument. "The Public Liberry? Listen, the Liberry ain't open this time of night. I ought to—Oh, thanks. Hop in." He folded the five-dollar bill and put the cab in gear.

Harse said ominously: "Liberry, Mooney? Why do you instruct him to take us to the Liberry?"

Mooney whispered: "There's a law against being in the Park at night. We'll have to sneak in. The Library's right across the street."

Harse stared, with his luminous pale eyes. But it was true; there was such a law, for the parks of the city lately had become fields of honor where rival gangs contended with bottle shards and zip guns, where a passerby was odds-on to be mugged.

"High Command must know this," Harse grumbled. "Must proceed, they say, to Nexus Point. But then one finds the aboriginals have made laws! Oh, I shall make a report!"

"*Sure* you will," Mooney soothed; but in his heart, he was prepared to bet heavily against it.

Because he had a new strategy. Clearly he couldn't get the survival kit from Harse. He had tried that and there was no luck; his arm still tingled as the bellboy's had, from having seemingly absent-mindedly taken the handle to help Harse. But there was a way.

Get rid of this clown from the future, he thought contentedly; meet the Nexus Point instead of Harse and there was the future, ripe for the taking! He knew where the rescuers would be—and, above all, he knew how to talk. Every man has one talent and Mooney's was salesmanship.

All the years wasted on peddling dime-store schemes like frozen-food plans! But this was the big time at last, so maybe the years of seasoning were not wasted, after all.

"That for you, Uncle Lester," he muttered. Harse looked up from his viewer angrily and Mooney cleared his throat. "I said," he explained hastily, "we're almost at the—the Nexus Point."

Snow was drifting down. The cab-driver glanced at the black, quiet library, shook his head and pulled away, leaving black, wet tracks in the thin snow.

The pale-eyed man looked about him irritably. "You!" he cried, waking Mooney from a dream of possessing the next ten years of stock-market reports. "You! Where is this Vale of Cashmere?"

"Right this way, Harse, right this way," said Mooney placatingly.

There was a wide sort of traffic circle—Grand Army Plaza was the name of it—and there were a few cars going around it. But not many, and none of them looked like police cars. Mooney looked up and down the broad, quiet streets.

"Across here," he ordered, and led the time traveler toward the edge of the park. "We can't go in the main entrance. There might be cops."

"Cops?"

"Policemen. Law-enforcement officers. We'll just walk down here a way and then hop over the wall. Trust me," said Mooney, in the voice that had put frozen-food lockers into so many suburban homes.

The look from those pale eyes was anything but a look of trust, but Harse didn't say anything. He stared about with an expression of detached horror, like an Alabama gentlewoman condemned to walk through Harlem.

"Now!" whispered Mooney urgently.

And over the wall they went.

They were in a thicket of shrubs and brush, snow-laden, the snow sifting down into Mooney's neck every time he touched a branch, which was always; he couldn't avoid it. They crossed a path and then a road—long, curving, broad, white, empty. Down a hill, onto another path. Mooney paused, glancing around.

"You know where you are. Going?"

"I think so. I'm looking for cops." None in sight. Mooney frowned. What the devil did the police think they were up to? They passed laws; why weren't they around to enforce them?

Mooney had his landmarks well in mind. There was the Drive, and there was the fork he was supposed to be looking for. It wouldn't be hard to find the path to the Vale. The only thing was, it was kind of important to Mooney's hope of future prosperity that he find a policeman first. And time was running out.

He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch—self-winding, shockproof, non-magnetic; the man in the hotel's jewelry shop had assured him only yesterday that he could depend on its time-keeping as on the beating of his heart. It was nearly a quarter of one.

"Come along, come along!" grumbled Harse.

Mooney stalled: "I—I think we'd better go along this way. It *ought* to be down there—"

He cursed himself. Why hadn't he gone in the main entrance, where there was sure to be a cop? Harse would never have known the difference. But there was the artist in him that wanted the thing done perfectly, and so he had held to the pretense of avoiding police, had skulked and hidden. And now—

"Look!" he whispered, pointing.

Harse spat soundlessly and turned his eyes where Mooney was pointing.

Yes. Under a distant light, a moving figure, swinging a nightstick.

Mooney took a deep breath and planted a hand between Harse's shoulder blades.

"Run!" he yelled at the top of his voice, and shoved. He sounded so real, he almost convinced himself. "We'll have to split up—I'll meet you there. Now *run!*"

VI

Oh, clever Mooney! He crouched under a snowy tree, watching the man from the future speed effortlessly away ... in the wrong direction.

The cop was hailing him; clever cop! All it had taken was a couple of full-throated yells and at once the cop had perceived that someone was in the park. But cleverer than any cop was Mooney.

Men from the future. Why, thought Mooney contentedly, no Mrs. Meyerhauser of the suburbs would have let me get away with a trick like that to sell her a freezer. There's going to be no problem at all. I don't have to worry about a thing. Mooney can take care of himself!

By then, he had caught his breath—and time was passing, passing.

He heard a distant confused yelling. Harse and the cop? But it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was getting to the Nexus Point at one minute past one.

He took a deep breath and began to trot. Slipping in the snow, panting heavily, he went down the path, around the little glade, across the covered bridge.

He found the shallow steps that led down to the Vale.

And there it was below him: a broad space where walks joined, and in the space a thing shaped like a dinosaur egg, rounded and huge. It glowed with a silvery sheen.

Confidently, Mooney started down the steps toward the egg and the moving figures that flitted soundlessly around it. Harse was not the only time traveler, Mooney saw. Good, that might make it all the simpler. Should he change his plan and feign amnesia, pass himself off as one of their own men?

Or—

A movement made him look over his shoulder.

Somebody was standing at the top of the steps. "Hell's fire," whispered Mooney. He'd forgotten all about that aboriginal law; and here above him stood a man in a policeman's uniform, staring down with pale eyes.

No, not a policeman. The face was—Harse's.

Mooney swallowed and stood rooted.

"You!" Harse's savage voice came growling. "You are to stand. Still?"

Mooney didn't need the order; he couldn't move. No twentieth-century cop was a match for Harse, that was clear; Harse had bested him, taken his uniform away from him for camouflage—and here he was.

Unfortunately, so was Howard Mooney.

The figures below were looking up, pointing and talking; Harse from above was coming down. Mooney could only stand, and wish—wish that he were back in Sea Bright, living on cookies and stale tea, wish he had planned things with more intelligence, more skill—perhaps even with more honesty. But it was too late for wishing.

Harse came down the steps, paused a yard from Mooney, scowled a withering scowl—and passed on.

He reached the bottom of the steps and joined the others waiting about the egg. They all went inside.

The glowing silvery colors winked and went out. The egg flamed purple, faded, turned transparent and disappeared.

Mooney stared and, yelling a demand for payment, ran stumbling down the steps to where it had been. There was a round thawed spot, a trampled patch—nothing else.

They were gone....

Almost gone. Because there was a sudden bright wash of flame from overhead—cold silvery flame. He looked up, dazzled. Over him, the egg was visible as thin smoke, hovering. A smoky, half-transparent hand reached out of a port. A thin, reedy voice cried: "I promised you. Pay?"

And the silvery dispatch-case sort of thing, the survival kit, dropped soundlessly to the snow beside Mooney.

When he looked up again, the egg was gone for good.

He was clear back to the hotel before he got a grip on himself—and then he was drunk with delight. Honest Harse! Splendidly trustable Harse! Why, all this time, Mooney had been so worried, had worked so hard—and the whole survival kit was his, after all!

He had touched it gingerly before picking it up but it didn't shock him; clearly the protective devices, whatever they were, were off.

He sweated over it for an hour and a half, looking for levers, buttons, a slit that he might pry wider with the blade of a knife. At last he kicked it and yelled, past endurance: "Open up, damn you!"

It opened wide on the floor before him.

"Oh, bless your heart!" cried Mooney, falling to his knees to drag out the string of wampum, the little mechanical mice, the viewing-machine sort of thing. Treasures like those were beyond price; each one might fetch a fortune, if only in the wondrous new inventions he could patent if he could discover just how they worked.

But where were they?

Gone! The wampum was gone. The goggles were gone. Everything was gone—the little flat canisters, the map instruments, everything but one thing.

There was, in a corner of the case, a squarish, sharp-edged thing that Mooney stared at blindly for a long moment before he recognized it. It was a part—only a part—of the jointed construction that Harse had used to rid himself of undesirables by bathing them in blue light.

What a filthy trick! Mooney all but sobbed to himself.

He picked up the squarish thing bitterly. Probably it wouldn't even work, he thought, the world a ruin around him. It wasn't even the whole complete weapon.

Still—

There was a grooved, saddle-shaped affair that was clearly a sort of trigger; it could move forward or it could move back. Mooney thought deeply for a while.

Then he sat up, held the thing carefully away from him with the pointed part toward the wall and pressed, ever so gently pressed forward on the saddle-shaped thumb-trigger.

The pale blue haze leaped out, swirled around and, not finding anything alive in its range, dwindled and died.

Aha, thought Mooney, not everything is lost yet! Surely a bright young man could find some use for a weapon like this which removed, if it did not kill, which prevented any nastiness about a corpse turning up, or a messy job of disposal.

Why not see what happened if the thumb-piece was moved backward?

Well, why not? Mooney held the thing away from him, hesitated, and slid it back.

There was a sudden shivering tingle in his thumb, in the gadget he was holding, running all up and down his arm. A violet haze, very unlike the blue one, licked soundlessly forth—not burning, but destroying as surely as flame ever destroyed; for where the haze touched the gadget itself, the kit, everything that had to do with the man from the future, it seared and shattered. The gadget fell into white crystalline powder in Mooney's hand and the case itself became a rectangular shape traced in white powder ridges on the rug.

Oh, no! thought Mooney, even before the haze had gone. It can't be!

The flame danced away like a cloud, spreading and rising. While Mooney stared, it faded away, but not without leaving something behind.

Mooney threw his taut body backward, almost under the bed. What he saw, he didn't believe; what he believed filled him with panic.

No wonder Harse had laughed so when Mooney asked if its victims were dead. For there they were, all of them. Like djinn out of a jar, human figures jelled and solidified where the cloud of violet flame had not at all diffidently rolled.

They were alive, as big as life, and beginning to move—and so many of them! Three—five—six:

The truck-driver, yes, and a man in long red flannel underwear who must have been the policeman, and Uncle Lester, and the bartender's brother, and the chambermaid, and a man Mooney didn't know.

They were there, all of them; and they came toward him, and oh! but they were angry!

THE HATED

Originally published in 1958

After space, there was always one more river to cross ... the far side of hatred and murder!

THE bar didn't have a name. No name of any kind. Not even an indication that it had ever had one. All it said on the outside was:

Cafe
EAT
Cocktails

which doesn't make a lot of sense. But it was a bar. It had a big TV set going ya-ta-ta in three glorious colors, and a jukebox that tried to drown out the TV with that lousy music they play. Anyway, it wasn't a kid hangout. I kind of like it. But I wasn't supposed to be there at all; it's in the contract. I was supposed to stay in New York and the New England states.

Cafe-EAT-Cocktails was right across the river. I think the name of the place was Hoboken, but I'm not sure. It all had a kind of dreamy feeling to it. I was—

Well, I couldn't even remember going there. I remembered one minute I was downtown New York, looking across the river. I did that a lot. And then I was there. I don't remember crossing the river at all.

I was drunk, you know.

YOU know how it is? Double bourbons and keep them coming. And after a while the bartender stops bringing me the ginger ale because gradually I forget to mix them. I got pretty loaded long before I left New York. I realize that. I guess I had to get pretty loaded to risk the pension and all.

Used to be I didn't drink much, but now, I don't know, when I have one drink, I get to thinking about Sam and Wally and Chowderhead and Gilvey and the captain. If I don't drink, I think about them, too, and then I take a drink. And that leads to another drink, and it all comes out to the same thing. Well, I guess I said it already, I drink a pretty good amount, but you can't blame me.

There was a girl.

I always get a girl someplace. Usually they aren't much and this one wasn't either. I mean she was probably somebody's mother. She was around thirty-five and not so bad, though she had a long scar under her ear down along her throat to the little round spot where her larynx was. It wasn't ugly. She smelled nice—while I could still smell, you know—and she didn't talk much. I liked that. Only—

Well, did you ever meet somebody with a nervous cough? Like when you say something funny—a little funny, not a big yock—they don't laugh and they don't stop

with just smiling, but they sort of cough? She did that. I began to itch. I couldn't help it. I asked her to stop it.

She spilled her drink and looked at me almost as though she was scared—and I had tried to say it quietly, too.

"Sorry," she said, a little angry, a little scared. "*Sorry*. But you don't have to—"

"Forget it."

"Sure. But you asked me to sit down here with you, remember? If you're going to—"

"*Forget it!*" I nodded at the bartender and held up two fingers. "You need another drink," I said. "The thing is," I said, "Gilvey used to do that."

"What?"

"That cough."

She looked puzzled. "You mean like this?"

"*Goddam it, stop it!*" Even the bartender looked over at me that time. Now she was really mad, but I didn't want her to go away. I said, "Gilvey was a fellow who went to Mars with me. Pat Gilvey."

"*Oh*." She sat down again and leaned across the table, low. "*Mars*."

THE bartender brought our drinks and looked at me suspiciously. I said, "Say, Mac, would you turn down the air-conditioning?"

"My name isn't Mac. No."

"Have a heart. It's too cold in here."

"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry.

I was cold. I mean that kind of weather, it's always cold in those places. You know around New York in August? It hits eighty, eighty-five, ninety. All the places have air-conditioning and what they really want is for you to wear a shirt and tie.

But I like to walk a lot. You would, too, you know. And you can't walk around much in long pants and a suit coat and all that stuff. Not around there. Not in August. And so then, when I went into a bar, it'd have one of those built-in freezers for the used-car salesmen with their dates, or maybe their wives, all dressed up. For what? But I froze.

"*Mars*," the girl breathed. "*Mars*."

I began to itch again. "Want to dance?"

"They don't have a license," she said. "Byron, *I* didn't know you'd been to *Mars*! Please *tell* me about it."

"It was all right," I said.

That was a lie.

She was interested. She forgot to smile. It made her look nicer. She said, "I knew a man—my brother-in-law—he was my husband's brother—I mean my ex-husband—"

"I get the idea."

"He worked for General Atomic. In Rockford, Illinois. You know where that is?"

"Sure." I couldn't go there, but I knew where Illinois was.

"He worked on the first Mars ship. Oh, fifteen years ago, wasn't it? He always wanted to go himself, but he couldn't pass the tests." She stopped and looked at me.

I knew what she was thinking. But I didn't always look this way, you know. Not that there's anything wrong with me now, I mean, but I couldn't pass the tests any more. Nobody can. That's why we're all one-trippers.

I said, "The only reason I'm shaking like this is because I'm cold."

It wasn't true, of course. It was that cough of Gilvey's. I didn't like to think about Gilvey, or Sam or Chowderhead or Wally or the captain. I didn't like to think about any of them. It made me shake.

You see, we couldn't kill each other. They wouldn't let us do that. Before we took off, they did something to our minds to make sure. What they did, it doesn't last forever. It lasts for two years and then it wears off. That's long enough, you see, because that gets you to Mars and back; and it's plenty long enough, in another way, because it's like a strait-jacket.

You know how to make a baby cry? Hold his hands. It's the most basic thing there is. What they did to us so we couldn't kill each other, it was like being tied up, like having our hands held so we couldn't get free. Well. But two years was long enough. Too long.

The bartender came over and said, "Pal, I'm sorry. See, I turned the air-conditioning down. You all right? You look so—"

I said, "Sure, I'm all right."

He sounded worried. I hadn't even heard him come back. The girl was looking worried, too, I guess because I was shaking so hard I was spilling my drink. I put some money on the table without even counting it.

"It's all right," I said. "We were just going."

"We were?" She looked confused. But she came along with me. They always do, once they find out you've been to Mars.

IN the next place, she said, between trips to the powder room, "It must take a lot of courage to sign up for something like that. Were you scientifically inclined in school? Don't you have to know an awful lot to be a space-flyer? Did you ever see any of those little monkey characters they say live on Mars? I read an article about how they lived in little cities of pup-tents or something like that—only they didn't make them, they grew them. Funny! Ever see those? That trip must have been a real drag, I bet. What is it, nine months? You couldn't have a baby! Excuse me— Say, tell me. All that time, how'd you—well, manage things? I mean didn't you ever have to go to the you-know or anything?"

"We managed," I said.

She giggled, and that reminded her, so she went to the powder room again. I thought about getting up and leaving while she was gone, but what was the use of that? I'd only pick up somebody else.

It was nearly midnight. A couple of minutes wouldn't hurt. I reached in my pocket for the little box of pills they give us—it isn't refillable, but we get a new prescription in the mail every month, along with the pension check. The label on the box said:

CAUTION

Use only as directed by physician. Not to be taken by persons suffering heart condition, digestive upset or circulatory disease. Not to be used in conjunction with alcoholic beverages.

I took three of them. I don't like to start them before midnight, but anyway I stopped shaking.

I closed my eyes, and then I was on the ship again. The noise in the bar became the noise of the rockets and the air washers and the sludge sluicers. I began to sweat, although this place was air-conditioned, too.

I could hear Wally whistling to himself the way he did, the sound muffled by his oxygen mask and drowned in the rocket noise, but still perfectly audible. The tune was *Sophisticated Lady*. Sometimes it was *Easy to Love* and sometimes *Chasing Shadows*, but mostly *Sophisticated Lady*. He was from Juilliard.

Somebody sneezed, and it sounded just like Chowderhead sneezing. You know how everybody sneezes according to his own individual style? Chowderhead had a ladylike little sneeze; it went *hutta*, real quick, all through the mouth, no nose involved. The captain went *Hrasssh*; Wally was *Ashoo*, *ashoo*, *ashoo*. Gilvey was *Hutch*-uh. Sam didn't sneeze much, but he sort of coughed and sprayed, and that was worse.

Sometimes I used to think about killing Sam by tying him down and having Wally and the captain sneeze him to death. But that was a kind of a joke, naturally, when I was feeling good. Or pretty good. Usually I thought about a knife for Sam. For Chowderhead it was a gun, right in the belly, one shot. For Wally it was a tommy gun—just stitching him up and down, you know, back and forth. The captain I would put in a cage with hungry lions, and Gilvey I'd strangle with my bare hands. That was probably because of the cough, I guess.

SHE was back. "Please tell me about it," she begged. "I'm so curious."

I opened my eyes. "You want me to tell you about it?"

"Oh, please!"

"About what it's like to fly to Mars on a rocket?"

"Yes!"

"All right," I said.

It's wonderful what three little white pills will do. I wasn't even shaking.

"There's six men, see? In a space the size of a Buick, and that's all the room there is. Two of us in the bunks all the time, four of us on watch. Maybe you want to stay in the sack an extra ten minutes—because it's the only place on the ship where you can stretch out, you know, the only place where you can rest without somebody's elbow in your side. But you can't. Because by then it's the next man's turn.

"And maybe you don't have elbows in your side while it's your turn off watch, but in the starboard bunk there's the air-regenerator master valve—I bet I could still show you the bruises right around my kidneys—and in the port bunk there's the emergency-escape-hatch handle. That gets you right in the temple, if you turn your head too fast.

"And you can't really sleep, I mean not soundly, because of the noise. That is, when the rockets are going. When they aren't going, then you're in free-fall, and that's bad, too, because you dream about falling. But when they're going, I don't know, I think it's worse. It's pretty loud.

"And even if it weren't for the noise, if you sleep too soundly you might roll over on your oxygen line. Then you dream about drowning. Ever do that? You're strangling and choking and you can't get any air? It isn't dangerous, I guess. Anyway, it always woke me up in time. Though I heard about a fellow in a flight six years ago—

"Well. So you've always got this oxygen mask on, all the time, except if you take it off for a second to talk to somebody. You don't do that very often, because what is there to say? Oh, maybe the first couple of weeks, sure—everybody's friends then. You don't even need the mask, for that matter. Or not very much. Everybody's still pretty clean. The place smells—oh, let's see—about like the locker room in a gym. You know? You can stand it. That's if nobody's got space sickness, of course. We were lucky that way.

"But that's about how it's going to get anyway, you know. Outside the masks, it's soup. It isn't that you smell it so much. You kind of *taste* it, in the back of your mouth, and your eyes sting. That's after the first two or three months. Later on, it gets worse.

"And with the mask on, of course, the oxygen mixture is coming in under pressure. That's funny if you're not used to it. Your lungs have to work a little bit harder to get rid of it, especially when you're asleep, so after a while the muscles get sore. And then they get sorer. And then—

"Well.

"Before we take off, the psych people give us a long doo-da that keeps us from killing each other. But they can't stop us from thinking about it. And afterward, after we're back on Earth—this is what you won't read about in the articles—they keep us apart. You know how they work it? We get a pension, naturally. I mean there's got to be a pension, otherwise there isn't enough money in the world to make anybody go. But in the contract, it says to get the pension we have to stay in our own area.

"The whole country's marked off. Six sections. Each has at least one big city in it. I was lucky, I got a lot of them. They try to keep it so every man's home town is in his own section, but—well, like with us, Chowderhead and the captain both happened to come from Santa Monica. I think it was Chowderhead that got California, Nevada, all that Southwest area. It was the luck of the draw. God knows what the captain got.

"Maybe New Jersey," I said, and took another white pill.

WE went on to another place and she said suddenly, "I figured something out. The way you keep looking around."

"What did you figure out?"

"Well, part of it was what you said about the other fellow getting New Jersey. This is New Jersey. You don't belong in this section, right?"

"Right," I said after a minute.

"So why are you here? I know why. You're here because you're looking for somebody."

"That's right."

She said triumphantly, "You want to find that other fellow from your crew! You want to fight him!"

I couldn't help shaking, white pills or no white pills. But I had to correct her.

"No. I want to kill him."

"How do you know he's here? He's got a lot of states to roam around in, too, doesn't he?"

"Six. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland—all the way down to Washington."

"Then how do you know—"

"He'll be here." I didn't have to tell her how I knew. But I knew.

I wasn't the only one who spent his time at the border of his assigned area, looking across the river or staring across a state line, knowing that somebody was on the other side. I knew. You fight a war and you don't have to guess that the enemy might have his troops a thousand miles away from the battle line. You know where his troops will be. You know he wants to fight, too.

Hutta. Hutta.

I spilled my drink.

I looked at her. "You—you didn't—"

She looked frightened. "What's the matter?"

"*Did you just sneeze?*"

"Sneeze? Me? Did I—"

I said something quick and nasty, I don't know what. No! It hadn't been her. I knew it.

It was Chowderhead's sneeze.

CHOWDERHEAD. Marvin T. Roebuck, his name was. Five feet eight inches tall. Dark-complected, with a cast in one eye. Spoke with a Midwest kind of accent, even though he came from California—"shrick" for "shriek," "hawror" for "horror," like that. It drove me crazy after a while. Maybe that gives you an idea what he talked about mostly. A skunk. A thoroughgoing, deep-rooted, mother-murdering skunk.

I kicked over my chair and roared, "Roebuck! Where are you, damn you?"

The bar was all at once silent. Only the jukebox kept going.

"I know you're here!" I screamed. "Come out and get it! You louse, I told you I'd get you for calling me a liar the day Wally sneaked a smoke!"

Silence, everybody looking at me.

Then the door of the men's room opened.

He came out.

He looked *lousy*. Eyes all red-rimmed and his hair falling out—the poor crumb couldn't have been over twenty-nine. He shrieked, "You!" He called me a million names. He said, "You thieving rat, I'll teach you to try to cheat me out of my candy ration!"

He had a knife.

I didn't care. I didn't have anything and that was stupid, but it didn't matter. I got a bottle of beer from the next table and smashed it against the back of a chair. It made a good weapon, you know; I'd take that against a knife any time.

I ran toward him, and he came all staggering and lurching toward me, looking crazy and desperate, mumbling and raving—I could hardly hear him, because I was talking, too. Nobody tried to stop us. Somebody went out the door and I figured it was to call the cops, but that was all right. Once I took care of Chowderhead, I didn't care what the cops did.

I went for the face.

He cut me first. I felt the knife slide up along my left arm but, you know, it didn't even hurt, only kind of stung a little. I didn't care about that. I got him in the face, and the bottle came away, and it was all like gray and white jelly, and then blood began to spring out. He screamed. Oh, that scream! I never heard anything like that scream. It was what I had been waiting all my life for.

I kicked him as he staggered back, and he fell. And I was on top of him, with the bottle, and I was careful to stay away from the heart or the throat, because that was too quick, but I worked over the face, and I felt his knife get me a couple times more, and—

And—

AND I woke up, you know. And there was Dr. Santly over me with a hypodermic needle that he'd just taken out of my arm, and four male nurses in fatigues holding me down. And I was drenched with sweat.

For a minute, I didn't know where I was. It was a horrible queasy falling sensation, as though the bar and the fight and the world were all dissolving into smoke around me.

Then I knew where I was.

It was almost worse.

I stopped yelling and just lay there, looking up at them.

Dr. Santly said, trying to keep his face friendly and noncommittal, "You're doing much better, Byron, boy. *Much* better."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "You worked through the whole thing in two hours and eight minutes. Remember the first time? You were sixteen hours killing him. Captain Van Wyck it was that time, remember? Who was it this time?"

"Chowderhead." I looked at the male nurses. Doubtfully, they let go of my arms and legs.

"Chowderhead," said Dr. Santly. "Oh—Roebuck. That boy," he said mournfully, his expression saddened, "he's not coming along nearly as well as you. *Nearly*. He can't run through a cycle in less than five hours. And, that's peculiar, it's usually you he— Well, I better not say that, shall I? No sense setting up a counter-impression when your pores are all open, so to speak?" He smiled at me, but he was a little worried in back of the smile.

I sat up. "Anybody got a cigarette?"

"Give him a cigarette, Johnson," the doctor ordered the male nurse standing alongside my right foot.

Johnson did. I fired up.

"You're coming along *splendidly*," Dr. Santly said. He was one of these psych guys that thinks if you say it's so, it makes it so. You know that kind? "We'll have you down under an hour before the end of the week. That's *marvelous* progress. Then we can work on the conscious level! You're doing extremely well, whether you know it or not. Why, in six months—say in eight months, because I like to be conservative—" he twinkled at me—"we'll have you out of here! You'll be the first of your crew to be discharged, you know that?"

"That's nice," I said. "The others aren't doing so well?"

"No. Not at all well, most of them. Particularly Dr. Gilvey. The run-throughs leave him in terrible shape. I don't mind admitting I'm worried about him."

"That's nice," I said, and this time I meant it.

HE looked at me thoughtfully, but all he did was say to the male nurses, "He's all right now. Help him off the table."

It was hard standing up. I had to hold onto the rail around the table for a minute. I said my set little speech: "Dr. Santly, I want to tell you again how grateful I am for this. I was reconciled to living the rest of my life confined to one part of the country, the way the other crews always did. But this is much better. I appreciate it. I'm sure the others do, too."

"Of course, boy. Of course." He took out a fountain pen and made a note on my chart; I couldn't see what it was, but he looked gratified. "It's no more than you have coming to you, Byron," he said. "I'm grateful that I could be the one to make it come to pass."

He glanced conspiratorially at the male nurses. "You know how important this is to me. It's the triumph of a whole new approach to psychic rehabilitation. I mean to say our heroes of space travel are entitled to freedom when they come back home to Earth, aren't they?"

"Definitely," I said, scrubbing some of the sweat off my face onto my sleeve.

"So we've got to end this system of designated areas. We can't avoid the tensions that accompany space travel, no. But if we can help you eliminate harmful tensions with a few run-throughs, why, it's not too high a price to pay, is it?"

"Not a bit."

"I mean to say," he said, warming up, "you can look forward to the time when you'll be able to mingle with your old friends from the rocket, free and easy, without any need for restraint. That's a lot to look forward to, isn't it?"

"It is," I said. "I look forward to it very much," I said. "And I know exactly what I'm going to do the first time I meet one—I mean without any restraints, as you say," I said. And it was true; I did. Only it wouldn't be a broken beer bottle that I would do it with.

I had much more elaborate ideas than that.

PLAGUE OF PYTHONS

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The pythons had entered into Mankind. No man knew at what moment he might be Possessed!

I

Because of the crowd they held Chandler's trial in the all-purpose room of the high school. It smelled of leather and stale sweat. He walked up the three steps to the stage, with the bailiff's hand on his elbow, and took his place at the defendant's table.

Chandler's lawyer looked at him without emotion. He was appointed by the court. He was willing to do his job, but his job didn't require him to like his client. All he said was, "Stand up. The judge is coming in."

Chandler got to his feet and leaned on the table while the bailiff chanted his call and the chaplain read some verses from John. He did not listen. The Bible verse came too late to help him, and besides he ached.

When the police arrested him they had not been gentle. There were four of them. They were from the plant's own security force and carried no guns. They didn't need any; Chandler had put up no resistance after the first few moments—that is, he stopped as soon as he could stop—but the police hadn't stopped. He remembered that very clearly. He remembered the nightstick across the side of his head that left his ear squashed and puffy, he remembered the kick in the gut that still made walking painful. He even remembered the series of blows about the skull that had knocked him out.

The bruises along his rib cage and left arm, though, he did not remember getting. Obviously the police had been mad enough to keep right on subduing him after he was already unconscious.

Chandler did not blame them—exactly. He supposed he would have done the same thing.

The judge was having a long mumble with the court stenographer apparently about something which had happened in the Union House the night before. Chandler knew Judge Ellithorp slightly. He did not expect to get a fair trial. The previous December the judge himself, while possessed, had smashed the transmitter of the town's radio station, which he owned, and set fire to the building it occupied. His son-in-law had been killed in the fire.

Laughing, the judge waved the reporter back to his seat and glanced around the courtroom. His gaze touched Chandler lightly, like the flick of the hanging strands of cord that precede a railroad tunnel. The touch carried the same warning. What lay ahead for Chandler was destruction.

"Read the charge," ordered Judge Ellithorp. He spoke very loudly. There were more than six hundred persons in the auditorium; the judge didn't want any of them to miss a word.

The bailiff ordered Chandler to stand and informed him that he was accused of having, on the seventeenth day of June last, committed on the person of Margaret Flershem, a minor, an act of rape—"Louder!" ordered the judge testily.

"Yes, Your Honor," said the bailiff, and inflated his chest. "An Act of Rape under Threat of Bodily Violence," he cried; "and Did Further Commit on the Person of Said Margaret Flershem an Act of Aggravated Assault—"

Chandler rubbed his aching side, looking at the ceiling. He remembered the look in Peggy Flershem's eyes as he forced himself on her. She was only sixteen years old, and at that time he hadn't even known her name.

The bailiff boomed on: "—and Did Further Commit on that Same Seventeenth Day of June Last on the Person of Ingovar Porter an Act of Assault with Intent to Rape, the Foregoing Being a True Bill Handed Down by the Grand Jury of Sepulpas County in Extraordinary Session Assembled, the Eighteenth Day of June Last."

Judge Ellithorp looked satisfied as the bailiff sat down, quite winded. While the judge hunted through the papers on his desk the crowd in the auditorium stirred and murmured.

A child began to cry.

The judge stood up and pounded his gavel. "What is it? What's the matter with him? You, Dundon!" The court attendant the judge was looking at hurried over and spoke to the child's mother, then reported to the judge.

"I dunno, Your Honor. All he says is something scared him."

The judge was enraged. "Well, that's just fine! Now we have to take up the time of all these good people, probably for no reason, and hold up the business of this court, just because of a child. Bailiff! I want you to clear this courtroom of all children under—" he hesitated, calculating voting blocks in his head—"all children under the age of six. Dr. Palmer, are you there? Well, you better go ahead with the—prayer." The judge could not make himself say "the exorcism."

"I'm sorry, madam," he added to the mother of the crying two-year-old. "If you have someone to leave the child with, I'll instruct the attendants to save your place for you." She was also a voter.

Dr. Palmer rose, very grave, as he was embarrassed. He glared around the all-purpose room, defying anyone to smile, as he chanted: "Domina Pythonis, I command you, leave! Leave, Hel! Leave, Heloym! Leave, Sother and Thetragrammaton, leave, all unclean ones! I command you! In the name of God, in all of His manifestations!" He sat down again, still very grave. He knew that he did not make nearly as fine a showing as Father Lon, with his resonant *in nomina Jesu Christi et Sancti Ubaldi* and his censer, but the post of exorcist was filled in strict rotation, one month to a denomination, ever since the troubles started. Dr. Palmer was a Unitarian. Exorcisms had not been in the curriculum at the seminary and he had been forced to invent his own.

Chandler's lawyer tapped him on the shoulder. "Last chance to change your mind," he said.

"No. I'm not guilty, and that's the way I want to plead."

The lawyer shrugged and stood up, waiting for the judge to notice him.

Chandler, for the first time, allowed himself to meet the eyes of the crowd.

He studied the jury first. He knew some of them casually—it was not a big enough town to command a jury of total strangers for any defendant, and Chandler had lived there most of his life. He recognized Pop Matheson, old and very stiff, who ran the railroad station cigar stand. Two of the other men were familiar as faces passed in the street. The forewoman, though, was a stranger. She sat there very composed and frowning, and all he knew about her was that she wore funny hats. Yesterday's had been red roses when she was selected from the panel; today's was, of all things, a stuffed bird.

He did not think that any of them were possessed. He was not so sure of the audience.

He saw girls he had dated in high school, long before he met Margot; men he worked with at the plant. They all glanced at him, but he was not sure who was looking out through some of those familiar eyes. The visitors reliably watched all large gatherings, at least momentarily; it would be surprising if none of them were here.

"All right, how do you plead," said Judge Ellithorp at last.

Chandler's lawyer straightened up. "Not guilty, Your Honor, by reason of temporary pandemic insanity."

The judge looked pleased. The crowd murmured, but they were pleased too. They had him dead to rights and it would have been a disappointment if Chandler had pleaded guilty. They wanted to see one of the vilest criminals in contemporary human society caught, exposed, convicted and punished; they did not want to miss a step of the process. Already in the playground behind the school three deputies from the sheriff's office were loading their rifles, while the school janitor chalked lines around the handball court to mark where the crowd witnessing the execution would be permitted to stand.

The prosecution made its case very quickly. Mrs. Porter testified that she worked at McKelvey Bros., the antibiotics plant, where the defendant also worked. Yes, that was him. She had been attracted by the noise from the culture room last—let's see—"Was it the seventeenth day of June last?" prompted the prosecutor, and Chandler's attorney instinctively gathered his muscles to rise, hesitated, glanced at his client and shrugged. That was right, it was the seventeenth. Incautiously she went right into the room. She should have known better, she admitted. She should have called the plant police right away, but, well, they hadn't had any trouble at the plant, you know, and—well, she didn't. She was a stupid woman, for all that she was rather good-looking, and insatiably curious. She had seen Peggy Flershem on the floor. "She was all *blood*. And her clothes were—And she was, I mean her—her body was—" With relentless tact the prosecutor allowed her to stammer out her observation that the girl had clearly been raped. And she had seen Chandler laughing and breaking up the place, throwing racks of cultures through the windows, upsetting trays. Of course she had crossed herself and tried a quick exorcism but there was no visible effect; then Chandler had leaped at her. "He was *hateful*! He was just *foul*!" But as he began to attack her the plant police came, drawn by her screams.

Chandler's attorney did not question.

Peggy Flershem's deposition was introduced without objection from the defense. But she had little to say anyway, having been dazed at first and unconscious later. The plant police testified to having arrested Chandler; a doctor described in chaste medical words the derangements Chandler had worked on Peggy Flershem's virgin anatomy. There was no question from Chandler's lawyer—and, for that matter, nothing to question. Chandler did not hope to pretend that he had not ravished and nearly killed one girl, then done his best to repeat the process on another. Sitting there as the doctor testified, Chandler was able to tally every break and bruise against the memory of what his own body had done. He had been a spectator then, too, as remote from the event as he was now; but that was why they had him on trial. That was what they did not believe.

At twelve-thirty the prosecution rested its case, Judge Ellithorp looking very pleased. He recessed the court for one hour for lunch, and the guards took Chandler back to the detention cell in the basement of the school.

Two Swiss cheese sandwiches and a wax-paper carton of chocolate milk were on the desk. They were Chandler's lunch. As they had been standing, the sandwiches were crusty and the milk lukewarm. He ate them anyway. He knew what the judge looked pleased about. At one-thirty Chandler's lawyer would put him on the stand, and no one would pay very much attention to what he had to say, and the jury would be out at most twenty minutes, and the verdict would be guilty. The judge was pleased because he would be able to pronounce sentence no later than four o'clock, no matter what. They had formed the habit of holding the executions at sundown. As, at that time of year, sundown was after seven, it would all go very well—for everyone but Chandler. For Chandler it would be the end.

II

The odd thing about Chandler's dilemma was not merely that he was innocent—in a way, that is—but that many who were guilty (in a way; as guilty as he himself, at any rate) were free and honored citizens. Chandler himself was a widower because his own wife had been murdered. He had seen the murderer leaving the scene of the crime, and the man he had seen was in the courtroom today, watching Chandler's own trial. Of the six hundred or so in the court, at least fifty were known to have taken part in one or more provable acts of murder, rape, arson, theft, sodomy, vandalism, assault and battery or a dozen other offenses indictable under the laws of the state. Of course, that could be said of almost any community in the world in those years; Chandler's was not unique. What had put Chandler in the dock was not what his body had been seen to do, but the place in which it had been seen to do it. For everybody knew that medicine and agriculture were never molested by the demons.

Chandler's own lawyer had pointed that out to him the day before the trial. "If it was anywhere but at the McKelvey plant, all right, but there's never been any trouble there. You know that. The trouble with you laymen is you think of lawyers in terms of Perry Mason, right? Rabbit out of the hat stuff. Well, I can't do that. I can only present your case, whatever it is, the best way possible. And the best thing I can do for your case right now is tell you haven't got one." At that time the lawyer was still trying to be fair. He was even casting around for some thought he could use to convince himself that his client was innocent, though he had frankly admitted as soon as he introduced himself that he didn't have much hope there.

Chandler protested that he didn't have to commit rape. He'd been a widower for a year, but—

"Wait a minute," said the lawyer. "Listen. You can't make an ordinary claim of possession stick, but what about good old-fashioned insanity?" Chandler looked puzzled, so the lawyer explained. Wasn't it possible that Chandler was—consciously, subconsciously, unconsciously, call it what you will—trying to get revenge for what had happened to his own wife?

No, said Chandler, certainly not! But then he had to stop and think. After all, he had never been possessed before; in fact, he had always retained a certain skepticism about "possession"—it seemed like such a convenient way for anyone to do any illicit thing he chose—until the moment when he looked up to see Peggy Flershem walking into the culture room with a tray of agar disks, and was astonished to find himself striking her with the wrench in his hand and ripping at her absurdly floral-printed slacks. Maybe his case was different. Maybe it wasn't the sort of possession that struck at random; maybe he was just off his rocker.

Margot, his wife, had been cut up cruelly. He had seen his friend, Jack Souther, leaving his home hurriedly as he approached; and although he had thought that the stains on his clothes looked queerly like blood, nothing in that prepared him for what he found in the rumpus room. It had taken him some time to identify the spread-out dissection on the floor with his wife Margot.... "No," he told his lawyer, "I was shaken up, of course. The worst time was the next night, when there was a knock on the door and I opened it and it was Jack. He'd come to apologize. I—fell apart; but I got over it. I tell you I was possessed, that's all."

"And I tell you that defense will put you right in front of a firing squad," said his lawyer. "And *that's* all."

Five or six others had been executed for hoaxing; Chandler was familiar with the ritual. He even understood it, in a way. The world had gone to pot in the previous two years. The real enemy was out of reach; when any citizen might run wild and, when caught, relapse into his own self, terrified and sick, there was a need to strike back. But the enemy was invisible. The hoaxers were only whipping boys—but they were the only targets vengeance had.

The real enemy had struck the entire world in a single night. One day the people of the world went about their business in the gloomy knowledge that they were likely to make mistakes but with, at least, the comfort that the mistakes would be their own. The next day had no such comfort. The next day anyone, anywhere, was likely to find himself seized, possessed, working evil or whimsy without intention and helplessly.

Chandler stood up, kicked the balled-up wax paper from his sandwiches across the floor and swore violently.

He was beginning to wake from the shock that had gripped him. "Damn fool," he said to himself. He had no particular reason. Like the world, he needed a whipping boy too, if only himself. "Damn fool, you know they're going to shoot you!"

He stretched and twisted his body violently, alone in the middle of the room, in silence. He *had* to wake up. He *had* to start thinking. In a quarter of an hour or less the court would reconvene, and from then it was only a steady, quick slide to the grave.

It was better to do anything than to do nothing. He examined the windows of his improvised cell. They were above his head and barred; standing on the table, he could see feet walking outside, in the paved play-yard of the school. He discarded the thought of escaping that way; there was no one to smuggle him a file, and there was no time. He studied the door to the hall. It was not impossible that when the guard opened it he could jump him, knock him out, run ... run where? The room had been a storage place for athletic equipment at the end of a hall; the hall led only to the stairs and the stairs emerged into the courtroom. It was quite likely, he thought, that the hall had another flight of stairs somewhere farther along, or through another room. What had he spent his taxes on these years, if not for schools designed with more than one exit in case of fire? But as he had not thought to mark an escape route when he was brought in, it did him no good.

The guard, however, had a gun. Chandler lifted up an edge of the table and tried to shake one of the legs. They did not shake; that part of his taxes had been well enough spent, he thought wryly. The chair? Could he smash the chair to get a club, which would give him a weapon to get the guard's gun?...

Before he reached the chair the door opened and his lawyer came in.

"Sorry I'm late," he said briskly. "Well. As your attorney I have to tell you they've presented a damaging case. As I see it—"

"What case?" Chandler demanded. "I never denied the acts. What else did they prove?"

"Oh, God!" said his lawyer, not quite loudly enough to be insulting. "Do we have to go over that again? Your claim of possession would make a defense if it had happened anywhere else. We know that these cases exist, but we also know that they follow a pattern. Some areas seem to be immune—medical establishments, pharmaceutical plants among them. So they proved that all this happened in a pharmaceutical plant. I advise you to plead guilty."

Chandler sat down on the edge of the table, controlling himself very well, he thought. He only asked: "Would that do me any good at all?"

The lawyer reflected, gazing at the ceiling. "... No. I guess it wouldn't."

Chandler nodded. "So what else shall we talk about? Want to compare notes about where you were and I was the night the President went possessed?"

The lawyer was irritated. He kept his mouth shut for a moment until he thought he could keep from showing it. Outside a vendor was hawking amulets: "St. Ann beads! Witch knots! Fresh garlic, local grown, best in town!" The lawyer shook his head.

"All right," he said, "it's your life. We'll do it your way. Anyway, time's up; Sergeant Grantz will be banging on the door any minute."

He zipped up his briefcase. Chandler did not move. "They don't give us much time anyway," the lawyer added, angry at Chandler and at hoaxers in general but not willing to say so. "Grantz is a stickler for promptness."

Chandler found a crumb of cheese by his hand and absently ate it. The lawyer watched him and glanced at his watch. "Oh, hell," he said, picked up his briefcase and kicked the base of the door. "Grantz! What's the matter with you? You asleep out there?"

Chandler was sworn, gave his name, admitted the truth of everything the previous witnesses had said. The faces were still aimed at him, every one. He could not read them at all any more, could not tell if they were friendly or hating, there were too many and they all had eyes. The jurors sat on their funeral-parlor chairs like cadavers, embalmed and propped, the dead witnessing a wake for the living. Only the forewoman in the funny hat showed signs of life, looking alertly at Chandler, at the judge, at the man next to her, around the auditorium. Maybe it was a good sign. At least she did not have the frozen in concrete, guilty-as-hell look of the others.

His attorney asked him the question he had been waiting for: "Tell us, in your own words, what happened." Chandler opened his mouth, and paused. Curiously, he had forgotten what he wanted to say. He had rehearsed this moment again and again; but all that came out was:

"I didn't do it. I mean, I did the acts, but I was possessed. That's all. Others have done worse, under the same circumstances, and been let off. Just as Fisher was acquitted for murdering the Learnards, as Draper got off after what he did to the Cline boy. As Jack Souther over there was let off after he murdered my own wife. They should be. They couldn't help themselves. Whatever this thing is that takes control, I know it can't be fought. My God, you can't even *try* to fight it!"

He was not getting through. The faces had not changed. The forewoman of the jury was now searching systematically through her pocketbook, taking each item out and examining it, putting it back and taking out another. But between times she looked at him and at least her expression wasn't hostile. He said, addressing her:

"That's all there is to it. It wasn't me running my body. It was someone else. I swear it before all of you, and before God."

The prosecutor did not bother to question him.

Chandler went back to his seat and sat down and watched the next twenty minutes go by in the wink of an eye, rapid, rapid, they were in a hurry to shoot him. He could hardly believe that Judge Ellithorp could speak so fast, the jurymen rise and file out at a gallop, zip, whisk, and they were back again. Too fast! he cried silently, time had gone into high gear; but he knew that it was only his imagination. The twenty minutes had been a full twelve hundred seconds. And then time, as if to make amends, came to a stop, abrupt, brakes-on. The judge asked the jury for their verdict and it was an eternity before the forewoman arose.

She was beginning to look rather disheveled. Beaming at Chandler—*surely* the woman was rather odd, it couldn't be just his imagination—she fumbled in her pocketbook for the slip of paper with the verdict. But she wore an expression of suppressed laughter.

"I *knew* I had it," she cried triumphantly and waved the slip above her head. "Now, let's see." She held it before her eyes and squinted. "Oh, yes. Judge, we the jury, and so forth and so on—"

She paused to wink at Judge Ellithorp. An uncertain worried murmur welled up in the auditorium. "All that junk, Judge," she explained, "anyway, we unanimously—but *unanimously*, love!—find this son of a bitch innocent. Why," she giggled, "we think he ought to get a medal, you know? I tell you what you do, love, you go right over and give him a big wet kiss and say you're sorry." She kept on talking, but no one heard. The murmur became a mass scream.

"Stop, stop her!" bawled the judge, dropping his glasses. "Bailiff!"

The scream became a word, in many voices chorused: *Possessed!* And beyond doubt the woman was. The men around her hurled themselves away, as from leprosy among them, and then washed back like a lynch mob. She was giggling as they fell on her. "Got a cigarette? No cigarettes in this lousy bag—oh." She screamed as they touched her, went limp and screamed again.

It was a different note this time, pure hysteria: "I couldn't stop. Oh, *God*."

Chandler caught his lawyer by the arm and jerked him away from staring at the scene. All of a sudden he was alive again. "You, damn it. Listen! The jury acquitted me, right?"

The lawyer was startled. "Don't be ridiculous. It's a clear case of—"

"Be a lawyer, man! You live on technicalities, don't you? Make this one work for me!"

The attorney gave him a queer, thoughtful look, hesitated, shrugged and got to his feet. He had to shout to be heard. "Your honor! I take it my client is free to go."

He made almost as much of a stir as the sobbing woman, but he outshouted the storm. "The jury's verdict is on record. Granted there was an *apparent* case of possession. Nevertheless—"

Judge Ellithorp yelled back: "No nonsense, you! Listen to me, young man—"

The lawyer snapped, "Permission to approach the bench."

"Granted."

Chandler sat unable to move, watching the brief, stormy conference. It was painful to be coming back to life. It was agony to hope. At least, he thought detachedly, his lawyer was fighting for him; the prosecutor's face was a thundercloud.

The lawyer came back, with the expression of a man who has won a victory he did not expect, and did not want. "Your last chance, Chandler. Change your plea to guilty."

"But—"

"Don't push your luck, boy! The judge has agreed to accept a plea. They'll throw you out of town, of course. But you'll be alive." Chandler hesitated. "Make up your mind! The best I can do otherwise is a mistrial, and that means you'll get convicted by another jury next week."

Chandler said, testing his luck: "You're sure they'll keep their end of the bargain?"

The lawyer shook his head, his expression that of a man who smells something unpleasant. "Your honor! I ask you to discharge the jury. My client wishes to change his plea."

... In the school's chemistry lab, an hour later, Chandler discovered that the lawyer had left out one little detail. Outside there was a sound of motors idling, the police car that would dump him at the town's limits; inside was a thin, hollow hiss. It was the sound of a Bunsen burner, and in its blue flame a crudely shaped iron changed slowly from cherry to orange to glowing straw. It had the shape of a letter "H".

"H" for "hoaxer." The mark they were about to put on his forehead would be with him wherever he went and as long as he lived, which would probably not be long. "H"

for "hoaxer," so that a glance would show that he had been convicted of the worst offense of all.

No one spoke to him as the sheriff's man took the iron out of the fire, but three husky policemen held his arms while he screamed.

III

The pain was still burning when Chandler awoke the next day. He wished he had a bandage, but he didn't, and that was that.

He was in a freight car—had hopped it on the run at the yards, daring to sneak back into town long enough for that. He could not hope to hitchhike, with that mark on him. Anyway, hitchhiking was an invitation to trouble.

The railroads were safer—far safer than either cars or air transport, notoriously a lightning-rod attracting possession. Chandler was surprised when the train came crashing to a stop, each freight car smashing against the couplings of the one ahead, the engine jolting forward and stopping again.

Then there was silence. It endured.

Chandler, who had been slowly waking after a night of very little sleep, sat up against the wall of the boxcar and wondered what was wrong.

It seemed remiss to start a day without signing the Cross or hearing a few exorcismal verses. It seemed to be mid-morning, time for work to be beginning at the plant. The lab men would be streaming in, their amulets examined at the door. The chaplains would be wandering about, ready to pray a possessing spirit out. Chandler, who kept an open mind, had considerable doubt of the effectiveness of all the amulets and spells—certainly they had not kept him from a brutal rape—but he felt uneasy without them.... The train still was not moving. In the silence he could hear the distant huffing of the engine.

He went to the door, supporting himself with one hand on the wooden wall, and looked out.

The tracks followed the roll of a river, their bed a few feet higher than an empty three-lane highway, which in turn was a dozen feet above the water. As he looked out the engine brayed twice. The train jolted uncertainly, then stopped again.

Then there was a very long time when nothing happened at all.

From Chandler's car he could not see the engine. He was on the convex of the curve, and the other door of the car was sealed. He did not need to see it to know that something was wrong. There should have been a brakeman running with a flare to ward off other trains; but there was not. There should have been a station, or at least a water tank, to account for the stop in the first place. There was not. Something had gone wrong, and Chandler knew what it was. Not the details, but the central fact that lay behind this and behind almost everything that went wrong these days.

The engineer was possessed. It had to be that.

Yet it was odd, he thought, as odd as his own trouble. He had chosen this car with care. It contained eight refrigerator cars full of pharmaceuticals, and if anything was known about the laws governing possession, as his lawyer had told him, it was that such things were almost never interfered with.

Chandler jumped down to the roadbed, slipped on the crushed rock and almost fell. He had forgotten the wound on his forehead. He clutched the sill of the car door, where an ankh and fleur-de-lis had been chalked to ward off demons, until the sudden rush of blood subsided and the pain began to relent. After a moment he walked gingerly to the end of the car, slipped between the cars, dodged the couplers and climbed the ladder to its roof.

It was a warm, bright, silent day. Nothing moved. From his height he could see the Diesel at the front of the train and the caboose at its rear. No people. The train was halted a quarter-mile from where the tracks swooped across the river on a suspension bridge. Away from the river, the side of the tracks that had been hidden from him before, was an uneven rock cut and, above it, the slope of a mountain.

By looking carefully he could spot the signs of a number of homes within half a mile or so—the corner of a roof, a glassed-in porch built to command a river view, a twenty-foot television antenna poking through the trees. There was also the curve of a higher road along which the homes were strung.

Chandler took thought. He was alive and free, two gifts more gracious than he had had any right to expect. However, he would need food and he would need at least some sort of bandage for his forehead. He had a wool cap, stolen from the high school, which would hide the mark, though what it would do to the burn on his skin was something else again.

Chandler climbed down the ladder. With considerable pain he gentled the cap over the great raw H on his forehead and began to climb the mountain.

He knocked on the first door he came to, a great old three-story house with well tended gardens.

There was a wait. The air smelled warmly of honeysuckle and mown grass, with wild onions chopped down by the blades of the mower. It was pleasant, or would have been in happier times. He knocked again, peremptorily, and the door was opened at once. Evidently someone had been right inside, listening.

A man stared at him. "Stranger, what do you want?" He was short, plump, with an extremely thick and unkempt beard. It did not appear to have been grown for its own sake, for where the facial hair could not be coaxed to grow his skin had the gross pits of old acne.

Chandler said glibly: "Good morning. I'm working my way east. I need something to eat and I'm willing to work for it."

The man withdrew, leaving the upper half of the Dutch door open. As it looked in on only a vestibule it did not tell Chandler much. There was one curious thing—a lath and cardboard sign, shaped like an arc of a rainbow, lettered:

WELCOME TO ORPHALESE

He puzzled over it and dismissed it. The entrance room, apart from the sign, had a knickknack shelf of Japanese carved ivory and an old-fashioned umbrella rack, but that added nothing to his knowledge. He had already guessed that the owners of this home were well off. Also it had been recently painted; so they were not demoralized,

as so much of the world had been demoralized, by the coming of the possessors. Even the elaborate sculpturing of its hedges had been maintained.

The man came back and with him was a girl of fifteen or so. She was tall, slim and rather homely, with a large jaw and an oval face. "Guy, he's not much to look at," she said to the pockmarked man. "Meggie, shall I let him in?" he asked. "Guy, you might as well," she shrugged, staring at Chandler with interest but not sympathy.

"Stranger, come along," said the man named Guy, and led him through a short hall into an enormous living room, a room two stories high with a ten-foot fireplace.

Chandler's first thought was that he had stumbled in upon a wake. The room was neatly laid out in rows of folding chairs, more than half of them occupied. He entered from the side, but all the occupants of the chairs were looking toward him. He returned their stares; he had had a good deal of practice lately in looking back at staring faces, he reflected. "Stranger, go on," said the man who had let him in, nudging him, "and meet the people of Orphalese."

Chandler hardly heard him. He had not expected anything like this. It was a meeting, a Daumier caricature of a Thursday Afternoon Literary Circle, old men with faces like moons, young women with faces like hags. They were strained, haggard and fearful, and a surprising number of them showed some sort of physical defect, a bandaged leg, an arm in a sling or merely the marks of pain on the features. "Stranger, go in," repeated the man, and it was only then that Chandler noticed the man was holding a pistol, pointed at his head.

Chandler sat in the rear of the room, watching. There must be thousands of little colonies like this, he reflected; with the breakdown of long-distance communication the world had been atomized. There was a real fear, well justified, of living in large groups, for they too were lightning rods for possession. The world was stumbling along, but it was lame in all its members; a planetary lobotomy had stolen from it its wisdom and plan. If, he reflected dryly, it had ever had any.

But of course things were better in the old days. The world had seemed on the brink of blowing itself up, but at least it was by its own hand. Then came Christmas.

It had happened at Christmas, and the first sign was on nation-wide television. The old President, balding, grave and plump, was making a special address to the nation, urging good will to men and, please, artificial trees because of the fire danger in the event of H-bomb raids; in the middle of a sentence twenty million viewers had seen him stop, look dazedly around and say, in a breathless mumble, what sounded like: "*Disht dvornyet ilgt.*" He had then picked up the Bible on the desk before him and thrown it at the television camera.

The last the viewers had seen was the fluttering pages of the Book, growing larger as it crashed against the lens, then a flicker and a blinding shot of the studio lights as the cameraman jumped away and the instrument swiveled to stare mindlessly upward. Twenty minutes later the President was dead, as his Secretary of Health and Welfare, hurrying with him back to the White House, calmly took a hand grenade from a Marine guard at the gate and blew the President's party to fragments.

For the President's seizure was only the first and most conspicuous. "*Disht dvornyet ilgt.*" C.I.A. specialists were playing the tapes of the broadcast feverishly, electronically cleaning the mumble and stir from the studio away from the words to

try to learn, first, the language and second what the devil it meant; but the President who ordered it was dead before the first reel spun, and his successor was not quite sworn in when it became his time to die. The ceremony was interrupted for an emergency call from the War Room, where a very nearly hysterical four-star general was trying to explain why he had ordered the immediate firing of every live missile in his command against Washington, D. C.

Over five hundred missiles were involved. In most of the sites the order was disobeyed, but in six of them, unfortunately, unquestioning discipline won out, thus ending not only the swearing in, the general's weeping explanation, the spinning of tapes, but also some two million lives in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia and (through malfunctioning relays on two missiles) Pennsylvania and Vermont. But it was only the beginning.

These were the first cases of possession seen by the world in some five hundred years, since the great casting out of devils of the Middle Ages. A thousand more occurred in the next few days, a hundred in the next hours. The timetable was made up out of scattered reports in the wire-service newsrooms, while they still had facilities for spot coverage in any part of the world. (That lasted almost a week.) They identified 237 cases of possession by noon of the next day. Disregarding the dubious items—the Yankee pitcher who leaped from the Manhattan bridge (he had Bright's disease), the warden of San Quentin who seated himself in the gas chamber and, literally, kicked the bucket (did he know the Grand Jury was subpoenaing his books?)—disregarding these, the chronology of major cases that evening was:

8:27 PM, E.S.T.: President has attack on television.

8:28 PM, E.S.T.: Prime Minister of England orders bombing raid against Israel, alleging secret plot (order not carried out).

8:28 PM, E.S.T.: Captain of SSN *Ethan Allen*, surfaced near Montauk Point, orders crash dive and course change, proceeding submerged at flank speed to New York Harbor.

9:10 PM, E.S.T.: Eastern Airlines six-engine jet makes wheels-up landing on roof of Pentagon, breaking some 1500 windows but causing no other major damage (except to the people aboard the jet); record of this incident fragmentary because entire site charred black in fusion attack two hours later.

9:23 PM, E.S.T.: Rosalie Pan, musical-comedy star, jumps off stage, runs up center aisle and vanishes in cab, wearing beaded bra, G-string and \$2500 headdress. Her movements are traced to Newark airport where she boards TWA jetliner, which is never seen again.

9:50 PM, E.S.T.: Entire S.A.C. fleet of 1200 jet bombers takes off for rendezvous over Newfoundland, where 72% are compelled to ditch as tankers fail to keep refueling rendezvous. (Orders committing the aircraft originate with S.A.C. commander, found to be a suicide.)

10.14 PM, E.S.T.: Submarine fusion explosion destroys 40% of New York City. Analysis of fallout indicates U.S. Navy Polaris missiles were detonated underwater in bay; by elimination it is deduced that the submarine was the *Ethan Allen*.

10:50 PM, E.S.T.: President's party assassinated by Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare; Secretary then dies on bayonet of Marine guard who furnished the grenade.

10:55 PM, E.S.T. Satellite stations observe great nuclear explosions in China and Tibet.

11:03 PM, E.S.T.: Heavily loaded munitions barges exploded near North Sea dikes of Holland; dikes breached, 1800 square miles of reclaimed land flooded out....

And so on. The incidents were countless. But before long, before even the C.I.A. had finished the first playthrough of the tapes, before their successors in the task identified *Disht dvorny et ilgt* as a Ukrainian dialect rendering of, My God, it works!—before all this, one fact was already apparent. There were many incidents scattered around the world, but not one of them took place in Russia itself.

Warsaw was ablaze, China pockmarked with blasts, East Berlin demolished along with its western sector, in eight rounds fired from a U.S. Army nuclear cannon. But the U.S.S.R. had not suffered at all, as far as could be told by the prying eyes in orbit; and that fact was reason enough for it to suffer very greatly very soon.

Within minutes of this discovery what remained of the military strength of the Western world was roaring through airless space toward the most likely targets of the East.

One unscathed missile base in Alaska completed a full shoot, seven missiles with fusion war-heads. The three American bases that survived at all in the Mediterranean fired what they had. Even Britain, which had already watched the fire-tails of the American missiles departing on suicide missions, managed to resurrect its own two prototype Blue Streaks from their racks, where they had moldered since the cancellation of the British missile program. One of these museum-pieces destroyed itself in launching, but the other chugged painfully across the sky, the tortoise following the flight of the hares. It arrived a full half-hour after the newer, hotter missiles. It might as well not have bothered. There was not much left to destroy.

It was fortunate for the Communists that most of the Western arsenal had already spent itself in suicide. What was left wiped out Moscow, Leningrad and nine other cities. It was even fortunate for the whole world, for this was the Apocalypse they had dreaded, every possible nuclear weapon committed. But the circumstances were such—hasty orders, often at once recalled; confusion; panic—that most were unfused, many others merely tore great craters in the quickly healing surface of the sea. The fallout was locally murderous but quite spotty.

And the conventional forces invading Russia found nothing to fight. The Russians were as confused as they. There were not many survivors of the very top brass, and no one seemed to know just what had happened.

Was the Secretary of the C.P., U.S.S.R. behind that terrible brief agony? As he was dead before it was over, there was no way to tell. More than a quarter of a billion lives went into mushroom-shaped clouds, and nearly half of them were Russian, Latvian, Tatar and Kalmuck. The Peace Commission squabbled for a month, until the breakdown of communications cut them off from their governments and each other; and in that way, for a time, there was peace.

This was the sort of peace that was left, thought Chandler looking around at the queer faces and queerer surroundings, the peace of medieval baronies, cut off from the world, untouched where the rain of fallout had passed by but hardly civilized any more. Even his own home town, trying to take his life in a form of law, reduced at last to torture and exile to cast him out, was not the civilization he had grown up in but something new and ugly.

There was a great deal of talk he did not understand because he could not quite hear it, though they looked at him. Then Guy, with the gun, led him up to the front of the room. They had constructed an improvised platform out of plywood panels resting on squat, heavy boxes that looked like empty ammunition crates. On the dais was a dentist's chair, bolted to the plywood; and in the chair, strapped in, baby spotlights on steel-tube frames glaring on her, was a girl. She looked at Chandler with regretting eyes but did not speak.

"Stranger, get up there," said Guy, prodding him from behind, and Chandler took a plain wooden chair next to the girl.

"People of Orphalese," cried the teen-age cutie named Meggie, "we have two more brands to save from the imps!"

The men and women in the audience cackled or shrilled "Save them! Save them!" They all had a look of invisible uniforms, Chandler saw, like baseball players in the lobby of a hotel or soldiers in a diner outside the gate of their post; they were all of a type. Their type was something strange. Some were tall, some short; there were old, fat, lean and young around them; but they all wore about them a look of glowing excitement, muted by an aura of suffering and pain. They wore, in a word, the look of bigots.

The bound girl was not one of them. She might have been twenty years old or as much as thirty. She might have been pretty. It was hard to tell; she wore no makeup, her hair strung raggedly to her neck, and her face was drawn into a tight, lean line. It was her eyes that were alive. She saw Chandler and she was sorry for him. And he saw, as he turned to look at her, that she was manacled to the dentist's chair.

"People of Orphalese," chanted Guy, standing behind Chandler with the muzzle of the gun against his neck, "the *meeting* of the Orphalese Self-Preservation *Society* will now come to *order*." There was an approving, hungry murmur from the audience.

"Well, people of *Orphalese*," Guy went on in his singsong, "the agenda for the day is first the salvation of we *Orphalese* on McGuire's *Mountain*."

("All saved, all of us saved," rolled a murmur from the congregation.) A lean, red-headed man bounded to the platform and fussed with the stand of spotlights, turning one of them full on Chandler.

"People of Orphalese, as we are *saved*, do I have your consent to *pass on* and proceed to the next order of *business*?"

("Consent, consent, consent," rolled the echo.)

"And then the *second* item of business is to *welcome* and bring to grace these two newly *found* and adopted *souls*."

The congregation shouted variously: "Bring them to grace! Save them from the imps! Keep Orphalese from the taint of the beast!"

Evidently Guy was satisfied. He nodded and became more chatty. "Okay, people of Orphalese, let's get down to it. We got two new ones, like I say. Their spirits have gone wandering on the wind, or anyway one of them has, and you all know the et cetera. They have committed a wrong unto others and therefore unto themselves. Herself, I mean. Course, the other one could have a flame spirit in him too." He stared severely at Chandler. "Boys, keep an eye on him, why don't you?" he said to two men in the front row, surrendering his gun. "Meggie, you tell about the female one."

The teen-aged girl stepped forward and said, in a conversational tone but with modest pride, "People of Orph'lese, well, I was walking down the cut and I heard this car coming. Well, I was pretty surprised, you know. I had to figure what to do. You all know what the trouble is with cars."

"The imps!" cried a woman of forty with a face like a catfish.

The girl nodded. "Most prob'ly. Well, I—I mean, people of Orph'lese, well, I was by the switchback where we keep the chevy-freeze hid, so I just waited till I saw it slowing down for the curve—me out of sight, you know—and I rolled the chevy-freeze out nice and it caught the wheels. Right over!" she cried gleefully. "Off the shoulder, people of Orph'lese, and into the ditch and over, and I didn't give it a chance to burn. I cut the switch and I had her! I put a knife into her back, just a little, about a quarter of an inch, maybe. Her pain was the breakin' of the shell that enclosed her understanding, like it says. I figured she was all right then because she yelled but I brought her along that way. Then Guy took care of her until we got the synod. Oh," she remembered, "and her tongue staggered a little without purpose while he was putting it on, didn't it, Guy?" The bearded man nodded, grinning, and lifted up the girl's foot. Incredulously, Chandler saw that it was bound tight with a three-foot length of barbed wire, wound and twisted like a tourniquet, the blood black and congealed around it. He lifted his shocked eyes to meet the girl's. She only looked at him, with pity and understanding.

Guy patted the foot and let it go. "I didn't have any more C-clamps, people of Orphalese," he apologized, "but it looks all right at that. Well, let's see. We got to make up our minds about these two, I guess—no, wait!" He held up his hand as a murmur began. "First thing is, we ought to read a verse or two."

He opened a purple-bound volume at random, stared at a page for a moment, moving his lips, and then read:

"Some of you say, 'It is the north wind who has woven the clothes we wear.'

"And I say, Ay, it was the north wind, but shame was his loom, and the softening of the sinews was his thread.

"And when his work was done he laughed in the forest."

Gently he closed the book, looking thoughtfully at the wall at the back of the room. He scratched his head. "Well, people of Orphalese," he said slowly "they're laughing in the forest all right, I guarantee, but we've got one here that may be honest in the flesh, probably is, though she was a thief in the spirit. Right? Well, do we take her in or reject her, O people of Orphalese?"

The audience muttered to itself and then began to call out: "Accept! Oh, bring in the brand! Accept and drive out the imp!"

"Fine," said the teen-ager, rubbing her hands and looking at the bearded man. "Guy, let her go." He began to release her from the chair. "You, girl stranger, what's your name?"

The girl said faintly, "Ellen Braisted."

"*Meggie*, my name is Ellen Braisted," corrected the teen-ager. "Always say the name of the person you're talkin' to in Orph'lese, that way we know it's you talkin', not a flame spirit or wanderer. Okay, go sit down." Ellen limped wordlessly down into the audience. "Oh, and people of Orph'lese," said Meggie, "the car's still there if we need it for anything. It didn't burn. Guy, you go on with this other fellow."

Guy stroked his beard and assessed Chandler, looking him over carefully. "Okay," he said. "People of Orphalese, the *third* order of business is to *welcome* or reject this *other* brand saved from the imps, as may be your *pleasure*." Chandler sat up straighter now that all of them were looking at him again; but it wasn't quite his turn, at that, because there was an interruption. Guy never finished. From the valley, far below, there was a sudden mighty thunder, rolling among the mountains. The windows blew in with a crystalline crash.

The room erupted into confusion, the audience leaping from their seats, running to the broad windows, Guy and the teen-age girl seizing rifles, everyone in motion at once.

Chandler straightened, then sat down again. The red-headed man guarding him was looking away. It would be quite possible to grab his gun, run, get away from these maniacs. Yet he had nowhere to go. They might be crazy, but they seemed to have organization.

They seemed, in fact, to have worked out, on whatever crazed foundation of philosophy, some practical methods for coping with possession. He decided to stay, wait and see.

And at once he found himself leaping for the gun.

No. Chandler didn't find himself attacking the red-headed man. He found his *body* doing it; Chandler had nothing to do with it. It was the helpless compulsion he had felt before, that had nearly cost him his life; his body active and urgent and his mind completely cut off from it. He felt his own muscles move in ways he had not planned, observed himself leap forward, felt his own fist strike at the back of the red-headed man's ear. The man went spinning, the gun went flying, Chandler's body leaped after it, with Chandler a prisoner in his own brain, watching, horrified and helpless. And he had the gun!

He caught it in the hand that was his own hand, though someone else was moving it; he raised it and half-turned. He was suddenly conscious of a fusillade of gunfire from the roof, and a scattered echo of guns all round the outside of the house. Part of him was surprised, another alien part was not. He started to shoot the teen-aged girl in the back of the head, silently shouting *No!*

His fingers never pulled the trigger.

He caught a second's glimpse of someone just beside him, whirled and saw the girl, Ellen Braisted, limping swiftly toward him with her barbed-wire amulet loose and catching at her feet. In her hands was an axe-handle club caught up from somewhere.

She struck at Chandler's head, with a face like an eagle's, impersonal and determined. The blow caught him and dazed him, and from behind someone else struck him with something else. He went down.

He heard shouts and firing, but he was stunned. He felt himself dragged and dropped. He saw a cloudy, misty girl's face hanging over him; it receded and returned. Then a frightful blistering pain in his hand startled him back into full consciousness.

It was the girl, Ellen, still there, leaning over him and, oddly, weeping. And the pain in his hand was the burning flame of a kitchen match. Ellen was doing it, his wrist in one hand, a burning match held to it with the other.

IV

Chandler yelled hoarsely, jerking his hand away.

She dropped the match and jumped up, stepping on the flame and watching him. She had a butcher knife that had been caught between her elbow and her body while she burned him. Now she put her hand on the knife, waiting. "Does it hurt?" she demanded tautly.

Chandler howled, with incredulity and rage: "God damn it, yes! What did you expect?"

"I expected it to hurt," she agreed. She watched him for a moment more and then, for the first time since he had seen her, she smiled. It was a small smile, but a beginning. A fusillade of shots from outside wiped it away at once. "Sorry," she said. "I had to do that. Please trust me."

"*Why* did you have to burn my hand?"

"House rules," she said. "Keeps the flame-spirits out, you know. They can't stand pain." She took her hand off the knife warily, "it still hurts, doesn't it?"

"It still does, yes," nodded Chandler bitterly, and she lost interest in him and got up, looking about the room. Three of the Orphalese were dead, or seemed to be from the casual poses in which they lay draped across a chair on the floor. Some of the others might have been freshly wounded, though it was hard to tell the casualties from the others in view of the Orphalese custom of self-inflicted pain. There was still firing going on outside and overhead, and a shooting-gallery smell of burnt powder in the air. The girl, Ellen Braisted, limped back with the butcher knife held carelessly in one hand. She was followed by the teen-ager, who wore a smile of triumph—and, Chandler noticed for the first time, a sort of tourniquet of barbed-wire on her left forearm, the flesh puffy red around it "Whopped 'em," she said with glee, and pointed a .22 rifle at Chandler.

Ellen Braisted said, "Oh, he—*Meggie*, I mean, he's all right." She pointed at his burned palm. Meg approached him with competent care, the rifle resting on her good right forearm and aimed at him as she examined his burn. She pursed her lips and looked at his face. "All right, Ellen, I guess he's clean. But you want to burn 'em deeper'n that. Never pays to go easy, just means we'll have to do something else to 'im tomorrow."

"The hell you will," thought Chandler, and all but said it; but reason stopped him. In Rome he would have to do Roman deeds. Besides, maybe their ideas worked. Besides, he had until tomorrow to make up his mind about what he wanted to do.

"Ellen, show him around," ordered the teen-ager. "I got no time myself. Shoosh! Almost got us that time, Ellen. Got to be more careful, cause the white-handed aren't clean, you know." She strutted away, the rifle at trail. She seemed to be enjoying herself very much.

The name of the girl in the barbed-wire bracelet was Ellen Braisted. She came from Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, and Chandler's first wonder was what she was doing nearly three thousand miles from home.

Nobody liked to travel much these days. One place was as bad as another, except that in the place where you were known you could perhaps count on friends and as a stranger you were probable fair game anywhere else. Of course, there was one likely reason for travel.

She didn't like to talk about it, that was clear, but that was the reason. She had been possessed. When the teen-ager trapped her car the day before she had been the tool of another's will. She had had a dozen sub-machine guns in the trunk and she had meant to deliver them to a party of hunters in a valley just south of McGuire's Mountain. Chandler said, with some effort, "I must have been——"

"Ellen, I must have been," she corrected.

"Ellen, I must have been possessed too, just now. When I grabbed the gun."

"Of course. First time?"

He shook his head. For some reason the brand on his forehead began to throb.

"Well, then you know. Look out here, now."

They were at the great pier windows that looked out over the valley. Down below was the river, an arc of the railroad tracks, the wooded mountainside he had scaled. "Over there, Chandler." She was pointing to the railroad bridge.

Wispy gray smoke drifted off southward toward the stream. The freight train Chandler had ridden on had been stopped, all that time, in the middle of the bridge. The explosion that blew out their windows had occurred when another train plowed into it—evidently at high speed. It seemed that one of the trains had carried some sort of chemicals. The bridge was a twisted mess.

"A diversion, Chandler," said Ellen Braisted. "They wanted us looking that way. Then they attacked from up the mountain."

"Who?"

Ellen looked surprised. "The men that crashed the trains ... if they *are* men. The ones who possessed me—and you—and the hunters. They don't like these Orphalese, I think. Maybe they're a little afraid of them. I think the Orphalese have a pretty good idea of how to fight them."

Chandler felt a sudden flash of sensation along his nerves. For a moment he thought he had been possessed again, and then he knew it for what it was. It was hope. "Ellen, I never thought of fighting them. I thought that was given up two years ago."

"So maybe you agree with me? Maybe you think it's worth while sticking with the Orphalese?"

Chandler allowed himself the contemplation of what hope meant. To find someone in this world who had a *plan*! Whatever the plan was. Even if it was a bad plan. He didn't think specifically of himself, or the brand on his forehead or the memory of the body of his wife. What he thought of was the prospect of thwarting—not even defeating, merely hampering or annoying was enough!—the imps, the "flame creatures," the pythons, devils, incubi or demons who had destroyed a world he had thought very fair.

"If they'll have me," he said, "I'll stick with them, all right! Where do I go to join?"

It was not hard to join at all. Meg chattily informed him that he was already practically a member. "Chandler, we got to watch everybody strange, you know. See why, don't you? Might have a flame spirit in 'em, no fault of theirs, but look how they could mess us up. But now we know you don't, so—What do you mean, how do we know? Cause you *did* have one when you busted loose in there. Can't have two at a time, you know. Think we couldn't tell the difference?"

The interrupted meeting was resumed after the place had been tidied up and the dead buried. There had been four of the hunters, and even without their sub-machine guns they had succeeded in killing eight Orphalese. But it was not all loss to the Orphalese, because two of the hunters were still alive, though wounded, and under the rules of this chessboard the captured enemy became a friend.

Guy had suffered a broken jaw in the scuffle and another man presided, a fat youth who favored a bandaged leg. He limped to his feet, grimacing and patting his leg. "O Orphalese and brothers," he said, "we have lost friends, but we have won a test. Praise the Prophet, we will be spared to win again, and to drive the imps of fire out of our world. Meggie, you going to tie these folks up?" The girl proudly ordered one of the hunters into the spotlighted dentist's chair, another into a wing chair that was hastily moved onto the platform. The men were bleeding and hurt, but they had clearly been abandoned by their possessors. They watched with puzzlement and fear.

"Walter, they're okay now," Meg reported as others finished tying up the hunters. "Oh, wait a minute." She advanced on Chandler. "Chandler, I'm sorry. You sit down there, hear?"

Chandler suffered himself to be bound to a camp chair on the platform and Walter took a drink of wine and opened the ornate book that was before him on the rostrum.

"Meg, thanks. Guy, I hope I do this as good as you do. Let me read you a little. Let's see." He put on his steel-rimmed glasses and read:

"Much in you is still man, and much in you is not yet man, but a shapeless pigmy that walks asleep in the mist searching for its own awakening."

He closed the book, looked with satisfaction at Guy and said: "Do you understand that, new friends? They are the words of the Prophet, who men call Kahlil Gibran. For the benefit of the new folks I ought to say that he died this fleshly life quite a good number of years ago, but his vision was unclouded. Like we say, we are the sinews that batter the flame spirits but he is our soul." There was an antiphonal murmur from the audience and Walter flipped the pages again rapidly, obviously looking for a familiar passage. "People of Orphalese, here we are now. This's what he

says. What is this that has torn our world apart? The Prophet says: 'It is life in quest of life, in bodies that fear the grave.' Now, honestly, nothing could be clearer than that, people of Orphalese and friends! We got something taking possession of us, see? What is it? Well, he says here, people of Orphalese and friends, 'It is a flame spirit in you ever gathering more of itself.' Now, what the heck! Nobody can blame *us* for what a flame spirit *in us* does! So the first thing we got to learn, friends—and people of Orphalese—is, we aren't to blame. And the second thing is, we *are* to blame!"

He turned and grinned at Chandler kindly, while the chorus of responses came from the room, "Like here," he said, "people of Orphalese, the Prophet says *everybody* is guilty. 'The murdered is not unaccountable for his own murder, and the robbed is not blameless in being robbed. The righteous is not innocent of the deeds of the wicked, and the white-handed is not clean in the doings of the felon.' You see what he's getting at? We all got to take the responsibility for *everything*—and that means we got to suffer—but we don't have to worry about any special things we did when some flame spirit or wanderer, like, took us over.

"But we do have to suffer, people of Orphalese." His expression became grim. "Our beloved founder, Guy, who's sitting there doing a little extra suffering now, was favored enough to understand these things in the very beginning, when he himself was seized by these imps. And it is all in this book! Like it says, 'Your pain is self-chosen. It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self.' Ponder on that, people of Orphalese—and friends. No, I mean really ponder," he explained, glancing at the bound "friends" on the platform. "We always do that for a minute. Ada there will play us some music so we can ponder."

Chandler shifted uncomfortably, while an old woman crippled by arthritis began fumbling a tune out of an electric organ. The burn Ellen Braisted had given him was beginning to hurt badly. If only these people were not such obvious *nuts*, he thought, he would feel a lot better about casting his lot in with them. But maybe it took lunatics to do the job. Sane people hadn't accomplished much.

And anyway he had very little choice....

"Ada, that's enough," ordered the fat youth. "Meg, come on up here. People of Orphalese, now you can listen again while Meg explains to the new folks how all this got started, seeing Guy's in no condition to do it."

The teen-ager marched up to the platform and took the parade-rest position learned in some high-school debating society—in the days when there were debating societies and high schools. "Ladies and gentlemen, well, let's start at the beginning. Guy tells this better'n I do, of course, but I guess I remember it all pretty well too. I ought to. I was in on it and all." She grimaced and said, "Well, anyway, ladies and gentlemen—people of Orph'lese—the way Guy organized this Orphalese self-protection society was, like Walter says, he was possessed. The only difference between Guy and you and me was that he knew what to do about it, because he read the book, you see. Not that that helped him at first, when he was took over. He was really seized. Yes, people of Orph'lese, he was taken and while his whole soul and brain and body was under the influence of some foul wanderer fiend from hell he did things that, ladies and gentlemen of Orph'lese, I wouldn't want to tell you. He was a harp in the hand of the mighty, as it says. Couldn't help it, not however much he tried. Only while he was doing—the things—he happened to catch his hand in a gas flame and, well, you can

see it was pretty bad." With a deprecatory smile Guy held up a twisted hand. "And, do you know, he was free of his imp right then and there! Now, Guy is a scientist, people of Orph'lese, he worked for the telephone company, and he not only had that training in the company school but he had read the book, you see, and he put two and two together. Oh, and he's my uncle, of course. I'm proud of him. I've always loved him, and even when he—when he was not one with himself, you know, when he was doing those terrible things to me, I knew it wasn't Uncle Guy that was doing them, but something else. I didn't know what, though. And when he told me he had figured out the Basic Rule, I went along with him every bit. I knew Guy wasn't wrong, and what he said was from Scripture. Imps fear pain! So we got to love it. That one I know by heart, all right: 'Could you keep your heart from wonder at the daily miracles of your life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy.' That's what it says, right? So that's why we got to hurt ourselves, people of Orph'lese—and new brothers—because the wanderers don't like it when we hurt and they leave us alone. Simple's that.

"Well—" the girl's face stiffened momentarily—"I knew *I* wasn't going to be seized. So Guy and I got Else, that's the other girl he'd been doing things to, and we knew she wasn't going to be taken either. Not if the imps feared pain like Guy said, because," she said solemnly, "I want to tell you Guy hurt us pretty bad.

"And then we came out here, and found this place, and ever since then we've been adding brothers and sisters. It's been slow, of course, because not many people come this way any more, and we've had to kill a lot. Yes, we have. Sometimes the possessed just can't be saved, but—"

Abruptly her face changed.

Suddenly alert, her face years older, she glanced around the room. Then she relaxed....

And screamed.

Guy leaped up. Hoarsely, his voice almost inarticulate as he tried to talk with his broken jaw, he cried, "Wha ... Wha's ... *matter*, Meg?

"Uncle Guy!" she wailed. She plunged off the platform and flung herself into his arms, crying hysterically.

"*Wha?*"

She sobbed, "I could feel it! They *took* me. Guy, you promised me they couldn't!"

He shook his head, dazed, staring at her as though she were indeed possessed—still possessed, and telling him some fearful great lie to destroy his hopes. He seemed unable to comprehend what she had said. One of the hunters bellowed in stark fear: "For God's sake, untie us! Give us a chance, anyway!" Chandler yelled agreement. In one split second everyone in the room had been transmuted by terror into something less than human. No one seemed capable of any action. Slowly the plump youth who had presided moved over to the hunter bound in the dentist's chair and began to fumble blindly at the knots. Ellen Braisted dropped her head into her hands and began to shake.

The cruelty of the moment was that they had all tasted hope. Chandler writhed wildly against his ropes, his mind racing out of control. The world had become a hell for

everyone, but a bearable hell until the promise of a chance to end it gave them a full sight of what their lives had been. Now that that was dashed they were far worse off than before.

Walter finished with the hunter and lethargically began to pick at Chandler's bonds. His face was slack and unseeing.

Then it, too, changed.

The plump youth stood up sharply, glanced about, and walked off the platform.

Ellen Braisted raised her face from her hands and, her eyes streaming, quietly stood up and followed. The old lady with the arthritis about-faced and limped with them. Chandler stared, puzzled, and then comprehended.

They were marching toward the corner of the room where the rifles were stacked. "Possessed!" Chandler bellowed, the words tasting of acid as they ripped out of his throat. "Stop them! You—Guy—look!" He flailed wildly at his loosened bonds, lunged, tottered and toppled, chair and all, crashingly off the platform.

The three possessed ones did not need to hurry. They had all the time in the world. They were already reaching out for the rifles when Chandler shouted. Economically they turned, raising the butts to their shoulders, and began to fire at the Orphalese. It was a queerly frightening sight to see the arthritic organist, with a face like a relaxed executioner, take quick aim at Guy and, with a thirty-thirty shell, blow his throat out. Three shots, and the nearest three of the congregation were dead. Three more, and others went down, while the remainder turned and tried to run. It was like a slaughter of vermin. They never had a chance.

When every Orphalese except themselves was down on the floor, dead, wounded or, like Chandler, overlooked, the arthritic lady took careful aim at Ellen Braisted and the plump youth and shot them neatly in the temples. They didn't try to prevent her. With expressions that seemed almost impatient they presented their profiles to her aim.

Then the arthritic lady glanced leisurely about, fired into the stomach of a wounded man who was trying to rise, reloaded her rifle for insurance and began to search the bodies of the nearest dead. She was looking for matches. When she found them, she tugged weakly at the upholstery on a couch, swore and began methodically to rip and crumple pages out of Kahlil Gibran. When she had a heap of loose papers piled against the dais she pitched the remainder of the book out of the window, knelt and ignited the crumpled heap.

She stood watching the fire, her expression angry and impatient, tapping her foot.

The crumpled pages burned briskly. Before they died the wooden dais was beginning to catch. Laboriously the old lady toted folding chairs to pile on the blaze until it was roaring handsomely.

She watched it for several minutes, until it was a great orange pillar of fire sweeping to the ceiling, until the drapes on the wall behind were burning and the platform was a holocaust, until the noise of crackling flame and the beginning of plaster falling from the high ceiling proved that there was no likelihood of the fire going out and, indeed, no way to put it out without a complete fire department arriving on the scene at once.

The old lady's expression cleared. She nodded to herself. She then put the muzzle of the rifle in her mouth and, with her thumb, pulled the trigger that blew the top of her head off. The body fell into the flames, but it was by then already dead.

Chandler had not been shot, but he was very near to roasting. Walter had released one hand and, while the possessed woman's attention was elsewhere, Chandler had worked on the other knots.

When he saw her commit suicide he redoubled his efforts. It was incredible to him that his life had been saved, and he knew that if he escaped the flames he still had nothing to live for—that blasted brief hope had broken his spirit—but his fingers had a will of their own.

He lay there, struggling, while great black clouds of smoke, orange painted from the flames, gathered under the high ceiling, while the thunder of falling lumps of plaster sounded like a child heaving volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica down a flight of stairs, while the heat and shortage of oxygen made him breathe in violent spasms. Then he cried out sharply and stumbled to his feet. It was only a matter of moments before he was out of the house, but it was very nearly not time enough.

Behind him was a great, sustained crash. He thought it must have been the furniture on the upper floor toppling through the burned-out ceiling of the hall. He turned and looked.

It was dark, and now every window on the side of the house facing him was lighted. It was as though some mad householder had decided to equip his rooms only with orange lights, orange lights that flickered and moved. For a second Chandler thought there were still living people in the rooms—shapes moved and cavorted at the windows, as though they were gathering up possessions or waving wildly for help. But it was only the drapes, aflame, tossed about in the fierce heat.

Chandler sighed and turned away.

Pain was not a sure defense after all. Evidently it was only an annoyance to the possessors ... whoever, or whatever, they might be. As soon as they had become suspicious they had exerted themselves and destroyed the Orphalese. He listened and looked about, but no one else moved. He had not expected anyone. He had been sure that he was the only survivor.

He began to walk down the hill toward the wrecked railway bridge, turning only when a roar told him that the roof of the house had fallen in. A tulip of flame a hundred feet tall rose above the standing walls, and above that a shower of floating red-orange sparks, heat-borne, drifting up and away and beginning to settle all over the mountainside. Many were still red when they landed, a few still flaming. It was a distinct risk that the trees would begin to burn, and then he would be in fresh danger. So great was his stupor that he did not even hurry.

By a plowed field he flung himself to the ground.

He could go no farther because he had nowhere to go. He had had two homes and he had been driven from both of them. He had had hope twice, and twice he had been damned.

He lay on his back, with the burning house mumbling and crackling in the distance, and stared up at the orange-lit tops of the trees and, past them, the stars. Over his left shoulder Deneb chased Vega across the sky; toward his feet something moved between the bright rosy dot that was Antares and another, the same brightness and hue—Mars? He spent several moments wondering if Mars were in that part of the heavens. Then he looked again for the tiny moving point that had crossed the claws of the Scorpion, but it was gone. A satellite, maybe. Although there were few of them left that the naked eye could hope to see. And there would never be any more, because the sort of accumulated wealth of nations that threw rockets into the sky was forever spent.

It was probably an airplane, he thought drowsily, and drifted off to sleep without realizing how remote even that possibility had become.... He woke up to find that he was getting to his feet.

Once again an interloper tenanted his brain. He tried to interfere, for he could not help it, although he knew how useless it was, but his own neck muscles turned his head from side to side, his own eyes looked this way and that, his own hand reached down for a dead branch that lay on the ground, then hesitated and withdrew. His body stood motionless for a second, the lips moving, the larynx mumbling to itself. He could almost hear words. Chandler felt like a fly in amber, prisoned in his own brainbox. He was not surprised when his legs moved to carry him back toward the destroyed building, now a fakir's bed of white-hot coals with brush fires spattered around it. He thought he knew why. It seemed very likely that what possessor had him was a sort of clean-up squad, tidying up the loose ends of the slaughter; he expected that his body's errand was to destroy itself, and thus him, as all the Orphalese had been destroyed.

V

Chandler's body carried him rapidly toward the house. Now and then it paused and glanced about. It seemed to be weighing some shortcut in its errand; but always it resumed its climb.

Chandler could sympathize with it, in a way. He still felt every pain from burn, brand and wound; as they neared the embers of the building the heat it threw off intensified them all. He could not be a comfortable body to inhabit for long. He was almost sympathetic because his tenant could not find a convenient weapon with which to fulfill his purpose.

When it seemed they could get no closer without the skin of his face crackling and bursting into flame his body halted.

Chandler could feel his muscles gathering for what would be the final leap into the auto-da-fe. His feet took a short step—and slipped. His body stumbled and recovered itself; his mouth swore thickly in a language he did not know.

Then his body hesitated, glanced at the ground, paused again and bent down. It had tripped on a book. It picked the book up, and Chandler saw that it was the Orphalese copy of Gibran's *The Prophet*.

Chandler's body stood poised for a moment, in an attitude of thought. Then it sat down, in the play of heat from the coals. It was a moment before Chandler realized he was free. He tested his legs; they worked; he got up, turned and began to walk away.

He had traveled no more than a few yards when he stumbled slightly, as though shifting gears, and felt the tenant in his mind again.

He continued to walk away from the building, down toward the road. Once his arm raised the book he still carried and his eyes glanced down, as if for reassurance that it was the same book. That was the only clue he was given as to what had happened and it was not much. It was as though his occupying power, whatever it was, had gone—somewhere—to think things over, perhaps to ask a question of an unimaginable companion, and then returned with an altered purpose. As time passed, Chandler began to receive additional clues, but he was in little shape to fit them together, for his body was near exhaustion.

He walked to the road, and waited, rigid, until a panel truck came bouncing along. He hailed it, his arms making a sign he did not understand, and when it stopped he addressed the driver in a language he did not speak. "*Shto*," said the driver, a somber-faced Mexican in dungarees. "*Ja nie jestem Ruska. Czego pragniesz?*"

"*Czy ty jedziesz to Los Angeles?*" asked Chandler's mouth.

"*Nyet. Acapulco.*"

Chandler's voice argued, "*Wes na Los Angeles.*"

"*Nyet.*" The voices droned on. Chandler lost interest in the argument and was only relieved when it seemed somehow to be settled and he was herded into the back of the truck. The somber Mexican locked him in; he felt the truck begin to move; his tenant left him, and he was at once asleep.

He woke long enough to find himself standing in the mist of early dawn at a crossroads. In a few minutes another car came by, and his voice talked earnestly with the driver for a moment. Chandler got in, was released, slept again and woke to find himself free and abandoned, sprawled across the back seat of the car, which was parked in front of a building marked Los Angeles International Airport.

Chandler got out of the car and strolled around, stretching. He realized he was very hungry.

No one was in sight. The field showed clear signs of having been through the same sort of destruction that had visited every major communications facility in the world. Part of the building before him was smashed flat and showed signs of having been burned. He saw projecting aluminum members, twisted and scorched but still visibly aircraft parts. Apparently a transport had crashed into the building. Burned-out cars littered the parking lot and what had once been a green lawn. They seemed to have been bulldozed out of the way, but not an inch farther than was necessary to clear the approach roads.

To his right, as he stared out onto the field, was a strange-looking construction on three legs, several stories high. It did not seem to serve any useful purpose. Perhaps it had been a sort of luxury restaurant at one time, like the Space Needle from the old Seattle Fair, but now it too was burned out and glassless in its windows. The field itself was swept bare except for two or three parked planes in the bays, but he could see wrecked transports lining the approach strips. All in all, Los Angeles International Airport appeared to be serviceable, but only just.

He wondered where all the people were.

Distant truck noises answered part of the question. An Army six by six came bumping across a bridge that led from the takeoff strips to this parking area of the airport. Five men got out next to one of the ships. They glanced at him but did not speak as they began loading crates of some sort of goods from the truck into the aircraft, a four-engine, swept-wing jet of what looked to Chandler like an obsolete model. Perhaps it was one of the early Boeings. There hadn't been many of those in use at the time the troubles began, too big and fast for short hops, too slow to compete over long distances with the rockets. But, of course, with all the destruction, and with no new aircraft being built anywhere in the world any more, no doubt they were as good as could be found.

The truckmen did not seem to be possessed; they worked with the normal amount of grunting and swearing, pausing to wipe sweat away or to scratch an itch. They showed neither the intense malevolent concentration nor the wide-eyed idiot curiosity of those whose bodies were no longer their own. Chandler settled the woolen cap over the brand on his forehead, to avoid unpleasantness, and drifted over toward them.

They stopped work and regarded him. One of them said something to another, who nodded and walked toward Chandler. "What do you want?" he demanded warily.

"I don't know. I was going to ask you the same question, I guess."

The man scowled. "Didn't your exec tell you what to do?"

"My what?"

The man paused, scratched and shook his head. "Well, stay away from us. This is an important shipment, see? I guess you're all right or you couldn't've got past the guards, but I don't want you messing us up. Got enough trouble already. I don't know why," he said in the tones of an old grievance, "we can't get the execs to let us *know* when they're going to bring somebody in. It wouldn't hurt them! Now here we got to load and fuel this ship and, for all I know, you've got half a ton of junk around somewhere that you're going to load onto it. How do I know how much fuel it'll take? No weather, naturally. So if there's headwinds it'll take full tanks, but if there's extra cargo I—"

"The only cargo I brought with me that I can think of is a book," said Chandler.

"Weighs maybe a pound. You think I'm supposed to get on that plane?"

The man grunted non-committally.

"All right, suit yourself. Listen, is there any place I can get something to eat?"

The man considered. "Well, I guess we can spare you a sandwich. But you wait here. I'll bring it to you."

He went back to the truck. A moment later one of the others brought Chandler two cold hamburgers wrapped in waxed paper, but would answer no questions.

Chandler ate every crumb, sought and found a washroom in the wrecked building, came out again and sat in the sun, watching the loading crew. He had become quite a fatalist. It did not seem that it was intended he should die immediately, so he might as well live.

There were large gaps in his understanding, but it seemed clear to Chandler that these men, though not possessed, were in some way working for the possessors. It

was a distasteful concept; but on second thought it had reassuring elements. It was evidence that whatever the "execs" were, they were very possibly human beings—or, if not precisely human, at least shared the human trait of working by some sort of organized effort toward some sort of a goal. It was the first non-random phenomenon he had seen in connection with the possessors, barring the short-term tactical matters of mass slaughter and destruction. It made him feel—what he tried at once to suppress, for he feared another destroying frustration—a touch of hope.

The men finished their work but did not leave. Nor did they approach Chandler, but sat in the shade of their truck, waiting for something. He drowsed and was awakened by a distant sputter of a single-engined Aerocoupe that hopped across the building behind him, turned sharply and came down with a brisk little run in the parking bay itself.

From one side the pilot climbed down and from the other two men lifted, with great care, a wooden crate, small but apparently heavy. They stowed it in the jet while the pilot stood watching; then the pilot and one of the other men got into the crew compartment. Chandler could not be sure, but he had the impression that the truckman who entered the plane was no longer his own master. His movements seemed more sure and confident, but above all it was the mute, angry eyes with which his fellows regarded him that gave Chandler grounds for suspicion. He had no time to worry about that; for in the same breath he felt himself occupied once more.

He did not rise. His own voice said to him, "You. Votever you name, you fellow vit de book! You go get de book verever you pud it and get on dat ship dere, you see?" His eyes turned toward the waiting aircraft. "And don't forget de book!"

He was released. "I won't," he said automatically, and then realized that there was no longer anyone there to hear his answer.

When he retrieved the Gibran volume from the car and approached the plane the loading crew said nothing. Evidently they knew what he was doing—either because they too had been given instructions, or because they were used to such things. He paused at the wheeled stairs. "Listen," he said, "can you at least tell me where I'm going?"

The four remaining men looked at him silently, with the same angry, worried expression he had seen on their faces before. They did not answer, but after a moment one of them raised his arm and pointed.

West. Out toward the Pacific. Out toward some ten million square miles of nearly empty sea.

Long before they reached their destination Chandler had reasoned what it must be. He was correct: it was the islands of Hawaii.

Chandler knew that the pilot and his coopted partner were up forward, in the crew compartment, but the door was locked and he never saw them again. Apart from them he was the only living person on the plane.

The plane was lightly loaded with cargo of unidentifiable sorts. In the rear section, where once tourist-class passengers had eaten their complimentary tray meals and planned their vacations, the seats had been removed and a thin scatter of crates and boxes were strapped to the floor. In the luxury of the forward section Chandler sat, stared at the water and drowsed. He seemed to be always sleepy. Perhaps it was the

consequence of his exertions; more likely it was a psychological phenomenon. He was beyond worry. He had reached that point in emotional fatigue when the sudden rattle of cannonfire or the enemy's banzai charge can no longer flood the blood with adrenalin. The glands are dry. The emotions have been triggered too often. Battle fatigue takes men in many different ways, but in Chandler it was only apathy. He not only could not worry, he could not even rouse himself to feel hunger, although the pricking of habit made him get up and search the flight kitchen, unsuccessfully, for food.

He had no idea how much time had passed when the hiss of the jets changed key.

The horizon dipped below the wingtip and straightened again, and he beheld land. He never saw the airfield, only water, then beach, then water again, then a few buildings. Then there was a roar of jets, with their clamshells deflecting their thrust forward to brake their speed, and then the wheels were on the ground. As the plane stopped he felt himself once more possessed. It was no longer terrifying—though Chandler was sure he was doomed.

Without knowing where he was going or why he picked up the ripped book, opened the cabin exit and stepped down onto the rolling steps that had immediately been brought into place. He was conscious of a horde of men swarming around the plane, stripping it of its cargo, and wondered briefly at the rush; but he could not stop to watch them, his legs carried him swiftly across a paved strip to where a police car was cruising.

Chandler cringed inside, instinctively, but his body did not falter as it stepped into the path of the car and raised its hand.

The police car jammed on its brakes. The policeman at the wheel, Chandler thought inside himself, looked startled, but he also looked resigned. "To de South Gate, quickly," said Chandler's lips, and he felt his legs carry him around to the door on the other side.

There was another policeman on the seat next to the driver. He leaped like a hare to get the door open and get out before Chandler's body got there. He made it with nothing to spare. "Jack, you go on, I'll tell Headquarters," he said hurriedly. The driver nodded without speaking. His lips were white. He reached over Chandler to close the door and made a sharp U-turn.

As soon as the car was moving Chandler felt himself able to move his lips again.

"I," he said. "I don't know—"

"Friend," said the policeman, "kindly keep your mouth shut. 'South Gate,' the exec said, and South Gate is where I'm going."

Chandler shrugged and looked out the window ... just in time to see the jet that had brought him to the islands once more lumbering into life. It crept, wobbling its wingtips, over the ground, picked up speed, roared across taxi strips and over rough ground and at last piled up against an ungainly looking foreign airplane, a Russian jet by its markings, in a thunderous crash and ball of flame as its fuel exploded. No one got out.

It seemed that traffic to Hawaii was all one way.

VI

They roared through downtown Honolulu with the siren blaring and cars scattering out of the way. At seventy miles an hour they raced down a road by the sea. Chandler caught a glimpse of a sign that said "Hilo," but where or what "Hilo" might be he had no idea. Soon there were fewer cars; then there were none but their own.

The road was a suburban highway lined with housing development, shopping centers, palm groves and the occasional center of a small municipality, scattering helter-skelter together. There was a road like this extending in every direction from every city in the United States, Chandler thought; but this one was somewhat altered. Something had been there before them. About a mile outside Honolulu's outer fringe, life was cut off as with a knife. There were no people on foot, and the only cars were rusted wrecks lining the roads. The lawns were ragged stands of weeds in front of the ranch-type homes.

It was evidently not allowed to live here.

Chandler craned his neck. His curiosity was becoming almost unbearable. He opened his mouth, but, "I said, 'Shut up.'" rumbled the cop without looking at him. There was a note in the policeman's voice that impressed Chandler. He did not quite know what it was, but it made him obey. They drove for another fifteen minutes in silence, then drew up before a barricade across the road.

Chandler got out. The policeman slammed the door behind him, ripping rubber off his tires with the speed of his U-turn and acceleration back toward Honolulu. He did not look at Chandler.

Chandler stood staring off after him, in bright warm sunlight with a reek of hibiscus and rotting palms in his nostril. It was very quiet there, except for a soft scratchy sound of footsteps on gravel. As Chandler turned to face the man who was coming toward him, he realized he had learned one fact from the policeman after all. The cop was scared clear through.

Chandler said, "Hello," to the man who was approaching.

He too wore a uniform, but not that of the Honolulu city police. It was like U.S. Army sundans, but without insignia. Behind him were half a dozen others in the same dress, smoking, chatting, leaning against whatever was handy. The barricades themselves were impressively thorough. Barbed wire ran down the beach and out into the ocean; on the other side of the road, barbed wire ran clear out of sight along the middle of a side road. The gate itself was bracketed with machine-gun emplacements.

The guard waited until he was close to Chandler before speaking. "What do you want?" he asked without greeting. Chandler shrugged. "All right, just wait here," said the guard, and began to walk away again.

"Wait a minute! What am I waiting for?" The guard shook his head without stopping or turning. He did not seem very interested, and he certainly was not helpful.

Chandler put down the copy of *The Prophet* which he had carried so far and sat on the ground, but again he had no long time to wait. One of the guards came toward him, with the purposeful movements Chandler had learned to recognize. Without speaking the guard dug into a pocket. Chandler jumped up instinctively, but it was only a set of car keys.

As Chandler took them the look in the guard's eyes showed the quick release of tension that meant he was free again; and in that same moment Chandler's own body was occupied once more.

He reached down and picked up the book. Quickly, but a little clumsily, his fingers selected a key, and his legs carried him toward a little French car parked just the other side of the barrier.

Chandler was learning at last the skills of allowing his body to have its own way. He couldn't help it in any event, so he was consciously disciplining himself to withdraw his attention from his muscles and senses. It involved queerly vertiginous problems. A hundred times a minute there was some unexpected body sway or movement of the hand, and his lagging, imprisoned mind would wrench at its unresponsive nerves to put out the elbow that would brace him or to catch itself with a step. He had learned to ignore these things. The mind that inhabited his body had ways not his own of maintaining balance and reaching an objective, but they were equally sure.

He watched his own hands shifting the gears of the car. It was a make he had never driven, with a clutchless drive he did not understand, but the mind in his brain evidently understood it well enough. They picked up speed in great, gasoline-wasting surges.

Chandler began to form a picture of that mind. It belonged to an older man, from the hesitancy of its walk, and a testy one, from the heedless crash of the gears as it shifted. It drove with careless slapdash speed. Chandler's mind yelled and flinched in his brain as they rounded blind curves, where any casual other motorist would have been a catastrophe; but the hand on the wheel and the foot on the accelerator did not hesitate.

Beyond the South Gate the island of Oahu became abruptly wild.

There were beautiful homes, but there were also great, gap-toothed spaces where homes had once been and were no longer. It seemed that some monstrous Zoning Commissar had stalked through the island with an eraser, rubbing out the small homes, the cheap ones, the old ones; rubbing out the stores, rubbing out the factories. This whole section of the island had been turned into an exclusive residential park.

It was not uninhabited. Chandler thought he glimpsed a few people, though since the direction of his eyes was not his to control it was hard to be sure. And then the Renault turned into a lane, paved but narrow. Hardwood trees with some sort of blossoms, Chandler could not tell what, overhung it on both sides.

It meandered for a mile or so, turned and opened into a great vacant parking lot. The Renault stopped with a squeal of brakes in front of a door that was flanked by bronze plaques: *TWA Flight Message Center*.

Chandler caught sight of a skeletal towering form overhead, like a radio transmitter antenna, as his body marched him inside, up a motionless escalator, along a hall and into a room.

His muscles relaxed.

He glanced around and, from a huge couch beside a desk, a huge soft body stirred and, gasping, sat up. It was a very fat old man, almost bald, wearing a coronet of silvery spikes.

He looked at Chandler without much interest. "Vot's your name?" he wheezed. He had a heavy, ineradicable accent, like a Hapsburg or a Russian diplomat. Chandler recognized it readily. He had heard it often enough, from his own lips.

The man's name was Koitska, he said in his accented wheeze. If he had another name he did not waste it on Chandler. He took as few words as possible to order Chandler to be seated and to be still.

Koitska squinted at the copy of Gibran's *The Prophet*. He did not glance at Chandler, but Chandler felt himself propelled out of his seat, to hand the book to Koitska, then returning. Koitska turned its remaining pages with an expression of bored repugnance, like a man picking off his arm. He seemed to be waiting for something.

A door closed on the floor below, and in a moment a girl came into the room.

She was tall, dark and not quite young. Chandler, struck by her beauty, was sure that he had seen her, somewhere, but could not place her face. She wore a coronet like the fat man's, intertwined in a complicated hairdo, and she got right down to business. "Chandler, is it? All right, love, what we want to know is what this is all about." She indicated the book.

A relief that was like pain crossed Chandler's mind. So that was why he was here! Whoever these people were, however they managed to rule men's minds, they were not quite certain of their perfect power. To them the sad, futile Orphalese represented a sort of annoyance—not important enough to be a threat—but something which had proved inconvenient at one time and therefore needed investigating. As Chandler was the only survivor they had deemed it worth their godlike whiles to transport him four thousand miles so that he might satisfy their curiosity.

Chandler did not hesitate in telling them all about the people of Orphalese. There was nothing worth concealing, he was quite sure. No debts are owed to the dead; and the Orphalese had proved on their own heads, at the last, that their ritual of pain was only an annoyance to the possessors, not a tactic that could long be used against them.

It took hardly five minutes to say everything that needed saying about Guy, Meggie and the other doomed and suffering inhabitants of the old house on the mountain.

Koitska hardly spoke. The girl was his interrogator, and sometimes translator as well, when his English was not sufficient to comprehend a point. With patient detachment she kept the story moving until Koitska with a bored shrug indicated he was through.

Then she smiled at Chandler and said, "Thanks, love. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I don't know. I thought the same thing about you."

"Oh, everybody's seen me. Lots of me. But—well, no matter. Good luck, love. Be nice to Koitska and perhaps he'll do as much for you." And she was gone.

Koitska lay unmoving on his couch for a few moments, rubbing a fat nose with a plump finger. "Hah," he said at last. Then, abruptly, "And now, de qvestion is, vot to do vit you, eh? I do not t'ink you can cook, eh?"

With unexpected clarity Chandler realized he was on trial for his life. "Cook? No, I'm afraid not. I mean, I can boil eggs," he said. "Nothing fancy."

"Hah," grumbled Koitska. "Vel. Ve need a couple, three doctors, but I do not t'ink you vould do."

Chandler shook his head. "I'm an electrical engineer," he said. "Or was."

"Vas?"

"I haven't had much practice. There has not been a great deal of call for engineers, the last year or two."

"Hah." Koitska seemed to consider. "Vel," he said, "it could be ... yes, it could be dat ve have a job for you. You go back downstairs and—no, wait." The fat man closed his eyes and Chandler felt himself seized and propelled down the stairs to what had once been a bay of a built-in garage. Now it was fitted up with workbenches and the gear of a radio ham's dreams.

Chandler walked woodenly to one of the benches. His own voice spoke to him. "Ve got here someplace—*da*, here is cirguit diagrams and de specs for a sqvare-vave generator. You know vot dat is? Write down de answer." Chandler, released with a pencil in his hand and a pad before him, wrote *Yes*. "Okay. Den you build vun for me. I areddy got vun but I vant another. You do dis in de city, not here. Go to Tripler, dey tells you dere vere you can work, vere to get parts, all dat. Couple days you come out here again, I see if I like how you build."

Clutching the thick sheaf of diagrams, Chandler felt himself propelled outside and back into the little car. The interview was over.

He wondered if he would be able to find his way back to Honolulu, but that problem was then postponed as he discovered he could not start the car. His own hands had already done so, of course, but it had been so quick and sure that he had not paid attention; now he found that the ignition key was marked only in French, which he could not speak. After trial and error he discovered the combination that would start the engine and unlock the steering wheel, and then gingerly he toured the perimeter of the lot until he found an exit road.

It was close to midnight, he judged. Stars were shining overhead; there was a rising moon. He then remembered, somewhat tardily, that he should not be seeing stars. The lane he had come in on had been overhung on both sides with trees.

A few minutes later he realized he was quite lost.

Chandler stopped the car, swore feelingly, got out and looked around.

There was nothing much to see. The roads bore no markers that made sense to him. He shrugged and rummaged through the glove compartment on the chance of a map; there was none, but he did find what he had almost forgotten, a half-empty pack of cigarettes. It had been—he counted—nearly a week since he had smoked. He lit up.

It was a pleasant evening, too. He felt almost relaxed. He stood there, wondering just what might be about to happen next—with curiosity more than fear—and then he felt a light touch at his mind.

It was nothing, really. Or nothing that he could quite identify. It was though he had been nudged. It seemed that someone was about to usurp his body again, but that did not develop.

As he had about decided to forget it and get back in the car he saw headlights approaching.

A low, lean sports car slowed as it came near, stopping beside him, and a girl leaned out, almost invisible in the darkness. "There you are, love," she said cheerfully. "Thought I spotted someone. Lost?"

She had a coronet, and Chandler recognized her. It was the girl who had interrogated him. "I guess I am," he admitted.

The girl leaned forward. "Come in, dear. Oh, that thing? Leave it here, the silly little bug." She giggled as they drove away from the Renault. "Koitska wouldn't like you wandering around. I guess he decided to give you a job?"

"How did you know?"

She said softly, "Well, love, you're here, you know. Otherwise—never mind. What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Going to Tripler, whatever that is. In Honolulu, I guess. Then I have to build some radio equipment."

"Tripler's actually on the other side of the city. I'll take you to the gate; then you tell them where you want to go. They'll take care of it."

"I don't have any money for fare."

She laughed. After a moment she said, "Koitska's not the worst. But I'd mind my step if I were you, love. Do what he says, the best you can. You never know. You might find yourself very fortunate...."

"I already think that. I'm alive."

"Why, love, that point of view will take you far." The sports car slid smoothly to a stop at the barricade and, in the floodlights above the machine-gun nests, she looked more closely at Chandler. "What's that on your forehead, dear?"

Somehow the woolen cap had been lost. "A brand," he said shortly. "'H' for 'hoaxer.' I did something when one of you people had me, and they thought I'd done it on my own."

"Why—why, this is wonderful!" the girl said excitedly. "No wonder I thought I'd seen you before. Don't you remember? I was in the forewoman at your trial!"

VII

A pink and silver bus let Chandler off at Fort Street in downtown Honolulu and he walked a few blocks to the address he had been given. The name of the place was Parts 'n Plenty. He found it easily enough. It was a radio parts store; by the size of it, it had once been a big, well-stocked one; but now the counters were almost bare.

A thin-faced man with khaki-colored skin looked up and nodded. Chandler nodded back. He fingered a bin of tuning knobs, hefted a coil of two-strand antenna wire and said, "A fellow at Tripler told me to come here to pick up equipment, but I'm damned if I know what I'm supposed to do when I locate it. I don't have any money."

The dark-skinned man got up and came over to him. "Figured you for a mainlander. No sweat. Have you got a list?"

"I can make one."

"All right. Catalogues on the table behind you, if you want them." He offered Chandler a cigarette and sat against the edge of the counter, reading over Chandler's shoulder. "Ho," he said suddenly. "Koitska's square-wave generator again, right?" Chandler admitted it, and the man grinned. "Every couple months he sends somebody along. He doesn't really need the generator, you know. He just wants to see how much you know about building it, Mr.—?"

"Chandler."

"Glad to know you. I'm John Hsi. But don't go easy on the job just because it's a waste of time, Chandler; it could be pretty important to you."

Chandler absorbed the information silently and handed over his list. The man did not look at it. "Come back in about an hour," he said.

"I won't have any money in an hour, either."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll put it on Koitska's bill."

Chandler said frankly, "Look, I don't know what's going on. Suppose I came in and picked up a thousand dollars' worth of stuff, would you put that on the bill, too?"

"Certainly," said Hsi optimistically. "You thinking about stealing them? What would you do with them?"

"Well...." Chandler puffed on his cigarette. "Well, I could—"

"No, you couldn't. Also, it wouldn't pay, believe me," Hsi said seriously. "If there is one thing that doesn't pay, it is cheating on the Exec."

"Now, that's another good question," said Chandler. "Who is the Exec?"

Hsi shook his head. "Sorry. I don't know you, Chandler."

"You mean you're afraid even to answer a question?"

"You're damned well told I am. Probably nobody would mind what I might tell you ... but 'probably' isn't good enough."

Exasperated, Chandler said, "How the devil am I supposed to know what to do next? So I take all this junk back to my room at Tripler and solder up the generator—then what?"

"Then Koitska will get in touch with you," Hsi said, not unkindly. "Play it as it comes to you, Chandler, that's the best advice I can offer." He hesitated. "Koitska's not the worst of them," he said; and then, daringly, "and maybe he's not the best, either. Just do whatever he told you. Keep on doing it until he tells you to do something else. That's all. I mean, that's all the advice I can give you. Whether it's going to be enough to satisfy Koitska is something else again."

There is not much to do in a strange town when you have no money. Chandler's room at what once had been Tripler General Hospital was free; the bus was free; evidently all the radio parts he could want were also free. But he did not have the price of a cup of coffee or a haircut in the pockets of the suntan slacks the desk man at Tripler had issued him. He wandered around the streets of Honolulu, waiting for the hour to be up.

At Tripler a doctor had also examined his scar and it was now concealed under a neat white bandage; he had been fed; he had bathed; he had been given new clothes. Tripler was a teeming metropolis in itself, a main building some ten stories high, a scattering of outbuildings connected to it by covered passages, with thousands of men and women busy about it. Chandler had spoken to a good many of them in the hour after waking up and before boarding the bus to Honolulu, and none of them had been free with information either.

Honolulu had not suffered greatly under the rule of the Exec. Remembering the shattered stateside cities, Chandler thought that this one had been spared nearly all the suffering of the rule of the world by the Exec, whoever they were. Dawdling down King Street, in the aromatic reek of the fish markets, Chandler could have thought himself in any port city before the grisly events of that Christmas when the planet went possessed. Crabs waved sluggishly at him from bins. Great pink-scaled fish rested on nests of ice, waiting to be sold. Smells of frying food came from half a dozen restaurants. It was only the people who were different. There was a solid sprinkling of those who, like himself, were dressed in insigneless former Army uniforms—obviously conscripts on Exec errands—and a surprising minority who, from overheard snatches of conversation, had come from countries other than the U.S.A. Russian mostly, Chandler guessed; but Russian or U.S., wearing suntans or aloha shirts, everyone he saw was marked by the visible signs of strain. There was no laughter.

Chandler saw a clock within the door of a restaurant; half an hour still to kill. He turned and wandered up, away from the water, toward the visible bulk of the hills; and in a moment he saw what made Honolulu's collective face wear its careworn frown.

It was an open square—perhaps it had once been a war memorial—and in the center of it was a fenced-off paved area where people seemed to be resting. It struck Chandler as curious that so many persons should have decided to take a nap on what surely was an uncomfortable bed of flat concrete; he approached and saw that they were not resting. Not only his eyes but his ears conveyed the message—and his nose, too, for the mild air was fetid with blood and rot.

These were not sleeping men and women. Some were dead; some were unconscious; all were maimed. The pavement was slimed with their blood. None had the strength to scream, but several were moaning and even some of the unconscious ones gasped like the breathing of a man in diabetic coma. Passersby walked briskly around the metal fence, and if their glances were curious it was at Chandler they looked, not at the tortured wrecks before them. He understood that the sight of the dying men and women was familiar—was painful—and thus was ignored; it was himself who was the curiosity, for staring at them. He turned and fled, trying not to vomit.

He was still shaken when he returned to Parts 'n Plenty. The hour was up but Hsi shook his head. "Not yet. You can sit down over there if you like." Chandler slumped

into the indicated swivel chair and stared blankly at the wall. This was far worse than anything he had seen stateside. The random terror of murders and bombs was at least a momentary thing, and when it was done it was done. This was sustained torture. He buried his head in his hands and did not look up until he heard the sound of a door opening.

Hsi, his face somehow different, was manipulating a lever on the outside of a door while a man inside, becoming visible as the door opened, was doing the same from within. It looked as though the lock on the door would not work unless both levers operated; and the man on the inside, whom Chandler had not seen before, was dressed, oddly, only in bathing trunks. His face wore the same expression as Hsi's. Chandler guessed (with practice it was becoming easy!) that both were possessed.

The man inside wheeled out two shopping carts loaded with electronic equipment of varying kinds, wordlessly received some empty ones from Hsi; and the door closed on him again.

Hsi tugged the lever down, turned, blinked and said, "All right, Chandler. Your stuff's here."

Chandler approached. "What was that all about?"

"Go to hell!" Hsi said with sudden violence. "I—Oh never mind. Sorry. But I told you already, ask somebody else your questions, not me." He gloomily began to pack the items on Chandler's list into a cardboard carton. Then he glanced at Chandler and said, apologetically, "These are tough times, buddy. I guess there's no harm in answering *some* questions. You want to know why most of my stock's locked behind an armor-plate door? Well, you ought to be able to figure that out for yourself, anyway. The Exec doesn't like to have people playing with radios. Bert stays in the stockroom; I stay out here; twice a day the bosses open the door and we fill whatever orders they've approved. A little rough on Bert, of course. It's a ten-hour day in the stockroom for him, and nothing to do. But it could be worse. Oh, that's for sure, friend: It could be worse."

"Why the bathing suit? Hot in there?"

"Hot for Bert if they think he's smuggling stuff out," said Hsi. "You been here long enough to see the Monument yet?"

Chandler shook his head, then grimaced. "You mean up about three blocks that way? Where the people—?"

"That's right," said Hsi admiringly, "three blocks mauka from here, where the people—Where the people are serving as a very good object lesson to you and me. About a dozen there, right? Small for this time of year, Chandler. Usually there are more. Notice anything special about them?"

"They were butchered! Some of them looked like their legs had been burned right off. Their eyes gouged out, their faces—" Chandler brought up sharply. It had been bad enough looking at those wretched, writhing semi-cadavers; he did not want to talk about them.

The parts man nodded seriously. "Sometimes there are more, and sometimes they're worse hurt than that. Have you got any idea how they get that way? They do it to themselves, that's how. My own brother was out there for a week, last Statehood Day. He jumped feet first into a concrete mixer, and it took him seven days to die after I put him on my shoulder and carried him out there. I didn't like it, of course, but I

didn't exactly have any choice; I wasn't running my own body at the time. Neither was he when he jumped. He was made to do it, because he used to have Bert's job and he thought he'd take a little short-wave set home. Like I said, you don't want to cheat on the Exec because it doesn't pay."

"But what the devil am I supposed to—"

Hsi held up his hand. "Don't ask me how to keep out of that Monument bunch, Chandler. *I* don't know. Do what you're told and don't do anything you aren't told to do; that is the whole of the law. Now do me a favor and get out of here so I can pack up these other orders." He turned his back on Chandler.

VIII

By the morning of the fourth day on the island of Oahu, Chandler had learned enough of the ropes to have signed a money-chit at the Tripler currency office against Koitska's account.

That was about all he had learned, except for a few practical matters like where meals were served and the location of the fresh-water swimming pool at the back of the grounds. He was killing time using the pool when, in the middle of a jackknife from the ten-foot board, he felt himself seized. He sprawled into the water with a hard splashing slap, threshed about and, as he came to the surface, found himself giggling.

"Sorry, dear," he apologized to himself, "but we don't carry our weight in the same places, you know. Get that square-what'sit thingamajig, like an angel, and meet me in front by the flagpole in twenty minutes."

He recognized the voice, even if his own vocal chords had made it. It was the girl who had driven him back from the interview with Koitska, the one who had casually announced she had saved his life at his hoaxing trial. Chandler swam to the side of the pool and towed as he trotted toward his quarters. She was from Koitska now, of course; which meant that his "test" was about to be graded.

Quickly though he dressed, she was there before him, standing beside a low-slung sports car and chatting with one of the groundskeepers. An armful of leis dangled beside her, and although she wore the coronet which was evidence of her status the gardener did not seem to fear her. "Come along, love," she called to Chandler. "Koitska wants your thingummy. Chuck it in the trunk if it'll fit, and we'll head waikiki wikiwiki. Don't I say that nicely? But I only fool the malihinis, like you."

She chattered away as the little car dug its rear wheels into the drive and leaped around the green and out the gate.

The wind howled by them, the sun was bright, the sky was piercingly blue. Riding next to this beautiful girl, it was hard for Chandler to remember that she was one of those who had destroyed his world. It was a terrible thing to have so much hatred and to feel it so diluted. Not even Koitska seemed a terrible enough enemy to accept such a load of detestation; it was hate without an object, and it recoiled on the hater, leaving him turgid and constrained. If he could not hate his onetime friend Jack Souther for defiling and destroying his wife, it was almost as hard to hate Souther's anonymous possessor. It could even have been Koitska. It could even have been this girl by his side. In the strange, cruel fantasies with which the Execs indulged themselves it was likely enough that they would sometimes assume the body, and the

role, of the opposite sex. Why not? Strange, ruthless morality; it was impossible to evaluate it by any human standards.

It was also impossible to think of hatred with her beside him. They soared around Honolulu on a broad expressway and paralleled the beach toward Waikiki. "Look, dear. Diamond Head! Mustn't ignore it—very bad form—like not going to see the night-blooming cereus at the Punahou School. You haven't missed that, have you?"

"I'm afraid I have—"

"Rosalie. Call me Rosalie, dear."

"I'm afraid I have, Rosalie." For some reason the name sounded familiar.

"Shame, oh, shame! They say it was wonderful night before last. Looks like cactus to me, but—"

Chandler's mental processes had worked to a conclusion. "Rosalie *Pan!*" he said. "Now I know!"

"Know what? You mean—" she swerved around a motionless Buick, parked arrogantly five feet from the curb—"you mean you didn't know who I was? And to think I used to pay five thousand a year for publicity."

Chandler said, smiling, and almost relaxed, "I'm sorry, but musical comedies weren't my strong point. I did see you once, though, on television. Then, let's see, wasn't there something about you disappearing—"

She nodded, glancing at him. "There sure was, dear. I almost froze to death getting out to that airport. Of course, it was worth it, I found out later. If I hadn't been took, as they say, I would've been dead, because you remember what happened to New York about an hour later."

"You must have had some friends," Chandler began, and let it trail off. So did the girl. After a moment she began to talk about the scenery again, pointing out the brick-red and purple bougainvillea, describing how the shoreline had looked before they'd "cleaned it up." "Oh, thousands and thousands of the *homeliest* little houses. You'd have hated it. So we have done at least a few good things, anyway," she said complacently, and began gently to probe into his life story. But as they stopped before the TWA message center, a few moments later, she said, "Well, love, it's been fun. Go on in; Koitska's expecting you. I'll see you later." And her eyes added gently: *I hope.*

Chandler got out of the car, turned ... and felt himself taken. His voice said briskly, "*Zdrastvoi, Rosie. Gd'yeh Koitska?*"

Unsurprised the girl pointed to the building. "*Kto govorit?*"

Chandler's voice answered in English, with a faint Oxford accent: "It is I, Rosie, Kalman. Where's Koitska's tinkertoy? Oh, all right, thanks; I'll just pick it up and take it in. Hope it's all right. I must say one wearies of breaking in these new fellows."

Chandler's body ambled around to the trunk of the car, took out the square-wave generator on its breadboard base and slouched into the building. It called ahead in the same language and was answered wheezily from above: Koitska. "*Zdrastvoi. Iditye suda ko mneh. Kto, Kalman?*"

"*Konyekhno!*" cried Chandler's voice and he was carried in and up to where the fat man lounged in a leather-upholstered wheel-chair. There was a conversation, long minutes of it, while the two men poked at the generator. Chandler did not understand a word until he spoke to himself: "You—what's your name."

"Chandler," Koitska filled in.

"You, Chandler. D'you know anything at all about submillimeter microwaves? Tell Koitska." Briefly Chandler felt himself free—long enough to nod; then he was possessed again, and Koitska repeated the nod. "Good, then. Tell Koitska what experience you've had."

Again free, Chandler said, "Not a great deal of actual experience. I worked with a group at Caltech on spectroscopic measurements in the million megacycle range. I didn't design any of the equipment, though I helped put it together." He recited his degrees until Koitska raised a languid hand.

"*Shto*, I don't care. If ve gave you diagrams you could build?"

"Certainly, if I had the equipment. I suppose I'd need—"

But Koitska stopped him again. "I know vot you need," he said damply. "Enough. Ve see." In a moment Chandler was taken again, and his voice and Koitska's debated the matter for a while, until Koitska shrugged, turned his head and seemed to go to sleep.

Chandler marched himself out of the room and out into the driveway before his voice said to him: "You've secured a position, then. Go back to Tripler until we send for you. It'll be a few days, I expect."

And Chandler was free again.

He was also alone. The girl in the Porsche was gone. The door of the TWA building had latched itself behind him. He stared around him, swore, shrugged and circled the building to the parking lot at back, on the chance that a car might be there for him to borrow.

Luckily, there was. There were four, in fact, all with keys in them. He selected a Ford, puzzled out the likeliest road back to Honolulu and turned the key in the starter.

It was fortunate, he thought, that there had been several cars; if there had been only one he would not have dared to take it, for fear of stranding Koitska or some other exec who might easily blot him out in annoyance. He did not wish to join the wretches at the Monument.

It was astonishing how readily fear had become a part of his life.

The trouble with this position he had somehow secured—one of the troubles—was that there was no union delegate to settle employee grievances. Like no transportation. Like no clear idea of working hours, or duties. Like no mention at all—of course—of wages. Chandler had no idea what his rights were, if any at all, or of what the penalties would be if he overstepped them.

The maimed victims at the Monument supplied a clue, of course. He could not really believe that that sort of punishment would be applied for minor infractions. Death was so much less trouble. Even death was not really likely, he thought, for a simple lapse.

He thought.

He could not be sure, of course. He could be sure of only one thing: He was now a slave, completely a slave, a slave until the day he died. Back on the mainland there was the statistical likelihood of occasional slavery-by-possession, but there it was only the body that was enslaved, and only for moments. Here, in the shadow of the execs, it was all of him, forever, until death or a miracle turned him loose.

On the second day following he returned to his room at Tripler after breakfast, and found a Honolulu city policeman sitting hollow-eyed on the edge of his bed. The man stood up as Chandler came in. "So," he grumbled, "you take so long! Here. Is diagrams, specs, parts lists, all. You get everything three days from now, then we begin."

The policeman, no longer Koitska, shook himself, glanced stolidly at Chandler and walked out, leaving a thick manila envelope on the pillow. On it was written, in a crabbed hand: *All secret! Do not show diagrams!*

Chandler opened the envelope and spilled its contents on the bed.

An hour later he realized that sixty minutes had passed in which he had not been afraid. It was good to be working again, he thought, and then that thought faded away again as he returned to studying the sheaves of circuit diagrams and closely typed pages of specifications. It was not only work, it was hard work, and absorbing. Chandler knew enough about the very short wavelength radio spectrum to know that the device he was supposed to build was no proficiency test; this was for real. The more he puzzled over it the less he could understand of its purpose. There was a transmitter and there was a receiver. Astonishingly, neither was directional: that ruled out radar, for example. He rejected immediately the thought that the radiation was for spectrum analysis, as in the Caltech project—unfortunate, because that was the only application with which he had first-hand familiarity; but impossible. The thing was too complicated. Nor could it be a simple message transmitter—no, perhaps it could, assuming there was a reason for using the submillimeter bands instead of the conventional, far simpler short-wave spectrum. Could it? The submillimeter waves were line-of-sight, of course, but would ionosphere scatter make it possible for them to cover great distances? He could not remember. Or was that irrelevant, since perhaps they needed only to cover the distances between islands in their own archipelago? But then, why all the power? And in any case, what about this fantastic switching panel, hundreds of square feet of it even though it was transistorized and subminiaturized and involving at least a dozen sophisticated technical refinements he hadn't the training quite to understand? AT&T could have handled every phone call in the United States with less switching than this—in the days when telephone systems spanned a nation instead of a fraction of a city. He pushed the papers together in a pile and sat back, smoking a cigarette, trying to remember what he could of the theory behind submillimeter radiation.

At half a million megacycles and up, the domain of quantum theory began to be invaded. Rotating gas molecules, constricted to a few energy states, responded directly to the radio waves. Chandler remembered late-night bull sessions in Pasadena during which it had been pointed out that the possibilities in the field were enormous—although only possibilities, for there was no engineering way to reach them, and no clear theory to point the way—suggesting such strange ultimate practical applications as the receiverless radio, for example. Was that what he had here?

He gave up. It was a question that would burn at him until he found the answer, but just now he had work to do, and he'd better be doing it.

Skipping lunch entirely, he carefully checked the components lists, made a copy of what he would need, checked the original envelope and its contents with the man at the main receiving desk for his safe, and caught the bus to Honolulu.

At the Parts 'n Plenty store, Hsi read the list with a faint frown that turned into a puzzled scowl. When he put it down he looked at Chandler for a few moments without speaking.

"Well, Hsi? Can you get all this for me?" The parts man shrugged and nodded. "Koitska said in three days."

Hsi looked startled, then resigned. "That puts it right up to me, doesn't it? All right. Wait a moment."

He disappeared in the back of the store, where Chandler heard him talking on what was evidently an intercom system. He came back in a few minutes and slipped Chandler's list into a slit in the locked door. "Tough for Bert," he said. "He'll be working all night, getting started—but I can take it easy till tomorrow. By then he'll know what we don't have, and I'll find some way to get it." He shrugged again, but his face was lined. Chandler wondered how one went about finding, for example, a thirty megawatt klystron tube; but it was Hsi's problem. He said:

"All right, I'll see you Monday."

"Wait a minute, Chandler." Hsi eyed him. "You don't have anything special to do, do you? Well, come have dinner with me. Maybe I can get to know you. Then maybe I can answer some of your questions, if you like."

They took a bus out Kapiolani Boulevard, then got out and walked a few blocks to a restaurant named Mother Chee's. Hsi was well known there, it seemed. He led Chandler to a booth at the back, nodded to the waiter, ordered without looking at the menu and sat back. "You malihinis don't know much about food," he said, humorously patronizing. "I think you'll like it. It's all fish, anyway."

The man was annoying. Chandler was moved to say, "Too bad, I was hoping for duck in orange sauce, perhaps some snow peas—"

Hsi shook his head. "There's meat, all right, but not here. You'll only find it in the places where the execs sometimes go.... Tell me something, Chandler. What's that scar on your forehead."

Chandler touched it, almost with surprise. Since the medics had treated it he had almost forgotten it was there. He began to explain, then paused, looking at Hsi, and changed his mind. "What's the score? You testing me, too? Want to see if I'll lie about it?"

Hsi grinned. "Sorry. I guess that's what I was doing. I do know what an 'H' stands for; we've seen them before. Not many. The ones that do get this far usually don't last long. Unless, of course, they are working for somebody whom it wouldn't do to offend," he explained.

"So what you want to know, then, is whether I was really hoaxing or not. Does it make any difference?"

"Damn right it does, man! We're slaves, but we're not animals!" Chandler had gotten to him; the parts man looked startled, then sallow, as he observed his own vehemence.

"Sorry, Hsi. It makes a difference to me, too. Well, I wasn't hoaxing. I was possessed, just like any other everyday rapist-murderer, only I couldn't prove it. And it didn't look too good for me, because the damn thing happened in a pharmaceuticals plant. That was supposed to be about the only place in town where you could be sure you wouldn't be possessed, or so everybody thought. Including me. Up to the time I went ape."

Hsi nodded. The waiter approached with their drinks. Hsi looked at him appraisingly, then did a curious thing. He gripped his left wrist with his right hand, quickly, then released it again. The waiter did not appear to notice. Expertly he served the drinks, folded small pink floral napkins, dumped and wiped their ashtray in one motion—and then, so quickly that Chandler was not quite sure he had seen it, caught Hsi's wrist in the same fleeting gesture just before he turned and walked away.

Without comment Hsi turned back to Chandler. He said, "I believe you. Would you like to know why it happened? Because I think I can tell you. The execs have all the antibiotics they need now."

"You mean—" Chandler hesitated.

"That's right. They did leave some areas alone, as long as they weren't fully stocked on everything they might want for the foreseeable future. Wouldn't you?"

"I might," Chandler said cautiously, "if I knew what I was—being an exec."

Hsi said, "Eat your dinner. I'll take a chance and tell you what I know." He swallowed his whiskey-on-the-rocks with a quick backward jerk of the head. "They're mostly Russians—you must know that much for yourself. The whole thing started in Russia."

Chandler said, "Well, that's pretty obvious. But Russia was smashed up as much as anywhere else. The whole Russian government was killed—wasn't it?"

Hsi nodded. "They're not the government. Not the exec. Communism doesn't mean any more to them than the Declaration of Independence does—which is nothing. It's very simple, Chandler: they're a project that got out of hand."

Back four years ago, he said, in Russia, it started in the last days of the Second Stalinite Regime, before the Neo-Krushchevists took over power in the January Push.

The Western World had not known exactly what was going on, of course. The "mystery wrapped in a riddle surrounded by an enigma" had become queerer and even more opaque after Kruschchev's death and the revival of such fine old Soviet institutions as the Gay Pay Oo. That was the development called the Freeze, when the Stalinites seized control in the name of the sacred Generalissimo of the Soviet Fatherland, a mighty-missile party, dedicated to bringing about the world revolution by force of sputnik. The neo-Krushchevists, on the other hand, believed that honey caught more flies than vinegar; and, although there were few visible adherents to that philosophy during the purges of the Freeze, they were not all dead. Then, out of the Donbas Electrical Workshop, came sudden support for their point of view.

It was a weapon. It was more than a weapon, an irresistible tool—more than that, the way to end all disputes forever. It was a simple radio transmitter (Hsi said)—or so it seemed, but its frequencies were on an unusual band and its effects were remarkable. It controlled the minds of men. The "receiver" was the human brain. Through this little portable transmitter, surgically patch-wired to the brain of the person operating it, his entire personality was transmitted in a pattern of very short waves which could invade and modulate the personality of any other human being in the world. For that matter, of any animal, as long as the creature had enough "mind" to seize—

"What's the matter?" Hsi interrupted himself, staring at Chandler. Chandler had stopped eating, his hand frozen midway to his mouth. He shook his head.

"Nothing. Go on." Hsi shrugged and continued.

While the Western World was celebrating Christmas—the Christmas before the first outbreak of possession in the outside world—the man who invented the machine was secretly demonstrating it to another man. Both of them were now dead. The inventor had been a Pole, the other man a former Party leader who, four years before, had rescued the inventor's dying father from a Siberian work camp. The Party leader had reason to congratulate himself on that loaf cast on the water. There were only three working models of the transmitter—what ultimately was refined into the coronet Chandler had seen on the heads of Koitska and the girl—but that was enough for the January push.

The Stalinites were out. The neo-Krushchevists were in.

A whole factory in the Donbas was converted to manufacturing these little mental controllers as fast as they could be produced—and that was fast, for they were simple in design to begin with and were quickly refined to a few circuits. Even the surgical wiring to the brain became unnecessary as induction coils tapped the encephalic rhythms. Only the great amplifying hookup was really complicated. Only one of those was necessary, for a single amplifier could serve as re-broadcaster—modulator for thousands of the headsets.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Hsi demanded.

Chandler put down his fork, lit a cigarette and beckoned to the waiter. "I'm all right. I just want another drink."

He needed the drink. For now he knew what he was building for Koitska.

The waiter brought two more drinks and carried away the uneaten food. "We don't know exactly who did what after that," Hsi said, "but somehow or other it got out of hand. I think it was the technical crew of the factory that took over. I suppose it was an inevitable danger." He grinned savagely. "I can just imagine the Party workers in the factory," he said, "trying to figure out how to keep them in line—bribe them or terrify them? Give them dachas or send a quota to Siberia? Neither would work, of course, because there isn't any bribe you can give to a man who only has to stretch out his hand to take over the world, and you can't frighten a man who can make you slit your own throat. Anyway, the next thing that happened—the following Christmas—was when they took over the world. It wasn't a Party movement at all any more. A lot of the workers were Czechs and Hungarians and Poles, and the first thing they wanted to do was to even a few scores.

"So here they are! Before they let the whole world go bang they got out of range. They got themselves out of Russia on two Red Navy cruisers, about a thousand of them; then they systematically triggered off every ballistic missile they could find ... and they could find all of them, sooner or later, it was just a matter of looking. As soon as it was safe they moved in here. Best place in the world for them.

"There are only a thousand or so of them here on the Islands, and nobody outside the Islands even knows where they are. If they did, what good would it do them? They can kill anyone, anywhere. They kill for fun, but sometimes they kill for a reason too. When one of them goes wandering for kicks he makes it a point to mess up all the transport and communications facilities he comes across—especially now, since they've stockpiled everything they're likely to need for the next twenty years. We don't know what they're planning to do when the twenty years are up. Maybe they don't care. Would you?"

Chandler drained his drink and shook his head. "One question," he said. "Who's 'we'?"

Hsi carefully unwrapped a package of cigarettes, took one out and lit it. He looked at it as though he were not enjoying it; cigarettes had a way of tasting stale these days. As they were. "Just a minute," he said.

Tardily Chandler remembered the quick grasp of the waiter's fingers on Hsi's wrist, and that the waiter had been hovering, inconspicuously close, all through their meal. Hsi was waiting for the man to return.

In a moment the waiter was back, looking directly at Chandler. He looped his own wrist with his fingers and nodded. Hsi said softly, "'We' is the Society of Slaves. That's all of us—slaves—but only a few of us belong to the Society. We—"

There was a crash of glass. The waiter had dropped their tray.

Across the table from Chandler, Hsi looked suddenly changed. His left hand lay on the table before him, his right hand poised over it. Apparently he had been about to show Chandler again the sign he had made.

But he could not do it. His hand paused and fluttered, like a captured bird. Captured it was. Hsi was captured. Out of Hsi's mouth, with Hsi's voice, came the light, tonal rhythms of Rosalie Pan. "*This* is an unexpected pleasure, love! I never expected to see you here. Enjoying your meal?"

IX

Chandler had his empty glass halfway to his lips, automatically, before he realized there was nothing in it to brace him. He said hoarsely, "Yes, thanks. Do you come here often?" It was like the banal talk of a language guide, wildly inappropriate to what had been going on a moment before. He was shaken.

"Oh, I love it," cooed Hsi, investigating the dishes before him. "All finished, I see. Too bad. Your friend doesn't feel like he ate much, either."

"I guess he wasn't hungry," Chandler managed.

"Well, I am." Hsi cocked his head and smiled like a female impersonator. "I know! Are you doing anything special right now, love? I know you've eaten, but—well, I've been a good girl and I guess I can eat a real meal, I mean not with somebody else's

teeth, and still keep the calories in line. Suppose I meet you down at the Beach? There's a place there where the luau is divine. I can be there in half an hour."

Chandler's breathing was back to normal. Why not? "I'll be delighted."

"Luigi the Wharf Rat, that's the name of it. They won't let you in, though, unless you tell them you're with me. It's special." Hsi's eye closed in Rosalie Pan's wink. "Half an hour," Hsi said, and was again himself. He began to shake.

The waiter brought him straight whiskey and, pretense abandoned, stood by while Hsi drank it. After a moment he said, "Scares you. But—I guess we're all right. She couldn't have heard much. You'd better go, Chandler. I'll talk to you again some other time."

Chandler stood up. But he couldn't leave Hsi like that. "Are you all right?"

Hsi almost managed control. "Oh—I think so. Not the first time it's come close, you know. Sooner or later it'll come closer still, and that will be the end, but—yes, I'm all right for now."

Chandler tarried. "You were saying something about the Society of Slaves."

"Damn it, go!" Hsi barked. "She'll be waiting for you.... Sorry, I didn't mean to shout. But go." As Chandler turned, he said more quietly, "Come around to the store tomorrow. Maybe we can finish our talk then."

Luigi the Wharf Rat's was not actually on the beach but on the bank of a body of water called the Ala Wai Canal. Across the water were the snowtopped hills. A maitre-de escorted Chandler personally to a table on a balcony, and there he waited. Rosalie's "half-hour" was nearly two; but then he heard her calling him from across the room, in the voice which had reached a thousand second balconies, and he rose as she came near.

She said lightly, "Sorry. You ought to be flattered, though. It's a twenty-minute drive—and an hour and a half to put on my face, so you won't be ashamed to be seen with me. Well, it's good to be out in my own skin for a change. Let's eat!"

The talk with Hsi had left a mark on Chandler that not even this girl's pretty face could obscure. It was a pretty face, though, and she was obviously exerting herself to make him enjoy himself. He could not help responding to her mood.

She talked of her life on the stage, the excitement of a performance, the entertainers she had known. Her conversation was one long name-drop, but it was not pretense: the world of the famous was the world she had lived in. It was not a world that Chandler had ever visited, but he recognized the names. Rosie had been married once to an English actor whose movies Chandler had made a point of watching on television. It was interesting, in a way, to know that the man snored and lived principally on vitamin pills. But it was a view of the man that Chandler had not sought.

The restaurant drew its clientele mostly from the execs, young ones or young-acting ones, like the girl. The coronets were all over. There had been a sign on the door:

KAPU, WALIHINI!

to mark it off limits to anyone not an exec or a collaborator. Still, Chandler thought, who on the island was not a collaborator? The only effective resistance a man could

make would be to kill everyone within reach and then himself, thus depriving them of slaves—and that was, after all, only what the execs themselves had done in other places often enough. It would inconvenience them only slightly. The next few planeloads or shiploads of possessed warm bodies from the mainland would be permitted to live, instead of being required to dash themselves to destruction, like the crew of the airplane that had carried Chandler. Thus the domestic stocks would be replenished.

An annoying feature of dining with Rosalie in the flesh, Chandler found, was that half a dozen times while they were talking he found himself taken, speaking words to Rosie that were not his own, usually in a language he did not understand. She took it as a matter of course. It was merely a friend, across the room or across the island, using Chandler as the casual convenience of a telephone. "Sorry," she apologized blithely after it happened for the third time, and then stopped. "You don't like that, love, do you?"

"Can you blame me?" He stopped himself from saying more; he was astonished even so at his tone.

She said it for him. "I know. It takes away your manhood, I suppose. Please don't let it do that to you, love. We're not so bad. Even—" She hesitated, and did not go on. "You know," she said, "I came here the same way you did. Kidnaped off the stage of the Winter Garden. Of course, the difference was the one who kidnaped me was an old friend. Though I didn't know it at the time and it scared me half to death."

Chandler must have looked startled. She nodded. "You've been thinking of us as another race, haven't you? Like the Neanderthals or—well, worse than that, maybe." She smiled. "We're not. About half of us came from Russia in the first place, but the others are from all over. You'd be astonished, really." She mentioned several names, world-famous scientists, musicians, writers. "Of course, not everybody can qualify for the club, love. Wouldn't be exclusive otherwise. The chief rule is loyalty. I'm loyal," she added gently after a moment, "and don't you forget it. Have to be. Whoever becomes an exec has to be with us, all the way. There are tests. It has to be that way—not only for our protection. For the world's."

Chandler was genuinely startled at that. Rosie nodded seriously. "If one exec should give away something he's not supposed to it would upset the whole applecart. There are only a thousand of us, and I guess probably two billion of you, or nearly. The result would be complete destruction."

Of the Executive Committee, Chandler thought she meant at first, but then he thought again. No. Of the world. For the thousand execs, outnumbered though they were two million to one, could not fail to triumph. The contest would not be in doubt. If the whole thousand execs at once began systematically to kill and destroy, instead of merely playing at it as the spirit moved them, they could all but end the human race overnight. A man could be made to slash his throat in a quarter of a minute. An exec, killing, killing, killing without pause, could destroy his own two million enemies in an eight-hour day.

And there were surer, faster ways. Chandler did not have to imagine them, he had seen them. The massacre of the Orphalese, the victims at the Monument—they were only crumbs of destruction. What had happened to New York City showed what mass-production methods could do. No doubt there were bombs left, even if only chemical ones. Shoot, stab, crash, blow up; swallow poison, leap from window, slit throat. Every man a murderer, at the touch of a mind from Hawaii; and if no one else

was near to murder, surely each man could find a victim in himself. In one ravaging day mankind would cease to exist as a major force. In a week the only survivors would be those in such faroff and hopelessly impotent places that they were not worth the trouble of tracking down.

"You hate us, don't you?"

Chandler paused and tried to find an answer. Rosie was not either belligerent or mocking. She was only sympathetically trying to reach his point of view. He shook his head silently.

"Not meaning 'no'—meaning 'no comment'? Well, I don't blame you, love. But do you see that we're not altogether a bad thing? It's bad that there should be so much violence. In a way. Hasn't there always been violence? And what were the alternatives? Until we came along the world was getting ready to kill itself anyway."

"There's a difference," Chandler mumbled. He was thinking of his wife. He and Margot had loved each other as married couples do—without any very great, searing compulsion; but with affection, with habit and with sporadic passion. Chandler had not given much thought to the whole, though he was aware of the parts, during the last years of his marriage. It was only after Margot's murder that he had come to know that the sum of those parts was a quite irreplaceable love.

But Rosie was shaking her head. "The difference is all on our side. Suppose Koitska's boss had never discovered the coronets. At any moment one country might have got nervous and touched off the whole thing—not carefully, the way we did it, with most of the really dirty missiles fused safe and others landing where they were supposed to go. I mean, touched off a *war*. The end, love. The bloody *finis*. The ones that were killed at once would have been the lucky ones. No, love," she said, in dead earnest, "we aren't the worst things that ever happened to the world. Once the—well, the *bad* part—is over, people will understand what we really are."

"And what's that, exactly?"

She hesitated, smiled and said modestly, "We're gods."

It took Chandler's breath away—not because it was untrue, but because it had never occurred to him that gods were aware of their deity.

"We're gods, love, with the privilege of electing mortals to the club. Don't judge us by anything that has gone before. Don't judge us by anything. We are a New Thing. We don't have to conform to precedent because we upset all precedents. From now on, to the end of time, the rules will grow from us."

She patted her lips briskly with a napkin and said, "Would you like to see something? Let's take a little walk."

She took him by the hand and led him across the room, out to a sundeck on the other side of the restaurant. They were looking down on what had once been a garden. There were people in it; Chandler was conscious of sounds coming from them, and he was able to see that there were dozens of them, perhaps a hundred, and that they all seemed to be wearing suntans like his own.

"From Tripler?" he guessed.

"No, love. They pick out those clothes themselves. Stand there a minute."

The girl in the coronet walked out to the rail of the sundeck, where pink and amber spotlights were playing on nothing. As she came into the colored lights there was a sigh from the people in the garden. A man walked forward with an armload of leis and deposited them on the ground below the rail.

They were *adoring* her.

Rosalie stood gravely for a moment, then nodded and returned to Chandler.

"They began doing that about a year ago," she whispered to him, as a murmur of disappointment came up from the crowd. "Their own idea. We didn't know what they wanted at first, but they weren't doing any harm. You see, love," she said softly, "we can make them do anything we like. But we don't make them do that."

Hours later, Chandler was not sure just how, they were in a light plane flying high over the Pacific, clear out of sight of land. The moon was gold above them, the ocean black beneath.

Chandler stared down as the girl circled the plane, slipping lower toward the water, silent and perplexed. But he was not afraid. He was almost content. Rosie was good company—gay, cheerful—and she had treasures to share. It had been an impulse of hers, a long drive in her sports car and a quick, comfortable flight over the ocean to cap the evening. It had been a pleasant impulse. He reflected gravely that he could understand now how generations of country maidens had been dazzled and despoiled. A touch of luxury was a great seducer.

The coronet on the girl's body could catch his body at any moment. She had only to think herself into his mind, and her will, flashed to a relay station like the one he was building for Koitska, at loose in infinity, could sweep into him and make him a puppet. If she chose, he would open that door beside him and step out into a thousand feet of air and a meal for the sharks.

But he did not think she would do it. He did not think anyone would, really, though with his own eyes he had seen some anyones do things as bad as that and sickeningly worse. There was no corrupt whim of the most diseased mind in history that some torpid exec had not visited on a helpless man, woman or child in the past years. Even as they flew here, Chandler knew, the gross bodies that lay in luxury in the island's villas were surging restlessly around the world; and death and horror remained where they had passed. It was a paradox too great to be reconciled, this girl and this vileness. He could not forget it, but he could not feel it in his glands. She was pretty. She was gay. He began to think thoughts that had left him alone for a long time.

The dark bulk of the island showed ahead and they were sinking toward a landing.

The girl landed skillfully on a runway that sprang into light as she approached—electronic wizardry, or the coronet and some tethered serf at a switch? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered very greatly at that moment to Chandler.

"Thank you, love," she said, laughing. "I liked that. It's all very well to use someone else's body for this sort of thing, but every now and then I want to keep my own in practice."

She linked arms with him as they left the plane. "When I was first given the coronet here," she reminisced, amusement in her voice, "I got the habit real bad. I spent six awful months—really, six months in bed! And by myself at that. Oh, I was all over the

world, and skin-diving on the Barrier Reef and skiing in Norway and—well," she said, squeezing his arm, "never *mind* what all. And then one day I got on the scales, just out of habit. Do you know what I *weighed*?" She closed her eyes in mock horror, but they were smiling when she opened them again. "I won't do that again, love. Of course, a lot of us do let ourselves go. Even Koitska. Especially Koitska. And some of the women—But just between us, the ones who do really didn't have much to keep in shape in the first place."

She led the way into a villa that smelled of jasmine and gardenias, snapped her fingers and subdued lights came on. "Like it? Oh, we've nothing but the best. What would you like to drink?"

She fixed them both tall, cold glasses and vetoed Chandler's choice of a sprawling wicker chair to sit on. "Over here, love." She patted the couch beside her. She drew up her legs, leaning against him, very soft, warm and fragrant, and said dreamily, "Let me see. What's nice? What do you like in music, love?"

"Oh ... anything."

"No, no! You're supposed to say, 'Why, the original-cast album from *Hi There*.' Or anything else I starred in." She shook her head reprovingly, and the points of her coronet caught golden reflections from the lights. "But since you're obviously a man of low taste I'll have to do the whole bit myself." She touched switches at a remote-control set by her end of the couch, and in a moment dreamy strings began to come from tri-aural speakers hidden around the room. It was not *Hi There*. "That's better," she said drowsily, and in a moment, "Wasn't it nice in the plane?"

"It was fine," Chandler said. Gently—but firmly—he sat up and reached automatically into his pocket.

The girl sighed and straightened. "Cigarette? They're on the table beside you. Hope you like the brand. They only keep one big factory going, not to count those terrible Russian things that're all air and no smoke." She touched his forehead with cool fingers. "You never told me about that, love."

It was like an electric shock—the touch of her fingers and the touch of reality at once. Chandler said stiffly, "My brand. But I thought you were there at the trial."

"Oh, only now and then. I missed all the naughty parts—though, to tell the truth, that's why I was hanging around. I do like to hear a little naughtiness now and then ... but all I heard was that stupid lawyer and that stupid judge. Made me mad." She giggled. "Lucky for you. I was so irritated I decided to spoil their fun too."

Chandler sat up and took a long pull at his drink. Curiously, it seemed to sober him. He said: "It's nothing. I happened to rape and kill a young girl. Happens every day. Of course, it was one of your friends that was doing it for me, but I didn't miss any of what was going on, I can give you a blow-by-blow description if you like. The people in the town where I lived, at that time, thought I was doing it on my own, though, and they didn't approve. Hoaxing—you know? They thought I was so perverse and cruel that I would do that sort of thing under my own power, instead of with some exec—or, as they would have put it, being ignorant, some imp, or devil, or demon—pulling the strings."

He was shaking. He waited for what she had to say; but she only whispered, "I'm sorry, love," and looked so contrite and honest that, as rapidly as it had come upon him, his anger passed.

He opened his mouth to say something to her. He didn't get it said. She was sitting there, looking at him, alone and soft and inviting. He kissed her; and as she returned the kiss, he kissed her again, and again.

But less than an hour later he was in her Porsche, cold sober, raging, frustrated, miserable. He slammed it through the unfamiliar gears as he sped back to the city.

She had left him. They had kissed with increasing passion, his hands playing about her, her body surging toward him, and then, just then, she whispered, "No, love." He held her tighter and without another word she opened her eyes and looked at him.

He knew what mind it was that caught him then. It was her mind. Stiffly, like wood, he released her, stood up, walked to the door and locked it behind him.

The lights in the villa went out. He stood there, boiling, looking into the shadows through the great, wide, empty window. He could see her lying there on the couch, and as he watched he saw her body toss and stir; and as surely as he had ever known anything before he knew that somewhere in the world some woman—or some man!—lay locked with a lover, violent in love, and was unable to tell the other that a third party had invaded their bed.

Chandler did not know it until he saw something glistening on his wrist, but he was weeping on the wild ride back to Honolulu in the car. Her car. Would there be trouble for his taking it? God, let there be trouble! He was in a mood for trouble. He was sick and wild with revulsion.

Worse than her use of him, a casual stimulant, an aphrodisiac touch, was that she thought what she did was right. Chandler thought of the worshipping dozens under the sundeck of the exec restaurant, and Rosalie's gracious benediction as they made her their floral offerings. Blind, pathetic fools!

Not only the deluded men and women in the garden were worshippers trapped in a vile religion, he thought. It was worse. The gods and goddesses worshipped at their own divinity as well!

X

Three days later Koitska's voice, coming from Chandler's lips, summoned him out to the TWA shack again.

Wise now in the ways of this world, Chandler commandeered a police car and was hurried out to the South Gate, where the guards allowed him a car of his own. The door of the building was unlocked and Chandler went right up.

He was astonished. The fat man was actually sitting up. He was fully dressed—more or less; incongruously he wore flowered shorts and a bright red, short-sleeve shirt, with rope sandals. He said, "You fly a *gilikopter*? No? No difference. Help me." An arm like a mountain went over Chandler's shoulders. The man must have weighed three hundred pounds. Slowly, wheezing, he limped toward the back of the room and touched a button.

A door opened.

Chandler had not known before that there was an elevator in the building. That was one of the things the exec did not consider important for his slaves to know. It lowered them with great grace and delicacy to the first floor, where a large old Cadillac, ancient but immaculately kept, the kind that used to be called a "gangster's car," waited in a private parking bay.

Chandler followed Koitska's directions and drove to an airfield where a small, Plexiglas-nosed helicopter waited. More by the force of Chandler pushing him from behind than through his own fat thighs, Koitska puffed up the little staircase into the cabin. Originally the copter had been fitted for four passengers. Now there was the pilot's seat and a seat beside it, and in the back a wide, soft couch. Koitska collapsed onto it. His face blanked out—he was, Chandler knew, somewhere else, just then.

In a moment his eyes opened again. He looked at Chandler with no interest at all, and turned his face to the wall.

After a moment he wheezed. "Sit down. At de controls." He breathed noisily for a while. Then, "It von't pay you to be interested in Rosalie," he said.

Chandler was startled. He craned around in the seat but saw only Koitska's back. "I'm not! Or anyway—" But he had no place to go in that sentence, and in any case Koitska no longer seemed interested.

After a moment Koitska stirred, settled himself more comfortably, and Chandler felt himself taken. He turned to face the split wheel and the unfamiliar pedals and watched himself work the controls. It was an admirable performance. Whoever Chandler was just then—he could not guess—he was a first-class helicopter pilot.

They crossed a wide body of ocean and approached another island; from one quick glance at a navigation map that his eyes had taken, Chandler guessed it to be Hilo. He landed the craft expertly on the margin of a small airstrip, where two DC-3s were already parked and being unloaded, and felt himself free again.

Two husky young men, apparently native Hawaiians by their size, rolled up a ramp and assisted Koitska down it and into a building. Chandler was left to his own devices. The building was rundown but sound. Around it stalky grass clumped, long uncut, and a few mauve and scarlet blossoms, almost hidden, showed where someone had once tended beds of bougainvillea and poinsettias. He could not guess what the building had been doing there, looking like a small office-factory combination out in the remote wilds, until he caught sight of a sign the winds had blown against a wall: *Dole*. Apparently this had been headquarters for one of the plantations. Now it was stripped almost clean inside, a welter of desks and rusted machines piled heedlessly where there once had been a parking lot. New equipment was being loaded into it from the cargo planes. Chandler recognized some of it as from the list he had given the parts man, Hsi. There also seemed to be a gasoline-driven generator—a large one—but what the other things were he could not guess.

Besides Koitska, there were at least five coronet-wearing execs visible around the place. Chandler was not surprised. It would have to be something big to winkle these torpid slugs out of their shells, but he knew what it was, and that it was big enough to them indeed; in fact, it was their lives. He deduced that Koitska's plans for his future comfort required a standby transmitter to service the coronets, in case something went wrong. And clearly it was this that they were to put together here.

For ten hours, while the afternoon became dark night, they worked at a furious pace. When the sun set one of the execs gestured and the generator was started, rocking on its rubber-tired wheels as its rotors spun and fumes chugged out, and they worked on by strings of incandescent lights. It was pick-and-shovel work for Chandler, no engineering, just unloading and roughly grouping the equipment where it was ready to be assembled. The execs did not take part in the work. Nor were they idle. They busied themselves in one room of the building with some small device—Chandler could not see what—and when he looked again it was gone. He did not see them take it away and did not know where it was taken. Toward midnight he suddenly realized that it was likely some essential part which they would not permit anyone but themselves to handle, and that, no doubt, was why they had come in person, instead of working through proxies.

Just before they left Koitska and two or three of the other execs quizzed him briefly. He was too tired to think beyond the questions, but they seemed to be trying to find out if he was able to do the simpler parts of the construction without supervision, and they seemed satisfied with the answers. He flew the helicopter home, with someone else guiding his arms and legs, but he was half asleep as he did it, and he never quite remembered how he managed to get back to his room at Tripler.

The next morning he went back to Parts 'n Plenty with an additional list, covering replacement of some parts that had been damaged. Hsi glanced at it quickly and nodded. "All this stuff I have. You can pick it up this afternoon if you like."

Chandler offered him a cigarette out of a stale pack. "About the other night—"

Hsi began to perspire, but he said, casually enough, "Interested in baseball?"

"Baseball?"

Hsi said, as though there had been nothing incongruous about the question, "There'll be a Little League game this afternoon. Back of the school on Punahou and Wilder. I thought I might stop by, then we can come back and pick up the rest of your gear. Two o'clock. Hope I'll see you."

Chandler walked away thoughtfully. He had no real intention of going there, but something in Hsi's attitude suggested more than a ball game; after a quick and poor lunch he decided to go.

The field was a dirty playground, scuffed out of what had probably once been an attractive campus. The players were ten-year-olds, of the mixture of hair colors and complexions typical of the islands. Chandler was puzzled. Surely even the wildest baseball rooter wouldn't go far out of his way for this, and yet there was an audience of at least fifty adults watching the game. And none seemed to be related to the ballplayers. The Little Leaguers played grave, careful ball, and the audience watched them without a word of parental encouragement or joy.

Hsi approached him from the shadow of the school building. "Glad you could make it, Chandler. No, no questions. Just watch."

In the fifth inning, with the score aggregating around thirty, there was an interruption. A tall, red-headed man glanced at his watch, licked his lips, took a deep breath and walked out onto the diamond. He glanced at the crowd, while the kids suspended play without surprise. Then the red-headed man nodded to the umpire

and stepped off the field. The ballplayers resumed their game, but now the whole attention of the audience was on the red-headed man.

Suspicion crossed Chandler's mind. In a moment it was confirmed, as the red-headed man raised his hands waist high and clasped his right hand around his left wrist—only for a moment, but that was enough.

The ball game was a cover. Chandler was present at a meeting of what Hsi had called The Society of Slaves, the underground that dared to pit itself against the execs.

Hsi cleared his throat and said, "This is the one. I vouch for him." And that was startling too, Chandler thought, because all these wrist-circled men and women were looking at *him*.

"All right," said the red-headed man nervously, "let's get started then. First thing, anybody got any weapons? Sure? Take a look—we don't want any slipups. Turn out your pockets."

There was a flurry and a woman near Chandler held up a key ring with a tiny knife on it "Penknife? Hell, yes; get rid of it. Throw it in the outfield. You can pick it up after the meeting." A hundred eyes watched the pearly object fly. "We ought to be all right here," said the red-headed man. "The kids have been playing every day this week and nobody looked in. But *watch your neighbor*. See anything suspicious, don't wait. Don't take a chance. Holler 'Kill the umpire!' or anything you like, but holler. Good and loud." He paused, breathing hard. "All right, Hsi. Introduce him."

The parts man took Chandler firmly by the shoulder. "This fellow has something for us," he said. "He's working for the exec Koitska, building what can't be anything else but a duplicate of the machine that they use to control us. He—"

"Wait a minute!" A bearded man came forward and peered furiously into Chandler's face. "Look at his head! Don't you see he's branded?"

Chandler touched his scar as the man with the beard hissed, "Damned hoaxer! This is the lowest species of life on the face of the earth—someone who pretended to be possessed in order to do some damned dirty act What was it, hoaxer? Murder? Burning babies alive?"

Hsi economically let go of Chandler's shoulder, half turned the bearded man with one hand and swung with the other. "Shut up, Linton. Wait till you hear what he's got for us."

The bearded man, sprawling and groggy, slowly rose as Hsi explained tersely what he had guessed of Chandler's work—as much as Chandler himself knew, it seemed. "Maybe this is only a duplicate. Maybe it won't be used. But maybe it will—and Chandler's the man who can sabotage it! How would you like that? The execs switching over to this equipment while the other one is down for maintenance—and their headsets don't work!"

There was a terrible silence, except for the sounds of the children playing ball. Two runs had just scored. Chandler recognized the silence. It was hope.

Linton broke it, his blue eyes gleaming above the beard. "No! Better than that. Why wait? We can *use* this fellow's machine. Set it up, get us some headsets—and we can control the execs themselves!"

The silence was even longer; then there was a babble of discussion, but Chandler did not take part in it. He was thinking. It was a tremendous thought.

Suppose a man like himself were actually able to do what they wanted of him. Never mind the practical difficulties—learning how it worked, getting a headset, bypassing the traps Koitska would surely have set to prevent just that. Never mind the penalties for failure. Suppose he could make it work, and find fifty headsets, and fit them to the fifty men and women here in this clandestine meeting of the Society of Slaves....

Would there, after all, be any change worth mentioning in the state of the world?

Or was Lord Acton, always and everywhere, right? Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. The power locked in the coronets of the exec was more than flesh and blood could stand; he could almost sense the rot in those near him at the mere thought.

But Hsi was throwing cold water on the idea. "Sorry, but I know that much: One exec can't control another. The headpieces insulate against control. Well." He glanced at his watch. "We agreed on twenty minutes maximum for this meeting," he reminded the red-headed man, who nodded.

"You're right." He glanced around the group. "I'll make the rest of it fast. News: You all know they got some more of us last week. Have you all been by the Monument? Three of our comrades were still there this morning. But I don't think they know we're organized, they think it's only individual acts of sabotage. In case any of you don't know, the execs can't read our minds. Not even when they're controlling us. Proof is we're all still alive. Hanrahan knew practically every one of us, and he's been lying out there for a week with a broken back, ever since they caught him trying to blow up the guard pits at East Gate. They had plenty of chance to pump him if they could. *They can't*. Next thing. No more individual attacks on one exec. Not unless it's a matter of life and death, and even then you're wasting your time unless you've got a gun. They can grab your mind faster than you can cut a throat. Third thing: Don't get the idea there are good execs and bad execs. Once they put that thing on their heads they're all the same. Fourth thing. You can't make deals. They aren't that worried. So if anybody's thinking of selling out—I'm not saying anyone is—forget it." He looked around. "Anything else?"

"What about germ warfare in the water supply?" somebody ventured.

"Still looking into it. No report yet. All right, that's enough for now. Meeting's adjourned. Watch the ball game for a while, then drift away. *One at a time*."

Hsi was the first to go, then a couple of women together, then a sprinkling of other men. Chandler was in no particular hurry, although it seemed time to leave anyway, because the ball game appeared to be over. A ten-year-old with freckles on his face was at the plate, but he was leaning on his bat, staring at Chandler with wide, serious eyes.

Chandler felt a sudden chill.

He turned, began to walk away—and felt himself seized.

He walked slowly into the schoolhouse, unable to look around. Behind him he heard a confused sob, tears and a child's voice trying to blubber through:

"Something *funny* happened."

If the child had been an adult it might have been warning enough. But the child had never experienced possession before, was not sure enough, was clear into the schoolhouse before the remaining members of the Society of Slaves awoke to their danger. He heard a quick cry of *They got him!* Then Chandler's legs stopped walking and he addressed himself savagely. A few yards away a stout Chinese lady was mopping the tiles; she looked up at him, startled, but no more startled than Chandler was himself. "You idiot!" Chandler blazed. "Why do you have to get mixed up in this? Don't you know it's wrong, love? Stay here!" Chandler commanded himself. "Don't you *dare* leave this building!"

And he was free again, but there was a sudden burst of screams from outside.

Bewildered, Chandler stood for a moment, as little able to move as though the girl still had him under control. Then he leaped through a classroom to a window, staring. Outside in the playground there was wild confusion. Half the spectators were on the ground, trying to rise. As he watched, a teen-age boy hurled himself at an elderly lady, the two of them falling. Another man flung himself to the ground. A woman swung her pocketbook into the face of the man next to her. One of the fallen ones rose, only to trip himself again. It was a mad spectacle, but Chandler understood it: What he was watching was a single member of the exec trying to keep a group of twenty ordinary, unarmed human beings in line. The exec was leaping from mind to mind; even so, the crowd was beginning to scatter.

Without thought Chandler started to leap out to help them; but the possessor had anticipated that. He was caught at the door. He whirled and ran toward the woman with the mop; as he was released, the woman flung herself upon him, knocking him down.

By the time he was able to get up again it was far too late to help ... if there ever had been a time when he could have been of any real help.

He heard shots. Two policeman had come running into the playground, with guns drawn.

The exec who had looked at him out of the boy's eyes, who had penetrated this nest of enemies and extricated Chandler from it, had taken first things first. Help had been summoned. Quick as the coronets worked, it was no time at all until the nearest persons with weapons were located, commandeered and in action.

Two minutes later there no longer was resistance.

Obviously more execs had come to help, attracted by the commotion perhaps, or summoned at some stolen moment after the meeting had first been invaded. There were only five survivors on the field. Each was clearly controlled. They rose and stood patiently while the two police shot them, shot them, paused to reload and shot again. The last to die was the bearded man, Linton, and as he fell his eyes brushed Chandler's.

Chandler leaned against a wall.

It had been a terrible sight. The nearness of his own death had been almost the least of it.

He had no doubt of the identity of the exec who had saved him and destroyed the others. Though he had heard the voice only as it came from his own mouth, he could not miss it. It was Rosalie Pan.

He looked out at the red-headed man, sprawled across the foul line behind third base, and remembered what he had said. There weren't any good execs or bad execs. There were only execs.

XI

Whatever Chandler's life might be worth, he knew he had given it away and the girl had given it back to him.

He did not see her for several days, but the morning after the massacre he woke to find a note beside his bed table. No one had been in the room. It was his own sleeping hand that had written it, though the girl's mind had moved his fingers:

If you get mixed up in anything like that again I won't be able to help you. So don't! Those people are just using you, you know. Don't throw away your chances. Do you like surfboarding?

Rosie

But by then there was no time for surfboarding, or for anything else but work. The construction job on Hilo had begun, and it was a nightmare. He was flown to the island with the last load of parts. No execs were present in the flesh, but in the first day Chandler lost count of how many different minds possessed his own. He began to be able to recognize them by a limp as he walked, by tags of German as he spoke, by a stutter, a distinctive gesture of annoyance, an expletive. As he was a trained engineer he was left to labor by himself for hours on end. It was worse for the others. There seemed to be a dozen execs hovering invisible around all the time; no sooner was a worker released by one than he was seized by another. The work progressed rapidly, but at the cost of utter exhaustion. By the end of the fourth day Chandler had eaten only two meals and could not remember when he had slept last. He found himself staggering when free, and furious with the fatigue-clumsiness of his own body when possessed. At sundown on the fourth day he found himself free for a moment and, incredibly, without work of his own to do just then, until someone else completed a job of patchwiring. He stumbled out into the open air and had time only to gaze around for a moment before his eyes began to close. This must once have been a lovely island. Even unkempt as it was, the trees were tall and beautiful. Beyond them a wisp of smoke was pale against the dark-blue evening sky; the breeze was scented.... He woke and found he was already back in the building, reaching for his soldering gun.

There came a point at which even the will of the execs was unable to drive the flogged bodies farther, and then they were permitted to sleep for a few hours. At daybreak they were awake again. The sleep was not enough. The bodies were slow and inaccurate. Two of the Hawaiians, straining a hundred-pound component into place, staggered, slipped—and dropped it.

Appalled, Chandler waited for them to kill themselves.

But it seemed that the execs were tiring too. One of the Hawaiians said irritably, with an accent Chandler did not recognize: "That's pau. All right, you morons, you've won yourselves a vacation; we'll have to fly you in replacements. Take the day off." And incredibly all eleven of the haggard wrecks stumbling around the building were free at once.

The first thought of every man was to eat, to relieve himself, to remove a shoe and ease a blistered foot—to do any of the things they had not been permitted to do. The second thought was sleep.

Chandler dropped off at once, but he was overtired; he slept fitfully, and after an hour or two of turning on the hard ground sat up, blinking red-eyed around. He had been slow. The cushioned seats in the aircraft and cars were already taken. He stood up, stretched, scratched himself and wondered what to do next, and he remembered the thread of smoke he had seen—when? three nights ago?—against the evening sky.

In all those hours he had not had time to think one obvious thought: There should have been no smoke there! The island was supposed to be deserted.

He stood up, looked around to get his bearings, and started off in the direction he remembered.

It was good to own his body again, in poor condition as it was. It was delicious to be allowed to think consecutive thoughts.

The chemistry of the human animal is such that it heals whatever thrusts it may receive from the outside world. Short of death, its only incapacitating wound comes from itself; from the outside it can survive astonishing blows, rise again and flourish. Chandler was not flourishing, but he had begun to rise.

Time had been so compressed and blurred in the days since the slaughter at the Punahou School that he had not had time to grieve over the deaths of his briefly-met friends, or even to think of their quixotic plans against the execs. Now he began to wonder.

He understood with what thrill of hope he had been received—a man like themselves, not an exec, whose touch was at the very center of the exec power. But how firm was that touch? Was there really anything he could do?

It seemed not. He barely understood the mechanics of what he was doing, far less the theory behind it. Conceivably knowing where this installation was he could somehow get back to it when it was completed. In theory it might be that there was a way to dispense with the headsets and exert power from the big board itself.

A Cro-Magnard at the controls of a nuclear-laden jet bomber could destroy a city. Nothing stopped him. Nothing but his own invincible ignorance. Chandler was that Cro-Magnard; certainly power was here to grasp, but he had no way of knowing how to pick it up.

Still—where there was life there was hope. He decided he was wasting time that would not come again. He had been wandering along a road that led into a small town, quite deserted, but this was no time for wandering. His place was back at the installation, studying, scheming, trying to understand all he could. He began to turn, and stopped.

"Great God," he said softly, looking at what he had just seen. The town was deserted of life, but not of death.

There were bodies everywhere.

They were long dead, perhaps years. They seemed natural and right as they lay there. It was not surprising they had escaped his notice at first. Little was left but bones and an occasional desiccated leathery rag that might have been a face. The clothing was faded and rotted away; but enough was left of the bodies and the clothes to make it clear that none of these people had died natural deaths. A rusted blade in a chest cage showed where a knife had pierced a heart; a small skull near his feet (with a scrap of faded blue rompers near it) was shattered. On a flagstone terrace a family group of bones lay radiating outward, like a rosette. Something had exploded there and caught them all as they turned to flee. There was a woman's face, grained like oak and eyeless, visible between the fender of a truck and a crushed-in wall.

Like exhumed Pompeii, the tragedy was so ancient that it aroused only wonder. The whole town had been blotted out.

The execs did not take chances; apparently they had sterilized the whole island—probably had sterilized all of them except Oahu itself, to make certain that their isolation was complete, except for the captive stock allowed to breed and serve them in and around Honolulu.

Chandler prowled the town for a quarter of an hour, but one street was like another. The bodies did not seem to have been disturbed even by animals, but perhaps there were none big enough to show traces of such work.

Something moved in a doorway.

Chandler thought at once of the smoke he had seen, but no one answered his call and, though he searched, he could neither see nor hear anything alive.

The search was a waste of time. It also wasted his best chance to study the thing he was building. As he returned to the cinder-block structure at the end of the airstrip he heard motors and looked up to see a plane circling in for a landing.

He knew that he had only a few minutes. He spent those minutes as thriftily as he could, but long before he could even grasp the circuitry of the parts he had not himself worked on he felt a touch at his mind. The plane was rolling to a stop. He and all of them hurried over to begin unloading it.

The plane was stopped with one wingtip almost touching the building, heading directly into it—convenient for unloading, but a foolish nuisance when it came time to turn it and take off again, Chandler's mind thought while his body lugged cartons out of the plane.

But he knew the answer to that. Takeoff would be no problem, any more than it would for the other small transports at the far end of the strip.

These planes were not going to return, ever.

The work went on, and then it was done, or all but, and Chandler knew no more about it than when it was begun. The last little bit was a careful check of line voltages and a balancing of biases. Chandler could help only up to a point, and then two execs, working through the bodies of one of the Hawaiians and the pilot of a Piper Tri-Pacer who had flown in some last-minute test equipment—and remained as part of the labor pool—laboriously worked on the final tests.

Spent, the other men flopped to the ground, waiting.

They were far gone. All of them, Chandler as much as the others. But one of them rolled over, grinned tightly at Chandler and said, "It's been fun. My name's Bradley. I always think people ought to know each other's names in cases like this. Imagine sharing a grave with some utter stranger!"

"Grave?"

Bradley nodded. "Like Pharaoh's slaves. The pyramid is just about finished, friend. You don't know what I'm talking about?" He sat up, plucked a blade of stemmy grass and put it between his teeth. "I guess you haven't seen the corpses in the woods."

Chandler said, "I found a town half a mile or so over there, nothing in it but skeletons."

"No, heavens, nothing that ancient. These are nice fresh corpses, out behind the junkheap there. Well, not *fresh*. They're a couple of weeks old. I thought it was neat of the execs to dispose of the used-up labor out of sight of the rest of us. So much better for morale ... until Juan Simoa and I went back looking for a plain, simple electrical extension cord and found them."

With icy calm Chandler realized that the man was talking sense. Used-up labor: the men who had unloaded the first planes, no doubt—worked until they dropped, then efficiently disposed of, as they were so cheap a commodity that they were not worth the trouble of hauling back to Honolulu for salvage. "I see," he said. "Besides, dead men tell no tales."

"And spread no disease. Probably that's why they did their killing back in the tall trees. Always the chance some exec might have to come down here to inspect in person. Rotting corpses just aren't sanitary." Bradley grinned again. "I used to be a doctor at Molokai."

"Lep—" began Chandler, but the doctor shook his head.

"No, no, never say 'leprosy.' It's 'Hansen's disease.' Whatever it is, the execs were sure scared of it. They wiped out every patient we had, except a couple who got away by swimming; then for good measure they wiped out most of the medical staff too, except for a couple like me who were off-island and had the sense to keep quiet about where they'd worked. I used," he said, rolling over his back and putting his hands behind his head, "in the old days to work on pest-control for the Public Health Service. We sure knocked off a lot of rats and fleas. I never thought I'd be one of them." He was silent.

Chandler admired his courage very much. The man had fallen asleep.

Chandler looked at the others. "You going to let them kill us without a struggle?" he demanded.

The remaining Hawaiian was the only one to answer. He said, "You just don't know how much *pilikia* you're in. It isn't what we *let* them do."

"We'll see," Chandler promised grimly. "They're only human. I haven't given up yet."

But in the end he could not save himself; it was the girl who saved him. That night Chandler tossed in troubled sleep, and woke to find himself standing, walking toward the Tri-Pacer. The sun was just beginning to pink the sky and no one else was moving. "Sorry, love," he apologized to himself. "You probably need to bathe and

shave, but I don't know how. Shave, I mean." He giggled. "Anyway, you'll find everything you need at my house."

He climbed into the plane. "Ever fly before?" he asked himself. "Well, you'll love it. Here we go. *Close* the door ... *snap* the belt ... *turn* the switch." He admired the practiced ease with which his body started the motor, raced it with a critical eye on the instruments, turned the plane and lifted it off, up, into the rising sun.

"Oh, dear. You *do* need a bath," he told himself, wrinkling his nose humorously. "No harm. I've the nicest tub—pink, deep—and nine kinds of bath salts. But I wish you weren't so tired, love, because it's a long flight and you're wearing me out." He was silent as he bent to the correct compass heading and cranked a handle over his head to adjust the trim. "Koitska's going to be so *huhu*," he said, smiling. "Never fear, love, I can calm him down. But it's easier to do with you in one piece, you know, the other way's too late."

He was silent for a long time, and then his voice began to sing.

They were songs from Rosalie's own musical comedies. Even with so poor an instrument as Chandler's voice to work with, she sang well enough to keep both of them entertained while his body brought the plane in for a landing; and so Chandler went to live in the villa that belonged to Rosalie Pan.

XII

"Love," she said, "there are worse things in the world than keeping me amused when I'm not busy. We'll go to the beach again one day soon, I promise." And she was gone again.

Chandler was a concubine—not even that; he was a male geisha, convenient to play gin rummy with, or for company on the surfboards, or to make a drink.

He did not quite know what to make of himself. In bad times one hopes for survival. He had hoped; and now he had survival, perfumed and cushioned, but on what mad terms! Rosalie was a pretty girl, and a good-humored one. She was right. There were worse things in the world than being her companion; but Chandler could not adjust himself to the role.

It angered him when she got up from the garden swing and locked herself in her room—for he knew that she was not sleeping as she lay there, though her eyes were closed and she was motionless. It infuriated him when she casually usurped his body to bring an ashtray to her side, or to stop him when his hands presumed. And it drove him nearly wild to be a puppet with her friends working his strings.

He was that most of all. One exec who wished to communicate with another cast about for an available human proxy nearby. Chandler was that for Rosalie Pan: her telephone, her social secretary, and on occasion he was the garment her dates put on. For Rosalie was one of the few execs who cared to conduct any major part of her life in her own skin. She liked dancing. She enjoyed dining out. It was her pleasure to display herself to the worshippers at Luigi the Wharf Rat's and to speed down the long combers on a surfboard. When another exec chose to accompany her it was Chandler's body which gave the remote "date" flesh.

He ate very well indeed—in surprising variety. He drank heavily sometimes and abstained others. Once, in the person of a Moroccan exec, he smoked an opium pipe; once he dined on roasted puppy. He saw many interesting things and, when Rosalie was occupied without him, he had the run of her house, her music library, her pantry and her books. He was not mistreated. He was pampered and praised, and every night she kissed him before she retired to her own room with the snap-lock on the door.

He was miserable.

He prowled the house in the nights after she had left him, unable to sleep. It had been bad enough on Hilo, under the hanging threat of death. But then, though he was only a slave, he was working at something that used his skill and training.

Now? Now a Pekingese could do nearly all she wanted of him. He despised in himself the knowledge that with a Pekingese's cunning he was contriving to make himself indispensable to her—her slippers fetched in his teeth, his silky mane by her hand to stroke—if not these things in actuality, then their very near equivalents.

But what else was there for him?

There was nothing. She had spared his life from Koitska, and if he offended her, Koitska's sentence would be carried out.

Even dying might be better than this, he thought.

Indeed, it might be better even to go back to Honolulu and life.

In the morning he woke to find himself climbing the wide, carpeted steps to her room. She was not asleep; it was her mind that was guiding him.

He opened the door. She lay with a feathery coverlet pulled up to her chin, eyes open, head propped on three pillows; as she looked at him he was free. "Something the matter, love? You fell asleep sitting up."

"Sorry." She would not be put off. She made him tell her his resentments. She was very understanding and very sure as she said, "You're not a dog, love. I won't have you thinking that way. You're my friend. Don't you think I need a friend?" She leaned forward. Her nightgown was very sheer; but Chandler had tasted that trap before and he averted his eyes. "You think it's all fun for us. I understand. Tell me, if you thought I was doing important work—oh, *crucial* work, love—would you feel a little easier? Because I am. We've got the whole work of the island to do, and I do my share. We've got our plans to make and our future to provide for. There are so few of us. A single H-bomb could kill us all. Do you think it isn't work, keeping that bomb from ever coming here? There's all Honolulu to monitor, for they know about us there. We can't like some disgusting nitwits like your Society of Slaves destroy *us*. There's the problems of the world to see to. Why," she said with pride, "we've solved the whole Indian-Pakistani population problem in the last two months. They'll not have to worry about famine again for a dozen generations! We're working on China now; next Japan; next—oh, all the world. We'll have three-quarters of the lumps gone soon, and the rest will have space to breathe in. It's work!"

She saw his expression and said earnestly, "No, don't think that! You call it murder. It is, of course. But it's the surgeon's knife. We're quicker and less painful than starvation, love ... and if some of us enjoy the work of weeding out the unfit, does that

change anything? It does not! I admit some of us are, well, *mean*. But not all. And we're improving. The new people we take in are better than the old."

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment.

Then she shook her head. "Never mind," she said—apparently to herself. "Forget it, love. Go like an angel and fetch us both some coffee."

Like an angel he went ... not, he thought bitterly, like a man.

She was keeping something from him, and he was too stubborn to let her tease him out of his mood. "Everything's a secret," he complained, and she patted his cheek.

"It has to be that way." She was quite serious. "This is the biggest thing in the world. I'm fond of you, love, but I can't let that interfere with my duty."

"*Shto, Rosie?*" said Chandler's mouth thickly.

"Oh, there you are, Andrei," she said, and spoke quickly in Russian.

Chandler's brows knotted in a scowl and he barked: "*Nyeh mozhet bit!*"

"Andrei..." she said gently. "*Ya vas sprashnivayoo....*"

"*Nyet!*"

"*No Andrei....*"

Rumble, grumble; Chandler's body twitched and fumed. He heard his own name in the argument, but what the subject matter was he could not tell. Rosalie was coaxing; Koitska was refusing. But he was weakening. After minutes Chandler's shoulders shrugged; he nodded; and he was free.

"Have some more coffee, love," said Rosalie Pan with an air of triumph.

Chandler waited. He did not understand what was going on. It was up to her to enlighten him, and finally she smiled and said: "Perhaps you can join us, love. Don't say yes or no. It isn't up to you ... and besides you can't know whether you want it or not until you try. So be patient a moment."

Chandler frowned; then felt his body taken. His lips barked: "*Khorashaw!*" His body got up and walked to the wall of Rosalie's room. A picture on the wall moved aside and there was a safe. Flick, flick, Chandler's own fingers dialed a combination so rapidly that he could not follow it. The door of the safe opened.

And Chandler was free, and Rosalie excitedly leaping out of the bed behind him, careless of the wisp of nylon that was her only garment, crowding softly, warmly past him to reach inside the safe. She lifted out a coronet very like her own.

She paused and looked at Chandler.

"You can't do anything to harm us with this one, love," she warned. "Do you understand that? I mean, don't get the idea that you can tell anyone anything. Or do something violent. You can't. I'll be right with you, and Koitska will be monitoring the transmitter." She handed him the coronet. "Now, when you see something interesting, you move right in. You'll see how. It's the easiest thing in the world, and—Oh, here. Put it on."

Chandler swallowed with difficulty.

She was offering him the tool that had given the execs the world. A blunter, weaker tool than her own, no doubt. But still it was power beyond his imagining. He stood there frozen as she slipped it on his head. Sprung electrodes pressed gently against his temples and behind his ears. She touched something....

Chandler stood motionless for a moment and then, without effort, floated free of his own body.

Floating. Floating; a jellyfish floating. Trailing tentacles that whipped and curled, floating over the sandbound claws and chitin that clashed beneath, floating over the world's people, and them not even knowing, not even seeing....

Chandler floated.

He was up, out and away. He was drifting. Around him was no-color. He saw nothing of space or size, he only saw, or did not see but felt-smelled-tasted, people. They were the sandbound. They were the creatures that crawled and struggled below, and his tentacles lashed out at them.

Beside him floated another. The girl? It had a shape, but not a human shape—a pair of great projecting spheres, a cinctured area-rule shape. Female. Yes, undoubtedly the girl. It waved a member at him and he understood he was beckoned. He followed.

Two of sandbound ones were ahead.

The female shape slipped into one, he into the other. It was as easy to invest this form with his own will as it was to command the muscles of his hand. They looked at each other out of sandbound eyes. "You're a boy!" Chandler laughed. The girl laughed: "You're an old washerwoman!" They were in a kitchen where fish simmered on an electric stove. The boy-Rosie wrinkled his-her nose, blinked and was empty. Only the small almond-eyed boy was left, and he began to cry convulsively. Chandler understood. He floated out after her.

This way, this way, she gestured. A crowd of mudbound figures. She slipped into one, he into another. They were in a bus now, rocking along an inland road, all men, all roughly dressed. Laborers going to clear a new section of Oahu of its split-level debris, Chandler thought, and looked for the girl in one of the men's eyes, could not find her, hesitated and—floated. She was hovering impatiently. This way!

He followed, and followed.

They were a hundred people doing a hundred things. They lingered a few moments as a teen-age couple holding hands in the twilight of the beach. They fled from a room where Chandler was an old woman dying on a bed, and Rosalie a stolid, uncaring nurse beside her. They played follow-the-leader through the audience of a Honolulu movie theater, and sought each other, laughing, among the fish stalls of King Street. Then Chandler turned to Rosalie to speak and ... it all went out ... the scene disappeared ... he opened his eyes, and he was back in his own flesh.

He was lying on the pastel pile rug in Rosalie's bedroom.

He got up, rubbing the side of his face. He had tumbled, it seemed. Rosalie was lying on the bed.

In a moment she opened her eyes.

"Well, love?"

He said hoarsely, "What made it stop?"

She shrugged. "Koitska turned you off. Tired of monitoring us, I expect—it's been an hour. I'm surprised his patience lasted this long."

She stretched luxuriously, but he was too full of what had happened even to see the white grace of her body. "Did you like it, love? Would you like to have it forever?"

XIII

For nine days Chandler's status remained in limbo. He spent that day in a state of numb bemusement, remembering the men and women he had worn like garments, appalled and exhilarated. He did not see Rosalie again that day, she kept to her room and he locked out. He was still a lapdog, but a lapdog with a dream dangling before him. He went to sleep that night thinking that he was a dog who might become a god, and he had eight days left.

The next day Rosalie wheedled another hour of the coronet from Koitska. They explored the ice caves on Mount Rainier in the bodies of two sick, starving hermits and wandered arm in arm near the destroyed International Bridge at Niagara, breathing the spray of the unchanging Falls. He had seven days left.

They passed like a dream. He saw a great deal of the inner workings of the exec, more than before. He had privileges. He was up for membership in the club. Rosalie had proposed him. He talked with two Czechoslovakian ballet dancers in their persons, and a succession of heavily accented Russians and Poles and Japanese through the mouth of the beach boy who came to tend Rosalie's garden. He thought they liked him and was pleased that he penetrated where he had not been allowed before ... until he realized that these freedoms were in themselves a threat. They allowed him this contact so that they could look him over. If they rejected him they would have to kill him, because he had seen too much. But by then a week had passed, and another day, and though he did not know it he had only one day left. Rosalie did what she could to make the days of waiting easy for him.

"Embarrassing, isn't it? I went through it myself, love. Come have a drink."

"When will I know?" he demanded fretfully.

"Well." She hesitated. "I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you, love, under the circumstances—"

He knew what the circumstances were.

"I guess I can tell you. You need just over seven hundred votes to come in. You've got—" Her eyes glazed for a moment. She was looking through some clerk's eyes, somewhere on the island. "You've got about a hundred and fifty so far. Takes time, doesn't it? But it's worth it in the end."

"How many 'no' votes?"

"None." She said gently, "You'll never have but one, love, because that's all it takes."

He stared. The girl gook took up his hand and kissed it lightly. "One blackball's enough, yes, but never fear. Rosie's on your side."

Restlessly Chandler stood up and made himself another drink. His head was beginning to buzz. They had been drinking on her sun terrace since early afternoon.

Rosalie came up beside him soothingly. "I know how you feel. Want me to tell you about when I went through it?"

"Sure," he said, stirring the ice around in the glass and drinking it down. He made another drink absently, hardly hearing what she said, although the sound of her voice was welcome.

"Oh, that lousy headdress! It weighed twenty pounds, and they put it on with hatpins." He caressed her absently. He had figured out that she was talking about the night New York was bombed. "I was in the middle of the big first-act curtain number when—" her face was strained, even after years, even now that she was herself one of the godlike ones—"when something took hold of me. I ran off the stage and right out through the front door. There was a cab waiting. As soon as I got in I was free, and the driver took off like a lunatic through the tunnel, out to Newark Airport. I tell you, I was scared! At the toll booth I screamed but my—friend—let go of the driver for a minute, smashed a trailer-truck into a police car, and in the confusion we got away. He took me over again at the airport. I ran bare as a bird into a plane that was just ready to take off. The pilot was under control.... We flew eleven hours, and I wore that damn feather headdress all the way."

She held out her glass for a refill. Chandler busied himself slicing a lime for her drink. Now she was talking about her friend. "I hadn't seen him in six years. I was just a kid, living in Islip. He was with a Russian trade commission next door, in an old mansion. Well, he was one of the ones, back in Russia, that came up with these." She touched her coronet. "So," she said brightly, "he put me up for membership and by and by they gave me one. You see? It's all very simple, except the waiting."

Chandler pulled her down on the couch beside him and made a toast. "Your friend."

"He's a nice guy," she said moodily, sipping her drink. "You know how careful I am about getting exercise and so on? It's partly because of him. You would have liked him, love, only—well, it turned out that he liked me well enough, but he began to like what he could get through the coronet a lot more. He got fat. A lot of them are awfully fat, love," she said seriously. "That's why they need people like me. And you. Replacements. Heart trouble, liver trouble, what can they expect when they lie in bed day in and day out, taking their lives through other people's bodies? I won't let myself go that way.... It's a temptation. You know, almost every day I find some poor woman on a diet and spend a solid hour eating cream puffs and gravies. How they must hate me!"

She grinned, leaned back and kissed him.

Chandler put his arms around the girl and returned the kiss, hard. She did not draw away. She clung to him, and he could feel in the warmth of her body, the sound of her breath that she was responding. The drink made him reckless; the last two weeks made him doubtful; he was torn. He could tell that there was no resistance in her body, but the coronet made it in doubt; she could fling him away from her with one touch of the mind. Yet she didn't do it—

"*Vi myenya zvali?*" his own voice demanded, harsh and mocking.

The girl tried to push him away. Her eyes were bright and huge, staring at him.
"Andrei!"

"*Da, Andrei! Kok eto dosadno!*"

"Andrei, please. I know that you are—"

"Filthy!" screamed Chandler's voice. "How can you? I do not allow this carrion to touch you so—not vot is mine—I do not allow him to live!" And Chandler dropped her and leaped to his feet. He fought. He struggled; but only in his mind, and helplessly; his body carried him out of the room, running and stumbling, out into the drive, into her waiting car and away.

He drove like a madman on roads he had never seen before. The car's gears bellowed pain at their abuse, the tires screamed.

Chandler, prisoned inside himself, recognized that touch. Koitska! He knew who Rosalie Pan's lover had been. If he had been in doubt his own voice, raucous and hysterical with rage, told him the truth. All that long drive it screamed threats and obscenities at him, in Russian and tortured English.

The car stopped in front of the TWA facility and, still prisoned, his body hurried in, bruising itself deliberately against every doorpost and stick of furniture. "I could have smashed you in the car!" his voice screamed hoarsely. "It is too merciful. I could have thrown you into the sea! It is not painful enough."

In the garage his body stopped and looked wildly around. "Knives, torches," his lips chanted. "Shall I gouge out eyes? Slit throat?"

A jar of battery acid stood on a shelf, "*Da, da!*" screamed Chandler, stumbling toward it. "One drink eh? And I von't even stay with you to feel it, the pain—just a moment—then it eats the gut, the long slow dying...." And all the time the body that was Chandler's was clawing the cap off the jar, tilting it—

He dropped the jar, and leaped aside instinctively as it splintered at his feet.

He was free!

Before he could move he was seized again, stumbled, crashed into a wall—

And was free again.

He stood waiting for a moment, unable to believe it; but he was still free. The alien invader did not seize his mind. There was no sound. No one moved. No gun fired at him, no danger threatened.

He *was* free; he took a step, turned, shook his head and proved it.

He was free and, in a moment, realized that he was in the building with the fat bloated body of the man who wanted to murder him, the body that in its own strength could scarcely stand erect.

It was suicide to attempt to harm an exec. He would certainly lose his life—except—that was gone already anyhow; he had lost it. He had nothing left to lose.

XIV

Chandler loped silently up the stairs to Koitska's suite.

Halfway up he tripped and sprawled, half stunning himself against the stair rail. It had not been his own clumsiness, he was sure. Koitska had caught at his mind again, but only feebly. Chandler did not wait. Whatever was interfering with Koitska's control, some distraction or malfunction of the coronet or whatever, Chandler could not bank on its lasting.

The door was locked.

He found a heavy mahogany chair, with a back of solid carved wood. He flung it onto his shoulders, grunting, and ran with it into the door, a bull driven frantic, lunging out of its querencia to batter the wall of the arena. The door splintered.

Chandler was gashed with long slivers of wood, but he was through the door.

Koitska lay sprawled along his couch, eyes staring.

Alive or dead? Chandler did not wait to find out but sprang at him hands outstretched. The staring eyes flickered; Chandler felt the pull at his mind. But Koitska's strength was almost gone. The eyes glazed, and Chandler was upon him. He ripped the coronet off and flung it aside, and the huge bulk of Koitska swung paralytically off the couch and fell to the floor.

The man was helpless. He lay breathing like a steam engine, one eye pressed shut against the leg of a coffee table, the other looking up at Chandler.

Chandler was panting almost as hard as the helpless mass at his feet. He was safe for a moment. At the most for a moment, for at any time one of the other execs might dart down out of the mind-world into the real, looking at the scene through Chandler's eyes and surely deducing what would be no more to his favor than the truth. He had to get away from there. If he seemed busy in another room perhaps they would go away again. Chandler turned his back on the paralyzed monster to flee. It would be even better to try to lose himself in Honolulu—if he could get that far—he did not in his own flesh know how to fly the helicopter that was parked in the yard or he would try to get farther still.

But as he turned he was caught.

Chandler turned to see Koitska lying there, and screamed.

His eyes were staring at Koitska. It was too late. He was possessed by someone, he did not know whom. Though it made little enough difference, he thought, watching his own hands reach out to touch the staring face.

His body straightened, his eyes looked around the room, he went to the desk. "Love," he cried to himself, "what's the matter with Koitska? Write, for God's sake!" And he took a pencil in his hand and was free.

He hesitated, then scribbled: *I don't know. I think he had a stroke. Who are you?*

The other mind slipped tentatively into his, scanning the paper. "Rosie, you idiot, who did you think?" he said furiously. "What have you done?"

Nothing, he began instinctively, then scratched the word out. Briskly and exactly he wrote: *He was going to kill me, but he had some kind of an attack. I took his coronet away. I was going to run.*

"Oh, you fool," he told himself shrilly a moment later. Chandler's body knelt beside the wheezing fat lump, taking its pulse. The faint, fitful throb meant nothing to Chandler; probably meant nothing to Rosie either, for his body stood up, hesitated, shook its head. "You've done it now," he sobbed, and was surprised to find he was weeping real tears. "Oh, love, why? I could have taken care of Koitska—somehow—No, maybe I couldn't," he said frantically, breaking down. "I don't know what to do. Do you have any ideas—outside of running?"

It took him several seconds to write the one word, but it was really all he could find to write. *No*.

His lips twisted as his eyes read the word. "Well," he said practically, "I guess that's the end, love. I mean, I give up."

He got up, turned around the room. "I don't know," he told himself worriedly. "There might be a chance—if we could hush this up. I'd better get a doctor. He'll have to use your body, so don't be surprised if there's someone and it isn't me. Maybe he can pull Andrei through. Maybe Andrei'll forgive you then—Or if he dies," Chandler's voice schemed as his eyes stared at the rasping motionless hulk, "we can say you broke down the door to *help* him. Only you'll have to put his coronet back on, so it won't look suspicious. Besides that will keep anyone from occupying him. Do that, love. Hurry." And he was free.

Gingerly Chandler crossed the floor.

He did not like to touch the dying animal that wheezed before him, liked even less to give it back the weapon that, if it had only a few moments of sentience again, it would use to kill him. But the girl was right. Without the helmet any wandering curiosity-himself.¹ The helmet would shield him from—

Would shield anyone from—

Would shield Chandler himself from possession if he used it!

He did not hesitate. He slipped the helmet on his head, snapped the switch and in a moment stood free of his own body, in the gray, luminous limbo, looking down at the pallid tracteries that lay beneath.

He did not hesitate then either.

He did not pause to think or plan; it was as though he had planned every step, in long detail, over many years. Chandler for at least a few moments had the freedom to battle the execs on their own ground, the freedom that any mourning parent or husband in the outside world would know well how to use.

Chandler also knew. He was a weapon. He might die—but it was not a great thing to die, millions had done it for nothing under the rule of the execs, and he was privileged to be able to die trying to kill *them*.

He stepped callously around the hulk on the floor and found a door behind the couch, a door and a hall, and at the end of that hall a large room that had once perhaps been a message center. Now it held rack after rack of electronic gear. He recognized it without elation. It had had to be there.

¹ Transcriber's note: As printed. Missing words, probably printer error.

It was the main transmitter for all the coronets of the exec.

He had only to pull one switch—that one there—and power would cease to flow. The coronets would be dead. The execs would be only humans. In five minutes he could destroy enough parts so that it would be at least a week's work to build it again, and in a week the slaves in Honolulu—somehow he could reach them, somehow he would tell them of their chance—could root out and destroy every exec on all the islands.

Of course, there was the standby transmitter he himself had helped to build.

He realized tardily that Koitska would have made some arrangement for starting that up by remote control.

He put down the tool-kit with which he had been advancing on the racks of transistors, and paused to think.

He was a fool, he saw after a moment. He could not destroy this installation—not yet—not until he had used it. He remembered to sit down so that his body would not crash to the floor, and then he sent himself out and up, to scan the nearby area.

There was no one there, nobody within a mile or more, except the feeble glimmer that was dying Koitska. He did not enter that body. He returned to his own long enough to barricade the door—it had a strong-looking lock, but he shouldered furniture against it too—and then he went up and out, grateful to Rosalie, who had taught him how to navigate in the curious world of the mind, flashing across water, under a mind-controlled plane, to the island of Hilo.

There *had* to be someone near the standby installation.

He searched; but there was no one. No one in the building. No one near the ruined field. No one in the village of the dead nearby. He was desperate; he became frantic; he was on the point of giving up, and then he found—someone? But it was a personality feebler than stricken Koitska's, a bare swampfire glow.

No matter. He entered it.

At once he screamed silently and left it again. He had never known such pain. A terrifying fire in the belly, a thunder past any migraine in the head, a thousand lesser aches and woes in every member. He could not imagine what person lived in such distress; but grimly he forced himself to enter again.

Moaning—it was astonishing how thick and animal-like the man's voice was—Chandler forced his borrowed body stumbling through the jungle. Time was growing very short. He drove it gasping at an awkward run across the airfield, dodged around one wrecked plane and blundered through the door. The pain was intolerable. He was hardly able to maintain control.

Chandler stretched out the borrowed hand to pick up a heavy wrench even while he thought. But the hand would not grasp. He brought it to the weak, watering eyes. The hand had no fingers. It ended in a ball of scar tissue. The left hand was nearly as misshapen.

Panicked, Chandler retreated from the body in a flash, back to his own; and then he began to think.

It was, it had to be, the creature he had seen in the village of the dead. A leper. One of the few who escaped from the colony at Molokai. Chandler drove himself back to that

body and, though it could not work well, he could make it turn a frequency dial, using its clubbed hands like sticks. He could make it throw a switch. He then caused it to place the toothed edge of a rusting saw on the ground and strike at it with its throat in a sort of reverse guillotine. Chandler could not see that he had a choice; he dared not have that creature left where it might be seized the moment he quit its body. It was better dead.

After that it all became easy.

In his own body he destroyed the installation in Oahu. A few minutes at Koitska's work bench, and he had changed the frequency on his own coronet to transmit on the new band the leper's touch had given the Hilo equipment.

He worked rapidly and without errors, one ear cocked for the sound of someone coming to threaten what he was doing (the sound never came), impatient to get the job done.

He was very impatient, for when he was done he would be the only exec.

And the execs would be only slaves.

XV

Chandler strolled out of the TWA building, very tired.

It was dawn. His job was done. He carried the coronet, the only working coronet in the world, in his hand. He had spent the night killing, killing, killing, and blood had washed away his passions; he was spent. He had killed every exec he could find, in widening circles from the building where his body lay. He had slit his dozen throats and fired bullets into his hundred hearts and hundred brains; he had entered bodies only long enough to feel for a coronet, and if it was there the body was doomed; and he stopped only when it occurred to him he wasn't even doing that much any more. He had probably killed some dozens of slaves, as well as all the execs in reach. And when he stopped the orgy of killing he had made one last search of the nearer portions of the island and found no one alive, and he had then realized that one of the closest execs had been Rosalie Pan.

He knew that in a while he would feel very badly for having killed that girl (which could she have been? The one with the shotgun in the mouth? The one whose intestines he had spilled with a silver letteropener in a whim of hara-kiri?), but just now he was too worn.

He was Chandler the giant killer, who had destroyed the creatures who had destroyed a world, but he was all tired out. He poked at the filigree of the coronet absently, as a man might caress the pretty rug which once had been the skin of a tiger that almost killed him. It was all that was left of the exec power. Who held this single coronet still held the world.

Of course, said a sly and treasonable voice in a corner of his mind, the job was not really done.

Not quite. Not all.

The job would not be done until it was impossible for anyone to find enough of the installations to be able to reconstruct them.

And then, said the voice, while Chandler stared at the dawn, listening, what about the *good* things the exec had done? Would he not be foolish to throw away so casually this one, unique chance to right every imaginable wrong the world might do him?

Chandler went back into the building and brewed some strong black coffee. While it was bubbling on the stove he slipped the coronet back atop his head. Only for a while, he promised. A very little while. He pledged himself solemnly that it would be just long enough to clean up all loose ends—not a moment longer, he pledged. And knew that he was lying.

THE FIVE HELLS OF ORION

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I

His name was Herrell McCray and he was scared.

As best he could tell, he was in a sort of room no bigger than a prison cell. Perhaps it was a prison cell. Whatever it was, he had no business in it; for five minutes before he had been spaceborne, on the Long Jump from Earth to the thriving colonies circling Betelgeuse Nine. McCray was ship's navigator, plotting course corrections—not that there were any, ever; but the reason there were none was that the check-sightings were made every hour of the long flight. He had read off the azimuth angles from the computer sights, automatically locked on their beacon stars, and found them correct; then out of long habit confirmed the locking mechanism visually. It was only a personal quaintness; he had done it a thousand times. And while he was looking at Betelgeuse, Rigel and Saiph ... it happened.

The room was totally dark, and it seemed to be furnished with a collection of hard, sharp, sticky and knobby objects of various shapes and a number of inconvenient sizes. McCray tripped over something that rocked under his feet and fell against something that clattered hollowly. He picked himself up, braced against something that smelled dangerously of halogen compounds, and scratched his shoulder, right through his space-tunic, against something that vibrated as he touched it.

McCray had no idea where he was, and no way to find out.

Not only was he in darkness, but in utter silence as well. No. Not quite utter silence.

Somewhere, just at the threshold of his senses, there was something like a voice. He could not quite hear it, but it was there. He sat as still as he could, listening; it remained elusive.

Probably it was only an illusion.

But the room itself was hard fact. McCray swore violently and out loud.

It was crazy and impossible. There simply was no way for him to get from a warm, bright navigator's cubicle on *Starship Jodrell Bank* to this damned, dark, dismal hole of a place where everything was out to hurt him and nothing explained what was going on. He cried aloud in exasperation: "If I could only see!"

He tripped and fell against something that was soft, slimy and, like baker's dough, not at all resilient.

A flickering halo of pinkish light appeared. He sat up, startled. He was looking at something that resembled a suit of medieval armor.

It was, he saw in a moment, not armor but a spacesuit. But what was the light? And what were these other things in the room?

Wherever he looked, the light danced along with his eyes. It was like having tunnel vision or wearing blinders. He could see what he was looking at, but he could see nothing else. And the things he could see made no sense. A spacesuit, yes; he knew that he could construct a logical explanation for that with no trouble—maybe a subspace meteorite striking the *Jodrell Bank*, an explosion, himself knocked out, brought here in a suit ... well, it was an explanation with more holes than fabric, like a fisherman's net, but at least it was rational.

How to explain a set of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*? A space-ax? Or the old-fashioned child's rocking-chair, the chemistry set—or, most of all, the scrap of gaily printed fabric that, when he picked it up, turned out to be a girl's scanty bathing suit? It was slightly reassuring, McCray thought, to find that most of the objects were more or less familiar. Even the child's chair—why, he'd had one more or less like that himself, long before he was old enough to go to school. But what were they doing here?

Not everything he saw was familiar. The walls of the room itself were strange. They were not metal or plaster or knotty pine; they were not papered, painted or overlaid with stucco. They seemed to be made of some sort of hard organic compound, perhaps a sort of plastic or processed cellulose. It was hard to tell colors in the pinkish light. But they seemed to have none. They were "neutral"—the color of aged driftwood or unbleached cloth.

Three of the walls were that way, and the floor and ceiling. The fourth wall was something else. Areas in it had the appearance of gratings; from them issued the pungent, distasteful halogen odor. They might be ventilators, he thought; but if so the air they brought in was worse than what he already had.

McCray was beginning to feel more confident. It was astonishing how a little light made an impossible situation bearable, how quickly his courage flowed back when he could see again.

He stood still, thinking. Item, a short time ago—subjectively it seemed to be minutes—he had been aboard the *Jodrell Bank* with nothing more on his mind than completing his check-sighting and meeting one of the female passengers for coffee. Item, apart from being shaken up and—he admitted it—scared damn near witless, he did not seem to be hurt. Item, wherever he was now, it became, not so much what had happened to him, but what had happened to the ship?

He allowed that thought to seep into his mind. Suppose there had been an accident to the *Jodrell Bank*.

He could, of course, be dead. All this could be the fantasies of a cooling brain.

McCray grinned into the pink-lit darkness. The thought had somehow refreshed him, like icewater between rounds, and with a clearing head he remembered what a spacesuit was good for.

It held a radio.

He pressed the unsealing tabs, slipped his hand into the vacant chest of the suit and pulled out the hand mike. "This is Herrell McCray," he said, "calling the *Jodrell Bank*."

No response. He frowned. "This is Herrell McCray, calling *Jodrell Bank*."

"Herrell McCray, calling anybody, come in, please."

But there was no answer.

Thoughtfully he replaced the microphone. This was ultrawave radio, something more than a million times faster than light, with a range measured, at least, in hundreds of light-years. If there was no answer, he was a good long way from anywhere.

Of course, the thing might not be operating.

He reached for the microphone again—

He cried aloud.

The pinkish lights went out. He was in the dark again, worse dark than before.

For before the light had gone, McCray had seen what had escaped his eyes before. The suit and the microphone were clear enough in the pinkish glimmer; but the hand—his own hand, cupped to hold the microphone—he had not seen at all. Nor his arm. Nor, in one fleeting moment of study, his chest.

McCray could not see any part of his own body at all.

II

Someone else could.

Someone was watching Herrell McCray, with the clinical fascination of a biochemist observing the wiggings of paramecia in a new antibiotic—and with the prayerful emotions of a starving, shipwrecked, sailor, watching the inward bobbing drift of a wave-born cask that *may* contain food.

Suppose you call him "Hatcher" (and suppose you call it a "him.") Hatcher was not exactly male, because his race had no true males; but it did have females and he was certainly not that. Hatcher did not in any way look like a human being, but they had features in common.

If Hatcher and McCray had somehow managed to strike up an acquaintance, they might have got along very well. Hatcher, like McCray, was an adventurous soul, young, able, well-learned in the technical sciences of his culture. Both enjoyed games—McCray baseball, poker and three-dimensional chess; Hatcher a number of sports which defy human description. Both held positions of some importance—considering their ages—in the affairs of their respective worlds.

Physically they were nothing alike. Hatcher was a three-foot, hard-shelled sphere of jelly. He had "arms" and "legs," but they were not organically attached to "himself." They were snakelike things which obeyed the orders of his brain as well as your mind can make your toes curl; but they did not touch him directly. Indeed, they worked as well a yard or a quarter-mile away as they did when, rarely, they rested in the crevices they had been irformed from in his "skin." At greater distances they worked less well, for reasons irrelevant to the Law of Inverse Squares.

Hatcher's principal task at this moment was to run the "probe team" which had McCray under observation, and he was more than a little excited. His members, disposed about the room where he had sent them on various errands, quivered and shook a little; yet they were the calmest limbs in the room; the members of the other team workers were in a state of violent commotion.

The probe team had had a shock.

"Paranormal powers," muttered Hatcher's second in command, and the others mumbled agreement. Hatcher ordered silence, studying the specimen from Earth.

After a long moment he turned his senses from the Earthman. "Incredible—but it's true enough," he said. "I'd better report. Watch him," he added, but that was surely unnecessary. Their job was to watch McCray, and they would do their job; and even more, not one of them could have looked away to save his life from the spectacle of a creature as odd and, from their point of view, hideously alien as Herrell McCray.

Hatcher hurried through the halls of the great buried structure in which he worked, toward the place where the supervising council of all probes would be in permanent session. They admitted him at once.

Hatcher identified himself and gave a quick, concise report:

"The subject recovered consciousness a short time ago and began to inspect his enclosure. His method of doing so was to put his own members in physical contact with the various objects in the enclosure. After observing him do this for a time we concluded he might be unable to see and so we illuminated his field of vision for him.

"This appeared to work well for a time. He seemed relatively undisturbed. However, he then reverted to physical-contact, manipulating certain appurtenances of an artificial skin we had provided for him.

"He then began to vibrate the atmosphere by means of resonating organs in his breathing passage.

"Simultaneously, the object he was holding, attached to the artificial skin, was discovered to be generating paranormal forces."

The supervising council rocked with excitement. "You're sure?" demanded one of the councilmen.

"Yes, sir. The staff is preparing a technical description of the forces now, but I can say that they are electromagnetic vibrations modulating a carrier wave of very high speed, and in turn modulated by the vibrations of the atmosphere caused by the subject's own breathing."

"Fantastic," breathed the councillor, in a tone of dawning hope. "How about communicating with him, Hatcher? Any progress?"

"Well ... not much, sir. He suddenly panicked. We don't know why; but we thought we'd better pull back and let him recover for a while."

The council conferred among itself for a moment, Hatcher waiting. It was not really a waste of time for him; with the organs he had left in the probe-team room, he was in fairly close touch with what was going on—knew that McCray was once again fumbling among the objects in the dark, knew that the team-members had tried illuminating the room for him briefly and again produced the rising panic.

Still, Hatcher fretted. He wanted to get back.

"Stop fidgeting," commanded the council leader abruptly. "Hatcher, you are to establish communication at once."

"But, sir...." Hatcher swung closer, his thick skin quivering slightly; he would have gestured if he had brought members with him to gesture with. "We've done everything we dare. We've made the place homey for him—" actually, what he said

was more like, *we've warmed the biophysical nuances of his enclosure*—"and tried to guess his needs; and we're frightening him half to death. We *can't* go faster. This creature is in no way similar to us, you know. He relies on paranormal forces—heat, light, kinetic energy—for his life. His chemistry is not ours, his processes of thought are not ours, his entire organism is closer to the inanimate rocks of a sea-bottom than to ourselves."

"Understood, Hatcher. In your first report you stated these creatures were intelligent."

"Yes, sir. But not in our way."

"But in *a* way, and you must learn that way. I know." One lobster-claw shaped member drifted close to the councillor's body and raised itself in an admonitory gesture. "You want time. But we don't have time, Hatcher. Yours is not the only probe team working. The Central Masses team has just turned in a most alarming report."

"Have they secured a subject?" Hatcher demanded jealously.

The councillor paused. "Worse than that, Hatcher. I am afraid their subjects have secured one of them. One of them is missing."

There was a moment's silence. Frozen, Hatcher could only wait. The council room was like a tableau in a museum until the councillor spoke again, each council member poised over his locus-point, his members drifting about him.

Finally the councillor said, "I speak for all of us, I think. If the Old Ones have seized one of our probers our time margin is considerably narrowed. Indeed, we may not have any time at all. You must do everything you can to establish communication with your subject."

"But the danger to the specimen—" Hatcher protested automatically.

"—is no greater," said the councillor, "than the danger to every one of us if we do not find allies *now*."

Hatcher returned to his laboratory gloomily.

It was just like the council to put the screws on; they had a reputation for demanding results at any cost—even at the cost of destroying the only thing you had that would make results possible.

Hatcher did not like the idea of endangering the Earthman. It cannot be said that he was emotionally involved; it was not pity or sympathy that caused him to regret the dangers in moving too fast toward communication. Not even Hatcher had quite got over the revolting physical differences between the Earthman and his own people. But Hatcher did not want him destroyed. It had been difficult enough getting him here.

Hatcher checked through the members that he had left with the rest of his team and discovered that there were no immediate emergencies, so he took time to eat. In Hatcher's race this was accomplished in ways not entirely pleasant to Earthmen. A slit in the lower hemisphere of his body opened, like a purse, emitting a thin, pussy, fetid fluid which Hatcher caught and poured into a disposal trough at the side of the eating room. He then stuffed the slit with pulpy vegetation the texture of kelp; it closed, and his body was supplied with nourishment for another day.

He returned quickly to the room.

His second in command was busy, but one of the other team workers reported—nothing new—and asked about Hatcher's appearance before the council. Hatcher passed the question off. He considered telling his staff about the disappearance of the Central Masses team member, but decided against it. He had not been told it was secret. On the other hand, he had not been told it was not. Something of this importance was not lightly to be gossiped about. For endless generations the threat of the Old Ones had hung over his race, those queer, almost mythical beings from the Central Masses of the galaxy. One brush with them, in ages past, had almost destroyed Hatcher's people. Only by running and hiding, bearing one of their planets with them and abandoning it—with its population—as a decoy, had they arrived at all.

Now they had detected mapping parties of the Old Ones dangerously near the spiral arm of the galaxy in which their planet was located, they had begun the Probe Teams to find some way of combating them, or of fleeing again.

But it seemed that the Probe Teams themselves might be betraying their existence to their enemies—

"Hatcher!"

The call was urgent; he hurried to see what it was about. It was his second in command, very excited. "What is it?" Hatcher demanded.

"Wait...."

Hatcher was patient; he knew his assistant well. Obviously something was about to happen. He took the moment to call his members back to him for feeding; they dodged back to their niches on his skin, fitted themselves into their vestigial slots, poured back their wastes into his own circulation and ingested what they needed from the meal he had just taken.... "Now!" cried the assistant. "Look!"

At what passed among Hatcher's people for a viewing console an image was forming. Actually it was the assistant himself who formed it, not a cathode trace or projected shadow; but it showed what it was meant to show.

Hatcher was startled. "Another one! And—is it a different species? Or merely a different sex?"

"Study the probe for yourself," the assistant invited.

Hatcher studied him frostily; his patience was not, after all, endless. "No matter," he said at last. "Bring the other one in."

And then, in a completely different mood, "We may need him badly. We may be in the process of killing our first one now."

"Killing him, Hatcher?"

Hatcher rose and shook himself, his mindless members floating away like puppies dislodged from suck. "Council's orders," he said. "We've got to go into Stage Two of the project at once."

Before Stage Two began, or before Herrell McCray realized it had begun, he had an inspiration.

The dark was absolute, but he remembered where the spacesuit had been and groped his way to it and, yes, it had what all spacesuits had to have. It had a light. He found the toggle that turned it on and pressed it.

Light. White, flaring, Earthly light, that showed everything—even himself.

"God bless," he said, almost beside himself with joy. Whatever that pinkish, dancing halo had been, it had thrown him into a panic; now that he could see his own hand again, he could blame the weird effects on some strange property of the light.

At the moment he heard the click that was the beginning of Stage Two.

He switched off the light and stood for a moment, listening.

For a second he thought he heard the far-off voice, quiet, calm and almost hopeless, that he had sensed hours before; but then that was gone. Something else was gone. Some faint mechanical sound that had hardly registered at the time, but was not missing. And there was, perhaps, a nice new sound that had not been there before; a very faint, an almost inaudible elfin hiss.

McCray switched the light on and looked around. There seemed to be no change.

And yet, surely, it was warmer in here.

He could see no difference; but perhaps, he thought, he could smell one. The unpleasant halogen odor from the grating was surely stronger now. He stood there, perplexed.

A tinny little voice from the helmet of the space suit said sharply, amazement in its tone, "McCray, is that you? Where the devil are you calling from?"

He forgot smell, sound and temperature and leaped for the suit. "This is Herrell McCray," he cried. "I'm in a room of some sort, apparently on a planet of approximate Earth mass. I don't know—"

"McCray!" cried the tiny voice in his ear. "Where are you? This is *Jodrell Bank* calling. Answer, please!"

"I *am* answering, damn it," he roared. "What took you so long?"

"Herrell McCray," droned the tiny voice in his ear, "Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank* responding to your message, acknowledge please. Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray...."

It kept on, and on.

McCray took a deep breath and thought. Something was wrong. Either they didn't hear him, which meant the radio wasn't transmitting, or—no. That was not it; they *had* heard him, because they were responding. But it seemed to take them so long....

Abruptly his face went white. Took them so long! He cast back in his mind, questing for a fact, unable to face its implications. When was it he called them? Two hours ago? Three?

Did that mean—did it *possibly* mean—that there was a lag of an hour or two each way? Did it, for example, mean that at the speed of his suit's paradio, millions of times faster than light, it took *hours* to get a message to the ship and back?

And if so ... where in the name of heaven was he?

Herrell McCray was a navigator, which is to say, a man who has learned to trust the evidence of mathematics and instrument readings beyond the guesses of his "common sense." When *Jodrell Bank*, hurtling faster than light in its voyage between stars, made its regular position check, common sense was a liar. Light bore false witness. The line of sight was trustworthy directly forward and directly after—sometimes not even then—and it took computers, sensing their data through instruments, to comprehend a star bearing and convert three fixes into a position.

If the evidence of his radio contradicted common sense, common sense was wrong. Perhaps it was impossible to believe what the radio's message implied; but it was not necessary to "believe," only to act.

McCray thumbed down the transmitter button and gave a concise report of his situation and his guesses. "I don't know how I got here. I don't know how long I've been gone, since I was unconscious for a time. However, if the transmission lag is a reliable indication—" he swallowed and went on—"I'd estimate I am something more than five hundred light-years away from you at this moment. That's all I have to say, except for one more word: Help."

He grinned sourly and released the button. The message was on its way, and it would be hours before he could have a reply. Therefore he had to consider what to do next.

He mopped his brow. With the droning, repetitious call from the ship finally quiet, the room was quiet again. And warm.

Very warm, he thought tardily; and more than that. The halogen stench was strong in his nostrils again.

Hurriedly McCray scrambled into the suit. By the time he was sealed down he was coughing from the bottom of his lungs, deep, tearing rasps that pained him, uncontrollable. Chlorine or fluorine, one of them was in the air he had been breathing. He could not guess where it had come from; but it was ripping his lungs out.

He flushed the interior of the suit out with a reckless disregard for the wastage of his air reserve, holding his breath as much as he could, daring only shallow gasps that made him retch and gag. After a long time he could breathe, though his eyes were spilling tears.

He could see the fumes in the room now. The heat was building up.

Automatically—now that he had put it on and so started its servo-circuits operating—the suit was cooling him. This was a deep-space suit, regulation garb when going outside the pressure hull of an FTL ship. It was good up to at least five hundred degrees in thin air, perhaps three or four hundred in dense. In thin air or in space it was the elastic joints and couplings that depolymerized when the heat grew too great; in dense air, with conduction pouring energy in faster than the cooling coils could suck it out and hurl it away, it was the refrigerating equipment that broke down.

McCray had no way of knowing just how hot it was going to get. Nor, for that matter, had the suit been designed to operate in a corrosive medium.

All in all it was time for him to do something.

Among the debris on the floor, he remembered, was a five-foot space-ax, tungsten-steel blade and springy aluminum shaft.

McCray caught it up and headed for the door. It felt good in his gauntlets, a rewarding weight; any weapon straightens the back of the man who holds it, and McCray was grateful for this one. With something concrete to do he could postpone questioning. Never mind why he had been brought here; never mind how. Never mind what he would, or could, do next; all those questions could recede into the background of his mind while he swung the ax and battered his way out of this poisoned oven.

Crash-clang! The double jolt ran up the shaft of the ax, through his gauntlets and into his arm; but he was making progress, he could see the plastic—or whatever it was—of the door. It was chipping out. Not easily, very reluctantly; but flaking out in chips that left a white powdery residue.

At this rate, he thought grimly, he would be an hour getting through it. Did he have an hour?

But it did not take an hour. One blow was luckier than the rest; it must have snapped the lock mechanism. The door shook and slid ajar. McCray got the thin of the blade into the crack and pried it wide.

He was in another room, maybe a hall, large and bare.

McCray put the broad of his back against the broken door and pressed it as nearly closed as he could; it might not keep the gas and heat out, but it would retard them.

The room was again unlighted—at least to McCray's eyes. There was not even that pink pseudo-light that had baffled him; here was nothing but the beam of his suit lamp. What it showed was cryptic. There were evidences of use: shelves, boxy contraptions that might have been cupboards, crude level surfaces attached to the walls that might have been workbenches. Yet they were queerly contrived, for it was not possible to guess from them much about the creatures who used them. Some were near the floor, some at waist height, some even suspended from the ceiling itself. A man would need a ladder to work at these benches and McCray, staring, thought briefly of many-armed blind giants or shapeless huge intelligent amoebae, and felt the skin prickle at the back of his neck.

He tapped half-heartedly at one of the closed cupboards, and was not surprised when it proved as refractory as the door. Undoubtedly he could batter it open, but it was not likely that much would be left of its contents when he was through; and there was the question of time.

But his attention was diverted by a gleam from one of the benches. Metallic parts lay heaped in a pile. He poked at them with a stiff-fingered gauntlet; they were oddly familiar. They were, he thought, very much like the parts of a bullet-gun.

In fact, they were. He could recognize barrel, chamber, trigger, even a couple of cartridges, neatly opened and the grains of powder stacked beside them. It was an older, clumsier model than the kind he had seen in survival locker, on the *Jodrell Bank*—and abruptly wished he were carrying now—but it was a pistol. Another trophy, like the strange assortment in the other room? He could not guess. But the others had been more familiar; they all have come from his own ship. He was prepared to swear that nothing like this antique had been aboard.

The drone began again in his ear, as it had at five-minute intervals all along:

"Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank* calling Herrell McCray...."

And louder, blaring, then fading to normal volume as the AVC circuits toned the signal down, another voice. A woman's voice, crying out in panic and fear: "*Jodrell Bank!* Where are you? Help!"

IV

Hatcher's second in command said: "He has got through the first survival test. In fact, he broke his way out! What next?"

"Wait!" Hatcher ordered sharply. He was watching the new specimen and a troublesome thought had occurred to him. The new one was female and seemed to be in pain; but it was not the pain that disturbed Hatcher, it was something far more immediate to his interests.

"I think," he said slowly, "that they are in contact."

His assistant vibrated startlement.

"I know," Hatcher said, "but watch. Do you see? He is going straight toward her."

Hatcher, who was not human, did not possess truly human emotions; but he did feel amazement when he was amazed, and fear when there was cause to be afraid. These specimens, obtained with so much difficulty, needed so badly, were his responsibility. He knew the issues involved much better than any of his helpers. They could only be surprised at the queer antics of the aliens with attached limbs and strange powers. Hatcher knew that this was not a freak show, but a matter of life and death. He said, musing:

"This new one, I cannot communicate with her, but I get—almost—a whisper, now and then. The first one, the male, nothing. But this female is perhaps not quite mute."

"Then shall we abandon him and work with her, forgetting the first one?"

Hatcher hesitated. "No," he said at last. "The male is responding well. Remember that when last this experiment was done every subject died; he is alive at least. But I am wondering. We can't quite communicate with the female—"

"But?"

"But I'm not sure that others can't."

The woman's voice was at such close range that McCray's suit radio made a useful RDF set. He located her direction easily enough, shielding the tiny built-in antenna with the tungsten-steel blade of the ax, while she begged him to hurry. Her voice was heavily accented, with some words in a language he did not recognize. She seemed to be in shock.

McCray was hardly surprised at that; he had been close enough to shock himself. He tried to reassure her as he searched for a way out of the hall, but in the middle of a word her voice stopped.

He hesitated, hefting the ax, glancing back at the way he had come. There had to be a way out, even if it meant chopping through a wall.

When he turned around again there was a door. It was oddly shaped and unlike the door he had hewn through, but clearly a door all the same, and it was open.

McCray regarded it grimly. He went back in his memory with meticulous care. Had he not looked at, this very spot a matter of moments before? He had. And had there been an open door then? There had not. There hadn't been even a shadowy outline of the three-sided, uneven opening that stood there now.

Still, it led in the proper direction. McCray added one more inexplicable fact to his file and walked through. He was in another hall—or tunnel—rising quite steeply to the right. By his reckoning it was the proper direction. He labored up it, sweating under the weight of the suit, and found another open door, this one round, and behind it—

Yes, there was the woman whose voice he had heard.

It was a woman, all right. The voice had been so strained that he hadn't been positive. Even now, short black hair might not have proved it, and she was lying face down but the waist and hips were a woman's, even though she wore a bulky, quilted suit of coveralls.

He knelt beside her and gently turned her face.

She was unconscious. Broad, dark face, with no make-up; she was apparently in her late thirties. She appeared to be Chinese.

She breathed, a little raggedly but without visible discomfort; her face was relaxed as though she were sleeping. She did not rouse as he moved her.

He realized she was breathing the air of the room they were in.

His instant first thought was that she was in danger of asphyxiation; he started to leap up to get, and put her into, the small, flimsy space suit he saw slumped in a corner. At second thought he realized that she would not be breathing so comfortably if the air were full of the poisonous reek that had driven him out of the first room.

There was an obvious conclusion to be drawn from that; perhaps he could economize on his own air reserve. Tentatively he cracked the seal of his faceplate and took a cautious breath. The faint reek of halogens was still there, but it was not enough even to make his eyes water, and the temperature of the air was merely pleasantly warm.

He shook her, but she did not wake.

He stood up and regarded her thoughtfully. It was a disappointment. Her voice had given him hope of a companion, someone to talk things over with, to compare notes—someone who, if not possessing any more answers than himself, could at least serve as a sounding-board in the give-and-take of discussion that might make some sort of sense out of the queerness that permeated this place.

What he had instead was another burden to carry, for she was unable to care for herself and surely he could not leave her in this condition.

He slipped off the helmet absently and pressed the buttons that turned off the suit's cooling units, looking around the chamber. It was bare except for a litter of irrelevant human articles—much like the one in which he himself had first appeared, except

that the articles were not *Jodrell Bank's*. A woven cane screen, some cooking utensils, a machine like a desk calculator, some books—he picked up one of the books and glanced at it. It was printed on coarse paper, and the text was in ideographs, Chinese, perhaps; he did not know Oriental languages.

McCray knew that the *Jodrell Bank* was not the only FTL vessel in this volume of space. The Betelgeuse run was a busy one, as FTL shipping lanes went. Almost daily departures from some point on Earth to one of the colonies, with equal traffic in the other direction.

Of course, if the time-lag in communication did not lie, he was no longer anywhere within that part of the sky; Betelgeuse was only a few hundred light-years from Sol, and subspace radio covered that distance in something like fifty minutes. But suppose the woman came from another ship; perhaps a Singapore or Tokyo vessel, on the same run. She might easily have been trapped as he was trapped. And if she were awake, he could find out from her what had happened, and thus learn something that might be of use.

Although it was hard to see what might be of use in these most unprecedented and unpleasant circumstances.

The drone from *Jodrell Bank* began again: "Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank* responding—"

He turned the volume down but did not dare turn it off. He had lost track of time and couldn't guess when they would respond to his last message. He needed to hear that response when it came. Meanwhile, what about his fellow-captive?

Her suit was only a flimsy work-about model, as airtight as his but without the bracing required for building jet propulsors into it. It contained air reserves enough, and limited water; but neither food nor emergency medical supplies.

McCray had both of these, of course. It was merely one more reason why he could not abandon her and go on ... if, that is, he could find some reason for going in one direction preferably to another, and if a wall would conveniently open again to let him go there.

He could give her an injection of a stimulant, he mused. Would that improve the situation? Not basically, he decided, with some regret. Sleep was a need, not a luxury; it would not help her to be awakened chemically, when body was demonstrating its need for rest by refusing to wake to a call. Anyway, if she were not seriously injured she would undoubtedly wake of her own accord before long.

He checked pulse and eye-pupils; everything normal, no evidence of bleeding or somatic shock.

So much for that. At least he had made one simple decision on his own, he thought with grim humor. To that extent he had reestablished his mastery of his own fate, and it made him feel a touch better.

Perhaps he could make some more. What about trying to find a way out of this place, for instance?

It was highly probable that they would not be able to stay here indefinitely, that was the first fact to take into account. Either his imagination was jumpy, or the reek of halogens was a bit stronger. In any case there was no guarantee that this place would

remain habitable any longer than the last, and he had to reckon with the knowledge that a spacesuit's air reserve was not infinite. These warrens might prove a death trap.

McCray paused, leaning on the haft of his ax, wondering how much of that was reason and how much panic. He knew that he wanted, more than anything to get out of this place, to see sky and stars, to be where no skulking creatures behind false panels in the walls, or peering through televiewers concealed in the furnishings, could trick and trap him. But did he have any reason to believe that he would be better off somewhere else? Might it not be even that this place was a sort of vivarium maintained for his survival—that the leak of poison gases and heat in the first room was not a deliberate thrust at his safety, but a failure of the shielding that alone could keep him alive?

He didn't know, and in the nature of things could not. But paradoxically the thought that escape might increase his danger made him all the more anxious to escape. He wanted to know. If death was waiting for him outside his chamber, McCray wanted to face it—now—while he was still in good physical shape.

While he was still sane. For there was a limit to how many phenomena he could store away in the back of his mind; sooner or later the contradictions, the puzzles, the fears would have to be faced.

Yet what could he do with the woman? Conceivably he could carry her; but could he also carry her suit? He did not dare take her without it. It would be no kindness to plunge her into another atmosphere of poison, and watch her die because he had taken her from her only hope of safety. Yet the suit weighed at least fifty pounds. His own was slightly more; the girl, say, a hundred and thirty. It added up to more mass than he could handle, at least for more than a few dozen yards.

The speaker in his helmet said suddenly: "Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank*. Your transmission received. We are vectoring and ranging your signal. Stand by. We will call again in ten minutes." And, in a different tone: "God help you, Mac. What the devil happened to you?"

It was a good question. McCray swore uselessly because he didn't know the answer.

He took wry pleasure in imagining what was going on aboard *Jodrell Bank* at that moment. At least not all the bewilderment was his own. They would be utterly baffled. As far as they were concerned, their navigator had been on the bridge at one moment and the next moment gone, tracelessly. That in itself was a major puzzle; the only way off an FTL ship in flight was in the direction called "suicide." That would have been their assumption, all right, as soon as they realized he was gone and checked the ship to make sure he was not for some reason wandering about in a cargo hold or unconscious in a closet after some hard-to-imagine attack from another crewman. They would have thought that somehow, crazily, he had got into a suit—there was the suit—and jumped out of a lock. But there would have been no question of going back to look for him. True, they could have tracked his subspace radio if he had used it. But what would have been the good of that? The first question, an all but unanswerable one, would be how long ago he had jumped. Even if they knew that, *Jodrell Bank*, making more than five hundred times light-speed, could not be stopped in fewer than a dozen light-years. They could hardly hope to return to even approximately the location in space where he might have jumped; and there was no hope of reaching a position, stopping, casting about, starting again—the accelerations were too enormous, a man too tiny a dust-mote.

And, of course, he would have been dead in the first place, anyway. The transition from FTL drive to normal space was instantly fatal except within the protecting shield of a ship's engines.

So they would have given him up and, hours later—or days, for he had lost track of time—they would have received his message. What would they make of that?

He didn't know. After all, he hardly knew what he made of it himself.

The woman still slept. The way back was still open. He could tell by sniffing the air that the poisons in the atmosphere were still gaining. Ahead there was nothing but blank walls, and the clutter of useless equipment littering the floor. Stolidly McCray closed his mind and waited.

The signal came at last.

"Mac, we have verified your position." The voice was that of Captain Tillinger, strained and shaking. "I don't know how you got there, but unless the readings lie you're the hell of a long way off. The bearing is identical with Messier object M-42 and the distance—" raggedly—"is compatible. About a thousand light-years from us, Mac. One way or another, you've been kidnaped. I—I—"

The voice hesitated, unable to say what it could not accept as fact but could not deny. "I think," it managed at last, "that we've finally come across those super-beings in space that we've wondered about."

Hatcher's detached limbs were quivering with excitement—and with more than excitement, because he was afraid. He was trying to conceal from the others just how afraid he was.

His second in command reported: "We have the second subject out of consciousness. How long do you want us to keep her that way?"

"Until I tell you otherwise! How about the prime subject?"

"We can't tell, Hatcher. But you were right. He is in communication with others, it seems, and by paranormal means." Hatcher noted the dismay in what his assistant said. He understood the dismay well enough. It was one thing to work on a project involving paranormal forces as an exercise in theory. It was something else entirely to see them in operation.

But there was more cause for dismay than that, and Hatcher alone knew just how bad the situation was. He summoned one of his own members to him and impressed on it a progress report for the Council. He sent it floating through the long warrens of his people's world, ordered his assistants back to their work and closed in his thoughts to consider what had happened.

These two creatures, with their command of forces in the paranormal—i.e., the electromagnetic—spectrum, seemed able to survive in the environments prepared for them. That was step one. No previous team had done as well. This was not the first time a probe team of his race had snatched a warmblooded biped from a spaceship for study—because their operation forces, psionic in nature, operated in non-Euclidean ways, it was easiest for them to make contact with the crew of a ship in the non-Euclidean space of FTL drive.

But it was the first time that the specimens had survived. He reviewed the work they had already done with the male specimen. He had shown himself unable to live in the

normal atmospheric conditions of Hatcher's world; but that was to be expected, after all, and the creature had been commendably quick about getting out of a bad environment. Probably they had blundered in illuminating the scene for him, Hatcher conceded. He didn't know how badly he had blundered, for the concept of "light" from a general source, illuminating not only what the mind wished to see but irrelevant matter as well, had never occurred to Hatcher or any of his race; all of their senses operated through the mind itself, and what to them was "light" was a sort of focusing of attention. But although something about that episode which Hatcher failed to understand had gone wrong, the specimen had not been seriously harmed by it. The specimen was doing well. Probably they could now go to the hardest test of all, the one which would mean success or failure. Probably they could so modify the creature as to make direct communication possible.

And the other specimen?

Hatcher would have frowned, if he had had brow muscles to shape such an expression—or a brow to be shaped. The female specimen was the danger. His own people knew how to shield their thoughts. This one evidently did not. It was astonishing that the Old Ones had not already encountered these bipeds, so loosely guarded was their radiation—when they radiated at all, of course, for only a few of them seemed to possess any psionic power worth mentioning.

Hatcher hastily drove that thought from his mind, for what he proposed to do with the male specimen was to give him that power.

And yet there was no choice for Hatcher's people, because they were faced with disaster. Hatcher, through his communications from the Council, knew how close the disaster was. When one of the probers from the Central Masses team disappeared, the only conclusion that could be drawn was the Old Ones had discovered them. They needed allies; more, they needed allies who had control of the electromagnetic forces that made the Old Ones so potent and so feared.

In the male and female they had snatched out of space they might have found those allies. But another thought was in Hatcher's mind: Suppose the Old Ones found them too?

Hatcher made up his mind. He could not delay any longer.

"Open the way to the surface," he ordered. "As soon as possible, take both of them to where we can work."

V

The object Captain Tillinger had called "M-42" was no stranger to Herrell McCray. It was the Great Nebula in Orion, in Earth's telescopes a fuzzy patch of light, in cold fact a great and glowing cloud of gas. M-42 was not an external galaxy, like most of the "nebulae" in Messier's catalogue, but it was nothing so tiny as a single sun either. Its hydrogen mass spanned dozens of light-years. Imbedded in it—growing in it, as they fed on the gas that surrounded them—were scores of hot, bright new suns.

New suns. In all the incongruities that swarmed around him McCray took time to consider that one particular incongruity. The suns of the Orion gas cloud were of the spectral class called "B"—young suns, less than a thousandth as old as a Sol. They simply had not been in existence long enough to own stable planetary systems—

much less planets which themselves were old enough to have cooled, brewed chemical complexes and thus in time produced life. But surely he was on a planet....

Wasn't he?

McCray breathed a deep sigh and for one more time turned his mind away from unprofitable speculations. The woman stirred slightly. McCray knelt to look at her; then, on quick impulse, opened his medical kit, took out a single-shot capsule of a stimulant and slipped it neatly into the exposed vein of her arm.

In about two minutes she would be awake. Good enough, thought McCray; at least he would have someone to talk to. Now if only they could find a way out of this place. If a door would open, as the other door had, and—

He paused, staring.

There was another door. Open.

He felt himself swaying, threw out an arm and realized that he was ... falling? Floating? Moving toward the door, somehow, not as though he were being dragged, not as though he were walking, but surely and rather briskly moving along.

His feet were not touching the ground.

It wasn't a volitional matter. His intentions had nothing to do with it. He flailed out, and touched nothing; nor did he slow his motion at all. He fought against it, instinctively; and then reason took over and he stopped.

The woman's form lifted from the floor ahead of him. She was still unconscious. From the clutter on the floor, her lightweight space suit rose, too; suit and girl, they floated ahead of him, toward the door and out.

McCray cried out and tried to run after them. His legs flailed and, of course, touched nothing; but it did seem that he was moving faster. The woman and her suit were disappearing around a bend, but he was right behind them.

He became conscious of the returning reek of gases. He flipped up the plate of his helmet and lunged at the girl, miraculously caught her in one hand and, straining, caught the suit with the other.

Stuffing her into the suit was hard, awkward work, like dressing a doll that is too large for its garments; but he managed it, closed her helmet, saw the flexible parts of her suit bulge out slightly as its automatic pressure regulators filled it with air.

They drove along, faster and faster, until they came to a great portal, and out into the blinding radiance of a molten copper sky.

Gathered in a circle were a score or more of Hatcher's people.

McCray didn't know they were Hatcher's people, of course. He did not know even that they were animate beings, for they lacked all the features of animals that he had been used to. No eyes. No faces. Their detached members, bobbing about seemingly at random, did not appear to have any relation to the irregular spheres that were their owners.

The woman got unevenly to her feet, her faceplate staring toward the creatures. McCray heard a smothered exclamation in his suit-phones.

"Are you all right?" he demanded sharply. The great crystal eye turned round to look at him.

"Oh, the man who spoke to me." Her voice was taut but controlled. The accent was gone; her control was complete. "I am Ann Mei-Ling, of the *Woomara*. What are—those?"

McCray said, "Our kidnappers, I guess. They don't look like much, do they?"

She laughed shakily, without answering. The creatures seemed to be waiting for something, McCray thought; if indeed they were creatures and not machines or—whatever one might expect to find, in the impossible event of being cast away on an improbable planet of an unexplored sun. He touched the woman's helmet reassuringly and walked toward the aliens, raising his arms.

"Hello," he said. "I am Herrell McCray."

He waited.

He half turned; the woman watching him. "I don't know what to do next," he confessed.

"Sit down," she said suddenly. He stared. "No, you must! They want you to sit down."

"I didn't hear—" he began, then shrugged. He sat down.

"Now lie stretched out and open your face mask."

"*Here?* Listen—Ann—Miss Mei-Ling, whatever you said your name was! Don't you feel the heat? If I crack my mask—"

"But you must." She spoke very confidently. "It is *s'in fo*—what do you call it—telepathy, I think. But I can hear them. They want you to open your mask. No, it won't kill you. They understand what they are doing."

She hesitated, then said, with less assurance, "They need us, McCray. There is something ... I am not sure, but something bad. They need help, and think you can give it to them. So open your helmet as they wish, please."

McCray closed his eyes and grimaced; but there was no help for it, he had no better ideas. And anyway, he thought, he could close it again quickly enough if these things had guessed wrong.

The creatures moved purposefully toward McCray, and he found himself the prisoner of a dozen unattached arms. Surprised, he struggled, but helplessly; no, he would not be able to close the plate again!... But the heat was no worse. Somehow they were shielding him.

A tiny member, like one of the unattached arms but much smaller, writhed through the air toward him, hesitated over his eyes and released something tinier still, something so small and so close that McCray could not focus his eyes upon it. It moved deliberately toward his face.

The woman was saying, as if to herself, "The thing they fear is—far away, but—oh, no! My God!"

There was a terrible loud scream, but McCray was not quite sure he heard it. It might have been his own, he thought crazily; for that tiny floating thing had found his face and was burrowing deep inside; and the pain was beyond belief.

The pain was incredible. It was worse than anything he had ever felt, and it grew ... and then it was gone.

What it was that the spheroidal aliens had done to his mind McCray had no way of learning. He could only know that a door had been open. An opaque screen was removed. He was free of his body.

He was more than free, he was extended—increased—enlarged. He was inside the body of an alien, and the alien was in him. He was also outside both, looking at them.

McCray had never felt anything like it in his life. It was a situation without even a close analogue. He had had a woman in his arms, he had been part of a family, he had shared the youthful sense of exploration that comes in small, eager groups: These were the comparisons that came to his mind. This was so much more than any of these things. He and the alien—he and, he began to perceive, a number of aliens—were almost inextricably mingled. Yet they were separate, as one strand of colored thread in a ball of yarn is looped and knotted and intertwined with every other strand, although it retains its own integrity. He was in and among many minds, and outside them all. McCray thought: This is how a god must feel.

Hatcher would have laughed—if he had lips, larynx or mouth to laugh with. He would have laughed in pure exultation, and, indeed, his second in command recognized the marionette quivering of his detached limbs as a shout of glee. "We've done it," cried the assistant, catching his delight. "We've made the project work!"

"We've done a great deal more than that," exulted Hatcher. "Go to the supervisors, report to them. Pass on the word to the Central Masses probe. Maintain for the alien the pressure and temperature value he needs—"

"And you, Hatcher?"

"I'm going with him—out in the open! I'm going to show him what *we* need!"

Hatcher. McCray recognized that this was a name—the name of the entity closest to himself, the one that had somehow manipulated his forebrain and released the mind from the prison of the skull. "Hatcher" was not a word but an image, and in the image he saw a creature whose physical shape was unpleasant, but whose instincts and hopes were enough like his own to provide common ground.

He saw more than that. This Hatcher was trying to persuade him to move. To venture farther. To come with him....

McCray allowed himself to be lead and at once he was outside not only of his own body but of all bodies. He was free in space.

The entity that had been born of Herrell McCray was now larger than a sun. He could see, all around him, the wonder and beauty of the great gas cloud in which his body rested, on one tiny planet of one trivial star. His sense of time was not changed from what it had been—he could count the pulses of his own body, still thudding in what, however remote, was his ear—but he could see things that were terribly slow and vast. He could see the friction of the streamers of gas in the cloud as light-pressure drove them outward. He could hear the subtle emanations of ion clashing with hurtling ion. He could see the great blue new suns tunneling through the cloud,

building their strength out of the diffuse contaminated hydrogen that made the Orion nebula, leaving relatively clear "holes" behind them. He could see into the gas and through it. He could perceive each star and gassy comet; and he could behold the ordered magnificence of the galaxy of stars, and the universe of galaxies, beyond.

The presence beside him was urging him to look beyond, into a denser, richer region of suns. McCray, unsure of his powers, stretched toward it—and recoiled.

There was something there which was terrifying, something cold and restless that watched him come toward it with the eyes of a crouched panther awaiting a deer.

The presence beside him felt the same terror, McCray knew. He was grateful when Hatcher allowed him to look away from the central clusters and return to the immediate neighborhood of his body.

Like a child's toy in a diminishing glass, McCray could see the planet he had left.

But it was no planet. It was not a planet, but a great irregular sphere of metal, honeycombed and warrened. He would have thought it a ship, though huge, if it had had engines or instruments.... No. It *was* a ship. Hatcher beside him was proof that these creatures needed neither, not in any Earthly sense, at least. They themselves were engines, with their power to move matter apart from the intervention of other matter. They themselves were instruments, through the sensing of force, that was now within his own power.

A moment's hesitant practice, and McCray had the "planet" in the palm of his hand—not a real palm, not a real hand; but it was there for his inspection. He looked at it and within it and saw the interior nests of Hatcher's folk, found the room where he had been brought, traced his course to the surface, saw his own body in its spacesuit, saw beside it the flaccid suit that had held the strange woman's body....

The suit was empty.

The suit was empty, and in the moment of that discovery McCray heard a terrible wailing cry—not in his ears, in his mind—from the aliens around him. The suit was empty. They discovered it the same moment as he. It was wrong and it was dangerous; they were terrified. The companion presence beside him receded into emptiness. In a moment McCray was back in his own body, and the gathering members let him free.

VI

Some hundreds of light-years away, the *Jodrell Bank* was making up lost time on its Betelgeuse run.

Herrell McCray swept the long line from Sol to Betelgeuse, with his perceptions that were not his eyes and his touch that was not of matter, until he found it. The giant ship, fastest and hugest of mankind's star vessels, was to him a lumbering tiny beetle.

It held friends and something else—something his body needed—air and water and food. McCray did not know what would happen to him if, while his mind was out in the stars, his body died. But he was not anxious to find out.

McCray had not tried moving his physical body, but with what had been done to his brain he could now do anything within the powers of Hatcher's people. As they had swept him from ship to planet, so he could now hurl his body back from planet to ship. He flexed muscles of his mind that had never been used before, and in a

moment his body was slumped on the floor of the *Jodrell Bank's* observation bubble. In another moment he was in his body, opening his eyes and looking out into the astonished face of Chris Stoerer, his junior navigator. "God in heaven," whispered Stoerer. "It's you!"

"It is," said McCray hoarsely, through lips that were parched and cracked, sitting up and trying the muscles of the body. It ached. He was bone-weary. "Give me a hand getting out of this suit, will you?"

It was not easy to be a mind in a body again, McCray discovered. Time had stopped for him. He had been soaring the star-lanes in his released mind for hours; but while his mind had been liberated, his body, back on Hatcher's "planet," had continued its slow metabolism, its steady devouring of its tissues, its inevitable progress toward death. When he had returned to it he found its pulse erratic and its breathing ragged. A grinding knot of hunger seethed in its stomach. Its muscles ached.

Whatever might become of his mind, it was clear that his body would die if it were left unfed and uncared-for much longer. So he had brought it back to the *Jodrell Bank*. He stood up and avoided Chris's questions. "Let me get something to eat, and then get cleaned up a little." (He had discovered that his body stank.) "Then I'll tell you everything you want to know—you and the captain, and anybody else who wants to listen. And we'll have to send a dispatch to Earth, too, because this is important.... But, please, I only want to tell it once." Because—he did not say—I may not have time to tell it again.

For those cold and murderous presences in the clustered inner suns had reached out as casually as a bear flicking a salmon out of a run and snatched the unknown woman from Hatcher's planet. They could reach anywhere in the galaxy their thoughts roamed.

They might easily follow him here.

It was good to be human again, and McCray howled with pain and joy as the icy needle-spray of the showers cleansed his body. He devoured the enormous plates of steak and potatoes the ship's galley shoved before him, and drank chilled milk and steaming black coffee in alternate pint mugs. McCray let the ship's surgeon look him over, and laughed at the expression in the man's eyes. "I know I'm a little wobbly," he said. "It doesn't matter, Doc. You can put me in the sickbay as long as you like, as soon as I've talked to the captain. I won't mind a bit. You see, I won't be there—" and he laughed louder, and would not explain.

An hour later, with food in his belly and something from the surgeon's hypospray in his bloodstream to clear his brain, he was in the captain's cabin, trying to spell out in words that made sense the incredible story of (he discovered) eight days since he had been abducted from the ship.

Looking at the ship's officers, good friends, companions on a dozen planetside leaves, McCray started to speak, stumbled and was for a moment without words. It was too incredible to tell. How could he make them understand?

They would have to understand. Insane or not, the insane facts had to be explained to them. However queerly they might stare, they were intelligent men. They would resist but ultimately they would see.

He settled his problem by telling them baldly and plainly, without looking at their faces and without waiting for their questions, everything that had happened. He told them about Hatcher and about the room in which he had come to. He told them about the pinkish light that showed only what he concentrated on—and explained it to them, as he had not understood it at first; about Hatcher's people, and how their entire sense-world was built up of what humans called E.S.P., the "light" being only the focusing of thought, which sees no material objects that it is not fixed on. He told them of the woman from the other ship and the cruel, surgical touch on his brain that had opened a universe to him. He promised that that universe would open for them as well. He told them of the deadly, unknowable danger to Hatcher's people—and to themselves—that lay at the galaxy's core. He told them how the woman had disappeared, and told them she was dead—at the hands of the Old Ones from the Central Masses—a blessing to her, McCray explained, and a blessing to all of them; for although her mind would yield some of its secrets even in death, if she were alive it would be their guide, and the Old Ones would be upon them.

He did not wait for them to react.

He turned to the ship's surgeon. "Doc, I'm all yours now, body and soul ... cancel that. Just body!"

And he left them, to swim once more in space.

In so short a time McCray had come to think of this as life, and a sort of interregnum. He swept up and out, glancing back only to see the ship's surgeon leaping forward to catch his unconscious body as it fell and then he was in space between the stars once more.

Here, 'twixt Sol and Betelgeuse, space was clear, hard and cold, no diffuse gas cloud, no new, growing suns. He "looked" toward Hatcher's world, but hesitated and considered.

First or last, he would have to look once more upon the inimical presences that had peered out at him from the Central Masses. It might as well be now.

His perceptions alert, he plunged toward the heart of the galaxy.

Thought speeds where light plods. The mind of Herrell McCray covered light-millenia in a moment. It skipped the drifts void between spiral arms, threaded dust clouds, entered the compact central galactic sphere to which our Earth's sector of the galaxy is only a remote and unimportant appendage. Here a great globular cluster of suns massed around a common center of gravity. McCray shrank himself to the perspective of a human body and stared in wonder. Mankind's Sol lies in a tenuous, stretched-out arm, thinly populated by stellar standards: if Earth had circled one of these dense-clustered suns, what a different picture of the sky would have greeted the early shepherds! Where Man's Earthbound eyes are fortunate to count a thousand stars in a winter sky, here were tens of thousands, bright enough to be a Sirius or a Capella at the bottom of a sink of atmosphere like Earth's—tens of billions of stars in all, whirling close to each other, so that star greets star over distances that are hardly more than planetary. Sol's nearest neighbor star is four light-years away. No single sun in this dense, gyrating central mass was as much as one light-year from its fellows.

Here were suns that had been blazing with mature, steady light when Sol was a mere contracting mass of hydrogen—whose planets had cooled and spawned life before Earth's hollows cupped the first scalding droplets that were the beginnings of seas.

On these ancient worlds life existed.

McCray had not understood all of what Hatcher had tried to communicate to him, but he had caught the terror in Hatcher's thoughts. Hatcher's people had fled from these ancients many millenia before—fled and hidden in the heart of the Orion gas cloud, their world and all. Yet even there they were not safe. They knew that in time the Old Ones would find them. And it was this fear that had led them to kidnap humans, seeking allies in the war that could not forever be deferred.

Hatcher's people were creatures of thought. Man was the wielder of physical forces—"paranormal" to Hatcher, as teleportation and mind-seeing were "paranormal" to McCray. The Old Ones had mastered both.

McCray paused at the fringe of the cluster, waiting for the touch of contemptuous hate. It came and he recoiled a thousand light-years before he could stop.

To battle the Old Ones would be no easy match—yet time might work for the human race. Already they controlled the electromagnetic spectrum, and hydrogen fusion could exert the force of suns. With Hatcher's help—and his own—Man would free his mind as well; and perhaps the Old Ones would find themselves against an opponent as mighty as themselves.

He drew back from the Central Masses, no longer afraid, and swept out to see Hatcher's planet.

It was gone.

In the great gas cloud the tunneling blue suns swept up their graze of hydrogen, untroubled by planets. Themselves too young to have solid satellites, Hatcher's adopted world removed again, they were alone.

Gone!

It was for a moment, a panicky thought. McCray realized what they had done. Hatcher's greatest hope had been to find another race to stand between his people and the Old Ones. And they had found it!

Now Hatcher's world could hide again and wait until the battle had been fought for them.

With a face light-years across, with a brain made up of patterns in the ether, McCray grinned wryly.

"Maybe they made the right choice," he thought, considering. "Maybe they'd only be in the way when the showdown comes." And he sought out *Jodrell Bank* and his body once more, preparing to return to being human ... and to teach his fellow-humans to be gods.

CONSPIRACY ON CALLISTO

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I

Duane's hand flicked to his waist and hung there, poised. His dis-gun remained undrawn.

The tall, white-haired man—Stevens—smiled.

"You're right, Duane," he said. "I could blast you, too. Nobody would win that way, so let's leave the guns where they are."

The muscles twitched in Peter Duane's cheeks, but his voice, when it came, was controlled. "Don't think we're going to let this go," he said. "We'll take it up with Andrias tonight. We'll see whether you can cut me out!"

The white-haired man's smile faded. He stepped forward, one hand bracing him against the thrust of the rocket engines underneath, holding to the guide rail at the side of the ship's corridor.

He said, "Duane, Andrias is your boss, not mine. I'm a free lance; I work for myself. When we land on Callisto tonight I'll be with you when you turn our—shall I say, our *cargo*?—over to him. And I'll collect my fair share of the proceeds. That's as far as it goes. I take no orders from him."

A heavy-set man in blue appeared at the end of the connecting corridor. He was moving fast, but stopped short when he saw the two men.

"Hey!" he said. "Change of course—get to your cabins." He seemed about to walk up to them, then reconsidered and hurried off. Neither man paid any attention.

Duane said, "Do I have to kill you?" It was only a question as he asked it, without threatening.

A muted alarm bell sounded through the P.A. speakers, signaling a one-minute warning. The white-haired man cocked his eyebrow.

"Not at all," he said. He took the measure of his slim, red-headed opponent. Taller, heavier, older, he was still no more uncompromisingly belligerent than Duane, standing there. "Not at all," he repeated. "Just take your ten thousand and let it go at that. Don't make trouble. Leave Andrias out of our private argument."

"Damn you!" Duane flared. "I was promised fifty thousand. I need that money. Do you think—"

"Forget what I think," Stevens said, his voice clipped and angry. "I don't care about fairness, Duane, except to myself. I've done all the work on this—I've supplied the goods. My price is set, a hundred thousand Earth dollars. What Andrias promised you is no concern of mine. The fact is that, after I've taken my share, there's only ten thousand left. That's all you get!"

Duane stared at him a long second, then nodded abruptly. "I was right the first time," he said. "I'll *have* to kill you!"

Already his hand was streaking toward the grip of his dis-gun, touching it, drawing it forth. But the white-haired man was faster. His arms swept up and pinioned Duane, holding him impotent.

"Don't be a fool," he grated. "Duane—"

The P.A. speaker rattled, blared something unintelligible. Neither man heard it. Duane lunged forward into the taller man's grip, sliding down to the floor. The white-haired man grappled furiously to keep his hold on Peter's gun arm, but Peter was slipping away. Belatedly, Stevens went for his own gun.

He was too late. Duane's was out and leveled at him.

"Now will you listen to reason?" Duane panted. But he halted, and the muzzle of his weapon wavered. The floor swooped and surged beneath him as the thrust of the mighty jets was cut off. Suddenly there was no gravity. The two men, locked together, floated weightlessly out to the center of the corridor.

"Course change!" gasped white-haired Stevens. "Good God!"

The ship had reached the midpoint of its flight. The bells had sounded, warning every soul on it to take shelter, to strap themselves in their pressure bunks against the deadly stress of acceleration as the ship reversed itself and began to slow its headlong plunge into Callisto. But the two men had not heeded.

The small steering rockets flashed briefly. The men were thrust bruisingly against the side of the corridor as the rocket spun lazily on its axis. The side jets flared once more to halt the spin, when the one-eighty turn was completed, and the men were battered against the opposite wall, still weightless, still clinging to each other, still struggling.

Then the main-drive bellowed into life again, and the ship began to battle against its own built-up acceleration. The corridor floor rose up with blinking speed to smite them—

And the lights went out in a burst of crashing pain for Peter Duane.

Someone was talking to him. Duane tried to force an eye open to see who it was, and failed. Something damp and clinging was all about his face, obscuring his vision. But the voice filtered in.

"Open your mouth," it said. "Please, Peter, open your mouth. You're all right. Just swallow this."

It was a girl's voice. Duane was suddenly conscious that a girl's light hand was on his shoulder. He shook his head feebly.

The voice became more insistent. "Swallow this," it said. "It's only a stimulant, to help you throw off the shock of your—accident. You're all right, otherwise."

Obediently he opened his mouth, and choked on a warm, tingly liquid. He managed to swallow it, and lay quiet as deft feminine hands did something to his face. Suddenly light filtered through his closed eyelids, and cool air stirred against his damp face.

He opened his eyes. A slight red-headed girl in white nurse's uniform was standing there. She stepped back a pace, a web of wet gauze bandage in her hands, looking at him.

"Hello," he whispered. "You—where am I?"

"In the sick bay," she said. "You got caught out when the ship changed course. Lucky you weren't hurt, Peter. The man you were with—the old, white-haired one, Stevens—wasn't so lucky. He was underneath when the jets went on. Three ribs broken—his lung was punctured. He died in the other room an hour ago."

Duane screwed his eyes tight together and grimaced. When he opened them again there was alertness and clarity in them—but there was also bafflement.

"Girl," he said, "who are you? Where am I?"

"Peter!" There was shock and hurt in the tone of her voice. "I'm—don't you know me, Peter?"

Duane shook his head confusedly. "I don't know anything," he said. "I—I don't even know my own name."

"Duane, Duane," a man's heavy voice said. "That won't wash. Don't play dumb on me."

"Duane?" he said. "Duane...." He swiveled his head and saw a dark, squat man frowning at him. "Who are you?" Peter asked.

The dark man laughed. "Take your time, Duane," he said easily. "You'll remember me. My name's Andrias. I've been waiting here for you to wake up. We have some business matters to discuss."

The nurse, still eyeing Duane with an odd bewilderment, said: "I'll leave you alone for a moment. Don't talk too much to him, Mr. Andrias. He's still suffering from shock."

"I won't," Andrias promised, grinning. Then, as the girl left the room, the smile dropped from his face.

"You play rough, Duane," he observed. "I thought you'd have trouble with Stevens. I didn't think you'd find it necessary to put him out of the way so permanently. Well, no matter. If you had to kill him, it's no skin off my nose. Give me a release on the merchandise. I've got your money here."

Duane waved a hand and pushed himself dizzily erect, swinging his legs over the side of the high cot. A sheet had been thrown over him, but he was fully dressed. He examined his clothing with interest—gray tunic, gray leather spaceman's boots. It was unfamiliar.

He shook his head in further confusion, and the motion burst within his skull, throbbing hotly. He closed his eyes until it subsided, trying to force his brain to operate, to explain to him where and what he was.

He looked at the man named Andrias.

"Nobody seems to believe me," he said, "but I really don't know what's going on. Things are moving too fast for me. Really, I—why, I don't even know my own name! My head—it hurts. I can't think clearly."

Andrias straightened, turned a darkly-suspicious look on Duane. "Don't play tricks on me," he said savagely. "I haven't time for them. I won't mince words with you. Give me a release on the cargo now, before I have to get rough. This is a lot more important to me than your life is."

"Go to hell," Duane said shortly. "I'm playing no tricks."

There was an instant's doubt in Andrias' eyes, then it flashed away. He bent closer, peered at Duane. "I almost think—" he began.

Then he shook his head. "No," he said. "You're lying all right. You killed Stevens to get his share—and now you're trying to hold me up. That's your last chance that just went by, Duane. From now on, I'm running this show!"

He spun around and strode to the door, thrust it open. "Dakin!" he bellowed. "Reed!"

Two large, ugly men in field-gray uniforms, emblazoned with the shooting-star insignia of Callisto's League police, came in, looking to Andrias for instructions.

"Duane here is resisting arrest," Andrias said. "Take him along. We'll fix up the charges later."

"You can't do that," Duane said wearily. "I'm sick. If you've got something against me, save it. Wait till my head clears. I'm sure I can explain—"

"Explain, hell." The dark man laughed. "If I wait, this ship will be blasting off for Ganymede within two hours. I'll wait—but so will the ship. It's not going anywhere till I give it clearance. I run Callisto; I'll give the orders here!"

II

Whoever this man Andrias was, thought Duane, he was certainly a man of importance on Callisto. As he had said, *he* gave the orders.

The crew of the rocket made no objection when Andrias and his men took Duane off without a word. Duane had thought the nurse, who seemed a good enough sort, might have said something on his behalf. But she was out of sight as they left. A curt sentence to a gray-clad official on the blast field where the rocket lay, and the man nodded and hurried off, to tell the rocket's captain that the ship was being refused clearance indefinitely.

A long, powerful ground car slid up before them. Andrias got in front, while the two uniformed men shoved Duane into the back of the car, climbed in beside him. Andrias gave a curt order, and the car shot forward.

The driver, sitting beside Andrias, leaned forward and readied a hand under the dashboard. The high wail of a siren came instantly from the car's roof, and what traffic was on the broad, straight highway into which they had turned pulled aside to let them race through.

Ahead lay the tall spires of a city. Graceful, hundreds of feet high, they seemed dreamlike yet somehow oddly familiar to Duane. Somewhere he had seen them before. He dragged deep into his mind, plumbing the cloudy, impenetrable haze that had settled on it, trying to bring forth the memories that he should have had. Amnesia, they called it; complete forgetting of the happenings of a lifetime. He'd heard of it—but never dreamed it could happen to him!

My name, it seems, is Peter Duane, he thought. And they tell me that I killed a man!

The thought was starkly incredible to him. A white-haired man, it had been; someone named Stevens. He tried to remember.

Yes, there had been a white-haired man. And there had been an argument. Something to do with money, with a shipment of goods that Stevens had supplied to Duane. There has even been talk of killing....

But—murder! Duane looked at his hands helplessly.

Andrias, up ahead, was turning around. He looked sharply at Duane, for a long second. An uncertainty clouded his eyes, and abruptly he looked forward again without speaking.

"Who's this man Andrias?" Duane whispered to the nearest guard.

The man stared at him. "Governor Andrias," he said, "is the League's deputy on Callisto. You know—the Earth-Mars League. They put Governor Andrias here to—well, to govern for them."

"League?" Duane asked, wrinkling his brow. He had heard something about a League once, yes. But it was all so nebulous....

The other guard stirred, leaned over. "Shut up," he said heavily. "You'll have plenty of chance for talking later."

But the chance was a long time in coming. Duane found himself, an hour later, still in the barred room into which he'd been thrust. The guards had brought him there, at Andrias' order, and left him. That had been all.

This was not a regular jail, Duane realized. It was more like a palace, something out of Earth's Roman-empire days, all white stone and frescoed walls. Duane wished for human companionship—particularly that of the nurse. Of all the people he'd met since awakening in that hospital bed, only she seemed warm and human. The others were—brutal, deadly. It was too bad, Duane reflected, that he'd failed to remember her. She'd seemed hurt, and she had certainly known him by first name. But perhaps she would understand.

Duane sat down on a lumpy, sagging bed and buried his head in his hands. Dim ghosts of memory were wandering in his mind. He tried to conjure them into stronger relief, or to exorcise them entirely.

Somewhere, some time, a man had said to him, "*Andrias is secretly arming the Callistan cutthroats for revolt against the League. He wants personal power—he's prepared to pay any price for it. He needs guns, Earth guns smuggled in through the League patrol. If he can wipe out the League police garrison—those who are loyal to the League, still, instead of to Andrias—he can sit back and laugh at any fleet Earth and Mars can send. Rockets are clumsy in an atmosphere. They're helpless. And if he can arm enough of Callisto's rabble, he can't be stopped. That's why he'll pay for electron rifles with their weight in gold.*"

Duane could remember the scene clearly. Could almost see the sharp, aquiline face of the man who had spoken to him. But there memory stopped.

A fugitive recollection raced through his mind. He halted it, dragged it back, pinned it down....

They had stopped in Darkside, the spaceport on the side of Luna that keeps perpetually averted from Earth, as if the moon knows shame and wants to hide the rough and roaring dome city that nestles in one of the great craters. Duane remembered sitting in a low-ceilinged, smoke-heavy room, across the table from a tall man with white hair. Stevens!

"Four thousand electron rifles," the man had said. "Latest government issue. Never mind how I got them; they're perfect. You know my price. Take it or leave it. And it's payable the minute we touch ground on Callisto."

There had been a few minutes of haggling over terms, then a handshake and a drink from a thin-necked flagon of pale-yellow liquid fire.

He and the white-haired man had gone out then, made their way by unfrequented side streets to a great windowless building. Duane remembered the white-hot stars overhead, shining piercingly through the great transparent dome that kept the air in the sealed city of Darkside, as they stood at the entrance of the warehouse and spoke in low tones to the man who answered their summons.

Then, inside. And they were looking at a huge chamber full of stacked fiber boxes—containing nothing but dehydrated dairy products and mining tools, by the stencils they bore. Duane had turned to the white-haired man with a puzzled question—and the man had laughed aloud.

He dragged one of the boxes down, ripped it open with the sharp point of a handling hook. Short-barreled, flare-mouthed guns rolled out, tumbling over the floor. Eight of them were in that one box, and hundreds of boxes all about. Duane picked one up, broke it, peered into the chamber where the tiny capsule of U-235 would explode with infinite violence when the trigger was pulled, spraying radiant death three thousand yards in the direction the gun was aimed....

And that memory ended.

Duane got up, stared at his haggard face in the cracked mirror over the bed. *"They say I'm a killer,"* he thought. *"Apparently I'm a gun-runner as well. Good lord—what am I not?"*

His reflection—white, drawn face made all the more pallid by the red hair that blazed over it—stared back at him. There was no answer there. If only he could remember—

"All right, Duane." The deep voice of a guard came to him as the door swung open. "Stop making eyes at yourself."

Duane looked around. The guard beckoned. "Governor Andrias wants to speak to you—now. Let's not keep the governor waiting."

A long, narrow room, with a long carpet leading from the entrance up to a great heavy desk—that was Andrias' office. Duane felt a click in his memory as he entered. One of the ancient Earth dictators had employed just such a psychological trick to overawe those who came to beg favors of him. Muslini, or some such name.

The trick failed to work. Duane had other things on his mind; he walked the thirty-foot length of the room, designed to imbue him with a sense of his own unimportance, as steadily as he'd ever walked in the open air of his home planet.

Whichever planet that was.

The guard had remained just inside the door, at attention. Andrias waved him out.

"Here I am," said Duane. "What do you want?"

Andrias said, "I've had the ship inspected and what I want is on it. That saves your life, for now. But the cargo is in your name. I could take it by force, if I had to. I prefer not to." He picked up a paper, handed it to Duane. "In spite of your behavior, you can keep alive. You can even collect the money for the guns—Stevens' share as well as your own. This is a release form, authorizing my men to take four hundred and twenty cases of dehydrated foods and drilling supplies from the hold of the *Cameroon*—the ship you came on. Sign it, and we'll forget our argument. Only, sign it now and get it over with. I'm losing patience, Duane."

Duane said, without expression, "No."

Dark red flooded into Andrias' sallow face. His jaws bunched angrily and there was a ragged thread of incomplete control to his voice as he spoke.

"I'll have your neck for this, Duane," he said softly.

Duane looked at the man's eyes. Death was behind them, peeping out. Mentally he shrugged. What difference did it make?

"Give me the pen," he said shortly.

Andrias exhaled a deep breath. You could see the tension leave him, the mottled anger fade from his face and leave it without expression. He handed the paper to Duane without a word. He gave him a pen, watched him scrawl his name.

"That," he said, "is better." He paused a moment ruminatively. "It would have been better still if you'd not stalled me so long. I find that hard to forgive in my associates."

"The money," Peter said. If he were playing a part—pretending he knew what he was doing—he might as well play it to the hilt. "When do I get it?"

Andrias picked up the paper and looked carefully at the signature. He creased it thoughtfully, stowed it in a pocket before answering.

"Naturally," he said, "there will have to be a revision of terms. I offered a hundred and ten thousand Earth-dollars. I would have paid it—but you made me angry. You'll have to pay for that."

Duane said, "I've paid already. I've been dragged from pillar to post by you. That's enough. Pay me what you owe me, if you want any more of the same goods!"

That was a shot in the dark—and it missed the mark.

Andrias' eyes widened. "You amaze me, Duane," he said. He rose and stepped around the desk, confronting Duane. "I almost think you really have lost your memory, Duane," he said. "Otherwise, surely you would know that this is all the rifles I need. With them I'll *take* whatever else I want!"

Duane said, "You're ready, then...."

He took time to think it over, but he knew that no thought was required. Already the hands that he had locked behind him were clenched, taut. Already the muscles of his legs were tensing.

"You're ready," he repeated. "You've armed the Callistan exiles—the worst gutter scum on nine planets. You're set to betray the League that gave you power here.... Well, that changes things. I can't let you do it!"

He hurled himself at Andrias, hands sweeping around to grapple for the dark man's throat. Andrias, off-balance, staggered backward. But his own hands were diving for the twin heat guns that hung at his waist.

Duane saw his danger, and reacted. His foot twisted around Andrias' ankle; his hands at the other's throat gripped tighter. He lunged forward, slamming the hard top of his head into the other's face, feeling flesh and cartilage give as Andrias' nose mashed flat. His own head pin-wheeled dizzily, agonizingly, as the jar revived the pain of his earlier accident.

But Andrias, unconscious already, tumbled back with Duane on top of him. His head made an audible, spine-chilling thud as it hit the carpeted floor.

Duane got up, retrieving the two heat guns, and stared at him.

"They tell me I killed Stevens the same way," he thought. "I'm getting in a rut!"

But Andrias was not dead, though he was out as cold as the void beyond Pluto. The thick carpeting had saved him from a broken head.

Duane stepped over the unconscious man and looked around the room. It was furnished severely, to the point of barrenness. Two chairs before Andrias' ornate, bare-topped desk and one luxurious chair behind it; a tasseled bell cord within easy reach of Andrias' chair; the long carpet. That was all it contained.

The problem of getting out was serious, he saw. How could one—

III

Methodically he ransacked the drawers of Andrias' desk. Papers, a whole arsenal of hand guns, Callistan money by the bale, ominously black-covered notebooks with cryptic figures littering their pages—those were the contents. A coldly impersonal desk, without the familiar trivia most men accumulate. There was nothing, certainly, that would get him out of a building that so closely resembled a fortress.

He tumbled the things back into the drawers helter-skelter, turned Andrias over and searched his pockets. More money—the man must have had a fortune within reach at all times—and a few meaningless papers. Duane took the release he had signed and tore it to shreds. But that was only a gesture. When Andrias came to, unless Duane had managed to get away and accomplish something, the mere lack of written permission would not keep him from the rocket's lethal cargo!

When Andrias came to....

An idea bloomed in Duane's brain. He looked, then, at unconscious Andrias—and the idea withered again.

He had thought of forcing Andrias himself to front for him, at gun's point, in the conventional manner of escaping prisoners. But fist fights, fiction to the contrary notwithstanding, leave marks on the men who lose them. Andrias' throat was speckled with the livid marks of Duane's fingers; Duane's head, butting Andrias in the face, had drawn a thick stream of crimson from his nostrils, turned his sharp nose askew.

No guard of Andrias' would have been deceived for an instant, looking at that face—even assuming that Andrias could have been forced to cooperate by the threat of a gun. Which, considering the stake Andrias had in this play, was doubtful....

He stood up and looked around. He had to act quickly. Already Andrias' breath was audible; he saw the man grimace and an arm flopped spasmodically on the floor. Consciousness was on its way back.

Duane touched the heat gun he'd thrust into his belt; drew it and held it poised, while he sought to discover what was in his own mind. He'd killed a man already, they said. Was he then a killer—could he shoot Andrias now, in cold blood, with so much to gain and nothing to lose?

He stood there a moment. Then, abruptly, he reversed the weapon and chopped it down on Andrias' skull.

There was a sharp grunt from the still unconscious man, but no other sign. Only—the first tremors of movement that had shown on him halted, and did not reappear.

"No," Duane thought. *"Whatever they say, I'm not a killer!"*

But still he had to get out. How?

Once more he stared around the room, catalogued its contents. The guard would be getting impatient. Perhaps any minute he would tap the door, first timorously, then with heavier strokes.

The guard! There was a way!

Duane eyed the length of the room. Thirty feet—it would take him a couple of seconds to run it at full speed. Was that fast enough?

There was only one way to find out.

He walked around the desk to the bell cord. He took a deep breath, tugged it savagely, and at once was in speedy motion, racing toward the door, his footsteps muffled in the deep, springy carpet. Almost as he reached it, he saw it begin to open. He quickly sidestepped and was out of the guard's sight, behind the door, as the man looked in.

Quick suspicion flared in his eyes, then certainty as he saw Andrias huddled on the floor. He opened his mouth to cry out—

But Duane's arm was around his throat, and he had no breath to spare. Duane's foot lashed out and the door slammed shut; Duane's balled left fist came up and connected with the guard's chin. Abruptly the man slumped.

Duane took a deep breath and let the man drop to the floor. But he paused only a second; now he had two unconscious men on his hands and he dared let neither revive until he was prepared.

He grasped the guard's arm and dragged him roughly the length of the room. He leaped on top of the desk, brutally scarring its gleaming top with the hard spikes of his boots. His agile fingers unfastened the long bell cord without causing it to ring and, bearing it, he dropped again to the floor.

Tugging and straining, he got the limp form of Andrias into his own chair, bound him with the bell cord, gagged him with the priceless Venus-wool scarf Andrias wore

knotted about his throat. He tested his bindings with full strength, and smiled. Those would hold, let Andrias struggle as he would.

The guard he stripped of clothing, bound and gagged with his own belt and spaceman's kerchief. He dragged him around behind the desk, thrust him under it out of sight. Andrias' chair he turned so that the unconscious face was averted from the door. Should anyone look in, then, the fact of Andrias' unconsciousness might not be noticed.

Then he took off his own clothes, quickly assumed the field-gray uniform of the guard. It fit like the skin of a fruit. He felt himself bulging out of it in a dozen places. The long cape the guard wore would conceal that, perhaps. In any case, there was nothing better.

Trying to make his stride as martial as possible, he walked down the long carpet to the door, opened it and stepped outside.

His luck couldn't hold out forever. It was next to miraculous that he got as far as he did—out of the anteroom before Andrias' office, past the two guards there, who eyed him absently but said nothing, down the great entrance hall, straight out the front door.

Going through the city had been easier, of course. There were many men in uniforms like his. Duane thought, then, that Andrias' power could not have been too strong, even over the League police whom he nominally commanded. The police could not all have been corrupt. There were too many of them; had they been turncoats, aiding Andrias in his revolt against the League, there would have been no need to smuggle rifles in for an unruly mass of civilians.

Duane cursed the lack of foresight of the early Earth governments. They'd made a prison planet of Callisto; had filled it with the worst scum of Earth. Then, when the damage had been done—when Callisto had become a pest-hole among the planets; its iniquities a stench that rose to the stars—they had belatedly found that they had created a problem worse than the one they'd tried to solve. One like a hydra-beast.

Criminality was not a thing of heredity. The children of the transported convicts, most of them, were honest and wanted to be respectable. And they could not be.

Earth's crime rate, too, had not been lowered materially by exiling its gangsters and murderers to Callisto. When it was long past time, the League had stepped in, and set a governor of its own over Callisto.

If the governor had been an honest man a satisfactory solution might have been worked out. The first governor had been honest. Under him great strides had been made. The bribe-proof, gun-handey League police had stamped out the wide-open plague spots of the planet; public works had been begun on a large scale. The beginnings of representative government had been established.

But the first governor had died. And the second governor had been—Andrias.

"You can see the results!" Duane thought grimly as he swung into the airfield in his rented ground car. Foreboding was stamped on the faces of half the Callistans he'd seen—and dark treachery on the others. Some of those men had been among the actual exiled criminals—the last convict ship had landed only a dozen years before.

All of those whom Andrias planned to arm were either of the original transportation-men, or their weaker descendants.

What was holding Andrias back? Why the need for smuggling guns in?

The answer to that, Duane thought, was encouraging but not conclusive. Clearly, then, Andrias did not have complete control over the League police. But how much control he did have, what officers he had won over to treachery, Duane could not begin to guess.

Duane slid the car into a parking slot, switched off the ignition and left it. It was night, but the short Callistan dark period was nearly over. A pearly glow at the horizon showed where the sun would come bulging over in a few minutes; while at the opposite rim of the planet he could still see the blood-red disc of mighty Jupiter lingering for a moment, casting a crimson hue over the landscape, before it made the final plunge. The field was not flood-lighted. Traffic was scarce on Callisto.

Duane, almost invisible in the uncertain light, stepped boldly out across the jet-blasted tarmac toward the huge bulk of the *Cameroon*, the rocket transport which had brought him. Two other ships lay on the same seared pavement, but they were smaller. They were fighting ships, small, speedy ones, in Callisto for refueling before returning to the League's ceaseless patrol of the System's starlanes.

Duane hesitated briefly, wondering whether he ought to go to one of those ships and tell his story to its League commander. He decided against it. There was too little certainty for him there; too much risk that the commander, even, might be a tool of Andrias'.

Duane shook his head angrily. If only his memory were clear—if only he could be sure what he was doing!

He reached the portal of the ship. A gray-clad League officer was there standing guard, to prevent the ship taking off.

"Official business," Duane said curtly, and swept by the startled man before he could object. He hurried along the corridor toward the captain's office and control room. A purser he passed looked at him curiously, and Duane averted his face. If the man recognized him there might be questions.

For the thousandth time he cursed the gray cloud that overhung his memory. He didn't know, even, who among the crew might know him and spread the alarm.

Then he was at the door marked, *Crew only—do not enter!* He tapped on it, then grasped the knob and swung it open.

A squat, open-featured man in blue, the bronze eagles of the Mercantile Service resting lightly on his powerful shoulders, looked at him. Recognition flared in his eyes.

"Duane!" he whispered. "Peter Duane, what're you doing in the clothes of Andrias' household guard?"

Duane felt the tenseness ebb out of his throat. Here was a friend.

"Captain," he said, "you seem to be a friend of mine. If you are—I need you. You see, I've lost my memory."

"Lost your memory?" the captain echoed. "You mean that blow on your head? The ship's surgeon said something ... yes, that was it. I hardly believed him, though."

"But were we friends?"

"Why, yes, Peter."

"Then help me now," said Duane. "I have a cargo stowed in your hold, Captain. Do you know what it is?"

"Why—yes. The rifles, you mean?"

Duane blinked. He nodded, then looked dizzily for a chair. The captain was a friend of his, all right—a fellow gun-runner!

"Good God," he said aloud. "What a mess!"

"What's happened?" the captain asked. "I saw you in the corridor, arguing with Stevens. You looked like trouble, and I should have come up to you then. But the course was to be changed, and I had to be there.... And the next I hear, Stevens is dead, and you've maybe killed him. Then I heard you've lost your memory, and are in a jam with Andrias."

He paused and speculation came into his eyes, almost hostility.

"Peter Duane," he said softly, "it strikes me that you may have lost more than your memory. Which side are you on. What happened between you and Andrias? Tell me now if you've changed sides on me, man. For friendship's sake I won't be too hard on you. But there's too much at stake here—"

"Oh, hell," said Peter, and the heat gun was suddenly in his hand, leveled at the squat man in blue. "I wish you were on my side, but there's no way I can tell. I can trust myself, I think—but that's all. Put up your hands!"

And that was when his luck ran out.

"Peter—" the captain began.

IV

But a sound from outside halted him. Together the two men stared at the viewplates. A siren had begun to shriek in the distance, the siren of a racing ground car. Through the gates it plunged, scattering the light wooden barrier. It spun crazily around on two wheels and came roaring for the ship.

Andrias was in it.

Peter turned on the captain, and the gun was rigidly outthrust in his hand.

"Close your ports!" he snarled. "Up rockets—in a hurry!"

"Listen, Peter," the captain began.

"I said, hurry!" The car's brakes shrieked outside, and it disappeared from the view of the men. There was an abrupt babble of voices.

"Close your ports!" Peter shouted savagely. "Now!"

The captain opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. He touched the stud of a communications set, said into it, "Close ports. Snap to it. Engine room—up rockets in ten seconds. All crew—stand by for lift!"

The ship's own take-off siren howled shrilly, drowning out the angry voices from below. Peter felt the whine of the electrics that dogged shut the heavy pressure doors. He stepped to the pilot's chair, slid into it, buckled the compression straps around him.

The instruments—he recognized them all, knew how to use them! Had he been a rocket pilot before his mind had blanked—before embarking on the more lucrative profession of gun smuggler? He wondered....

But it was the captain who took the ship off. "Ten seconds," Peter said. "Get moving!"

The captain hesitated the barest fraction, but his eyes were on the heat gun and he knew that Duane was capable of using it. "The men—" he said. "If they're underneath when the jets go, they'll burn!"

"That's the chance they take," said Duane. "They heard the siren!"

The captain turned his head quickly, and his fingers flashed out. He was in his own acceleration seat too, laced down by heavy canvas webbing. His hands reached out to the controls before him, and his fingers took on a life of their own as they wove dexterously across the keys, setting up fire-patterns, charting a course of take-off. Then the heel of his hand settled on the firing stop....

The acceleration was worse than Peter's clouded mind had expected, but no more than he could stand. In his frame of mind, he could stand almost anything, he thought—short of instant annihilation!

The thin air of Callisto howled past them, forming a high obligato to the thunder of the jets. Then the air-howl faded sharply to silence, and the booming of the rockets became less a thing of sound than a rumble in the framework of the *Cameroon*. They were in space.

The captain's foot kicked the pedal that shut off the over-drive jets, reducing the thrust to a mere one-gravity acceleration. He turned to Duane.

"What now?" he asked.

Duane, busy unstrapping himself from the restraining belts, shook his head without answering. What now? "*A damn good question!*" he thought.

The captain, with the ease of long practice, was already out of his own pressure straps. He stood there by his chair, watching Duane closely. But the gun was still in Duane's hand, despite his preoccupation.

Duane cocked an ear as he threw off the last strap. Did he hear voices in the corridor, a distance away but coming.

The captain, looking out the port with considerable interest, interrupted his train of thought. "What," he asked, "for instance, are you going to do about—those?"

His arm was outstretched, pointing outward and down. Duane looked in that direction—

The two patrol rockets were streaking up after his commandeered ship. Fairy-like in their pastel shades, with the delicate tracery of girders over their fighting noses, they nevertheless represented grim menace to Duane!

He swore under his breath. The *Cameroon*, huge and lumbering, was helpless as a sitting bird before those lithe hawks of prey. If only he knew which side the ships were on. If only he knew—anything!

He couldn't afford to take a chance. "Stand back!" he ordered the captain. The man in blue gave ground before him, staring wonderingly as Duane advanced. Duane took a quick look at the control set-up, tried to remember how to work it.

It was so tantalizingly close to his memory! He cursed again; then stabbed down on a dozen keys at random, heeled the main control down, jumped back, even as the ship careened madly about in its flight, and blasted the delicate controls to shattered ashes with a bolt from his heat gun. Now the ship was crippled, for the time being at least. Short of a nigh-impossible boarding in space, the two patrol cruisers could do nothing with it till the controls were repaired. The *Cameroon*, and its cargo of political dynamite, would circle through space for hours or days.

It wasn't much—but it was the best he could do. At least it would give him time to think things over.

No. He heard the voices of the men in the corridor again, tumbled about by the abrupt course change—luckily, it had been only a mild thing compared to the one that had killed Stevens and caused his own present dilemma—but regaining their feet and coming on. And one of the voices, loud and harsh, was Andrias! Somehow, before the ports closed, he'd managed to board the *Cameroon*!

Duane stood erect, whirled to face the door. The captain stood by it. Duane thrust his heat gun at him.

"The door!" he commanded. "Lock it!"

Urged by the menace of the heat gun, the captain hurriedly put out a hand to the lock of the door—

And jerked it back, nursing smashed knuckles, as Andrias and four men burst in, hurling the door open before them. They came to a sliding, tumbling halt, though, as they faced grim Duane and his ready heat pistol.

"Hold it!" he ordered. "That's right.... Stay that way while I figure things out. The first man that moves, dies for it."

Dark blood flooded into Andrias' face, but he said no word, only stood there glaring hatred. The smear of crimson had been brushed from his face, but his nose was still awry and a huge purplish bruise was spreading over it and across one cheek. The three men with him were guards. All were armed—the police with hand weapons as lethal as Duane's own, Andrias with an old-style projective-type weapon—an ancient pistol, snatched from some bewildered spaceman as they burst into the *Cameroon*.

Duane braced himself with one arm against the pilot's chair and stared at them. The crazy circular course the blasted controls had given the ship had a strong lateral component; around and around the ship went, in a screaming circle, chasing its own tail. There was a sudden change in the light from the port outside; Duane involuntarily looked up for a moment. Dulled and purplish was the gleam from the brilliant stars all about; the *Cameroon*, in its locked orbit, had completed a circle and was plunging through its own wake of expelled jet-gases. He saw the two patrol rockets streak past; then saw the flood of rocket-flares from their side jets as they

spun and braked, trying to match course and speed with the crazy orbit of the *Cameroon*.

He'd looked away for only a second; abruptly he looked back.

"Easy!" he snapped. Andrias' arm, which had begun to lift, straightened out, and the scowl on the governor's face darkened even more.

Clackety-clack. There was the sound of a girl's high heels running along the corridor, followed by heavier thumps from the space boots of men. Duane jerked his gun at Andrias and his police.

"Out of the way!" he said. "Let's see who's coming now."

It was the girl. Red hair fluttering in the wake of her running, face alight with anxiety, she burst into the room.

"Peter!" she cried. "Andrias and his men—"

She stopped short and took in the tableau. Duane's eyes were on her, and he was about to speak. Then he became conscious of something in her own eyes, a sudden spark that flared even before her lips opened and a thin cry came from them; even before she leaped to one side, at Andrias.

Peter cursed and tried to turn, to dodge; tried to bring his heat gun around. But a thunder louder than the bellowing jets outside filled the room, and a streak of livid fire crossed the fringe of Peter's brain. Sudden blackness closed in around him. He fell—and his closing eyes saw new figures running into the room, saw the counterplay of lashing heat beams.

This is it—he thought grimly, and then thought no more.

V

Duane was in the sickbay again, on the same bed. His head was spinning agonizedly. He forced his eyes open—and the girl was there; the same girl. She was watching him. A cloud on her face lifted as she saw his lids flicker open; then it descended again. Her lips quivered.

"Darn you, Peter," she whispered. "Who are you now?"

"Why—why, I'm Peter Duane, of course," he said.

"Well, thank God you know that!" It was the captain. He'd changed since the last time Peter had seen him. One arm was slung in bandages that bore the yellow seeping tint of burn salve.

Peter shook his head to try to clear it. "Where—where am I?" he asked. "Andrias—"

"Andrias is where he won't bother you," the captain said. "Locked up below. So are two of his men. The other one's dead. How's your memory, Peter?"

Duane touched it experimentally with a questing mental finger. It seemed all right, though he felt still dazed.

"Coming along," he said. "But where am I? The controls—I blasted them."

The captain laughed. "I know," he said briefly. "Well—I guess you had to, in a way. You didn't trust anyone; couldn't trust anyone. You had to make sure the rifles wouldn't get back to Callisto too soon. But they're working on installing duplicates

now, Peter. In an hour we'll be back on Callisto. We shut the jets off already; we're in an orbit."

Duane sank back. "Listen," he said. "I think—I think my memory's clearing, somehow. But how—I mean, were you on my side? All along?"

The captain nodded soberly. "On your side, yes, Peter," he said. "The League's side, that is. You and I, you know, both work for the League. When they got word of Andrias' plans, they had to work fast. To move in by force would have meant bloodshed, would have forced his hand. That would have been utterly bad. It was too dangerous. Callisto is politically a powder-keg already. The whole thing might have exploded."

Peter's eyes flared with sudden hope and enlightenment. "And you and I—" he began.

"You and I, and a couple of other undercover workers were put on the job," the captain nodded. "We had to find out who Andrias' supporters were—and to keep him from getting more electron rifles while the commanders of the Callisto garrison were quietly checked, to see who was on which side. They've found Andrias' Earth backers—a group of wealthy malcontents who thought Callisto should be exploited for their gain, had made secret deals with him for concessions. You, of course, slowed down the delivery of the rifles as long as you could. They lay in the Lunar warehouses a precious extra week while you haggled over terms. That's what you were doing with Stevens, I think, when the course change caught you both."

"You've had him long enough," the nurse broke in. "I have a few words to say."

"No, wait—" Duane protested. But the captain was grinning broadly. He moved toward the door.

"Later," he said over his shoulder. "There'll be plenty of time." The door closed behind him. Duane turned to the girl.

He shook his head again. The cloud was lifting. He could almost remember everything again; things were beginning to come into focus. This girl, for instance—

She noticed his motion. "How's your head, Peter?" she asked solicitously. "Andrias hit you with that awful old bullet-gun. I tried to stop him, but all I could do was jar his arm. Oh, Peter, I was so afraid when I saw you fall!"

"You probably saved my life," Peter said soberly. "Andrias struck me as a pretty good shot." He tried to grin.

The girl frowned. "Peter," she said, "I'm sorry if I seemed rude, before—the last time you were here. It was just that I.... Well, you didn't remember me. I couldn't understand."

Peter stared at her. Yes—he *should* remember her. He did, only—

"Perhaps this will help you," the girl said. She rummaged in a pocket of her uniform, brought something out that was tiny and glittering. "I don't wear it on duty, Peter. But I guess this is an exception...."

Peter pushed himself up on one elbow, trying to make out what she was doing. She was slipping the small thing on a finger....

A ring. An engagement ring!

"Oh—" said Peter. And suddenly everything clicked; he remembered; he could recall ... everything. That second blow on his head had undone the harm of the first one.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up, reached out hungry arms for the girl.

"Of course I remember," he said as she came into the circle of his arms. "The ring on your finger. I ought to remember—*I put it there!*"

And for a long time after there was no need for words.

THE KNIGHTS OF ARTHUR

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I

THERE was three of us—I mean if you count Arthur. We split up to avoid attracting attention. Engdahl just came in over the big bridge, but I had Arthur with me so I had to come the long way around.

When I registered at the desk, I said I was from Chicago. You know how it is. If you say you're from Philadelphia, it's like saying you're from St. Louis or Detroit—I mean *nobody* lives in Philadelphia any more. Shows how things change. A couple years ago, Philadelphia was all the fashion. But not now, and I wanted to make a good impression.

I even tipped the bellboy a hundred and fifty dollars. I said: "Do me a favor. I've got my baggage booby-trapped—"

"Natch," he said, only mildly impressed by the bill and a half, even less impressed by me.

"I mean *really* booby-trapped. Not just a burglar alarm. Besides the alarm, there's a little surprise on a short fuse. So what I want you to do, if you hear the alarm go off, is come running. Right?"

"And get my head blown off?" He slammed my bags onto the floor. "Mister, you can take your damn money and—"

"Wait a minute, friend." I passed over another hundred. "Please? It's only a shaped charge. It won't hurt anything except anybody who messes around, see? But I don't want it to go off. So you come running when you hear the alarm and scare him away and—"

"No!" But he was less positive. I gave him two hundred more and he said grudgingly: "All right. If I hear it. Say, what's in there that's worth all that trouble?"

"Papers," I lied.

He leered. "Sure."

"No fooling, it's just personal stuff. Not worth a penny to anybody but me, understand? So don't get any ideas—"

He said in an injured tone: "Mister, naturally the *staff* won't bother your stuff. What kind of a hotel do you think this is?"

"Of course, of course," I said. But I knew he was lying, because I knew what kind of hotel it was. The staff was there only because being there gave them a chance to knock down more money than they could make any other way. What other kind of hotel was there?

Anyway, the way to keep the staff on my side was by bribery, and when he left I figured I had him at least temporarily bought. He promised to keep an eye on the

room and he would be on duty for four more hours—which gave me plenty of time for my errands.

I MADE sure Arthur was plugged in and cleaned myself up. They had water running—New York's very good that way; they always have water running. It was even hot, or nearly hot. I let the shower splash over me for a while, because there was a lot of dust and dirt from the Bronx that I had to get off me. The way it looked, hardly anybody had been up that way since it happened.

I dried myself, got dressed and looked out the window. We were fairly high up—fifteenth floor. I could see the Hudson and the big bridge up north of us. There was a huge cloud of smoke coming from somewhere near the bridge on the other side of the river, but outside of that everything looked normal. You would have thought there were people in all those houses. Even the streets looked pretty good, until you noticed that hardly any of the cars were moving.

I opened the little bag and loaded my pockets with enough money to run my errands. At the door, I stopped and called over my shoulder to Arthur: "Don't worry if I'm gone an hour or so. I'll be back."

I didn't wait for an answer. That would have been pointless under the circumstances.

After Philadelphia, this place seemed to be bustling with activity. There were four or five people in the lobby and a couple of dozen more out in the street.

I tarried at the desk for several reasons. In the first place, I was expecting Vern Engdahl to try to contact me and I didn't want him messing with the luggage—not while Arthur might get nervous. So I told the desk clerk that in case anybody came inquiring for Mr. Schlaepfer, which was the name I was using—my real name being Sam Dunlap—he was to be told that on no account was he to go to my room but to wait in the lobby; and in any case I would be back in an hour.

"Sure," said the desk clerk, holding out his hand.

I crossed it with paper. "One other thing," I said. "I need to buy an electric typewriter and some other stuff. Where can I get them?"

"PX," he said promptly.

"PX?"

"What used to be Macy's," he explained. "You go out that door and turn right. It's only about a block. You'll see the sign."

"Thanks." That cost me a hundred more, but it was worth it. After all, money wasn't a problem—not when we had just come from Philadelphia.

THE big sign read "PX," but it wasn't big enough to hide an older sign underneath that said "Macy's." I looked it over from across the street.

Somebody had organized it pretty well. I had to admire them. I mean I don't like New York—wouldn't live there if you gave me the place—but it showed a sort of go-getting spirit. It was no easy job getting a full staff together to run a department store operation, when any city the size of New York must have a couple thousand stores. You know what I mean? It's like running a hotel or anything else—how are you going to get people to work for you when they can just as easily walk down the street, find a vacant store and set up their own operation?

But Macy's was fully manned. There was a guard at every door and a walking patrol along the block-front between the entrances to make sure nobody broke in through the windows. They all wore green armbands and uniforms—well, lots of people wore uniforms.

I walked over.

"Afternoon," I said affably to the guard. "I want to pick up some stuff. Typewriter, maybe a gun, you know. How do you work it here? Flat rate for all you can carry, prices marked on everything, or what is it?"

He stared at me suspiciously. He was a monster; six inches taller than I, he must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. He didn't look very smart, which might explain why he was working for somebody else these days. But he was smart enough for what he had to do.

He demanded: "You new in town?"

I nodded.

He thought for a minute. "All right, buddy. Go on in. You pick out what you want, see? We'll straighten out the price when you come out."

"Fair enough." I started past him.

He grabbed me by the arm. "No tricks," he ordered. "You come out the same door you went in, understand?"

"Sure," I said, "if that's the way you want it."

That figured—one way or another: either they got a commission, or, like everybody else, they lived on what they could knock down. I filed that for further consideration.

Inside, the store smelled pretty bad. It wasn't just rot, though there was plenty of that; it was musty and stale and old. It was dark, or nearly. About one light in twenty was turned on, in order to conserve power. Naturally the escalators and so on weren't running at all.

I PASSED a counter with pencils and ball-point pens in a case. Most of them were gone—somebody hadn't bothered to go around in back and had simply knocked the glass out—but I found one that worked and an old order pad to write on. Over by the elevators there was a store directory, so I went over and checked it, making a list of the departments worth visiting.

Office Supplies would be the typewriter. Garden & Home was a good bet—maybe I could find a little wheelbarrow to save carrying the typewriter in my arms. What I wanted was one of the big ones where all the keys are solenoid-operated instead of the cam-and-roller arrangement—that was all Arthur could operate. And those things were heavy, as I knew. That was why we had ditched the old one in the Bronx.

Sporting Goods—that would be for a gun, if there were any left. Naturally, they were about the first to go after it happened, when *everybody* wanted a gun. I mean everybody who lived through it. I thought about clothes—it was pretty hot in New York—and decided I might as well take a look.

Typewriter, clothes, gun, wheelbarrow. I made one more note on the pad—try the tobacco counter, but I didn't have much hope for that. They had used cigarettes for currency around this area for a while, until they got enough bank vaults open to supply big bills. It made cigarettes scarce.

I turned away and noticed for the first time that one of the elevators was stopped on the main floor. The doors were closed, but they were glass doors, and although there wasn't any light inside, I could see the elevator was full. There must have been thirty or forty people in the car when it happened.

I'd been thinking that, if nothing else, these New Yorkers were pretty neat—I mean if you don't count the Bronx. But here were thirty or forty skeletons that nobody had even bothered to clear away.

You call that neat? Right in plain view on the ground floor, where everybody who came into the place would be sure to go—I mean if it had been on one of the upper floors, what difference would it have made?

I began to wish we were out of the city. But naturally that would have to wait until we finished what we came here to do—otherwise, what was the point of coming all the way here in the first place?

THE tobacco counter was bare. I got the wheelbarrow easily enough—there were plenty of those, all sizes; I picked out a nice light red-and-yellow one with rubber-tired wheel. I rolled it over to Sporting Goods on the same floor, but that didn't work out too well. I found a 30-30 with telescopic sights, only there weren't any cartridges to fit it—or anything else. I took the gun anyway; Engdahl would probably have some extra ammunition.

Men's Clothing was a waste of time, too—I guess these New Yorkers were too lazy to do laundry. But I found the typewriter I wanted.

I put the whole load into the wheelbarrow, along with a couple of odds and ends that caught my eye as I passed through Housewares, and I bumped as gently as I could down the shallow steps of the motionless escalator to the ground floor.

I came down the back way, and that was a mistake. It led me right past the food department. Well, I don't have to tell you what *that* was like, with all the exploded cans and the rats as big as poodles. But I found some cologne and soaked a handkerchief in it, and with that over my nose, and some fast footwork for the rats, I managed to get to one of the doors.

It wasn't the one I had come in, but that was all right. I sized up the guard. He looked smart enough for a little bargaining, but not too smart; and if I didn't like his price, I could always remember that I was supposed to go out the other door.

I said: "Psst!"

When he turned around, I said rapidly: "Listen, this isn't the way I came in, but if you want to do business, it'll be the way I come out."

He thought for a second, and then he smiled craftily and said: "All right, come on."

Well, we haggled. The gun was the big thing—he wanted five thousand for that and he wouldn't come down. The wheelbarrow he was willing to let go for five hundred. And the typewriter—he scowled at the typewriter as though it were contagious.

"What you want that for?" he asked suspiciously. I shrugged.

"Well—" he scratched his head—"a thousand?"

I shook my head.

"Five hundred?"

I kept on shaking.

"All right, all right," he grumbled. "Look, you take the other things for six thousand—including what you got in your pockets that you don't think I know about, see? And I'll throw this in. How about it?"

That was fine as far as I was concerned, but just on principle I pushed him a little further. "Forget it," I said. "I'll give you fifty bills for the lot, take it or leave it. Otherwise I'll walk right down the street to Gimbel's and—"

He guffawed.

"Whats the matter?" I demanded.

"Pal," he said, "you kill me. Stranger in town, hey? You can't go anyplace but here."

"Why not?"

"Account of there *ain't* anyplace else. See, the chief here don't like competition. So we don't have to worry about anybody taking their trade elsewhere, like—we burned all the other places down."

That explained a couple of things. I counted out the money, loaded the stuff back in the wheelbarrow and headed for the Statler; but all the time I was counting and loading, I was talking to Big Brainless; and by the time I was actually on the way, I knew a little more about this "chief."

And that was kind of important, because he was the man we were going to have to know very well.

II

I LOCKED the door of the hotel room. Arthur was peeping out of the suitcase at me.

I said: "I'm back. I got your typewriter." He waved his eye at me.

I took out the little kit of electricians' tools I carried, tipped the typewriter on its back and began sorting out leads. I cut them free from the keyboard, soldered on a ground wire, and began taping the leads to the strands of a yard of forty-ply multiplex cable.

It was a slow and dull job. I didn't have to worry about which solenoid lead went to which strand—Arthur could sort them out. But all the same it took an hour, pretty near, and I was getting hungry by the time I got the last connection taped. I shifted the typewriter so that both Arthur and I could see it, rolled in a sheet of paper and hooked the cable to Arthur's receptors.

Nothing happened.

"Oh," I said. "Excuse me, Arthur. I forgot to plug it in."

I found a wall socket. The typewriter began to hum and then it started to rattle and type:

DURA AUK UKOO RQK MWS AQB

It stopped.

"Come on, Arthur," I ordered impatiently. "Sort them out, will you?"

Laboriously it typed:

!!!

Then, for a time, there was a clacking and thumping as he typed random letters, peeping out of the suitcase to see what he had typed, until the sheet I had put in was used up.

I replaced it and waited, as patiently as I could, smoking one of the last of my cigarettes. After fifteen minutes or so, he had the hang of it pretty well. He typed:

YOU DAMQXXX DAMN FOOL WHUXXX WHY DID YOU LEAQNXXX LEAVE ME ALONE Q

“Aw, Arthur,” I said. “Use your head, will you? I couldn’t carry that old typewriter of yours all the way down through the Bronx. It was getting pretty beat-up. Anyway, I’ve only got two hands—”

YOU LOUSE, it rattled, ARE YOU TRYONXXX TRYING TO INSULT ME BECAUSE I DONT HAVE ANY Q

“Arthur!” I said, shocked. “You know better than that!”

The typewriter slammed its carriage back and forth ferociously a couple of times. Then he said: ALL RIGHT SAM YOU KNOW YOUVE GOT ME BY THE THROAT SO YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT TO WITH ME WHO CARES ABOUT MY FEELINGS ANYHOW

“Please don’t take that attitude,” I coaxed.

WELL

“Please?”

He capitulated. ALL RIGHT SAY HEARD ANYTHING FROM ENGDAHL Q

“No.”

ISNT THAT JUST LIKE HIM Q CANT DEPEND ON THAT MAN HE WAS THE LOUSIEST ELECTRICIANS MATE ON THE SEA SPRITE AND HE ISNT MUCH BETTER NOW SAY SAM REMEMBER WHEN WE HAD TO GET HIM OUT OF THE JUG IN NEWPORT NEWS BECAUSE

I settled back and relaxed. I might as well. That was the trouble with getting Arthur a new typewriter after a couple of days without one—he had so much garrulity stored up in his little brain, and the only person to spill it on was me.

APPARENTLY I fell asleep. Well, I mean I must have, because I woke up. I had been dreaming I was on guard post outside the Yard at Portsmouth, and it was night, and I looked up and there was something up there, all silvery and bad. It was a missile—and that was silly, because you never see a missile. But this was a dream.

And the thing burst, like a Roman candle flaring out, all sorts of comet-trails of light, and then the whole sky was full of bright and colored snow. Little tiny flakes of light coming down, a mist of light, radiation dropping like dew; and it was so pretty, and I took a deep breath. And my lungs burned out like slow fire, and I coughed myself to death with the explosions of the missile banging against my flaming ears....

Well, it was a dream. It probably wasn’t like that at all—and if it had been, I wasn’t there to see it, because I was tucked away safe under a hundred and twenty fathoms of Atlantic water. All of us were on the *Sea Sprite*.

But it was a bad dream and it bothered me, even when I woke up and found that the banging explosions of the missile were the noise of Arthur's typewriter carriage crashing furiously back and forth.

He peeped out of the suitcase and saw that I was awake. He demanded: HOW CAN YOU FALL ASLEEP WHEN WERE IN A PLACE LIKE THIS Q ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN SAM I KNOW YOU DONT CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO ME BUT FOR YOUR OWN SAKE YOU SHOULDN'T

"Oh, dry up," I said.

Being awake, I remembered that I was hungry. There was still no sign of Engdahl or the others, but that wasn't too surprising—they hadn't known exactly when we would arrive. I wished I had thought to bring some food back to the room. It looked like long waiting and I wouldn't want to leave Arthur alone again—after all, he was partly right.

I thought of the telephone.

On the off-chance that it might work, I picked it up. Amazing, a voice from the desk answered.

I crossed my fingers and said: "Room service?"

And the voice answered amiably enough: "Hold on, buddy. I'll see if they answer."

Clicking and a good long wait. Then a new voice said: "Whaddya want?"

There was no sense pressing my luck by asking for anything like a complete meal. I would be lucky if I got a sandwich.

I said: "Please, may I have a Spam sandwich on Rye Krisp and some coffee for Room Fifteen Forty-one?"

"Please, you go to hell!" the voice snarled. "What do you think this is, some damn delicatessen? You want liquor, we'll get you liquor. That's what room service is for!"

I HUNG up. What was the use of arguing? Arthur was clacking peevishly:

WHATS THE MATTER SAM YOU THINKING OF YOUR BELLY AGAIN Q

"You would be if you—" I started, and then I stopped. Arthur's feelings were delicate enough already. I mean suppose that all you had left of what you were born with was a brain in a kind of sardine can, wouldn't you be sensitive? Well, Arthur was more sensitive than you would be, believe me. Of course, it was his own foolish fault—I mean you don't get a prosthetic tank unless you die by accident, or something like that, because if it's disease they usually can't save even the brain.

The phone rang again.

It was the desk clerk. "Say, did you get what you wanted?" he asked chummily.

"No."

"Oh. Too bad," he said, but cheerfully. "Listen, buddy, I forgot to tell you before. That Miss Engdahl you were expecting, she's on her way up."

I dropped the phone onto the cradle.

"Arthur!" I yelled. "Keep quiet for a while—trouble!"

He clacked once, and the typewriter shut itself off. I jumped for the door of the bathroom, cursing the fact that I didn't have cartridges for the gun. Still, empty or not, it would have to do.

I ducked behind the bathroom door, in the shadows, covering the hall door. Because there were two things wrong with what the desk clerk had told me. Vern Engdahl wasn't a "miss," to begin with; and whatever name he used when he came to call on me, it wouldn't be Vern Engdahl.

There was a knock on the door. I called: "Come in!"

The door opened and the girl who called herself Vern Engdahl came in slowly, looking around. I stayed quiet and out of sight until she was all the way in. She didn't seem to be armed; there wasn't anyone with her.

I stepped out, holding the gun on her. Her eyes opened wide and she seemed about to turn.

"Hold it! Come on in, you. Close the door!"

She did. She looked as though she were expecting me. I looked her over—medium pretty, not very tall, not very plump, not very old. I'd have guessed twenty or so, but that's not my line of work; she could have been almost any age from seventeen on.

The typewriter switched itself on and began to pound agitatedly. I crossed over toward her and paused to peer at what Arthur was yacking about: SEARCH HER YOU DAMN FOOL MAYBE SHES GOT A GUN

I ordered: "Shut up, Arthur. I'm *going* to search her. You! Turn around!"

SHE shrugged and turned around, her hands in the air. Over her shoulder, she said: "You're taking this all wrong, Sam. I came here to make a deal with you."

"Sure you did."

But her knowing my name was a blow, too. I mean what was the use of all that sneaking around if people in New York were going to know we were here?

I walked up close behind her and patted what there was to pat. There didn't seem to be a gun.

"You tickle," she complained.

I took her pocketbook away from her and went through it. No gun. A lot of money—an *awful* lot of money. I mean there must have been two or three hundred thousand dollars. There was nothing with a name on it in the pocketbook.

She said: "Can I put my hands down, Sam?"

"In a minute." I thought for a second and then decided to do it—you know, I just couldn't afford to take chances. I cleared my throat and ordered: "Take off your clothes."

Her head jerked around and she stared at me. "*What?*"

"Take them off. You heard me."

"Now wait a minute—" she began dangerously.

I said: "Do what I tell you, hear? How do I know you haven't got a knife tucked away?"

She clenched her teeth. "Why, you dirty little man! What do you think—" Then she shrugged. She looked at me with contempt and said: "All right. What's the difference?"

Well, there was a considerable difference. She began to unzip and unbutton and wriggle, and pretty soon she was standing there in her underwear, looking at me as though I were a two-headed worm. It was interesting, but kind of embarrassing. I could see Arthur's eye-stalk waving excitedly out of the opened suitcase.

I picked up her skirt and blouse and shook them. I could feel myself blushing, and there didn't seem to be anything in them.

I growled: "Okay, I guess that's enough. You can put your clothes back on now."

"Gee, thanks," she said.

She looked at me thoughtfully and then shook her head as if she'd never seen anything like me before and never hoped to again. Without another word, she began to get back into her clothes. I had to admire her poise. I mean she was perfectly calm about the whole thing. You'd have thought she was used to taking her clothes off in front of strange men.

Well, for that matter, maybe she was; but it wasn't any of my business.

ARTHUR was clacking distractedly, but I didn't pay any attention to him. I demanded: "All right, now who are you and what do you want?"

She pulled up a stocking and said: "You couldn't have asked me that in the first place, could you? I'm Vern Eng—"

"Cut it out!"

She stared at me. "I was only going to say I'm Vern Engdahl's partner. We've got a little business deal cooking and I wanted to talk to you about this proposition."

Arthur squawked: WHATS ENGDAHL UP TO NOW Q SAM IM WARNING YOU I DONT LIKE THE LOOK OF THIS THIS WOMAN AND ENGDAHL ARE PROBABLY DOUBLECROSSING US

I said: "All right, Arthur, relax. I'm taking care of things. Now start over, you. What's your name?"

She finished putting on her shoe and stood up. "Amy."

"Last name?"

She shrugged and fished in her purse for a cigarette. "What does it matter? Mind if I sit down?"

"Go ahead," I rumbled. "But don't stop talking!"

"Oh," she said, "we've got plenty of time to straighten things out." She lit the cigarette and walked over to the chair by the window. On the way, she gave the luggage a good long look.

Arthur's eyestalk cowered back into the suitcase as she came close. She winked at me, grinned, bent down and peered inside.

"My," she said, "he's a nice shiny one, isn't he?"

The typewriter began to clatter frantically. I didn't even bother to look; I told him: "Arthur, if you can't keep quiet, you have to expect people to know you're there."

She sat down and crossed her legs. "Now then," she said. "Frankly, he's what I came to see you about. Vern told me you had a pross. I want to buy it."

The typewriter thrashed its carriage back and forth furiously.

"Arthur isn't for sale."

"No?" She leaned back. "Vern's already sold me his interest, you know. And you don't really have any choice. You see, I'm in charge of materiel procurement for the Major. If you want to sell your share, fine. If you don't, why, we requisition it anyhow. Do you follow?"

I was getting irritated—at Vern Engdahl, for whatever the hell he thought he was doing; but at her because she was handy. I shook my head.

"Fifty thousand dollars? I mean for your interest?"

"No."

"Seventy-five?"

"No!"

"Oh, come on now. A hundred thousand?"

It wasn't going to make any impression on her, but I tried to explain: "Arthur's a friend of mine. He isn't for sale."

SHE shook her head. "What's the matter with you? Engdahl wasn't like this. He sold his interest for forty thousand and was glad to get it."

Clatter-clatter-clatter from Arthur. I didn't blame him for having hurt feelings that time.

Amy said in a discouraged tone: "Why can't people be reasonable? The Major doesn't like it when people aren't reasonable."

I lowered the gun and cleared my throat. "He doesn't?" I asked, cuing her. I wanted to hear more about this Major, who seemed to have the city pretty well under his thumb.

"No, he doesn't." She shook her head sorrowfully. She said in an accusing voice: "You out-of-towners don't know what it's like to try to run a city the size of New York. There are fifteen thousand people here, do you know that? It isn't one of your hick towns. And it's worry, worry, worry all the time, trying to keep things going."

"I bet," I said sympathetically. "You're, uh, pretty close to the Major?"

She said stiffly: "I'm not married to him, if that's what you mean. Though I've had my chances.... But you see how it is. Fifteen thousand people to run a place the size of New York! It's forty men to operate the power station, and twenty-five on the PX, and thirty on the hotel here. And then there are the local groceries, and the Army, and the Coast Guard, and the Air Force—though, really, that's only two men—and—Well, you get the picture."

"I certainly do. Look, what kind of a guy is the Major?"

She shrugged. "A guy."

"I mean what does he like?"

"Women, mostly," she said, her expression clouded. "Come on now. What about it?"

I stalled. "What do you want Arthur for?"

She gave me a disgusted look. "What do you think? To relieve the manpower shortage, naturally. There's more work than there are men. Now if the Major could just get hold of a couple of prosthetics, like this thing here, why, he could put them in the big installations. This one used to be an engineer or something, Vern said."

"Well ... *like* an engineer."

AMY shrugged. "So why couldn't we connect him up with the power station? It's been done. The Major knows that—he was in the Pentagon when they switched all the aircraft warning net over from computer to prosthetic control. So why couldn't we do the same thing with our power station and release forty men for other assignments? This thing could work day, night, Sundays—what's the difference when you're just a brain in a sardine can?"

Clatter-rattle-*bang*.

She looked startled. "Oh. I forgot he was listening."

"No deal," I said.

She said: "A hundred and fifty thousand?"

A hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I considered that for a while. Arthur clattered warningly.

"Well," I temporized, "I'd have to be sure he was getting into good hands—"

The typewriter thrashed wildly. The sheet of paper fluttered out of the carriage. He'd used it up. Automatically I picked it up—it was covered with imprecations, self-pity and threats—and started to put a new one in.

"No," I said, bending over the typewriter, "I guess I couldn't sell him. It just wouldn't be right—"

That was my mistake; it was the wrong time for me to say that, because I had taken my eyes off her.

The room bent over and clouted me.

I half turned, not more than a fraction conscious, and I saw this Amy girl, behind me, with the shoe still in her hand, raised to give me another blackjacking on the skull.

The shoe came down, and it must have weighed more than it looked, and even the fractional bit of consciousness went crashing away.

III

I HAVE to tell you about Vern Engdahl. We were all from the *Sea Sprite*, of course—me and Vern and even Arthur. The thing about Vern is that he was the lowest-ranking one of us all—only an electricians' mate third, I mean when anybody paid any attention to things like that—and yet he was pretty much doing the thinking for the rest of us. Coming to New York was his idea—he told us that was the only place we could get what we wanted.

Well, as long as we were carrying Arthur along with us, we pretty much needed Vern, because he was the one who knew how to keep the lash-up going. You've got no idea what kind of pumps and plumbing go into a prosthetic tank until you've seen one

opened up. And, naturally, Arthur didn't want any breakdowns without somebody around to fix things up.

The *Sea Sprite*, maybe you know, was one of the old liquid-sodium-reactor subs—too slow for combat duty, but as big as a barn, so they made it a hospital ship. We were cruising deep when the missiles hit, and, of course, when we came up, there wasn't much for a hospital ship to do. I mean there isn't any sense fooling around with anybody who's taken a good deep breath of fallout.

So we went back to Newport News to see what had happened. And we found out what had happened. And there wasn't anything much to do except pay off the crew and let them go. But us three stuck together. Why not? It wasn't as if we had any families to go back to any more.

Vern just loved all this stuff—he'd been an Eagle Scout; maybe that had something to do with it—and he showed us how to boil drinking water and forage in the woods and all like that, because nobody in his right mind wanted to go near any kind of a town, until the cold weather set in, anyway. And it was always Vern, Vern, telling us what to do, ironing out our troubles.

It worked out, except that there was this one thing. Vern had bright ideas. But he didn't always tell us what they were.

So I wasn't so very surprised when I came to. I mean there I was, tied up, with this girl Amy standing over me, holding the gun like a club. Evidently she'd found out that there weren't any cartridges. And in a couple of minutes there was a knock on the door, and she yelled, "Come in," and in came Vern. And the man who was with him had to be somebody important, because there were eight or ten other men crowding in close behind.

I didn't need to look at the oak leaves on his shoulders to realize that here was the chief, the fellow who ran this town, the Major.

It was just the kind of thing Vern *would* do.

VERN said, with the look on his face that made strange officers wonder why this poor persecuted man had been forced to spend so much time in the brig: "Now, Major, I'm sure we can straighten all this out. Would you mind leaving me alone with my friend here for a moment?"

The Major teetered on his heels, thinking. He was a tall, youngish-bald type, with a long, worried, horselike face. He said: "Ah, do you think we should?"

"I guarantee there'll be no trouble, Major," Vern promised.

The Major pulled at his little mustache. "Very well," he said. "Amy, you come along."

"We'll be right here, Major," Vern said reassuringly, escorting him to the door.

"You bet you will," said the Major, and tittered. "Ah, bring that gun along with you, Amy. And be sure this man knows that we have bullets."

They closed the door. Arthur had been cowering in his suitcase, but now his eyestalk peeped out and the rattling and clattering from that typewriter sounded like the Battle of the Bulge.

I demanded: "Come on, Vern. What's this all about?"

Vern said: "How much did they offer you?"

Clatter-bang-BANG. I peeked, and Arthur was saying: WARNED YOU SAM THAT ENGDAHL WAS UP TO TRICKS PLEASE SAM PLEASE PLEASE HIT HIM ON THE HEAD KNOCK HIM OUT HE MUST HAVE A GUN SO GET IT AND SHOOT OUR WAY OUT OF HERE

"A hundred and fifty thousand dollars," I said.

Vern looked outraged. "I only got forty!"

Arthur clattered: VERN I APPEAL TO YOUR COMMON DECENCY WERE OLD SHIPMATES VERN REMEMBER ALL THE TIMES I

"Still," Vern mused, "it's all common funds anyway, right? Arthur belongs to both of us."

I DONT DONT REPEAT DONT BELONG TO ANYBODY BUT ME

"That's true," I said grudgingly. "But I carried him, remember."

SAM WHATS THE MATTER WITH YOU Q I DONT LIKE THE EXPRESSION ON YOUR FACE LISTEN SAM YOU ARENT

Vern said, "A hundred and fifty thousand, remember."

THINKING OF SELLING

"And of course we couldn't get out of here," Vern pointed out. "They've got us surrounded."

ME TO THESE RATS Q SAM VERN PLEASE DONT SCARE ME

I SAID, pointing to the fluttering paper in the rattling machine: "You're worrying our friend."

Vern shrugged impatiently.

I KNEW I SHOULDN'T HAVE TRUSTED YOU, Arthur wept. THATS ALL I MEAN TO YOU EH

Vern said: "Well, Sam? Let's take the cash and get this thing over with. After all, he *will* have the best of treatment."

It was a little like selling your sister into white slavery, but what else was there to do? Besides, I kind of trusted Vern.

"All right," I said.

What Arthur said nearly scorched the paper.

Vern helped pack Arthur up for moving. I mean it was just a matter of pulling the plugs out and making sure he had a fresh battery, but Vern wanted to supervise it himself. Because one of the little things Vern had up his sleeve was that he had found a spot for himself on the Major's payroll. He was now the official Prosthetic (Human) Maintenance Department Chief.

The Major said to me: "Ah, Dunlap. What sort of experience have you had?"

"Experience?"

"In the Navy. Your friend Engdahl suggested you might want to join us here."

"Oh. I see what you mean." I shook my head. "Nothing that would do you any good, I'm afraid. I was a yeoman."

“Yeoman?”

“Like a company clerk,” I explained. “I mean I kept records and cut orders and made out reports and all like that.”

“Company clerk!” The eyes in the long horsy face gleamed. “Ah, you’re mistaken, Dunlap! Why, that’s *just* what we need. Our morning reports are in foul shape. Foul! Come over to HQ. Lieutenant Bankhead will give you a lift.”

“Lieutenant Bankhead?”

I got an elbow in my ribs for that. It was that girl Amy, standing alongside me. “I,” she said, “am Lieutenant Bankhead.”

Well, I went along with her, leaving Engdahl and Arthur behind. But I must admit I wasn’t sure of my reception.

Out in front of the hotel was a whole fleet of cars—three or four of them, at least. There was a big old Cadillac that looked like a gangsters’ car—thick glass in the windows, tires that looked like they belonged on a truck. I was willing to bet it was bulletproof and also that it belonged to the Major. I was right both times. There was a little MG with the top down, and a couple of light trucks. Every one of them was painted bright orange, and every one of them had the star-and-bar of the good old United States Army on its side.

It took me back to old times—all but the unmilitary color. Amy led me to the MG and pointed.

“Sit,” she said.

I sat. She got in the other side and we were off.

It was a little uncomfortable on account of I wasn’t just sure whether I ought to apologize for making her take her clothes off. And then she tramped on the gas of that little car and I didn’t think much about being embarrassed or about her black lace lingerie. I was only thinking about one thing—how to stay alive long enough to get out of that car.

IV

SEE, what we really wanted was an ocean liner.

The rest of us probably would have been happy enough to stay in Lehigh County, but Arthur was getting restless.

He was a terrible responsibility, in a way. I suppose there were a hundred thousand people or so left in the country, and not more than forty or fifty of them were like Arthur—I mean if you want to call a man in a prosthetic tank a “person.” But we all did. We’d got pretty used to him. We’d shipped together in the war—and survived together, as a few of the actual fighters did, those who were lucky enough to be underwater or high in the air when the ICBMs landed—and as few civilians did.

I mean there wasn’t much chance for surviving, for anybody who happened to be breathing the open air when it happened. I mean you can do just so much about making a “clean” H-bomb, and if you cut out the long-life fission products, the short-life ones get pretty deadly.

Anyway, there wasn't much damage, except of course that everybody was dead. All the surface vessels lost their crews. All the population of the cities were gone. And so then, when Arthur slipped on the gangplank coming into Newport News and broke his fool neck, why, we had the whole staff of the *Sea Sprite* to work on him. I mean what else did the surgeons have to do?

Of course, that was a long time ago.

But we'd stayed together. We headed for the farm country around Allentown, Pennsylvania, because Arthur and Vern Engdahl claimed to know it pretty well. I think maybe they had some hope of finding family or friends, but naturally there wasn't any of that. And when you got into the inland towns, there hadn't been much of an attempt to clean them up. At least the big cities and the ports had been gone over, in some spots anyway, by burial squads. Although when we finally decided to move out and went to Philadelphia—

Well, let's be fair; there had been fighting around there after the big fight. Anyway, that wasn't so very uncommon. That was one of the reasons that for a long time—four or five years, at any rate—we stayed away from big cities.

We holed up in a big farmhouse in Lehigh County. It had its own generator from a little stream, and that took care of Arthur's power needs; and the previous occupants had been just crazy about stashing away food. There was enough to last a century, and that took care of the two of us. We appreciated that. We even took the old folks out and gave them a decent burial. I mean they'd all been in the family car, so we just had to tow it to a gravel pit and push it in.

The place had its own well, with an electric pump and a hot-water system—oh, it was nice. I was sorry to leave but, frankly, Arthur was driving us nuts.

We never could make the television work—maybe there weren't any stations near enough. But we pulled in a couple of radio stations pretty well and Arthur got a big charge out of listening to them—see, he could hear four or five at a time and I suppose that made him feel better than the rest of us.

He heard that the big cities were cleaned up and every one of them seemed to want immigrants—they were pleading, pleading all the time, like the TV-set and vacuum-cleaner people used to in the old days; they guaranteed we'd like it if we only came to live in Philly, or Richmond, or Baltimore, or wherever. And I guess Arthur kind of hoped we might find another pross. And then—well, Engdahl came up with this idea of an ocean liner.

It figured. I mean you get out in the middle of the ocean and what's the difference what it's like on land? And it especially appealed to Arthur because he wanted to do some surface sailing. He never had when he was real—I mean when he had arms and legs like anybody else. He'd gone right into the undersea service the minute he got out of school.

And—well, sailing was what Arthur knew something about and I suppose even a prosthetic man wants to feel useful. It was like Amy said: He could be hooked up to an automated factory—

Or to a ship.

HQ for the Major's Temporary Military Government—that's what the sign said—was on the 91st floor of the Empire State Building, and right there that tells you something about the man. I mean you know how much power it takes to run those

elevators all the way up to the top? But the Major must have liked being able to look down on everybody else.

Amy Bankhead conducted me to his office and sat me down to wait for His Military Excellency to arrive. She filled me in on him, to some degree. He'd been an absolute nothing before the war; but he had a reserve commission in the Air Force, and when things began to look sticky, they'd called him up and put him in a Missile Master control point, underground somewhere up around Ossining.

He was the duty officer when it happened, and naturally he hadn't noticed anything like an enemy aircraft, and naturally the anti-missile missiles were still rusting in their racks all around the city; but since the place had been operating on sealed ventilation, the duty complement could stay there until the short half-life radioisotopes wore themselves out.

And then the Major found out that he was not only in charge of the fourteen men and women of his division at the center—he was ranking United States Military Establishment officer farther than the eye could see. So he beat it, fast as he could, for New York, because what Army officer doesn't dream about being stationed in New York? And he set up his Temporary Military Government—and that was nine years ago.

If there hadn't been plenty to go around, I don't suppose he would have lasted a week—none of these city chiefs would have. But as things were, he was in on the ground floor, and as newcomers trickled into the city, his boys already had things nicely organized.

It was a soft touch.

WELL, we were about a week getting settled in New York and things were looking pretty good. Vern calmed me down by pointing out that, after all, we had to sell Arthur, and hadn't we come out of it plenty okay?

And we had. There was no doubt about it. Not only did we have a fat price for Arthur, which was useful because there were a lot of things we would have to buy, but we both had jobs working for the Major.

Vern was his specialist in the care and feeding of Arthur and I was his chief of office routine—and, as such, I delighted his fussy little soul, because by adding what I remembered of Navy protocol to what he was able to teach me of Army routine, we came up with as snarled a mass of red tape as any field-grade officer in the whole history of all armed forces had been able to accumulate. Oh, I tell you, nobody sneezed in New York without a report being made out in triplicate, with eight endorsements.

Of course there wasn't anybody to send them to, but that didn't stop the Major. He said with determination: "Nobody's ever going to chew *me* out for non-compliance with regulations—even if I have to invent the regulations myself!"

We set up in a bachelor apartment on Central Park South—the Major had the penthouse; the whole building had been converted to barracks—and the first chance we got, Vern snaffled some transportation and we set out to find an ocean liner.

See, the thing was that an ocean liner isn't easy to steal. I mean we'd scouted out the lay of the land before we ever entered the city itself, and there were plenty of liners, but there wasn't one that looked like we could just jump in and sail it away. For that

we needed an organization. Since we didn't have one, the best thing to do was borrow the Major's.

Vern turned up with Amy Bankhead's MG, and he also turned up with Amy. I can't say I was displeased, because I was beginning to like the girl; but did you ever try to ride three people in the seats of an MG? Well, the way to do it is by having one passenger sit in the other passenger's lap, which would have been all right except that Amy insisted on driving.

We headed downtown and over to the West Side. The Major's Topographical Section—one former billboard artist—had prepared road maps with little red-ink Xs marking the streets that were blocked, which was most of the streets; but we charted a course that would take us where we wanted to go. Thirty-fourth Street was open, and so was Fifth Avenue all of its length, so we scooted down Fifth, crossed over, got under the Elevated Highway and whined along uptown toward the Fifties.

"There's one," cried Amy, pointing.

I was on Vern's lap, so I was making the notes. It was a Fruit Company combination freighter-passenger vessel. I looked at Vern, and Vern shrugged as best he could, so I wrote it down; but it wasn't exactly what we wanted. No, not by a long shot.

STILL, the thing to do was to survey our resources, and then we could pick the one we liked best. We went all the way up to the end of the big-ship docks, and then turned and came back down, all the way to the Battery. It wasn't pleasure driving, exactly—half a dozen times we had to get out the map and detour around impenetrable jams of stalled and empty cars—or anyway, if they weren't exactly empty, the people in them were no longer in shape to get out of our way. But we made it.

We counted sixteen ships in dock that looked as though they might do for our purposes. We had to rule out the newer ones and the reconverted jobs. I mean, after all, U-235 just lasts so long, and you can steam around the world on a walnut-shell of it, or whatever it is, but you can't store it. So we had to stick with the ships that were powered with conventional fuel—and, on consideration, only oil at that.

But that left sixteen, as I say. Some of them, though, had suffered visibly from being left untended for nearly a decade, so that for our purposes they might as well have been abandoned in the middle of the Atlantic; we didn't have the equipment or ambition to do any great amount of salvage work.

The *Empress of Britain* would have been a pretty good bet, for instance, except that it was lying at pretty nearly a forty-five-degree angle in its berth. So was the *United States*, and so was the *Caronia*. The *Stockholm* was straight enough, but I took a good look, and only one tier of portholes was showing above the water—evidently it had settled nice and even, but it was on the bottom all the same. Well, that mud sucks with a fine tight grip, and we weren't going to try to loosen it.

All in all, eleven of the sixteen ships were out of commission just from what we could see driving by.

Vern and I looked at each other. We stood by the MG, while Amy sprawled her legs over the side and waited for us to make up our minds.

"Not good, Sam," said Vern, looking worried.

I said: "Well, that still leaves five. There's the *Vulcania*, the *Cristobal*—"

"Too small."

"All right. The *Manhattan*, the *Liberté* and the *Queen Elizabeth*."

Amy looked up, her eyes gleaming. "Where's the question?" she demanded. "Naturally, it's the *Queen*."

I tried to explain. "Please, Amy. Leave these things to us, will you?"

"But the Major won't settle for anything but the best!"

"The *Major*?"

I GLANCED at Vern, who wouldn't meet my eyes. "Well," I said, "look at the problems, Amy. First we have to check it over. Maybe it's been burned out—how do we know? Maybe the channel isn't even deep enough to float it any more—how do we know? Where are we going to get the oil for it?"

"We'll get the oil," Amy said cheerfully.

"And what if the channel isn't deep enough?"

"She'll float," Amy promised. "At high tide, anyway. Even if the channel hasn't been dredged in ten years."

I shrugged and gave up. What was the use of arguing?

We drove back to the *Queen Elizabeth* and I had to admit that there was a certain attraction about that big old dowager. We all got out and strolled down the pier, looking over as much as we could see.

The pier had never been cleaned out. It bothered me a little—I mean I don't like skeletons much—but Amy didn't seem to mind. The *Queen* must have just docked when it happened, because you could still see bony queues, as though they were waiting for customs inspection.

Some of the bags had been opened and the contents scattered around—naturally, somebody was bound to think of looting the *Queen*. But there were as many that hadn't been touched as that had been opened, and the whole thing had the look of an amateur attempt. And that was all to the good, because the fewer persons who had boarded the *Queen* in the decade since it happened, the more chance of our finding it in usable shape.

Amy saw a gangplank still up, and with cries of girlish glee ran aboard.

I plucked at Vern's sleeve. "You," I said. "What's this about what the *Major* won't settle for less than?"

He said: "Aw, Sam, I had to tell her something, didn't I?"

"But what about the *Major*—"

He said patiently: "You don't understand. It's all part of my plan, see? The *Major* is the big thing here and he's got a birthday coming up next month. Well, the way I put it to Amy, we'll fix him up with a yacht as a birthday present, see? And, of course, when it's all fixed up and ready to lift anchor—"

I said doubtfully: "That's the hard way, Vern. Why couldn't we just sort of get steam up and take off?"

He shook his head. "*That* is the hard way. This way we get all the help and supplies we need, understand?"

I shrugged. That was the way it was, so what was the use of arguing?

But there was one thing more on my mind. I said: "How come Amy's so interested in making the Major happy?"

Vern chortled. "Jealous, eh?"

"I asked a question!"

"Calm down, boy. It's just that he's in charge of things here so naturally she wants to keep in good with him."

I scowled. "I keep hearing stories about how the Major's chief interest in life is women. You sure she isn't ambitious to be one of them?"

He said: "The reason she wants to keep him happy is so she *won't* be one of them."

V

THE name of the place was Bayonne.

Vern said: "One of them's *got* to have oil, Sam. It *has* to."

"Sure," I said.

"There's no question about it. Look, this is where the tankers came to discharge oil. They'd come in here, pump the oil into the refinery tanks and—"

"Vern," I said. "Let's look, shall we?"

He shrugged, and we hopped off the little outboard motorboat onto a landing stage. The tankers towered over us, rusty and screeching as the waves rubbed them against each other.

There were fifty of them there at least, and we poked around them for hours. The hatches were rusted shut and unmanageable, but you could tell a lot by sniffing. Gasoline odor was out; smell of seaweed and dead fish was out; but the heavy, rank smell of fuel oil, that was what we were sniffing for. Crews had been aboard these ships when the missiles came, and crews were still aboard.

Beyond the two-part superstructures of the tankers, the skyline of New York was visible. I looked up, sweating, and saw the Empire State Building and imagined Amy up there, looking out toward us.

She knew we were here. It was her idea. She had scrounged up a naval engineer, or what she called a naval engineer—he had once been a stoker on a ferryboat. But he claimed he knew what he was talking about when he said the only thing the *Queen* needed to make 'er go was oil. And so we left him aboard to tinker and polish, with a couple of helpers Amy detached from the police force, and we tackled the oil problem.

Which meant Bayonne. Which was where we were.

It had to be a tanker with at least a fair portion of its cargo intact, because the *Queen* was a thirsty creature, drinking fuel not by the shot or gallon but by the ton.

"Saaam! Sam *Dunlap*!"

I looked up, startled. Five ships away, across the U of the mooring, Vern Engdahl was bellowing at me through cupped hands.

"I found it!" he shouted. "Oil, lots of oil! Come look!"

I clasped my hands over my head and looked around. It was a long way around to the tanker Vern was on, hopping from deck to deck, detouring around open stretches.

I shouted: "I'll get the boat!"

He waved and climbed up on the rail of the ship, his feet dangling over, looking supremely happy and pleased with himself. He lit a cigarette, leaned back against the upward sweep of the rail and waited.

It took me a little time to get back to the boat and a little more time than that to get the damn motor started. Vern! "Let's not take that lousy little twelve horse-power, Sam," he'd said reasonably. "The twenty-five's more what we need!" And maybe it was, but none of the motors had been started in most of a decade, and the twenty-five was just that much harder to start now.

I struggled over it, swearing, for twenty minutes or more.

The tanker by whose side we had tied up began to swing toward me as the tide changed to outgoing.

FOR a moment there, I was counting seconds, expecting to have to make a jump for it before the big red steel flank squeezed the little outboard flat against the piles.

But I got it started—just about in time. I squeezed out of the trap with not much more than a yard to spare and threaded my way into open water.

There was a large, threatening sound, like an enormous slow cough.

I rounded the stern of the last tanker between me and open water, and looked into the eye of a fire-breathing dragon.

Vern and his cigarettes! The tanker was loose and ablaze, bearing down on me with the slow drift of the ebbing tide. From the hatches on the forward deck, two fountains of fire spurted up and out, like enormous nostrils spouting flame. The hawsers had been burned through, the ship was adrift, I was in its path—

And so was the frantically splashing figure of Vern Engdahl, trying desperately to swim out of the way in the water before it.

What kept it from blowing up in our faces I will never know, unless it was the pressure in the tanks forcing the flame out; but it didn't. Not just then. Not until I had Engdahl aboard and we were out in the middle of the Hudson, staring back; and then it went up all right, all at once, like a missile or a volcano; and there had been fifty tankers in that one mooring, but there weren't any more, or not in shape for us to use.

I looked at Engdahl.

He said defensively: "Honest, Sam, I thought it was oil. It *smelled* like oil. How was I to know—"

"Shut up," I said.

He shrugged, injured. "But it's all right, Sam. No fooling. There are plenty of other tankers around. Plenty. Down toward the Amboys, maybe moored out in the channel. There must be. We'll find them."

“No,” I said. “*You* will.”

And that was all I said, because I am forgiving by nature; but I thought a great deal more.

Surprisingly, though, he did find a tanker with a full load, the very next day.

It became a question of getting the tanker to the *Queen*. I left that part up to Vern, since he claimed to be able to handle it.

It took him two weeks. First it was finding the tanker, then it was locating a tug in shape to move, then it was finding someone to pilot the tug. Then it was waiting for a clear and windless day—because the pilot he found had got all his experience sailing Star boats on Long Island Sound—and then it was easing the tanker out of Newark Bay, into the channel, down to the pier in the North River—

Oh, it was work and no fooling. I enjoyed it very much, because I didn’t have to do it.

BUT I had enough to keep me busy at that. I found a man who claimed he used to be a radio engineer. And if he was an engineer, I was Albert Einstein’s mother, but at least he knew which end of a soldering iron was hot. There was no need for any great skill, since there weren’t going to be very many vessels to communicate with.

Things began to move.

The advantage of a ship like the *Queen*, for our purposes, was that the thing was pretty well automated to start out with. I mean never mind what the seafaring unions required in the way of flesh-and-blood personnel. What it came down to was that one man in the bridge or wheelhouse could pretty well make any part of the ship go or not go.

The engine-room telegraph wasn’t hooked up to control the engines, no. But the wiring diagram needed only a few little changes to get the same effect, because where in the original concept a human being would take a look at the repeater down in the engine room, nod wisely, and push a button that would make the engines stop, start, or whatever—why, all we had to do was cut out the middleman, so to speak.

Our genius of the soldering iron replaced flesh and blood with some wiring and, presto, we had centralized engine control.

The steering was even easier. Steering was a matter of electronic control and servomotors to begin with. Windjammers in the old movies might have a man lashed to the wheel whose muscle power turned the rudder, but, believe me, a big superliner doesn’t. The rudders weigh as much as any old windjammer ever did from stem to stern; you have to have motors to turn them; and it was only a matter of getting out the old soldering iron again.

By the time we were through, we had every operational facility of the *Queen* hooked up to a single panel on the bridge.

Engdahl showed up with the oil tanker just about the time we got the wiring complete. We rigged up a pump and filled the bunkers till they were topped off full. We guessed, out of hope and ignorance, that there was enough in there to take us half a dozen times around the world at normal cruising speed, and maybe there was. Anyway, it didn’t matter, for surely we had enough to take us anywhere we wanted to go, and then there would be more.

We crossed our fingers, turned our ex-ferry-stoker loose, pushed a button—

Smoke came out of the stacks.

The antique screws began to turn over. Astern, a sort of hump of muddy water appeared. The *Queen* quivered underfoot. The mooring hawsers creaked and sang.

“Turn her off!” screamed Engdahl. “She’s headed for Times Square!”

Well, that was an exaggeration, but not much of one; and there wasn’t any sense in stirring up the bottom mud. I pushed buttons and the screws stopped. I pushed another button, and the big engines quietly shut themselves off, and in a few moments the stacks stopped puffing their black smoke.

The ship was alive.

Solemnly Engdahl and I shook hands. We had the thing licked. All, that is, except for the one small problem of Arthur.

THE thing about Arthur was they had put him to work.

It was in the power station, just as Amy had said, and Arthur didn’t like it. The fact that he didn’t like it was a splendid reason for staying away from there, but I let my kind heart overrule my good sense and paid him a visit.

It was way over on the East Side, miles and miles from any civilized area. I borrowed Amy’s MG, and borrowed Amy to go with it, and the two of us packed a picnic lunch and set out. There were reports of deer on Avenue A, so I brought a rifle, but we never saw one; and if you want my opinion, those reports were nothing but wishful thinking. I mean if people couldn’t survive, how could deer?

We finally threaded our way through the clogged streets and parked in front of the power station.

“There’s supposed to be a guard,” Amy said doubtfully.

I looked. I looked pretty carefully, because if there was a guard, I wanted to see him. The Major’s orders were that vital defense installations—such as the power station, the PX and his own barracks building—were to be guarded against trespassers on a shoot-on-sight basis and I wanted to make sure that the guard knew we were privileged persons, with passes signed by the Major’s own hand. But we couldn’t find him. So we walked in through the big door, peered around, listened for the sounds of machinery and walked in that direction.

And then we found him; he was sound asleep. Amy, looking indignant, shook him awake.

“Is that how you guard military property?” she scolded. “Don’t you know the penalty for sleeping at your post?”

The guard said something irritable and unhappy. I got her off his back with some difficulty, and we located Arthur.

Picture a shiny four-gallon tomato can, with the label stripped off, hanging by wire from the flashing-light panels of an electric computer. That was Arthur. The shiny metal cylinder was his prosthetic tank; the wires were the leads that served him for fingers, ears and mouth; the glittering panel was the control center for the Consolidated Edison Eastside Power Plant No. 1.

“Hi, Arthur,” I said, and a sudden ear-splitting thunderous hiss was his way of telling me that he knew I was there.

I didn't know exactly what it was he was trying to say and I didn't want to; fortune spares me few painful moments, and I accept with gratitude the ones it does. The Major's boys hadn't bothered to bring Arthur's typewriter along—I mean who cares what a generator-governor had to offer in the way of conversation?—so all he could do was blow off steam from the distant boilers.

WELL, not quite all. Light flashed; a bucket conveyor began crashingly to dump loads of coal; and an alarm gong began to pound.

"Please, Arthur," I begged. "Shut up a minute and listen, will you?"

More lights. The gong rapped half a dozen times sharply, and stopped.

I said: "Arthur, you've got to trust Vern and me. We have this thing figured out now. We've got the *Queen Elizabeth*—"

A shattering hiss of steam—meaning delight this time, I thought. Or anyway hoped.

"—and its only a question of time until we can carry out the plan. Vern says to apologize for not looking in on you—" hiss—"but he's been busy. And after all, you know it's more important to get everything ready so you can get out of this place, right?"

"Psst," said Amy.

She nodded briefly past my shoulder. I looked, and there was the guard, looking sleepy and surly and definitely suspicious.

I said heartily: "So as soon as I fix it up with the Major, we'll arrange for something better for you. Meanwhile, Arthur, you're doing a capital job and I want you to know that all of us loyal New York citizens and public servants deeply appreciate—"

Thundering crashes, bangs, gongs, hisses, and the scream of a steam whistle he'd found somewhere.

Arthur was mad.

"So long, Arthur," I said, and we got out of there—just barely in time. At the door, we found that Arthur had reversed the coal scoops and a growing mound of it was pouring into the street where we'd left the MG parked. We got the car started just as the heap was beginning to reach the bumpers, and at that the paint would never again be the same.

Oh, yes, he was mad. I could only hope that in the long run he would forgive us, since we were acting for his best interests, after all.

Anyway, I *thought* we were.

STILL, things worked out pretty well—especially between Amy and me. Engdahl had the theory that she had been dodging the Major so long that *anybody* looked good to her, which was hardly flattering. But she and I were getting along right well.

She said worriedly: "The only thing, Sam, is that, frankly, the Major has just about made up his mind that he wants to marry me—"

"He *is* married!" I yelped.

"Naturally he's married. He's married to—so far—one hundred and nine women. He's been hitting off a marriage a month for a good many years now and, to tell you the truth, I think he's got the habit Anyway, he's got his eye on me."

I demanded jealously: "Has he said anything?"

She picked a sheet of onionskin paper out of her bag and handed it to me. It was marked *Top Secret*, and it really was, because it hadn't gone through his regular office—I knew that because I was his regular office. It was only two lines of text and sloppily typed at that:

Lt. Amy Bankhead will report to HQ at 1700 hours 1 July to carry out orders of the Commanding Officer.

The first of July was only a week away. I handed the orders back to her.

"And the orders of the Commanding Officer will be—" I wanted to know.

She nodded. "You guessed it."

I said: "We'll have to work fast."

ON the thirtieth of June, we invited the Major to come aboard his palatial new yacht.

"Ah, thank you," he said gratefully. "A surprise? For my birthday? Ah, you loyal members of my command make up for all that I've lost—all of it!" He nearly wept.

I said: "Sir, the pleasure is all ours," and backed out of his presence. What's more, I meant every word.

It was a select party of slightly over a hundred. All of the wives were there, barring twenty or thirty who were in disfavor—still, that left over eighty. The Major brought half a dozen of his favorite officers. His bodyguard and our crew added up to a total of thirty men.

We were set up to feed a hundred and fifty, and to provide liquor for twice that many, so it looked like a nice friendly brawl. I mean we had our radio operator handing out highballs as the guests stepped on board. The Major was touched and delighted; it was exactly the kind of party he liked.

He came up the gangplank with his face one great beaming smile. "Eat! Drink!" he cried. "Ah, and be merry!" He stretched out his hands to Amy, standing by behind the radio op. "For tomorrow we wed," he added, and sentimentally kissed his proposed bride.

I cleared my throat. "How about inspecting the ship, Major?" I interrupted.

"Plenty of time for that, my boy," he said. "Plenty of time for that." But he let go of Amy and looked around him. Well, it was worth looking at. Those Englishmen really knew how to build a luxury liner. God rest them.

The girls began roaming around.

It was a hot day and late afternoon, and the girls began discarding jackets and boleros, and that began to annoy the Major.

"Ah, cover up there!" he ordered one of his wives. "You too there, what's-your-name. Put that blouse back on!"

It gave him something to think about. He was a very jealous man, Amy had said, and when you stop to think about it, a jealous man with a hundred and nine wives to be jealous of really has a job. Anyway, he was busy watching his wives and keeping his military cabinet and his bodyguard busy too, and that made him too busy to notice when I tipped the high sign to Vern and took off.

VI

IN Consolidated Edison's big power plant, the guard was friendly. "I hear the Major's over on your boat, pal. Big doings. Got a lot of the girls there, hey?"

He bent, sniggering, to look at my pass.

"That's right, pal," I said, and slugged him.

Arthur screamed at me with a shrill blast of steam as I came in. But only once. I wasn't there for conversation. I began ripping apart his comfy little home of steel braces and copper wires, and it didn't take much more than a minute before I had him free. And that was very fortunate because, although I had tied up the guard, I hadn't done it very well, and it was just about the time I had Arthur's steel case tucked under my arm that I heard a yelling and bellowing from down the stairs.

The guard had got free.

"Keep calm, Arthur!" I ordered sharply. "We'll get out of this, don't you worry!"

But he wasn't worried, or anyway didn't show it, since he couldn't. I was the one who was worried. I was up on the second floor of the plant, in the control center, with only one stairway going down that I knew about, and that one thoroughly guarded by a man with a grudge against me. Me, I had Arthur, and no weapon, and I hadn't a doubt in the world that there were other guards around and that my friend would have them after me before long.

Problem. I took a deep breath and swallowed and considered jumping out the window. But it wasn't far enough to the ground.

Feet pounded up the stairs, more than two of them. With Arthur dragging me down on one side, I hurried, fast as I could, along the steel galleries that surrounded the biggest boiler. It was a nice choice of alternatives—if I stayed quiet, they would find me; if I ran, they would hear me, and then find me.

But ahead there was—what? Something. A flight of stairs, it looked like, going out and, yes, *up*. Up? But I was already on the second floor.

"Hey, you!" somebody bellowed from behind me.

I didn't stop to consider. I ran. It wasn't steps, not exactly; it was a chain of coal scoops on a long derrick arm, a moving bucket arrangement for unloading fuel from barges. It did go up, though, and more important it went *out*. The bucket arm was stretched across the clogged roadway below to a loading tower that hung over the water.

If I could get there, I might be able to get down. If I could get down—yes, I could see it; there were three or four mahogany motor launches tied to the foot of the tower.

And nobody around.

I looked over my shoulder, and didn't like what I saw, and scuttled up that chain of enormous buckets like a roach on a washboard, one hand for me and one hand for Arthur.

THANK heaven, I had a good lead on my pursuers—I needed it. I was on the bucket chain while they were still almost a city block behind me, along the galleries. I was

halfway across the roadway, afraid to look down, before they reached the butt end of the chain.

Clash-clatter. *Clank!* The bucket under me jerked and clattered and nearly threw me into the street. One of those jokers had turned on the conveyor! It was a good trick, all right, but not quite in time. I made a flying jump and I was on the tower.

I didn't stop to thumb my nose at them, but I thought of it.

I was down those steel steps, breathing like a spouting whale, in a minute flat, and jumping out across the concrete, coal-smeared yard toward the moored launches. Quickly enough, I guess, but with nothing at all to spare, because although I hadn't seen anyone there, there was a guard.

He popped out of a doorway, blinking foolishly; and overhead the guards at the conveyor belt were screaming at him. It took him a second to figure out what was going on, and by that time I was in a launch, cast off the rope, kicked it free, and fumbled for the starting button.

It took me several seconds to realize that a rope was required, that in fact there was no button; and by then I was floating yards away, but the pudgy pop-eyed guard was also in a launch, and he didn't have to fumble. He knew. He got his motor started a fraction of a second before me, and there he was, coming at me, set to ram. Or so it looked.

I wrenched at the wheel and brought the boat hard over; but he swerved too, at the last moment, and brought up something that looked a little like a spear and a little like a sickle and turned out to be a boathook. I ducked, just in time. It sizzled over my head as he swung and crashed against the windshield. Hunks of safety glass splashed out over the forward deck, but better than my head.

Boathooks, hey? I had a boathook too! If he didn't have another weapon, I was perfectly willing to play; I'd been sitting and taking it long enough and I was very much attracted by the idea of fighting back. The guard recovered his balance, swore at me, fought the wheel around and came back.

We both curved out toward the center of the East River in intersecting arcs. We closed. He swung first. I ducked—

And from a crouch, while he was off balance, I caught him in the shoulder with the hook.

He made a mighty splash.

I throttled down the motor long enough to see that he was still conscious.

"*Touché*, buster," I said, and set course for the return trip down around the foot of Manhattan, back toward the *Queen*.

It took a while, but that was all right; it gave everybody a nice long time to get plastered. I sneaked aboard, carrying Arthur, and turned him over to Vern. Then I rejoined the Major. He was making an inspection tour of the ship—what he called an inspection, after his fashion.

He peered into the engine rooms and said: "Ah, fine."

He stared at the generators that were turning over and nodded when I explained we needed them for power for lights and everything and said: "Ah, of course."

He opened a couple of stateroom doors at random and said: "Ah, nice."

And he went up on the flying bridge with me and such of his officers as still could walk and said: "Ah."

Then he said in a totally different tone: "What the devil's the matter over there?"

He was staring east through the muggy haze. I saw right away what it was that was bothering him—easy, because I knew where to look. The power plant way over on the East Side was billowing smoke.

"Where's Vern Engdahl? That gadget of his isn't working right!"

"You mean Arthur?"

"I mean that brain in a bottle. It's Engdahl's responsibility, you know!"

Vern came up out of the wheelhouse and cleared his throat. "Major," he said earnestly, "I think there's some trouble over there. Maybe you ought to go look for yourself."

"Trouble?"

"I, uh, hear there've been power failures," Vern said lamely. "Don't you think you ought to inspect it? I mean just in case there's something serious?"

The Major stared at him frostily, and then his mood changed. He took a drink from the glass in his hand, quickly finishing it off.

"Ah," he said, "hell with it. Why spoil a good party? If there are going to be power failures, why, let them be. That's my motto!"

Vern and I looked at each other. He shrugged slightly, meaning, well, we tried. And I shrugged slightly, meaning, what did you expect? And then he glanced upward, meaning, take a look at what's there.

But I didn't really have to look because I heard what it was. In fact, I'd been hearing it for some time. It was the Major's entire air force—two helicopters, swirling around us at an average altitude of a hundred feet or so. They showed up bright against the gathering clouds overhead, and I looked at them with considerable interest—partly because I considered it an even-money bet that one of them would be playing crumple-fender with our stacks, partly because I had an idea that they were not there solely for show.

I said to the Major: "Chief, aren't they coming a little close? I mean it's *your* ship and all, but what if one of them takes a spill into the bridge while you're here?"

He grinned. "They know better," he bragged. "Ah, besides, I want them close. I mean if anything went wrong."

I said, in a tone that showed as much deep hurt as I could manage: "Sir, what could go wrong?"

"Oh, you know." He patted my shoulder limply. "Ah, no offense?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Well," I said, "let's go below."

ALL of it was done carefully, carefully as could be. The only thing was, we forgot about the typewriters. We got everybody, or as near as we could, into the Grand Salon where the food was, and right there on a table at the end of the hall was one of the typewriters clacking away. Vern had rigged them up with rolls of paper instead of sheets, and maybe that was ingenious, but it was also a headache just then. Because the typewriter was banging out:

LEFT FOUR THIRTEEN FOURTEEN AND TWENTYONE BOILERS WITH A FULL HEAD OF STEAM AND THE SAFETY VALVES LOCKED BOY I TELL YOU WHEN THOSE THINGS LET GO YOURE GOING TO HEAR A NOISE THATLL KNOCK YOUR HAT OFF

The Major inquired politely: "Something to do with the ship?"

"Oh, *that*," said Vern. "Yeah. Just a little, uh, something to do with the ship. Say, Major, here's the bar. Real scotch, see? Look at the label!"

The Major glanced at him with faint contempt—well, he'd had the pick of the greatest collection of high-priced liquor stores in the world for ten years, so no wonder. But he allowed Vern to press a drink on him.

And the typewriter kept rattling:

LOOKS LIKE RAIN ANY MINUTE NOW HOO BOY IM GLAD I WONT BE IN THOSE WHIRLYBIRDS WHEN THE STORM STARTS SAY VERN WHY DONT YOU EVER ANSWER ME Q ISNT IT ABOUT TIME TO TAKE OFF XXX I MEAN GET UNDER WEIGH Q

Some of the "clerks, typists, domestic personnel and others"—that was the way they were listed on the T/O; it was only coincidence that the Major had married them all—were staring at the typewriter.

"Drinks!" Vern called nervously. "Come on, girls! Drinks!"

THE Major poured himself a stiff shot and asked: "What is that thing? A teletype or something?"

"That's right," Vern said, trailing after him as the Major wandered over to inspect it.

I GIVE THOSE BOILERS ABOUT TEN MORE MINUTES SAM WELL WHAT ABOUT IT Q READY TO SHOVE OFF Q

The Major said, frowning faintly: "Ah, that reminds me of something. Now what is it?"

"More scotch?" Vern cried. "Major, a little more scotch?"

The Major ignored him, scowling. One of the "clerks, typists" said: "Honey, you know what it is? It's like that pross you had, remember? It was on our wedding night, and you'd just got it, and you kept asking it to tell you limericks."

The Major snapped his fingers. "Knew I'd get it," he glowed. Then abruptly he scowled again and turned to face Vern and me. "Say—" he began.

I said weakly: "The boilers."

The Major stared at me, then glanced out the window. "What boilers?" he demanded. "It's just a thunderstorm. Been building up all day. Now what about this? Is that thing—"

But Vern was paying him no attention. "Thunderstorm?" he yelled. "Arthur, you listening? Are the helicopters gone?"

YESYESYES

"Then shove off, Arthur! Shove off!"

The typewriter rattled and slammed madly.

The Major yelled angrily: "Now listen to me, you! I'm asking you a question!"

But we didn't have to answer, because there was a thrumming and a throbbing underfoot, and then one of the "clerks, typists" screamed: "The dock!" She pointed at a porthole. "It's moving!"

WELL, we got out of there—barely in time. And then it was up to Arthur. We had the whole ship to roam around in and there were plenty of places to hide. They had the whole ship to search. And Arthur was the whole ship.

Because it was Arthur, all right, brought in and hooked up by Vern, attained to his greatest dream and ambition. He was skipper of a superliner, and more than any skipper had ever been—the ship was his body, as the prosthetic tank had never been; the keel his belly, the screws his feet, the engines his heart and lungs, and every moving part that could be hooked into central control his many, many hands.

Search for us? They were lucky they could move at all! Fire Control washed them with salt water hoses, directed by Arthur's brain. Watertight doors, proof against sinking, locked them away from us at Arthur's whim.

The big bull whistle overhead brayed like a clamoring Gabriel, and the ship's bells tinkled and clanged. Arthur backed that enormous ship out of its berth like a racing scull on the Schuylkill. The four giant screws lashed the water into white foam, and then the thin mud they sucked up into tan; and the ship backed, swerved, lashed the water, stopped, and staggered crazily forward.

Arthur brayed at the Statue of Liberty, tooted good-by to Staten Island, fainted a charge at Sandy Hook and really laid back his ears and raced once he got to deep water past the moored lightship.

We were off!

Well, from there on, it was easy. We let Arthur have his fun with the Major and the bodyguards—and by the sodden, whimpering shape they were in when they came out, it must really have been fun for him. There were just the three of us and only Vern and I had guns—but Arthur had the *Queen Elizabeth*, and that put the odds on our side.

We gave the Major a choice: row back to Coney Island—we offered him a boat, free of charge—or come along with us as cabin boy. He cast one dim-eyed look at the hundred and nine "clerks, typists" and at Amy, who would never be the hundred and tenth.

And then he shrugged and, game loser, said: "Ah, why not? I'll come along."

AND why not, when you come to think of it? I mean ruling a city is nice and all that, but a sea voyage is a refreshing change. And while a hundred and nine to one is a respectable female-male ratio, still it must be wearing; and eighty to thirty isn't so bad, either. At least, I guess that was what was in the Major's mind. I know it was what was in mine.

And I discovered that it was in Amy's, for the first thing she did was to march me over to the typewriter and say: "You've had it, Sam. We'll dispose with the wedding march—just get your friend Arthur here to marry us."

"Arthur?"

"The captain," she said. "We're on the high seas and he's empowered to perform marriages."

Vern looked at me and shrugged, meaning, you asked for this one, boy. And I looked at him and shrugged, meaning, it could be worse.

And indeed it could. We'd got our ship; we'd got our ship's company—because, naturally, there wasn't any use stealing a big ship for just a couple of us. We'd had to manage to get a sizable colony aboard. That was the whole idea.

The world, in fact, was ours. It could have been very much worse indeed, even though Arthur was laughing so hard as he performed the ceremony that he jammed up all his keys.

THE DAY OF THE BOOMER DUKES

Originally published in 1956

I

Foraminifera 9

Paptaste udderly, semped sempsemp dezhavoo, quued schmerz—Excuse me. I mean to say that it was like an endless diet of days, boring, tedious....

No, it loses too much in the translation. Explete my reasons, I say. Do my reasons matter? No, not to you, for you are troglodytes, knowing nothing of causes, understanding only acts. Acts and facts, I will give you acts and facts.

First you must know how I am called. My "name" is Foraminifera 9-Hart Bailey's Beam, and I am of adequate age and size. (If you doubt this, I am prepared to fight.) Once the—the tediety of life, as you might say, had made itself clear to me, there were, of course, only two alternatives. I do not like to die, so that possibility was out; and the remaining alternative was flight.

Naturally, the necessary machinery was available to me. I arrogated a small viewing machine, and scanned the centuries of the past in the hope that a sanctuary might reveal itself to my aching eyes. Kwel tediety that was! Back, back I went through the ages. Back to the Century of the Dog, back to the Age of the Crippled Men. I found no time better than my own. Back and back I peered, back as far as the Numbered Years. The Twenty-Eighth Century was boredom unendurable, the Twenty-Sixth a morass of dullness. Twenty-Fifth, Twenty-Fourth—wherever I looked, tediety was what I found.

I snapped off the machine and considered. Put the problem thus: Was there in all of the pages of history no age in which a 9-Hart Bailey's Beam might find adventure and excitement? There had to be! It was not possible, I told myself, despairing, that from the dawn of the dreaming primates until my own time there was no era at all in which I could be—happy? Yes, I suppose happiness is what I was looking for. But where was it? In my viewer, I had fifty centuries or more to look back upon. And that was, I decreed, the trouble; I could spend my life staring into the viewer, and yet never discover the time that was right for me. There were simply too many eras to choose from. It was like an enormous library in which there must, there had to be, contained the one fact I was looking for—that, lacking an index, I might wear my life away and never find.

"Index!"

I said the word aloud! For, to be sure, it was the answer. I had the freedom of the Learning Lodge, and the index in the reading room could easily find for me just what I wanted.

Splendid, splendid! I almost felt cheerful. I quickly returned the viewer I had been using to the keeper, and received my deposit back. I hurried to the Learning Lodge and fed my specifications into the index, as follows, that is to say: Find me a time in

recent past where there is adventure and excitement, where there is a secret, colorful band of desperadoes with whom I can ally myself. I then added two specifications—second, that it should be before the time of the high radiation levels; and first, that it should be after the discovery of anesthesia, in case of accident—and retired to a desk in the reading room to await results.

It took only a few moments, which I occupied in making a list of the gear I wished to take with me. Then there was a hiss and a crackle, and in the receiver of the desk a book appeared. I unzipped the case, took it out, and opened it to the pages marked on the attached reading tape.

I had found my wonderland of adventure!

Ah, hours and days of exciting preparation! What a round of packing and buying; what a filling out of forms and a stamping of visas; what an orgy of injections and inoculations and preventive therapy! Merely getting ready for the trip made my pulse race faster and my adrenalin balance rise to the very point of paranoia; it was like being given a true blue new chance to live.

At last I was ready. I stepped into the transmission capsule; set the dials; unlocked the door, stepped out; collapsed the capsule and stored it away in my carry-all; and looked about at my new home.

Pyew! Kwel smell of staleness, of sourness, above all of coldness! It was a close matter then if I would be able to keep from a violent eructative stenosis, as you say. I closed my eyes and remembered warm violets for a moment, and then it was all right.

The coldness was not merely a smell; it was a physical fact. There was a damp grayish substance underfoot which I recognized as snow; and in a hard-surfaced roadway there were a number of wheeled vehicles moving, which caused the liquefying snow to splash about me. I adjusted my coat controls for warmth and deflection, but that was the best I could do. The reek of stale decay remained. Then there were also the buildings, painfully almost vertical. I believe it would not have disturbed me if they had been truly vertical; but many of them were minutes of arc from a true perpendicular, all of them covered with a carbonaceous material which I instantly perceived was an inadvertent deposit from the air. It was a bad beginning!

However, I was not *bored*.

I made my way down the "street," as you say, toward where a group of young men were walking toward me, five abreast. As I came near, they looked at me with interest and kwel respect, conversing with each other in whispers.

I addressed them: "Sirs, please direct me to the nearest recruiting office, as you call it, for the dread Camorra."

They stopped and pressed about me, looking at me intently. They were handsomely, though crudely dressed in coats of a striking orange color, and long trousers of an extremely dark material.

I decreed that I might not have made them understand me—it is always probable, it is understood, that a quicknik course in dialects of the past may not give one instant command of spoken communication in the field. I spoke again: "I wish to encounter

a representative of the Camorra, in other words the Black Hand, in other words the cruel and sinister Sicilian terrorists named the Mafia. Do you know where these can be found?"

One of them said, "Nay. What's that jive?"

I puzzled over what he had said for a moment, but in the end decreed that his message was sensefree. As I was about to speak, however, he said suddenly: "Let's rove, man." And all five of them walked quickly away a few "yards." It was quite disappointing. I observed them conferring among themselves, glancing at me, and for a time proposed terminating my venture, for I then believed that it would be better to return "home," as you say, in order to more adequately research the matter.

However, the five young men came toward me again. The one who had spoken before, who I now detected was somewhat taller and fatter than the others, spoke as follows: "You're wanting the Mafia?" I agreed. He looked at me for a moment. "Are you holding?"

He was inordinately hard to understand. I said, slowly and with patience, "Keska that 'holding' say?"

"Money, man. You going to slip us something to help you find these cats?"

"Certainly, money. I have a great quantity of money instantly available," I rejoined him. This appeared to relieve his mind.

There was a short pause, directly after which this first of the young men spoke: "You're on, man. Yeah, come with us. What's to call you?" I queried this last statement, and he expanded: "The name. What's the name?"

"You may call me Foraminifera 9," I directed, since I wished to be incognito, as you put it, and we proceeded along the "street." All five of the young men indicated a desire to serve me, offering indeed to take my carry-all. I rejected this, politely.

I looked about me with lively interest, as you may well believe. Kwel dirt, kwel dinginess, kwel cold! And yet there was a certain charm which I can determine no way of expressing in this language. Acts and facts, of course. I shall not attempt to capture the subjectivity which is the charm, only to transcribe the physical datum—perhaps even data, who knows? My companions, for example: They were in appearance overwrought, looking about them continually, stopping entirely and drawing me with them into the shelter of a "door" when another man, this one wearing blue clothing and a visored hat appeared. Yet they were clearly devoted to me, at that moment, since they had put aside their own projects in order to escort me without delay to the Mafia.

Mafia! Fortunate that I had found them to lead me to the Mafia! For it had been clear in the historical work I had consulted that it was not ultimately easy to gain access to the Mafia. Indeed, so secret were they that I had detected no trace of their existence in other histories of the period. Had I relied only on the conventional work, I might never have known of their great underground struggle against what you term society. It was only in the actual contemporary volume itself, the curiosity titled *U.S.A. Confidential* by one Lait and one Mortimer, that I had descried that, throughout the world, this great revolutionary organization flexed its tentacles, the plexus within a

short distance of where I now stood, battling courageously. With me to help them, what heights might we not attain! Kwel dramatic delight!

My meditations were interrupted. "Boomers!" asserted one of my five escorts in a loud, frightened tone. "Let's cut, man!" he continued, leading me with them into another entrance. It appeared, as well as I could decree, that the cause of his ejaculative outcry was the discovery of perhaps three, perhaps four, other young men, in coats of the same shiny material as my escorts. The difference was that they were of a different color, being blue.

We hastened along a lengthy chamber which was quite dark, immediately after which the large, heavy one opened a way to a serrated incline leading downward. It was extremely dark, I should say. There was also an extreme smell, quite like that of the outer air, but enormously intensified; one would suspect that there was an incomplete combustion of, perhaps, wood or coal, as well as a certain quantity of general decay. At any rate, we reached the bottom of the incline, and my escort behaved quite badly. One of them said to the other four, in these words: "Them jumpers follow us sure. Yeah, there's much trouble. What's to prime this guy now and split?"

Instantly they fell upon me with violence. I had fortunately become rather alarmed at their visible emotion of fear, and already had taken from my carry-all a Stollgratz 16, so that I quickly turned it on them. I started to replace the Stollgratz 16 as they fell to the floor, yet I realized that there might be an additional element of danger. Instead of putting the Stollgratz 16 in with the other trade goods, which I had brought to assist me in negotiating with the Mafia, I transferred it to my jacket. It had become clear to me that the five young men of my escort had intended to abduct and rob me—indeed had intended it all along, perhaps having never intended to convoy me to the office of the Mafia. And the other young men, those who wore the blue jackets in place of the orange, were already descending the incline toward me, quite rapidly.

"Stop," I directed them. "I shall not entrust myself to you until you have given me evidence that you entirely deserve such trust."

They all halted, regarding me and the Stollgratz 16. I detected that one of them said to another: "That cat's got a zip."

The other denied this, saying: "That no zip, man. Yeah, look at them Leopards. Say, you bust them flunkies with that thing?"

I perceived his meaning quite quickly. "You are 'correct'," I rejoined. "Are you associated in friendship with them flunkies?"

"Hell, no. Yeah, they're Leopards and we're Boomer Dukes. You cool them, you do us much good." I received this information as indicating that the two socio-economic units were inimical, and unfortunately lapsed into an example of the Bivalent Error. Since p implied not-q, I sloppily assumed that not-q implied r (with, you understand, r being taken as the class of phenomena pertinently favorable to me). This was a very poor construction, and of course resulted in certain difficulties. Qued, after all. I stated:

"Them flunkies offered to conduct me to a recruiting office, as you say, of the Mafia, but instead tried to take from me the much money I am holding." I then went on to

describe to them my desire to attain contact with the said Mafia; meanwhile they descended further and grouped about me in the very little light, examining curiously the motionless figures of the Leopards.

They seemed to be greatly impressed; and at the same time, very much puzzled. Naturally. They looked at the Leopards, and then at me.

They gave every evidence of wishing to help me; but of course if I had not forgotten that one cannot assume from the statements "not-Leopard implies Boomer Duke" and "not-Leopard implies Foraminifera 9" that, quod, "Boomer Duke implies Foraminifera 9" ... if I had not forgotten this, I say, I should not have been "deceived." For in practice they were as little favorable to me as the Leopards. A certain member of their party reached a position behind me.

I quickly perceived that his intention was not favorable, and attempted to turn around in order to discharge at him with the Stollgratz 16, but he was very rapid. He had a metallic cylinder, and with it struck my head, knocking "me" unconscious.

II

Shield 8805

This candy store is called Chris's. There must be ten thousand like it in the city. A marble counter with perhaps five stools, a display case of cigars and a bigger one of candy, a few dozen girly magazines hanging by clothespin-sort-of things from wire ropes along the wall. It has a couple of very small glass-topped tables under the magazines. And a juke—I can't imagine a place like Chris's without a juke.

I had been sitting around Chris's for a couple of hours, and I was beginning to get edgy. The reason I was sitting around Chris's was not that I liked Cokes particularly, but that it was one of the hanging-out places of a juvenile gang called The Leopards, with whom I had been trying to work for nearly a year; and the reason I was becoming edgy was that I didn't see any of them there.

The boy behind the counter—he had the same first name as I, Walter in both cases, though my last name is Hutner and his is, I believe, something Puerto Rican—the boy behind the counter was dummying up, too. I tried to talk to him, on and off, when he wasn't busy. He wasn't busy most of the time; it was too cold for sodas. But he just didn't want to talk. Now, these kids love to talk. A lot of what they say doesn't make sense—either bullying, or bragging, or purposeless swearing—but talk is their normal state; when they quiet down it means trouble. For instance, if you ever find yourself walking down Thirty-Fifth Street and a couple of kids pass you, talking, you don't have to bother looking around; but if they stop talking, turn quickly. You're about to be mugged. Not that Walt was a mugger—as far as I know; but that's the pattern of the enclave.

So his being quiet was a bad sign. It might mean that a rumble was brewing—and that meant that my work so far had been pretty nearly a failure. Even worse, it might mean that somehow the Leopards had discovered that I had at last passed my examinations and been appointed to the New York City Police Force as a rookie patrolman, Shield 8805.

Trying to work with these kids is hard enough at best. They don't like outsiders. But they particularly hate cops, and I had been trying for some weeks to decide how I could break the news to them.

The door opened. Hawk stood there. He didn't look at me, which was a bad sign. Hawk was one of the youngest in the Leopards, a skinny, very dark kid who had been reasonably friendly to me. He stood in the open door, with snow blowing in past him. "Walt. Out here, man."

It wasn't me he meant—they call me "Champ," I suppose because I beat them all shooting eight-ball pool. Walt put down the comic he had been reading and walked out, also without looking at me. They closed the door.

Time passed. I saw them through the window, talking to each other, looking at me. It was something, all right. They were scared. That's bad, because these kids are like wild animals; if you scare them, they hit first—it's the only way they know to defend themselves. But on the other hand, a rumble wouldn't scare them—not where they would show it; and finding out about the shield in my pocket wouldn't scare them, either. They hated cops, as I say; but cops were a part of their environment. It was strange, and baffling.

Walt came back in, and Hawk walked rapidly away. Walt went behind the counter, lit a cigaret, wiped at the marble top, picked up his comic, put it down again and finally looked at me. He said: "Some punk busted Fayó and a couple of the boys. It's real trouble."

I didn't say anything.

He took a puff on his cigaret. "They're chilled, Champ. Five of them."

"Chilled? Dead?" It sounded bad; there hadn't been a real rumble in months, not with a killing.

He shook his head. "Not dead. You're wanting to see, you go down Gomez's cellar. Yeah, they're all stiff but they're breathing. I be along soon as the old man comes back in the store."

He looked pretty sick. I left it at that and hurried down the block to the tenement where the Gomez family lived, and then I found out why.

They were sprawled on the filthy floor of the cellar like winoes in an alley. Fayó, who ran the gang; Jap; Baker; two others I didn't know as well. They were breathing, as Walt had said, but you just couldn't wake them up.

Hawk and his twin brother, Yogi, were there with them, looking scared. I couldn't blame them. The kids looked perfectly all right, but it was obvious that they weren't. I bent down and smelled, but there was no trace of liquor or anything else on their breath.

I stood up. "We'd better get a doctor."

"Nay. You call the meat wagon, and a cop comes right with it, man," Yogi said, and his brother nodded.

I laid off that for a moment. "What happened?"

Hawk said, "You know that witch Gloria, goes with one of the Boomer Dukes? She opened her big mouth to my girl. Yeah, opened her mouth and much bad talk came out. Said Fayó primed some jumper with a zip and the punk cooled him, and then a couple of the Boomers moved in real cool. Now they got the punk with the zip and much other stuff, real stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

Hawk looked worried. He finally admitted that he didn't know what kind of stuff, but it was something dangerous in the way of weapons. It had been the "zip" that had knocked out the five Leopards.

I sent Hawk out to the drug-store for smelling salts and containers of hot black coffee—not that I knew what I was doing, of course, but they were dead set against calling an ambulance. And the boys didn't seem to be in any particular danger, only sleep.

However, even then I knew that this kind of trouble was something I couldn't handle alone. It was a tossup what to do—the smart thing was to call the precinct right then and there; but I couldn't help feeling that that would make the Leopards clam up hopelessly. The six months I had spent trying to work with them had not been too successful—a lot of the other neighborhood workers had made a lot more progress than I—but at least they were willing to talk to me; and they wouldn't talk to uniformed police.

Besides, as soon as I had been sworn in, the day before, I had begun the practice of carrying my .38 at all times, as the regulations say. It was in my coat. There was no reason for me to feel I needed it. But I did. If there was any truth to the story of a "zip" knocking out the boys—and I had all five of them right there for evidence—I had the unpleasant conviction that there was real trouble circulating around East Harlem that afternoon.

"Champ. They all waking up!"

I turned around, and Hawk was right. The five Leopards, all of a sudden, were stirring and opening their eyes. Maybe the smelling salts had something to do with it, but I rather think not.

We fed them some of the black coffee, still reasonably hot. They were scared; they were more scared than anything I had ever seen in those kids before. They could hardly talk at first, and when finally they came around enough to tell me what had happened I could hardly believe them. This man had been small and peculiar, and he had been looking for, of all things, the "Mafia," which he had read about in history books—*old* history books.

Well, it didn't make sense, unless you were prepared to make a certain assumption that I refused to make. Man from Mars? Nonsense. Or from the future? Equally ridiculous....

Then the five Leopards, reviving, began to walk around. The cellar was dark and dirty, and packed with the accumulation of generations in the way of old furniture and rat-inhabited mattresses and piles of newspapers; it wasn't surprising that we

hadn't noticed the little gleaming thing that had apparently rolled under an abandoned potbelly stove.

Jap picked it up, squalled, dropped it and yelled for me.

I touched it cautiously, and it tingled. It wasn't painful, but it was an odd, unexpected feeling—perhaps you've come across the "buzzers" that novelty stores sell which, concealed in the palm, give a sudden, surprising tingle when the owner shakes hands with an unsuspecting friend. It was like that, like a mild electric shock. I picked it up and held it. It gleamed brightly, with a light of its own; it was round; it made a faint droning sound; I turned it over, and it spoke to me. It said in a friendly, feminine whisper: *Warning, this portatron attuned only to Bailey's Beam percepts. Remain quiescent until the Adjuster comes.*

That settled it. Any time a lit-up cue ball talks to me, I refer the matter to higher authority. I decided on the spot that I was heading for the precinct house, no matter what the Leopards thought.

But when I turned and headed for the stairs, I couldn't move. My feet simply would not lift off the ground. I twisted, and stumbled, and fell in a heap; I yelled for help, but it didn't do any good. The Leopards couldn't move either.

We were stuck there in Gomez's cellar, as though we had been nailed to the filthy floor.

III

Cow

When I see what this flunky has done to them Leopards, I call him a cool cat right away. But then we jump him and he ain't so cool. Angel and Tiny grab him under the arms and I'm grabbing the stuff he's carrying. Yeah, we get out of there.

There's bulls on the street, so we cut through the back and over the fences. Tiny don't like that. He tells me, "Cow. What's to leave this cat here? He must weigh eighteen tons." "You're bringing him," I tell him, so he shuts up. That's how it is in the Boomer Dukes. When Cow talks, them other flunkies shut up fast.

We get him in the loft over the R. and I. Social Club. Damn, but it's cold up there. I can hear the pool balls clicking down below so I pass the word to keep quiet. Then I give this guy the foot and pretty soon he wakes up.

As soon as I talk to him a little bit I figure we had luck riding with us when we see them Leopards. This cat's got real bad stuff. Yeah, I never hear of anything like it. But what it takes to make a fight he's got. I take my old pistol and give it to Tiny. Hell, it makes him happy and what's it cost me? Because what this cat's got makes that pistol look like something for babies.

First he don't want to talk. "Stomp him," I tell Angel, but he's scared. He says, "Nay. This is a real weird cat, Cow. I'm for cutting out of here."

"Stomp him," I tell him again, pretty quiet, but he does it. He don't have to tell me this cat's weird, but when the cat gets the foot a couple of times he's willing to talk. Yeah, he talks real funny, but that don't matter to me. We take all the loot out of his bag, and I make this cat tell me what it's to do. Damn, I don't know what he's talking

about one time out of six, but I know enough. Even Tiny catches on after a while, because I see him put down that funky old pistol I gave him that he's been loving up.

I'm feeling pretty good. I wish a couple of them chicken Leopards would turn up so I could show them what they missed out on. Yeah, I'll take on them, and the Black Dogs, and all the cops in the world all at once—that's how good I'm feeling. I feel so good that I don't even like it when Angel lets out a yell and comes up with a wad of loot. It's like I want to prime the U.S. Mint for chickenfeed, I don't want it to come so easy.

But money's on hand, so I take it off Angel and count it. This cat was really loaded; there must be a thousand dollars here.

I take a handful of it and hand it over to Angel real cool. "Get us some charge," I tell him. "There's much to do and I'm feeling ready for some charge to do it with."

"How many sticks you want me to get?" he asks, holding on to that money like he never saw any before.

I tell him: "Sticks? Nay. I'm for real stuff tonight. You find Four-Eye and get us some horse." Yeah, he digs me then. He looks like he's pretty scared and I know he is, because this punk hasn't had anything bigger than reefers in his life. But I'm for busting a couple of caps of H, and what I do he's going to do. He takes off to find Four-Eye and the rest of us get busy on this cat with the funny artillery until he gets back.

It's like I'm a million miles down Dream Street. Hell, I don't want to wake up.

But the H is wearing off and I'm feeling mean. Damn, I'll stomp my mother if she talks big to me right then.

I'm the first one on my feet and I'm looking for trouble. The whole place is full now. Angel must have passed the word to everybody in the Dukes, but I don't even remember them coming in. There's eight or ten cats lying around on the floor now, not even moving. This won't do, I decide.

If I'm on my feet, they're all going to be on their feet. I start to give them the foot and they begin to move. Even the weirdie must've had some H. I'm guessing that somebody slipped him some to see what would happen, because he's off on Cloud Number Nine. Yeah, they're feeling real mean when they wake up, but I handle them cool. Even that little flunky Sailor starts to go up against me but I look at him cool and he chickens. Angel and Pete are real sick, with the shakes and the heaves, but I ain't waiting for them to feel good. "Give me that loot," I tell Tiny, and he hands over the stuff we took off the weirdie. I start to pass out the stuff.

"What's to do with this stuff?" Tiny asks me, looking at what I'm giving him.

I tell him, "Point it and shoot it." He isn't listening when the weirdie's telling me what the stuff is. He wants to know what it does, but I don't know that. I just tell him, "Point it and shoot it, man." I've sent one of the cats out for drinks and smokes and he's back by then, and we're all beginning to feel a little better, only still pretty mean. They begin to dig me.

"Yeah, it sounds like a rumble," one of them says, after a while.

I give him the nod, cool. "You're calling it," I tell him. "There's much fighting tonight. The Boomer Dukes is taking on the world!"

IV

Sandy Van Pelt

The front office thought the radio car would give us a break in spot news coverage, and I guessed as wrong as they did. I had been covering City Hall long enough, and that's no place to build a career—the Press Association is very tight there, there's not much chance of getting any kind of exclusive story because of the sharing agreements. So I put in for the radio car. It meant taking the night shift, but I got it.

I suppose the front office got their money's worth, because they played up every lousy auto smash the radio car covered as though it were the story of the Second Coming, and maybe it helped circulation. But I had been on it for four months and, wouldn't you know it, there wasn't a decent murder, or sewer explosion, or running gun fight between six P.M. and six A.M. any night I was on duty in those whole four months. What made it worse, the kid they gave me as photographer—Sol Detweiler, his name was—couldn't drive worth a damn, so I was stuck with chauffeuring us around.

We had just been out to LaGuardia to see if it was true that Marilyn Monroe was sneaking into town with Aly Khan on a night plane—it wasn't—and we were coming across the Triborough Bridge, heading south toward the East River Drive, when the office called. I pulled over and parked and answered the radiophone.

It was Harrison, the night City Editor. "Listen, Sandy, there's a gang fight in East Harlem. Where are you now?"

It didn't sound like much to me, I admit. "There's always a gang fight in East Harlem, Harrison. I'm cold and I'm on my way down to Night Court, where there may or may not be a story; but at least I can get my feet warm."

"*Where are you now?*" Harrison wasn't fooling. I looked at Sol, on the seat next to me; I thought I had heard him snicker. He began to fiddle with his camera without looking at me. I pushed the "talk" button and told Harrison where I was. It pleased him very much; I wasn't more than six blocks from where this big rumble was going on, he told me, and he made it very clear that I was to get on over there immediately.

I pulled away from the curb, wondering why I had ever wanted to be a newspaperman; I could have made five times as much money for half as much work in an ad agency. To make it worse, I heard Sol chuckle again. The reason he was so amused was that when we first teamed up I made the mistake of telling him what a hot reporter I was, and I had been visibly cooling off before his eyes for a better than four straight months.

Believe me, I was at the very bottom of my career that night. For five cents cash I would have parked the car, thrown the keys in the East River, and taken the first bus out of town. I was absolutely positive that the story would be a bust and all I would get out of it would be a bad cold from walking around in the snow.

And if that doesn't show you what a hot newspaperman I really am, nothing will.

Sol began to act interested as we reached the corner Harrison had told us to go to. "That's Chris's," he said, pointing at a little candy store. "And that must be the pool hall where the Leopards hang out."

"You know this place?"

He nodded. "I know a man named Walter Hutner. He and I went to school together, until he dropped out, couple weeks ago. He quit college to go to the Police Academy. He wanted to be a cop."

I looked at him. "You're going to college?"

"Sure, Mr. Van Pelt. Wally Hutner was a sociology major—I'm journalism—but we had a couple of classes together. He had a part-time job with a neighborhood council up here, acting as a sort of adult adviser for one of the gangs."

"They need advice on how to be gangs?"

"No, that's not it, Mr. Van Pelt. The councils try to get their workers accepted enough to bring the kids in to the social centers, that's all. They try to get them off the streets. Wally was working with a bunch called the Leopards."

I shut him up. "Tell me about it later!" I stopped the car and rolled down a window, listening.

Yes, there was something going on all right. Not at the corner Harrison had mentioned—there wasn't a soul in sight in any direction. But I could hear what sounded like gunfire and yelling, and, my God, even bombs going off! And it wasn't too far away. There were sirens, too—squad cars, no doubt.

"It's over that way!" Sol yelled, pointing. He looked as though he was having the time of his life, all keyed up and delighted. He didn't have to tell me where the noise was coming from, I could hear for myself. It sounded like D-Day at Normandy, and I didn't like the sound of it.

I made a quick decision and slammed on the brakes, then backed the car back the way we had come. Sol looked at me. "What—"

"Local color," I explained quickly. "This the place you were talking about? Chris's? Let's go in and see if we can find some of these hoodlums."

"But, Mr. Van Pelt, all the pictures are over where the fight's going on!"

"Pictures, shmictures! Come on!" I got out in front of the candy store, and the only thing he could do was follow me.

Whatever they were doing, they were making the devil's own racket about it. Now that I looked a little more closely I could see that they must have come this way; the candy store's windows were broken; every other street light was smashed; and what had at first looked like a flight of steps in front of a tenement across the street wasn't anything of the kind—it was a pile of bricks and stone from the false-front cornice on the roof! How in the world they had managed to knock that down I had no idea; but it sort of convinced me that, after all, Harrison had been right about this being a *big* fight. Over where the noise was coming from there were queer flashing lights in the clouds overhead—reflecting exploding flares, I thought.

No, I didn't want to go over where the pictures were. I like living. If it had been a normal Harlem rumble with broken bottles and knives, or maybe even home-made zip guns—I might have taken a chance on it, but this was for real.

"Come on," I yelled to Sol, and we pushed the door open to the candy store.

At first there didn't seem to be anyone in, but after we called a couple times a kid of about sixteen, coffee-colored and scared-looking, stuck his head up above the counter.

"You. What's going on here?" I demanded. He looked at me as if I was some kind of a two-headed monster. "Come on, kid. Tell us what happened."

"Excuse me, Mr. Van Pelt." Sol cut in ahead of me and began talking to the kid in Spanish. It got a rise out of him; at least Sol got an answer. My Spanish is only a little bit better than my Swahili, so I missed what was going on, except for an occasional word. But Sol was getting it all. He reported: "He knows Walt; that's what's bothering him. He says Walt and some of the Leopards are in a basement down the street, and there's something wrong with them. I can't exactly figure out what, but—"

"The hell with them. What about *that*?"

"You mean the fight? Oh, it's a big one all right, Mr. Van Pelt. It's a gang called the Boomer Dukes. They've got hold of some real guns somewhere—I can't exactly understand what kind of guns he means, but it sounds like something serious. He says they shot that parapet down across the street. Gosh, Mr. Van Pelt, you'd think it'd take a cannon for something like that. But it has something to do with Walt Hutner and all the Leopards, too."

I said enthusiastically, "Very good, Sol. That's fine. Find out where the cellar is, and we'll go interview Hutner."

"But Mr. Van Pelt, the pictures—"

"Sorry. I have to call the office." I turned my back on him and headed for the car.

The noise was louder, and the flashes in the sky brighter—it looked as though they were moving this way. Well, I didn't have any money tied up in the car, so I wasn't worried about leaving it in the street. And somebody's cellar seemed like a very good place to be. I called the office and started to tell Harrison what we'd found out; but he stopped me short. "Sandy, where've you been? I've been trying to call you for—Listen, we got a call from Fordham. They've detected radiation coming from the East Side—it's got to be what's going on up there! Radiation, do you hear me? That means atomic weapons! Now, you get th—"

Silence.

"Hello?" I cried, and then remembered to push the talk button. "Hello? Harrison, you there?"

Silence. The two-way radio was dead.

I got out of the car; and maybe I understood what had happened to the radio and maybe I didn't. Anyway, there was something new shining in the sky. It hung below the clouds in parts, and I could see it through the bottom of the clouds in the middle; it was a silvery teacup upside down, a hemisphere over everything.

It hadn't been there two minutes before.

I heard firing coming closer and closer. Around a corner a bunch of cops came, running, turning, firing; running, turning and firing again. It was like the retreat from Caporetto in miniature. And what was chasing them? In a minute I saw. Coming around the corner was a kid with a lightning-blue satin jacket and two funny-looking guns in his hand; there was a silvery aura around him, the same color as the lights in the sky; and I swear I saw those cops' guns hit him twenty times in twenty seconds, but he didn't seem to notice.

Sol and the kid from the candy store were right beside me. We took another look at the one-man army that was coming down the street toward us, laughing and prancing and firing those odd-looking guns. And then the three of us got out of there, heading for the cellar. Any cellar.

V

Priam's Maw

My occupation was "short-order cook", as it is called. I practiced it in a locus entitled "The White Heaven," established at Fifth Avenue, Newyork, between 1949 and 1962 C.E. I had created rapport with several of the aboriginals, who addressed me as Bessie, and presumed to approve the manner in which I heated specimens of minced ruminant quadruped flesh (deceased to be sure). It was a satisfactory guise, although tiring.

Using approved techniques, I was compiling anthropometric data while "I" was, as they say, "brewing coffee." I deem the probability nearly conclusive that it was the double duty, plus the datum that, as stated, "I" was physically tired, which caused me to overlook the first signal from my portatron. Indeed, I might have overlooked the second as well except that the aboriginal named Lester stated: "Hey, Bessie. Ya got an alarm clock in ya pocketbook?" He had related the annunciator signal of the portatron to the only significant datum in his own experience which it resembled, the ringing of a bell.

I annotated his dossier to provide for his removal in case it eventuated that he had made an undesirable intuit (this proved unnecessary) and retired to the back of the "store" with my carry-all. On identifying myself to the portatron, I received information that it was attuned to a Bailey's Beam, identified as Foraminifera 9-Hart, who had refused treatment for systemic weltschmerz and instead sought to relieve his boredom by adventuring into this era.

I thereupon compiled two recommendations which are attached: 2, a proposal for reprimand to the Keeper of the Learning Lodge for failure to properly annotate a volume entitled *U.S.A. Confidential* and, 1, a proposal for reprimand to the Transport Executive, for permitting Bailey's Beam-class personnel access to temporal transport. Meanwhile, I left the "store" by a rear exit and directed myself toward the locus of the transmitting portatron.

I had proximately left when I received an additional information, namely that developed weapons were being employed in the area toward which I was directing. This provoked that I abandon guise entirely. I went transparent and quickly examined all aboriginals within view, to determine if any required removal; but none had observed this. I rose to perhaps seventy-five meters and sped at full atmospheric

driving speed toward the source of the alarm. As I crossed a "park" I detected the drive of another Adjuster, whom I determined to be Alephplex Priam's Maw—that is, my father. He bespoke me as follows: "Hurry, Besplex Priam's Maw. That crazy Foraminifera has been captured by aboriginals and they have taken his weapons away from him." "Weapons?" I inquired. "Yes, weapons," he stated, "for Foraminifera 9-Hart brought with him more than forty-three kilograms of weapons, ranging up to and including electronic."

I recorded this datum and we landed, went opaque in the shelter of a doorway and examined our percepts. "Quarantine?" asked my father, and I had to agree. "Quarantine," I voted, and he opened his carry-all and set-up a quarantine shield on the console. At once appeared the silvery quarantine dome, and the first step of our adjustment was completed. Now to isolate, remove, replace.

Queried Alephplex: "An Adjuster?" I observed the phenomenon to which he was referring. A young, dark aboriginal was coming toward us on the "street," driving a group of police aboriginals before him. He was armed, it appeared, with a fission-throwing weapon in one hand and some sort of tranquilizer—I deem it to have been a Stollgratz 16—in the other; moreover, he wore an invulnerability belt. The police aboriginals were attempting to strike him with missile weapons, which the belt deflected. I neutralized his shield, collapsed him and stored him in my carry-all. "Not an Adjuster," I asserted my father, but he had already perceived that this was so. I left him to neutralize and collapse the police aboriginals while I zeroed in on the portatron. I did not envy him his job with the police aboriginals, for many of them were "dead," as they say. It required the most delicate adjustments.

The portatron developed to be in a "cellar" and with it were some nine or eleven aboriginals which it had immobilized pending my arrival. One spoke to me thus: "Young lady, please call the cops! We're stuck here, and—" I did not wait to hear what he wished to say further, but neutralized and collapsed him with the other aboriginals. The portatron apologized for having caused me inconvenience; but of course it was not its fault, so I did not neutralize it. Using it for d-f, I quickly located the culprit, Foraminifera 9-Hart Bailey's Beam, nearby. He spoke despairingly in the dialect of the locus, "Besplex Priam's Maw, for God's sake get me out of this!" "Out!" I spoke to him, "you'll wish you never were 'born,' as they say!" I neutralized but did not collapse him, pending instructions from the Central Authority. The aboriginals who were with him, however, I did collapse.

Presently arrived Alephplex, along with four other Adjusters who had arrived before the quarantine shield made it not possible for anyone else to enter the disturbed area. Each one of us had had to abandon guise, so that this locus of Newyork 1939-1986 must require new Adjusters to replace us—a matter to be charged against the guilt of Foraminifera 9-Hart Bailey's Beam, I deem.

This concluded Steps 3 and 2 of our Adjustment, the removal and the isolation of the disturbed specimens. We are transmitting same disturbed specimens to you under separate cover herewith, in neutralized and collapsed state, for the manufacture of simulacra thereof. One regrets to say that they number three thousand eight hundred forty-six, comprising all aboriginals within the quarantined area who had first-hand knowledge of the anachronisms caused by Foraminifera's importation of contemporary weapons into this locus.

Alephplex and the four other Adjusters are at present reconstructing such physical damage as was caused by the use of said weapons. Simultaneously, while I am preparing this report, "I" am maintaining the quarantine shield which cuts off this locus, both physically and temporally, from the remainder of its environment. I deem that if replacements for the attached aboriginals can be fabricated quickly enough, there will be no significant outside percept of the shield itself, or of the happenings within it—that is, by maintaining a quasi-stasis of time while the repairs are being made, an outside aboriginal observer will see, at most, a mere flicker of silver in the sky. All Adjusters here present are working as rapidly as we can to make sure the shield can be withdrawn, before so many aboriginals have observed it as to make it necessary to replace the entire city with simulacra. We do not wish a repetition of the California incident, after all.

MY LADY GREENSLEEVES

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I

His name was Liam O'Leary and there was something stinking in his nostrils. It was the smell of trouble. He hadn't found what the trouble was yet, but he would. That was his business. He was a captain of guards in Estates-General Correctional Institution—better known to its inmates as the Jug—and if he hadn't been able to detect the scent of trouble brewing a cell-block away, he would never have survived to reach his captaincy.

And her name, he saw, was Sue-Ann Bradley, Detainee No. WFA-656R.

He frowned at the rap sheet, trying to figure out what got a girl like her into a place like this. And, what was more important, why she couldn't adjust herself to it, now that she was in.

He demanded: "Why wouldn't you mop out your cell?"

The girl lifted her head angrily and took a step forward. The block guard, Sodaro, growled warningly: "Watch it, auntie!"

O'Leary shook his head. "Let her talk, Sodaro." It said in the *Civil Service Guide to Prison Administration*: "Detainees will be permitted to speak in their own behalf in disciplinary proceedings." And O'Leary was a man who lived by the book.

She burst out: "I never got a chance! That old witch Mathias never told me I was supposed to mop up. She banged on the door and said, 'Slush up, sister!' And then, ten minutes later, she called the guards and told them I refused to mop."

The block guard guffawed. "Wipe talk—that's what she was telling you to do. Cap'n, you know what's funny about this? This Bradley is—"

"Shut up, Sodaro."

Captain O'leary put down his pencil and looked at the girl. She was attractive and young—not beyond hope, surely. Maybe she had got off to a wrong start, but the question was, would putting her in the disciplinary block help straighten her out? He rubbed his ear and looked past her at the line of prisoners on the rap detail, waiting for him to judge their cases.

He said patiently: "Bradley, the rules are you have to mop out your cell. If you didn't understand what Mathias was talking about, you should have asked her. Now I'm warning you, the next time—"

"Hey, Cap'n, wait!" Sodaro was looking alarmed. "This isn't a first offense. Look at the rap sheet. Yesterday she pulled the same thing in the mess hall." He shook his head reprovingly at the prisoner. "The block guard had to break up a fight between her and another wench, and she claimed the same business—said she didn't

understand when the other one asked her to move along." He added virtuously: "The guard warned her then that next time she'd get the Greensleeves for sure."

Inmate Bradley seemed to be on the verge of tears. She said tautly: "I don't care. I don't care!"

O'Leary stopped her. "That's enough! Three days in Block O!"

It was the only thing to do—for her own sake as much as for his. He had managed, by strength of will, not to hear that she had omitted to say "sir" every time she spoke to him, but he couldn't keep it up forever and he certainly couldn't overlook hysteria. And hysteria was clearly the next step for her.

All the same, he stared after her as she left. He handed the rap sheet to Sodaro and said absently: "Too bad a kid like her has to be here. What's she in for?"

"You didn't know, Cap'n?" Sodaro leered. "She's in for conspiracy to violate the Categorized Class laws. Don't waste your time with her, Cap'n. She's a figger-lover!"

Captain O'Leary took a long drink of water from the fountain marked "Civil Service." But it didn't wash the taste out of his mouth, the smell from his nose.

What got into a girl to get her mixed up with that kind of dirty business? He checked out of the cell blocks and walked across the yard, wondering about her. She'd had every advantage—decent Civil Service parents, a good education, everything a girl could wish for. If anything, she had had a better environment than O'Leary himself, and look what she had made of it.

The direction of evolution is toward specialization and Man is no exception, but with the difference that his is the one species that creates its own environment in which to specialize. From the moment that clans formed, specialization began—the hunters using the weapons made by the flint-chippers, the food cooked in clay pots made by the ceramists, over fire made by the shaman who guarded the sacred flame.

Civilization merely increased the extent of specialization. From the born mechanic and the man with the gift of gab, society evolved to the point of smaller contact and less communication between the specializations, until now they could understand each other on only the most basic physical necessities—and not even always then.

But this was desirable, for the more specialists, the higher the degree of civilization. The ultimate should be the complete segregation of each specialization—social and genetic measures to make them breed true, because the unspecialized man is an uncivilized man, or at any rate he does not advance civilization. And letting the specializations mix would produce genetic undesirables: clerk-laborer or Professional-GI misfits, for example, being only half specialized, would be good at no specialization.

And the basis of this specialization society was: "The aptitude groups are the true races of mankind." Putting it into law was only the legal enforcement of a demonstrable fact.

"Evening, Cap'n." A bleary old inmate orderly stood up straight and touched his cap as O'Leary passed by.

"Evening."

O'Leary noted, with the part of his mind that always noted those things, that the orderly had been leaning on his broom until he'd noticed the captain coming by. Of course, there wasn't much to sweep—the spray machines and sweeperdozers had been over the cobblestones of the yard twice already that day. But it was an inmate's job to keep busy. And it was a guard captain's job to notice when they didn't.

There wasn't anything wrong with that job, he told himself. It was a perfectly good civil-service position—better than post-office clerk, not as good as Congressman, but a job you could be proud to hold. He *was* proud of it. It was *right* that he should be proud of it. He was civil-service born and bred, and naturally he was proud and content to do a good, clean civil-service job.

If he had happened to be born a fig—a *clerk*, he corrected himself—if he had happened to be born a clerk, why, he would have been proud of that, too. There wasn't anything wrong with being a clerk—or a mechanic or a soldier, or even a laborer, for that matter.

Good laborers were the salt of the Earth! They weren't smart, maybe, but they had a—well, a sort of natural, relaxed joy of living. O'Leary was a broad-minded man and many times he had thought almost with a touch of envy how *comfortable* it must be to be a wipe—a *laborer*. No responsibilities. No worries. Just an easy, slow routine of work and loaf, work and loaf.

Of course, he wouldn't *really* want that kind of life, because he was Civil Service and not the kind to try to cross over class barriers that weren't *meant* to be—

"Evening, Cap'n."

He nodded to the mechanic inmate who was, theoretically, in charge of maintaining the prison's car pool, just inside the gate.

"Evening, Conan," he said.

Conan, now—he was a big buck greaser and he would be there for the next hour, languidly poking a piece of fluff out of the air filter on the prison jeep. Lazy, sure. Undependable, certainly. But he kept the cars going—and, O'Leary thought approvingly, when his sentence was up in another year or so, he would go back to his life with his status restored, a mechanic on the outside as he had been inside, and he certainly would never risk coming back to the Jug by trying to pass as Civil Service or anything else. He knew his place.

So why didn't this girl, this Sue-Ann Bradley, know hers?

II

Every prison has its Greensleeves—sometimes they are called by different names. Old Marquette called it "the canary;" Louisiana State called it "the red hats;" elsewhere it was called "the hole," "the snake pit," "the Klondike." When you're in it, you don't much care what it is called; it is a place for punishment.

And punishment is what you get.

Block O in Estates-General Correctional Institution was the disciplinary block, and because of the green straitjackets its inhabitants wore, it was called the Greensleeves. It was a community of its own, an enclave within the larger city-state that was the Jug. And like any other community, it had its leading citizens ... two of them. Their names were Sauer and Flock.

Sue-Ann Bradley heard them before she reached the Greensleeves. She was in a detachment of three unfortunates like herself, convoyed by an irritable guard, climbing the steel steps toward Block O from the floor below, when she heard the yelling.

"Owoo-o-o," screamed Sauer from one end of the cell block and "Yow-w-w!" shrieked Flock at the other.

The inside deck guard of Block O looked nervously at the outside deck guard. The outside guard looked impassively back—after all, he was on the outside.

The inside guard muttered: "Wipe rats! They're getting on my nerves."

The outside guard shrugged.

"Detail, *halt!*" The two guards turned to see what was coming in as the three new candidates for the Greensleeves slumped to a stop at the head of the stairs. "Here they are," Sodaro told them. "Take good care of 'em, will you? Especially the lady—she's going to like it here, because there's plenty of wipes and greasers and figgers to keep her company." He laughed coarsely and abandoned his charges to the Block O guards.

The outside guard said sourly: "A woman, for God's sake. Now O'Leary knows I hate it when there's a woman in here. It gets the others all riled up."

"Let them in," the inside guard told him. "The others are riled up already."

Sue-Ann Bradley looked carefully at the floor and paid them no attention. The outside guard pulled the switch that turned on the tanglefoot electronic fields that swamped the floor of the block corridor and of each individual cell. While the fields were on, you could ignore the prisoners—they simply could not move fast enough, against the electronic drag of the field, to do any harm. But it was a rule that, even in Block O, you didn't leave the tangle fields on all the time—only when the cell doors had to be opened or a prisoner's restraining garment removed.

Sue-Ann walked bravely forward through the opened gate—and fell flat on her face. It was her first experience of a tanglefoot field. It was like walking through molasses.

The guard guffawed and lifted her up by one shoulder. "Take it easy, auntie. Come on, get in your cell." He steered her in the right direction and pointed to a greensleeved straitjacket on the cell cot. "Put that on. Being as you're a lady, we won't tie it up, but the rules say you got to wear it and the rules—Hey. She's crying!" He shook his head, marveling. It was the first time he had ever seen a prisoner cry in the Greensleeves.

However, he was wrong. Sue-Ann's shoulders were shaking, but not from tears. Sue-Ann Bradley had got a good look at Sauer and at Flock as she passed them by and she was fighting off an almost uncontrollable urge to retch.

Sauer and Flock were what are called prison wolves. They were laborers—"wipes," for short—or, at any rate, they had been once. They had spent so much time in prisons that it was sometimes hard even for them to remember what they really were, outside. Sauer was a big, grinning redhead with eyes like a water moccasin. Flock was a lithe five-footer with the build of a water moccasin—and the sad, stupid eyes of a calf.

Sauer stopped yelling for a moment. "Hey, Flock!"

"What do you want, Sauer?" called Flock from his own cell.

"We got a lady with us! Maybe we ought to cut out this yelling so as not to disturb the lady!" He screeched with howling, maniacal laughter. "Anyway, if we don't cut this out, they'll get us in trouble, Flock!"

"Oh, you think so?" shrieked Flock. "Jeez, I wish you hadn't said that, Sauer. You got me scared! I'm so scared, I'm gonna have to yell!"

The howling started all over again.

The inside guard finished putting the new prisoners away and turned off the tangle field once more. He licked his lips. "Say, you want to take a turn in here for a while?"

"Uh-uh." The outside guard shook his head.

"You're yellow," the inside guard said moodily. "Ah, I don't know why I don't quit this lousy job. Hey, you! Pipe down or I'll come in and beat your head off!"

"Ee-ee-ee!" screamed Sauer in a shrill falsetto. "I'm scared!" Then he grinned at the guard, all but his water-moccasin eyes. "Don't you know you can't hurt a wipe by hitting him on the head, Boss?"

"Shut up!" yelled the inside guard.

Sue-Ann Bradley's weeping now was genuine. She simply could not help it. The crazy yowling of the hard-timers, Sauer and Flock, was getting under her skin. They weren't even—even *human*, she told herself miserably, trying to weep silently so as not to give the guards the satisfaction of hearing her—they were animals!

Resentment and anger, she could understand. She told herself doggedly that resentment and anger were natural and right. They were perfectly normal expressions of the freedom-loving citizen's rebellion against the vile and stifling system of Categorized Classes. It was *good* that Sauer and Flock still had enough spirit to struggle against the vicious system—

But did they have to scream so?

The senseless yelling was driving her crazy. She abandoned herself to weeping and she didn't even care who heard her any more. Senseless!

It never occurred to Sue-Ann Bradley that it might not be senseless, because noise hides noise. But then she hadn't been a prisoner very long.

III

"I smell trouble," said O'Leary to the warden.

"Trouble? Trouble?" Warden Schluckebier clutched his throat and his little round eyes looked terrified—as perhaps they should have. Warden Godfrey Schluckebier was the almighty Caesar of ten thousand inmates in the Jug, but privately he was a fussy old man trying to hold onto the last decent job he would have in his life.

"Trouble? *What* trouble?"

O'Leary shrugged. "Different things. You know Lafon, from Block A? This afternoon, he was playing ball with the laundry orderlies in the yard."

The warden, faintly relieved, faintly annoyed, scolded: "O'Leary, what did you want to worry me for? There's nothing wrong with playing ball in the yard. That's what recreation periods are for."

"You don't see what I mean, Warden. Lafon was a professional on the outside—an architect. Those laundry cons were laborers. Pros and wipes don't mix; it isn't natural. And there are other things."

O'Leary hesitated, frowning. How could you explain to the warden that it didn't *smell* right?

"For instance—Well, there's Aunt Mathias in the women's block. She's a pretty good old girl—that's why she's the block orderly. She's a lifer, she's got no place to go, she gets along with the other women. But today she put a woman named Bradley on report. Why? Because she told Bradley to mop up in wipe talk and Bradley didn't understand. Now Mathias wouldn't—"

The warden raised his hand. "Please, O'Leary, don't bother me about that kind of stuff." He sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. He poured himself a cup of steaming black coffee from a brewpot, reached in a desk drawer for something, hesitated, glanced at O'Leary, then dropped a pale blue tablet into the cup. He drank it down eagerly, ignoring the scalding heat.

He leaned back, looking suddenly happier and much more assured.

"O'Leary, you're a guard captain, right? And I'm your warden. You have your job, keeping the inmates in line, and I have mine. Now your job is just as important as my job," he said piously. "*Everybody's* job is just as important as everybody else's, right? But we have to stick to our own jobs. We don't want to try to *pass*."

O'Leary snapped erect, abruptly angry. Pass! What the devil way was that for the warden to talk to him?

"Excuse the expression, O'Leary," the warden said anxiously. "I mean, after all, 'Specialization is the goal of civilization,' right?" He was a great man for platitudes, was Warden Schluckebier. "*You* know you don't want to worry about *my* end of running the prison. And *I* don't want to worry about *yours*. You see?" And he folded his hands and smiled like a civil-service Buddha.

O'Leary choked back his temper. "Warden, I'm telling you that there's trouble coming up. I smell the signs."

"Handle it, then!" snapped the warden, irritated at last.

"But suppose it's too big to handle. Suppose—"

"It isn't," the warden said positively. "Don't borrow trouble with all your supposing, O'Leary." He sipped the remains of his coffee, made a wry face, poured a fresh cup and, with an elaborate show of not noticing what he was doing, dropped three of the pale blue tablets into it this time.

He sat beaming into space, waiting for the jolt to take effect.

"Well, then," he said at last. "You just remember what I've told you tonight, O'Leary, and we'll get along fine. 'Specialization is the—' Oh, curse the thing."

His phone was ringing. The warden picked it up irritably.

That was the trouble with those pale blue tablets, thought O'Leary; they gave you a lift, but they put you on edge.

"Hello," barked the warden, not even glancing at the viewscreen. "What the devil do you want? Don't you know I'm—What? You did *what*? You're going to WHAT?"

He looked at the viewscreen at last with a look of pure horror. Whatever he saw on it, it did not reassure him. His eyes opened like clamshells in a steamer.

"O'Leary," he said faintly, "my mistake."

And he hung up—more or less by accident; the handset dropped from his fingers.

The person on the other end of the phone was calling from Cell Block O.

Five minutes before, he hadn't been anywhere near the phone and it didn't look as if his chances of ever getting near it were very good. Because five minutes before, he was in his cell, with the rest of the hard-timers of the Greensleeves.

His name was Flock.

He was still yelling. Sue-Ann Bradley, in the cell across from him, thought that maybe, after all, the man was really in pain. Maybe the crazy screams were screams of agony, because certainly his face was the face of an agonized man.

The outside guard bellowed: "Okay, okay. Take ten!"

Sue-Ann froze, waiting to see what would happen. What actually did happen was that the guard reached up and closed the switch that actuated the tangler fields on the floors of the cells. The prison rules were humanitarian, even for the dregs that inhabited the Greensleeves. Ten minutes out of every two hours, even the worst case had to be allowed to take his hands out of the restraining garment.

"Rest period" it was called—in the rule book. The inmates had a less lovely term for it.

At the guard's yell, the inmates jumped to their feet.

Bradley was a little slow getting off the edge of the steel-slat bed—nobody had warned her that the eddy currents in the tangler fields had a way of making metal smoke-hot. She gasped but didn't cry out. Score one more painful lesson in her new language course. She rubbed the backs of her thighs gingerly—and slowly, slowly, for the eddy currents did not permit you to move fast. It was like pushing against rubber; the faster you tried to move, the greater the resistance.

The guard peered genially into her cell. "You're okay, auntie." She proudly ignored him as he slogged deliberately away on his rounds. He didn't have to untie her and practically stand over her while she attended to various personal matters, as he did with the male prisoners. It was not much to be grateful for, but Sue-Ann Bradley was grateful. At least she didn't have to live *quite* like a fig—like an underprivileged clerk, she told herself, conscience-stricken.

Across the hall, the guard was saying irritably: "What the hell's the matter with you?" He opened the door of the cell with an asbestos-handled key held in a canvas glove.

Flock was in that cell and he was doubled over.

The guard looked at him doubtfully. It could be a trick, maybe. Couldn't it? But he could see Flock's face and the agony in it was real enough. And Flock was gasping, through real tears: "Cramps. I—I—"

"Ah, you wipes always got a pain in the gut." The guard lumbered around Flock to the draw-strings at the back of the jacket. Funny smell in here, he told himself—not for the first time. And imagine, some people didn't believe that wipes had a smell of their own! But this time, he realized cloudily, it was a rather unusual smell. Something burning. Almost like meat scorching.

It wasn't pleasant. He finished untying Flock and turned away; let the stinking wipe take care of his own troubles. He only had ten minutes to get all the way around Block O and the inmates complained like crazy if he didn't make sure they all got the most possible free time. He was pretty good at snowshoeing through the tangler field. He was a little vain about it, even; at times he had been known to boast of his ability to make the rounds in two minutes, every time.

Every time but this.

For Flock moaned behind him, oddly close.

The guard turned, but not quickly enough. There was Flock—astonishingly, he was half out of his jacket; his arms hadn't been in the sleeves at all! And in one of the hands, incredibly, there was something that glinted and smoked.

"All right," croaked Flock, tears trickling out of eyes nearly shut with pain.

But it wasn't the tears that held the guard; it was the shining, smoking thing, now poised at his throat. A shiv! It looked as though it had been made out of a bed-spring, ripped loose from its frame God knows how, hidden inside the greensleeved jacket God knows how—filed, filed to sharpness over endless hours.

No wonder Flock moaned—the eddy currents in the shiv were slowly cooking his hand; and the blister against his abdomen, where the shiv had been hidden during other rest periods, felt like raw acid.

"All right," whispered Flock, "just walk out the door and you won't get hurt. Unless the other screw makes trouble, you won't get hurt, so tell him not to, you hear?"

He was nearly fainting with the pain.

But he hadn't let go.

He didn't let go. And he didn't stop.

IV

It was Flock on the phone to the warden—Flock with his eyes still streaming tears, Flock with Sauer standing right behind him, menacing the two bound deck guards.

Sauer shoved Flock out of the way. "Hey, Warden!" he said, and the voice was a cheerful bray, though the serpent eyes were cold and hating. "Warden, you got to get a medic in here. My boy Flock, he hurt himself real bad and he needs a doctor." He gestured playfully at the guards with the shiv. "I tell you, Warden. I got this knife and I got your guards here. Enough said? So get a medic in here quick, you hear?"

And he snapped the connection.

O'Leary said: "Warden, I told you I smelled trouble!"

The warden lifted his head, glared, started feebly to speak, hesitated, and picked up the long-distance phone. He said sadly to the prison operator: "Get me the governor—fast."

Riot!

The word spread out from the prison on seven-league boots.

It snatched the city governor out of a friendly game of Seniority with his manager and their wives—and just when he was holding the Porkbarrel Joker concealed in the hole.

It broke up the Base Championship Scramble Finals at Hap Arnold Field to the south, as half the contestants had to scramble in earnest to a Red Alert that was real.

It reached to police precinct houses and TV newsrooms and highway checkpoints, and from there it filtered into the homes and lives of the nineteen million persons that lived within a few dozen miles of the Jug.

Riot. And yet fewer than half a dozen men were involved.

A handful of men, and the enormous bulk of the city-state quivered in every limb and class. In its ten million homes, in its hundreds of thousands of public places, the city-state's people shook under the impact of the news from the prison.

For the news touched them where their fears lay. Riot! And not merely a street brawl among roistering wipes, or a bar-room fight of greasers relaxing from a hard day at the plant. The riot was down among the corrupt sludge that underlay the state itself. Wipes brawled with wipes and no one cared; but in the Jug, all classes were cast together.

Forty miles to the south, Hap Arnold Field was a blaze of light. The airmen tumbled out of their quarters and dayrooms at the screech of the alert siren, and behind them their wives and children stretched and yawned and worried. An alert! The older kids fussed and complained and their mothers shut them up. No, there wasn't any alert scheduled for tonight; no, they didn't know where Daddy was going; no, the kids couldn't get up yet—it was the middle of the night.

And as soon as they had the kids back in bed, most of the mothers struggled into their own airwac uniforms and headed for the briefing area to hear.

They caught the words from a distance—not quite correctly. "Riot!" gasped an aircraftswoman first-class, mother of three. "The wipes! I *told* Charlie they'd get out of hand and—Alys, we aren't safe. You know how they are about GI women! I'm going right home and get a club and stand right by the door and—"

"Club!" snapped Alys, radarscope-sergeant, with two children querulously awake in her nursery at home. "What in God's name is the use of a club? You can't hurt a wipe by hitting him on the head. You'd better come along to Supply with me and draw a gun—you'll need it before this night is over."

But the airmen themselves heard the briefing loud and clear over the scramble-call speakers, and they knew it was not merely a matter of trouble in the wipe quarters. The Jug! The governor himself had called them out; they were to fly interdicting missions at such-and-such levels on such-and-such flight circuits around the prison.

The rockets took off on fountains of fire; and the jets took off with a whistling roar; and last of all, the helicopters took off ... and they were the ones who might actually accomplish something. They took up their picket posts on the prison perimeter, a pilot and two bombardiers in each 'copter, stone-faced, staring grimly alert at the prison below.

They were ready for the breakout.

But there wasn't any breakout.

The rockets went home for fuel. The jets went home for fuel. The helicopters hung on—still ready, still waiting.

The rockets came back and roared harmlessly about, and went away again. They stayed away. The helicopter men never faltered and never relaxed. The prison below them was washed with light—from the guard posts on the walls, from the cell blocks themselves, from the mobile lights of the guard squadrons surrounding the walls.

North of the prison, on the long, flat, damp developments of reclaimed land, the matchbox row houses of the clerical neighborhoods showed lights in every window as the figgers stood ready to repel invasion from their undesired neighbors to the east, the wipes. In the crowded tenements of the laborers' quarters, the wipes shouted from window to window; and there were crowds in the bright streets.

"The whole bloody thing's going to blow up!" a helicopter bombardier yelled bitterly to his pilot, above the flutter and roar of the whirling blades. "Look at the mobs in Greaserville! The first breakout from the Jug's going to start a fight like you never saw and we'll be right in the middle of it!"

He was partly right. He would be right in the middle of it—for every man, woman and child in the city-state would be right in the middle of it. There was no place anywhere that would be spared. *No mixing*. That was the prescription that kept the city-state alive. There's no harm in a family fight—and aren't all mechanics a family, aren't all laborers a clan, aren't all clerks and office workers related by closer ties than blood or skin?

But the declassified cons of the Jug were the dregs of every class; and once they spread, the neat compartmentation of society was pierced. The breakout would mean riot on a bigger scale than any prison had ever known.

But he was also partly wrong. Because the breakout wasn't seeming to come.

The Jug itself was coming to a boil.

Honor Block A, relaxed and easy at the end of another day, found itself shaken alert by strange goings-on. First there was the whir and roar of the Air Force overhead. *Trouble*. Then there was the sudden arrival of extra guards, doubling the normal complement—day-shift guards, summoned away from their comfortable civil-service homes at some urgent call. *Trouble for sure*.

Honor Block A wasn't used to trouble. A Block was as far from the Greensleeves of O Block as you could get and still be in the Jug. Honor Block A belonged to the prison's halfbreeds—the honor prisoners, the trustees who did guards' work because there weren't enough guards to go around. They weren't Apaches or Piutes; they were camp-following Injuns who had sold out for the white man's firewater. The price of their service was privilege—many privileges.

Item: TV sets in every cell. Item: Hobby tools, to make gadgets for the visitor trade—the only way an inmate could earn an honest dollar. Item: In consequence, an exact knowledge of everything the outside world knew and put on its TV screens (including the grim, alarming reports of "trouble at Estates-General"), and the capacity to convert their "hobby tools" to—other uses.

An honor prisoner named Wilmer Lafon was watching the TV screen with an expression of rage and despair.

Lafon was a credit to the Jug—he was a showpiece for visitors. Prison rules provided for prisoner training—it was a matter of "rehabilitation." Prisoner rehabilitation is a joke and a centuries-old one at that; but it had its serious uses, and one of them was to keep the prisoners busy. It didn't much matter at what.

Lafon, for instance, was being "rehabilitated" by studying architecture. The guards made a point of bringing inspection delegations to his cell to show him off. There were his walls, covered with pin-ups—but not of women. The pictures were sketches Lafon had drawn himself; they were of buildings, highways, dams and bridges; they were splendidly conceived and immaculately executed.

"Looka that!" the guards would rumble to their guests. "There isn't an architect on the outside as good as this boy! What do you say, Wilmer? Tell the gentlemen—how long you been taking these correspondence courses in architecture? Six years! Ever since he came to the Jug."

And Lafon would grin and bob his head, and the delegation would go, with the guards saying something like: "Believe me, that Wilmer could design a whole skyscraper—and it wouldn't fall down, either!"

And they were perfectly, provably right. Not only could Inmate Lafon design a skyscraper, but he had already done so. More than a dozen of them. And none had fallen down.

Of course, that was more than six years back, before he was convicted and sent to the Jug. He would never design another. Or if he did, it would never be built. For the plain fact of the matter was that the Jug's rehabilitation courses were like rehabilitation in every prison since crime and punishment began. They kept the inmates busy. They made a show of purpose for an institution that had never had a purpose beyond punishment.

And that was all.

For punishment for a crime is not satisfied by a jail sentence. How does it hurt a man to feed and clothe and house him, with the bills paid by the state? Lafon's punishment was that he, as an architect, was *through*.

Savage tribes used to lop off a finger or an ear to punish a criminal. Civilized societies confine their amputations to bits and pieces of the personality. Chop-chop, and a man's reputation comes off; chop-chop again, and his professional standing is gone; chop-chop, and he has lost the respect and trust of his fellows.

The jail itself isn't the punishment. The jail is only the shaman's hatchet that performs the amputation. If rehabilitation in a jail worked—if it were *meant* to work—it would be the end of jails.

Rehabilitation? Rehabilitation for what?

Wilmer Lafon switched off the television set and silently pounded his fist into the wall.

Never again to return to the Professional class! For, naturally, the conviction had cost him his membership in the Architectural Society and *that* had cost him his Professional standing.

But still—just to be out of the Jug, that would be something! And his whole hope of ever getting out lay not here in Honor Block A, but in the turmoil of the Greensleeves, a hundred meters and more than fifty armed guards away.

He was a furious man. He looked into the cell next door, where a con named Garcia was trying to concentrate on a game of Solitaire Splitfee. Once Garcia had been a Professional, too; he was the closest thing to a friend Wilmer Lafon had. Maybe he could now help to get Lafon where he wanted—*needed!*—to be.

Lafon swore silently and shook his head. Garcia was a spineless milksop, as bad as any clerk—Lafon was nearly sure there was a touch of the inkwell somewhere in his family. Shrewd and slippery enough, like all figgers. But you couldn't rely on him in a pinch.

Lafon would have to do it all himself.

He thought for a second, ignoring the rustle and mumble of the other honor prisoners of Block A. There was no help for it; he would have to dirty his hands with physical activity.

Outside on the deck, the guards were grumbling to each other. Lafon wiped the scowl off his black face, put on a smile, rehearsed what he was going to say, and politely rattled the door of his cell.

"Shut up down there!" one of the screws bawled. Lafon recognized the voice; it was the guard named Sodaro. That was all to the good. He knew Sodaro and he had some plans for him.

He rattled the cell door again and called: "Chief, can you come here a minute, please?"

Sodaro yelled: "Didn't you hear me? Shut up!" But he came wandering by and looked into Lafon's tidy little cell.

"What the devil do you want?" he growled.

Lafon said ingratiatingly: "What's going on, Chief?"

"Shut your mouth," Sodaro said absently and yawned. He hefted his shoulder holster comfortably. That O'Leary, what a production he had made of getting the guards back! And here he was, stuck in Block A on the night he had set aside for getting better acquainted with that little blue-eyed statistician from the Census office.

"Aw, Chief. The television says there's something going on in the Greensleeves. What's the score?"

Sodaro had no reason not to answer him, but it was his unvarying practice to make a con wait before doing anything the con wanted. He gave Lafon a ten-second stare before he relented.

"The score? Sauer and Flock took over Block O. What about it?"

Much, much about it! But Lafon looked away to hide the eagerness in his eyes. Perhaps, after all, it was not too late....

He suggested humbly: "You look a little sleepy. Do you want some coffee?"

"Coffee?" Sodaro scratched. "You got a cup for me?"

"Certainly! I've got one put aside—swiped it from the messhall—not the one I use myself."

"Um." Sodaro leaned on the cell door. "You know I could toss you in the Greensleeves for stealing from the messhall."

"Aw, chief!" Lafon grinned.

"You been looking for trouble. O'Leary says you were messing around with the bucks from the laundry detail," Sodaro said halfheartedly. But he didn't really like picking on Lafon, who was, after all, an agreeable inmate to have on occasion. "All right. Where's the coffee?"

They didn't bother with tanglefoot fields in Honor Block A. Sodaro just unlocked the door and walked in, hardly bothering to look at Lafon. He took three steps toward the neat little desk at the back of the cell, where Lafon had rigged up a drawing board and a table, where Lafon kept his little store of luxury goods.

Three steps.

And then, suddenly aware that Lafon was very close to him, he turned, astonished—a little too late. He saw that Lafon had snatched up a metal chair; he saw Lafon swinging it, his black face maniacal; he saw the chair coming down.

He reached for his shoulder holster, but it was very much too late for that.

V

Captain O'Leary dragged the scared little wretch into the warden's office. He shook the con angrily. "Listen to this, Warden! The boys just brought this one in from the Shops Building. Do you know what he's been up to?"

The warden wheezed sadly and looked away. He had stopped even answering O'Leary by now. He had stopped talking to Sauer on the interphone when the big convict called, every few minutes, to rave and threaten and demand a doctor. He had almost stopped doing everything except worry and weep. But—still and all, he was the warden. He was the one who gave the orders.

O'Leary barked: "Warden, this little greaser has bollixed up the whole tangler circuit for the prison. If the cons get out into the yard now, you won't be able to tangle them. You know what that means? They'll have the freedom of the yard, and who knows what comes next?"

The warden frowned sympathetically. "Tsk, tsksk."

O'Leary shook the con again. "Come on, Hiroko! Tell the warden what you told the guards."

The con shrank away from him. Sweat was glistening on his furrowed yellow forehead. "I—I had to do it, Cap'n! I shorted the wormcan in the tangler subgrid, but

I had to! I got a signal—'Bollix the grid tonight or some day you'll be in the yard and we'll static you!' What could I do, Cap'n? I didn't want to—"

O'Leary pressed: "Who did the signal come from?"

The con only shook his head, perspiring still more.

The warden asked faintly: "What's he saying?"

O'Leary rolled his eyes to heaven. And this was the warden—couldn't even understand shoptalk from the mouths of his own inmates!

He translated: "He got orders from the prison underground to short-circuit the electronic units in the tangler circuit. They threatened to kill him if he didn't."

The warden drummed with his fingers on the desk.

"The tangler field, eh? My, yes. That is important. You'd better get it fixed, O'Leary. Right away."

"Fixed? Warden, who's going to fix it? You know as well as I do that every mechanic in the prison is a con. Even if one of the guards would do a thing like that—and I'd bust him myself if he did!—he wouldn't know where to start. That's mechanic work."

The warden swallowed. He had to admit that O'Leary was right. Naturally nobody but a mechanic—and a specialist electrician from a particular subgroup of the greaser class at that—could fix something like the tangler field generators.

He said absently: "Well, that's true enough. After all, 'Specialization is the goal of civilization,' you know."

O'Leary took a deep breath. He needed it.

He beckoned to the guard at the door. "Take this greaser out of here!"

The con shambled out, his head hanging.

O'Leary turned to the warden and spread his hands.

"Warden," he said, "don't you see how this thing is building up? Let's not just wait for the place to explode in our faces! Let me take a squad into Block O before it's too late."

The warden pursed his lips thoughtfully and cocked his head, as though he were trying to find some trace of merit in an unreasonable request.

He said at last: "No."

O'Leary made a passionate sound that was trying to be bad language, but he was too raging mad to articulate it. He walked stiffly away from the limp, silent warden and stared out the window.

At least, he told himself, *he* hadn't gone to pieces. It was his doing, not the warden's, that all the off-duty guards had been dragged double-time back to the prison, his doing that they were now ringed around the outer walls or scattered on extra-man patrols throughout the prison.

It was something, but O'Leary couldn't believe that it was enough. He'd been in touch with half a dozen of the details inside the prison on the intercom and each of them had reported the same thing. In all of E-G, not a single prisoner was asleep. They

were talking back and forth between the cells and the guards couldn't shut them up. They were listening to concealed radios and the guards didn't dare make a shakedown to find them. They were working themselves up to something. To what?

O'Leary didn't want ever to find out what. He wanted to go in there with a couple of the best guards he could get his hands on—shoot his way into the Greensleeves if he had to—and clean out the infection.

But the warden said no.

O'Leary stared balefully at the hovering helicopters.

The warden was the warden. He was placed in that position through the meticulously careful operations of the Civil Service machinery, maintained in that position year after year through the penetrating annual inquiries of the Reclassification Board. It was *subversive* to think that the Board could have made a mistake!

But O'Leary was absolutely sure that the warden was a scared, ineffectual jerk.

The interphone was ringing again. The warden picked up the handpiece and held it bonelessly at arm's length, his eyes fixed glassily on the wall. It was Sauer from the Greensleeves again. O'Leary could hear his maddened bray.

"I warned you, Warden!" O'Leary could see the big con's contorted face in miniature, in the view screen of the interphone. The grin was broad and jolly, the snake's eyes poisonously cold. "I'm going to give you five minutes, Warden, you hear? Five minutes! And if there isn't a medic in here in five minutes to take care of my boy Flock—your guards have had it! I'm going to slice off an ear and throw it out the window, you hear me? And five minutes later, another ear. And five minutes later—"

The warden groaned weakly. "I've called for the prison medic, Sauer. Honestly I have! I'm sure he's coming as rapidly as he—"

"Five minutes!" And the ferociously grinning face disappeared.

O'Leary leaned forward. "Warden, let me take a squad in there!"

The warden gazed at him for a blank moment "Squad? No, O'Leary. What's the use of a squad? It's a medic I have to get in there. I have a responsibility to those guards and if I don't get a medic—"

A cold, calm voice from the door: "I am here, Warden."

O'Leary and the warden both jumped up.

The medic nodded slightly. "You may sit down."

"Oh, Doctor! Thank heaven you're here!" The warden was falling all over himself, getting a chair for his guest, flustering about.

O'Leary said sharply: "Wait a minute, Warden. You can't let the doctor go in alone!"

"He isn't alone!" The doctor's intern came from behind him, scowling belligerently at O'Leary. Youngish, his beard pale and silky, he was a long way from his first practice. "I'm here to assist him!"

O'Leary put a strain on his patience. "They'll eat you up in there, Doc! Those are the worst cons in the prison. They've got two hostages already. What's the use of giving them two more?"

The medic fixed him with his eyes. He was a tall man and he wore his beard proudly. "Guard, do you think you can prevent me from healing a sufferer?" He folded his hands over his abdomen and turned to leave.

The intern stepped aside and bowed his head.

O'Leary surrendered. "All right, you can go. But I'm coming with you—with a squad!"

Inmate Sue-Ann Bradley cowered in her cell. The Greensleeves was jumping. She had never—no, *never*, she told herself wretchedly—thought that it would be anything like this. She listened unbelievably to the noise the released prisoners were making, smashing the chairs and commodes in their cells, screaming threats at the bound guards.

She faced the thought with fear, and with the sorrow of a murdered belief that was worse than fear. It was bad that she was in danger of dying right here and now, but what was even worse was that the principles that had brought her to the Jug were dying, too.

Wipes were *not* the same as Civil-Service people!

A bull's roar from the corridor and a shocking crash of glass—that was Flock, and apparently he had smashed the TV interphone.

"What in the world are they *doing*?" Inmate Bradley sobbed to herself. It was beyond comprehension. They were yelling words that made no sense to her, threatening punishments on the guards that she could barely imagine. Sauer and Flock were laborers; some of the other rioting cons were clerks, mechanics—even Civil-Service or Professionals, for all she could tell. But she could hardly understand any of them. Why was the quiet little Chinese clerk in Cell Six setting fire to his bed?

There did seem to be a pattern, of sorts. The laborers were rocketing about, breaking things at random. The mechanics were pleasurably sabotaging the electronic and plumbing installations. The white-collar categories were finding their dubious joys in less direct ways—liking setting fire to a bed. But what a mad pattern!

The more Sue-Ann saw of them, the less she understood.

It wasn't just that they *talked* differently. She had spent endless hours studying the various patois of shoptalk and it had defeated her; but it wasn't just that.

It was bad enough when she couldn't understand the words—as when that trusty Mathias had ordered her in wipe shoptalk to mop out her cell. But what was even worse was not understanding the thought behind the words.

Sue-Ann Bradley had consecrated her young life to the belief that all men were created free and equal—and alike. Or alike in all the things that mattered, anyhow. Alike in hopes, alike in motives, alike in virtues. She had turned her back on a decent Civil-Service family and a promising Civil-Service career to join the banned and despised Association for the Advancement of the Categorized Classes—

Screams from the corridor outside.

Sue-Ann leaped to the door of her cell to see Sauer clutching at one of the guards. The guard's hands were tied, but his feet were free; he broke loose from the clumsy clown with the serpent's eyes, almost fell, ran toward Sue-Ann.

There was nowhere else to run. The guard, moaning and gasping, tripped, slid, caught himself and stumbled into her cell. "Please!" he begged. "That crazy Sauer—he's going to cut my ear off! For heaven's sake, ma'am—stop him!"

Sue-Ann stared at him, between terror and tears. Stop Sauer! If only she could. The big redhead was lurching stiffly toward them—raging, but not so angry that the water-moccasin eyes showed heat.

"Come here, you figger scum!" he roared.

The epithet wasn't even close—the guard was Civil Service through and through—but it was like a reviving whip-sting to Sue-Ann Bradley.

"Watch your language, Mr. Sauer!" she snapped incongruously.

Sauer stopped dead and blinked.

"Don't you dare hurt him!" she warned. "Don't you see, Mr. Sauer, you're playing into their hands? They're trying to divide us. They pit mechanic against clerk, laborer against armed forces. And you're helping them! Brother Sauer, I beg—"

The redhead spat deliberately on the floor.

He licked his lips, and grinned an amiable clown's grin, and said in his cheerful, buffoon bray: "Auntie, go verb your adjective noun."

Sue-Ann Bradley gasped and turned white. She had known such words existed—but only theoretically. She had never expected to *hear* them. And certainly she would never have believed she would hear them, applied to her, from the lips of a—*a laborer*.

At her knees, the guard shrieked and fell to the floor.

"Sauer! Sauer!" A panicky bellow from the corridor; the red-haired giant hesitated. "Sauer, come on out here! There's a million guards coming up the stairs. Looks like trouble!"

Sauer said hoarsely to the unconscious guard: "I'll take care of *you*." And he looked blankly at the girl, and shook his head, and hurried back outside to the corridor.

Guards were coming, all right—not a million of them, but half a dozen or more. And leading them all was the medic, calm, bearded face looking straight ahead, hands clasped before him, ready to heal the sick, comfort the aged or bring new life into the world.

"Hold it!" shrieked little Flock, crouched over the agonizing blister on his abdomen, gun in hand, peering insanely down the steps. "Hold it or—"

"Shut up." Sauer called softly to the approaching group: "Let only the doc come up. Nobody else!"

The intern faltered; the guards stopped dead; the medic said calmly: "I must have my intern with me." He glanced at the barred gate wonderingly.

Sauer hesitated. "Well—all right. But no guards!"

A few yards away, Sue-Ann Bradley was stuffing the syncoped form of the guard into her small washroom.

It was time to take a stand. No more cowering, she told herself desperately. No more waiting. She closed the door on the guard, still unconscious, and stood grimly before it. Him, at least, she would save if she could. They could get him, but only over her dead body.

Or anyway, she thought with a sudden throbbing in her throat, over her body.

VI

After O'Leary and the medic left, the warden tottered to a chair—but not for long. His secretary appeared, eyes bulging. "The governor!" he gasped.

Warden Schluckebier managed to say: "Why, Governor! How good of you to come—"

The governor shook him off and held the door open for the men who had come with him. There were reporters from all the news services, officials from the township governments within the city-state. There was an Air GI with major's leaves on his collar—"Liaison, sir," he explained crisply to the warden, "just in case you have any orders for our men up there." There were nearly a dozen others.

The warden was quite overcome.

The governor rapped out: "Warden, no criticism of you, of course, but I've come to take personal charge. I'm superseding you under Rule Twelve, Paragraph A, of the Uniform Civil Service Code. Right?"

"Oh, *right!*" cried the warden, incredulous with joy.

"The situation is bad—perhaps worse than you think. I'm seriously concerned about the hostages those men have in there. And I had a call from Senator Bradley a short time ago—"

"Senator Bradley?" echoed the warden.

"Senator *Sebastian* Bradley. One of our foremost civil servants," the governor said firmly. "It so happens that his daughter is in Block O as an inmate."

The warden closed his eyes. He tried to swallow, but the throat muscles were paralyzed.

"There is no question," the governor went on briskly, "about the propriety of her being there. She was duly convicted of a felonious act, namely conspiracy and incitement to riot. But you see the position."

The warden saw all too well.

"Therefore," said the governor. "I intend to go in to Block O myself. Sebastian Bradley is an old and personal friend—as well," he emphasized, "as being a senior member of the Reclassification Board. I understand a medic is going to Block O. I shall go with him."

The warden managed to sit up straight. "He's gone. I mean they already left, Governor. But I assure you Miss Brad—Inmate Bradley—that is, the young lady is in no danger. I have already taken precautions," he said, gaining confidence as he listened to himself talk. "I—uh—I was deciding on a course of action as you came in. See, Governor, the guards on the walls are all armed. All they have to do is fire a couple of rounds into the yard and then the 'copters could start dropping tear gas and light fragmentation bombs and—"

The governor was already at the door. "You will *not*," he said; and: "Now which way did they go?"

O'Leary was in the yard and he was smelling trouble, loud and strong. The first he knew that the rest of the prison had caught the riot fever was when the lights flared on in Cell Block A.

"That Sodaro!" he snarled, but there wasn't time to worry about that Sodaro. He grabbed the rest of his guard detail and double-timed it toward the New Building, leaving the medic and a couple of guards walking sedately toward the Old. Block A, on the New Building's lowest tier, was already coming to life; a dozen yards, and Blocks B and C lighted up.

And a dozen yards more and they could hear the yelling; and it wasn't more than a minute before the building doors opened.

The cons had taken over three more blocks. How? O'Leary didn't take time even to guess. The inmates were piling out into the yard. He took one look at the rushing mob. Crazy! It was Wilmer Lafon leading the rioters, with a guard's gun and a voice screaming threats! But O'Leary didn't take time to worry about an honor prisoner gone bad, either.

"Let's get out of here!" he bellowed to the detachment, and they ran.

Just plain ran. Cut and ran, scattering as they went.

"Wait!" screamed O'Leary, but they weren't waiting. Cursing himself for letting them get out of hand, O'Leary salvaged two guards and headed on the run for the Old Building, huge and dark, all but the topmost lights of Block O.

They saw the medic and his escort disappearing into the bulk of the Old Building and they saw something else. There were inmates between them and the Old Building! The Shops Building lay between—with a dozen more cell blocks over the workshops that gave it its name—and there was a milling rush of activity around its entrance, next to the laundry shed—

The laundry shed.

O'Leary stood stock still. Lafon leading the breakout from Block A. The little greaser who was a trusty in the Shops Building sabotaging the yard's tangler circuit. Sauer and Flock taking over the Greensleeves with a manufactured knife and a lot of guts.

Did it fit together? Was it all part of a plan?

That was something to find out—but not just then. "Come on," O'Leary cried to the two guards, and they raced for the temporary safety of the main gates.

The whole prison was up and yelling now.

O'Leary could hear scattered shots from the beat guards on the wall—*Over their heads, over their heads!* he prayed silently. And there were other shots that seemed to come from inside the walls—guards shooting, or convicts with guards' guns, he couldn't tell which. The yard was full of convicts now, in bunches and clumps; but none near the gate. And they seemed to have lost some of their drive. They were milling around, lit by the searchlights from the wall, yelling and making a lot of noise ... but going nowhere in particular. Waiting for a leader, O'Leary thought, and wondered briefly what had become of Lafon.

"You Captain O'Leary?" somebody demanded.

He turned and blinked. Good Lord, the governor! He was coming through the gate, waving aside the gate guards, alone. "You him?" the governor repeated. "All right, glad I found you. I'm going into Block O with you."

O'Leary swallowed and waved inarticulately at the teeming cons. True, there were none immediately near by—but there were plenty in the yard! Riots meant breaking things up; already the inmates had started to break up the machines in the laundry shed and the athletic equipment in the yard lockers. When they found a couple of choice breakables like O'Leary and the governor, they'd have a ball!

"But, Governor—"

"But my foot! Can you get me in there or can't you?"

O'Leary gauged their chances. It wasn't more than fifty feet to the main entrance to the Old Building—not at the moment guarded, since all the guards were in hiding or on the walls, and not as yet being invaded by the inmates at large.

He said: "You're the boss. Hold on a minute—" The searchlights were on the bare yard cobblestones in front of them; in a moment, the searchlights danced away.

"Come on!" cried O'Leary, and jumped for the entrance. The governor was with him and a pair of the guards came stumbling after.

They made it to the Old Building.

Inside the entrance, they could hear the noise from outside and the yelling of the inmates who were still in their cells. But around them was nothing but gray steel walls and the stairs going all the way up to Block O.

"Up!" panted O'Leary, and they clattered up the steel steps.

They would have made it—if it hadn't been for the honor inmate, Wilmer Lafon, who knew what he was after and had headed for the Greensleeves through the back way. In fact, they did make it—but not the way they planned. "Get out of the way!" yelled O'Leary at Lafon and the half-dozen inmates with him; and "Go to hell!" screamed Lafon, charging; and it was a rough-and-tumble fight, and O'Leary's party lost it, fair and square.

So when they got to Block O, it was with the governor marching before a convict-held gun, and with O'Leary cold unconscious, a lump from a gun-butt on the side of his head.

As they came up the stairs, Sauer was howling at the medic: "You got to fix up my boy! He's dying and all you do is sit there!"

The medic said patiently: "My son, I've dressed his wound. He is under sedation and I must rest. There will be other casualties."

Sauer raged, but that was as far as it went. Even Sauer wouldn't attack a medic. He would as soon strike an Attorney, or even a Director of Funerals. It wasn't merely that they were Professionals. Even among the Professional class, they were special; not superior, exactly, but *apart*. They certainly were not for the likes of Sauer to fool with and Sauer knew it.

"Somebody's coming!" bawled one of the other freed inmates.

Sauer jumped to the head of the steps, saw that Lafon was leading the group, stepped back, saw whom Lafon's helpers were carrying and leaped forward again.

"Cap'n O'Leary!" he roared. "Gimme!"

"Shut up," said Wilmer Lafon, and pushed the big redhead out of the way. Sauer's jaw dropped and the snake eyes opened wide.

"Wilmer," he protested feebly. But that was all the protest he made, because the snake's eyes had seen that Lafon held a gun. He stood back, the big hands half outstretched toward the unconscious guard captain, O'Leary, and the cold eyes became thoughtful.

And then he saw who else was with the party. "Wilmer! You got the governor there!"

Lafon nodded. "Throw them in a cell," he ordered, and sat down on a guard's stool, breathing hard. It had been a fine fight on the steps, before he and his boys had subdued the governor and the guards, but Wilmer Lafon wasn't used to fighting. Even six years in the Jug hadn't turned an architect into a laborer; physical exertion simply was not his metier.

Sauer said coaxingly: "Wilmer, won't you leave me have O'Leary for a while? If it wasn't for me and Flock, you'd still be in A Block and—"

"Shut up," Lafon said again, gently enough, but he waved the gun muzzle. He drew a deep breath, glanced around him and grinned. "If it wasn't for you and Flock," he mimicked. "If it wasn't for you and Flock! Sauer, you wipe clown, do you think it took *brains* to file down a shiv and start things rolling? If it wasn't for *me*, you and Flock would have beaten up a few guards, and had your kicks for half an hour, and then the whole prison would fall in on you! It was me, Wilmer Lafon, who set things up and you know it!"

He was yelling and suddenly he realized he was yelling. And what was the use, he demanded of himself contemptuously, of trying to argue with a bunch of lousy wipes and greasers? They'd never understand the long, soul-killing hours of planning and sweat. They wouldn't realize the importance of the careful timing—of arranging that the laundry cons would start a disturbance in the yard right after the Greensleeves hard-timers kicked off the riot, of getting the little greaser Hiroko to short-circuit the yard field so the laundry cons could start their disturbances.

It took a *Professional* to organize and plan—yes, and to make sure that he himself was out of it until everything was ripe, so that if anything went wrong, *he* was all right. It took somebody like Wilmer Lafon—a *Professional*, who had spent six years too long in the Jug—

And who would shortly be getting out.

VII

Any prison is a ticking bomb. Estates-General was in process of going off.

From the Greensleeves, where the trouble had started, clear out to the trusty farms that ringed the walls, every inmate was up and jumping. Some were still in their

cells—the scared ones, the decrepit oldsters, the short-termers who didn't dare risk their early discharge. But for every man in his cell, a dozen were out and yelling.

A torch, licking as high as the hanging helicopters, blazing up from the yard—that was the laundry shed. Why burn the laundry? The cons couldn't have said. It was burnable and it was there—burn it!

The yard lay open to the wrath of the helicopters, but the helicopters made no move. The cobblestones were solidly covered with milling men. The guards were on the walls, sighting down their guns; the helicopter bombardiers had their fingers on the bomb trips. There had been a few rounds fired over the heads of the rioters, at first.

Nothing since.

In the milling mob, the figures clustered in groups. The inmates from Honor Block A huddled under the guards' guns at the angle of the wall. They had clubs—all the inmates had clubs—but they weren't using them.

Honor Block A: On the outside, Civil Service and Professionals. On the inside, the trusties, the "good" cons.

They weren't the type for clubs.

With all of the inmates, you looked at them and you wondered what twisted devil had got into their heads to land them in the Jug. Oh, perhaps you could understand it—a little bit, at least—in the case of the figgers in Blocks B and C, the greasers in the Shop Building—that sort. It was easy enough for some of the Categorized Classes to commit a crime and thereby land in jail.

Who could blame a wipe for trying to "pass" if he thought he could get away with it? But when he didn't get away with it, he wound up in the Jug and that was logical enough. And greasers liked Civil-Service women—everyone knew that.

There was almost a sort of logic to it, even if it was a sort of inevitable logic that made decent Civil-Service people see red. You *had* to enforce the laws against rape if, for instance, a greaser should ask an innocent young female postal clerk for a date. But you could understand what drove him to it. The Jug was full of criminals of that sort. And the Jug was the place for them.

But what about Honor Block A?

Why would a Wilmer Lafon—a certified public architect, a Professional by category—do his own car repairs and get himself jugged for malpractice? Why would a dental nurse sneak back into the laboratory at night and cast an upper plate for her mother? She must have realized she would be caught.

But she had done it. And she had been caught; and there she was, this wild night, huddled under the helicopters, uncertainly waving the handle of a floor mop. It was a club.

She shivered and turned to the stocky convict next to her. "Why don't they break down the gate?" she demanded. "How long are we going to hang around here, waiting for the guards to get organized and pick us all off one at a time?"

The convict next to her sighed and wiped his glasses with a beefy hand. Once he had been an Income-Tax Accountant, disbarred and convicted on three counts of impersonating an attorney when he took the liberty of making changes in a client's lease. He snorted: "They expect us to do *their* dirty work."

The two of them glared angrily and fearfully at the other convicts in the yard.

And the other convicts, huddled greaser with greaser, wipe with wipe, glared ragingly back. It wasn't *their* place to plan the strategy of a prison break.

Captain Liam O'Leary muttered groggily: "They don't want to escape. All they want is to make trouble. I know cons!"

He came fully awake and sat up and focused his eyes. His head was hammering.

That girl, that Bradley, was leaning over him. She looked scared and sick. "Sit still! Sauer is just plain crazy—listen to them yelling out there!"

O'Leary sat up and looked around, one hand holding his drumming skull.

"They *do* want to escape," said Sue-Ann Bradley. "Listen to what they're saying!"

O'Leary discovered that he was in a cell. There was a battle going on outside. Men were yelling, but he couldn't see them.

He jumped up, remembering. "The governor!"

Sue-Ann Bradley said: "He's all right. I *think* he is, anyway. He's in the cell right next to us, with a couple guards. I guess they came up with you." She shivered as the yells in the corridor rose. "Sauer is angry at the medic," she explained. "He wants him to fix Flock up so they can—'crush out,' I think he said. The medic says he can't do it. You see, Flock got burned pretty badly with a knife he made. Something about the tanglefoot field—"

"Eddy currents," said O'Leary dizzily.

"Anyway, the medic—"

"Never mind the medic. What's Lafon doing?"

"Lafon? The Negro?" Sue-Ann Bradley frowned. "I didn't know his name. He started the whole thing, the way it sounds. They're waiting for the mob down in the yard to break out and then they're going to make a break—"

"Wait a minute," growled O'Leary. His head was beginning to clear. "What about you? Are you in on this?"

She hung between laughter and tears. Finally: "Do I *look* as if I am?"

O'Leary took stock. Somehow, somewhere, the girl had got a length of metal pipe—from the plumbing, maybe. She was holding it in one hand, supporting him with the other. There were two other guards in the cell, both out cold—one from O'Leary's squad, the other, O'Leary guessed, a desk guard who had been on duty when the trouble started.

"I wouldn't let them in," she said wildly. "I told them they'd have to kill me before they could touch that guard."

O'Leary said suspiciously: "You belonged to that Double-A-C, didn't you? You were pretty anxious to get in the Greensleeves, disobeying Auntie Mathias's orders. Are you sure you didn't know this was going to—"

It was too much. She dropped the pipe, buried her head in her hands. He couldn't tell if she laughed or wept, but he could tell that it hadn't been like that at all.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly, and touched her helplessly on the shoulder.

He turned and looked out the little barred window, because he couldn't think of any additional way to apologize. He heard the wavering beat in the air and saw them—bobbing a hundred yards up, their wide metal vanes fluttering and hissing from the jets at the tips. The GI 'copters. Waiting—as everyone seemed to be waiting.

Sue-Ann Bradley asked shakily: "Is anything the matter?"

O'Leary turned away. It was astonishing, he thought, what a different perspective he had on those helicopter bombers from inside Block O. Once he had cursed the warden for not ordering at least tear gas to be dropped.

He said harshly: "Nothing. Just that the 'copters have the place surrounded."

"Does it make any difference?"

He shrugged. Does it make a difference? The difference between trouble and tragedy, or so it now seemed to Captain O'Leary. The riot was trouble. They could handle it, one way or another. It was his job, any guard's job, to handle *prison* trouble.

But to bring the GIs into it was to invite race riot. Not prison riot—race riot. Even the declassified scum in the Jug would fight back against the GIs. They were used to having the Civil-Service guards over them—that was what guards were for. Civil-Service guards guarded. What else? It was their job—as clerking was a rigger's job, and machines were a greaser's, and pick-and-shovel strong-arm work was a wipe's.

But the Armed Services—their job was to defend the country against forces outside—in a world that had only inside forces. The cons wouldn't hold still under attack from the GIs. *Race riot!*

But how could you tell that to a girl like this Bradley? O'Leary glanced at her covertly. She *looked* all right. Rather nice-looking, if anything. But he hadn't forgotten why she was in E-G. Joining a terrorist organization, the Association for the Advancement of the Categorized Classes.

Actually getting up on street corners and proposing that greasers' children be allowed to go to school with GIs, that wipes inter-marry with Civil Service. Good Lord, they'd be suggesting that doctors eat with laymen next!

The girl said evenly: "Don't look at me that way. I'm not a monster."

O'Leary coughed. "Sorry. I didn't know I was staring." She looked at him with cold eyes. "I mean," he said, "you don't *look* like anybody who'd get mixed up in—well, miscegenation."

"Miscegenation!" she blazed. "You're all alike! You talk about the mission of the Categorized Classes and the rightness of segregation, but it's always just the one thing that's in your minds—sex! I'll tell you this, Captain O'Leary—I'd rather many a decent, hard-working clerk any day than the sort of Civil-Service trash I've seen around here!"

O'Leary cringed. He couldn't help it. Funny, he told himself, I thought I was shockproof—but this goes too far!

A bull-roar from the corridor. Sauer.

O'Leary spun. The big redhead was yelling: "Bring the governor out here. Lafon wants to talk to him!"

O'Leary went to the door of the cell, fast.

A slim, pale con from Block A was pushing the governor down the hall, toward Sauer and Lafon. The governor was a strong man, but he didn't struggle. His face was as composed and remote as the medic's; if he was afraid, he concealed it extremely well.

Sue-Ann Bradley stood beside O'Leary. "What's happening?"

He kept his eyes on what was going on. "Lafon is going to try to use the governor as a shield, I think." The voice of Lafon was loud, but the noises outside made it hard to understand. But O'Leary could make out what the dark ex-Professional was saying: "—know damn well you did something. But what? *Why don't they crush out?*"

Mumble-mumble from the Governor. O'Leary couldn't hear the words.

But he could see the effect of them in Lafon's face, hear the rage in Lafon's voice. "Don't call me a liar, you civvy punk! You did something. I had it all planned, do you hear me? The laundry boys were going to rush the gate, the Block A bunch would follow—and then I was going to breeze right through. But you loused it up somehow. You must've!"

His voice was rising to a scream. O'Leary, watching tautly from the cell, thought: He's going to break. He can't hold it in much longer.

"All *right!*" shouted Lafon, and even Sauer, looming behind him, looked alarmed. "It doesn't matter what you did. I've got you now and *you* are going to get me out of here. You hear? I've got this gun and the two of us are going to walk right out, through the gate, and if anybody tries to stop us—"

"Hey," said Sauer, waking up.

"—if anybody tries to stop us, you'll get a bullet right in—"

"*Hey!*" Sauer was roaring loud as Lafon himself now. "What's this talk about the *two* of you? You aren't going to leave me and Flock!"

"Shut up," Lafon said conversationally, without taking his eyes off the governor.

But Sauer, just then, was not the man to say "shut up" to, and especially he was not a man to take your eyes away from.

"That's torn it," O'Leary said aloud. The girl started to say something.

But he was no longer there to hear.

It looked very much as though Sauer and Lafon were going to tangle. And when they did, it was the end of the line for the governor.

Captain O'Leary hurtled out of the sheltering cell and skidded down the corridor. Lafon's face was a hawk's face, gleaming with triumph. As he saw O'Leary coming toward him, the hawk sneer froze. He brought the gun up, but O'Leary was a fast man.

O'Leary leaped on the lithe black honor prisoner. Lafon screamed and clutched; and O'Leary's lunging weight drove him back against the wall. Lafon's arm smacked against the steel grating and the gun went flying. The two of them clinched and fell, gouging, to the floor.

Grabbing the advantage, O'Leary hammered the con's head against the deck, hard enough to split a skull. And perhaps it split Lafon's, because the dark face twitched and froth appeared at the lips; and the body slacked.

One down!

Now Sauer was charging. O'Leary wriggled sidewise and the big redhead blundered crashing into the steel grate. Sauer fell and O'Leary caught at him. He tried hammering the head as he swarmed on top of the huge clown. But Sauer only roared the louder. The bull body surged under O'Leary and then Sauer was on top and O'Leary wasn't breathing. Not at all.

Good-by, Sue-Ann, O'Leary said silently, without meaning to say anything of the kind; and even then he wondered why he was saying it.

O'Leary heard a gun explode beside his head.

Amazing, he thought, I'm breathing again! The choking hands were gone from his throat.

It took him a moment to realize that it was Sauer who had taken the bullet, not him. Sauer who now lay dead, not O'Leary. But he realized it when he rolled over, and looked up, and saw the girl with the gun still in her hand, staring at him and weeping.

He sat up. The two guards still able to walk were backing Sue-Ann Bradley up. The governor was looking proud as an eagle, pleased as a mother hen.

The Greensleeves was back in the hands of law and order.

The medic came toward O'Leary, hands folded. "My son," he said, "if your throat needs—"

O'Leary interrupted him. "I don't need a thing, Doc! I've got everything I want right now."

VIII

Inmate Sue-Ann Bradley cried: "They're coming! O'Leary, they're coming!"

The guards who had once been hostages clattered down the steps to meet the party. The cons from the Greensleeves were back in their cells. The medic, after finishing his chores on O'Leary himself, paced meditatively out into the wake of the riot, where there was plenty to keep him busy. A faintly guilty expression tintured his carven face. Contrary to his oath to care for all humanity in anguish, he had not liked Lafon or Sauer.

The party of fresh guards appeared and efficiently began re-locking the cells of the Greensleeves.

"Excuse me, Cap'n," said one, taking Sue-Ann Bradley by the arm. "I'll just put this one back—"

"I'll take care of her," said Liam O'Leary. He looked at her sideways as he rubbed the bruises on his face.

The governor tapped him on the shoulder. "Come along," he said, looking so proud of himself, so pleased. "Let's go out in the yard for a breath of fresh air." He smiled contentedly at Sue-Ann Bradley. "You, too."

O'Leary protested instinctively: "But she's an inmate!"

"And I'm a governor. Come along."

They walked out into the yard. The air was fresh, all right. A handful of cons, double-guarded by sleepy and irritable men from the day shift, were hosing down the rubble on the cobblestones. The yard was a mess, but it was quiet now. The helicopters were still riding their picket line, glowing softly in the early light that promised sunrise.

"My car," the governor said quietly to a state policeman who appeared from nowhere. The trooper snapped a salute and trotted away.

"I killed a man," said Sue-Ann Bradley, looking a little ill.

"You saved a man," corrected the governor. "Don't weep for that Lafon. He was willing to kill a thousand men if he had to, to break out of here."

"But he never did break out," said Sue-Ann.

The governor stretched contentedly. "He never had a chance. Laborers and clerks join together in a breakout? It would never happen. They don't even speak the same language—as you have discovered, my dear."

Sue-Ann blazed: "I still believe in the equality of Man!"

"Oh, please do," the governor said, straight-faced. "There's nothing wrong with that. Your father and I are perfectly willing to admit that men are equal—but we can't admit that all men are the *same*. Use your eyes! What you believe in is your business, but," he added, "when your beliefs extend to setting fire to segregated public lavatories as a protest move, which is what got you arrested, you apparently need to be taught a lesson. Well, perhaps you've learned it. You were a help here tonight and that counts for a lot."

Captain O'Leary said, face furrowed: "What about the warden, Governor? They say the category system is what makes the world go round; it fits the right man to the right job and keeps him there. But look at Warden Schluckebier! He fell completely apart at the seams. He—"

"Turn that statement around, O'Leary."

"Turn—?"

The governor nodded. "You've got it reversed. Not the right man for the job—the right job for the man! We've got Schluckebier on our hands, see? He's been born; it's too late to do anything about that. He will go to pieces in an emergency. So where do we put him?"

O'Leary stubbornly clamped his jaw, frowning.

"We put him," the governor went on gently, "where the best thing to *do* in a crisis is to go to pieces! Why, O'Leary, you get some hot-headed man of action in here, and every time an inmate sneezes, you'll have bloodshed! And there's no harm in a prison riot. Let the poor devils work off steam. I wouldn't have bothered to get out of bed for

it—except I was worried about the hostages. So I came down to make sure they were protected in the best possible way."

O'Leary's jaw dropped. "But you were—"

The governor nodded. "I was a hostage myself. That's one way to protect them, isn't it? By giving the cons a hostage that's worth more to them."

He yawned and looked around for his car. "So the world keeps going around," he said. "Everybody is somebody else's outgroup and maybe it's a bad thing, but did you ever stop to realize that we don't have wars any more? The categories stick tightly together. Who is to say that that's a bad thing?"

He grinned. "Reminds me of a story, if you two will pay attention to me long enough to listen. There was a meeting—this is an old, *old* story—a neighborhood meeting of the leaders of the two biggest women's groups on the block. There were eighteen Irish ladies from the Church Auxiliary and three Jewish ladies from B'nai B'rith. The first thing they did was have an election for a temporary chairwoman. Twenty-one votes were cast. Mrs. Grossinger from B'nai B'rith got three and Mrs. O'Flaherty from the Auxiliary got eighteen. So when Mrs. Murphy came up to congratulate Mrs. O'Flaherty after the election, she whispered: 'Good for you! But isn't it terrible, the way these Jews stick together?'"

He stood up and waved a signal as his long official car came poking hesitantly through the gate.

"Well," he declared professionally, "that's that. As we politicians say, any questions?"

Sue-Ann hesitated. "Yes, I guess I do have a question," she said. "What's a Jew?"

It was full dawn at last. The recall signal had come and the helicopters were swooping home to Hap Arnold Field.

A bombardier named Novak, red-eyed and grumpy, was amusing himself on the homeward flight by taking practice sights on the stream of work-bound mechanics as they fluttered over Greaserville.

"Could pick 'em off like pigeons," he said sourly to his pilot, as he dropped an imaginary bomb on a cluster of a dozen men. "For two cents, I'd do it, too. The only good greaser is a dead greaser."

His pilot, just as weary, said loftily: "Leave them alone. The best way to handle them is to leave them alone."

And the pilot was perfectly right; and that was the way the world went round, spinning slowly and unstoppably toward the dawn.

PYTHIAS

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I AM sitting on the edge of what passes for a bed. It is made of loosely woven strips of steel, and there is no mattress, only an extra blanket of thin olive-drab. It isn't comfortable; but of course they expect to make me still more uncomfortable.

They expect to take me out of this precinct jail to the District prison and eventually to the death house.

Sure, there will be a trial first, but that is only a formality. Not only did they catch me with the smoking gun in my hand and Connaught bubbling to death through the hole in his throat, but I admitted it.

I—knowing what I was doing, with, as they say, malice aforethought—deliberately shot to death Laurence Connaught.

They execute murderers. So they mean to execute me.

Especially because Laurence Connaught had saved my life.

Well, there are extenuating circumstances. I do not think they would convince a jury.

Connaught and I were close friends for years. We lost touch during the war. We met again in Washington, a few years after the war was over. We had, to some extent, grown apart; he had become a man with a mission. He was working very hard on something and he did not choose to discuss his work and there was nothing else in his life on which to form a basis for communication. And—well, I had my own life, too. It wasn't scientific research in my case—I flunked out of med school, while he went on. I'm not ashamed of it; it is nothing to be ashamed of. I simply was not able to cope with the messy business of carving corpses. I didn't like it, I didn't want to do it, and when I was forced to do it, I did it badly. So—I left.

Thus I have no string of degrees, but you don't need them in order to be a Senate guard.

DOES that sound like a terribly impressive career to you? Of course not; but I liked it. The Senators are relaxed and friendly when the guards are around, and you learn wonderful things about what goes on behind the scenes of government. And a Senate guard is in a position to do favors—for newspapermen, who find a lead to a story useful; for government officials, who sometimes base a whole campaign on one careless, repeated remark; and for just about anyone who would like to be in the visitors' gallery during a hot debate.

Larry Connaught, for instance. I ran into him on the street one day, and we chatted for a moment, and he asked if it was possible to get him in to see the upcoming foreign relations debate. It was; I called him the next day and told him I had arranged for a pass. And he was there, watching eagerly with his moist little eyes, when the Secretary got up to speak and there was that sudden unexpected yell, and

the handful of Central American fanatics dragged out their weapons and began trying to change American policy with gunpowder.

You remember the story, I suppose. There were only three of them, two with guns, one with a hand grenade. The pistol men managed to wound two Senators and a guard. I was right there, talking to Connaught. I spotted the little fellow with the hand grenade and tackled him. I knocked him down, but the grenade went flying, pin pulled, seconds ticking away. I lunged for it. Larry Connaught was ahead of me.

The newspaper stories made heroes out of both of us. They said it was miraculous that Larry, who had fallen right on top of the grenade, had managed to get it away from himself and so placed that when it exploded no one was hurt.

For it did go off—and the flying steel touched nobody. The papers mentioned that Larry had been knocked unconscious by the blast. He was unconscious, all right.

He didn't come to for six hours and when he woke up, he spent the next whole day in a stupor.

I called on him the next night. He was glad to see me.

"That was a close one, Dick," he said. "Take me back to Tarawa."

I said, "I guess you saved my life, Larry."

"Nonsense, Dick! I just jumped. Lucky, that's all."

"The papers said you were terrific. They said you moved so fast, nobody could see exactly what happened."

He made a deprecating gesture, but his wet little eyes were wary. "Nobody was really watching, I suppose."

"I was watching," I told him flatly.

He looked at me silently for a moment.

"I was between you and the grenade," I said. "You didn't go past me, over me, or through me. But you were on top of the grenade."

He started to shake his head.

I said, "Also, Larry, you fell *on* the grenade. It exploded underneath you. I know, because I was almost on top of you, and it blew you clear off the floor of the gallery. Did you have a bulletproof vest on?"

HE cleared his throat. "Well, as a matter of—"

"Cut it out, Larry! What's the answer?"

He took off his glasses and rubbed his watery eyes. He grumbled, "Don't you read the papers? It went off a yard away."

"Larry," I said gently, "I was there."

He slumped back in his chair, staring at me. Larry Connaught was a small man, but he never looked smaller than he did in that big chair, looking at me as though I were Mr. Nemesis himself.

Then he laughed. He surprised me; he sounded almost happy. He said, "Well, hell, Dick—I had to tell somebody about it sooner or later. Why not you?"

I can't tell you all of what he said. I'll tell most of it—but not the part that matters. I'll never tell *that* part to *anybody*.

Larry said, "I should have known you'd remember." He smiled at me ruefully, affectionately. "Those bull sessions in the cafeterias, eh? Talking all night about everything. But you remembered."

"You claimed that the human mind possessed powers of psychokinesis," I said. "You argued that just by the mind, without moving a finger or using a machine, a man could move his body anywhere, instantly. You said that nothing was impossible to the mind."

I felt like an absolute fool saying those things; they were ridiculous notions. Imagine a man *thinking* himself from one place to another! But—I had been on that gallery.

I licked my lips and looked to Larry Connaught for confirmation.

"I was all wet," Larry laughed. "Imagine!"

I suppose I showed surprise, because he patted my shoulder.

He said, becoming sober, "Sure, Dick, you're wrong, but you're right all the same. The mind alone can't do anything of the sort—that was just a silly kid notion. But," he went on, "*but* there are—well, techniques—linking the mind to physical forces—simple physical forces that we all use every day—that can do it all. Everything! Everything I ever thought of and things I haven't found out yet.

"Fly across the ocean? In a second, Dick! Wall off an exploding bomb? Easily! You saw me do it. Oh, it's work. It takes energy—you can't escape natural law. That was what knocked me out for a whole day. But that was a hard one; it's a lot easier, for instance, to make a bullet miss its target. It's even easier to lift the cartridge out of the chamber and put it in my pocket, so that the bullet can't even be fired. Want the Crown Jewels of England? I could get them, Dick!"

I asked, "Can you see the future?"

He frowned. "That's silly. This isn't supersti—"

"How about reading minds?"

LARRY'S expression cleared. "Oh, you're remembering some of the things I said years ago. No, I can't do that either, Dick. Maybe, some day, if I keep working at this thing— Well, I can't right now. There are things I can do, though, that are just as good."

"Show me something you can do," I asked.

He smiled. Larry was enjoying himself; I didn't begrudge it to him. He had hugged this to himself for years, from the day he found his first clue, through the decade of proving and experimenting, almost always being wrong, but always getting closer.... He *needed* to talk about it. I think he was really glad that, at last, someone had found him out.

He said, "Show you something? Why, let's see, Dick." He looked around the room, then winked. "See that window?"

I looked. It opened with a slither of wood and a rumble of sash weights. It closed again.

"The radio," said Larry. There was a *click* and his little set turned itself on. "Watch it."

It disappeared and reappeared.

"It was on top of Mount Everest," Larry said, panting a little.

The plug on the radio's electric cord picked itself up and stretched toward the baseboard socket, then dropped to the floor again.

"No," said Larry, and his voice was trembling, "I'll show you a hard one. Watch the radio, Dick. I'll run it without plugging it in! The electrons themselves—"

He was staring intently at the little set. I saw the dial light go on, flicker, and hold steady; the speaker began to make scratching noises. I stood up, right behind Larry, right over him.

I used the telephone on the table beside him. I caught him right beside the ear and he folded over without a murmur. Methodically, I hit him twice more, and then I was sure he wouldn't wake up for at least an hour. I rolled him over and put the telephone back in its cradle.

I ransacked his apartment. I found it in his desk: All his notes. All the information. The secret of how to do the things he could do.

I picked up the telephone and called the Washington police. When I heard the siren outside, I took out my service revolver and shot him in the throat. He was dead before they came in.

FOR, you see, I knew Laurence Connaught. We were friends. I would have trusted him with my life. But this was more than just a life.

Twenty-three words told how to do the things that Laurence Connaught did. Anyone who could read could do them. Criminals, traitors, lunatics—the formula would work for anyone.

Laurence Connaught was an honest man and an idealist, I think. But what would happen to any man when he became God? Suppose you were told twenty-three words that would let you reach into any bank vault, peer inside any closed room, walk through any wall? Suppose pistols could not kill you?

They say power corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And there can be no more absolute power than the twenty-three words that can free a man of any jail or give him anything he wants. Larry was my friend. But I killed him in cold blood, knowing what I did, because he could not be trusted with the secret that could make him king of the world.

But I can.

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